

SYMPOSIUM
TEACHING EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHY: NEW APPROACHES

INTRODUCTION

ALBERTO VANZO

Published in *Metaphilosophy*, 46 (2015), 321–25. The definitive version of this article is available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/meta.12138/full>

Abstract

The articles in the symposium “Teaching Early Modern Philosophy: New Approaches” provide theoretical reflections and practical advice on new ways of teaching undergraduate survey courses in early modern philosophy. This introduction lays out the rationale for the symposium and summarizes the articles that compose it.

Keywords: early modern philosophy, history of philosophy, pedagogy.

Most survey courses in early modern philosophy follow a familiar narrative, based on the development of empiricism and rationalism and their synthesis in Kant’s philosophy. Over the past few decades, this narrative has come under heavy criticism (see, e.g., Loeb 1981) and is now rejected by many scholars. Yet, the narrative still informs most survey courses, manuals, and anthologies (see, e.g., Copenhaver 2013). A growing number of teachers are keen to try new approaches to the teaching of early modern survey courses. However, there are few scholarly up-to-date, pedagogically well-thought-out models that they may follow or draw inspiration from.¹

1 Marshall 2014 discusses several ways of structuring early modern survey courses. For outlines of courses focusing on natural philosophy, see Garber 2004; on God and evil, see Neiman 2002 and 2004 and Larrimore 2004; on ethics, see Schneewind 1984, 1998, and

The six articles in this symposium are intended to help fill this gap. They include theoretical reflections and practical advice on how to structure introductory courses on early modern philosophy. They discuss how these courses can introduce students to ways of thinking that they tend to find implausible. They argue that survey courses ought to highlight the interaction between natural and moral philosophy and to include women philosophers, and they outline ways in which this can be done. They show how one can give students a better understanding of social contract theorists and dissenting figures by exposing them to the views of critics of the modern unified state. They discuss what kinds of distortions are acceptable in pedagogical situations and whether the distinction between empiricism and rationalism is one of them.

In “Teaching Early Modern Philosophy as a Bridge Between Causal or Naturalistic Accounts and Conceptual Thought,” Jeremy Barris and Paul Turner argue that early modern survey courses can be used to shake up the ideas of students who are being exposed to philosophy for the first time about what can be reasoned about and in what ways. Undergraduate students and popular culture often assume that objective truth can only be found within the realm of physical reality and that the only legitimate procedures for establishing objective truths are those employed by the natural sciences. Many early modern philosophers valued highly the methods and results of the natural sciences. Yet, they also attempted to apply those methods to the investigation of nonphysical aspects of reality, including issues concerning values, lived consciousness, and spirituality. Moreover, they took seriously the cogency of purely conceptual or logical connections and meaningfulness. By emphasizing these elements when introducing topics in the philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza, and Hobbes, teachers can lead students to reflect on the legitimacy of science-informed approaches to the physical world, to consider the possibility of objective thought about nonphysical aspects of reality, to appreciate the peculiarity of a form of reasoning that searches not for empirical facts and causal links but for logical relations and conceptual connections, and to adopt a sympathetic attitude toward ways of thinking that are marginalized within popular culture and academic philosophy.

In the past few decades, scholars have often stressed that many early modern thinkers

2004a. Loeb 1981, Popkin 2003, and Watkins 2013 can be used as a guide for articulating at least parts of undergraduate survey courses. A helpful resource on women philosophers is Atherton 1994.

regarded natural philosophy as a central component of philosophy itself. Yet, early modern survey courses tend to exclude natural philosophy and to ignore the links between natural and moral philosophy. In “Before the Two Cultures: Merging the Canons of the History of Science and Philosophy,” Tamás Demeter argues that this results in a distorted image of early modern thought. For instance, in order to give an adequate account of eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers, it is essential to note that they conceived of natural and moral philosophy as parts of a single enterprise, mutually reliant on one another, employing a single method, and, for most authors, presupposing a common understanding of the world as oriented by God toward certain ends. Demeter argues that teachers can highlight the interrelations of natural and moral philosophy by focusing on methodological ideas. For instance, they can focus on the methods of analysis and synthesis to highlight the connections between Newtonian natural philosophy and Scottish moral philosophy. A focus on methodology can guide the discussion of other authors, like Descartes and Spinoza, and of the oppositions between empiricism and rationalism or experimental and speculative philosophy. Methodological views provide a link between natural and moral philosophy and between authors and topics that are often considered in isolation from one another.

