



BPYC-134

WESTERN PHILOSOPHY: MODERN

THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY



SCHOOL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY AND TRANS-DISCIPLINARY STUDIES (SOITS)

**INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI**

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Unit 5 Spinoza	Dr. Anish Chakravarty
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Block 3 Empiricims	
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Unit 9 Berkeley	Dr. Sudha Gopinath
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Contents

Block 1 Precursor to Modern Western Philosophy

Unit 1	Introduction to Modern Western Philosophy	Dr. Rekha Basu
Unit 2	Renaissance	Dr. Keith D'Souza
Unit 3	Enlightenment	Dr. Keith D'Souza

Block 2 Rationalism

Unit 4	Descartes	Dr. Henry Kodukuthiyil
Unit 5	Spinoza	Dr. Anish Chakraborty
Unit 6	Leibniz	Dr. Sudha Gopinath
Unit 7	Criticisms of Rationalism	Dr. Priyadarshi Jetli

Block 3 Empiricism

Unit 8	Locke	Dr. Jalalu Haq
Unit 9	Berkeley	Dr. Sudha Gopinath
Unit 10	Hume	Prof. Jose Kannanaikkal
Unit 11	Criticisms of Empiricism	Prof. Augustine Mangalathu

Block 4 Critical and Dialectic Philosophies

Unit 12	Kant	Dr. Saju Chackalackal
Unit 13	Hegel	Dr. Rekha Basu
Unit 14	Marx	

COURSE INTRODUCTION

This course is a six credits core course which will acquaint the reader with the conception and development of “Modern Western Philosophy”.

Modern philosophy is philosophy practiced in Western Europe and North America between the 17th and early 20th centuries. The periods roughly mark the beginning and the end of modern philosophy. In this course we shall focus on two paramount characteristics of modern philosophy: its relentless search for solid *foundations* and its resolute turn toward *subjectivity*. While the renaissance, the reformation, the discovery of the new world, the rise of science and capitalism, represent the external (socio-historical) determinants of modernity, its major internal driving forces have been undoubtedly the human *subjectivity* (reason, freedom, creativity, innovation, autonomy, self-reflection). The course consists of 4 blocks further divided into 14 units.

Block 1 “Precursor to Modern Western Philosophy” begins with an introduction to modern western philosophy and then explains in detail both renaissance and enlightenment, in the historical as well as in the philosophical approaches.

Block 2 is on “Rationalism.” This block delves into the philosophical thoughts of the Rationalist philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz and concludes with a critical appraisal of some ideas of these philosophers.

Block 3 is on “Empiricism.” The block delves into the philosophical thoughts of the British empiricists: Locke, Berkley and Hume and concludes with a critical appraisal of some of their proposals.

Block 4 “Critical and Dialectic Philosophies” traces the critical and dialectic philosophical developments appearing across the works of Kant, Hegel and Marx.

Note on Referencing style: Since there are several styles which may be adopted for referencing and bibliographical citation, the learner would find that different blocks and units given in this study material exhibit an understandable variability in the style of referring being used both for “in-text” and “end-text” citations.



BPYC-134

Block 1

**PRECURSOR TO MODERN WESTERN
PHILOSOPHY**

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance (during the 14th-16th centuries) and the Enlightenment (1650-1800) in Europe heralded major changes in culture, art, philosophy, science, and mathematics. The Renaissance has usually been associated with advances in literature, architecture, humanism, and a world economy. In French, Renaissance translates as “rebirth,” meaning that this was a Golden Age of artistic, cultural, and intellectual thought and production. Some famous people of this period include William Shakespeare, Amadeus Mozart, Leonardo da Vinci and Nicolaus Copernicus. The period of Enlightenment was a period of discovery, but is generally limited to the realm of science, mathematics, and technology. Logic and reason reigned as thinkers became convinced that society and the natural world were like a giant machine. The scientific method, which relied on the notion of objective observation leading to verifiable conclusions, spurred developments in astronomy, philosophy, medicine, physiology, and chemistry. The block serves as an introduction to the course on “Modern Western Philosophy.”

Unit 1, “Introduction to Modern Western Philosophy,” is a succinct introduction to the background to and major trends of modern philosophy. It is a brief survey that examines modern philosophical developments in Western Europe. Its purpose is to give students a background for more in-depth study in philosophy and the history of modern ideas.

Unit 2, “Renaissance,” provides an overview of the Renaissance and the impact it has had in the development of Western Philosophy. Quite often we find that the philosophy of a given time is related to the culture from which it arises. Hence if we wish to understand the period of ‘Modern Western Philosophy,’ we would need to be familiar with the prevailing culture of the Renaissance.

Unit 3, “Enlightenment,” deals with the period of the Enlightenment, which is characterized by the growing acceptance of reason (rather than cultural and religious tradition) as the primary authority used to settle philosophical, scientific and political problems. This emergence of a reason-based approach to life brought the age of the Renaissance to a close.

UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO MODERN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY*

Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 The Reformation
- 1.2 The Scientific Revolution
- 1.3 Rationalism
- 1.4 Sir Isaac Newton
- 1.5 The Enlightenment
- 1.6 Colonialism
- 1.7 Empiricism
- 1.8 Capitalism, Individualism
- 1.9 Voltaire, Rousseau, The French Revolution
- 1.10 Immanuel Kant
- 1.11 Romanticism
- 1.12 Hegel, Marx
- 1.13 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.14 Key Words
- 1.15 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 1.16 Further Readings and References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit are,

- To orient the learner towards the philosophical developments that appeared in Western Europe signifying the “Modern” period of thought.
- These developments will primarily be traced through the appearance of movements such as Rationalism, Enlightenment, Colonialism, Capitalism, Individualism, Romanticism, etc.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

* Dr. Rekha Basu, Former faculty of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy, Hindu College, University of Delhi.

This course will familiarize the reader with the history of ideas in Western Europe from approximately 1500 to 1800 CE. “Modern” stands for what is “new” or “untested”. So, the question arises, what ‘novelty’ was evidenced in these three centuries the like of which had not been witnessed before? A related query is, what was being challenged or repudiated?

Well, religion, in its orthodox version, came under attack. José Casanova coined the term “secularism” as a need to undertake societal modernization. Simply put, secularism was a belief system that implied a separation of church and the state, along with economy and science. This was a very significant development in modern Western thought. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648* resulted in the transfer of territories previously under ecclesiastic control to the dominion of political authorities.

Another related development was that humanism became a matured ideology in modern Western philosophy.†

This refers to a variety of Western beliefs, methods, and philosophy that places emphasis on the human realm. Hitherto, religion had monopolized the debates in the West, accompanied by an interest in a transcendent world, resulting in a neglect of other spheres of human knowledge.

Finally, there was the rise of individualism in the modern era. It was partly an outcome of the Renaissance, and partly that of the liberal values of the Enlightenment. Stress on individual autonomy and uniqueness were integral to individualism. The individual in the pre-modern times was perceived either as a believing Christian, or as a political subject. The emergence of individualism puts a premium on the pursuit of self-interests as contrasted to collective interests.

The Reformation

A salient feature of this era was its critical engagement with orthodox religion, here, Christianity. Accompanying this critique emerged ideals of secularism, humanism, scientific temper, individualism, faith in progress and an enhanced focus on issues of knowledge, skepticism and justification. These ideals will be elaborated upon in this Unit.

The phrase *Modern Western Philosophy* implies a reconsideration of the religious preoccupations of the Middle Ages*, it signified a rejection of the authority of the Roman

*The Peace of Westphalia is the collective name for two peace treaties signed in 1648 in the Westphalian cities of Osnabrück and Münster. The power of the Holy Roman Emperor was broken, the states could determine the religion of their lands.

†Humanism was first evidenced in the thinking of Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1538).

Catholic Church. The Church possessed plenipotentiary powers and had begun intruding into the matters of the State. The Reformation, as this movement by the rebels was called, is generally recognized to have begun in 1517, when Martin Luther, a monk and a university professor, posted his ninety-five theses on the castle church in Wittenberg, arguing basically for reforms in the Church. The reformers, who began to be called Protestants, rejected the papal authority as well as many of the principles and practices of Catholicism of that time. The Reformation brought about a repudiation of medieval philosophy and established a “Protestant Ethic” in its place. Plato and Aristotle, among many others, revived during the Renaissance, were censured for the cosmologies that they represented and sank into relative oblivion. Modern Western philosophy emerged on the horizon as the harbinger of a new science.[†]

It would be facile to presume that scientific activity was in abeyance during the Middle Ages, obviously science, as every other intellectual discipline thrived in this epoch, however, it was subservient to theology and was expected to justify itself in the court of religion. For example, the Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus displaced the Ptolemaic physics that had perceived the earth as the center of the solar system. He gave incontrovertible evidence that the sun was the center, and that the earth was not stationary but moving around the sun. This theory was anathema to the medievalists because it undermined their idea of mechanics. The fear of incurring the wrath of the Church made Copernicus delay the printing of his work.

One significant consequence of the Reformation was that, since the universalist authority of the Church was demolished, it strengthened the territorial state under the rule of the King. This was an inkling of the times to come as Europe’s political future began to take shape in terms of independent, sovereign nation-states.

Yet another concrete impact of the Reformation was the emergence of a middle class. This was also the consequence of the beginnings of modern capitalism. The accumulation of wealth ceased to invite moral contempt, it was legitimized by being perceived as the fulfillment of God’s purpose on earth. Finally, the rebellion against an authoritarian Church

*The phrase “Middle Ages” refers generally to a period in Europe between the fall of Rome in 476 CE and the beginning of the Renaissance in the 14th century.

†The changes here being discussed were gradual, from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance and on into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, there was no neat way in which any epoch in history could be described. Hence, within the ‘Modern’ era in Europe the continued prevalence of Christian images and metaphors should not surprise us.

resulted in a certain amount of religious individualism, and this ideology spread gradually to other fields.

1.2 The Scientific Revolution

Modern philosophy might be said to begin with the rise of science. It is pertinent to cite here the observations made by Herbert Butterfield. He writes, (the scientific revolution) “outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and Reformation to the rank of mere episodes.”* The scientific revolution redefined human thought. This reorientation in human thinking found its manifestation in the Industrial Revolution around the beginning of the nineteenth century. The medievalist tended to view the world as creation by a divine fiat. The modernist perceived it as a world of events operating mechanically. When Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) publicly avowed support for Copernican astronomy, he received a reprimand from the Church. Even his famous invention, the telescope, was viewed with suspicion as it militated against the understanding of astronomy held by the clergy. Galileo was threatened with torture if he dared to engage with the Copernican system in any way. In a letter that he wrote to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany, he wrote, “Me thinks that in the discussion of natural problems, we ought not to begin at the authority of places of scripture, but at the sensible experiments and necessary demonstrations.”†

One concrete outcome of this confrontation between the clergy and the scientists was that the “Aristotelian sky” was dismantled by modern physics. The heavenly bodies, according to Aristotle, were not made of matter, they were perceived to be of a higher order than the earth. The new, emerging science challenged this assumption as uniform laws were formulated to study *both*. The early birds of modern times such as Bacon, Hobbes and Descartes were inspired by these advances made by science.

