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Teaching Early Modern Philosophy as a Bridge between Causal or Naturalistic and Conceptual  
Thought

Jeremy Barris and Paul M. Turner

## Abstract

It is a challenge in teaching early modern philosophy to balance historical faithfulness to the arguments and concerns of early modern philosophers and interpreting them as relevant to the kinds of thinking that contemporary undergraduate students find plausible. Early modern philosophy is unique, however, in applying modern scientific method directly to problems concerning nonphysical aspects of reality that our contemporary scientific thought, and with it mainstream contemporary culture, no longer finds amenable in their own, independent right to reliable reasoned approaches. At the same time, early modern philosophy often also takes seriously purely conceptual or logically consequential thought in the investigation of these topics, as our mainstream contemporary culture does not. This kind of thought, we argue, is distinctive of philosophy in general and appropriate to nonphysical aspects of reality. Early modern philosophy, then, offers a bridge between the kind of reasoned, objective thought our mainstream culture finds plausible and thought about nonphysical reality or, in general, the thought that characterizes philosophy.

Keywords: Causal Explanation; Conceptual Analysis; Descartes; Hobbes; Naturalistic Explanation; Spinoza; Teaching Early Modern Philosophy

A problem in teaching early modern philosophy is that of finding a balance between historical faithfulness to the arguments and concerns of early modern philosophers and presenting them in a way that is relevant, not only to current discussions in philosophy, but also to the kinds of thinking that contemporary undergraduate students can find or come to find plausible. We shall argue that, because of the particular character of its incongruity with contemporary thought, early modern philosophy is in fact uniquely suited to introducing and exploring an issue that is fundamental both to our contemporary discussions in philosophy and to the wider contemporary cultural understanding of thought's capabilities in which our students' intuitions are formed.

Early modern philosophy is unique in taking up an early form of modern scientific method as a resource, but applying it directly to problems that our contemporary scientific thought, and with it mainstream contemporary culture, no longer finds at all amenable in their own, independent right to reliable reasoned approaches. These problems involve, for example, values, principles, lived consciousness, and meaningfulness or spirituality: that is, nonphysical aspects of reality. These include nonphysical aspects of physical reality itself, such as the essence or being of a physical thing. At the same time, early modern philosophy often also takes seriously the cogency of purely conceptual or logically consequential thought in the investigation of these topics, as our mainstream contemporary culture does not. As we shall argue, this kind of thought is appropriate to addressing nonphysical aspects of reality in their own right, irrespective of whether modern scientific method may reasonably be taken not to be so. Early modern philosophy, then, offers a bridge between the kind of reasoned, objective thought our culture at large finds plausible and thought about nonphysical aspects of reality in their own right. Consequently its study is well suited to helping us reconsider the possibility of reasoned, objective thought about those aspects of reality. It then also gives a substantial contrast with

science-informed approaches to physical reality that allows us, in turn, to reconsider the scope, character, and legitimacy of science-informed reasoning itself.

In addition, once this kind of discussion has shaken up students' ideas about what can be reasoned about and in what ways, it opens the question of what other kinds of unfamiliar approaches might be legitimate. In particular, it helps establish a more sympathetic attitude to the potential cogency of many of the marginalized approaches of early modern philosophy. In addition, given that open possibility of their legitimacy, their novelty can also make them interesting to consider.

As will become clear below, the kind of thinking that works appropriately with nonphysical aspects of reality is arguably the kind of thinking that is distinctive for philosophy in general, so the contemporary cultural failure to recognize it is also a failure to recognize the character and cogency of philosophy itself. Consequently, identifying this kind of thinking and its legitimacy is the central problem for teaching introductory philosophy at all in our culture. If so, the bridge early modern philosophy provides is helpful in a very fundamental way.

We make this argument in general terms in the first two sections below, and then offer several examples of specific early modern arguments and approaches that illustrate the general themes.

### 1. The Contemporary Understanding of Plausible Reasoning and Its Appropriate Topics

One characteristic of the popular thought and very often of the scholarly thought of our age is the assumption that objective truth and reasoned procedures for evaluation of that truth belong only to inquiry into physical reality, and then to that kind of reality only as studied by the physical sciences. Even psychology and social life are understood as legitimately studied only on the

model of the “hard sciences,” that is, on the basis of what we might call observational-calculative procedures of validation. In this conception, aspects of life and reality such as their moral, political, spiritual, metaphysical, and existential (that is, concerned with meaningfulness) aspects ultimately have no objectivity of their own, but reduce to or, in more sophisticated versions, supervene on observable, physical reality.

