



*The Theological Origins
of Modernity*

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THE THEOLOGICAL CRISIS OF LATE MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

While the modern world became conscious of itself in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it would be as much a mistake to believe that modernity began at that time as it would be to believe that human life begins when one first becomes self-conscious. Modernity did not spring forth full-grown from the head of Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, or Hobbes but arose over a long period of time and as a result of the efforts of many different people in a variety of contexts. As we discussed above, it is one of the chief characteristics of modernity to conceive of itself as radically new and unprecedented. This is the consequence of a peculiarly modern understanding of human capacities and of the way in which human being unfolds in time. However, there are good reasons to doubt that this modern self-understanding is correct. As Oedipus tragically discovered, no one is “fortune’s child”; everyone and everything has an origin and is shaped in decisive ways by that origin. To begin to understand the nature of the modern world, it is thus crucial that we examine its early, “preconscious” development in the three hundred years between the collapse of the medieval world and the rise of modernity.

The origins of the medieval world can be traced to the synthesis of Christianity and pagan philosophy in the Hellenistic world of late antiquity. This began in Alexandria in the first and second centuries. Here various strains of Christian thought, eastern religious beliefs, Neoplatonism, and a variety of other ancient philosophical views were amalgamated in different and at times conflicting ways, reflecting the intellectual and spiritual ferment of the times. This process of amalgamation was clarified and institutionalized when Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. The various conflicting strains of Christianity were fused into a formalized doctrine in the series of councils

beginning with the Council of Nicea (323). However, despite this doctrinal consolidation enforced by imperial authority, the tensions within Christianity between revelation with its emphasis on divine omnipotence and incarnation, on one hand, and philosophy with its emphasis on rationalism and the notion of a rational cosmos, on the other, were not so easily resolved and remained a continuing problem for Christianity throughout its long history. Indeed, much if not all of the succeeding development of Christian theology was made necessary by the continual and periodically deepening antagonism between these two elements of Christianity.

During the early medieval period, the knowledge of the impact of Greek philosophy on Christianity was largely lost in Western Europe, although Boethius provided a slim connection to this earlier intellectual tradition. The decisive event in medieval Christianity was the rediscovery of Aristotle, largely through contact with the Arab world in Spain and the Levant. This led, shortly after the millennium, to the rise of scholasticism, which was the greatest and most comprehensive theological attempt to reconcile the philosophical and scriptural elements in Christianity.

While there was considerable variety within scholasticism, its classic form was realism. Realism, as the scholastics understood it, was a belief in the extra-mental existence of universals. Drawing heavily on a Neoplatonic reading of Aristotle, scholastic realists argued that universals such as species and genera were the ultimately real things and that individual beings were merely particular instances of these universals. Moreover, these universals were thought to be nothing other than divine reason made known to man either by illumination, as Augustine had suggested, or through the investigation of nature, as Aquinas and others argued. Within this realist ontology, nature and reason reflected one another. Nature could consequently be described by a syllogistic logic that defined the rational structure of the relationships of all species to one another. Moreover, while God transcended his creation, he was reflected in it and by analogy could be understood through it. Thus, logic and natural theology could supplement or, in the minds of some, even replace revelation. For similar reasons, man did not need Scripture to inform him of his earthly moral and political duties. He was a natural being with a natural end and was governed by the laws of nature. Scripture, of course, was necessary in order to understand everything that transcended nature, including man's supernatural destiny, but earthly life could be grasped philosophically.

For all of its magnificence, the cathedral of scholastic thought depended on the delicate counterbalancing of Christian belief and pagan rationalism, and it was the instability of this relationship that brought it down.¹

This balance was threatened both by the growing influence of reason and secularism within the church, which fostered a falling away from Christian practices, and by the ever recurring and ever more urgent demands for a more original Christianity, based on revelation and/or an imitation of the life of Christ. The preservation of medieval Christianity depended upon a reconciliation of these two powerful and opposing impulses. Such a synthesis, however, could only be maintained in theory by the creation of an ever more elaborate theology and in practice by the ever increasing use of papal and princely power.

The immediate cause of the dispute that shattered this synthesis was the growth of Aristotelianism both within and outside the church. The increasing interest in Aristotle was in part an inevitable consequence of the growth of scholasticism itself, but it was decisively accelerated by the reintroduction of many Aristotelian texts to Christian Europe through the commentaries of the great Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroës. The most visible manifestation of this new interest in Aristotle was the development of an independent system of philosophy alongside theology and a new kind of secular Christian intellectual.² This phenomenon was viewed with deep suspicion by the pious defenders of a more “original” Christianity not merely because of its pagan roots but also and perhaps more importantly because of its connection to Islam. Paganism was a known and tolerable evil; Islam, by contrast, was an ominous theological and political threat. This was especially true after the failure of the Crusades. For almost two hundred years Christianity had seemed to gain ground against Islam, especially in the East, but after the loss of all the Christian colonies in the Levant in the later thirteenth century and the rise of Islamic military power, this optimism dimmed and the suspicion of Islamic influences on Christian thought became more intense. The growth of Aristotelianism in this context was often seen by suspicious defenders of the faith as the growth of Averroism.³

The church attempted to limit what it saw as a theologically subversive development by fiat. Aristotelianism was condemned first in 1270 and then more fully in 1277 by the Bishop of Paris Etienne Tempier and by Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Kilwardby.⁴ The position staked out in this Condemnation laid great emphasis on omnipotence as the cardinal characteristic of God, and in the succeeding years, this notion of omnipotent freedom came to constitute the core of a new anti-Aristotelian notion of God. This view of God was reflected in part in the work of Duns Scotus but more clearly and decisively in the work of William of Ockham and the nominalist movement his thought engendered.

Ockham was born in England between 1280 and 1285. After entering the Franciscan order at an early age, he completed his studies at Oxford. He was probably not the student of his famous successor, Duns Scotus, but was certainly deeply influenced by his thought, which remained strong at Oxford. Most of Ockham's philosophical and theological work was completed between 1317 and 1324, when he was summoned to Avignon to answer charges of heresy. In 1326, fifty-one of his assertions were declared open to censure although none was actually condemned.