Ponder Box I

A new physics was evidenced in modern Western thought, an ideology of man versus nature. Contrast it with Medieval science that viewed the world as a “creation.”

1.3 RATIONALISM

1.3.1 René Descartes

*Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science*, New York, 1952, p. viii.

†Cf. Edwin Arthur Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*, p.72.

The adulatory phrase “father of modern philosophy” has been awarded to René Descartes (1596-1650) by historians of philosophy. Descartes was raised in a Jesuit Seminary, and acquired considerable proficiency in science and mathematics.* His early training in a religious institution was to remain with him as a formative influence on his writings. Exposed to Galileo’s exciting findings, Descartes reflected on the fallibility of appearances, and our relative dependence on reason to extend our knowledge. The “New Science”, as the theories advanced by Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo was called, resulted in the erosion of the evidence of the senses in the visible world. The sun did not move, the earth did, the Galaxy unraveled never- heard-of-before secrets, in brief, the invisible world underlying the visible one, comprising atoms, collided with the conservative cosmology of the Church. Yet another matter that wielded tangible influence on Descartes’ methodological preoccupations was the perpetual religious warfare in Europe. He believed that *reason* could offer to the suffering humanity a way out of this belligerence in the name of religion.

A revolutionary thesis advanced by Descartes was about the need for intellectual autonomy. He castigated knowledge based on common sense as frequently being nonsensical. The inaugural moment of his philosophy was the demand that each of us strive for truth independently, based on reason, unmediated by ecclesiastic authority, tradition or experience. He stressed on searching for a certitude that had the character of a mathematical certitude. The method of doubt was invented by him to achieve this end. Skepticism, or withholding consent till proved without a shadow of doubt, became the guiding motto of his rationalism. The search for indubitable truth led Descartes to the use of the method of deduction. This implies the existence of some axioms that are self-evident. From these other principles of knowledge must be deduced. The axiom that he established incontrovertibly was the celebrated claim “I think, therefore I am.” This was called “a self-testimony subjectivism” by the scholars. Even if I am fooled by an evil genius, I must nonetheless exist in order to be fooled. Once Descartes has resolved his skepticism he proceeds to prove the existence of God, and then, once that is established, the existence of the external world.

Was the method of doubt an outrage against our experience? Was the quest for certain knowledge unrealistic? Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), a French thinker relatively unknown and uncelebrated by historians, had doubted the human capacity for finding truth. Unlike Descartes’ striving for invariant and absolute truths, Montaigne was fascinated by the

* Jesuits were members of society of Jesus, which was a Roman Catholic order.

contingency of human belief. However, the credit for initiating the discourse about subjectivity goes to Descartes. Obviously, this is a multifarious term, connoting an “inner” space, “introspection”, as also mere “opinion” or “personal beliefs.” Of course, Descartes’ intent had been to employ it as non-relative, and as indicative of a “foundation.” Crucially, the affective and conative meanings of the subject, meaning the notion of the subject as suffering from the vicissitudes of emotions, or prejudices, or sentiments, was completely ruled out by Descartes’ explicit rationalist position.

Descartes undoubtedly left behind a legacy of subjectivism that was appropriated as an argument for individualism. He went on to stress that this *Cogito* was the center of thought. Eventually he would go on to look at a person as a compound of mind and body. This dualism left a lasting impact on thought in the West. There were traditions that critiqued this premise as problematic, there were others that jumped on to the dualist bandwagon as it liberated the physical world for the scientist, while the mind acquired considerable breadth over centuries, being seen now as a soul, now as a political subject, now as a site for freedom, and so on.

1.3.2 Spinoza and Leibniz

The next two philosophers in this series of modern western thinkers were the Dutchman Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) and the German Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716). In the manner of his predecessor Descartes, Spinoza set up mathematics as the paradigm to follow in his philosophy. Further, he affirmed only one substance, God, and perceived in it a totality of everything that is. Spinoza constructed a rationalist system in which everything was interconnected by a relation of implication. Hence, knowledge implied a comprehension of the whole nexus of implicatory relations of which each human was to be identified as a finite part. Effectively Spinoza talked about an awareness of a rational order that had God at its center. But this God was accessed not through faith but through understanding. Moreover, the evidence being presented before the potential knower is of the nature of a geometric proof. A poignant expression coined by Spinoza is “the intellectual love of God,” which is a fundamentally rationalist insight that we are inseparable from God.

It was a foregone conclusion that Spinoza was perceived as a heretic who had blasphemed against Christianity. An immanent God was an anathema to theologians, the distinction between the creator and the created was necessary for orthodoxy, hence a transcendent God was a necessary tenet in Christianity. By dissolving the distance between God and the world Spinoza was implicated in a formal *Ex-Communication*, which meant that he was banished

from his Jewish community. A concrete contribution of Spinoza to modern Western thought was his affirmation that God could be approached through reason rather than faith. When confronted with the skepticism from orthodoxy that one could not possibly pray to a *System of Truths* (viz. Spinoza's conception of God) Spinoza is supposed to have retorted that metaphysics is an attempt to ascertain the truth about reality—not designed to assuage the fears of the superstitious.

Leibniz challenged Descartes' and Spinoza's view that mechanics was concerned with extension, matter and body. He questioned the assumption that extension was an ultimate principle that was the central concern of physics. In place of this view, he advocated the notion of substance as *force* rather than as matter in motion. He looked upon the physical world as a continuum. Therefore, rather than using motion, which was discontinuous, he argued in favor of a kind of flow, or a drive that ensures that the transitioning of the motion from one point to the next is smooth. So the essential point that he was driving home was that the physicist has to deal not with motion, but infinitely small units of force.

These units were called "monads" by Leibniz. Each monad was a substance, differing from others in respect of thought. Leibniz believed that, rather than being bodies, monads were minds. He pointed to our first-hand experience of ourselves; we sense ourselves as being alive, this, according to Leibniz comes from that thrust or drive that is at the foundation of physical movement and change. These monads differ from one another, not because they occupy different points in space (that argument is disallowed to Leibniz since monads are not physical points to be found in space) but because they have different thoughts. So, Leibniz visualizes a universe comprising a vast assembly of different individuals, operating at different levels of consciousness. This is indicative of a hierarchy among the monads, the degree of consciousness, or self-consciousness is not uniform among the monads. Every monad mirrors the universe in its own unique way, interaction among the monads is ruled out. Adopting the analogy of a watchmaker Leibniz brings in God who maintains a perfect harmony among the diverse perceptions and experiences of different monads.

As I had observed before, it would be a folly to look at rationalism as being guided only by reason, or empiricism only operating with sense experience. Leibniz is a perfect example of a thinker who displays the influence of Aristotle (the notion of entelechy/thrust) and theology (a pre-established in a world peopled by many monads, being harmonized according to a divine design). He proceeds to affirm the divine goodness in choosing the "best possible

world” for humans out of multiple choices available to Him. In *Candide** Voltaire (1694-1778) lampooned this thesis of ours being the best possible universe.

1.4 SIR ISAAC NEWTON

Newton’s (1643-1727) physics had a considerable influence on philosophical thought in the eighteenth century. Newton had been Janus-faced, he felt inspired by both the material and mechanical physical theory of the world, and Christianity. One crucial debate between science and philosophy was on the notion of space and time, and involved Newton and Leibniz. Newtonian mechanics envisaged a world of matter in motion taking place in an infinite and empty space. Similarly time was conceived as an endless and beginning less medium. Various events in nature took place in these two mediums. Leibniz hotly contested this since his metaphysics revolved around monads as spiritual units. He asserted the relativity of space and time, relative to bodies and events.

1.5 THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Following upon the achievements of Newtonian mechanics Europe witnessed a resurgence of faith in reason, albeit a scientific rationality. Enlightenment was the name of this movement, emerging first of all in England, following in the wake of the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688. Subsequently Enlightenment spread to France, transmitted by young intellectuals like Voltaire who had spent a fairly long time in England. It would not be an exaggeration to look at the French Revolution in 1789 as being the culminating point of the Enlightenment ideology. The impact of this movement was felt in Spain, Italy and Germany, traditional ways of thinking were attacked in these places.

The ideology of the Enlightenment was not overtly anti- religion. Yet its encouragement to rationality, outside of theocratic frameworks, placed it in opposition to the church. Intellectual autonomy was emphasized, as also, significantly, a variety of cosmic humanism. Sectarian battles in the name of religion had resulted in the fragmentation of people. Enlightenment provided the healing touch to a populace fatigued with senseless bloodshed. The philosophers in this era called upon a unification of humanity cutting across national

*The publication of this novella was prompted by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 which claimed 20,000 innocent lives. Essentially *Candide* was a satire against Leibnizian optimism about our world being the best possible world. Voltaire’s final advice to the reader, in *Candide*, was to continue living life and working, without theorizing. That would be the best way to endure “evils and pain” that come, unbidden, to our doorstep.

boundaries. Through reason they believed, they would tap the basic resources of nature and establish a heaven on earth. It goes without saying that this mission of consolidating riches for humanity in general were realized only through the toils of slaves brought from Africa. Europeans, specifically, the Portuguese, invaded Africa around 1415, looking for gold and spices. One hundred years later the Africans were being seized and sold as slaves.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Briefly mention the salient features of Enlightenment movement.

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1.6 COLONIALISM

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), an Italian explorer, intending to find a short route to India, completed four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean, opening the way for the extensive European colonization of the Americas. By the sixteenth century, the Portuguese had conquered the trade routes to Asia that had formerly been controlled by Africans, Asians and Arabs. Soon the Spanish jumped into this race for accumulating wealth. Missionaries were taken to these foreign lands to seek the conversion of the indigenous population of these lands to Christianity. The English, the Dutch, and the French all eventually joined this mission to conquer new lands, and establish colonies. Obviously, this rapacious conduct made them enemies of each other as they rushed to displace each other and establish their exclusive dominion. The need to siphon precious metals and other resources required man power. Thus was established a market for African slaves. Apart from colonizing North America, inroads were made into Africa and India. The British had to leave America following the American War of Independence in 1776, not to be beaten, they infiltrated into Australia, New Zealand and a large number of Pacific Islands. A Eurocentric colonialism was firmly in place.

Ponder Box II

Do you think colonialism was intended to bring “civilization” to the native population, or was it undertaken out of greed?

1.7 EMPIRICISM

1.7.1 Locke

Empiricism, simply stated, is the philosophical theory according to which all knowledge begins with sense experience. John Locke (1632-1704) did not subscribe to the rationalist confidence in reason. He suggested that, rather than rely on abstract reason we should employ experience to gather all that we need to know. This was a breakthrough as intellectual thought in the West since Plato had repudiated sense-based knowledge as fallible. Locke authored two of the most celebrated treatises on government. Locke would display sensitivity to the notion of human rights which had got newly incorporated into the political discourse, especially the right to private property.

