

The History Guide

Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History

Lecture 2

The Medieval World View (1)

For the most part, it can be said that great thinkers lead two lives. Their first life occurs while they are busy at work in their earthly garden. But there is also a second life which begins the moment their life ceases and continues as long as their ideas and conceptions remain powerful. **In the history of the western intellectual tradition** -- a tradition reaching back to the pre-Socratic philosophers of Ionia -- **there have always been great thinkers who have attempted to explain the nature and scope of human knowledge.**

Toward the end of the 18th century, a **German idealist** philosopher published a number of important philosophical treatises -- treatises which he called critiques. *The Critique of Practical Reason*, *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Judgment* were the work of **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804). The great question which plagued Kant, as well as all philosophers before or after him, was this: **what is knowledge?** This is an epistemological question and is often joined by other questions: **what is reality? what is illusion? What can we know? What does it mean to know something?** In the [INTRODUCTION](#) to the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant began with the following words:



There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience.

This, of course, is the credo of the empiricist. [John Locke](#) (1632-1704) was an empiricist. So too were [Galileo](#) (1564-1642), and [Isaac Newton](#) (1642-1727). In fact, **most scientists are empiricists by nature.** **This should tell you something.** It was Locke who, in the late 17th century, argued that the human mind was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which experience records itself as knowledge. **What you see is what you get.** For [Alfred North Whitehead](#) (1861-1947), "the point is, that an elephant, when present, is noticed." Things exist -- we experience them -- and this becomes knowledge. But Locke was a rather "modern" empiricist.

One of the first empiricists was [Aristotle](#) (384-322 B.C.). In fact, it's safe to say that it was Aristotle who made the empirical point of view a reality. Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great. Aristotle had also been the pupil of [Plato](#) (c.427-347 B.C.), who was in turn, the student of [Socrates](#) (c.469-399 B.C.). **Plato, simply stated, believed that universal ideas of things**

-- like justice, beauty, truth -- had an objective existence all their own. What this means is that these things existed whether men perceived (apprehended) them or not. They had an independent reality which Plato believed men could come to grasp as knowledge. These ideas exist "apriori," that is, they exist prior to experience and hence, transcend experience. For Plato, our senses are deceptive and what we experience in our daily lives is not reality but the shadow of reality. This is one of the messages of Plato's *Republic*, specifically *THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE*. Plato's doctrine of the Forms (Ideas, or Universals) concerns itself with innate ideas -- ideas which exist before men have experience of them. This philosophical school has come to be known as rationalism. So, between 384 and 330 B.C. in Athens, the two major western philosophical traditions of thought were born. For 2000 years, philosophers had to choose whether they followed Plato and his rationalism, or Aristotle and his empiricism. Indeed, Plato comes off as the first philosopher and Aristotle as his first critic. As Whitehead wrote in *Process and Reality* in 1929:

The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.

Now, getting back to Kant. "Though all our knowledge begins with experience," he wrote, "it does not follow that it all arises out of experience." What Kant did with this one simple statement was to supply a synthesis -- necessary perhaps -- of 2000 years of philosophical discussion on the nature and scope of human knowledge. This single act secured for this solitary Lutheran philosopher a central place in the western intellectual tradition. This much said, however, a synthetic act was created much earlier using different philosophical tools but with an end result whose ramifications were no less profound.



It was the "Dumb Ox" of Roccasecca, as SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-1274) was called, who, by the end of the 13th century, had also supplied a necessary intellectual synthesis. By the end of the 13th century, Christianity had become the world view of medieval Europe. But Christianity -- especially a Christianity as interpreted by its institutional form, the Church -- was always confronted by challenges. One such challenge was Human Reason -- a capacity to think which had been discovered by the Greeks, accepted by the Romans, but which had been labeled pagan by centuries of intellectual arrogance on the part of the Church Fathers. The Church Fathers -- Origen (185-254), St. Jerome (c.342-420) and St. Augustine (354-430) -- sought to explain the Holy Writ through Revelation and Faith alone. But, they soon realized that they needed the classical authors to aid them in their writing. So, men like Plato or Cicero(106-43 B.C.) were thorns in the side of Christian thinkers like Jerome and Augustine.

Aquinas recognized this and sought reconciliation. But instead of uniting two philosophical traditions as Kant was to do in the 1780s, Aquinas joined two methods. Reason was no longer conceived as the nemesis of Faith. Neither was Philosophy the enemy of Theology. Instead, Aquinas joined the two by claiming that both were paths to a single truth: "God exists."

Hopefully, this should ring a few bells for this is very similar to what Abelard had done a century earlier. Before we turn to the synthesis of Aquinas, it is necessary to examine the historical context from which this synthesis appeared.

