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# 1

## THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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*The demand for certainty is one which is natural to man, but is nevertheless an intellectual vice ... to endure uncertainty is difficult. Dogmatism and scepticism are both, in a sense, absolute philosophies; one is certain of knowing, the other of not knowing. What philosophy should dissipate is certainty, whether of knowledge or ignorance.*  
(Bertrand Russell 2009[1946]: 38–9)

## INTRODUCTION

The search for certainty is one of the most enduring themes of humanity. The question of how we might know ourselves and the world we inhabit has driven a range of responses from the Greek philosophers to the scholars of the Enlightenment and on to the twenty-first-century thinkers of our age. The desire to understand what we are, have been and may become – to explore the very essence of what it means to be human – has given rise to a whole industry of reflexive construction in religion, psychotherapy, psychology, philosophy, politics, art, literature, theatre, technology and the social and physical sciences as a whole. The search for certainty opens up a terrain where reflexivity is often seen to operate at its height: between knowing why we act and acting itself, or between thought and action.

How do we grasp an independent, ambiguous reality in an unambiguous form? This chapter aims to address this question and discuss differences emerging between alternative schools of thought. Those are: *rationalism*, which locates certainty and reason within the uncontaminated human mind, via a separation of thought and action; *empiricism* which places trust in the experiences and senses in order to gain true knowledge of the world; and *scepticism* which embraces the limitations of the mind through emphasising doubt and the uncertainty of all knowledge claims. This history will thus reflect different views on how we should make epistemic judgements. Are those derived from a solitary, reflexive view? Or through a consideration of the kinds of beings we are? Or even by combining reflection and experience grounded in historical consciousness and context?

The changing contexts within which these ideas have been developed were highly significant in shaping their content. Many of the thinkers discussed in this chapter lived around the time of the Enlightenment or ‘Age of Reason’ (1620s–1780s), coinciding with the scientific revolution: René Descartes (1596–1650) lived during the Thirty Years’ War and through conflict and uncertainty in Europe; John Locke (1632–1704) experienced the English Civil War and the Restoration, with its new ideas on liberty and freedom; Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was influenced by revolution, war, plague, the scientific revolution and the experiential elements of religious teaching in Europe. It is unsurprising that a second enduring theme we can take from these authors to inform our understandings of reflexivity is the importance of context, not only in shaping how they saw the world, but also in how we all gain knowledge of and relate to the world we live in. Extending these insights, there are consequences of these ideas for how scholars have not only theorised the making and governing of communities, economies and societies, but also shaped them through their reflections upon knowledge and society (Siedentop 2015).

Certainty, context and the making of society: these are the three themes that run throughout this chapter. Through a brief tour of what is an extensive and rich history – from the Greek philosophers to Cartesianism, British Empiricism, German Idealism and Materialism – this chapter provides a fusion of insights into questions of individualism,

autonomy, freedom, authority and society. It is not exhaustive; rather it highlights key thinkers and debates whose works we need to understand as a basis for a deeper interrogation of concepts and contexts for reflexive thought in the rest of the book.

## IN SEARCH OF CERTAINTY

It is often assumed that the Greeks were the first off the starting line for philosophical enquiry. The idea of a mechanistic material world, captured and purified through the realm of ideas, found its outlet in elements of Greek philosophy. Plato (c. 428–348 BC) proposed that the separation between knowing and doing could be achieved by the exercise of reason, abstracted from the particularities of everyday experiences. Plato's forms were proposed as higher realities than the material world which we inhabit and through which we come to know the essence of things. Within such understandings, the world of everyday experience is nothing more than appearance and in a state of flux. The constant, understood by the mind, is the realm of ideas: it is a 'universal' that enables us to escape the dim light that pervades the darkened caves of experience in which we normally reside.

Truth is the purity of thought that captures the essence of reality. Hence, the foundations for knowledge were argued to be provided for through a separation of mind and an independent reality. These ideas informed a politics of differentiation between those that know and those that do. The Platonic idea of the 'philosopher king' was to rule over the affairs of people whose actions raised perplexing circumstances that were resolvable only through the exercise of wisdom. In this, we see the seeds of a transcendental philosophy and ascetic attitude in the pursuit of contemplative ideals, deploying the capacity of reason aimed towards a state of spiritual enlightenment, which has continued to appeal across history.