Some movements within the social sciences and philosophy have strongly challenged this widespread conception. One representative form this challenge takes is the distinction between explanation and understanding as seminally developed by Max Weber (e.g., 1978).<sup>1</sup> Explanation, roughly speaking, is observational-calculative, taking as its subject matter interactions between separately identifiable entities that in turn are observed by a separately identifiable observer. Explanation consequently works with external relations between the objects it studies. In contrast, internal relations are those between interacting objects or events that constitute each other’s character in the relevant respects, so that these objects or events are not identifiable without reference to each other. In the context of working with external relations, the kinds of interactions that are looked for are typically causal.

Understanding, on the other hand, traces the logic inherent in the phenomena it studies, that is, the character of properties internal or essential to them. Among these properties essential to the phenomena are some of their relations to other phenomena; where these relations occur, different phenomena are identifiable as and are the phenomena they are only in relation each other, and so are themselves internal to each other. These internally related phenomena can include the observer and the observed. In other words, understanding studies the sense or meanings of things and the relations that derive from that sense. In the context of working with

internal relations, then, the kinds of connections that are looked for are typically logical or conceptual.

Where the sense or meaning of the observed phenomenon involves a relation between it and the observer in which they define each other and so in that sense are internal to each other, it also, consequently, involves the kinds of conceptual structures on the part of the observer that culture and differing perspectives inform.

This challenge to the idea that only observational-calculative procedures reliably give truth, and with this idea that only physical reality (as itself defined on the basis of these procedures) is capable of objective study, however, has not affected the popular conception of truth and of effective procedures for establishing truth. It is also very much a minority commitment in current philosophical discussion and in the social sciences, especially at the level at which undergraduate students are exposed to these disciplines. One indication of this lack of effect is that undergraduate students, for example, often use the phrase “physical proof” or “tangible proof” to mean “proof” (so, for instance, “Descartes’ argument that God exists is pure opinion because he gives no physical proof”). Here the addition of “physical” or “tangible” to “proof” does not offer a contrast with an alternative kind of proof, but is simply a reminder of what counts as proof, and that here this essential element is missing.

This state of affairs offers one explanation for why early modern philosophy is hard to teach. Early modern philosophy does not respect the assumption that physical and nonphysical reality are not both legitimate objects of rational study each in its own independent right, and our students typically take that assumption for granted as beyond question. But we propose that the particular way in which early modern philosophy does not respect this assumption actually makes it very helpful in this regard.

## 2. Plausible Reasoning in Early Modern Philosophy and Teaching Early Modern Philosophy

Today

We suggest that early modern philosophy serves as a very useful introduction to the possibility of objective and reasoned thoughtfulness about nonphysical aspects of reality because, in terms of the explanation/understanding distinction, it very often takes nonphysical aspects of reality as its topic in the internally meaningful sense that understanding addresses, while at the same time approaching them in the external, observational-calculative way characteristic of explanation.

Early modern philosophy, then, can help introduce our students to the deeply unfamiliar cogency of understanding-like thought and its possible appropriateness to moral, spiritual, existential, and metaphysical aspects of reality and life, via the explanation-like thought that is familiar to them as the basis for objectivity and valid evaluation. In this way, it can serve as a bridge between the two types of approach or account. What is more, early modern philosophy is probably unique in offering this particular coordination of the two types of approach, since, while it is newly caught up in the appeal of explanation-like early physical scientific method, it also inherits the Aristotelian and Scholastic sense of the issues that it approaches with this method, a sense that is in important ways akin to the understanding-like approaches of, for example, ordinary language philosophy and descriptive phenomenology.

Of course, early modern philosophy does not interpret this distinction between kinds of account on the basis of the conceptual resources and constraints offered by more recently current terms like understanding versus explanation, internal versus external, and logical versus causal. Instead, it works with terms like essential versus accidental, formal and material cause versus efficient cause, and privation versus negation. Nonetheless, as should become clear below, early



modern philosophy gets at what is often roughly the same set of distinctions in using its own conceptual resources.

The point here is not that early modern philosophy provides a bridge to a distinction about whose character we later moderns are already independently clear, but that it provides a bridge to opening up the question of a distinction whose character is constitutionally unclear, and one that it was equally the early moderns' business and is our permanent business to reopen and strive to make clear. Consequently, the ways in which their and our conceptual resources differ are part of the value of the bridge the early moderns offer. In this paper, however, we shall use contemporary vocabulary, since it is to us that we are trying to say something about this shared distinction.