Drawing on the work of earlier proto-nominalist thinkers such as Roscelin and Abelard, and the work of Henry of Ghent and Scotus, Ockham laid out in great detail the foundations for a new metaphysics and theology that were radically at odds with scholasticism.⁵ Faith alone, Ockham argues, teaches us that God is omnipotent and that he can do everything that is possible, that is to say, everything that is not contradictory.⁶ Thus, every being exists only as a result of his willing it and it exists as it does and as long as it does only because he so wills it. Creation is thus an act of sheer grace and is comprehensible only through revelation.⁷ God creates the world and continues to act within it, bound neither by its laws nor by his previous determinations. He acts simply and solely as he pleases and, and as Ockham often repeats, he is no man's debtor. There is thus no immutable order of nature or reason that man can understand and no knowledge of God except through revelation. Ockham thus rejected the scholastic synthesis of reason and revelation and in this way undermined the metaphysical/theological foundation of the medieval world.

This notion of divine omnipotence was responsible for the demise of realism. God, Ockham argued, could not create universals because to do so would constrain his omnipotence.⁸ If a universal did exist, God would be unable to destroy any instance of it without destroying the universal itself. Thus, for example, God could not damn any one human being without damning all of humanity. If there are no real universals, every being must be radically individual, a unique creation of God himself, called forth out of nothing by his infinite power and sustained by that power alone. To be sure, God might employ secondary causes to produce or sustain an entity, but they were not necessary and were not ultimately responsible for the creation or the continued existence of the entity in question.⁹

The only necessary being for Ockham was God himself.¹⁰ All other beings were contingent creations of his will. In a technical sense, the things God chooses to bring into existence already have a nature, but these natures are not themselves universal but apply only to each individual thing. Moreover, they are infinite in number and chosen freely by divine will.

These “natures” thus do not in any real sense constrain divine will except insofar as they exclude the impossible, that is, the logically contradictory. They are neither implied by nor are they the presupposition of anything else. In this way, Ockham’s assertion of ontological individualism undermines not only ontological realism but also syllogistic logic and science, for in the absence of real universals, names become mere signs or signs of signs. Language thus does not reveal being but in practice often conceals the truth about being by fostering a belief in the reality of universals. In fact, all so-called universals are merely second or higher order signs that we as finite beings use to aggregate individual beings into categories. These categories, however, do not denote real things. They are only useful fictions that help us make sense out of the radically individualized world.¹¹ However, they also distort reality. Thus, the guiding principle of nominalist logic for Ockham was his famous razor: do not multiply universals needlessly.¹² While we cannot, as finite beings, make sense of the world without universals, every generalization takes us one more step away from the real. Hence, the fewer we employ the closer we remain to the truth.

Since each individual being for Ockham is contingent upon God’s free will, there can be no knowledge of created beings prior to investigation.¹³ As a result, humans cannot understand nature without an investigation of the phenomena themselves. Syllogism is thus replaced by hypothesis as the foundation of science. Moreover, human knowledge can never move beyond hypothesis, for God is free in the fullest sense, that is, free even from his previous decisions. He can thus overturn anything he has established, interrupt any chain of causes, or create the world again from the beginning if he wants to. There is therefore no absolute necessity except for God’s will. God, according to Ockham, did not even have to send his son in the form of a man; the savior might have been a donkey or a rock.¹⁴

In defending such a radical notion of omnipotence, Ockham and his followers came very close to denying the truth of revelation. They sought to avoid this heretical conclusion by distinguishing between God’s *potentia absoluta* and his *potentia ordinata*, between his absolute and his ordained power, between what God could do and what he determined that he would do. This distinction, however, was difficult to maintain because God was under no obligation to keep his promises or to act consistently. For nominalism God is, to use a technical term, “indifferent,” that is, he recognizes no natural or rational standards of good and evil that guide or constrain his will. What is good is good not in itself but simply because he wills it. Thus, while today God may save the saints and damn the sinners, tomorrow he may do the reverse, recreating the world from its very

beginning if necessary. To be fair, neither Ockham nor most of his followers believed that God was likely to do this. They were for the most part probabilists, that is to say, they believed that in all likelihood God could be relied upon to keep his promises. They thus did not really believe that God would damn the saints or save the sinners, but they insisted that such a possibility could not be dismissed without denying God's divinity.

Most nominalists were convinced that human beings could know little about God and his intentions beyond what he reveals to them in Scripture. Natural theology, for example, can prove God's existence, infinity, and supremacy, according to Ockham, but it cannot even demonstrate that there is only one God.¹⁵ Such a radical rejection of scholastic theology clearly grew out of a deep distrust not merely of Aristotle and his Islamic interpreters but of philosophic reason itself. In this sense, Ockham's thought strengthened the role of revelation in Christian life.

Ockham also rejected the scholastic understanding of nature. Scholasticism imagined nature to be teleological, a realm in which divine purposes were repeatedly realized. Particular entities became what they already potentially were in attaining their special end. They thus saw motion as directed toward the good. The nominalist rejection of universals was thus a rejection not merely of formal but also of final causes. If there were no universals, there could be no universal ends to be actualized. Nature, thus, does not direct human beings to the good. Or to put the matter more positively, nominalism opens up the possibility of a radically new understanding of human freedom.

The fact that human beings have no defined natural ends does not mean that they have no moral duties. The moral law continues to set limits on human action. However, the nominalists believe that this law is known only by revelation. Moreover, there is no natural or soteriological motive to obey the moral law. God is no man's debtor and does not respond to man. Therefore, he does not save or damn them because of what they do or don't do. There is no utilitarian motive to act morally; the only reason for moral action is gratitude. For nominalism, human beings owe their existence solely and simply to God. He has already given them the gift of life, and for this humans should be grateful. To some few he will give a second good, eternal life, but he is neither just nor unjust in his choice since his giving is solely an act of grace.¹⁶ To complain about one's fate would be irrational because no one deserves existence, let alone eternal existence.

As this short sketch makes clear, the God that nominalism revealed was no longer the beneficent and reasonably predictable God of scholasticism. The gap between man and God had been greatly increased. God could no

longer be understood or influenced by human beings—he acted simply out of freedom and was indifferent to the consequences of his acts. He laid down rules for human conduct, but he might change them at any moment. Some were saved and some were damned, but there was only an accidental relation between salvation and saintliness, and damnation and sin. It is not even clear that this God loves man.¹⁷ The world this God created was thus a radical chaos of utterly diverse things in which humans could find no point of certainty or security.¹⁸

How could anyone love or venerate such an unsettling God? This was not a new question. The author of Job had posed it many centuries earlier in confronting a similar possibility, and Calvin was later so troubled by the injustice of such a God that he could only imagine him to be the devil in disguise.¹⁹ It is perhaps no accident that this view of God originated among the Franciscans, who stood at the opposite extreme on the theological spectrum from the Aristotelians. During the late medieval period, they were the preeminent voice calling for a more original or “primitive” Christianity that took its bearings not from the philosophical ideas of the Greeks and the corrupt political structures of the Roman state but from the example of Christ. The Christian life, they argued, was not to be found in papal palaces and curial power but in poverty and asceticism.²⁰ The most radical Franciscans found even revelation insufficient and believed that one could only live a Christian life if one imitated the life of Christ and his disciples. They were not alone in their pursuit of this alternative. In fact, they were only the most famous of the “primitivist” movements within the church that included the earlier Cathari, Waldensians, and Humiliati. Francis, however, spoke for all of these radicals when he argued that to be a Christian one must walk with Christ, retracing the *via dolorosa*. Only in this way could one appreciate the meaning of the Incarnation and God’s love for man. Francis embodied this dedication to suffering in his own asceticism (and stigmata) and enshrined it in his famous Rule that imposed austerity and poverty upon his followers.