The attribution of all roots of philosophical thought to the Greeks is problematic. Emphasising the extensive links between Northern Africa and Greece, there is a challenge to the epistemological dominance of the West, citing, for instance, the visits of early Greek scholars to Egypt in search of wisdom: 'a rhetoric of denial of Africa's capability was developed to accompany the dispossession of Africa' (Asante 2004). Whilst efforts to ground alternative epistemologies are increasing, through valorising endogenous ways of being and knowing (see for instance, Nkulu-N'Sengha 2005; Nyamnjoh 2012), these often rely on non-written oral traditions, giving rise to ethno-philosophical studies. The dominance of European, white, male writings in most histories of reflexive thought is readily apparent, not only to the exclusion of African, but also Asian or South American perspectives. The necessity of accessing knowledge through written texts makes this a difficult challenge to overcome. The Greek philosophers, Descartes, Hegel and others have also been critiqued for their gendered philosophies (Amóros 1994; Alanen and Witt 2004), whilst women have been excluded from the philosophical canon, as Mary Ellen Waithe has been credited with saying: 'These women are not women on the fringes of philosophy, but philosophers on

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the fringes of history' (Witt and Shapiro 2016). The legacy of exclusions and inclusions in philosophy and social research is still felt today, hence we are concerned not only with drawing upon, but also challenging, traditional formations of ways of knowing. We shall return to these themes continuously throughout the book. We start first with René Descartes and the birth of French rationalism.

### 'I think, therefore I am'

René Descartes (1596–1650) was versed in Greek philosophy including the writings of Plato and his pupil, Aristotle, whose writings on ethics included reflexive understandings of human wellbeing. Aristotle rejected the simple separation between knowing and doing and instead held that every object is both matter and form. His view that the mind does not represent reality as such, but participates in the production of knowledge about objects, raised a troubling question: how can the mind be a locus of certainty about the world when it is influenced by the world itself?

Descartes argued that the mind itself provides certainty and does so through a reflexive turn that discovers its own foundations. Recognising that the mind could be misled, Descartes needed to prove that God would not deceive him. Through his extensive works, he derived one of the most famous phrases in the history of philosophy: '*Cogito ergo sum*' ('I think, therefore I am'). As he wrote, 'I find the existence of myself as a thinking being an indubitable fact. It is indubitable only because I clearly and distinctly perceive it; that is the ground of its certainty and must equally be a sufficient ground of the certainty of other judgements. I may therefore take it as a general rule that what is clearly and distinctively perceived is true' (Descartes quoted in Stout 1967: 169).

The search for certainty lay in the capacity to reason, which occurred by withdrawing from the world to ground knowledge of reality via a separation between mind and body. For the Greeks, the emphasis was on first working on ourselves before we are able to work upon knowing the truth: self-making through an ascetic attitude *and* working towards the truth were conjoined. Descartes changed this formulation: 'Before Descartes, one could be impure, immoral, and know the truth. With Descartes, direct evidence is enough. After Descartes, we have a non-ascetic subject of knowledge. This change makes possible the institutionalization of modern science' (Foucault 1997: 279).

Descartes' ideas were taken forward and challenged by scholars such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who argued that there were innate properties in the mind and who sought a universal language to express all thoughts, as well as by those such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) who saw human nature as a 'state of reason' corrupted by civilisation and that knowledge resides in sensory experiences. For Rousseau, movement in and through nature was necessary to release the mind from the shackles of society, a theme that finds its resonance today. Box 1.1 illustrates this point and highlights that social scientists need to pay attention to the spatial conditions and contexts which might help or hinder reflexive thought (see also Chapter 7).

**Box 1.1****Mind, body and reflexive thought**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one of the most important French philosophers of the Enlightenment. Rousseau's 'virtue epistemology' emphasised how our capacity for sensation can be cultivated to develop judgement and wisdom, moving from the passive reception of experiences to the active process of developing complex ideas and morals (Hanley 2012). To this extent he was a predecessor of Romanticism (see Chapter 2). Rousseau believed that civilisation had generated and corrupted human beings from a 'state of reason': knowledge could be acquired not only by experience, but also through the reflections of the solitary mind. For Rousseau 'being' was as important as 'knowing' and that to both be oneself and know oneself required an immersion in nature. Importantly, it was not only intellectual retreat, but also physical withdrawal from the corrosive influences of society, that informed Rousseau's philosophy. We see this most clearly in his *Reveries d'un Promeneur Solitaire*, published posthumously in 1782. Having felt persecuted, criticised and rejected across Europe, Rousseau could only find peace and 'be himself' on his daily solitary walks, as 'my mind only works with my legs'. The purpose of walking was not to value the innate beauty of the natural world (although Rousseau was a keen botanist), but to value himself. Walking enabled meditations on his inner life; the process of being in nature and of movement through nature acted as a sensory catalyst to grasping his own mind. As he put it in the Seventh Walk, 'Sometimes my reveries end in meditation, but more often my meditations end in reverie; and during these wanderings, my soul rambles and glides through the universe on the wings of imagination, in ecstasies which surpass every other enjoyment' (1922: 91).

