Philosophical Background to 19th Century Modernism

Early Modern Philosophy

In the sixteenth century, European artists and philosophers, influenced by the rise of empirical science, faced a formidable intellectual challenge—to liberate western culture from a deeply entrenched Aristotelian and medieval world view. The modern approach emphasized the role of the individual as a rational investigator, unencumbered by the dogmatic and uncritical appeals to authority and tradition so much a part of the pre-modern era. With the rise of individualism in the modern western world, the people who made up a society came increasingly to be thought of as independent and separate selves. This new conception of what it means to be a human being—a subject of experience—emerged from the radical changes taking place in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe.

From the perspective of a philosopher such as Descartes, the emerging concept of the individual was that of an essentially immaterial and a priori conscious subject—a thinker or cogito—that observes its own nature and the world around it from a position of rationality, detachment, and objectivity.

The underlying assumption here is that we, as thinkers, are linked to pure rationality—a transcendental order. We are rational beings because the universe is rational. The universe is rationally ordered because God is rational. Thus, by objectively—empirically and scientifically—studying the order concealed in nature we are studying the ways of "God the Mathematician".

Thus, "objectivity" and rationality, together with an increasing value placed on the individual, put the human being—"Man, the measure of all things"—at the center of History and knowledge. And with this rational freedom and centrality of the individual came a strong measure of responsibility and duty to protect and increase the autonomy of every rational human being.

Eighteenth Century Rationalism and Empiricism

This new concept of the subject was to have increasing and far-reaching effects on social life, religion, science, politics, and the arts. For example, during the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century the prospects for understanding and harnessing the forces of nature increased dramatically due to the successes of modern science and technology in explaining various natural phenomena in rational and mechanical terms.

It should be noted that this "enlightened" approach, while accepting the achievements of science, retained vestiges of the Christian world view. Many of these enlightenment thinkers assumed

- an ontological separation of "Man" and "nature"—mind and body—and thus
- the possibility of characterizing human experience as, in some sense, distinct from natural events.

Social reforms during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries typically focused on reason as a way out of the dogma ("appeal to authority") and absolutism of the Middle Ages, as well as the privilege claimed by the ruling classes since the fifteenth century. Human freedom and autonomy—two concepts of emerging importance—were thought to be achievable primarily through

- objective observation,
- reason, and
- critique.

What does this mean and what were the assumptions lying behind these concepts?
The first is that objective observation of the world around us provides unmediated access to reality. This assumption can be seen in full force in the writings and work of Galileo.

The second is that Reason, which many believed to be the essence and defining feature of human nature, was considered a natural endowment equally distributed among all human beings. This was a fairly widespread belief among many intellectuals and found explicitly in the writings of Montaigne and Descartes.

And third, the route to Truth that bypasses the entrenched dogmas is through the practice of critique, i.e. approaching life critically by examining and questioning all beliefs and claims of knowledge.

Thus, the experience of human beings on earth was taken as the basis for a grand teleological concept of History to be fully developed in the nineteenth century. On this account, still much beholden to the Christian tradition, the history of "Man" becomes the story of how human beings came to increase their freedom from the natural world and the material constraints associated with it by the exercise of their innate capacity to think logically in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. The route to this teleological historicism in through Kant's reconciliation of rationalism and empiricism.

Kant's Critical Philosophy (Transcendental Idealism)

If all you know is based on the contents of your own mind (as standard forms of empiricism suggest), then most of our ordinary assumptions about knowledge must be set aside. Empiricists assume there is only one source of knowledge—the ideas one finds in the mind, all of which are acquired through experience of the external world of nature. Knowing is assumed to be a matter of getting the impressions and ideas in the mind (mental representations and logical judgments) to conform to the external objective world. This, Kant claims, is a mistake. He suggests instead that knowledge is grounded in and made possible by, in the most fundamental sense, intuition and understanding, in particular, the a priori forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding. As a result, he turned the tables on the empiricist theories of knowledge by claiming that the objective world that we experience—the external world "outside the mind"—conforms to the mind, not the other way around. It's for this reason that his view is referred to as transcendental idealism.