After his death in 1226, the Franciscan order split between the zealots who demanded strict obedience of the Rule and the moderates who sought a papal dispensation from its more extreme strictures.²¹ Given the broad appeal of this movement among the common people and the consequent threat that it represented to the well-heeled clerical hierarchy, Pope John XXII (1249–1334) not only granted such a dispensation, he also condemned and hunted down the most zealous Franciscans, the so-called Fraticelli. While this satisfied the more pragmatic members of the order, John did not stop there. Drawn into a dispute with the Franciscan order and their

governor general Michael of Cesena over the issue of poverty (the so-called Poverty Dispute), he ultimately condemned the Franciscan belief in the moral superiority of the ascetic life in 1326, arguing that this opinion contradicted Scripture.

John recognized that the doctrine of poverty not only threatened his power within the church but also threatened to transform Christianity as a whole. The medieval church understood itself as the embodiment of the Holy Spirit and thus as exercising God's dominion or kingship on earth. Churchmen thus imagined that they should live in a manner befitting their status. The Franciscan doctrine of poverty challenged this view. Man, as Francis understood him, is not by nature an exalted being. His joy comes not from his place or possessions in the world but from his nearness to God. The Kingdom of God is thus not a literal kingdom here on earth represented by the church, but a spiritual kingdom in which individuals are related to one another only in and through God. Taken to its extreme, such a doctrine was thus not merely an attack on priestly wealth and power; it was also an attack on clerical hierarchy and on the church itself.

One of the leading spokesmen for the Franciscan side in this debate was William of Ockham, who was then in Avignon to defend himself against charges of heresy leveled by his Thomistic opponents. The pope based his argument against the superiority of poverty on the natural necessity of property to the preservation of human life, asserting that property existed even before the Fall. The Franciscans by contrast rested their case on revelation, arguing that property existed not by nature but only as a result of sin and therefore only after the Fall. They also asserted that through God's absolute power Christ and his disciples were able to return to this prelapsarian state, living a pious life without property. Francis in their view had opened up this possibility anew and thus had laid out the grounds for a genuine Christian practice. When John rejected this view on the grounds of the invariance of the ordained order of nature, Ockham and the Franciscans were horrified. They were convinced that God could not be bound by the "laws" of nature that he himself had previously made. Christ's life was a demonstration of this fact. Thus, in their view the pope's declaration was a revival of Abelard's heretical position that God is bound to save some from all eternity by his previous will.²² God, they argued, is not bound by such laws and is subject only to the principle of noncontradiction. Otherwise, he is free and sovereign. To deny this fact is to deny God. They consequently proclaimed the pope a heretic and fled Avignon, seeking the protection of the emperor. Ockham in fact became a member of the imperial court and along with Marsilius of Padua (1270–1342) was

instrumental in formulating the intellectual defense for the emperor in his dispute with the papacy.

Nominalism in this sense was Franciscan theology.²³ It destroyed the order of the world that scholasticism had imagined to mediate between God and man and replaced it with a chaos of radically individual beings. However, it united each of these beings directly to God. From the Franciscan point of view, life in a radically individualized world seemed chaotic only to those who did not see the unity of creation in God. For those such as Francis who shared in this mystical unity, all other beings were their brothers and sisters, since all animate and inanimate beings were equally the creatures and creations of God.

The church attempted to suppress nominalism, but these efforts had little impact. Ockham's thought was censured in 1326 and repeatedly condemned from 1339 to 1347, but his influence continued to grow, and in the one hundred and fifty years after his death nominalism became one of the most powerful intellectual movements in Europe. There was a strong Ockhamist tradition in England that began in the first half of the fourteenth century under the leadership of Thomas Bradwardine (the archbishop of Canterbury), Robert Holcot, and Adam Woodham. The Ockhamists in Paris during the fourteenth century were also strong and included Nicholas of Autrecourt, John Buridan, John of Mirecourt, and later Peter D'Ailly, Jean Gerson, and Marsilius of Inghen (who was also active in Heidelberg). In Germany there was a powerful nominalist tradition, especially in the later fourteen and fifteenth centuries that culminated in Gabriel Biel. In fact, outside of Spain and Italy the influence of nominalist thought grew to such an extent that by the time of Luther there was only one university in Germany that was not dominated by the nominalists.

While nominalism undermined the view of a harmonious Christian world that scholasticism had developed (often in the face of the less than harmonious political and religious realities) and thus worked a revolution in Christianity, it was not merely destructive. Nominalism presented not only a new vision of God but also a new view of what it meant to be human that placed much greater emphasis on the importance of human will. As Antony Levi has pointed out, scholasticism from the thirteenth century on never had at its disposal a psychology that could explain action as both rational and willful.²⁴ For scholasticism the will both in God and man could therefore either do everything or nothing. Aquinas effectively argued for the latter. Scotus (building on Bonaventure's emphasis on God's independence of his contingent creation) and then Ockham asserted the radical freedom of divine will. In emphasizing the centrality of divine

will, however, they both also gave a new prominence to and justification of the human will. Humans were made in the image of God, and like God were principally willful rather than rational beings. Such a capacity for free choice had always been imagined to play a role in mundane matters, but orthodox Christianity had denied that humans were free to accept or reject justificatory grace. Still, if humans were truly free, as many nominalists believed, then it was at least conceivable that they could choose to act in ways that would increase their chances of salvation.