By the end of the 12th century there were signs of a widespread awakening and progress felt across Europe. For instance, the lords of the manor were learning to make better use of their serfs. They did this by emancipating them and so from this point on the serfs were now called peasants. Peasants were no longer tied to the land by labor obligations owed to the lord. Now, they paid rent instead. Meanwhile, suburbs began to appear around older cities and hundreds of new villages sprang into being. Overall, European society was becoming more diversified and life was beginning to hold more comforts. And in terms of intellectual history, this period has come to be characterized as the 12th Century Renaissance.

All across northern Europe and England, peasants were freed from labor obligations and were now offered land -- for rent -- under very attractive terms. Peasants expanded into new territories. They leveled forests and drained swamps wherever they went. The peasants also had better tools at their disposal. The plough was now in general use, wind mills were more common and the land seemed to be yielding more. Despite numerous setbacks, the peasantry of northern Europe slowly recognized that a three field system of crop rotation would yield more than the older two field system. The bottom line is this -- peasants were better fed, less afraid of famine and could now raise more children because the land could support a larger, or at least growing, population. And the peasants did raise more children for one of the signs of increased economic prosperity was at the same time an increase in the population.

In areas where peasants normally congregated, villages became towns and towns became cities. A process of urbanization was under way -- a process which the Romans had to abandon in the 3rd century under the pressures of barbarian invasion. Rome was a specifically urban civilization. The Romans liked their cities and the conveniences the city offered. But by the 4th century at the latest, this began to change as Germanic tribes moved south of the Danube River, deeper and deeper into the heart of the Roman Empire. With the final collapse of the Empire in the 5th century Germanic tribes were everywhere. Not only did they bring their language, religions and customs, they also brought with them a preference for the open country and a general distaste for anything cityfied. So, between the 5th century and the 11th century, the urban civilization of the former Roman Empire declined. The process of urbanization would not begin anew until the 11th century at the earliest. One of the reasons why this is so is that the threat of barbarian migration began to subside. And the reason this took place was that slowly but surely, the chieftains of the barbarian tribes were converted to Christianity. And once a chieftain was converted, so too were his people converted as an act of homage and loyalty.

The economic factors of renewed urbanization affected all orders of European society. However, it was the European peasantry who reaped the fewest benefits of this progress. Just the same, landlords were now making less demands on the peasantry. Peasants could rent land to which they could direct all their energy. They could also pass this land on to their sons. In other words, a degree of liberty had begun to infiltrate the world of the European peasant. While the peasants roughed out their lives in the countryside, there were artisans who inhabited towns and cities. As

craftsmen and shopkeepers, builders and tradesmen, they had the potential to spread the fruits of their labor over a wider market, a market stretching from the North Sea to North Africa and from Constantinople to Lisbon. In the towns of Italy -- especially port towns like Genoa, Pisa and Venice -- a passion for money-making resulted in what would eventually become a genuinely capitalist society. It was in Italy that the commercial practices and attitudes so characteristic of later ages first emerged. Italian merchants learned how to change money, they perfected double-entry bookkeeping, and they formed trading associations in order to protect their mercantile interests. So, by the 13th century, there existed a bourgeois mentality characterized by the spirit of entrepreneurial risk taking, the pursuit of gain and with all that, the demand for greater political freedom. However, although we can locate a growing bourgeois mentality, there is at this time no evidence of a nascent bourgeois culture -- that again would come with time.

The ruling orders were also changing fast. The nobility were the men who reaped the most benefits from the emancipation of the serfs and the subsequent increase in agricultural productivity. With improved productivity, the nobility could now collect higher rents and obtain greater profits from the sale of surplus agricultural goods. And while the nobility clearly made more money, they were always quick to find new and quicker ways to spend it. So, they began to improve their castles -- castles became larger and more elaborate. They sought out better armor and weapons. The artisans of the growing towns and cities, now joined together in cooperatives known as guilds, were only too happy to supply the nobility with whatever it was they needed. And while the nobility built bigger and more impenetrable castles, and obtained the best in armor and weaponry, they also began to dress in finer clothes which the merchants of the cities, now also members of their own guilds, brought to them.

Many members of the nobility across Europe sought a refinement of life. The economic changes which I have already briefly described brought with them cultural and intellectual progress, especially when compared with the centuries which had come before. The Crusades, for the most part, were over. What was the medieval knight to do now that his main business of the day -- killing the infidels and their children -- had come to an end? Hunting and tournaments, at least for some nobles, began to give way to a lively interest in culture and education. The feudal court, once merely a gathering place for knights to fill their bellies while engaged in a Holy Quest, now became centers of intense literary activity. But, with all this said, it would be incorrect to say that the medieval knight was a more cultured individual. The medieval knight was still a fighting machine, he was still a fierce and oftentimes gluttonous warrior.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, something like a revival of the arts and letters was taking place across England and the Continent. This revival -- or Renaissance -- was more pronounced in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe. Indeed, it is almost a general characteristic of European history as a whole, that compared to the West, Eastern Europe seemed backward and primitive. One of the major characteristics of this Renaissance was the rediscovery of numerous Latin classics. For the philosophers, theologians and poets of the 12th and 13th centuries, there was much wisdom to be obtained in the pages of [Virgil's](#) (70-19 B.C.) *Aeneid*, or [Ovid's](#) (43 B.C.-A.D. 17) *Metamorphosis* or the letters and political speeches of that greatest of Roman orators, Cicero, or the [Stoicism](#) of a Seneca (5 B.C.-A.D. 65).