Intuition is the process of grasping that which is given in experience. The forms of intuition are space and time. Understanding is judgment according to concepts, often expressed propositionally (e.g. "This is a rose", where the concept rose is applied to an intuition—an object of consciousness.) These judgments are made possible and also limited by the structure and operation of the mind. They are subject to the categories of the understanding (substance, unity, plurality, cause, possibility, existence, etc.) operating in conjunction with the faculty of Imagination.

Two Orders of Reality: The Phenomenal and the Noumenal

As a result of his epistemological views—views about knowledge and how it's acquired—Kant concluded that a whole range of philosophical problems, including the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and freedom of the will, could never be resolved. Thus, we may well have opinions with regard to these very basic and fundamental questions, but no real knowledge. It also follows, according to Kant, that certain basic tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition cannot be defended rationally, but must be held, if at all, on faith alone.

As stated above, Kant claimed that our knowledge of the deterministic natural world is governed by the structure of the mind. Metaphysical beliefs (in God, free will, immortality, etc.) cannot be proven or refuted. They are beyond the limits of human reason and understanding. In Kant's
terminology, we can know things as they appear to us phenomenally but not as they are in themselves noumenally.

In distinguishing between the phenomenal and the noumenal, Kant frees a space for morality and faith within his system. Morality must be noumenal and grounded in faith. Beauty (linked to morality by Kant) and art also lie outside the bounds of human knowledge.

**Dominant Tendencies in Late 18th Century German Thought: Hegel**

There was a strong reaction among German intellectuals of the late eighteenth century to mainstream (French) Enlightenment thought. Hegel's work grew out of two important aspects of this reaction which came to be known as Romanticism and had a profound impact on literature and visual culture in the 19th century.

1. **Expressivism**: Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803)

   The German response arose in opposition to positivistic and utilitarian aspects of the Enlightenment thinking about the human being "as both subject and object of an objectifying scientific analysis. The focus of objection was against a view of man as the subject of egoistic desires, for which nature and society provided merely the means to fulfillment". [See Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 1] Greater emphasis was placed by the romantics on the (aesthetic) unity of life and its holistic and thematic nature.

   Herder and others developed an alternative notion of man whose dominant image was rather that of an expressive object. Human life was seen as having a unity rather analogous to that of a work of art, where every part or aspect only found its proper meaning in relation to all the others....To see a human being as in some way compounded of different elements: faculties of reason and sensibility, or soul and body, or reason and feeling, was to lose sight of the living, expressive unity... [Ibid., 1f]

   On this view, the highest fulfillment is reached in a life lived as an *expressive* activity. This is in contrast with science which not only distorts the unity of life but also isolates the individual from society. [Ibid., 2] The human being is *continuous* with nature, the romantics claimed, not separate from it.

2. **Moral Freedom**

   Kant's *radically free moral subjectivity* and the *a priori* binding nature of moral law was another important reaction against the objectifying tendencies in utilitarian thinking. The utilitarian reasoned as follows:

   "If man was to be treated as another piece of objectified nature, whether in introspection or external observation, then his motivation would have to be explained causally like all other events.... [T]his was not incompatible with freedom, for was not one free in being motivated by one's own desire, however caused?" [Ibid., 3]

   Not so, argued Kant. Freedom arises from the self-determining nature of the moral will *outside of nature and causality* and *independent of desire and inclination*. But this freedom is purchased at a cost—the separation of Reason and Nature. [Ibid., 6] Thus, to reconcile this apparent duality, it became necessary to find a way of uniting the *expressive unity of life* with *moral freedom*.

   While we can't go into the details here, suffice it to say that this approach to romanticism culminated in Hegel's emphases on
• the historically conscious subject,
• texts with meaning determined by the unified and coherent intentions of the author,
• a teleological approach to history.

One of the parallel developments related to this way of thinking which had a profound impact on cultural analysis is hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics rejected objectivity as practically unachievable and emphasized the value of subjective experience.

Basic Assumptions

• Cultural products are "texts" (understood in a broad sense) and must be interpreted as such.
• The primary function of a text is to communicate meaning from an "author" to a "reader".
• The primary aim of textual analysis is understanding, not explanation.
• "Language", also understood in a broad sense, is the primary medium of the communication of meanings.

