

# INTRODUCTION

All historical disciplines need periodization, and so does the history of philosophy. Yet while dividing history into periods or eras allows us to neatly order historical themes and events, it could also create an overly rigid structure that ends up obscuring the continuity of history as it actually happened. Thus at the start of a study on Modern Philosophy, it is only fitting to remind the readers that we are not dealing with an absolutely defined period that began and ended at exact moments.

If we take a look at the periodization of history in general, we see that the start of the Modern Age usually falls between the middle and the end of the 15th Century. The two most significant dates that mark the start of the new era are 1453, the fall of Constantinople, and 1492, the discovery of America. At the same time, it is reasonable to think that neither the first nor the second event occurred by chance, but that these were preceded by long periods of preparation, without which such events would not have taken place. Moreover, the very process that led up to a specific event provides the essential elements for comprehending its significance.

On the other hand, historians usually indicate the beginning of Modern Philosophy around the year 1620, when Descartes began his philosophical activity. There is a large and notable difference between this date and that which general history uses to mark the beginning of the Modern Era. If we take the year 1453 as the beginning of the Modern Age, then the difference is more than a century and a half. At the same time, we have to ask whether before Descartes there had not been a philosophy

worthy of the name “modern”. Putting the question more clearly: is modern philosophy a completely Cartesian invention? The history of philosophy is not an island: it is no exception among other historical disciplines. Just as in general history, in the field of philosophy, the facts—all ideas, currents of thought, philosophers—are always preceded by periods of preparation, by earlier events that predisposed their emergence in history. Even the very beginning of philosophy in ancient Greece was prepared by social conditions, cultural peculiarities, and by pre-philosophical speculation more religious and poetic in character.

To say that there are preparations, predispositions, and continuities in history is not the same as saying that there is an evolution, in the progressive sense of the word. Newer philosophical systems are not necessarily better or worse than their antecedents. Rather, each philosophical system is a better or worse development of the only true antecedents of philosophy, the human intellect and human freedom. In itself, the history of philosophy is not a process of constant and necessary progress.

Having affirmed, therefore, the continuity in the history of philosophy, we can now devote ourselves to the intended topic of this *History of Modern Philosophy*. We shall begin with the fifteenth century. In those years, very close to the Middle Ages, Renaissance philosophy was developing, although it had already begun to differentiate itself from the medieval worldview. The continuities and ruptures between the two historical periods, the traditional past and the emerging modern world, are particularly evident. Philosophical traditions and novelties, modern propositions, and reception of the ancient heritage, all mark the rhythm of this period in which modern philosophy begins to emerge. In the sixteenth century, we witness on the one hand, a skeptical inclination, and on the other hand, a renewed vigor for the scholastic philosophy of the medieval tradition.

The elements that we have just mentioned form part of the background of Descartes, but they constitute a cultural and speculative scenario that is already modern. Descartes may stand out as the founder of a new philosophy, but he is not

isolated from tradition. His philosophy has its historical roots, and among his own contemporaries he found his critics. It is sometimes considered, however, that modern philosophy—to be worthy of its name—is the one that adequately responded to the rationalist project inaugurated by the French philosopher. It is true that such a project's unity of interests and main line of thought evidently manifested a new era. It is also true that Descartes and Bacon, fathers of rationalism and empiricism respectively, were clearly aware that they heralded a new philosophical period. But it must also be said, without a doubt, that the philosophy of the seventeenth century has Renaissance and Scholastic roots. But while rooted in history, modern thought was not merely the mature blossoming of older traditions; it truly generated its own cultural and speculative fruits.

Science, especially Physics, also began to emerge in the cultural and philosophical panorama of the seventeenth century. Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo are to science what Descartes is for modern philosophy: creators, and not mere innovators or supporters. But modern science was not born only unto itself. From a theoretical point of view, the modern sciences posed new and difficult problems for philosophy.

Rationalism, empiricism, and modern science are the interweaving threads that constitute the fabric of this new cultural era. Man's consciousness of his capabilities, of the power of his freedom, and of his ingenuity increased as he entered the modern age. The maturity of this awareness will become the central category of the modern age—and consequently of our own: the category of autonomy. Man feels free to think as he wants; he feels free to judge visible and invisible reality, society and institutions, science, art, and religion. The so-called Age of Enlightenment shows the extremity of this accentuation of autonomy, understood primarily as an autonomy of reason, and which in turn is antagonistic toward tradition.

Modern philosophy is not the same thing as the Enlightenment, although the Enlightenment sprung up within modernity as a new cultural movement. From a philosophical point of

view, the Enlightenment is part of modern philosophy, but this is not to say that it is its exclusive expression. On the contrary, there are some expressions of modern philosophy, not pertaining to the Enlightenment, which will have profound influence in the future. Moreover, the harshest criticisms of the Enlightenment would also come from within the currents of modern philosophy. Thus it is necessary to distinguish, with historical rigor, between the modern philosophy that preceded the Enlightenment, and the modern philosophy that blossomed under the influence of this new cultural phenomenon.

Kant dominated the last part of the eighteenth century. His philosophy represents, in a sense, the final act of the Enlightenment. In it, Enlightenment thought becomes conscious of its own limits. The philosopher from Königsberg stands out for rethinking the philosophical and cultural issues of an era, and bequeathing his own system of thought which later philosophers would be compelled to take into consideration.

The itinerary of this *History of Modern Philosophy* aims to present this rich and complex period in a fairly linear fashion, relying on the most representative authors, and briefly analyzing and expounding upon their thoughts. This text, therefore, is an introduction, bringing the reader into contact with the philosophical thought of an era. Despite the book's introductory nature, the authors have sought to present the complexity of the period under examination. A schematic representation of history will always seem simplistic. The pages that follow are schematic only as to their form; there are elements in the text that are starting points for readers who wish to delve into some of the arguments discussed in these pages.

This book is divided into five parts. The first is devoted to the most important events of Renaissance philosophy. The second is dedicated to rationalism, and the third to empiricism. These parts, in turn, are further divided into chapters where we analyze the important works of philosophers from these two schools. The fourth part takes up the study of the Enlightenment, and the last part is devoted to Kant's transcendental phi-

losophy. The book concludes with a general synthesis, which offers a brief overview of the last decades of the eighteenth century, introducing early criticism of the Enlightenment made by the philosophers of the romantic period.

The distinction between modern philosophy and contemporary philosophy is essentially didactic. Continuities between the two periods are much more numerous than their divergences. Although this continuity is especially noticeable in German Idealism, the authors have chosen not to deal with this important philosophical current for pedagogical reasons. Those who are interested in the topic can complete their study by reading our *A History of Contemporary Philosophy: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Mariano Fazio and Francisco Fernández Labastida).