Locke contested the doctrine of innate ideas which was seminal to rationalism. He perceived the mind as a “blank tablet” on which experience will keep scribbling throughout a lifetime. There is nothing innate to the mind, everything that exists in the mind is transported into it by our senses. Many scholars are of the opinion that Locke sowed the seed of democracy and the liberal movement. He had famously observed that any government derives its power from the consent of the governed. The “governed” must possess reason if they are to participate in a government.

1.7.2 George Berkeley

Berkeley (1685-1753) actually repudiated the existence of a “substantial” world apart from the world in our mind. He was a deeply devout Christian who felt perturbed at the continuous conflict between science and religion. It was his firm conviction that the atheists subscribed to the existence of an independently existing matter while deriding an immaterial substance and providence. So, his project was to decline the existence of matter without jeopardizing the whole scientific enterprise. This he achieved in his thought by asserting that there was no substantial world apart from our experience. This experience comprises ideas, and these ideas, since an external world has already been rejected, must be sourced to God. Berkeley’s celebrated utterance “To be is to be perceived,” is an articulation of his belief that God is at the core of the universe; in other words, when not being perceived by the human mind, the world is assured perpetuity in a divine consciousness.

Berkeley’s empiricism was rather feeble, he undoubtedly employed the empiricist test to decline the existence of matter, but did not carry it to test his convictions regarding the existence of a material substance.

1.7.3 David Hume

I wish to begin a discussion on Hume (1711-1776) by citing from *Enquiry*, it is a pithy statement of Hume's position. He says, "...Accurate and just reasoning is the only catholic remedy, fitted for all persons and all dispositions; and is alone able to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom."* According to Hume, all simple ideas are memory copies of simple impressions, complex ideas are combinations of simple ones. This is called the empirical criterion of meaning.

Nominalism was the logical outcome of this criterion. Implied therein is also a rebuttal of universals. Hume applied a rigorous version of the empirical criterion to repudiate the notions of substance and self. Hume has advanced elaborate arguments to combat both these foundational concepts in Western thought. In a similar vein he pointed out that no evidence can be produced for the existence of an external world. He sourced this belief in an external world to the faculty of imagination. I shall not go into the details of the argument he has formulated to do this, suffice it is to say that Hume has asserted that the grounds for belief in an external world, or material objects are not logical, they are psychological.

Hume's contribution to modern Western thought is the discovery that a total suspension of beliefs is untenable. Skepticism, pure and simple, is an unviable alternative. For Hume ordinary people carry on the business of their lives despite the absence of a logical evidence for an external world in which these lives are anchored.

1.8 CAPITALISM, INDIVIDUALISM

Let us pause and, interrupting the ongoing descriptions of specific philosophers, try and take stock of the evolving ideas in the modern era. As Robert Solomon has observed, "Modern philosophy was not an extended debate about ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics. It was a defense of humanism and reasonableness, a plea for lively conversation instead of deadly massacres."† There is a dawn of capitalism, and the felt need for a new philosophy to justify it. The Protestant ethic had brought the focus back on worldly success rather than in redemption in a transcendental world. The world of new colonizers witnessed an expansion

* *An Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, ed., L.A.Selby-Bigge, Clarendon, Oxford, 1894, p.1.

† *A Short History of Philosophy*, Robert C. Solomon & Kathleen M. Higgins, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 198.

of their territories, this was true of England, France, Holland and Spain. Trade was no longer localized within, instead an international trade, along with a money-based economy, was generated.

Adam Smith (1723-1790), called the father of free-enterprise system, observed how self-interest could serve public good. A competitive society, prompted by self-interested individuals, will lead to consumer satisfaction and lower prices. The guild-economy, characteristic of a feudal society, gradually declined as a demand for *Laissez-faire* (leave us alone) became shrill. Individualism, as purely commercial, found its passionate defense in Smith.

1.9 VOLTAIRE, ROUSSEAU, THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution of 1789 was, to begin with, a revolution of ideas, of justice, equality and governance. It sought to completely overhaul the relationship between the monarch and the ruled, and to redefine the notion of political power. The monarchy was overthrown in France. The ideas of thinkers like Rousseau (1712-1778) and Voltaire (1694-1778) played an important role in bringing about the revolution. Voltaire had been a vicious critic of the French State and the Church. An admirer of Locke, he argued passionately for reason. Rousseau emphasized that a good government must have the freedom of all its citizens as its central tenet. Rousseau is endlessly quotable. He is reported to have observed that he prefers liberty with danger than peace with slavery. His Social Contract theory stressed that government attains its right to exist and to govern by the consent of the governed. This was a radical position in the eighteenth century. Monarchs, he observed, were not divinely empowered to legislate, only people are sovereign. This thinking exercised a major impact on the French Revolution. The revolution originally, was a popular uprising against the privileges and wealth of the elite.

It would be remiss not to mention The American War of Independence in 1776. It is noteworthy that, since the early settlers in America had very little leisure to engage in complex metaphysical queries, they settled down with a pragmatic sensibility. The English Discourse of Rights was evidenced in the Constitution that was drawn for the fledgling nation. From our point of view it is significant that the talk about Rights and various judicial entitlements got firmly entrenched in the Western consciousness.

1.10 IMMANUEL KANT

Let us resume our historical narrative now. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) marked the definite juncture of the conflict between science and religion. While Kant was a devout Christian, he also believed in Newtonian mechanics. He believed that the discourse about God, freedom and immortality has been consistently present in human civilization, it cannot be offloaded to science. He talked about being fascinated equally by astronomy, as well as the Moral Law. In popular imagination Kant has been likened to a philosopher-magician who seceded from pure versions of rationalism and empiricism, and stressed the need to see their complementarity. However, it may be asserted that this perception of Kant is too restrictive, it projects him as having grappled with only those concerns that had been raised by his fellow-philosophers. Kant may in fact be identified as a genius who worked on many “agendas,” and wished to establish science, religion and morality on a rationalist footing. To Kant goes the credit for having splintered rationality along dual lines, *pure* and *practical*.

Kant divided the world into two aspects, the phenomenal and the noumenal. Metaphysical issues, such as God, Freedom and Immortality fell under the realm of Practical Reason, and belonged to the noumenal realm. On the other hand, the external world pertained to the Pure Reason, an equivalent of scientific rationality. For Kant, the constitution of the objects of our experience proceeds in conformity with the *a priori* intuitions of Space and Time, and the *a priori* Categories of the Understanding. For example, a term like “substance” is not inferred from its attributes, it is a Category, a structuring principle according to which we experience an object. Kant’s rejoinder to the rationalists and the empiricists is that, while knowledge undoubtedly begins with experience, it cannot be sourced out of experience. Experience gains coherence only by being organized by the Categories that lie *a priori* in the Understanding.

This was the picture of the phenomenal world, the world of Newtonian science that found its vindication in Kant. Kant has affirmed a noumenal world as well. This was no arbitrary import. It is meant to curtail the scientific rationality with its attendant determinism. Our capacity to exercise choice, to *will*, is symbolic of our freedom. Of course, here, as in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant is emphatic on the need for a universalization. Morality requires us to respect the intrinsic humanity of others, his famous Categorical Imperatives bear testimony to that.

So, how did Kant impact modern Western thought? In multiple ways, which may be evaluated thus: Firstly, his justification of Newtonian science in

Ponder Box III

Apart from the ways in which philosophers and scientists have talked about space and time, try and think about the ways in which we, you and I, experience them.

the *Critique of Pure Reason* may be seen as a poignant gesture, since one does not find an equivalent support for a scientific theory by any other philosopher. Second, his “faculty” view of consciousness, a fairly problematic notion, has had considerable influence on subsequent traditions of thought in philosophy and in psychology. A consciousness fragmented along affective, conative and cognitive lines in Kant’s moral theory found many critics, who endeavored to bridge the “gaps” in consciousness. Finally, the notion of a human “as an end in him/herself,” and a defense for human autonomy in Kant’s moral theory has had multiple takers. It was a revolutionary call for its time. Today, nearly two hundred and fifty years later, we have to continually remind ourselves of this invaluable insight.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Which ideas proposed by Kant influence the future trajectory of western philosophical thinking?

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1.11 Romanticism

This movement in Europe arose as a protest against an unadulterated scientific rationality being employed to arrive at truths in philosophy and literature. “Truth” in philosophy is not always deductive, inspiration or intuition are more often the norm in this realm, is the Romantic’s plea. Johann Herder (1744-1803), following in the footsteps of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), lamented that the universalism in Kant made him feel “homeless.” He complained that truth has been perceived as timeless by philosophy. The Romantic Movement highlighted the “irrational” aspects of human life, reason cannot be the sole category to look at existence, that was the Romantic premise. Not just reason, but discord, conflict and change are to be found in human life.

1.12 Hegel, Marx

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) began his philosophy by overcoming the dichotomies that he had inherited from his fellow-philosophers. One such duality was phenomenon-noumenon in Kant. Similarly, a faculty view of consciousness was unacceptable to him. This is the reason why he contested the categorical imperative, it

exemplified only reason, abstracting from individual contingencies. Similarly, the Cartesian dualism between mind and body was rejected by Hegel as an incorrect conceptualization of reality. Self-consciousness in Hegel's thought was not a private mental occurrence; it was located always in a social space. A key Hegelian insight was to discern unity in this vast multiplicity of norms, customs, cultures and world-views. An expression frequently employed to understand Hegel's philosophy is "dialectical." *Dialectic* means "giving reasons"—each form of life vindicates what it takes to be authoritative for itself, or reasons why revisions within the world-views must be undertaken.

Karl Marx (1818-1883), though a consistent critic of Hegel, ended up displaying not an insubstantial influence by the latter. Hegel had talked about contradictions that come into a philosophy, his mission was to resolve them. Marx perceived the conflict between the *bourgeoisie* and the *proletariat* as exemplifying an economic confrontation. Where Hegel had looked at contesting *ideas*, Marx applied this concept of conflict in a concrete historical, social context. Inscribed upon Marx's grave are the following words, "*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.*"

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the salient features of Modern Western Thought? OR, Discuss how ideas in the modern Western thought have evolved.

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1.13 LET US SUM UP

We have dealt here with many philosophers and their thinking, some movements, social, political and literary, have also been highlighted. Nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been equally eventful. Phenomenology, Existentialism, Structuralism, and Post-Structuralism are some of the most prominent ways in which thinking in the West has articulated itself. This later thought has borrowed heavily from the traditions that we have studied in this Unit. The key issues discussed in this unit were,

- A history from approximately 1500-1800 CE.
- The Reformation as a challenge to the authority of Roman Catholic Church.
- A science deriving from theological sources challenged, the dawn of a new physics.

- The impact of movements such as Rationalism, Empiricism & Criticism.
- With Descartes a legacy of subjectivism is inaugurated. Truth available directly to the thinker, the mediation of the clergy not necessary.
- Enlightenment: A resurgence of Reason.
- Colonialism resulted in territorial expansion, expanded international trade.
- Locke sowed the seeds of democracy and liberalism.
- A Protestant ethics gave legitimacy to capitalism and individualism.
- With French Revolution new ideals of liberty and equality introduced into societies that had been hierarchical.
- Kant's contribution to modern Western thought is the recognition of human dignity, and the need for autonomy.
- Hegel gave to us a dialectical movement among ideas, Marx applied this method in a concrete socio- economic context.