While this position is reasonable, by the standards of the time such a view was highly questionable since it came perilously close to the Pelagianism that had been condemned by Augustine and by almost every orthodox theologian after him.²⁵ Despite the repeated claims by Ockham and many of his followers that God did not in any way respond to man and thus could not be influenced by any act of the human will, however free, nominalists were thus continually attacked as Pelagians. In part this had to do with their interpretation of man as a willing rather than a rational being, but it was also certainly due to the fact that a number of nominalists simply found it difficult to countenance a God who was so terrifying and merciless, arguing not on the basis of theology but simply as a practical matter that God would not deny salvation to anyone who gave his all or did everything that was in him to do: “*Facientibus quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam*” (“If you do what is in you, God will not deny grace”). This was the so-called *Facientibus* principle. Such a view seemed to imply that there were standards for salvation, but that the standards were completely idiosyncratic to each individual. One man’s all might be quite different than that of another. The determination of sanctity and sinfulness was thus taken out of the hands of the church. No habit of charity was necessary for salvation, for God in his absolute power could recognize any meretricious act as sufficient, and more importantly could recognize any act *as* meretricious.²⁶ The *Facientibus* principle thus not only undermined the spiritual (and moral) authority of the church, it defended a notion of salvation that was perilously close to Pelagianism.

Appearances notwithstanding, this view of nominalism as thoroughly Pelagian is mistaken. While later nominalists such as Gabriel Biel did in fact promote at least a semi-Pelagian idea of salvation, Ockham and his fourteenth- and fifteenth-century followers did not. Their emphasis on divine omnipotence simply left too little room to attribute any efficacy to the human will. It is true that their recognition of the importance of the human will seemed to suggest that human beings could win their own salvation, but this was mitigated by their assertion that all events and choices

were absolutely predestined by God. While their doctrine seemed to open up space for human freedom, this was negated by their commitment to a divine power that determined everything absolutely but did so in an utterly arbitrary and therefore unpredictable way.

With this emphasis on divine determinism, nominalism was able to avoid Pelagianism, but the price was high, for the notion of predestination not only relieved humans of all moral responsibility, it also made God responsible for all evil. John of Mirecourt saw this conclusion as the unavoidable consequence of his own nominalism, admitting that God determined what would count as sin and who would act sinfully. Nicholas d'Autrecourt went even further, declaring that God himself was the cause of sin.²⁷ While this conclusion for good reason was not emphasized by most nominalists, it was too important to remain submerged for long, and it emerged in all of its distinctive power in the period of the Reformation.

Nominalism sought to tear the rationalistic veil from the face of God in order to found a true Christianity, but in doing so it revealed a capricious God, fearsome in his power, unknowable, unpredictable, unconstrained by nature and reason, and indifferent to good and evil. This vision of God turned the order of nature into a chaos of individual beings and the order of logic into a mere concatenation of names. Man himself was dethroned from his exalted place in the natural order of things and cast adrift in an infinite universe with no natural law to guide him and no certain path to salvation. It is thus not surprising that for all but the most extreme ascetics and mystics, this dark God of nominalism proved to be a profound source of anxiety and insecurity.

While the influence of this new vision of God derived much of its force from the power of the idea itself and from its scriptural foundation, the concrete conditions of life in the second half of the fourteenth century and early fifteenth centuries played an essential role in its success. During this period, three momentous events, the Black Death, the Great Schism, and the Hundred Years War, shook the foundations of medieval civilization that had been weakened by the failure of the Crusades, the invention of gunpowder, and the severe blow that the Little Ice Age dealt to the agrarian economy that was the foundation of feudal life.²⁸ While such a vision of God might have been regarded as an absurdity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the catastrophes of the succeeding period helped make such a God believable.²⁹

While the Middle Ages ended with the triumph of this nominalist vision of God, the scholastic enterprise did not simply vanish. In fact, it was revived a number of times but never with the same global aspirations. Even

Francisco Suarez, Aquinas's greatest defender and the last great scholastic, was ontologically a nominalist. On one level, he supported Thomistic realism, arguing for the extra-mental existence of universals, but at a deeper level he twisted this argument in a nominalistic fashion, asserting that every individual being was a universal. The world in which modernity came to be was thus not the world of scholasticism but the world of scholasticism overturned. This collapse of scholasticism did not, of course, occur all at once or in a short space of time, but it was well underway by the end of the fourteenth century.

FROM AVIGNON TO THE MODERN WORLD

In 1305, the seat of the papacy was relocated to Avignon in part because the new French pope was beholden to the French king, but also because violence had become so endemic in Rome that the pope was no longer safe there. It remained there until 1378. During this time Avignon became the locus for European intellectual life. Although it was far from centrally located, the city was on a major trade route and had relatively easy communication with France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and England. Intellectuals were drawn there for many different reasons. Conservative theologians sought to use the power of the curia to win intellectual battles they were losing in Paris, Oxford, and other university towns, while their opponents came to defend their radical views. As we have seen, it was for this reason that Ockham came to Avignon, but it was the defense of his order that kept him there and that catapulted him into his struggle with the pope. However, he was only one of the important thinkers who came to Avignon during this period.

In fact, as Ockham and the pope were fighting the final theological battle of the Middle Ages in the convents and courts of Avignon, a few blocks away the son of a Florentine exile was just beginning a lifelong project that would help to define the modern age. He was Francesco Petrarca. Like Ockham, Petrarca rejected scholasticism as overly rationalized, but he was also repulsed by the nominalists' endless arguments about terms and what he saw as vapid speculation about divine power.³⁰ Like the nominalists he too was aware of the corruption of the church and hoped for purification and renewal, but he sought such a renewal not through faith and a new scriptural theology but through an amalgamation of Christian practice and ancient moral virtue.³¹

Petrarca believed that a Christian life required not merely faith and ceremonies but moral practice as well, and that such morality could only be

achieved by a richer understanding of what it meant to be human that drew not merely on Scripture but on the moral models of antiquity. In sharp contrast to the asceticism of late medieval Christianity, he thus sought to revivify the love of honor and beauty as preeminent human motives. While his thought remained generally Christian, he envisioned a new kind of man with new virtues, not a citizen of a city-state or a republic but an autarchic individual being who was whole and complete in himself. Petrarch recognized that such individuals might surround themselves with friends or join with others as citizens, but he was convinced that they could only do so effectively if they were autonomous individuals first. It was this ideal of human individuality that inspired the humanist movement.

Such a focus on the individual was unknown in the ancient world. The ideal for the Greek artist and citizen was not the formation of individual character or personality but assimilation to an ideal model. Petrarch and his humanist followers did not put the human per se at the center of things but the *individual* human being, and in this respect they owed a deeper ontological debt to nominalism than to antiquity. For humanism, the individual is not a rational animal standing at the peak of creation. Like Ockham the humanists were convinced that human beings have no natural form or end. They also thus concluded that humans are characterized by their free will. This will, as humanism understood it, however, differs in one decisive respect from the will that Ockham and nominalism attribute to humans. It is not simply a created will but also a self-creating will. God grants humans the capacity to will, and they then make themselves into what they want to be. This notion of a self-willing being has clear affinities to the model of the nominalist God. Like the God who creates him, this man is an artisan, but an artisan whose greatest work of art is himself, a poet in the literal sense of the term, able to identify with every being and make himself into any one of them.

