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This is the first lecture in the series of lectures on Contemporary Theology I. The focus of this course is to cover contemporary thinking from the time of Hegel all the way through the Death of God theologies. Before we turn to our material for today, I would like to just have a word of prayer, asking for the Lord's guidance and direction on our thinking as we begin to study.

*Our loving heavenly Father, we thank You so much for the privilege of study. We pray that as we think back through the philosophical backgrounds of the modern period that You would illumine our thinking, that You would help us to understand the concepts that are presented. And may we see ways in which they are relevant to our thinking even today. We ask all these things in Christ's name, Amen.*

The focus of this first lecture is to lay out in some detail, but not a whole lot, the philosophical backgrounds of the modern period. As you study contemporary theology, you come to realize that contemporary theology in a non-orthodox mold is really theology that has adopted various ideas from contemporary theology, as well as methods, and wedded them to biblical language, some biblical concept. So if we're going to really understand the contemporary period in theology, we need to get an idea of the philosophy that lies behind the modern period.

It is oftentimes said that modern philosophy began with René Descartes. Whether one agrees or disagrees with that, there were some very major changes that came in philosophical thinking and in philosophical method with René Descartes, and so we need to see what the changes were that Descartes made and then to look at some of the turns and twists that happened in the history of philosophy from the time of Descartes onward, which really will help us to understand the backgrounds to the modern period of thought, both in philosophy and in theology.

What is it that is so different in regard to Descartes and his

approach to philosophy? Prior to Descartes, in the Middle Ages at least and, to some extent, even back into the ancient period, if you were a philosopher, you were also a theologian. And it was also true that theologians were philosophers. At that time, theology was understood to be the queen of the sciences. What that meant is that you studied all of your disciplines—logic, mathematics, literature, language, and philosophy—so that ultimately you would be prepared for doing the most important task, namely theology. As a result of seeing theology as the queen of the sciences, everything had to, in some way or other, be related to theology. And so, as you look at philosophers in the medieval period, you see that they discuss some of the same broad topics that we do in contemporary philosophy. They would, for example, discuss theory of knowledge, which is known as epistemology. They would talk about metaphysics, which deals with the nature and structure of reality. They would also talk about ethics, just as we do, and they would talk about other areas of philosophy. But when they would do it, they always assumed that God existed. They always assumed that God played an important part in the understanding of their philosophical discipline. In other words, when you looked at philosophy at this point in history, you could say that God was really the starting point of philosophy.

I think I can illustrate this by just briefly giving you an example of what one medieval philosopher had to say about knowledge. I'm thinking, in particular, of a medieval philosopher by the name of Grosseteste. His epistemology was an interesting one, but it was not an unusual one for that day. According to Grosseteste, God has various ideas in His mind about one object or another. In fact, He has ideas in His mind about all objects that are possible to conceive of, let alone to create. And on the basis of those ideas in the divine mind, He created things in the external world; so that God has, for example, an idea of a tree. And then God would create specific trees along the format of this idea that He has in His mind of the tree. The objects would conform to the ideas in God's mind, and God's ideas would conform to the objects that He created.

Suppose you and I wanted to gain knowledge of the fact that there was a tree in the world. In order for that to happen, according to Grosseteste, God would have to give illumination to our mind. We normally think of illumination as a theological doctrine, and we think of God needing to illumine the human mind so that we can understand Scripture. But back at this time, there was a belief that for anyone to know any intellectual thing, any object of

knowledge, God would have to illumine the mind. So God would give illumination to the human mind so that the idea of the object, say the tree, would conform to God's idea and would thereby help us to understand what it is that we're seeing. In other words, God would create the tree on the basis of His idea, and then He would illumine the mind so that as it looked out at the tree it would properly be able to understand what it was seeing.

Well, this is just an example of how God winds up being involved as the starting point in philosophy. Here in the case of Grosseteste, He was the starting point of Grosseteste's epistemology; and you just didn't do epistemology—you didn't talk about perception and knowledge—without invoking God in some way or another.