Another way in which standard survey courses distort the early modern period is by excluding early modern women. In “Including Early Modern Women Writers in Survey Courses: A Call to Action,” Jessica Gordon-Roth and Nancy Kendrick note that this is due, to a significant extent, to the way in which male bias has shaped our canon. The same bias is at least partly responsible for the underrepresentation of women in philosophy, starting with the drop in the number of women students between introductory and advanced undergraduate courses. Women students feel that philosophy is not a place where they belong. To address this, we ought to include texts written by women in early modern undergraduate syllabi. Gordon-Roth and Kendrick provide evidence of how this changes students’ perception of philosophy as a discipline, helping students realise that women can be philosophers.

As Gordon-Roth and Kendrick note, an obstacle to developing early modern courses that include women writers is the scarcity of secondary literature that takes their philosophical contributions seriously. For instance, scholars writing on Mary Astell’s correspondence with John Norris present Astell primarily as his disciple and respondent. Yet, she was also directing the discussion and setting the foundations for independent philosophical positions. Similarly, Astell’s philosophical theory of friendship has been portrayed as an expression of

girlish anxiety over romantic love.

Sandrine Berges highlights another obstacle in “On the Outskirts of the Canon: The Myth of the Lone Female Philosopher and What to Do About It”: it is difficult to integrate texts written by women in the standard narrative of early modern philosophy. Compared with their male counterparts, women philosophers appear isolated and hard to place within established traditions and dialogues, especially dialogues with other women. In order to feature women philosophers in the curriculum, Berges advises against replacing standard syllabi with a course focusing solely or mostly on female philosophers, or introducing women authors as dialoguing with canonical male philosophers. She argues that it is preferable to abandon the standard narrative altogether and to structure survey courses in new ways—a view shared by Gordon-Roth and Kendrick.

In “Challenging the State: Teaching Alternative Historiographies in Early Modern Politics,” Jacob Affolter advocates introducing students of early modern political philosophy to a pre-modern political outlook that recent critics of the unified state have placed in evidence. Survey courses tend to portray the development of the modern liberal state as an unambiguous step forward over absolute monarchies and to stress the differences between Hobbes’s, Locke’s, and Rousseau’s contractualist models. An important commonality among these authors and their current-day readers is the assumption that there is a unified state with ultimate authority over society. By contrast, in the Middle Ages a plurality of institutions such as guilds, cities, and dioceses exercised political authority, had frequent struggles over its extent, and claimed ultimate power to interpret the limits of their own authority. Absolute monarchies came relatively late, and even then people seldom conceived of the loyalty to the state as distinct from the loyalty to a specific monarch. Hobbes’s, Locke’s, and Rousseau’s insistence on the unified state as the sole bearer of ultimate political power is best seen against this background. This is also the background that critics of social contract theory had in mind. Hume’s attack on social contract theories aims to regain some of the virtues of the pre-modern political organisation. Tocqueville grants private associations a role that recalls, in some respects, the roles of churches, guilds, towns, and landowners in medieval society. Some of Burke’s statements on the social contract and the right of rebellion are reflections on an approach to politics that predates the formation of the unitary state.

On a more abstract level, Kirsten Walsh and Adrian Currie’s “Caricatures, Myths, and White Lies” discusses which distortions are appropriate in pedagogical situations.

Pedagogical success in introductory-level teaching of early modern philosophy requires not only omitting some details but also introducing some distortions of the historical record. Distortions may be introduced to facilitate students' understanding of the past or for some other purpose (for example, to explain a distinction in contemporary epistemology). Walsh and Currie discuss when and to what extent the historical truth may be sacrificed for the sake of pedagogical success, that is, which distortions are warranted and which ought to be avoided. They distinguish between caricatures and myths. Cutting-edge research in early modern philosophy identifies a set of core truths, which are essential for understanding a given historical period. Caricatures retain core truths and are allowed, whereas myths distort core truths and ought to be avoided. Walsh and Currie hold that the distinction between empiricism and rationalism is an example of such a myth. An upshot of their discussion is that there is a robust connection between introductory teaching and cutting-edge research on the history of early modern philosophy. Research identifies the core truths that teaching ought to preserve, whereas teaching can be seen as the expression of assumptions about what the core truths are.

Department of Philosophy
Social Sciences Building
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
United Kingdom
alberto.vanzo@email.it

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editor in chief and the managing editor of *Metaphilosophy*, Armen Marsoobian and Otto Bohlmann, for their support, and Tom Sorell for advice. This research was supported by a Marie Curie International Incoming Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme.

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