This application of explanation-type thinking to nonphysical reality at first naturally strikes students who begin with our culture's popular conception of plausible reasoning as inappropriate and even parodic. As a result, teaching this kind of subject matter gives the opportunity to raise the question whether this approach is indeed inappropriate—not because, for example, nonphysical reality has no structure of its own amenable to being reasoned about (and perhaps no reality sufficiently independent to allow that kind of structure), but instead because it has a type of structure to which this approach is unsuited. Raising this possibility then allows us to explore in order to discover if there is such an alternative structure and what it might be. And in fact early modern thinkers do offer an account of nonphysical reality as conceptually structured, that is, as having its own internal logic. Once we have identified that structure in company with our students, we are then in a position to identify what the alternative kind of reasoning might be that, unlike explanation-type thinking, is suited to recognizing and working with it. In addition, early modern philosophy includes a great variety of different kinds of

argument, on different kinds of topic, that employ explanation-type reasoning in understanding-type contexts. This gives us opportunities to clarify different aspects of the nature of this alternative kind of reasoning (that is, in our terms, conceptual or logical reasoning), depending on what the specific causal or externally connective argument is and so what specific internal relations it disconnects with or bypasses.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that the early moderns are generally unaware of the distinction between the two kinds of approach and wrongly apply explanation-type or causal reasoning to an unsuitable subject matter, and that we know better and so can responsibly evaluate them as making a mistake. In fact, instead, as we illustrate in the examples below, they are fully aware of the distinction, and what they are often relying on *in* the causal reasoning *are* the internal or conceptual connections that they identify as also and independently playing a role in the context of that causal kind of reasoning itself.

It is true that for us it is crucial to emphasize the distinction and explicitly ward off confusion between the two types of account, either because, with the popular conception, we sharply reject the possibility of one of the types of account, or perhaps because, as philosophers, we defend that rejected form of account as legitimate in its own way. But early modern philosophers are typically not concerned to emphasize that distinction because, we suggest, they are instead excited by exactly the opposite possibility of newly *combining* the two kinds of reasoning, of exploring, in the novel context of the causal reasoning newly discovered to be so broadly promising in its own right, the possibilities of the internal, conceptual reasoning that continues to be understood as an essential part of the traditional, necessary philosophical stock in trade.

Our contemporary culture's way of reading these early modern arguments, though, as our students inherit that culture, *does* confuse the natures and roles of the two kinds of reasoning in early modern thought in the sense that causal reasoning is understood as being applied to unsuitable subject matter, while the other kind of reasoning is not recognized as genuine reasoning at all, and still less as relevant to the causal account. And that confusion about early modern philosophy on our own part, we are arguing, is a very useful confusion to unravel.

In the end, this exploration in early modern philosophy of the presence and force of internal or conceptual connection in causal contexts allows us to reconsider in turn the legitimacy of the exclusive functioning of causal or explanation-type reasoning itself in its own proper contexts, and whether it has ever been plausible even there without unacknowledgedly presupposing the contribution of internal connections.

In addition, the unsettling of contemporary entrenched assumptions that occurs in the context of these reflections puts students in a position to recognize the possible, thought-provoking cogency of other unfamiliar early modern approaches. For example, there is the occasionalist argument that separate, mutually external entities, whether mental or physical, are not able to cause anything in each other at all. As Étienne Gilson very usefully notes in explaining the point, just as we easily see a deep problem with understanding actions of mind and body on each other, "a body itself is just as distinct a substance from another body, as it is from a mind; how then are we to account for the fact that one body seems to act upon another body?" (1964, 166).<sup>2</sup>

This kind of exploration can also serve as a helpful entry point to, and give critical leverage on, contemporary discussions of causality. In this light, students can see for, example, why a philosopher like Bertrand Russell is not simply stating the obvious but offering a

substantive philosophical thesis when he notes (explicitly in opposition to occasionalism) that “in any legitimate sense of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, science seems to show that they are usually very widely dissimilar” (1963, 138). (Russell continues—also not on observational-calculative grounds and now very much counterintuitively to the general cultural perspective—“the ‘cause’ being, in fact, two states of the whole universe, and the ‘effect’ some particular event” [138].)