Once we get to René Descartes, we find that there is a very different method that ultimately is going to remove God from the picture of doing philosophy. Or, at least if it includes Him, it includes Him only at the very end. God will be brought into the picture and into the discussion very late in the discussion, if He's brought into it at all. How does this actually turn out to work in philosophy after the time of Descartes? I mentioned that Descartes had a new method, a new approach to doing philosophy. I would like to lay out what that was and then point out some of the other ideas in Descartes and some other philosophers, up to the time of Immanuel Kant and the time of Hegel.

Descartes had a new way of doing philosophy. As you reflect on it, you can see very clearly that it was an emphasis that centered on the area of epistemology. Descartes felt that the way to begin doing philosophy was not to appeal to God first of all, but rather to begin by asking how much he actually knew and could know beyond the shadow of a doubt. So what Descartes does in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* is to begin considering everything that he thinks he knows, and he calls into question whether he really does know. He wonders whether he actually has this information or whether he only thinks he has this information. Descartes decided that he would only continue to hold onto things that he was sure, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he actually knew. Well, Descartes began to question one thing and another that he thought he had as knowledge, and he found out that he could reasonably doubt that he really knew those things. Even some things that you might think that Descartes would have no reason to doubt, he felt they were doubtable. *After all, he said, maybe there's an evil demon that's tampering with my reason. And even though I think that I know something, maybe I don't.*

As a result of this method of calling into question everything that he knew in order to find out what he certainly and surely did know, he decided that what he had to finally come up with was one certain truth as the starting point of philosophy. He said, *If I don't come up with one thing that I cannot doubt reasonably, there's going to be no way for me to begin attaining knowledge at all.* Then, once he would find that one certain truth, Descartes felt that he had to establish some criterion for truth so that he would have a means or a method of being able to discover what other things he might know. As a result, then, he took a different turn methodologically than philosophy had taken before. His method, then, was to question the truth of anything and everything, according to whatever his criterion of truth would be. And if the object that one thought that one knew turned out not to match or fit with this criterion of truth, then one would have to conclude that one could not and did not know that particular item of knowledge.

A lot of people might think that what Descartes was really trying to do here was to destroy faith and to destroy knowledge, so that we would wind up believing that there was nothing that we would know. But, actually, that was not Descartes' intent. His real intent was not to destroy belief but, instead, to firmly ground it on that which could be definitely proved and could not reasonably be doubted.

As you look at the history of philosophy following Descartes, you find that philosophers after him agreed with what he considered to be his one certain and indubitable truth. Some of them interpret it a little bit differently than he did, but everybody after the time of Descartes seems to have accepted what he considered the one certain and indubitable truth. Everyone after Descartes, as well, seemed to agree that you then would have to come up with some criterion of truth and use that criterion to judge what you actually knew.

Well, what about Descartes? What did he finally consider was the one certain truth that he made the starting point of philosophy? Descartes' one certain truth is oftentimes referred to simply as *The Cogito* and this is shorthand for the Latin phrase *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes realized that when he thought that he was seeing a tree or seeing a desk or even seeing a hand, he could possibly be mistaken. It could be that his sensory receptors were wrong. It could be that something else was happening, in terms of his reason, and he was making a wrong judgment. Descartes found that that was true with almost

everything that he could possibly imagine that he knew, but he finally came to the point that there was one thing that he could not reasonably doubt. He said *Let's try and see if I can doubt that I exist*. And he came to the conclusion that it didn't make any sense for him to reasonably doubt that. After all, things that are nonexistent don't do anything, including doubt. So the very fact that Descartes could doubt his existence was proof that, in fact, he did exist; because nonexistent things don't do anything, including doubt.

Descartes then came to the conclusion that this would have to be the starting point of philosophy for him and the starting point of knowledge, but notice what has happened. As I said, the starting point in philosophy prior to Descartes seemed to have been God. You would argue for God's existence very quickly into your philosophy, and then you would invoke the idea of God's existence at one point or another in doing philosophy. But now what Descartes is saying is that the starting point of philosophy is no longer God, but instead it is the certainty of consciousness, that is, specifically, the certainty of one's own consciousness, the certainty of one's self as a thinking person, a thinking being. With Descartes, then, we see the beginning of the importance of consciousness and self-consciousness of one's own personhood. This particular trend of making man and man's own consciousness the initial focus, the starting point of philosophy and the emphasis, really, in many cases, winds up growing more and more important in modern philosophy and modern theology. We see this with the continued emphasis on the subject, that is, the knower as subject, rather than as an object.