Besides the ideas implicit in these classical authors, the major contribution of the rediscovery of these texts was a style of writing. That style was classical Latin. Just think about it. 12th century scholars were now reading texts written in Latin over 1200 years ago. It goes without saying that the Latin language had undergone profound transformations over the years, just as the English language has changed over the past 100 years. Imagine what it must have been like to discover ancient texts written in a more or less recognizable form, but which were more expressive and more lyrical. As a result, 12th and 13th century poets began to express their own thoughts and feelings in a language which now came to them naturally. And, it's also worth mentioning that these poets were now writing for an increasingly larger audience. There was a greater use of rhyme and meter and while most poetry remained religious in nature, there were other writers who were beginning to emote over more secular themes.

It was the Wandering Scholars or Goliards who used the vernacular instead of classical or even medieval or Carolingian Latin. The Goliards wrote free and joyous poetry -- they have a near immediate appeal to the modern reader because they stand outside the image of medieval piety and religious devotion. [GOLIARDIC VERSE](#) -- meant to be sung rather than simply read -- praises the pleasures of this world as well as despair over the uncertainties of life. The Goliards were also deeply critical of the "system" -- especially the privileged orders of the knights, bishops and professors. The wandering scholars were dissatisfied with their own age and so they reveled in a rather boisterous, drunken life -- they were Europe's first bohemians.

The growth of vernacular literature happened most readily in those places where the authority of the Church seemed to be weakest. But there were other reasons why we can observe this shift from medieval Latin to the vernacular. In the south of France, professional scribes were finding it more and more difficult to write official documents in Latin. The words of the spoken language, the *langue d'oc* came much easier to them. After all, it was the spoken language which had grown and so literature, whether an official document or poem, had to reflect this change. By 1200, most official documents were now composed in the vernacular. Other examples of vernacular texts abound: the [Chanson de Roland](#) is perhaps the best French example. From Germany we have the [Kaiserchronik](#). And of course, the 14th century could almost be called the golden age of vernacular literature for there we find Geoffrey Chaucer's (1345-1400) [Canterbury Tales](#), Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-1375) [Decameron](#), William Langland's (c.1332-c.1400) [Piers Plowman](#), Jean Froissart's (c.1333-c.1405) [Chronicles](#) and Dante's (1265-1321) [Divine Comedy](#).

While these developments took place across Europe and England, a new institution appeared at which much of this new learning could be found. **By the 13th century, universities had been established at Oxford, Paris, Berlin, Padua and Bologna. We have the so-called Dark Ages to thank for the university.** University students could obtain a B.A., M.A. or Ph.D. degree in one of four higher faculties: Theology, Philosophy, Medicine or Law. (D.D., Ph.D., M.D., J.D.) Some schools specialized in law such as the University of Bologna -- a university run and controlled by the students. Other universities, like Paris, specialized in theology and philosophy. Padua specialized in medicine. It was at the university that the western intellectual tradition we are most interested in can be found. Indeed, it is at the university that the modern intellectual can be found. At Paris, for instance, we meet Abelard, a teacher so eloquent, so persuasive and so masterful that he attracted students from all over Europe. Even after his expulsion from Paris

because of his affair with Heloise, students flocked to his side to hear his dissertations on theology and philosophy. Abelard, in other words, was a product of the university which in turn was a product of the city which was a product of economic and social circumstances which made the rise of cities possible in the first place. And **while the university was a breeding ground of consent and conformity to papal authority and Christian dogma, the university could also be fertile soil for dissent** or, at the very least, a spirit of inquiry. Abelard was no heretic, but by calling the authority of the Church Fathers into question, he certainly had made the conscious choice to voice his dissent. **A spirit of inquiry and skepticism was perhaps here to stay.**

Although we may be apt to label a man like Abelard a dissenter, or even a radical, he never frontally assaulted the Church or its authority. Instead he raised questions and let the reader decide. But **by the beginning of the 13th century, there were numerous and much more direct challenges to the Church which we need to consider.** These challenges will help us understand the intellectual or religious environment in which a man like Aquinas lived.

| [Part Two](#) |

| [Table of Contents](#) |

| [The History Guide](#) | [Feedback](#) |

copyright 2000 Steven Kreis
Last Revised -- April 13, 2012
[Conditions of Use](#)

from: <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture2a.html>