# Rethinking Early Modern Philosophy

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**Abstract**: This introductory article outlines how this special issue contributes to existing scholarship that calls for a rethinking and re-evaluation of common assumptions about early modern philosophy. One way of challenging existing narratives is by questioning what role systems or systematicity play during this period. Another way of rethinking early modern philosophy is by considering assumptions about the role of philosophy itself and how philosophy can effect change in those who form philosophical beliefs or engage in philosophical argumentation. A further way of advancing early modern scholarship is by examining the tight links between early modern views on metaphysics and epistemology, on the one hand, and moral, social, and political philosophy, on the other hand. Moreover, there are ongoing debates whether and how the traditional distinction between rationalism and empiricism, which has been questioned for several reasons, should be replaced. It has been proposed to replace it with a distinction between experimental and speculative philosophy, but this distinction cannot easily accommodate early modern debates concerning moral, social and political philosophy. In addition to highlighting several ways how early modern philosophy has and can be rethought, we summarize how the papers in this special issue contribute to these ongoing efforts.

**Keywords**: Early modern philosophy, new narratives, system, experience, moral agency, social philosophy

Scholarship on early modern philosophy has been flourishing over the last few decades. Existing narratives have been questioned, new themes and methods are being explored, and there is growing research on women philosophers and other previously neglected, excluded, or forgotten philosophers.[1] This special issue contributes to the ongoing debates among

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[1] For instance, see Anstey and Vanzo (2023), Detlefsen and Shapiro (2023), Laerke, Smith, and Schliesser (2013), Mercer (2019), O'Neill (1998), O'Neill and Lascano (2019), Shapiro (2016).

scholars that call for a rethinking and re-evaluation of established assumptions about the philosophical writings of the early modern period and their significance.

Before we comment further on the content of this special issue, we would like to acknowledge some of the ongoing efforts to rethink early modern philosophy that provide important background for the research presented in the following papers.

One way that existing narratives are being challenged is by questioning what role systems or systematicity play in the early modern period. Many of the so-called canonical early modern philosophers are generally interpreted as offering us robust packages of views. These systems are intended to rely on a circumscribed set of basic commitments and to hang together in a consistent and mutually reinforcing way. For instance, René Descartes paints a picture of philosophy as "like a tree" where the "roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences" (AT IXB:14; CSM I:186).[2] Pauline Phemister argues that "Descartes believed that the diverse aspects of his philosophy, particularly its theological, metaphysical, scientific, and ethical dimensions, could in principle be integrated within a single systematic account" (Phemister 2006, 20–21). The system – or perhaps the several systems – that Descartes describes and advocates in his philosophy contrasts with those offered by Baruch de Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, or George Berkeley. Alan Nelson (2013) argues that in some cases it is obvious that philosophers intended to offer a system or a systematic work. However, Nelson also acknowledges that "[t]here are other cases in which a philosopher gives some indications that a system is presented, but the texts themselves do not seem to bear it out" (2013, 236). In this vein, he offers a "brief sketch of how one might systematically approach Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*" (Nelson 2013, 236). Another philosopher who can be said to develop a system is David Hume. In the introduction to his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume outlines an ambitious project, namely to "propose a compleat [sic] system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security" (*Treatise*, Introduction 7; SBN xvi).[3] Statements such as this provide a basis for one common way of teaching and presenting the early modern period, namely as a contest between these figures as system builders.

While it is plausible that some early moderns *should be* understood as system builders in some of their works or in general, it is less plausible that we should understand the contributions of early moderns as either systematic or as inferior.[4] System-building is but one way to philosophize well. The value of less systematic philosophy in the early modern period is clear in the case of figures like Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, whose correspondence with Descartes contains innumerable philosophical insights, not to mention trenchant and incisive engagement with Descartes' positions.[5] The same goes for some of the works of the system-builders, too. Recent work on Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* has revealed their great independent value and their connections to his more systematic works (the *Treatise* and

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[2] References to Descartes' writings are to Descartes (1964–76), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols, cited in the text as "AT" followed by volume and page number, and to Descartes (1984–91), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (and Anthony Kenny, vol. 3), cited as "CSM" in the text (for vols. 1 and 2), followed by volume and page number.

[3] References to Hume's *Treatise* are to Hume (2007 [1739–40]), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, cited in the text as "*Treatise*," followed by book, part, section, paragraph number, and to Hume (1978 [1739–40]), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed., cited in the text as "SBN," followed by page number.

[4] See Nelson (2013).

[5] For instance, see Shapiro (2021), accessed 10 July 2023. For further discussion of the broader historiographical concerns, see Shapiro (2023, 36).

the *Enquiries*).[6] One of the papers in our special issue, Robert Miner's "Anti-System in the Philosophical Practice of Francis Bacon," uses the case of Bacon to challenge the assumption that the great early moderns are and should be uniformly systematic as they develop and present their philosophical insights.