Such an individual, however, is not God. He is limited by his own mortality and by the chaotic motions of matter or by what humanists following the Romans dubbed *fortuna*.³² Artists can give form to things, paint pictures, shape marble, build palaces, and even create states, but fortune will eventually bring all to ruin.³³ Even the greatest of princes, as Machiavelli, for example, argues, will only be able to succeed half the time. While the individual for humanism is free and in some sense divine, he is not omnipotent, for he has both a childhood and a dotage in which he is dependent on others, and a death that inevitably brings his mastery to an end.

This humanist idea of fortune reflects an underlying notion of time as degeneration. Form and purpose do not inhere in nature but are the

products of an artistic will that builds dikes against the floods of fortune, dikes, however, that fortune ultimately overflows. This humanist pessimism about the capacity of art to master nature was reflected in their understanding of their own place in time. They knew that the magnificent world of the ancients that they so admired had perished and been superseded by a dark, Gothic age. They hoped to establish a new golden age but they never imagined it would last forever and never dreamed that it might be successively improved for all time.

Humanism grew alongside and also out of nominalism.³⁴ It offered a solution to many of the problems posed by divine omnipotence. This solution was itself constructed on nominalist grounds, that is, on the understanding of man as an individual and willful being, although it is only successful because it vastly narrowed the ontological difference that nominalism saw separating man and God. The consequent vision of the magnificent individual, towering, as Shakespeare's Cassius puts it, "like a colossus," was thus something distinctively new and a clear step beyond the Middle Ages. Glory not humility was this man's goal, and to this end he employed art rather than philosophy and rhetoric rather than dialectic. Humanism thus sought to answer the problem posed by divine omnipotence by imagining a new kind of human being who could secure himself by his own powers in the chaotic world nominalism had posited.

We today imagine humanism to be antagonistic to religion or even a form of atheism. Renaissance humanism, however, was almost always Christian humanism. In formulating their particular brand of Christianity, however, humanists drew heavily on Cicero and Neoplatonism and laid out a vision of Christianity that placed much greater weight on moral practice than on faith or ceremonies. This transformation, which was evident even among the more moderate northern humanists, pushed Christianity in a Pelagian direction that was deeply offensive to many ardent Christians. In this respect, the humanist impact upon Christian belief and practice was very important in fomenting the second great intellectual movement in answer to the problem posed by the nominalist revolution, the Reformation.

Luther was the father of the Reformation, and his life and thought were in many ways a reaction to the problems posed by nominalism. However, in his response to nominalism, he followed a path that was radically different than that of the humanists, not away from God toward man but from man back to God. The humanists had sought to reform Christianity, but Luther's idea of reformation was more radical and all-encompassing.

The Reformation has been described as the last great upsurge of medieval religiosity, and while not entirely false, this claim conceals the astonishing extent to which Reformation Christianity rejects medieval Christianity on essentially nominalist grounds. Luther's example makes this clear. As a young man, Luther became an Ockhamist, but he was troubled by the impenetrability of the God nominalism described, and tormented by the consequent uncertainty of his own personal salvation. Luther's concern with personal salvation could hardly be stilled by a God who was unstillness itself, who today might save the saints and damn the sinners but tomorrow do exactly the reverse.

Luther's personal quest for certainty vis-à-vis this God was intertwined with his struggle against corruption in the church. The corruption of the church in Luther's mind was bound up with the doctrine of works and the sale of indulgences in particular. Luther rejected the redemptive power of works on nominalistic grounds. If what was preeminent in God and by extension in man was the will, then sin could only be remitted through right willing, regardless of the result.³⁵ But right willing depended not on man but on God. Luther's answer to the question of indulgences was thus his answer to the problem of the nominalist God: "faith alone saves." Luther accepted the nominalist notion of man as a willing being but transformed this notion by reconfiguring the relationship of divine and human will. Faith, according to Luther, is the will to union with God, but faith can come only from God through Scripture.³⁶ Faith in Scripture, in other words, guarantees salvation.

At first glance, it is difficult to see how Scripture solves the problem posed by nominalism, since the reliance on Scripture seems to assume the invariance of what God has ordained, an invariance that nominalism explicitly denies. Luther, however, gives Scripture a different status. In his view, it is not simply a text, but a means by which God speaks directly to man.³⁷ Faith arises from hearing the voice of God. God's power is thus not something abstract and distant but acts always in and through us. In this way, Luther was able to transform the terrifying God of nominalism into a power within individual human beings. The Christian is reborn in God because God is born in him.

Ockham proclaimed the individuality of every being as a unique creation of God, but he saw the radical separation of God and man as an impenetrable barrier to human understanding and an insuperable barrier to the human will. He thus turned to Scripture, but even Scripture only revealed the momentary determination of a distant God's will, which might at any moment be otherwise. Luther too saw God as a *deus absconditus*

who could not be philosophically analyzed or understood. He too turned to Scripture as the sole source of guidance. In contrast to the nominalists, however, he recognized that the difference between God and man could be bridged by the scriptural infusion of divine will that banishes all doubts. In contrast to the humanists, however, this was not because man willed in the same way that God wills, that is, creatively, but because he willed *what* God willed, that is, morally and piously. Man does not become a demi-god but becomes the dwelling place of God; God becomes the interior and guiding principle of his life, or what Luther calls conscience.

Neither the humanists nor the reformers saw themselves as founding a new age or initiating something distinctively new. Rather, they understood their task as restoring something ancient and traditional. In doing so, however, they found themselves entwined in the conflict about the relationship of the divine and the human that had bedeviled Christianity from the very beginning. Italian humanism suggested in a Promethean fashion that man could lift himself to the level of God or even in some respects become God. In this sense it was clearly Pelagian, or at least semi-Pelagian. Humanism's vision of man was thus incompatible with divine omnipotence and with the notion that God was God. Without such a God, however, it was difficult to see how man could be more than an animal. The Reformation was directed not merely against the abuses in the church but also against this Pelagian humanism. God for the Reformers was omnipotent, and man was nothing without God. The idea of a free human will was thus an illusion. This anti-Pelagian and antihumanist position, however, was equally unsatisfying, for if the human will is utterly impotent, then God and not man is the source of evil, and humans cannot be held morally responsible for their actions. While humanism thus could not sustain a notion of divine omnipotence, it also could not exist without it. Similarly, Reformation theology could not countenance a free human will and yet could not sustain the notion of a good God in its absence. The humanists and the Reformers were thus entwined in an antinomy from which there was no escape. They were thus inevitably brought into conflict. This disagreement appears in its clearest light in the debate between Erasmus and Luther over the freedom or bondage of the will, but also in the disastrous Wars of Religion that raged across Europe for more than a hundred years.