Many other writers since have discovered an intuitive connection between walking, movement, thinking and writing, for example Henry David Thoreau, William Wordsworth, Virginia Woolf and Friedrich Nietzsche (Nicholson 2009). Contemporary scholars have undertaken early studies to prove the relationship between walking and creative thinking (Opezzo and Schwartz 2014), enabling our minds to wander through images, thoughts and ideas. Others have focused not on walking but on bodily movements, such as the practice of combining meditation with qigong movements in Chinese spiritual practice. In our 'Age of Distraction', the value of deep, slow, semi-automatic and mechanistic movements – mending motor-bikes, home-cooking, gardening, kung fu – is not to be underplayed in efforts to resist 'a culture saturated with technologies ... [in which] our interior mental lives are laid bare as a resource to be harvested by others' (Crawford 2015: 247). This connection between mind and body challenges the Cartesian dualism. From literature and spiritualism, psychology and chemistry, many emphasise instead the intrinsic interdependence between mind, body and spirit in knowing the self and the world.

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The seventeenth century has been characterised as one that switched from 'philosophical egalitarianism' to a 'scientific hierarchy' (Toulmin 2003: 22). Explanation took on a mechanistic viewpoint expressed in terms of laws and underpinned by mathematical formulations

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(Kearney 1971). Descartes was attracted to mathematics as a means of providing certainty through impersonal abstraction. With such developments, the role of science in social life was to change – both through the exercise of Cartesian scepticism concerning everyday life and the desire for predictability in a world increasingly questioning of traditional belief. This foundational legacy remains in contemporary ideas of practice: we provide ourselves with certainty through individualised and isolated acts and the power of moral resources lies only within us. Descartes can be seen as the founder of modern individualism, but he also set us on a quest ‘for an order of science, of clear and distinct knowledge in universal terms, which where possible will be the basis of instrumental control’ (Taylor 1992: 182).

### Mind, exchange and interest

These ideas were to be challenged by the work of John Locke. Whilst Locke read Descartes, he was more attuned to medicine and scientific method and experimentation. Building a lineage for British empiricism, he emphasised experience and induction, with knowledge built upon sensory perception acquired through experimentation. At the same time, he extended the reification of the mind, through insisting that withdrawal and reflection on the operations of our minds are still necessary for experience to be translated into knowledge. Like Descartes, this continued to represent an atomistic and individualistic approach to reflexivity, through the emphasis on a personal responsibility for knowledge acquisition.

From this era, the combination of the scientific revolution with the idea of rational mastery of the self cannot be underestimated. Whilst the artisans and merchants were confident in their handling of things, they also sought ideas to make sense of their lives (Hill 1997[1965]): ‘Holding the package together is an ideal of freedom or independence, backed by a conception of disengagement and procedural reasons. This has given Locke’s outlook its tremendous influence, not only in the eighteenth century, but right through to today’ (Taylor 1992: 174). The construction of the individual in this way, along with the beginnings of modern science, has influenced the practices and presuppositions of modern psychology and economics, often by sidelining uncertainty through particular constructions of the individual.

As with Plato, these ideas had profound consequences for how society should be organised. Locke was part of Social Contract Theory which emerged in the work of those such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Hobbes was concerned with the search for certainty. He explored the possibility of mathematics and experimentation for this purpose, but recognised the need to appeal to the passions and rhetorical persuasion, without succumbing to scepticism. Hobbes started with self-interest and hence the need for a social contract to prevent life being ‘solitary, brutish and short’. Such differences have led to observations that in France we find a tendency for authority to be above the individual, whilst in England a person tended to be seen as the source of their own authority (Hawthorn 1976).

