Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Almighty God, you alone can order the unruly wills and passions of sinful men: grant to your people that they may love what you command and desire what you promise, that so, among the many and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

--Book of Common Prayer, Easter 4

Introduction to Course and Review of Syllabus and Requirements

The Transition from Protestant Scholastic Theology to Rationalist Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century

One of the most significant shifts in the early modern period is the transition from

- Christian Aristotelian thought ("scholasticism") which
  - predominated in late Middle Ages, Reformation and post-Reformation period,;
  - asserted the primacy of revelation over other forms of knowing, but also
  - understood theology as *the* discipline that could scientifically reflect upon and integrate the various truths known through revelation and reason, allowing for a relative uniformity to exist within one's community in regard to intellectual thought and public moral ideals;

to

- the rationalist philosophy of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz which
  - rose to prominence after 1660 and contributed to the development of Enlightenment thought in eighteenth-century England, France and Germany;
  - provided a basis upon which individuals could
    - challenge the claims made by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and
    - appeal for tolerance of religious and intellectual dissent

Scholasticism and the Scientific Organization and Demonstration of Theology

1) It was assumed that reason could never suffice as the foundation for knowledge of God, God's nature or God's purposes in the world.
   - Even with respect to the natural world, there were significant limits upon how far the world could be known and understood by unaided reason.
2) Since revelation supplied essential knowledge that was simply not available to unaided reason, the study of Scripture by properly qualified persons was essential if

one were to arrive at meaningful knowledge of God and the world. Scripture was to be carefully read by the theologian,

- with faith
- in light of the teaching of the Church,
- using traditional philological methods to determine the precise meaning of words in their literal sense.

3) The Scriptural passages dealing with a particular topic are then to be collected together into thematic, theologically relevant groupings (*loci*="places"), e.g. "justification," organizing the contents of the Bible in a logical way that allows systematic reflection (the locus method in theology).
   - Such reflection --when accompanied by the aid of the Holy Spirit and by prayer (*meditatio*) and struggle against temptation (*tentatio*)--can help one to reject prevailing errors and arrive with greater certainty at that pure doctrine which alone can provide the foundation for a life of godliness (Lat. *pietas* ; Ger. *Gottseligkeit*).
4) In this process, it was normally assumed by Protestants that the confessional documents produced during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century (e.g. the Lutheran confessions assembled in the Book of Concord or the Three Forms of Unity in the Dutch Reformed churches) simply represented and summarized the teaching of the Scriptures and therefore could legitimately play a role in this process of systematically organizing and reflecting upon the Scriptures.
   - On this account, one accepted and subscribed to the confessions because they *were* an accurate summary of the Scriptures.
   - This is different from the modern, post-Enlightenment view that one might accept and subscribe to the confessions *insofar as they agreed* with the Scriptures.)
5) One might then
   a) raise and resolve questions about apparent contradictions in the Scriptures;
   b) define terms in a way that shows how relationships of cause and effect should properly be understood, e.g. "good works are caused by unconditional faith in Christ rather than by a desire to please God." (God's desire is for us to surrender our lives to Him through unconditional faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore to say "good works arise from a desire to please God" is too general to be wholly accurate and is also open to misunderstandings, i.e. one might wrongly assume that the desire to please God--which even a practicing Muslim might have--is sufficient to enable one to produce works that are good and pleasing to God.)
   c) examine how doctrines might be analyzed or related (Thus one might ask questions such as
      i) What is the relationship between God's predestining the elect from eternity and his calling them in time?
      ii) What are the elements of repentance?
   d) reflect upon contested issues (polemics against persons or communities having alternative religious viewpoints were common);
   e) examine the relation between what could be known through
      - reason,
      - natural law or
      - the traditional Aristotelian approaches to science

      and how this could be related to what was known through revelation, so that one arrived at a systematic, comprehensive view of some particular aspect of

existence (e.g. the different states of the soul [virtues and vices] or the manner in which one's senses functioned);

Methodological reflection of the kind described in 4(e) above could also be systematically discussed in a special section (normally put at the beginning of a systematic theology based on the loci principle) called the *prolegomena*. Generally this represented an attempt to organize and order revealed and natural truths in accordance with the principles of a Christianized form of Aristotelian logic (e.g. the use of analogy, inference and deduction).