In a sense, I think, we find that this emphasis on the individual with his own consciousness and his own self winds up being a key to both modern philosophy and modern theology. It surely is a major departure from the way philosophy was done before. It's not as though Descartes had no use for God in his philosophy. At one point, as we're going to see in a moment, he even felt that it was necessary to argue for God's existence; but God is invoked way down the line, after you've started with man and his perspective.

In addition to this one certain and indubitable idea upon which to build philosophy, there were other epistemological concepts that were important, not only to Descartes, but to other philosophers in the period from Descartes onward, up to the philosopher Hegel. I mentioned that Descartes not only wanted to set forth the one indubitable truth on which to build philosophy, but he



also wanted to come up with, to originate, a criterion of truth. And a criterion of truth would be some principle that he could use which would allow him to know whether something that he thought he knew, he actually knew. In Descartes' case, he came up with the following as his criterion: He said *I'm going to judge only as true those things of which I have a clear and distinct idea*. So, for example, if Descartes looked at his hand, or if he looked at a desk, and he felt that he had a clear and distinct idea of what that hand was or what a desk was or what a tree was, then he would say, *Yes, in fact, I do know that there's a hand here or that there's a tree or that there's a desk*. Well, that would sound like it was sufficient to secure knowledge for him, but Descartes was still employing that method of radical doubt. So Descartes said, *This seems to make sense, but suppose it turns out that when I think I'm seeing my hand, I'm only thinking it. It's really not there. Maybe I'm just having an illusion. Maybe there's some evil demon who's tampering with my sensory receptors, and I'm only thinking that I'm having a clear and distinct idea, when in fact I'm not*.

So Descartes thought about that for a while, and he said, *You know, I really have to come up with some way to guarantee that when I think I'm having a clear and distinct idea, I really am. I'm not just mistaken*. And Descartes finally came to the conclusion that the way to ensure this was to prove that there was a God who exists; because if God exists, then surely God will ensure that when I think that I'm having a clear and distinct idea, I really am. Nothing is tampering with my reason. Nothing is tampering with my sense perception. So in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes in the "third meditation," and then in the "fifth meditation," sets out to prove that, in fact, there is a God. You can see God gets invoked, but not because we start out with God; but He gets invoked because we need Him to secure a particular point in our epistemology. That was Descartes' criterion of truth: *I'll only believe as true that which I have a clear and distinct idea of*.

Following Descartes, we have other philosophers who are known as rationalists. Descartes himself is included among the rationalist philosophers, but the other ones who are typically thought of are Spinoza and Leibniz. I would like to just read to you the definition of rationalism that you find in the Dictionary of Philosophy. I think this is an interesting definition on a number of accounts, and I'll explain why in just a moment; but let me explain to you how the Dictionary of Philosophy defines rationalism. The authors say that rationalism is, generally, a theory of philosophy "in which the criterion of truth is not sensory but intellectual

and deductive, usually associated with an attempt to introduce mathematical methods into philosophy, as in Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza.” Now that’s the definition that you get in the Dictionary of Philosophy.

You can see, then, that there’s a rational criterion of truth, an intellectual and deductive criterion of truth that is used. Typically, in these thinkers, there is an appealing to the law of non-contradiction, for example, that if a proposition does not fail by being self-contradictory, then that’s a good idea that it’s true. But notice something about the definition. This Dictionary of Philosophy is, of course, something that has been done in the twentieth century, and it reflects the state of knowledge at our time. Now the rationalists—people like Descartes and Spinoza and Leibniz—surely had interests other than epistemology and other than criteria of truth. You can see from this definition how much epistemology has become central in contemporary theology and philosophy, in particular. There are surely other concerns that philosophers have than these, but this is a central focus.

The next major movement in philosophy after rationalism is known as empiricism. The philosophers who are best known in relation to empiricism are John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. Empiricism had its own criterion of truth, and it was a different criterion of truth than we find in rationalism. I suppose that we can characterize the empiricist criterion by the following statement, which says that “nothing is in the mind which is not first in the senses.” In other words, empiricism is a belief about the sources of knowledge, and it says that the sole source of knowledge is experience. In particular, the reference here is to experience of the world external to the mind; and so we’re really talking here, primarily, about sensory experience. It’s not that the empiricists didn’t have any use for things like the law of non-contradiction; it’s just that they felt that the real acquisition of knowledge about the world was only going to come through sensory contact with the external world.