Even without considering the specific cooperative coordination of causal reasoning with reasoning through internal relations or, contrariwise, the rejection of causal reasoning in the light of the relevance of internal relations, just the simple apparent failure, in certain kinds of context, of causal reasoning to fit subject matter that nonetheless has some evident degree of reality and structure allows us to provoke a reconsideration of the scope, character, and legitimacy of causal reasoning. Such contexts include, for example, for religious students, Descartes’ proof of the existence of God, and, for secularly minded students, Spinoza’s presentation of the external, thing-like production of thoughts and emotions that also and at least as fundamentally takes place as a logically necessary, or internally connected, expression of nature’s essence. (We discuss each of these in the following sections.)

This arguable insufficiency of causal reasoning helps to give students the kind of leverage on their assumptions that, for instance, allows us to raise the question: if causal reasoning cannot be applied as a matter of course in that context, why are we so certain it can be applied in its usual contexts? Is it not equally flimsy in both contexts? True, in physics we have recourse to observations of events that can be shared and in that way confirmed or disconfirmed independently of the observers and their subjective thinking and interpretations. But do we not equally well have observation of things we can as easily agree on in, say, our emotional lives, and also in what we often share in our strong responses to ethical rights and wrongs? What those

responses are may vary, but with respect to being observable what each response responds to are issues that we can clearly register, communicate, mutually understand, and come to shared conclusions about. Conversely, physics in fact works very little with observables and far more with highly complex and extended reasoning, including conceptual and logically consequential thought rather than causal or observationally confirmable thought. And physics often and fundamentally deals with entities that are unobservable not only in fact but in principle.

What is more, if we now no longer arbitrarily assume the legitimacy of explanatory-type thinking but recognize the need to justify it, we can see that we cannot do so on its own basis without circularity. If it is going to acquire justification at all, then, it will have to be on the basis of a different type of thinking—such as conceptual, internal-logical type thinking. And, in that light, we would need to re-evaluate the possible legitimacy and force of such thinking, not only as an alternative resource for establishing truth, but also as indispensable for causal, explanation-type thinking itself.

### 3. An Example in Teaching Descartes

In teaching Descartes' *Meditations* (1996 [1641]), there is a revealing contrast between the ways students typically react to the *Cogito* argument in the second meditation and to the proof of God's existence in the third meditation. In the case of the proof of God's existence via the necessity of an efficient or external cause of the idea of a perfect being, students often readily understand the basic idea insofar as it involves external causality, but find Descartes' application of that idea hopelessly insufficient. And they typically do so for reasons that fail to recognize the role in this argument of logically necessary connections that Descartes argues hold between cause and effect. That is, it is not that they reject the role played by those connections, but that

they do not see it at all. For instance, students often argue, in effect, that while external causes are generally a sound basis for accounting for things, they involve a variety of hypothetically possible alternatives that need to be controlled for, and Descartes does not control for these. For example, his argument relies on the idea of the cause's having "as much reality" as the effect. But students often understand this "sufficient reality," if it has any meaning at all, to be something that can only be established by observational testing of alternative causes, and this kind of testing plays no part in his discussion.

Alternatively, because degree of reality really does not seem to be testable observationally at all, students take it not to be the kind of thing that can be meaningfully discussed as a factor in causation. Instead, they take it to be subjective, and therefore arbitrary or possibly even entirely imaginary. This problem of arbitrary subjectivity also applies, for example, to Descartes' discussion of perfection as an attribute of cause or effect. What "perfection" refers to also cannot be established by observational testing, and students therefore see it as arbitrarily interpretable in different ways.

In contrast, the proof of one's own existence as presupposed by the very doubting of it (even if I am deceived, I must exist in order to be deceived) turns entirely on logical consequence. And when students encounter this argument, they generally altogether fail to recognize what Descartes' reasoning is, and in fact often substitute for it completely different lines of thought of their own without realizing they have done so. In other words, for typical undergraduate students this example of consequential reasoning, unlike the argument for the existence of God in the third meditation, is not just a weak form of an understandable kind of reasoning that is plausible in some contexts but happens not to be plausible in this one. It is instead a kind of reasoning whose presence they miss altogether, and usually automatically

misrecognize as a different type of argument, typically a version of external-causal, observational reasoning (which, since the issue really is a logical one, begs the question). For example, I know I exist because I am aware of my own thoughts, and since these thoughts are my own, I am very close to them; as a result my observation of them is very clear and I cannot mistake their existence. And since I produce or am the cause of these existing thoughts, I must also exist.