Humanism and the Reformation founded their views of the world on man and God respectively. These choices were rooted in the long history of Christianity, and the conflict that arose between them was in many ways a reflection of the contradictions that had been present in Christianity since the beginning. In the midst of this conflict, a small group of

thinkers sought a new path, abandoning both God and man as the foundation of their investigations, turning instead to the natural world. Modernity proper in this way begins with the goal of developing a science that will make man master and possessor of nature. This project was deeply indebted to nominalism in many different and important ways.

Nominalism destroyed the ontological ground of medieval science by positing a chaotic world of radically individual beings. Indeed, for the nominalists, the world itself is only a higher order sign, an aid to the understanding that does not correspond to any reality. Nominalism thus seems to make science impossible. In fact, however, modern science develops out of nominalism as the result of a reconsideration of the meaning of nominalist ontology.

Scholastic metaphysics understood God as the highest being and creation as a rational order of beings stretching up to God. From the nominalist perspective, however, such an order is untenable not only because each being is radically individual but also and perhaps more importantly because God himself is not a being in the same sense as all created beings. While Ockham points to this gulf between God and his creation, he does not extensively explore it. This task was undertaken by the great thinker whose path crossed that of Ockham and Petrarch in Avignon, the German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1328).

Eckhart was deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, although his Neoplatonism was transfigured by his mysticism. Like Ockham, Eckhart saw an infinite distance between God and the world. From the perspective of the beings we encounter in everyday life, God thus seems to be nothing. In Eckhart's view, however, this issue must be examined from a divine rather than a human perspective, not logically but mystically. From this perspective, it is not God but the beings of the world that are nothing, or at least they are nothing without God. Since, however, these beings in some sense "are," they must "be" God, that is, God must be "in" beings in some way. Without him, they would be pure nothingness. However, the infinite difference between God and his creation means that God cannot be in things as their whatness or essence. God, Eckhart suggests, is in them in a different sense, as their how, the operative force that determines their becoming. In nominalistic terms, God is pure willing, pure activity, or pure power, and the world in its becoming is divine will, is this God. Or in more modern terms, the world is the ceaseless motion that is determined by divine will understood as efficient or mechanical causality. The world is the incarnation, the body of God, and he is in the world as the soul is in the body, omnipresent as the motive principle.³⁸

Creation is thus not simply disorder. God is in the world in a new and different sense than scholasticism and traditional metaphysics imagined. He is not the ultimate whatness or quiddity of all beings but their howness or becoming. To discover the divinely ordered character of the world, it is thus necessary to investigate becoming, which is to say, it is necessary to discover the laws governing the motion of all beings. Theology and natural science thereby become one and the same.

Rationalism and materialism both work within this general understanding of the relationship of God and his creation, but they differ considerably in their understanding of the meaning of this relationship. Rationalism, for the most part, understands this identification of God and his creation pantheistically. The motion of nature therefore is the motion of God, and nature's laws are the forms and structures of divine will. Rationalist science thus is theologically grounded not in Scripture but in the deduction of the laws of motion from transcendental will or freedom.

Materialism, by contrast, understands the meaning of the identification of God and creation atheistically.³⁹ To say that the God of nominalism as Ockham understood him is in everything in the way Eckhart (and later Nicholas of Cusa) suggested is to say that everything is willfulness, motion without purpose or end, and without any necessary regularity. Viewed in this manner, there is no effective difference between the nominalist cosmos and a godless universe of matter in motion. The existence or nonexistence of God is irrelevant for the understanding of nature, since he can neither increase nor decrease the chaos of radical individuality that characterizes existence. Science thus does not need to take this God or Scripture into account in its efforts to come to terms with the natural world and can rely instead on experience alone. "Atheistic" materialism thus has a theological origin in the nominalist revolution. Materialism, it is true, also draws upon ancient atomism and Epicureanism, but both of these are received and understood within what was already an essentially nominalist view of the world.

This new understanding of becoming or change as a manifestation of divine will is the ontological foundation for the self-consciousness of modernity. Since Plato, being had been understood as timeless, unchanging presence. Change was always a falling away from being, degeneration. Nominalism called this notion into question with its assertion that God himself was not only subject to change but was perhaps even change itself. The changeable cosmos was no longer seen as a falling away from perfection, no longer merely "the moving image of eternity," as Plato put it in the *Timaeus*. Change was not simply degeneration. While this new view of

becoming was never entirely spelled out and was constantly troubling to modern thinkers who strove repeatedly to discover an unchanging “ontological” ground of becoming, it was a crucial step away from both ancient and medieval notions of time and change.

If change is not simply degeneration, then some change may be progressive. Change guided by an enlightened humanity may produce good. Progress in this way is opened up as a human possibility. The ability of the will to master the world was already clear to the Renaissance humanists such as Machiavelli, but their reliance on *individual* prowess and willing made a thorough mastery of nature inconceivable to them. Human finitude meant that even the greatest individuals would inevitably succumb to all-conquering time. Mastering nature thus would require something more than a merely individual will. Early modern thinkers argued that this problem could be solved only if human beings came to understand that science is not an individual accomplishment but a broadly based social or political enterprise. In this way, it was possible to imagine a human will of unlimited longevity that might finally master the natural world.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is often characterized as the father of modern science. Like his nominalist predecessors, Bacon rejected realism both in its scholastic and in its classical form. He agreed with the nominalists that “in nature nothing really exists besides individual bodies, performing purely individual acts.”⁴⁰ As a result, the universe is a labyrinth that is impenetrable to unaided human reason.⁴¹ Previous thinkers in Bacon’s view did not make any progress through this labyrinth because they did not use the powers available to them to attain this end, relying instead on mere observation and overhasty generalization.⁴² There are various reasons for such ineptitude, and Bacon describes them in great detail in *The New Organon* in his famous discussion of the four idols or false notions that have become rooted in the mind.⁴³ Human beings have come to believe that all they need to know comes from their immediate experience. Consequently, they have been unwilling or unable to verify their generalizations by the examination of particulars. They have thus been content to guess rather than know and have put the dreams of the imagination in place of real knowledge.⁴⁴ Even in his own time, when realism had been called into question, Bacon believed that men were still deterred from such an investigation by an undue reverence for antiquity and by the belief that scientific progress was impossible because of the obscurity of nature, the shortness of life, the deceitfulness of the senses, the weakness of the judgment, the difficulty of experiment, and the like.⁴⁵ What is needed, he argued, is a total reconstruction of science, the arts, and human knowledge on a proper foundation.⁴⁶

