

The Millennium Gap Theory and the Historiography of Early Modern Philosophy

In *The Philosopher and Theology*, Étienne Gilson recollects about his time studying at the University of Paris in the first decade of the 20th Century. He describes encountering historiographical positions: “so commonly received that they were almost dogmas,” one of them being that “there was first a Greek philosophy, then a modern philosophy came; between these two, nothing, except perhaps a theology based on faith and authority, which are the very negation of philosophy.”¹ He credits these positions to, amongst others, Victor Cousin’s philosophical and historiographical influence who, according to Gilson, stated that: “There are only two really distinct periods in the history of philosophy as well as in the history of the world: Antiquity and Modern Times... the philosophy that had preceded Descartes was theology.”² Let us call this view, which states that there was no philosophy for over a thousand years between Ancient and Modern times, ‘the millennium gap theory’.

While few philosophers would explicitly endorse the millennium gap theory today, I will argue that it still functionally survives in the way philosophical curriculum is conceptualised, at least in the UK. If one were to survey undergraduate philosophy courses in the UK, one would quickly find that very few of them teach thinkers belonging to the millennium gap, and even fewer offer specialised modules on the period. In fact, the teaching of the history of philosophy in the UK tends to perfectly align with Cousin’s historiography, with core historical modules consisting almost universally of Ancient Philosophy (Plato and Aristotle), followed by a direct jump to Descartes, and then to the rest of the standard (Early) Modern canon (Locke, Hume, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant).

In this talk, I want to conceptualise the millennial gap, as well as historical conditions and historiographical presuppositions that underlie it. I am currently leading an interdisciplinary project with two empirical elements. The first is to investigate the history of philosophy curricula at the UK universities to support the afore-mentioned observation that the teaching provision in the UK implicitly endorses the millennium gap theory. In the second element, we will undertake a series of interviews with academics who have a say on curricular development at various UK universities to collect their views regarding the lack of provision of teaching on the period. The interviews will be completed by June, and I want to share the results of the study at the conference.

I believe that this research is directly relevant to the question of how and why we study Early Modern Philosophy today. According to Cousinian historiography, due to their religious or theological concerns, post-Ancient/pre-Modern thinkers were either irrational, or their rational engagement was too involved with theology and religion for their ideas to be compatible with secular philosophical education. This implies that the

¹ Gilson, É. (1962) *The Philosopher and Theology*. New York: Random House. Pp. 87, 89.

² Ibid.

advent of Modern philosophy is itself a reintroduction of rationality as such into philosophy, or at least a development of a kind of secular rationality that is acceptable as a part of a philosophy curriculum. While very few contemporary historians of Early Modern Philosophy would subscribe to the millennium gap theory, or claim that the Early Moderns were more rational (or necessarily more secular) than their predecessors, the existence of the millennium gap in the curricular provision requires us to reflect on how we conceptualise and present Early Modern philosophy (e.g. as the age of reason, birthplace of science, freedom from religion) in order to avoid furthering the historiographical presuppositions that result in ignoring over a thousand years of history.

In summary, in the talk I will present the millennium gap theory and talk about historiographical models on which it rests. I will present the results of our ongoing empirical works which tries to see whether the reasons given for the presence of the gap in the UK curricula can be explained by implicit or explicit endorsement of this type of models. Finally, I will draw some implications this has on studying and teaching early Modern Philosophy.

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