Even in this non-Cartesian version, an internal connection between my thinking and myself is in fact necessary to the conclusion (the drawing of the conclusion presupposes that what it is to be a thought is partly to be produced by a self). But it is presupposed without recognition that it is not simply a self-evident observation but itself a step of reasoning, and in particular a step that is logically based (not necessarily validly, we acknowledge; but at least occurring in the medium of internal or logical connection) rather than observationally based. Similarly, in reading Descartes' explanation of his own version, students typically simply do not recognize as part of what is said and so as part of the argument the logical or internal rather than observationally discovered connection between being deceived, on the one hand, and existing in order to be something that can be deceived, on the other.

That is, students typically recognize causal reasoning or, more broadly, reasoning that identifies external relations between independently identifiable entities, such as they take our selves and our thoughts to be; but they fail to recognize the possibility of internal or logical relations and, consequently, the kind of reasoning that identifies and works with them.

This confusion, in this context in which both kinds of thought are explicitly present and sometimes coordinated, however, gives us the opportunity to make clear that causal or external reasoning does not work in the proof of one's own existence, since it implicitly presupposes

another kind of reasoning without which it begs the question. And this then allows us to identify the other kind of reasoning that it presupposes and that is made explicit in the text. In doing so, we not only establish the distinction between the two kinds of reasoning, but we can also establish the “abstract” or nonphysical character of the issues or aspects of issues they apply to. Further, we establish that sometimes causal reasoning is insufficient even for issues that do seem clearly capable of being reasoned about, while the alternative kind of reasoning, logical or consequential reasoning, does in fact work in connection with some of these issues, issues views about which are capable of being assessed as true or false and which include nonphysical topics.

In this light, we have a useful background of conceptual resources with which to return to the proof of God’s existence and identify the logical rather than observational-external elements on which it also turns, and which are masked by the approach through efficient causes. It is not an observational result that a cause must have as much reality as the effect it causes, and students can now recognize that the alternative kind of reasoning involved requires criteria for its evaluation (however that evaluation may turn out) different from those that they presuppose and apply on the basis of the genuinely external, causal reasoning they are used to in scientifically informed culture.

#### 4. An Example in Teaching Spinoza

In Spinoza, at least on the surface, there is a more or less direct conflation of internal and external relations or, in his terms, of what follows from essence and what is produced by efficient causes. This makes the incongruity between the two kinds of account especially sharp and illuminating. It is possible that the conflict between the roles each type of relation plays is resolved at a very deep level of his account. If so, however, this is an achievement, and a very



difficult one, and the surface incongruity consequently still remains striking and thought provoking.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that “whether we consider nature under the attribute of extension or under the attribute of thought or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order and one and the same connection of causes” (1989 [1677], Part II, Proposition 7, Note). That is, thoughts follow from one another on the basis of the same kind of causality in virtue of which physical things produce effects in each other, and vice versa. Spinoza clarifies that “the idea of a particular thing actually existing has God for its cause, not in so far as he is infinite, but in so far as he is considered as affected by the idea of another particular thing actually existing of which also God is the cause, in so far as he is affected by another third idea, and so on to infinity,” and he specifies that “the idea of a particular thing actually existing is a particular mode of thinking and distinct from all others” (Part II, Proposition 9). Thoughts follow from other thoughts and physical things follow from other physical things as entities affected by separately identifiable entities, in other words, on the basis, in both cases, of external causality.

On the other hand, he argues that “nothing can exist or be conceived without God” (Part I, Proposition 15), and “all things which can fall under the divine intellect . . . must necessarily follow from the necessity of the divine nature” (Part I, Proposition 16). What he means by “necessarily following” in this way emerges in the proof he immediately offers:

from a given definition of anything the intellect infers certain properties, which in truth necessarily follow from the definition (that is, the very essence of the thing) . . . But as the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes, each of which expresses infinite essence in its kind, infinite things in infinite ways . . . must necessarily follow from its necessity.

On the one hand, then, Spinoza argues that thoughts (as he argues of physical things too [e.g., Part II, Proposition 6, Corollary]) are brought about and modified by external causation. On the other hand, he argues that they are also, and in the same respects (since “nothing can exist or be conceived without God”), brought about and modified by logical consequence, in the sense of expressing, organically, what is essential or internal to God or, as Spinoza argues is the same thing, to nature.