1.14 KEY WORDS

Reformation: The Reformation was the start of Protestantism and the split of the Western Church into Protestantism and what is now the Roman Catholic Church.

Romanticism: A movement in the arts and literature that originated in the late 18th century, emphasizing inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual.

The Enlightenment: It was an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries with global influences and effects. Also, the age of scientific reason.

1.15 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Web-links

- http://sdeuoc.ac.in/sites/default/files/sde_videos/SLM-19508-%20Philosophy-Modern%20western%20philosophy.pdf
- <https://iep.utm.edu/category/history/>
- <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/>

1.16 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

(Guideposts to Answers. Learners are advised to substantiate their answers by using their own illustrations and examples, wherever applicable.)

Check Your Progress I

1.

- Faith in Reason.
- Intellectual Autonomy.
- Cosmic Humanism.

Check Your Progress II

1.

- Justification of Newtonian Physics.
- Faculty view of consciousness/Categories of reason.
- Human as an end in her/himself.
- Idea of Human autonomy.

Check Your Progress III

1.

- Mention the time-frame, i.e., 1500-1800 CE.
- A revolt against the Roman Catholic Church because the Church was interfering into matters of the state. Besides, it was promoting cosmologies that were unacceptable to the new science.
- The scientific revolution begun by Copernicus that knelt a death-blow to Aristotelian science.
- Descartes in the rationalist tradition inaugurated the era of subjectivity in the West. Individualism is also a consequence.
- Enlightenment, celebrating a scientific reason, fought against dogma and superstition.

- Colonialism, accompanied by enhanced trade, generated capitalism and a competitive society.
- Kant's call for autonomy, and the intrinsic dignity of human beings.
- Hegel's Spirit, inspired by a cosmic humanism, a unificatory ideal.
- Marx's agenda to change the world by redefining the class relations.



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UNIT 2 THE RENAISSANCE*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Major Events and Their Significance
- 2.3 Aspects of Renaissance Culture and Philosophy
- 2.4 Major Thinkers during the Renaissance
- 2.5 Major Areas of Significance for Western Philosophy
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Key Words
- 2.8 Further Readings and References
- 2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to provide an overview of the Renaissance, and the impact it has had in the development of Western Philosophy. Quite often we find that the philosophy of a given time is related to the culture from which it arises. Hence, if we wish to understand the period of ‘Modern Western Philosophy,’ we would need to be familiar with the prevailing cultures of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. This unit deals with the Renaissance and the next unit will deal with the Enlightenment.

By the end of this unit, you should be familiar with:

- The basic understanding of the period of the Renaissance
- Major events and their significance during this period
- Aspects of Renaissance culture and philosophy
- Prominent thinkers and personalities and their contribution
- The significance of this period in terms of Modern Western Philosophy

2.1 INTRODUCTION

* Dr. Keith D’Souza, St. Pius College, Mumbai. (This unit is a revised version of the unit titled “The Renaissance” of BPY-008).

The term 'Renaissance,' sometimes 'Renascence,' is derived from a French / Latin word meaning 'rebirth'. It refers to an experience of the European world that began from the 14th century, and was characterised by a rebirth of learning, arts and culture. The people of this period felt that there was a sharp break between their own age and the 'Dark Ages' that had preceded them, and moreover, that there were similarities between their own civilisation and that of the Greeks and Romans, who had flourished between 400 B.C.E and 300 C.E. Later historians have sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed with this point of view. Jules Michelet in his book *La Renaissance* held that the two most significant features of this epoch were 'the discovery of the world, and the discovery of man'.

The Renaissance began in Italy. It lasted from around 1300 to 1600. Historically, it followed the Mediaeval period and led into the Modern period, which began with the Enlightenment. Politically, Mediaeval Europe was dominated by the feudal hierarchy. This meant that the peasants were subject to a landowner, who in turn would be subject to a higher lord and so on, all the way up to the King. In the field of learning, the Catholic Church was dominant, and all arts, sciences and philosophical learning were regarded as servants of Christian theology. Hence, mediaeval architecture expressed itself in Cathedrals, while mediaeval art expressed itself in the form of religious paintings. Even the ancient authors were read principally from the point of view of mastering the Latin language, so as to study theology which was taught in Latin. Scholasticism was the term used to describe this attitude and methodology, which was declining by the middle of the 14th century.

The Renaissance put an end to this subservience of the arts, sciences and philosophy. Beginning from the 14th century, there was an increasing tendency to study these subjects for their own sake, and not merely as servants of theology. This led to a flowering of the arts and sciences, and paved the way for the 'Modern' period in philosophy. This new-found independence in thought was also manifested in the Protestant Reformation, which ended the Catholic Church's dominance in northern Europe. The feudal system was also collapsing during this period, partly due to the increasing number of urban dwellers and traders, who did not fit in with the land-based feudal hierarchy. Ultimately, all these changes amounted to a totally new vision of the human person through Renaissance Humanism.

The revival of arts and learning was financed by the commercial revival of Europe, through the rise of great banking families in Italy (particularly in the city of Florence), during the 14th century, followed by the discovery of the sea routes to India and America towards the end of the 15th century. The Renaissance transformed Mediaeval Europe beyond recognition. It

resulted in the development of an intellectual independence that no longer took arguments from authority for granted, but instead strove to explore and discover new frontiers in philosophy, science and technology. Hence, it took Europe to the threshold of the Age of Reason. The period of the Renaissance was followed by that of the Enlightenment, during which new attitudes, supported by new discoveries, gave birth to Modern Philosophy and Science, which are characterised by their total independence from Theology.

2.2 MAJOR EVENTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

1305-1378 After over 12 centuries, the Popes leave Rome to stay at Avignon in France. This is known as the ‘Babylonian Captivity of the Church’ and results in a loss of prestige for the Church leaders.

1341 Petrarch, the first great humanist, is crowned as ‘Poet Laureate’ in Rome.

1348 The Black Death in Europe: Bubonic plague drastically reduces the population. However, the plague is followed by an economic revival.

1378 The Pope returns to Rome but the French insist on having a Pope at Avignon as well, resulting in the Great Schism or split in the Church.

1397 The Medici Bank is founded in Florence. The Medicis, great patrons of art and culture, soon become practically the rulers of the city. Also in Florence, Greek literature is introduced as a subject at the University.

1400-1450 Donatello, artist and sculptor, flourishes in Florence.

1450 Johann Gutenberg invents the printing press (printing was earlier known to the Chinese), and uses it to print the Latin Bible.

1453 Constantinople falls to the Turks; many Greek scholars settle in Italy, bringing their manuscripts.

1479 The Italians (of Venice) are defeated by the Turks; hence the ancient trading route to India (via Egypt) is cut off. The Portuguese and Spanish begin exploring new routes.

1492 Christopher Columbus, in search of India, reaches America.

1495-1498 Leonardo da Vinci paints *The Last Supper*.

1498 Vasco da Gama discovers a sea route to India, arriving at Kerala. The Portuguese become the first European colonial power in India.

1503-1505 Leonardo da Vinci paints the *Mona Lisa*, while Michelangelo completes his statue of *David*.

1508-1512 Michelangelo paints the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in St. Peter's Cathedral, Rome.

1517 Rise of Martin Luther, who initiates the Protestant Reformation in Germany. He is followed by Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, and (in the 1530s) by John Calvin in France.

1519 onwards Expansion of the Spanish empire in Central and South America.

1543 Copernicus publishes his work on the Solar System, claiming that the Earth travels around the Sun.

1546-1563 The Catholic Church holds a Council at Trent, in Italy, and initiates a process of Counter-Reformation. The measures taken include strict censorship of books (resulting in the "Index" of forbidden books), with consequences for philosophers and scientists in southern Europe.

1585 Introduction of the modern (Gregorian) calendar by Pope Gregory XIII.

1588 The Spanish Armada (Navy) is defeated by Queen Elizabeth I of England, paving the way for the rise of new colonial powers like the British, Dutch and French.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is generally understood by the word 'Renaissance'?

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2. What are some of the major events which gave rise to the formation of this period?

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2.3 ASPECTS OF RENAISSANCE CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

2.3.1 Humanism

Today, humanism refers to an attitude of deep concern for the welfare of humanity. However, during the time of the Renaissance, a humanist was one who had mastered the five subjects known as humanities. The Italian universities were famous for these humanities, which included grammar, rhetoric (the art of persuasive speech), poetry, history and moral philosophy. The humanists often studied these subjects for their own sake and not merely as an aid to theology. Hence, the attitude of the humanists was quite distinct from that of the Scholastics, who followed the Mediaeval tradition. This led some of the humanists to look down upon the later Scholastics, who were unable to move beyond Aristotle's philosophy.

Renaissance Humanism began in Italy, with the rediscovery of certain ancient manuscripts of classical Latin literature. Later, with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a number of Greek scholars immigrated to Italy, bringing their precious manuscripts with them. Hence, the study of the Greek language and literature became more widespread than before. The writings of Plato, and other early philosophers, were read in a new light. All this had a direct impact on society in the fields of letter writing, literature, art, architecture, philosophy, religion and the sciences. Further, a positive attitude emerged which led scholars to study these subjects for their own sake, and not merely as a prelude to the study of theology.

2.3.2 The Arts and Architecture

The architects of the Renaissance went back to the Classical Greek temples and Roman buildings for their models. Churches were increasingly built with domed roofs rather than vaults. The construction of St. Peter's Basilica, in Rome (1506-1667), can be said to be one of the highlights of this period. The dome of this church (designed by Michelangelo) was modelled on the ancient Roman Pantheon.

The secularisation of architecture also took place during this period. Henceforth, there were many rich noblemen and princes who could afford to build a palace for themselves, and elaborate buildings began spreading throughout Italy. A large number of country houses in France were built during this period.

Sculptors and painters also began to look to ancient models, which were regarded as more natural and lifelike than mediaeval art. Rather than follow convention, the artists studied the human body and attained a better sense of proportion. A sense of perspective was also achieved by painting distant objects smaller than the ones nearby. Italian painting generally

remained religious in nature. Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci were famous for their paintings.

The art of music also began to flourish during the Renaissance period. New instruments were invented, and harmony was increasingly used, though most music (as an art form) was still composed either for the courts or for religious purposes. Music composed during this period remains an integral part of European culture today.