This hermeneutic approach ran parallel to a thread in European thought of the nineteenth century that emphasized imagination (Romanticism) and ethical judgment in philosophy and the arts, as well as an increasing interest in communication and interpretation, which had the effect of weakening the critical aspect of culture, while strengthening the value placed on the individual.

Materialism and Historicism: Marx

Another important development, both coming out of and in reaction to Hegel and German Idealism, can be found in the work of Karl Marx. Marx and other materialists generally rejected

• hermeneutics’ reliance on subjective imagination and
• its lack of criticality.

By adopting an empirical approach to the study of human existence, and by attempting to make of it a science, Marx set out to challenge the idealism that exerted such an influence on German thought in the nineteenth century.

The idealist, such as Hegel or Plato, believes that there is a realm of true being that supersedes and, in some sense, determines or controls the material events of human history. Hegel, for example, conceived of an Absolute being that puts matter into motion from the realm of pure spirit. The course of human history is then the attempt of the Absolute to project itself into matter and thus to extend its existence beyond the limitations of pure spirit through the vehicle of individual human lives. The Absolute, according to Hegel, “completes itself” through “Man”.

The problem with Hegel’s view, according to Marx, is that it starts with a theory, in this case a set of theological assumptions about God (the Absolute Spirit) and the role of nature in the divine plan. But such an approach introduces a bias that can never be overcome. As a result of Hegel’s theological bias, he constructs an elaborate and ingenious speculative philosophical system which merely reinforces and rationalizes his own personal beliefs which are not subject to observation or refutation. This is not the proper way to proceed according to empiricist and scientific principles of explanation. One must start with a question, not with an answer, and appeal to the facts in order to answer the question. Thus, it is through observation of facts that one derives a theory; one does not rearrange the facts in order to fit an a priori assumption. In
this conflict between Hegel and Marx we see, once again, a contrast between rationalist and empiricist approaches.

Marx felt that by looking at the actual history of real human societies one forms a very different view of the world. More specifically, Marx came to the view that if we look honestly at the historical record of material (economic, social, and political) events taking place from the ancient through the feudal and ultimately to the capitalist form of political economy, we find a pattern emerging. Based on this pattern, Marx felt it was possible to predict the emergence of a new form of social order.

Through his critique of Hegel and his own historical studies, Marx came to the conclusion that capitalism—the quintessentially modern form of economic relations in the West—violates the essence of human nature, which is grounded in the need to work—to transform nature and express oneself through one’s creations. The problem of the modern world is that human beings have been separated from that which is essential to a good life—control over the process of making things for their own use and pleasure.

In this way, according to Marx, the human being is defined by work. Creativity in the sense of free productive labor is what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Alienation arises when one is unable to realize his or her potential for creative and cooperative work.

Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory
To complete this brief discussion about the “real” (hidden) source of power and determination in human life and history, we should also mention the contributions of Sigmund Freud. As physiological and rational explanations of “abnormal” human behavior also appeared increasingly inadequate to many in the late nineteenth century, Freud developed a new theory based on the unconscious—an aspect of the mind which lies between the purely material, biological level and conscious thought and perception.

According to Freud, since human behavior is shaped by unconscious desires, rational control, hermeneutic understanding, and social and economic reorganization cannot fully explain it.

[The interpretations of the western metaphysical tradition are also challenged by Nietzsche. But that’s another story.]

Summary
The trajectory outlined above, which traces the broad development of modernist thinking in the West, leads us to mid-twentieth-century “postmodernism”. There we find a loss of faith in the grand narrative of the western metaphysical tradition due to

• the failure of religion to provide a transcendental source of meaning and purpose; [crisis of meaning]
• the failure of science to establish an objective world of facts (events determined by natural laws) to which we have direct access; [crisis of truth]
• the failure of the conscious (Cartesian) subject to know itself through direct access to its own nature. [crisis of subjectivity and self-knowledge]

Thus, the following theses replaced the universalisms of the past with a radically different, postmodern view of the world and our place in it. This change can be summarized roughly in the following three theses.

• All experience is mediated.
• All knowledge is constructed and contingent.
• All accounts of reality are ideological.

Timothy Quigley, 2008