Following the rationalists and the empiricists, we get Immanuel Kant, who winds up combining the two different traditions, the rationalistic and the empiricist tradition. According to Kant, the function of reason was to relate or to synthesize the data of sense; but how was it going to do this? Up to the time of Kant, it was assumed fundamentally that the mind was very passive in the acquisition of knowledge. Data from the external world would bombard the senses, and it would basically imprint itself upon the

mind, as though the mind was a blank slate or a mirror. And then the individual would be able to tell what he knew. Kant had come to the conclusion that this was just not the way that it worked. He came to the conclusion that not only did the world impact the mind, but the mind interacted with the world. Kant claimed that there were certain basic concepts that were inherent in the mind that allowed the mind to interact with the world, to integrate it, to make judgments about what is actually being seen and what isn't the case. Some of these concepts are very familiar. In fact, most of them would be familiar to us. Concepts like causality—you don't actually see causal connections in the world; but, on the other hand, if you look out at the world, you see one event happen, and then you see another event happen. But we oftentimes say that that first event caused the second event. The causation is not actually in the events or in the world, but that is an idea that we have intrinsic in the mind that allows us to connect these events in the world together in a causal way.

So all of these ideas, then, or these basic concepts that let us evaluate and understand reality are inherent in the mind. And in that sense, this system of Kant is rationalistic; or, if you will, it is *a priori*. By that is meant that the categories are logically prior to the materials which they relate. The categories are not in the world, they are inherent in the mind. Kant also called these categories transcendental; and, by that, he meant that they are surely in experience as a connected whole, but they transcend, or they are distinct from, the sensuous materials that we find out in the world. So they are intrinsic to the mind. What happens, then, is that the mind interacts with the data from the sensory world, and it makes judgments as to how big things are, how small, how they're related to one another. In Kant's view, then, the sensuous materials that are embedded in the objects in the external world constitute percepts or things that we can perceive; while reason, on the other hand, through the understanding, supplies the concepts and the principles by means of which the percepts are synthesized into meaningful judgments of nature.

As it turns out, this change in the way the knowing relation is viewed, as well as this change in perception about how the mind functions in knowing, is what is referred to as the Copernican or Kant's Copernican Revolution in philosophy. Just as Copernicus said that we needed to have, in terms of astronomy, a different way of looking at things—that the earth was not the center of the universe, but the sun was—so it was in Kant's epistemology. He said we need to have a major shift in the way we look at things.



We cannot simply look at the mind as passive and not active in the knowing relationship. Instead, we've got to see both the mind and the world as involved in the knowing process. That has to do with the matter of criterion of truth.

Let me turn to another epistemological issue that we see developed in the modern period, and that is the whole matter of perception. Prior to the time of people like Hume and his followers, and Kant as well, there was basically a view toward perception, and by perception I mean sensory perception, that can be described as naïve realism. I have somewhat hinted about that view in what I said in regard to Kant. But according to the view of naïve realism, the idea was that the mind basically is passive. It mirrors back reality. The sense organs, so to speak, are attacked by the data from the objects of experience, as those objects are in themselves. The data would go through the sense organs to the mind and imprint themselves on the mind exactly as they are in the world. For a long time, that was basically the view as to how human sense perception worked; but gradually philosophers came to realize that that was not going to be an adequate view.

As it turned out, people realized that if you looked at a stick out of water, it would appear straight. If you looked at a stick in a lake, let's say, it would look like it was bent. People also realized that one person standing in one position looking at an object might see it one way, and someone looking from a different position might see it a different way. As a result of this, there came to be the view that at least the sensory organs might distort what we were seeing; that materials from the external world, the sense data, had to be filtered through these sense organs. And it was always possible that our sensory organs could at least distort what we were seeing to a certain extent. So that the move went from a view known as naïve realism to this view that said *No, there's not an exact mirroring of the world upon the mind*. Instead, there's at least a little bit of distortion. But that is not where this matter of perception stopped, because as things moved along, up to the time of Kant and afterward, we find that we get a more sophisticated view of sensory perception.