Another way of rethinking early modern philosophy is by considering our and early moderns' assumptions about what and whom philosophy is *for*. What is the power of philosophy to effect change in those who engage in it? And who are its intended (or accidental) audiences? Early modern philosophers had well-developed descriptive and normative views on the formation of representations such as beliefs and affective states such as passions, as well as the causation of actions, in response to philosophical argumentation and reflection. They were distinctively aware of the social contexts in which philosophy can have a greater or lesser effect on those who engage in it.

A paper in our special issue, Mark Boespflug's "Why Every Belief is a Choice: Descartes' Doxastic Voluntarism Reconsidered," reconsiders Descartes' views on the nature of the control that we have over the beliefs that we form. This sort of foundational work provides essential grounding for our understanding of Descartes' many recommendations for philosophers to change how they think and what they believe, such as in the *Meditations*.

Other early modern thinkers draw attention to the practical obstacles that can limit a person's freedom to philosophize. As Sarah Hutton points out, "to be free to philosophize required having the opportunity to philosophize, having the time, place and means to philosophize. It presupposed at least basic education and favourable social circumstances" (Hutton 2017, 125).[7] Several women philosophers of the early modern period emphasize how important access to education is for one's intellectual and moral development.[8] For instance, Mary Astell discusses methods for improving mental capacities. Astell's approach to self-improvement is not restricted to a theoretical study of the human mind, but rather she also recommends practical methods such as daily exercises, meditation, and prayer that can aid personal and moral development.[9]

The tight links between early moderns' views on metaphysics and epistemology and their moral, social, and political views strongly recommend efforts to bring together their positions in these different domains. We believe that this is a crucial frontier for interesting new research. One example of how this can be done is Anik Waldow's book *Experience Embodied: Early Modern Accounts of the Human Place in Nature* (2020), which we feature as part of a book symposium in the second part of this special issue. Her book examines early modern debates concerning experience and argues that these debates were not restricted to epistemological concerns. Her book foregrounds the embodied dimension of our human lives and shows that moral considerations play a central role in early modern debates concerning experience. Waldow not only draws on well-known works by early modern thinkers, but also on other works that have received less attention, such as writings on education. These writings shed new light on the developmental potential of human beings and the processes by which they can become self-determined and responsible agents.

Other papers in our special issue also advance existing scholarship by bridging gaps between epistemology and metaphysics, on the one hand, and moral and political philosophy, on the other hand. For instance, Elena Yi-Jia Zeng proposes in her paper "The Role of Philosophy in Hume's Critique of Empire" that Hume's political philosophy, and particularly his critique of empire, are informed by his psychology of belief and passion formation as well

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[6] For instance, see Watkins (2019).
[7] See also Broad (2014).
[8] For instance, see Astell (2002), Clarke (2013), Masham (1705).
[9] See Astell (2002, Part II, ch. 4). For further discussion, see Broad (2015, 2019).

as his sceptical epistemology. Hope Sample's paper "Reconciling Moral Responsibility with Multiplicity in Conway's *Principles*" brings together Anne Conway's moral philosophy with her unique metaphysics of creatures and examines how both can be reconciled.

One more way that we hope our special issue encourages a rethinking of the early modern period is with respect to the traditional distinction between rationalism and empiricism and ongoing debates as to whether it should be replaced with other distinctions or narratives. Since the end of the nineteenth century, it has been common to portray the history of early modern philosophy as a dispute between these two camps, with Immanuel Kant synthesizing them in his transcendental idealism.[10] This narrative commonly draws attention to three so-called rationalists, namely Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, and three so-called empiricists, namely Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.[11]

However, recent scholarship has drawn attention to a number of problems with this traditional way of presenting the history of early modern philosophy.[12] Focusing on seven major philosophers can give the misleading impression that these philosophers worked in isolation, while actually most philosophers were part of large networks and developed their philosophical views by exchanging ideas with other male and female philosophers and intellectuals of their day. Another problem with the traditional rationalism/empiricism divide is that not every philosopher fits neatly into one of the camps.[13] Additionally, it is worth noting that philosophers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not describe themselves as rationalists or empiricists, but rather these classifications were developed retrospectively.[14]

Peter Anstey and colleagues offer one attempt to remedy the problem that the distinction between rationalism and empiricism is a retrospective construct. Their proposal is to replace it with a distinction between speculative and experimental philosophy.[15] This distinction features prominently in writings on natural philosophy during the early modern period. However, as Waldow observes in the book covered in our special issue, it "shifts the focus of the debate to questions discussed in the history of science" and "mainly concentrates on methodological issues" (Waldow 2020, 10). It is harder to see what, if any, role the distinction between experimental and speculative philosophy plays in other domains of philosophy such as moral or political philosophy, accounts of the self and self-consciousness, accounts of the passions, or approaches to education.