The Decline of Scholasticism: The Empiricist Attack on Aristotelian Science as a Way of Knowing the Natural World

Example: Francis Bacon *Novum Organum* (1620)

- The old Aristotelian science simply offered a means of
    - classifying items perceived in the world (identifying and grouping items together in terms of an *a priori* scheme of "species" and "genera"),
    - making certain deductions from this previously given system (and thus arriving at the logical consequences of what is already accepted as known)
- This does not provide a means for
    - discovering new facts from the observation of the natural world,
    - using induction to move from observed events to postulate universal laws.
        - These universal laws will show the causes that make things in the natural world become what they are (efficient causality).
            - Contrary to scholastic thought, it is assumed that this causal power is not in the object and intrinsic to the object, but rather that the object is passively affected by predictable forces from outside itself that govern it.
        - Showing the causes that make things happen does not require us to assume that there is an ultimate purpose or goal that informs how and why things happen (final causality=the idea essential to scholastic thought that the cause of an event may be found in its purpose).
            - There is thus no reason why things happen (in the sense of purpose); things just happen (but the causes that make things happen can be fully known to the enquiring mind).

The Emergence of Rationalist Philosophy as an Alternative to Traditional Scholastic Theology

Ratio = reason, so rationalism is the attempt, by the use of reason alone, to arrive at a kind of knowledge which is superior to both

(a) the knowledge which we derive from the senses and
(b) the conventional beliefs which we have received from tradition.

- The senses can help us to know what happens to be the case (i.e. this object appears to the senses to have certain qualities, e.g. color or smell).

- The senses, however, are fallible; they can create erroneous impressions and lead us to false conclusions.
    - For example, think about the man crawling across the desert who sees in the distance what appears to be cool water. He assumes that it is a certain sort of thing with certain sorts of sensible properties, i.e. an oasis, but the information delivered by his senses is faulty; he has been deceived by a mirage.
    - Similarly, we have all had dreams that are as vivid and compelling as the events that occur while one is awake.

René Descartes (1596-1650) and the Need to Begin with **Doubt**:
The Negative Program:

- Since the senses are unreliable, doubt must remain about all acquired beliefs that are in some way based upon the reports of the senses (=the prejudices and errors acquired in one's youth).
- To arrive at certainty, the individual must begin by rejecting everything doubtful in one's acquired beliefs (i.e. things that are possible or merely probable but not certain).
    - Note that this involves treating as positively false anything that seems uncertain to [=could possibly be doubted by] the enquiring mind.
- One must withdraw the mind from the senses.
    - To arrive at a scientific knowledge of the world, one must posit a distinction between mind and body.
        - God has given the mind a version of his own intelligence by introducing into it a number of basic thoughts--"clear and distinct notions" which we cannot help believing--that cannot be false and include everything necessary for a mind intent on finding the truth to arrive at a correct general understanding of the physical world.
            - This information is possessed independently of the senses.
            - Descartes' notion of self-verifying truths assumes that the mind's own state provides the validation of the mind's own contents.
                - Descartes' whole project thus depends upon the assumption that there is "some characteristic of our mental processes whereby we recognize the intrinsic validity of ideas. The 'clear and distinction perception' of Descartes must itself be immune from Cartesian doubt. It this is so, then the faculty which governs clear and distinct perception, the 'natural light of reason' is our ultimate guarantee of knowledge" (Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, 2 ed., London: Routledge, 2002, 43).
            - Regarding the truths which are the objects of such certain knowledge, Descartes further explained: What can be known to be invariably and universally true and cannot be

doubted, e.g. mathematical truths (relating to quantity) and geometrical postulates (relating to extension in space), are true by way of definition,

- As Descartes explained in his first Meditation, "Whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides."
- Such mathematical and geometrical truths, it was argued, provide a model and a basis for secure knowledge.
  - ♣ Since these concepts are universal, they can (and will) be known by anyone who has reason and uses it.
  - ♣ Any further knowledge must be deduced from these secure foundational truths, using the proper method.