Again, this incongruity gives a helpful provocation for coming to recognize the contrast between the two kinds of connection, identifying their respective characters, and raising the question of their respective legitimacy and scope. And again, it can serve as a useful entry to our own contemporary discussions of the conflict and compatibility of these kinds of connections, since it shakes up the assumptions that make external-causal explanations seem obviously and exclusively legitimate. As a result, it gives critical leverage on the difficulties at issue. It is then possible for students to see why, for example, Donald Davidson is not simply stating the obvious in defending reasons as at least partially external causes for actions, and at the same time to see that in making this case he is not neglecting or denying the ways in which reasons and actions are also internally connected. And it allows students to see that this coordination of the two types of connection is itself part of the subtlety and interest of his insight (e.g., 1980, 10, 14). Again, in similar ways, it is a useful entry to Davidson’s and others’ discussions of beliefs and desires as explicable in terms of behavior without being reducible to it (e.g., 1984, 159).

##### 5. An Example in Teaching Hobbes

Hobbes may seem an unlikely figure to illustrate our proposal, since his thought is materialist and nominalist (indeed, Leibniz referred to it as a “super-nominalism”), and one might initially

assume that it would be irrelevant to a curriculum thematizing internal-conceptual reasoning in early modern philosophy. On the contrary, however, we believe it is precisely in several points of his disagreement with a figure like Descartes that he provides interesting opportunities for opening up productive discussion and thinking about internal-conceptual relations as a plausible way of reasoning.

As we have noted, many students' sense of what counts as plausible reasoning often extends little further than what can be voiced in the register of causal relations between discrete physical things. Hobbes' materialism and nominalism may well appeal to those coming to philosophy with such a view, since he dismisses much of philosophical technical vocabulary as a kind of nonsense. It is merely "insignificant speech" in such cases where

men make a name of two names, whose significations are contradictory and inconsistent; as this name, an incorporeal body, or (which is all one) an incorporeal substance, and a great number more. For whensoever any affirmation is false, the two names of which it is composed, put together and made one, signify nothing at all. (1996 [1651], 30)

The view, then, is that such terms as "incorporeal substance" mean nothing on account of the fact that substance must mean body, that is, a body in extension. When speaking this way, there may be an appearance of sense, but consideration of the sense of each combined term shows this must be an illusion, or an "absurdity." Our students, perplexed by the language of essences and thinking substance, may perhaps feel that they have found a sensible ally.

Even on this humble point, however, it is productive to notice precisely why Hobbes does not allow such talk in philosophical discourse. Although the student may perhaps sympathize with Hobbes in his dismissal of, for example, incorporeal substances, the process by which the sympathetic student employing the common sense approach dismisses it typically differs

somewhat from Hobbes'. In focusing on the significations of terms, Hobbes makes a move structurally similar to the kind of internal-conceptual reasoning so central to Descartes' argumentation. "Incorporeal" and "substance" fail to signify anything when combined because each term would violate the *sense* of the other, the range of the embedded significations contained within each. So, incorporeal substances are not dismissed simply because they cannot be encountered or because we have for other reasons so far failed physically to observe them to exist; rather, they are dismissed because the sense of each term excludes the possibility of significant combination with the other.

Even in this nominalistic theory grounded in a materialist ontology, then, we can find simple examples of conceptual-style reasoning. This is not to say that Hobbes' account of terms and speech is not materialist or nominalist—it most certainly is—but simply that the names utilized in reasoning have an internal structure or content which in some cases may preclude the possibility of meaningful combination with certain other terms, in turn owing to those terms' content. Put more simply, the arrangement of terms matters because of what those names signify. What is interesting for our purposes here is that Hobbes' method, because of its apparent commonality with many contemporary students' familiar approaches and beliefs, may provide a point of entry into a novel form of reasoning, insofar as it actually utilizes that reasoning on the way to what appears to be a familiar conclusion or standpoint. This construal could be made an explicit theme, and then ultimately related to the structurally similar conceptual reasoning found in other early modern philosophy.

In a similar vein, these apparent commonalities in Hobbes' position and parts of his approach may provide a helpful point of entry into the type of reasoning featured in Descartes' *Cogito* argument, which we have discussed above. After familiarizing students with Hobbes'

thought and argumentation, it may be helpful then to take up the first two of Descartes' meditations. The second meditation could be studied in concert with Hobbes' objections to it.

In this context, what is useful about Hobbes' objections to Descartes—specifically the second of the series of refutations—is that students can observe how he, an unambiguous materialist, responds to Descartes' argument for the existence of the "I" as thinking substance. First, while Hobbes certainly wishes to make the point in his objection that the "I" is really something corporeal, the way that he proceeds in making the point follows the same kind of internal-conceptual procedure that does the work in Descartes' argument. This is clear here:

"I am a thing that thinks"; quite true. For from the fact that I think or have a phantasm, whether I am asleep or awake, it can be inferred that I am thinking, for "I think" means the same thing as "I am thinking." From the fact that I am thinking it follows that I am, since that which thinks is not nothing. (2006 [1641], 101)

Our students can see that the materialist is quite happy to go along with the kind of reasoning found in the original, rather than dismissing it as some bizarre failure or parodic device. Actions, mental or otherwise, cannot exist as independent entities, so the presence of an activity such as thinking implies an agent or acting substance.