According to Waldow (2020), neither the traditional distinction between rationalism and empiricism which tends to focus on issues in epistemology,[16] nor the distinction between speculative and experimental philosophy which shifts the focus towards natural philosophy, are satisfactory to account for the broad range of issues discussed by early modern philosophers. Many early modern philosophers not only engage with issues in epistemology and metaphysics, but also with a wide range of issues in moral philosophy as well as social and political questions. For instance, various philosophers of the period are interested in questions concerning liberty and necessity, moral responsibility, and moral agency. Their

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[10] For helpful further discussion of the history of the rationalism/empiricism distinction, see Vanzo (2016), Wilson (2016, 15–20).

[11] For instance, see Bennett (2001).

[12] For further discussion, see Dea, Walsh, and Lennon (2018, especially sect. 6), accessed 10 July 2023, Loeb (1981).

[13] For instance, Ayers (2005) examines the question of whether Berkeley was an empiricist or a rationalist. See also Loeb (1981).

[14] On this point, see Dea, Walsh, and Lennon (2018, sect. 6), accessed 10 July 2023, Vanzo (2016), Wilson (2016, 15–20).

[15] For instance, see Anstey (2005), Anstey and Vanzo (2012, 2023).

[16] See Markie and Folescu (2023), accessed 10 July 2023.

answers to these questions commonly lie at the intersection of moral philosophy, metaphysics, and epistemology.

Our special issue has two parts. The first part contains four articles that each in different ways advance or challenge existing scholarship and invite us to rethink early modern philosophy. The second part is devoted to a book symposium, which focuses on Waldow's monograph *Experience Embodied*. With this background in hand, we turn to providing brief summaries of the articles in the issue.

In "Anti-System in the Philosophical Practice of Francis Bacon," Robert Miner seeks to spark reflection on the role of system in early modern philosophy by arguing that Bacon does not intend to build a system in his philosophical writings, despite his rare references to "system" in some of his works. Indeed, Miner argues that Bacon develops a critique of system-building as a philosophical methodology and deploys an aphoristic form of philosophical writing as an alternative to system-building. Miner calls into question both the received reading of Bacon and the received conception of philosophy in the early modern period as necessarily disposed to construction of systems.

In "The Role of Philosophy in Hume's Critique of Empire," Elena Yi-Jia Zeng argues that Hume presents a new way of diagnosing the perennial tensions between empire and liberty that were made salient by the challenges facing the British Empire in the early eighteenth century. How does an empire grow and maintain itself while remaining free internally and externally? While other thinkers focused on issues like the role of conquest in the building of empire or the consequences of commerce, Zeng proposes that Hume deployed his unique fusion of epistemology and psychology to analyse the causes of and reasons for the beliefs and motivating passions of the people of an empire that contribute to its stability. Zeng draws our attention to Hume's recommendations for the widespread use of philosophical thinking, including a moderating scepticism.

In "Why Every Belief is a Choice: Descartes' Doxastic Voluntarism Reconsidered," Mark Boespflug pushes back against traditional interpretations that hold that Descartes should not be taken literally when he tells us that everything we believe is produced by a voluntary choice. This sort of extreme position is seen as lacking viability or plausibility, and thus we should not attribute it to Descartes, or so prior commentators argue. Boespflug contends that a proper understanding of Descartes' other positions – in particular, his views on free will and the nature of freedom – reveals the viability and plausibility of Descartes' view on voluntary belief. Not only do these other positions show us how we should understand the latter view, but they also show us why it would make sense to us if we were to share Descartes' commitments.

In "Reconciling Moral Responsibility with Multiplicity in Conway's *Principles*," Hope Sample argues that there is a solution to the apparent tension between Conway's commitment to creaturely moral responsibility and her unique metaphysics of creatures. Sample pays particular attention to Conway's metaphysics of multiplicity, which not only revolves around the view that each creature has multiple parts, but also that creatures are integrated into a larger whole – an intriguing divergence from the positions of other early moderns. A consequence of Conway's account of multiplicity is that creatures can ontologically overlap, which leads to a potential problem, namely whether creatures are distinct enough to be subjects of moral responsibility. Sample proposes that Conway avoids the tension by maintaining that vital powers distinguish each creature from the others, despite ontological overlap. Sample explains that the motivation for Conway's position comes from her twofold commitment to our individual and collective moral development towards salvation.

In the second part, six commentators engage critically with Anik Waldow's book *Experience Embodied* (2020). The book symposium begins with a short précis by Waldow,

which summarizes the core ideas of her book. Waldow's book examines what role experience plays in the philosophical works by Descartes, Locke, Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Kant. By examining the conceptions of experience in the works of these authors Waldow highlights that their discussions are not restricted to epistemological concerns and have an important moral dimension. Each commentary that responds to the book focuses on one of the six figures and seeks to evaluate the extent to which the book is effective in demanding rethinking of existing narratives of early modern philosophy, as well as how much rethinking is really needed. The book symposium ends with a reply by Waldow that sheds further light on the queries, comments, and suggestions raised by the commentators.

We hope that the papers in this special issue will inspire future research on these topics.

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