

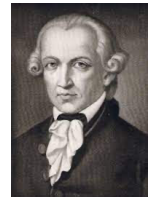
Reckoning with the Modern Triumph
The Christian Faith and Contemporary Challenges
March 14, 2021

“The autonomous man of Kant says ‘I am’ and allows nothing more ultimate than itself. The Christian says ‘I am’ in terms of Christ and God as the great I AM.” – Cornelius Van Til

I. Review: The Triumph of (Autonomous) Reason

- A. **The Enlightenment** = a multifaceted social, scientific, philosophical, and cultural phenomenon roughly dated from 1650–1800, which, generally, emphasized the superiority of human reason as a guide to all knowledge and human concerns.

1. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): *“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another . . . Sapere aude! [‘Dare to know!']. ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of the enlightenment.”*



- B. **The “Modern” Period** = commonly associated with the “Enlightenment” but extends beyond it. Depending on which feature of modernity one has in mind, it may be said to extend from mid-15th century up to the 20th century (1960’s or 70’s).

- A. Belief in objective truth as attainable and desirable: We are obligated to believe the truth that is “out there,” and we ought to use science and reason to find it.
- B. Confidence in Methodology: Independent, unbiased methodology is the way to know truth; strong sense of “human autonomy.”
- C. Rise of Naturalism: All legitimate quests for knowledge must take place *within* and *in terms of* the natural world alone, since all scientific inquiry applies only here. There is no relevance to the supernatural—in fact, it is a corrupting intrusion on scientific inquiry.

“Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.” – John Calvin (Institutes of the Christian Religion)

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man.”

Alexander Pope (18th century poet English poet)

II. Three Shifts Within the Modern Triumph

A. **Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and the “Expressive” Individual**

1. Main Idea = Given that universal truth is embedded in nature, we must purge society of all encrustations and distortions of nature from church, monarch, conventions, etc., unmask the artificiality of society, and return to nature.

- A. Result #1 - Rousseau develops a *religious* autonomy rooted in the individual moral conscience.

- 1) *“Behold, my son, the absurdities to which pride and intolerance bring us, when everybody*

*wants others to think as he does, and everybody fancies that he has an exclusive claim upon the rest of mankind ... So I closed all my books. There is one book which is open to every one—the book of nature. In this good and great volume I learn to serve and adore its Author. If I use my reason, if I cultivate it, if I employ rightly the innate faculties which God bestows upon me, I shall learn by myself to know and love him ...” (Rousseau, *The Creed of a Priest of Savoy*, 228)*

- B. Result #2 – Rousseau held that our natural humanity is innocent and noble, and the constraints of society are responsible for the misery and inhumanity we inflict on one another. (“Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains”).

B. G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) and the “Social” Individual

1. Main Idea = In order to overcome Kant’s rather restricted application of reason to the experienced world, Hegel insisted that (a) the mind *could* discover what ultimate reality really is and, in fact, (b) *reality was nothing less than Mind (or Spirit) coming into self-consciousness* (Isn’t philosophy fun!?).

- A. Result #1 – The journey to Truth (with a capital “T”) proceeds according to a logical process of contradiction and resolution. I.e., every assertion is a partial truth, to be countered by another, leading to a greater synthesis, all of which leads to the comprehensive truth, which comes at the end of the process.

- 1) *“Reality is constituted by mind. At first mind does not realize this. It sees reality as something independent of it, even as something hostile or alien to it. During this period mind is estranged or alienated from its own creation. Only when mind awakens to the fact that reality is its own creation can it give up this reaching after the ‘beyond.’ Then it understands that there is nothing beyond itself. Then it knows reality as directly and immediately as it knows itself. It is at one with it. As Hegel puts it in the conclusion section of the Phenomenology, absolute knowledge is ‘mind knowing itself in the shape of mind.’” (Peter Singer, *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*, 93)*

- B. Result #2 – In contrast to Rousseau, for Hegel, personal identity does not come from within alone, but is worked out in relationship with society, which enables the full realization of individual freedom.

- 1) *“[P]ersonhood for Hegel is not an atomistic conception, or a sheer unity of being-for-self only. The latter is a distortion and perversion of being-for-self. Rather personhood is a social unity in and through difference—to wit, a unity of being-for-self and being-for-other.” (Robert R. Williams, *Hegel on the Proofs and the Personhood of God*, 150)*
- 2) *“Hegel is useful because he is the key philosopher who wrestled with the quintessential problem of identity in the modern era: how to connect the aspiration to express oneself as an individual and to be free with the desire for being at one with (or belonging to) society as a whole.” (Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 59)*

C. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and the “Powerful” Individual

1. Main Idea = Now that the Enlightenment has rendered God unnecessary, and there is no stable structure to anything—no truth, no human nature—we can see that all “knowledge” is rooted in instinct and struggles for power.
 - A. Result #1 – Now that there is no such thing as objective moral truth, we must dispense with the “slave morality” of Christianity and pursue personal satisfaction through self-creation.
 - 1) “‘Wither is God?’ he cried. ‘I will tell you! We have killed him—you and I! All of us are his murderers! But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Wither is it moving now? Wither are we moving? ... Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?’” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, sec. 125, 182)
 - 2) “I would say, no, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.” (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 267)
 - B. Result #2 – Our self-creation ought not to take the form of nihilism, but an assertion of our will to seek our own greatness as if every day had eternal significance.
 - 1) “Behold, I teach you the Overman. The Overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The Overman shall be the meaning of the earth.” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 560)

III. Conclusion: The “modern” attempt to exalt reason above God’s self-revelation ...

1. ... magnified important questions about authority (How do we know things?), the natural world (How does it work?), and the role of Christian faith (What is the role of Scripture? Is God relevant to human life?).
2. ... sheds light on the contemporary confidence in individual reason (Kant), the value of self-expression (Rousseau), the craving for social recognition (Hegel), and the ultimate hopelessness of the journey (Nietzsche).
3. ... is ultimately a futile enterprise that indirectly calls us to bow before God as our Creator and Redeemer, whose Word interprets our world (and us!) and, most importantly, leads us to Christ, in whom we are complete.

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³ Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (Is 55:2–3)

“... Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2–3)