Rationalism

I. Descartes (1596-1650)

A. He, like others at the time, was obsessed with questions of truth and doubt

1. How could one be certain in the absence of religious guidance and trustworthy senses
2. Tried the typical rationalist program of finding clarity in thought

a. Find clear first principles that could act as a bedrock or foundation for thought
b. Decided that he could doubt everything except his own existence

(1) Cognito ergo sum
(2) Even the act of doubting presupposes a thinking entity

3. From such a clear first principle one could deduce all the rest – deductive reason was seen to be largely infallible.

B. Descartes also introduced modern dualism into philosophy and psychology

1. He was certainly not the first to see a sharp distinction between mind and body

a. Aristotle
b. And all the Christian, Medieval thinkers.

2. The older view portrayed a dualism between that which perishes and that which survives death

a. The Medieval notion was based on Aristotle's division into three parts

(1) vegetative
(2) sensitive
(3) rational

b. The first two were allied with a conception of vital forces, those mysterious factors that allow for movement and evidence of life
c. But they were only active to the extent that they were directed by the intellect or rational soul.
d. The body then is seen as a husk that gave evidence of life only when animated by a soul

3. Descartes made a sharper distinction between these various components and assigned the vital forces solely to the body with the rational soul entirely separate

a. Furthermore, the body is extended whereas the mind is not, "unextended substance"
b. And the body obeys mechanical laws because it is a part of the mechanical universe, whereas the mind does not
c. But in creating such a radical separation he unleashed a problem that had been camouflaged in the Medieval conception

(1) How do the mind and body interact?
(2) How can something without mass and weight, something that is unobservable, influence something that has mass?

4. Descartes's solution was to assume a kind of interactionism

(1) The mind and body interact at the pineal gland which takes care of all the translation work
(2) And when the mind influences the body, it is through the agency of will
(3) That much would not have been foreign to Medieval thinkers although Descartes is far clearer about the nature of the problems
(4) But the influence of the body on the mind is more complex and an issue not fully recognized by earlier thinkers in other than a passive perception sense.

(a) The body is subject to passions created by sensation
(b) These passions affect the mind
(c) When all goes well, these passions induce will to control the body, but they can also interfere with clear thought.

C. Descartes's theory of the mind was also influential

1. He distrusted sensory data which are too unreliable to produce clear truths.
2. He further reduced the importance of perception by assuming that we have innate ideas

a. He doesn't seem to have meant that ideas are literally innate
b. But only that we have the capacity to form certain ideas.

3. He also suggested that there re various intellectual faculties such as memory, intuition, and will. This part of his work had enormous influence and it led to much second and third rate philosophy that put French thought on the backburner for the next crucial century or two.

II. Spinoza (1632-1677)

A. He lay outside the mainstream of Continental thought until "rediscovered" toward the end of the last century

1. Partially because he was Jewish and thus had a different kind of background
2. Partially because he was so rejected
3. And partially because he was geographically isolated

B. He is most famous for having a different sort of solution to the mind-body problem and dualism – parallelism

1. God and his creations are not separable
2. Therefore there can be no radical separation between mind and body
3. They are really two sides to the same coin – today we might be inclined to say that they are just different language systems to describe the same thing
4. But there is at least one important implication in terms of causality

a. Since the body is part of the physical world that obeys immutable laws, it follows that the mind (the other side of the coin) must also be so determined
b. And hence our mental lives just as our physical are fully determined.

C. He also had an important theory of emotion and passion – largely influenced by the Stoics

1. Emotions were directed at clear objects whereas the passions were merely generalized disruptions

a. Those emotions that we share with God are perfect and are emotions
b. Whereas those that are not are imperfect and disruptive
c. Emotions will serve as agents of the intellect in helping to channel thought and commit us to reasoned action
d. Whereas the passions will disrupt

2. Truth itself is known most clearly when accompanied by emotion and we grasp truth as a kind of intuition

a. Our searchings for ultimate truth will be guided by emotion
b. And we will experience pleasure when we get there