This comes about, and it comes along with, Kant's Copernican Revolution in philosophy. If the mind is going to be as active and as important in the acquisition of knowledge as are the data of sense, then it only stands to reason that there might not only be distortion through the sense organs, but beyond that, the mind itself might distort what the person is seeing. As a result of this,

people came to believe, and Kant himself said, that you had to distinguish between the thing in itself and the thing for us, or the thing as it appears to us. Kant came to the conclusion that because of the distortion that you have, not only through the sense organs, but because of what the mind does with what it perceives, that nobody is ever in a position to see a thing as it is in itself. The only way we can have contact with objects in the external world is to see them as they appear to us; and, of course, how they appear to us is going to be a function, partially, of how well our sense receptors work. Also, it is going to be a function of the concepts that we have in our mind and how those concepts integrate the data from sensory reality.

For example, if it turns out that I do not have the concept of a cat, but I have a concept of a dog and other animals, I might someday wind up seeing a cat. But, because I don't have the concept of a cat, I might misidentify it. I might think it's a very small dog. You see, it is not strictly a matter of having the world mirrored on my mind. The mind has to have certain concepts intrinsic to it in order to make a proper judgment as to what's being seen.

You can see that with these moves and perception, more and more as we move into the modern period there has been a consensus that has said—in terms of our ability to know exactly the way things are in the world—we really don't have that ability anymore. We are getting further and further removed from our ability to have direct and immediate contact with the external world, and we are getting left more and more with the basic thoughts and the basic ideas of our own consciousness.

Let me turn to another area in philosophy where there has been change over the centuries, and it is also important as a background to contemporary theology and contemporary philosophy. Let me turn now to the matter of metaphysics. This is another area of philosophy that deals with the nature and structure of reality, and it is an area where there has been a change in the history of philosophy. And the changes are important for both the doing of philosophy and the doing of theology.

Prior to Immanuel Kant, we find that in philosophy there were discussions about topics like God, and the soul, and immortality, and the world as a whole. The rationalists would try to reason about these things, although they surely wouldn't use them as the starting points of philosophy, as the medievals had done. As we said, the medievals would start with God. The rationalists

wouldn't begin with God, but they would still talk about Him. The empiricists, on the other hand, would apply their criterion of truth to this area of philosophy. And, as a result of that, we find that within the empiricist thinkers there was an awful lot of doubt that was raised about how much we could know about God. For example, when you look at David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, he has some very interesting things to say about God. A lot of people think that Hume is entirely anti-God; and, of course, since the *Dialogues* have various characters who are having a discussion, and you don't always know which ones represent Hume and which ones don't, you're not always sure exactly what Hume's position is. But as you look at the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the issue is not so much whether God exists, but rather the issue is what we can actually know about this God. Because of this empiricist criterion that says that knowledge comes from whatever we are able to discern by our experience with the external world, it is pretty obvious that God, as an immaterial being, is not going to be capable of being perceived through the sense organs. As a result of that, there really is a sincere or severe question about how much can be known about God. Well, that's prior to Kant.

When you get to Kant, though, he is even more radical and even more negative about metaphysics than his predecessors. In fact, Immanuel Kant claimed to put an end to metaphysics altogether. Kant had already said that it was impossible to know the thing in itself, but if there is something to be experienced, at least you could know that thing as it appears to us. These objects of experience, which are for us—they appear to us—wind up existing in what Kant called the *phenomenal realm*. And the phenomenal realm is the realm of appearances. But now there are a number of things, according to Kant, which are not objects of experience. They transcend our sensory experience, and they are not for us at all. They are not in the phenomenal realm at all. There is no way that the mind can apply the categories of thought to a non-sensuous nothing, so to speak. What happens, then, is that all of these objects that are not available to us through sensory experience are in another realm, the realm that Kant called the noumenal realm. Anything that winds up being in the noumenal realm is not, according to Kant, an object of knowledge. What winds up in the noumenal realm? According to Kant, entities like the immortal soul, the world in its entirety, and God Himself wind

up in the noumenal realm. Now this does not mean that they don't exist, it just means that if they do exist, there's no way that you can demonstrate that they do. They are not objects of knowledge.