2.3.3 Literature

The Renaissance can be said to have begun with the rediscovery and translation of many ancient Roman and Greek texts. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which had earlier been known only through brief Latin summaries, could now be read in full, as could other ancient literature. This led to the revival of certain features of classical style, which were imitated by humanist authors and poets. The Popes shared this love for classical literature, and established the Vatican Library in 1447. The humanist scholars, who were skilled in languages, were often employed as secretaries to the Popes, princes and noblemen of the period. Initially, their letters were composed in Latin, but by the end of the 14th century, vernacular languages were beginning to take over. Many humanists were also known for their poetry. Petrarch, an early humanist, was crowned as 'poet laureate' in Rome in the year 1341. The humanists began to contribute to the spread of new ideas through their works. A Greek edition of the Bible, produced by Erasmus in 1516, revealed that the Latin version in use had deviated in certain places from the Greek text, which was now understood to be the original. This led to new religious movements. Similarly, the field of politics, which had been changing rapidly with the decay of feudalism, was analysed in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Rabelais' *Gargantua*, and several other works. Cervantes' famous *Don Quixote* took a humorous look at the outdated feudal system. One of the greatest European playwrights ever, William Shakespeare, flourished during the later years of the Renaissance.

During the Middle Ages, manuscripts had to be copied by hand. The arrival of printing simplified the process of making copies of books, and hence paved the way for the spread of literacy and learning. Paper had been invented by the Chinese, and was introduced into Europe by the Arabs in Spain. In 1450, Johann Gutenberg, a German, designed and built a printing press and printed the famous Gutenberg Bible, in Latin. Ultimately, printing proved

to be a great liberative force, spreading the light of learning to the common man through affordable mass-produced literature, public libraries, and soon newspapers.

2.3.4 Religion

The two major religious events of the Renaissance were the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and the Protestant Reformation. The Popes had generally been associated with Rome, but due to largely political compulsions, one of them decided to establish his permanent seat in Avignon, a town in southern France. When a later Pope decided to return to Rome, there was opposition and the result was that two Popes were elected, one at Avignon and one at Rome. This resulted in constant conflicts. The presence of two Popes divided the Christian world, and lowered the status of the Church. This condition lasted until 1417. The Popes were heavily concerned with secular matters, and vast wealth began to accumulate in Rome. Exactly a hundred years later (in 1517), Martin Luther, a German monk, condemned what he described as the Catholic Church's immoral ways of collecting money through the sale of indulgences (cancellation of the punishment due to sin, in return for a donation). He also pointed out other areas of corruption that had crept into religious practices and structures. The need for change was felt strongly and many people from different strata of society sided with Martin Luther. His followers included a number of German princes, and with their help, he established a Church organisation that was independent of the Pope. Luther intended this to be a temporary measure until Rome itself could be purified of its immorality. However, other reformers such as Zwingli and Calvin began to take still more radical measures, such as destroying the statues in the Churches. It soon became impossible to heal the divisions within Christianity, which have therefore endured to this day. The new churches began to call themselves Protestant.

2.3.5 Science

During the Mediaeval period, arguments based on Aristotle's writings were still considered to be more important than actual observation of nature. The Renaissance, however, was an age of discovery. It opened people's minds to new ways of thinking, and thus helped to create the modern scientific mentality. One of the key discoveries of the Middle Ages was the fact that the Earth was in constant motion around the Sun. This idea, first proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus and later by Galileo, led to what is known as the 'Copernican Revolution.' After

this discovery, humans were no longer able to consider themselves the centre of the Universe. This led to a dramatic change in the European worldview.

Such discoveries in astronomy, as well as important medical studies such as Vesalius' detailed description of the human body, and William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood, led the thinkers of the Renaissance to reject all blind dependence on Aristotle's teachings. Aristotle had held that blood was formed in the liver. His views were now challenged. But more significant was the new scientific method of observation and experiment, by which he was shown to be in the wrong. Towards the end of the Renaissance period, most European scholars were aware that if they wanted to progress, merely turning to the ancients was not enough; they needed to surpass the classical authors in their knowledge, and this knowledge could be attained through the scientific method. Thus, the Scientific Renaissance paved the way for the next age, the Age of Enlightenment.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is understood by Renaissance 'humanism'?

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2. In what ways did Renaissance culture differ from mediaeval or 'Middle Age' culture?

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2.4 MAJOR THINKERS DURING THE RENAISSANCE

Petrarch (1304-1374) has been described as the first great humanist and the first modern scholar. Noted as a poet, he was crowned as 'Poet Laureate' in Rome, in the year 1341. He travelled from city to city, and composed literature in Italian and Latin. He rightly described

himself as standing between two eras, and in many ways the attitudes of the Renaissance were first seen in his writings.

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) began originally by studying Church law, and ended his career as a Cardinal of the Catholic Church. He was a man ahead of his times. He anticipated Copernicus by holding that the Earth was not the centre of the Universe. He made major contributions through his study of ancient manuscripts. He is famous for his philosophy which he explained in his book *On Learned Ignorance*. He criticised the philosophy of Aristotle, which was the prevailing view at that time, and held that we can attain only an approximate knowledge of reality which he calls 'conjecture'. Although he did not belong to any particular school, he paved the way for the revival of Platonic ideas during the Renaissance.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), from Rotterdam in Holland, was the foremost humanist of the Renaissance. He did much to spread the values of the humanists. In 1516, he published his Greek text of the New Testament, which had wide-ranging implications for the field of religion. It showed that there were errors in the official Latin Bible that was being used. He also wrote *In Praise of Folly*, which satirically exposed the shortcomings of the upper classes and religious institutions of his time. Martin Luther was strongly influenced by the writings of Erasmus, and thus the humanism of Erasmus prepared the way for the Reformation.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was an Italian statesman, who served at the court of the Republic of Florence (in Italy), which was then dominated by the Medici family of bankers. After he left the court in 1512, he began publishing his views in the form of books, the most famous of which is *The Prince*. This contains an analysis of Italian politics, and shows how a prince who is not bound by scruples will be successful not only in ruling his own city but also in conquering his neighbours. This has given rise to the English term 'Machiavellian', which refers to plans and schemes that involve deceit or other underhand means to gain power.

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) justly famous for bringing about the 'Copernican Revolution,' was a Polish astronomer and scientist, who realised that the patterns of the movement of the heavenly bodies would make more sense if the Sun, rather than the Earth, was regarded as the centre of the Universe. He published this view (known as the

Heliocentric Theory) in his book *De Revolutionibus*, which was printed in the year of his death (1543). This was a daring theory because it seemed to contradict both the Bible and Greek Philosophy. Though his views took time to get established, this book marked a major milestone in the history of science.

Thomas More (1477-1535) was an eminent humanist and statesman. He studied law at Oxford University, where he met several humanists. Later, he served as Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII of England. However, when Henry VIII proclaimed that the King, rather than the Pope, was the head of the Church of England, Thomas More refused to sign the Act. He was sent to the Tower of London and beheaded. His *Utopia*, a novel about an imaginary republic, was a protest against the abuses of the day. It is an important work of political philosophy.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was well known for his lead role in the reformation of the German church. He was a monk in the Augustinian Order, and was a professor of theology. He was shocked by the wealth and the scandalous life of some of the clergy, especially in Rome. He began his struggle to reform Christianity by protesting against another monk named Johann Tetzel, who was collecting money in return for ‘indulgences.’ These indulgences were designed to excuse a person from the penalties of his or her sins. Luther also called for a change in the Church structure. When several of the German princes supported him, a new Church (later known as the Lutheran Church) was established, based on principles of the Bible alone as the source of doctrine, and faith alone as the means of salvation.

John Calvin (1509-1564) was a Frenchman who expounded the principles of Protestantism in a systematic manner in his book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He stressed the importance of the Bible, and stopped all practices not mentioned in Scripture. He believed in predestination – the belief that human beings are predestined by God either for Heaven or Hell. The French Protestant communities, later to be known as the Huguenots, accepted his doctrines. When he had to leave France for Geneva (Switzerland), his followers managed to take over the city and rule it on Calvinist principles. The movement spread to Holland and Scotland as well.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) held views on religion, society and human life that were quite different from those of his contemporaries. He argued, for example, that reason was the only source of knowledge, that the Copernican model was correct and that the universe was infinite in size. He also taught that the universe was made up of two principles, namely matter and the soul, both of which were aspects of the same substance. This idea, similar to Baruch Spinoza's, led him to a form of monism. He was condemned as a heretic and executed in 1600.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was an English intellectual reformer. He held a number of Governmental posts during the reign of King James I of England. In his *Novum Organum*, he proposed a new system of knowledge based on the principle of induction, which should be used along with deduction in order to build human knowledge. Through induction (by which we observe a number of individual facts and are able to draw a general conclusion) we are able to learn not only through reasoning but also through our experience. The method of induction still serves as the basis of scientific research today.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is the best known English playwright of the Renaissance. His historical dramas, comedies and tragedies reveal a deep understanding of human nature, and have been a tremendous force in the creation of modern English literature.

Johann Kepler (1571-1630) was a German astronomer and mathematician. Reflecting on the views of Pythagoras, he came to the conclusion that the Universe has a geometrical arrangement. He abandoned the ancient theory that the orbits of the planets were circular, and instead brought out the three laws of planetary motion, which state that the orbit of the planet is elliptical in shape. He is known to have corresponded with Galileo.

2.5 MAJOR AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The following advances that took place during the Renaissance are significant for the development of Western philosophy:

1. There was a move to return to the original texts or sources, rather than to read their accepted interpretations. This attitude of going to the origins of texts was echoed in the numerous 'Modern Philosophy' projects of discovering the origins of human experience, rather than choosing any other commonly accepted starting point. Later units will show that the Rationalists chose the mind and its powers as the starting point of experience and knowledge, while the Empiricists chose the senses and what they revealed as the starting point of experience and knowledge.
2. This desire of going to the original texts resulted in a gradual turning away from the dominance of Scholastic and Aristotelean-influenced thinking, and an embracing of alternative worldviews, including a renewed interest in Platonism.
3. The turning away from theological interests to more humanistic interests sowed the first seeds of the gradual secularisation of learning, and the secularization of European consciousness in general. The seeds of this movement have taken root and grown steadily in Europe, so that what we see today in the contemporary European scenario is a culture which is predominantly characterised by secular and humanistic ideals, rather than religious ones. This has direct consequences for contemporary European philosophical interests.
4. The religious turmoil which Europe witnessed during this age (and during the Enlightenment) was one more reason which determined the later reluctance to allow religion to enter spheres of social and political influence. That is why, as compared to Medieval Philosophy, Modern and Contemporary philosophy are not as concerned about theological questions as they are about the human and the social horizon of meaning.
5. The emphasis on creativity in artistic expression (in art, sculpture, architecture and music) replaced the desire to repeat the aesthetic forms of the medieval age. This also had an echo in philosophy, where creativity in thinking and in choosing new starting points for philosophical inquiry was encouraged, rather than frowned upon.
6. The invention of printing and the spread of literature enabled philosophical tracts to become more widespread and to be available throughout the continent. Printing made the process of education (including exposure to these philosophical works) comparatively more accessible and democratic, especially since works were translated into vernacular languages, and widely disseminated for the first time.