III. Leibniz (1646-1716)

A. Contemporary of Locke and much of his philosophy is an attempt to refute him

1. "Nothing is in the intellect which is not first in the senses"
2. To which he replied: Nothing except the intellect itself

B. Also a dualist and adopted a parallelism position

1. Being consists of monads which are basically ideal points of psychic energy
2. However, when concentrated in one place they take on extension and give the impression of body
3. Mind and body obey different laws but are adjusted by God to show perfect agreement – pre-established harmony

C. One of his most important contributions lay in his theory of consciousness

1. Each monad has mental activity
2. However, the mental activity of an individual monad is so small that it is not conscious – note the distinction between mental activity and consciousness
3. Consciousness results when monads are combined

a. Note that consciousness thus exists on a continuum
b. And there must be a threshold of sorts as to what is conscious
c. This idea would be the first subject of psychological experimentation

D. But he also had important ideas on how we think at what we might call the macro level

1. Conscious mental thought is not merely a result of sensation
2. It must be guided by higher mental structures through a process he called apperception

a. This term came to mean many things, but for him it was a kind of cognitive schema that guided thought.
b. It is that which gives form to thought and can be identified with the Platonic Forms or Aristotlean categories.

E. Leibniz had great influence on the development of psychology in the 19th century, more so probably than did Kant, who is by all accounts a greater thinker.

1. Psychophysics and the issue of thresholds of consciousness
2. The notion of apperception and schematic thinking – Wundt
3. Conflict between ideas – Freud and others

IV. Kant (1724-1804)

A. His major work was a response to Hume's skepticism

1. He was deeply bothered by the implications for religion and morality

a. If nothing could be known with certainty then theology and morality were on shaky grounds
b. So there must be a way of finding certainty

2. Kant did not deny the importance of experience and sensation, but he did deny that they were sufficient
3. But somewhat inaccurately Hume and the empiricists would say that we know because we perceive, but the rationalists (and certainly Kant) would say that we perceive because we know.

B. The formal way that this comes down requires an understanding of the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions – an old distinction

1. Analytic propositions are those that are true more or less by definition, so they are linguistic in nature – the predicate is logically implied by the subject

a. Bodies have extension
b. Bachelors are unmarried males
c. Men have penises

2. Synthetic propositions are those with empirical content where the predicate bears only a contingent relationship to the subject

a. They are contingent
b. They are probabilistically true
c. And they can be assessed only a posteriori
d. Examples

(1) Rice students are smart
(2) Frenchmen are average in height

3. Kant's program was to show that there are synthetic propositions that have a priori validity

a. His method of demonstrating this takes the major part of a very large and complex book (*The Critique of Pure Reason* – 1781).
b. But the outlines are clear

(1) In the first place, even the building blocks of Hume's analysis of

causality are not given in experience

(a) Requires that we understand there are actually two objects which requires a notion of extended space
(b) And that one follows the other, which requires time

(2) To be sure, as Hume recognized, the ideas of space and time are subject to the same skeptical view, but Kant's point is a different one, and one common to all rationalist programs

(a) Whether or not one has the idea of space and time, one must have the implicit categories of same
(b) And these categories must be innate because logically they must precede all experience.

(3) And by extension causality may also be an innate category
(4) There is a better and more extended proof in terms of Kantian analogies, part of which is given in Robinson

4. Thus there are categories of thought (12 of them) and these are logically required for any thought

a. Negation
b. Plurality
c. Causality

5. Having thus proved that things like causality are not merely inventions of the mind, he can proceed to develop similar arguments for morality

a. Certain moral truths are self-evident
b. The famous categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that the maxim of your action could serve as a universal law of nature"

C. Kant also had some negative influences on the history of psychology

1. He firmly believed that there could be no science of psychology

a. Because mental processes were fleeting and could never be caught. Thus mental processes are of but not in the mind.
b. He also believed that such processes could not be measured, and he understood that measurement in one essential ingredient of science.

2. This served as a challenge for subsequent thinkers

a. Herbart and measurement
b. Fechner and psychophysics