Let me quote from Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, and you can see what he has to say about this idea of the noumenal and the phenomenal realm. The things that are in the noumenal realm are not objects of knowledge. According to Kant, we see that "At the very outset, however, we come upon an ambiguity which may occasion serious misapprehension. The understanding, when it entitles an object in a certain relation mere phenomenon, at the time forms, apart from that relation, a representation of an object in itself, and so comes to represent itself as also being able to form concepts of such objects." Notice it's a representation of the thing in itself; it's not the thing in itself.

"And since the understanding yields no concepts additional to the categories, it also supposes that the object in itself must at least be thought through these pure concepts, and so is misled into treating the entirely indeterminate concept of an intelligible entity, namely, of a something in general outside our sensibility, as being a determinate concept of an entity that allows of being known in a certain purely intelligible manner by means of the understanding."

What Kant essentially is suggesting there is that the thing in itself is not for us in the phenomenal realm. It's not what he would call an object of knowledge. A few pages later, Kant says about matters that are in the noumenal realm that they are not, in fact, objects of knowledge; although you can intellectually intuit that these things must exist. He says, "Further, the concept of a noumenon is necessary, to prevent sensible intuition from being extended to things in themselves, and thus to limit the objective validity of sensible knowledge. The remaining things, to which it does not apply, are entitled noumena, in order to show that this knowledge cannot extend its domain over everything which the understanding thinks."

Then Kant also says, in another passage, that this noumenon includes things that we just are not able to know through experience. "The possibility of a thing can never be proved merely from the fact that its concept is not self-contradictory..." See, the rationalists thought that was enough to guarantee

that you knew something. Kant says that's enough "...but only through its being supported by some corresponding intuition. If, therefore, we should attempt to apply the categories to objects which are not viewed as being appearances, we should have to postulate an intuition other than the sensible, and the object would thus be a noumenon in the positive sense. Since, however, such a type of intuition, intellectual intuition,"—and that would be an intellectual intuition as opposed to a sensible one—since intellectual intuition "forms no part whatsoever of our faculty of knowledge, it follows that the employment of the categories can never extend further than to the objects of experience."

This means that if you have to have and use the categories of knowledge to know anything about the world, you extend those categories that are in the mind to the sensible data of the world in order to know something. If there are no sensory data, in regard to something that you hope to know, then that thing cannot be an object of knowledge. As we said, this means that whatever is in the noumenal realm may, in fact, exist; but there's no way that it can be an object of knowledge. And that means, from Kant's perspective, that there may be a God, but there's nothing that we really can say about Him as to His being an object of our knowledge. And surely we cannot produce any argument, a demonstrative proof that He exists.

Kant did believe, in fact, that God existed; but he held that God had to be a postulate of practical reason. And the reason he thought that was so is that if there wasn't a God, you could not ensure and assure the moral governance of the world. That being the case, there had to be a God, but we couldn't prove that there was one, and He really was beyond the realm of what we could know.

As a result, you see that God is essentially taken out of metaphysics. He is taken out of demonstration. He's taken out of knowability, and He's taken out of meaningful discourse. And I think you can see that, right at this point, the way is paved for what we're going to see by the end of this course, namely, the Death of God theology. If, in fact, God is becoming more and more transcendent because He is not an object of knowledge, there's very little that you can know or demonstrate about Him. The best you can do is to say that we have to postulate that He's there, because we need Him to ensure that there is moral governance in the world. Well, it's not going to be too long before God is going to become even



more transcendent, to the point where theologians are going to say He's totally beyond our knowledge, totally beyond saying anything about Him. If that's the case, then we might as well just say there isn't a God, or at least God, as we thought of Him, surely must not exist.

Well, these are some key ideas, key concepts, that form the background of modern theology and modern philosophy. You'll see how some of them get integrated and picked up into the works of various philosophers that we're going to talk about, various theologians that we look at. But I think you can see that there are some definite changes that took place with Descartes and from Descartes onward. We'll begin to see what all of this means in the next lecture, where we're going to look at the philosophy and the philosophical theology of Hegel.