The knowledge that Bacon seeks differs profoundly from that of scholasticism. He is not concerned with what nature is and what it tends toward, that is, with the formal or final cause of things, but with the particular character and motion of matter, that is, with material and efficient causality. In other words, he wants to know not *what* nature is but *how* it works, and his goal is thus not theory or speculation but the practical betterment of the human condition.⁴⁷ When nature is comprehended in this manner, it can be made to produce works that are useful for human life, for when we understand the properties of particulars we will be able to bring them together in ways that will produce the effects we desire. Bacon's ultimate aim is to produce a model of nature not as a static system of categories but as a dynamic whole, as the interacting operation of all particulars.⁴⁸ To understand nature in this way is to comprehend nature as power.

Bacon believed that the power that arose from the knowledge of nature could carry humanity to hitherto unimaginable heights. However, in his view such knowledge can only be gained by first lowering oneself, by subordinating oneself to nature and limiting the exercise of one's own will. To master and command nature, it is necessary first to be the servant and interpreter of nature. For Bacon, the goal of science is thus not the mere

felicity of speculation, but the real business and fortunes of the human race, and all power of operation. For man is but the servant and interpreter of nature: what he does and what he knows is only what he has observed of nature's order in fact or in thought; beyond this he knows nothing and can do nothing. For the chain of causes cannot by any force be loosened or broken, nor can nature be commanded except by being obeyed. And so these twin objects, human Knowledge and human Power, do really meet in one; and it is from ignorance of causes that operation fails.⁴⁹

The presupposition of such knowledge is the humiliation of the human spirit, since success depends upon abandoning our proud belief that we occupy a superior place in the order of creation. Instead of acting as lords of creation, in the way that humanism suggested, we must become apprentices in nature's workshop.⁵⁰ We do not need great wit or individual excellence, but a dogged persistence and obedience to the surest rules and demonstrations.⁵¹

While *humility* gains us entrance to the study of nature, *cruelty* is the means by which we reach our end. Mere experience will take us only into nature's outer courts. To come to nature's inner chambers, we must tear it to pieces, constraining, vexing, dissecting, and torturing nature in order to force it to reveal the secret entrances to its treasure chambers.⁵² Only as

merciless servants who bind and torture their master to learn the source of his power can we win from nature the knowledge of its hidden forces and operation. On the basis of this knowledge, we can then produce “a line and race of inventions that may in some degree subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity.”⁵³

Bacon thus offers a new and revolutionary answer to the problem posed by nominalism and the nominalist God. He confronts and accepts the nominalist vision of the world and attempts to find a solution to its fundamental problems. He seeks neither a poetic transfiguration of this world nor a new covenant with its God. Instead, he strives to discover the hidden powers by which nature moves in order to gain mastery over it. For Bacon as for Ockham and Petrarch, man is a willing being who seeks to secure himself in the world. In contrast to both Franciscan asceticism and the humanist notion of godlike individuality, however, Bacon imagines man to be a relatively weak and fearful being who can only succeed by consistently working with his fellow human beings over many years to learn nature’s laws and turn this knowledge to human use. It is the very democratic character of Bacon’s project that makes its success conceivable. It does not depend upon the exercise of great and thus rare genius, but upon the consistent application of ordinary intelligence to a series of small problems that can be easily analyzed. Bacon in this way differs considerably from his humanist predecessors. The hero of knowledge that Bacon imagines in his *New Atlantis*, for example, is not a sparkling “great-souled man,” but a solemn, priestlike, and unheroic scientist who is willing to investigate not merely the beautiful and noble but the low and foul, for like Bacon he knows that “whatever deserves to exist deserves also to be known.”⁵⁴

While Bacon laid the first bricks of the new science on a nominalistic foundation, it was Galileo, Descartes, and Hobbes who raised its walls. Bacon’s method, in fact, was ill-suited to the comprehension of nature understood as matter in motion. Its unmitigated nominalistic focus on individual beings and its inductive method rendered it incapable of grasping motion as such. Galileo’s transposition of motion into the abstract world of geometry and his new understanding of inertia were crucial steps that made modern mathematical science possible.⁵⁵ On this foundation, Descartes and Hobbes developed alternative visions of the modern scientific enterprise.

The differences between Descartes and Hobbes are crucial and central to the bifurcation of modernity. There is one strain of modern thought that begins with Descartes and includes Leibniz, Malebranche, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and most contemporary continental

philosophers. There is a second beginning with Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Mill, and that includes many contemporary Anglo-American thinkers. These two strains of thought represent alternative answers to the fundamental problem posed by the nominalist God within the framework of modern science. The differences between them turn on a number of issues, but the question of the nature and relationship of man and God is of central importance.

Man for Bacon is a part of nature. He thus “can do so much and so much only as he has observed in fact or in thought of the course of nature. Beyond this he neither knows anything nor can do anything.”⁵⁶ Man is a natural being subject to all of the constraints of nature. While he can ameliorate his condition and in a limited sense master the natural world, he remains a part of nature and is not its creator.

Descartes offers us a different vision of the modern project. His thinking too was deeply influenced by the problem of the nominalist God, but his solution to this problem was different in decisive respects from that of Bacon. In particular, he has a radically different notion of man’s position with respect to both God and nature. In his early thought, Descartes was convinced that he could construct an apodictic science on the basis of mathematics. Such a science, he believed, could produce a mathematical representation of all motion that would allow human beings to truly master nature, make them able not merely to ameliorate human misery as Bacon had hoped but actually to make man the immortal lord of all creation.⁵⁷ This initial project was called into question by Descartes’ realization that the idea of a truly omnipotent God undermined the certainty of mathematics. This realization led to the spiritual quest that ended with Descartes’ articulation of his famous principle, *cogito ergo sum*, as the foundation for all human knowledge. The scientific project as Descartes lays it out in his mature thought is thus a clear response to the problem posed by nominalism.