Second, however, even when Hobbes does not visibly rely on logical connections, his materialist arguments are strikingly arbitrary unless we supply such logical connections. What is more, we can do so on the basis of his thinking as it is expressed elsewhere. In Hobbes' objection, having agreed that thinking implies a thinking thing, he then makes the claim that this thing is actually a corporeal substance. In at least some readings, his efforts in this respect appear to be uninspiring, if not oddly and perhaps perplexingly irrelevant to the matter at hand. It will be helpful here to quote him at some length:

And from this it seems to follow that a thing that thinks is something corporeal, for the subjects of all acts seem to be understood only in terms of matter, as he later points out in the example of the piece of wax, which, while its color, hardness, shape, and other acts undergo change, is nevertheless understood always to be the same thing, that is, the same matter undergoing a number of changes. However, it is not to be concluded that I think by means of another thought; for although a person can think that he has been thinking (this sort of thinking being merely a case of remembering), nevertheless, it is utterly impossible to think that one thinks, or to know that one knows. For it would involve an infinite series of questions: how do you know that you know that you know? Therefore, since the knowledge of the proposition “I exist” depends on the knowledge of the proposition “I think,” and the knowledge of this latter proposition depends on the fact that we cannot separate thought from the matter that thinks, it seems we should infer that a thing that thinks is material, rather than immaterial. (2006 [1641], 101-2)

In the first portion of the paragraph, it appears that Hobbes has missed the point Descartes actually intends to make with the wax example. As Descartes puts it, “the only thing I proved by means of the example of the piece of wax was that color, hardness, and shape do not belong to the essence of the wax. . . . I was treating neither the essence of the mind nor that of the body” (2006 [1641], 103). It also appears to assume that only a corporeal body can be conceived as the basis for thought, with no stated justification. But if Hobbes were simply voicing dogmatic materialism here, why would he bother following Descartes in tracing the logical consequences of thought's existence before, rather than simply asserting his own position against him? In the latter portion of the quoted passage, Hobbes argues that thinking that one thinks involves an infinite regress, which does not (at least very clearly) connect with anything Descartes has

discussed, nor does it necessarily even seem intuitively true without further explanation. (That is, why can one not think that she thinks, or know that she knows?) We are likely left a bit puzzled and perhaps disappointed by the argument.

In order to make sense of Hobbes' objection, or at least to see why he might have thought it was telling, we need to dig into the kind of thinking that involves logically rather than materialistically required connections and concepts, concepts such as "essence" and "substance" (considered without regard, for example, to whether substance is corporeal or incorporeal). Here Edwin Curley provides a very helpful possible line of thought of this kind. Curley argues that Hobbes may actually be pointing out a logical or metaphysical problem with a subject that consists in thinking, on the basis that thought's own essence is incompatible with the character of a subject or substance. We should bear in mind that the goal here is to find an independent substance that could be responsible for the activity of thinking which, as Hobbes agrees above, Descartes has shown evidently to exist. A substance, or subject, is, among other things, that which persists through various accidental changes, or can receive various accidents.

Let us briefly see how this may be what Hobbes is getting at. Now, Hobbes and Descartes share the position that it is in the essence of thought itself that it must always represent an object (either extended or mental), that is, that thinking is always thinking *of* something. This causes a potential problem, as Curley shows:

the thought which would serve as a principle of constancy cannot have any particular object. If it did, that object might change, and then it would no longer be a principle of constancy; but if it had no particular object, then it would be incomplete, and so, again, it could not be a principle of constancy. If we imagine a sufficiently general object of this thought which is to be the principle of constancy (e.g., that I think), we can always ask,

What is the object of this thought? So the infinite regress arises from the need to find a suitable object for the thought which is to serve as a principle of constancy. (1995, 104)

In other words, thinking must have an object in order to be thinking at all, according to its own essence. But this necessity makes its character dependent upon the constancy of some object, as a change in the object would change the thought that represents it. The problem is that its constancy would ultimately come not from its own self, but would be dependent on something external. Now, if we take what thought is of to be another thought, or even thinking in general (for example, “I think that I think”), then this would produce Hobbes’ infinite regress problem, insofar as *that* thought would in turn be subject to the question of and dependent on the constancy of what it represents. Curley concludes that matter or body, in contrast, can fulfill the role which thinking cannot, because “we can conceive of extension clearly without attributing to it any particular determination” (103) such as “being of” something else in the way that thinking is, and so we can conceive of extension as remaining constant in its general character. He points out that this is precisely what is at work in the science of geometry. Extension can thus, according to its *nature*—what is internal to it—be conceived in a way that allows it to constitute a subject, whereas the nature of thought does not allow it to be conceived in this way.