7. This period also witnessed the decline of a feudal social structure and a feudal mentality. Consequently, capitalism was born and grew rapidly, aided by the growth of Protestantism. All of these had serious consequences in terms of socio-political philosophy, especially in terms of the birth of Marxism, which was a response to capitalism. The modern phenomenon of globalization is a development of capitalism, which had its origins in this age.
8. The Copernican Revolution set Europe on the path of scientific progress. Once again, theological interests and control gave way to more positive and scientific inclinations and inquiries. This resulted in the rapid advance of science and technology in the Age of Reason (17th century), and during the Enlightenment in general (17th and 18th century), and in the birth of 'Positivism' and many human-centred philosophical projects in 'Contemporary Philosophy' (from 1800 onwards).

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Give examples of major thinkers who represented this period, and their contribution.

.....

2. In what way was the Renaissance significant in terms of Western Philosophy?

.....

2.6 LET US SUM UP

The period of 'Modern Western Philosophy' cannot be fully understood without reference to the prevailing cultures of the time in Europe, namely, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In this unit we have portrayed the basic features of Renaissance culture. We

began by providing a basic understanding and overview of the ‘Renaissance,’ by highlighting the most significant and defining moments during this period. We then focused on key aspects of the culture and philosophy of the times, and some prominent thinkers and personalities who contributed to the development of this culture. Finally, we reflected over the significance this culture had in terms of the development of the history of western philosophy.

Try and remember the following key points related to the Renaissance:

- ‘Renaissance’ means ‘rebirth’. This period (from the 14th to the 16th centuries) saw the rebirth of classical patterns in art, architecture and literature in Europe. It is sometimes called the ‘Early Modern’ period.
- This was also a period of cultural and social turmoil. The feudal system declined and trade became more important, leading to the beginnings of a capitalist economy.
- The Renaissance began in Italy with the revival of interest in Greek learning and Greek philosophy. All this was funded by rich banking families, and several Popes, who were patrons of art and architecture.
- The five subjects known as humanities (grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy) began to be studied for their own sake, and not as a preparation for theology. Hence, the Renaissance became an age of humanism, dominated by humanists such as Erasmus. The humanists also prepared the ground for the Reformation which affected the religious sphere.
- All this undermined the mediaeval schools of thought, and led to independent thinking. An interest arose in observing nature directly, rather than merely quoting from the ancient authorities. This led to the birth of modern science through the discovery of the heliocentric theory (Copernicus), and the focus on the law of induction (Francis Bacon).
- During this period, sea routes to America and India were also discovered.
- The most important invention of this period was that of the art of printing. Printing led to the spread of learning across Europe and prepared the way for the Enlightenment.

2.7 KEY WORDS

Heliocentric Theory: The theory proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus, which states that the Sun (rather than the earth) is at the centre of the solar system, and the earth and other planets revolve around it.

Protestantism: The most recent of the three major branches in Christianity. Protestantism arose from the Reformation. Its main characteristics are the belief that we are saved by God's grace through faith, and a strong reliance on the authority of the Bible.

Reformation: A revolution in the religious sphere brought about by Martin Luther, John Calvin and their followers, which resulted in the creation of independent Christian churches in several parts of Europe.

Renaissance: The period in European history following the Middle Ages. It lasted from 1300 to 1600 and saw the revival of classical culture, the growth of humanism, and the important geographical discoveries of sea routes between Europe and other continents.

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Web-links:

- Renaissance-Related Resources:
www.learner.org/exhibits/renaissance/resources.html
- Mediaeval Sourcebook: Renaissance www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook1x.html
- Italian Renaissance: history.hanover.edu/courses/italren.html
- The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: www.iep.utm.edu
- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: plato.stanford.edu
- The Meta-Encyclopedia of Philosophy: www.ditext.com/encyc/frame.html

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. The term 'Renaissance' is derived from a French / Latin word meaning 'rebirth'. It refers to an experience of the European world that began from the 14th century and was characterised by a rebirth of learning, arts and culture.
2. The following are some of the major events that gave rise to the Renaissance:
 - a) The rise of great banking families in Italy
 - b) The immigration of Greek scholars to Italy after the fall of Constantinople
 - c) The increase in the number of urban dwellers
 - d) The rediscovery of ancient texts and the invention of printing
 - e) Interest in the study of the humanities

Check Your Progress II

1. During the Renaissance, a humanist was one who had mastered the five subjects known as humanities: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. Unlike the Scholastics, the Humanists had a positive attitude towards these subjects, and studied them for their own sake and not merely as a preparation for theology.

2. Some major differences between Mediaeval and Renaissance culture are as follows:

- a) Mediaeval Europe had a feudal social structure, whereas Renaissance Europe had several city states, nation states, and the first colonial empires.
- b) Mediaeval education was oriented towards theology, whereas during the Renaissance the humanities were studied for their own sake. Books became widespread in the Renaissance due to the invention of printing.
- c) Renaissance art, architecture and literature were influenced by classical models, which had not been used during the Middle Ages.
- d) Aristotelian philosophy which was dominant during the Middle Ages lost its prestige during the Renaissance, and the philosophy of Plato gained more attention once again.

Check Your Progress III

1. The following thinkers are most significant for this period:

- a) Petrarch: He was the first great humanist, and revived classical themes in his poetry.
- b) Erasmus: He spread the values of the humanists throughout Europe.
- c) Copernicus: He proved that the Sun was the centre of the solar system.
- d) Thomas More: He wrote *Utopia* – a work of political philosophy.
- e) Martin Luther: He attempted to reform the Church on biblical lines.
- f) Francis Bacon: He gave importance to the principle of induction.

2. The Renaissance was a turning point in the history of philosophy. It was an age of discoveries, which Michelet has described as ‘the discovery of the world, and the discovery of man.’ Important developments include the Copernican Revolution, the invention of printing, and the use of the inductive method in scientific inquiry. Together, all these changes put an end to the dominance of scholastic theology, and thus, philosophy and science were set free from their role as servants of theology. The Renaissance writers began to recognise the limitations of depending on authorities such as Aristotle, and this resulted in the growth of independent thinking, leading to the birth of Modern Philosophy.

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Major Events during this Period

3.3 Aspects of Enlightenment Culture and Philosophy

3.4 Major Figures during the Enlightenment

3.5 Significance of the Enlightenment for Western Philosophy

3.6 Let Us Sum Up

3.7 Key Words

3.8 Further Readings and References

3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to provide an overview of the Enlightenment and the impact it has had on the development of Western Philosophy. As is often the case, the philosophy of a given is closely related to the culture from which it arises. Hence if we wish to understand the period of ‘Modern Western Philosophy,’ we would need to be familiar with the prevailing culture of the Enlightenment. The high point of this culture was in the 18th century, but we shall extend our study to also include its origins, thus studying the period from 1600-1800 C.E. (Remember that the previous culture – portrayed in the previous Unit – was the Renaissance, which dominated European consciousness roughly from 1400-1600, though we have extended our study of this period from 1300-1600).

By the end of this unit the learner will be familiar with:

- The basic understanding of the period of the Enlightenment
- The major events and their significance during this period.

* Dr. Keith D’Souza, St. Pius College, Mumbai. (This unit is a revised version of the unit “The Enlightenment” of BPY-008).

- Prominent thinkers and personalities and their contribution
- The significance of this period in terms of Modern Western Philosophy

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The 17th century (the age of Descartes and Francis Bacon) is generally referred to as the Age of Reason, while the term ‘Enlightenment’ is often restricted to the 18th century. There is in fact no clear demarcation between the two. Hence when we refer to the ‘Enlightenment,’ we shall refer to the events unfolding in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries (that is, roughly from 1600- 1800).

The period of the Enlightenment is characterized by the growing acceptance of reason (rather than cultural and religious tradition) as the primary authority used to settle philosophical, scientific and political problems. This emergence of a reason-based approach to life brought the age of the Renaissance to a close. This is because the Western mind entered a brand new phase in its history, during which there was no need to prove one’s theories by citing Plato, Aristotle or any other authoritative thinkers of the past any more. Anyone was free to contribute to the stock of human knowledge through the means of observation, experimentation, and inference. A new age with a scientific mindset had begun.

Almost every aspect of the Enlightenment is linked with this basic shift in philosophy. Indeed, the shift had partially already begun during the Renaissance. But the Enlightenment was in a special way the awakening of Europe, beginning with England. It was a time when philosophical ideas began to play a role in transforming the day-to-day lives of even the simplest people. Unlike previous cultural shifts such as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment was not restricted to a particular social class but directly affected the general public through the spread of science, education and democratic values. Wherever the new aspirations of the people were blocked, pent-up tensions resulted in dramatic events such as the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. The most important countries influenced by the Enlightenment were England, France and Germany. To

Ponder Box I

How did the ejection of King in France contribute to enlightenment?

begin with, in England, the 17th and 18th centuries were characterized by the steady progress of science. The sciences were now completely separated from philosophy. The development of science in England finally led to the Industrial Revolution through which technology changed the face of England. Alongside this, there was a steady growth in the British colonial empire, especially in India. Australia was discovered by Captain Cook. Trade with such colonies helped to enrich England and fueled the Industrial Revolution.

France, on the other hand, was driven by the prestige of the Bourbon royal family. Under the great King Louis XIV, France became the cultural center of Europe and all other European nations tried to imitate French customs and manners. Every art and science were dominated by the needs of the King and the Royal Court. However, during the 18th century, the common people of France began to lose their respect for the King and were influenced instead by the writings of Voltaire and other radical thinkers. Finally, King Louis XVI was overthrown and a Republic was established.

Germany was divided into many small states as a result of the 30 years' war. Austria and Prussia were dominant but neither of them was able to unify the whole of Germany during this period, and Germany was often vulnerable to the French. Nevertheless, German philosophy flourished, and the period of the Enlightenment produced some of the greatest of philosophers.

At the close of the Enlightenment, the intellectual atmosphere of the modern age was already in place. Education was widespread in every country of Europe. The Industrial Revolution had begun in England but had been adopted by other countries as well. Finally, freedom and democracy, the hallmarks of the modern age, had established themselves as ideals in England, America, France and gradually other European countries.