What distinguishes the Cartesian solution to this problem from that of Bacon is evident in his fundamental principle, for it grounds all of modern science on an autonomous subject who not only transcends nature but is also able to resist and ultimately challenge (or even replace) God himself. Man for Descartes becomes master and possessor of nature by dispossessing its current owner, that is, by taking it away from God. This is possible because man in some sense already is God, or at least is the same infinite will that constitutes God.⁵⁸

The Cartesian notion of science thus rests upon a new notion of man as a willing being, modeled on the omnipotent God of nominalism and

able like him to master nature through the exercise of his infinite will. Descartes draws here not merely upon nominalism but upon the humanist ideal of a self-creating and self-sufficient individual, and upon Luther's idea of the conjunction of the human and divine will. It is this potent combination that gives rise to the notion of subjectivity that plays a central role in rationalism, idealism, and later continental thought as well.

Insofar as Descartes both leaves man within nature as a body in motion and elevates him above it into a quasi-omnipotence, he lays the groundwork for an inevitable and irremediable dissatisfaction that poses tremendous moral and political dangers for modernity. The infinite human will constantly strives to master and transcend the body but is itself at the same time always bodily. In its striving to realize its infinite essence, it must always negate the finite. Such a negation, however, is impossible. As idealistic and noble as its aspirations may be, idealism in its practical form thus constantly faces a millenarian temptation to use ever more extreme means of control to achieve its unachievable ends.

Hobbes has a more limited view of human capacities than Descartes. Man for Hobbes is a piece of nature, a body in motion. Like the nominalists, Hobbes believes that this motion is not teleologically determined, but in contrast to them he sees it not as random but as mechanical. It neither realizes its essence in Aristotelian fashion, nor is it attracted to a natural end by love or beauty, but is pushed ever onward by collisions with other individual objects. Man is therefore moved not by his intrinsic natural impulses, nor by divine inspiration or free will, but by a succession of causal motions. In contrast to Descartes, Hobbes does not see human beings rising above nature. Humans are rather thoroughly natural objects that obey the laws of nature. According to these laws that govern all matter, each of these (human) objects will remain in its given motion unless this motion is contravened by collision with another body. Such a collision of human objects is conflict, since it limits the continuous (and therefore in Hobbes' view free) motion of the individual. In a densely packed world, the natural state of man is thus the state of war. The purpose of science, as Hobbes understands it, is to organize the motion of both human and non-human bodies to maximize the unimpeded (and therefore free) motion of human beings.

The importance of free will is vastly diminished in Hobbes' thought. In fact, Hobbes denies that human beings have a free will, characterizing the will as simply the last appetite before action.⁵⁹ For Hobbes, human life is lived within nature and is always constrained by the natural world. Man is more a creature than a creator, more governed by laws than law-giving.

He is not a transcendent being who might imagine himself a god but an impelled object whose chief desire is to continue on his prescribed course with the least interference from others.

Most human beings in Hobbes' view fear death and consent to be ruled in a state to achieve peace and maximize their free motion. The chief dangers to such rule and the peace it makes possible are the desire for glory (that characterized humanism) and the belief that our actions in this life can affect the life to come (that was central to the Reformation). The impact of the desire for glory is mitigated by the Leviathan, who Hobbes characterizes as a "mortal god," since no one can compete with him for honor. The impact of religious passion is reduced by a correct understanding of predestination. Hobbes agrees with Luther and Calvin that everything is predestined but argues that it is precisely this fact that demonstrates that the things we do in this world have no impact on our salvation. If everything is already determined, then there is nothing anyone can do to either gain or lose salvation.

With the elimination of glory and beatitude as motives for human action, Hobbes believes human beings will be naturally inclined to pursue preservation and prosperity. These are lesser goods than earthy or supernatural glory, but they are also less likely to be the source of violent conflict. Hobbes thus seeks to make man master and possessor of nature not in order to achieve his apotheosis but in order to satisfy his natural, bodily desires.

Modernity has two goals—to make man master and possessor of nature and to make human freedom possible. The question that remains is whether these two are compatible with one another. The debate between Hobbes and Descartes in the *Objections and Replies to the Meditations* would suggest that they are not. Indeed, what we see in this debate is the reemergence of the issues at the heart of the debate between Luther and Erasmus. For Descartes as for Erasmus, there is human freedom in addition to the causality through nature. For Hobbes as for Luther there is only the absolute power of God as the ultimate cause behind the motion of all matter. In this way we see the reemergence at the very heart of modernity of the problematic relationship of the human and the divine that bedeviled Christianity from its beginning. The modern ontic turn away from man and God to nature thus in the end still assumes a continuing metaphysical and structural importance for the very categories it seeks to transcend. The successors to Hobbes and Descartes in the modern tradition struggle with this question. The Enlightenment in particular is characterized by a series of unsuccessful attempts to solve this problem. The centrality of this

problem to the modern enterprise becomes apparent in Kant's antinomy doctrine and in the French Revolution. At the end of modernity, we are thus left to confront the question whether there is any solution to this problem within the ontological horizon that modernity opens up, and thus whether modernity even in its most secular form can escape from the metaphysical/theological problem with which it began.

In his *Parmenides* Plato explores the primordial question of the one and the many. This question is primordial because it cannot be answered, and it cannot be answered because it is itself the presupposition of all thinking, and therefore of all questioning and answering. We cannot think about things without thinking those things as being *both* one and many. There are different explanations for this dilemma, some rooted in the contradictory nature of existence and others in the inadequacy of language to grasp being, but we need not go into those matters here. It is sufficient for our purposes to recognize that there is no unequivocal answer to this question. As a result, there can be no final theoretical vision of the whole that can serve as the absolute, fundamental, and unshakable truth. Neither a Parmenidean dwelling in the one nor a radical individualism or nominalism can dissolve this contradiction. Nor can it be eliminated by means of a linguistic turn that imagines everything to be the play of mere words or signs, a language game or games that create the world anew every time we speak. This question thus underlies and shapes all philosophizing. Plato's *Parmenides* argues there that the attempt to explain the world either through the one without reference to the many or through the many without reference to the one is doomed to failure. Nominalism rejects realism because it goes too far in the direction of the one, positing an identity between God and his creation. Nominalism by contrast draws a sharp distinction between the two and as a result puts great emphasis on manyness and particularity.

The three men who left the Cathédrale Notre-Dame des Doms that day in 1326 in—William of Ockham, Francesco Petrarch, and Meister Eckhart—faced this question and sought to answer it. Their answers and those of their successors in various and often contradictory ways have shaped the modern world, redefining the nature and relation of man, God, and the cosmos. In the struggles that we now face and in those that the future holds in store over the nature of modernization and globalization, it is imperative that we understand the ways in which not only our opponents but we ourselves continue to be shaped and motivated by beliefs and ideas that are themselves not modern, that are in fact the reappearance of the very questions that gave birth to the modern age.