Such an argument will undoubtedly be more or less convincing for different readers, and some may find the implicit argument Curley provides to be too speculative, since if it is what Hobbes had in mind, we may ask why he would choose not to provide it explicitly. (Basically, Curley’s argument is that Hobbes declines to provide a clear exposition of this standpoint because at the time it could have led to accusations of heresy. That is, since Hobbes’ position would have excluded the possibility of incorporeal substances on the grounds explained above, Hobbes could then either be seen as an atheist or as asserting the view that God was a material



body. Even if Hobbes were committed to the latter view, he presumably would wish to have the opportunity to explain in depth how it avoids certain theological difficulties.) What is interesting for us is that it does allow Hobbes and Descartes to be put into conversation in such a way as to defend Hobbes' materialism as a viable option on the basis of internal-conceptual reasoning. The materialism is not simply asserted as obvious fact; rather, it is the concept or essence of thought itself that prevents it from being substance, leaving matter as a more plausible candidate for constituting the subject-substance (which then thinks, having thinking as a power of its material nature).

Some parts of Hobbes' objections, then, especially if presented along with an explication like the one Curley provides, could offer an interesting and valuable pedagogical resource. Among the most useful lessons that could be drawn out of the objection above would be to show that materialism itself can be and arguably, in order to be properly philosophical, *should* be accounted for using reasoning that does not circularly presuppose itself or simply begin by asserting its own truth axiomatically. A productive lesson or pedagogical exercise might be to thematize the various ways in which Descartes does not find Hobbes' reasoning convincing and why, and then to present an interpretation like Curley's, focusing on how it addresses precisely those weaknesses. Students would be exposed to the plausibility, and possibly also the power and importance, of conceptual reasoning even for positions that would seem initially not to value it.

## 6. Conclusion

As we mentioned at several points, in shaking up particular presuppositions about the nature of plausible or cogent reasoning and the issues to which it can be applied, this exploration of contrasting types of connection also opens students up to the potential cogency of unfamiliar

styles and topics of reasoned thought more generally. This includes the other approaches and concerns of early modern philosophy that have been marginalized for lack of contemporary weight. Also, given the open possibility of these approaches' legitimacy, their novelty can then make them interesting to consider.

In particular, approaching early modern philosophers in the manner we have discussed could open more meaningful engagement with the Aristotelian and Scholastic approaches that both precede and continue into the early modern period. These approaches tend to privilege reasoning and justification of the internal-conceptual variety, and a thematic study of this type of reasoning and the way early modern figures employ it, in the context of the bridge these figures provide between internal-conceptual reasoning and our currently more familiar external-observational reasoning, would be likely to make that yet further removed philosophy more intelligible.

This in turn also allows for a broader contextualization of the canonical early modern figures, whose genuine philosophical contributions are in many respects distorted when presented in isolation from the concerns and discourses of their various contemporaries and interlocutors.

In the introductory section, we suggested that the understanding-like thinking that works appropriately with, for example, nonphysical aspects of reality is arguably also the kind of thinking that is distinctive for philosophy in general. This type of thinking, we subsequently proposed, involves logical or conceptual analysis, which gives a deeper understanding of otherwise familiar facts, rather than the kind of observational-calculative research that discovers new facts. If this suggestion is correct, then, in helping to identify the existence and clarify the

nature of this kind of thinking and to give an idea of the grounds for its legitimacy, teaching early modern philosophy can be fundamentally helpful as an introduction to philosophy as such.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Weber took it up from nineteenth century German hermeneutics, and a variety of later thinkers deepened and elaborated it in turn. For later, also seminal developments along these and related lines, see, for example, in the Continental context, Merleau-Ponty 1976; in the Anglo-American context, Winch 1958; and drawing on both contexts Apel 1984 and Jürgen Habermas, e.g., 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Gilson gives a helpful brief account of this argument and its history from de la Forge through Malebranche to Hume; see chapter 8. The comment in the text is from his discussion of de la Forge.