3.2 MAJOR EVENTS DURING THIS PERIOD (1600-1800)

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|-----------|--|
| 1600 | The East India Company is founded in England. |
| 1609 | Kepler publishes <i>The New Astronomy</i> based on his first two laws. |
| 1610 | Galileo publishes <i>The Starry Messenger</i> , containing reports of his telescopic discoveries including the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus. |
| 1618-1648 | The Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants in Germany. |
| 1620 | Francis Bacon's <i>Novum Organum</i> introduces a new system of logic based on the method of induction. |

- 1628 William Harvey publishes a description of the circulation of blood.
- 1632 Galileo Galilei presents his arguments in favor of Copernicus' theory in the form of a book titled *Dialogue on the Two Chief Systems of the World*. The book brings him into conflict with the Church.
- 1641 Publication of Rene Descartes' *Meditations*.
- 1642-1714 Reign of Louis XIV, the 'Sun King' of France. France becomes the center of European culture.
- 1645 The first calculating machine is invented by Blaise Pascal.
- 1649 King Charles I of England is beheaded after a seven-year civil war. Parliament takes over the government of the country.
- 1651 Thomas Hobbes publishes *Leviathan*, a work of political philosophy.
- 1687 Sir Isaac Newton publishes *Principia Mathematica*.
- 1688-89 The Stuart dynasty is overthrown in England and William of Orange (from the Netherlands) is invited to be the King.
Establishment of a Constitutional Government brought about via the Declaration of Rights.
- 1690 John Locke's *Two Treatises on Civil Government*.
- 1705 The steam pump is invented by Thomas Newcomen.
- 1721 Robert Walpole becomes the first Prime Minister of England.
- 1740-87 Reign of Frederick II the Great, 'enlightened' ruler of Prussia and friend of Voltaire.
- 1744 onwards: Anglo-French struggle for supremacy in India.
- 1751 Diderot's *Encyclopedie* began to be published (a multi-volume exposition by prominent thinkers to promote the ideals of the Enlightenment).
- 1756-63 The Seven Years' War; France loses its influence in India and Canada.
- 1757 The Battle of Plassey: The British become the *de facto* rulers of Bengal.
- 1758 Voltaire completes *Candide*.
- 1762 Rousseau publishes *The Social Contract*.
- 1764 Battle of Buxar: The Mughal Emperor is defeated and becomes a pensioner of the British. The Marathas become a leading power in India.
- 1768 Captain Cook begins his voyages on the *Endeavour*.
- 1769 James Watt patents the improved steam engine.

1775-83 American War of Independence.

1781 Immanuel Kant publishes *A Critique of Pure Reason*.

Emperor Joseph I of Austria liberates the serfs.

1789 onwards: The French Revolution.

1799 Napoleon becomes First Consul of France (later Emperor in 1804).

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is generally understood by the term 'Enlightenment'?

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3.3 ASPECTS OF ENLIGHTENMENT CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

3.3.1 The Scientific Culture

Science in ancient and medieval times was largely dominated by the 'deductive method,' which began with generally accepted conclusions (which were culturally and theologically accepted as true) and then only applied to particular observable cases. After the Renaissance, and especially during the Enlightenment, this deductive method gave way to the 'inductive method,' which was based on observations leading to newer and newer conclusions. This gave rise to new discoveries and paved the way for the 'Industrial Revolution.' This new form of scientific demonstration and knowledge began to have greater prestige among the general population, and scientists such as Isaac Newton and Edmund Halley were as prominent in their day as Michelangelo and Leonardo had been during the Renaissance. Scientific inventions such as the steam engine began to have an increasing application in controlling the forces of nature. The advances in travel made the world grow smaller and allowed the development of the vast British and Russian Empires. The new knowledge was compiled by the Encyclopaedists in France.

Although the epoch can be said to have begun with Galileo, the person who stands out with the greatest clarity is Sir Isaac Newton, the British scientist who discovered the Universal Law of Gravitation and thereby showed how every object in the Universe is related to every other object. Chemists increasingly discarded the ancient concept of the

four elements, while biologists, rather disturbingly, were beginning to show that man – contrary to what the people of the Middle Ages had believed – was in fact similar in many ways to the lower animals. This ‘humbling’ of man, however, was not taken negatively but seen as a challenge, namely, how human society could achieve the greatest welfare of the greatest number of people, through the mastery of nature by means of science and technology.

3.3.2 New Philosophical Beginning

The Philosophy of the Enlightenment began with Descartes’ decision to test all previous philosophy on the criteria of certainty, thereby making a fresh beginning with a corpus of absolutely certain and indubitable facts. His methodology was highly influential and he was regarded as being the father of a whole new movement of thought which developed through the course of French and German Rationalism, English Empiricism and finally German Idealism.

Hence a new age dawned – the age of ‘Modern Philosophy’. Modern philosophy no longer made appeal to authorities such as Plato and Aristotle except as examples. Rather, the main source of knowledge was the ‘great book of the world’ itself, and this book was ‘read’ through experience. Since the experiences of different peoples are different, toleration and pluralism increased and there were calls for freedom of thought and freedom of religion. There were also sceptics who tried to show that nothing was knowable. Finally, there were political philosophers who were convinced that the old order was the source of nothing but misery and slavery and were determined that it should be replaced by a new order.

3.3.3 The Emergence of the Public Sphere

Strangely, one of the most important cultural changes that took place during this period was the emergence of a space in which private people were able to come together as a public. This public sphere included coffeehouses, reading societies, etc. Through the growth of the international book trade and the emergence of mass-produced pamphlets and news bulletins, people in different parts of the world were increasingly reading and discussing the same events, persons and ideas. For example, in 1776, Adam Smith estimated that 33,000 newspapers were sold in Britain every day. Voltaire’s books sold 1,500,000 copies within seven years. The phenomenal growth of the press led to the

establishment of what Immanuel Kant called a ‘tribunal of reason,’ i.e., an informal forum in which persons and their opinions were either accepted or condemned. This proved important for the politics of the day but it also had an impact on philosophy and religion.

The kind of books that were read also changed. Whereas books were earlier chiefly used as a means to spiritual development, now they were increasingly read for intellectual stimulation (as in the case of scientific literature) as well as for information that could result in action (as in the case of political literature).

3.3.4 The Spread of Democratic Values

The 17th century saw various attempts made by monarchs to establish the principle of the Divine Right of Kings. In the 18th century, this was no longer possible. The bankrupt monarchs had to turn to assemblies and parliaments to raise money to finance their projects. The result was that different groups of people increasingly saw it as their right to place limits on the power of the kings.

In England, this was achieved during the 17th century itself, with the Civil War (1640s) and the Glorious Revolution (1688). Power began to pass from the King to the Prime Minister. However, the French Kings refused to part with power in spite of their loss of prestige in the 18th century. As a result, the writings of philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau gained popularity and were instrumental in spreading the idea that all people had a right to freedom and equality. Finally, after the Americans (with French support) had given themselves a republican form of government, the common people of France, who had been oppressed for centuries, rose up in Revolution against their King and rebuilt their country and laws on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. How did the Enlightenment give rise to a ‘modern’ mentality?

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2. What are some areas of continuity and difference between the Enlightenment and the earlier period of the Renaissance?

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3.4 MAJOR FIGURES DURING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was an Italian astronomer and mathematician. He is famous for having discovered the moons of Jupiter. He publicly defended the view that the Earth travelled round the Sun. When he published these views in the form of a book titled *Dialogue on the Two Chief Systems of the World*, he had to face intense opposition and persecution, particularly from the religious authorities. He was put on trial in 1633, suspected of contradicting the Bible. Hence, his life brought out the tragedy of the contradiction between fundamentalist religious beliefs and scientific progress.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), a French philosopher, widely regarded as the ‘Father of Modern Philosophy.’ He began his career as a soldier but devoted his leisure hours to philosophizing. In an age of uncertainty, he made a new beginning by discarding the traditional scholastic methodology and beginning with the one fact that he could be certain of – the fact that he was thinking. From this, he concluded that his own existence was also a certainty. His well-known saying is ‘Cogito, ergo sum’ (‘I think, therefore I am’). Proceeding in this manner, he built his entire philosophy using a mathematical style of reasoning (he was also an excellent mathematician and is known for his contributions to Coordinate Geometry). He published his philosophical reflections in several works such as *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The outcome of this thinking was that truth was accessible to human reason directly, unmediated by any ecclesiastic authority.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French mathematician, physicist and philosopher. The scientific unit of pressure is named after him. At an early age, he invented the world’s first calculating machine. In addition to his scientific achievements, he had a deep insight into human nature, which he explores in his work titled *Pensées* (‘Thoughts’). He believed that philosophy leads to skepticism, and that man’s true happiness lies in religion. His ‘wager’ argument shows that if we cannot be certain of God’s existence, it is more reasonable to believe in God (to bet that God exists and to live a life accordingly)

rather than to be an atheist.

Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632-1677), a Dutch Jewish (later Christian) rationalist philosopher, used a geometric method similar to Descartes in his philosophy. He came to the conclusion that mind and matter were two aspects of the same substance. This led him to a kind of pantheistic view according to which all things were somehow included in God, and that nature was a manifestation of God. He also called for a government that would be broad-minded and liberal. However, he was a thinker ahead of his times, and his views were not easily accepted in 17th century Europe.

John Locke (1632-1704), in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, began a new phase in philosophy by turning from reason (Descartes' method) to sense experience as a means of attaining truth. This began the movement known as 'Empiricism.' He held that all our ideas come ultimately from sense experiences. The mind combines simple ideas to produce more complex ideas. For example, the sensations of 'white,' 'hard,' 'high' and 'flat' may be combined to form the idea of a white wall. Locke also wrote significant treatises on economics and politics, and argued in favor of religious toleration, which was rare in the 17th century. He is one of the first thinkers to propose that human beings have rights innate to human nature. This thinking has gradually led to the creation of our modern understanding of 'human rights.'

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) will probably rank as one of the greatest scientists ever. In less than two years (1665-67) he invented a new branch of mathematics known as calculus, discovered that white light is a mixture of different colors, and hit upon his Universal Law of Gravitation. He is also known for his three laws of motion. However, he was more interested in research than fame, and neglected to publish his discoveries until his friend Edmund Halley (discoverer of Halley's comet) urged him to do so in 1687 (in the book titled *Principia Mathematica*). His scientific method, today known as 'Classical Physics,' went unchallenged until the arrival of the Quantum Theory and the Theory of Relativity in the 20th century.

Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), a German Rationalist, was highly skilled in a number of disciplines and has made remarkable contributions in the fields of engineering, library

science, mathematics, logic, physics, linguistics, history, aesthetics and political science. The modern system of library cataloguing comes from him. As a philosopher, he was influenced by the teachings of Descartes and Spinoza but sought to build unity between them and several other philosophies and religions. The result was his famous philosophical concept of the monads which are the smallest units of substance, similar to atoms but containing the past and the future of the substance as well. This will be discussed in greater detail in the Block on 'Rationalism'.

George Berkeley (1685-1753), an 18th century Irish (Anglican) Bishop and empiricist philosopher, was famous for his statement that 'to be is to be perceived' (*'esse est percipi'* in Latin). In other words, that which is not perceived has no real existence. This philosophy is known as Immaterialism. For Berkeley, even the physical objects in our world are nothing but ideas. Hence, he did not believe in the existence of matter.

Charles-Louis de Secondat (1689-1755), known as **Montesquieu**, was a pioneering French political thinker and supporter of human freedom. In his book, *The Spirit of the Laws*, he analyzed different systems of government such as the Republic, the Monarchy and the Despotic State. He argued that the best government would be one in which the three powers of government, namely the legislative, executive and judicial, would be separate from each other. His views have influenced the constitutions of many countries, including India.

Francois-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), a famous French thinker, was better known by his pen name of Voltaire. He was a deist, who believed in God, but not in any particular religion. He strongly advocated the three principles of free trade, religious tolerance and freedom of expression. He felt that it was only a combination of these that could lead to progress and prosperity. Although he himself supported the idea of monarchy, his political thought strongly influenced the French Revolution.

