Modernity

Modernity is both a period in philosophy's history and a description of industrial societies in the last 200 or more years. As a period in philosophy, modernity is commonly said to begin with René Descartes (1596-1650) or Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Modern philosophers, especially those in the age of **Enlightenment**, thought of themselves as such in contrast to the philosophy and theology of the middle ages. As a description of industrial society and its ethos, modernity designates the ways in which ideas characteristic of modern philosophy have been translated into the social fabric.

Modernity encompasses several intellectual commitments. Above, it stands for the power of human reason. This confidence in reason manifests itself in the accomplishments of **natural science** and in the use of **technology**. The success of scientific explanations and the results of technology have, to many people, confirmed the capacity of human reason to discover truth and solve problems.

At the same time, modern thinkers have sometimes contrasted the power of reason with religious faith. Whereas (in this view) faith is belief supported merely by authority, reason is presented as knowledge based on evidence and logic. When viewed in this way, confidence in reason is an assertion of the principle of autonomy–human freedom from illegitimate authority. Modernity is thus often linked to **rationalism**.

Modernity's emphasis on freedom is expressed in its political theory, the classic expression of which was the theory of the social contract, according to which political power arises from the people, in contrast with pre-modern views in which this power flows from God to monarchs. Modernity thus sees political society as composed of individuals who come together to create various sorts of community. It is also associated with the idea of the secular state, in which there is a strict separation of church and state, in contrast with the pre-modern ideal of the national and established church.

Modernity has been thoroughly critiqued from many sides. In the 19th century, the Romantic movement and philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) objected to modernity's exalting of human reason and proposed that more fundamental to human nature than reason is feeling and instinct. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) criticized modernity on a broader basis, arguing that its emphasis on reason, science and technology and the resulting alienation of modern humanity from the natural world was the inevitable outcome of philosophical impulses stretching back to Plato and Aristotle. More recently, the movement known as Deconstruction has criticized the totalitarian implications of modernity's view of reason–its tendency to value identity over difference, in the domain of ideas and also in the social realm.

The theological community has also offered critique of modernity. In the 18th century many theologians, including John Wesley, objected to the way in which some modern philosophers contrasted reason and faith. In the 19th century the **Roman Catholic church** responded to modernity's elevation of reason over authority by declaring the infallibility of the pope and condemning (in the Syllabus of Errors) many beliefs typical of modern thought. In the 20th century theological **fundamentalism** reacted to modernity by rejecting not only its confidence in

reason but also leading theories of natural science. Recent movements such as **post-liberal** theology and **Radical Orthodoxy** have also been sharply critical of modern philosophy and theology.

The extent of recent critiques of modernity have led some to believe that today we have move beyond modernity to **Post-modernity**. However, it is more likely that post-modernism, at least in its philosophical versions, is a phase within the development of modernism than a repudiation of modernity.