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| ***Early Modern Philosophy*** |

The [Age of Reason](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_reason.html) of the 17th Century and the [Age of Enlightenment](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_enlightenment.html) of the 18th Century (very roughly speaking), along with the advances in science, the growth of religious tolerance and the rise of liberalism which went with them, mark the real beginnings of modern philosophy. In large part, the period can be seen as an ongoing battle between two opposing doctrines, Rationalism (the belief that all knowledge arises from intellectual and deductive reason, rather than from the senses) and Empiricism (the belief that the origin of all knowledge is sense experience).

*Descartes*

This revolution in philosophical thought was sparked by the French philosopher and mathematician [René Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html), the first figure in the loose movement known as [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html), and much of subsequent Western philosophy can be seen as a response to his ideas. His method (known as methodological skepticism, although its aim was actually to dispel [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html) and arrive at certain knowledge), was to shuck off everything about which there could be even a suspicion of doubt (including the unreliable senses, even his own body which could be merely an illusion) to arrive at the single indubitable principle that he possessed consciousness and was able to think ("I think, therefore I am"). He then argued (rather unsatisfactorily, some would say) that our perception of the world around us must be created for us by God. He saw the human body as a kind of machine that follows the mechanical laws of physics, while the mind (or consciousness) was a quite separate entity, not subject to the laws of physics, which is only able to influence the body and deal with the outside world by a kind of mysterious two-way interaction. This idea, known as [Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html) (or, more specifically, Cartesian Dualism), set the agenda for philosophical discussion of the "mind-body problem" for centuries after. Despite [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)' innovation and boldness, he was a product of his times and never abandoned the traditional idea of a God, which he saw as the one true substance from which everything else was made.

*Spinoza*

The second great figure of [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html) was the Dutchman [Baruch Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html), although his conception of the world was quite different from that of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html). He built up a strikingly original self-contained metaphysical system in which he rejected Descartes' [Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html) in favor of a kind of [Monism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_monism.html) where mind and body were just two different aspects of a single underlying substance which might be called Nature (and which he also equated with a God of infinitely many attributes, effectively a kind of [Pantheism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pantheism.html)). [Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html) was a thoroughgoing [Determinist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html) who believed that absolutely everything (even human behavior) occurs through the operation of necessity, leaving absolutely no room for free will and spontaneity. He also took the [Moral Relativist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_relativism.html) position that nothing can be in itself either good or bad, except to the extent that it is subjectively perceived to be so by the individual (and, anyway, in an ordered [deterministic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html) world, the very concepts of Good and Evil can have little or no absolute meaning).

*Leibniz*

The third great [Rationalist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html) was the German [Gottfried Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html). In order to overcome what he saw as drawbacks and inconsistencies in the theories of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html) and [Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html), he devised a rather eccentric [metaphysical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html) theory of monadsoperating according to a pre-established divine harmony. According to [Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html)'s theory, the real world is actually composed of eternal, non-material and mutually-independent elements he called monads, and the material world that we see and touch is actually just phenomena (appearances or by-products of the underlying real world). The apparent harmony prevailing among monads arises because of the will of God (the supreme monad) who arranges everything in the world in a [deterministic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html) manner. Leibniz also saw this as overcoming the problematic interaction between mind and matter arising in [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)' system, and he declared that this must be the best possible world, simply because it was created and determined by a perfect God. He is also considered perhaps the most important logician between [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html) and the mid-19th Century developments in modern formal Logic.

In opposition to the continental European [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html) movement was the equally loose movement of [British Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html), which was also represented by three main proponents.

*Locke*

The first of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html) was [John Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html). He argued that all of our ideas, whether simple or complex, are ultimately derived from experience, so that the knowledge of which we are capable is therefore severely limited both in its scope and in its certainty (a kind of modified [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)), especially given that the real inner natures of things derive from what he called their primary qualities which we can never experience and so never know. [Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html), like [Avicenna](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_avicenna.html) before him, believed that the mind was a tabula rasa (or blank slate) and that people are born without innate ideas, although he did believe that humans have absolute natural rights which are inherent in the nature of [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html). Along with [Hobbes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hobbes.html) and [Rousseau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_rousseau.html), he was one of the originators of [Contractarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_contractarianism.html) (or Social Contract Theory), which formed the theoretical underpinning for democracy, republicanism, [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html) and [Libertarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_libertarianism.html), and his political views influenced both the American and French Revolutions.

*Berkeley*

The next of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html) chronologically was [Bishop George Berkeley](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_berkeley.html), although his [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) was of a much more radical kind, mixed with a twist of [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html). Using dense but cogent arguments, he developed the rather counter-intuitive system known as Immaterialism (or sometimes as [Subjective Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html#Subjective)), which held that underlying reality consists exclusively of minds and their ideas, and that individuals can only directly know these ideas or perceptions (although not the objects themselves) through experience. Thus, according to [Berkeley](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_berkeley.html)'s theory, an object only really exists if someone is there to see or sense it ("to be is to be perceived"), although, he added, the infinite mind of God perceives everything all the time, and so in this respect the objects continue to exist.

*Hume*

The third, and perhaps greatest, of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html) was [David Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html). He believed strongly that human experience is as close are we are ever going to get to the truth, and that experience and observation must be the foundations of any logical argument. [Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html) argued that, although we may form beliefs and make inductive inferences about things outside our experience (by means of instinct, imagination and custom), they cannot be conclusively established by reason and we should not make any claims to certain knowledge about them (a hardline attitude verging on complete [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)). Although he never openly declared himself an [atheist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atheism.html), he found the idea of a God effectively nonsensensical, given that there is no way of arriving at the idea through sensory data. He attacked many of the basic assumptions of religion, and gave many of the classic criticisms of some of the arguments for the existence of God (particularly the teleological argument). In his [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html), Hume stressed the importance of moderation, and his work contains elements of both [Conservatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html) and [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html).