David Hume (1711-1776) was a famous Scottish philosopher of the Enlightenment. Although he was born in a pious family, he gradually became a sceptic. He published *A Treatise of Human Nature* at the age of 29. His writings are famous for their direct attacks on religious belief. One of his claims is that human beings can never know for

certain that one event is the cause of another. By this skeptical claim, he undermined the foundation of all human knowledge.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was born in Geneva but settled in France. He was one of the philosophers who prepared the ground for the French Revolution. In his most important work, *The Social Contract*, he taught that human beings are naturally in competition with one another and hence they join together to form groups so that they stand a better chance in the struggle. Rousseau believed that this Social Contract was at the basis of modern civilization and society. He criticized the concept of private property because it created social inequality. He advocated freedom, equality and justice for all.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was probably the most influential philosopher of the Enlightenment. He claimed that we can never know objects in themselves, but only as they appear to us. Thus, he brought about a 'Copernican Revolution' in philosophy because his major insight was that knowledge is not determined by the nature of the external world of objects but rather by the nature of human rationality. This approach addressed many of the problems that philosophers had been discussing and led to the emergence of idealism in German philosophy. Some of Kant's famous disciples include Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, all of them great philosophers in their own right.

3.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT FOR WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

- Ancient Philosophy was interested in wisdom which governed different aspects of theoretical and practical life. Medieval Philosophy was interested in wisdom which governed life in relationship with the divine reality. In contrast to these two approaches, Modern Philosophy was more modest in its methods and its goals. It largely restricted itself to epistemology, namely, the philosophical quest to know the nature, origins and scope of human knowledge. This quest was considered to be basic to all other theoretical and practical questions.
- This was because the Enlightenment was a period when neither theological authority

(the primary texts, the prominent thinkers and leaders of the Church), nor philosophical authority (the texts and prominent thinkers of ancient and medieval philosophy) was given primary importance.

- Instead, there was a desire to think things through from scratch, so that one could arrive at the truth without the baggage and the blindfolds of theological and philosophical tradition.
- Descartes is considered to be the father of Modern Philosophy. This is because he was one of the first to decide that rather than accepting arguments from tradition and authority, he would rely on his own power of reasoning and thus arrive at facts that he could be certain of.
- After starting from scratch, the well-known conclusion that Descartes arrived at was 'Cogito, ergo sum' ('I think, therefore I am'). From this, he was led to numerous other conclusions.
- Of course, this attitude of starting from scratch was not easy, and was not even possible. This is because many of the thinkers of this time were influenced by their cultural, philosophical and religious traditions, and so their methodological processes and conclusions were not as impartial as they thought them to be.
- Basically, the Rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza Leibniz) believed that the mind and its faculties were largely responsible for most of the authentic knowledge which human beings possess. On the other hand, the Empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) believed that the senses and their powers were primarily responsible for genuine human knowledge.

- German philosopher Immanuel Kant who reconciled these two positions by claiming that while the mind produced necessary 'concepts' or categories with which to understand reality, the senses produced necessary 'percepts' or sensations which filled in these concepts. Kant believed that while the concepts of the human mind are common to all of us, they do not allow us to know reality as such. We only know reality based on the limits of these concepts of the human mind.
- Many philosophers after Kant began to doubt whether we can truly know and understand metaphysical realities. Thus, from the time of Kant, philosophy has

refrained from turning its gaze towards metaphysical questions concerning the Heavens, and instead focused on questions primarily concerned with human and social problems.

- On account of this Kantian influence, Contemporary Western Philosophy largely focuses on issues concerned with human existence, scientific knowledge, language, communication, social structures and similar human problems. The larger and all-embracing vision of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy has been replaced by more narrow concerns in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy which address the problems which face people on the personal, inter-personal and social fronts.
- On the socio-political front, this attitude of starting from scratch with the use of reason alone resulted in the downgrading of the authority of the many European monarchs and of the upgrading of democratic processes in many nations.
- That is why while most parts of the world are still largely influenced by cultural tradition and by religious authority, contemporary European consciousness – largely influenced by the Enlightenment – is influenced by the powers of reason, scientific demonstration and democratic social consensus to help form the fabric of society. In this way, the Enlightenment has shaped current European culture and given it an identity which is quite distinct from that of the rest of the world.
- In conclusion, it may be stated that the period of the Enlightenment has largely defined the consciousness and social structure of modern Europe. This has happened through the intellectual revolution in philosophy (the birth of Modern Philosophy, and Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’), the scientific and technological revolution, the Industrial Revolution (in England) and lastly the political revolutions in England, France and America.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Give examples of major thinkers who represented this period, and their contribution.

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2. In what way was the Enlightenment significant in terms of Western Philosophy?

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3.6 LET US SUM UP

The period of ‘Modern Western Philosophy’ is closely related to the prevailing culture generally known as the ‘Enlightenment.’ In order to enter more fully into the study of Modern Philosophy, this Unit has helped us become more familiar with a basic overview of the Enlightenment, and the more significant events and personalities prevailing during this time-frame of 1600-1800. We have had a chance to reflect over some prominent problems and areas of concern which dominated European consciousness during this age. Finally, we were also able to see how all of these dimensions of the Enlightenment (significant events and developments, prominent problems and themes, outstanding personalities) have had an impact on the development of Western philosophy. The main facets of enlightenment movement can be summarized as under,

- The ‘reason’ dominant during the Enlightenment is “scientific” reason, exemplified by Isaac Newton.
- Secularization of thought, the growing independence of the various aspects of human life from the church.
- The mind-body dualism strengthened the science lobby in Europe. The ‘mind’ was left to the clergy while the “body,’ signifying matter, was a realm reserved for scientific query.
- An attack on superstition, blind faith and dogma.

Try and remember the following key points related to the Enlightenment:

- The ‘Enlightenment’ (18th century) followed the Age of Reason (17th century). But more generally speaking, the Enlightenment may be considered to cover the 17th and 18th centuries (1600-1800), as it was the authority of reason which was increasingly used in philosophical and scientific arguments, rather than faith.
- The period of the ‘Enlightenment’ largely coincides

Ponder Box II

Remember the incidents took place in and after English, French and American revolutions. Examine the role of these revolutions in the development of Democracy and democratic values.

with the period in Western Philosophy known as ‘Modern Philosophy.’ Modern philosophy was concerned with the problem of the nature, source and scope of knowledge (that is, the branch of philosophy known as ‘Epistemology’).

- During the Renaissance, social progress was largely experienced by the rich, powerful and educated. However, during the Enlightenment, social progress was enjoyed by a far wider segment of the population.
- This period saw the rapid growth of democracy, beginning with England, France and America. The spread of democracy helped to strengthen the values of liberty and equality in Europe and in the ‘New World’ (North America).
- This period also resulted in the Industrial Revolution, because of the many technological applications which sprang from scientific discoveries and inventions, and because of the opportunities for trade with many European colonies all over the world.

3.7 KEY WORDS

Democracy: A form of government “of the people, by the people and for the people,” in which the citizens have the right to govern the state, and they exercise this right through a majority rule. It is derived from the Greek terms *demos* (‘people’) and *kratos* (‘strength’). Modern democracy is quite different from the democracy practiced in ancient times, as it attempts to give more and more sections of people power, and not only certain privileged sections of society as in the past.

Enlightenment: A period in European cultural history beginning in the 17th century but peaking in the 18th century, during which Reason (rather than cultural, religious and philosophical tradition) was advocated as the main source and legitimacy for authority. It was a period of great progress in science, philosophy and politics.

Inductive Method: This is a method of obtaining new knowledge through experimentation and observation rather than from previously held theories. It allows the researcher to eliminate false theories by seeing whether they correspond with the facts observed. As a method, it was described in detail by Francis Bacon in 1620. It was very useful for scientific research and scientific progress, as it led to many new discoveries and inventions.

Industrial Revolution: A period in the late 18th and early 19th centuries when great changes took place in the fields of mining, agriculture, transportation and other areas of technological development. These changes made life more efficient, comfortable, and less physically stressful, as machines began to do the work of human beings. These industrial changes transformed the economic and cultural situation in Britain and subsequently led to social change all over the world.

3.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Web-links:

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- Internet Modern History Sourcebook: The Enlightenment
www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook10.html
- The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: www.iep.utm.edu
- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: plato.stanford.edu

- The Meta-Encyclopedia of Philosophy: www.ditext.com/encyc/frame.html

3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. The Enlightenment was a period in the cultural history of Europe beginning in the 17th century and reaching its climax in the 18th century. During this time, there was a general awakening of Europe from its tradition-bound past, in favor of a future which was to be governed by reason and scientific and social progress. It was a period when learning and philosophy were no longer restricted to a few scholars but became widespread among the common people. This resulted in important intellectual, scientific, cultural and political revolutions.

Check Your Progress II

1. The Enlightenment saw the birth of a scientific culture, which in turn led to many technological innovations. Arguments from authority began to lose ground while reason and empirical evidence became more important as sources of knowledge. At the same time there were numerous social changes, as a result of which people were reading more and discussing various issues in the newly-emerging public forum. Finally, the understanding by which human beings were believed to possess natural rights gave birth to the modern political ideas of freedom, equality and democracy.

2. Some areas of continuity between Renaissance and Enlightenment:

- a) The separation of philosophy and theology continued.
- b) There was a similar appeal to the power of reason and experience rather than authority.
- c) There was a gradual spread of education, learning and reading.

Some areas of difference between Renaissance and Enlightenment:

- a) The Renaissance aimed to revive classical ideas whereas the Enlightenment aimed at progressing beyond what had been achieved in the past.
- b) The Renaissance was a cultural change that affected certain strata of society whereas the Enlightenment affected the daily lives of society as a whole, including ordinary, simple people.

c) The Renaissance was dominated by the arts and humanities, while the Enlightenment was dominated by science and technology.

Check Your Progress III

1. Some of the most important thinkers of the Enlightenment were:

a) Rene Descartes, who attempted to make a fresh beginning in philosophy, accepting nothing from authority or tradition.

b) Sir Isaac Newton, who discovered the Universal Law of Gravitation and the three laws of motion. These and other discoveries helped to revolutionize the world of science and technology.

c) Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau, who propagated Enlightenment ideas in France, leading ultimately to the French Revolution.

d) Immanuel Kant, who brought about a 'Copernican Revolution' in philosophy by turning philosophical attention from the world of objects to the world of the subject.

2. The Enlightenment was significant for the following reasons:

e) A new beginning was made in philosophy by the return to direct experience and reasoning rather than arguments from tradition and authority.

f) There was a shift in philosophical interest from metaphysics towards epistemology. Within epistemology, there was a shift from the world of external objects to the faculties and conceptual abilities of the knowing subject.

g) Numerous changes in the scientific, industrial and political realms brought about a new confidence in human potential and human progress. This in turn led to the gradual secularization of Europe (where earthly interests took prominence over other-worldly considerations). Likewise, the philosophical horizon began to become more human and more secular, rather than show interest in transcendental questions which were earlier discussed in metaphysics and ethics.