The Positive Program:

- I am thinking, so I must exist (it would be impossible for me to be thinking if I did not exist); from this foundational truth, all other truths could be deduced.
- This process of deduction from one necessary truth will lead one to other necessary truths, i.e. what must be and cannot be otherwise (chains of reasoning which show by means of necessary inferences what must be the case).

Rationalism and the Search for a **Method** That Will Allow One to Arrive at **Certainty** and Is **Universal** in Scope

- If we wish to arrive at a position that we can embrace with certainty (a God-like perspective on reality, such as God-like reason makes possible), we must turn not to the traditional notion of revelation but rather to pure mathematics and geometry (abstract physical sciences) as models of knowledge that can be embraced with certainty.
- Note that certain quantitative relations *must* obtain in pure mathematics and geometry; for example, the internal angles of a triangle *must* add up to 180 degrees.
- The theological reason why such necessary truths exist and may be known:
  - Once God had ordered matter and set all things in motion, God abstained from making further interventions in the course of nature, merely sustaining things through the laws of nature that had been established (no miracles to disrupt the course of nature).
- Implication: the accessibility of all things to the human intellect

What About the Body?

If the mind and its proper functions are

a) independent of the body and
b) superior to the bodily senses,

then what significance does the body have?

Animal Bodies as Complex Machines (Automata): The Power of Mechanistic Explanation

Descartes identifies rationality (associated with the mind) with ability to use language to respond unrestrictedly in varying, contextually appropriate ways to what is said by others

- Machines lack the capacity to do this, but so do animals.
    - Since animals lack rationality, they can be thought of as bodies that function as complex machines and their behavior can be fully accounted for by mechanistic patterns of explanation (similar to the cause-effect sequences that account for the movements of complex machines).
        - Cf. Arnauld's skeptical summary of Descartes' position (cited in Rozemond, *Descartes' Dualism*, p. 43):
          "As far as the souls of the brute animals are concerned, M. Descartes elsewhere suggests clearly enough that they have none. All they have is a body with a certain configuration, made up of various organs in such a way that all the operations which we observe can be produced in it and by means of it. But I think that in order for this conviction to find faith in the minds of men, it must be proved by very valid reasons. For...it seems incredible at first sight that it can happen without the help of any soul that the light reflected from the body of a wolf into the eyes of a sheep move the very thin optical nerves, and that upon that motion reaching the brain, animal spirits are diffused through the nerves in such a way as is necessary to make the sheep flee."

It is worth reflecting upon how the above changes would impact Christian belief and theology:

(1) Reason gained an unquestioned authority in intellectual enquiry and pursuit of truth, displacing the both
    - the traditional authority of revelation and even
    - the authority ascribed to the observation of the world with the senses by the new (post-Aristotelian) science.

(2) The expanded scope of the mind's enquiry was affirmed, rejecting traditional conceptions of the limits of the mind's knowledge or ability to engage in enquiry.

(3) The separation of the mind and body, with the body being reduced to a complex machine that had no necessarily inherent animating principle (rejecting the traditional conception of the soul found in the Christian Scriptures and Greco-Roman philosophy) and whose movements could be accounted for in terms of physical cause-event sequences.

(4) As the mind and unrestricted rational enquiry become dominant, the locus of authority shifts from bearers of tradition which were in some sense external (Scripture, visible church, etc.) to the individual as a critical enquirer unrestricted by tradition, convention or the limitations of his or her particular socio-historical context.