Hobbes was concerned with how individuals, living in isolation, would consent to come together and do so under a particular set of obligations in order to form a society. People

both made and were the subjects of the content of the contract itself. Self-interest was assumed to be universal, insofar as people were motivated by the same desires: human laws and nature. In this way he brought what appeared to be incompatible elements together in his work as it ‘solves the problem of difference because it makes arithmetic, whose method is capable of producing certain knowledge, an integral part of social and ethical analysis’ (Poovey 1998: 108). Putting politics and ideas on the infallibility of science together was no easy task. Whilst some political interventions might rely on ‘wit’, others needed ‘infallible rules’. As scientific knowledge grew more precise, so it would grow away from the understanding of the average citizen and the result would be a greater distance between political knowledge and the everyday experience of citizens. Acceptance of the rules would then be an issue for the populace at large, ‘hence the only way that political knowledge could be translated into a shared public philosophy was through imposition by authority and acquiescence by the citizenry’ (Wolin 2004: 234). Hobbes’ work represented an important point in history. He introduced to political philosophy the idea of ‘making’ in human affairs: the Real is forged and events are made as they are wished – all of which is ably assisted by science. Therefore ‘modern rationalism as it is currently known, with the assumed antagonism of reason and passion as its stock-in-trade, has never found a more clearer and uncompromising representative’ (Arendt 1998[1958]: 300).

Within the very different traditions of rationalism and empiricism, a clear focus on the natural sciences could be seen. Box 1.2 highlights key differences, illustrated through a literary example, but what these schools had in common was the search for certainty and an unquestioning adherence for the Truth. To seek to find understanding in the actually existing realm of human activity was regarded as a chaotic endeavour. Within this, a clear hierarchy of knowledge could be seen, expressed in the work of Benedictus Spinoza (1632–77) who formulated a philosophy of life, with experience at the bottom, through to general reasoning, and then finally the deployment of intuition for rational insight as its highest expression.

## ■ Box 1.2

### Rationalism and empiricism in literature

The epistemological positions of rationalism and empiricism, embodied here through the works of Descartes and Locke, have different consequences for the process of scientific enquiry. Rationalism requires a retreat from the world, to seek knowledge via the inner reflections of the solitary mind. Deductive reasoning is used to reach a true conclusion through establishing premises and working from the general to the particular. Empiricism instead involves gaining knowledge via experiences and sensations, from the facts through induction to more general conclusions.

These positions find their unlikely archetypes in detective fiction, through the works of Agatha Christie (1890–1976) and Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930). Christie’s Belgian detective,

*(Continued)*



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Hercule Poirot, uses his 'little grey cells' to order reality and sit back, close his eyes and reflect on the cases presented before him in order to draw conclusions. The classic armchair detective, he takes physical clues into account, but does not fully trust them, instead drawing on his rational mind and knowledge of human psychology to solve the problem at hand. Sherlock Holmes, on the other hand, is a close observer and gathers empirical evidence at every point. With his magnifying glass in hand, Holmes is scientifically trained and uses forensics and induction to find clues that will lead him to the truth. Whilst often retiring from the field to think, play the violin or otherwise indulge his senses, it is the evidence that directs him towards solving a case: 'Poirot is the French rationalist par excellence whereas Holmes is the English empiricist pure and simple' (Tostevin 2010: 20). Detective fiction presents an interesting window into these concerns, seen also in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, whose stories 'reject the empirical "scientific" mode of knowledge that was doing so much to revolutionise existing technologies and industries, embracing instead rationalism in a refutation of the values of an industrialising American society' (Thompson 1993: 45).

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## CONTEXT MATTERS

There are two key consequences of the mode of abstracting universal features through the exercise of reason. First, it ignores the contingent factors that influence our lives and allow for a diversity of experiences; second, it produces a dichotomy between the subjective and objective. It also separates the reflexive capacity of our minds from our bodies, as if the latter were too close to nature with its apparent distorting power of mere appearance and desire. Once we admit of the importance of these issues, the idealisations of the rationalists may be seen as nothing more than projections born of particular positions.

### Historical consciousness and the senses

Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) challenged the acontextual, rational self as the source of true knowledge. He drew on the works of scholars such as Francis Bacon to argue for an understanding of ourselves which takes passion and emotion into account. Questioning the utilisation of the natural sciences to know ourselves, he argued that the study of human affairs needed history for understanding. It is the mental states of humankind that determine the course of events and so it is there that we should look for our explanations, with every epoch being dominated by 'a "spirit", a genius, of its own' (Vico 1990[1709]: 73).

For Vico, history has a basis in psychology and requires a scientific attitude different from previous understandings. In advocating the humanities Vico was not against science but scientism. Common sense should be a basis of education: 'I may add that common sense, besides being the criterion of practical judgement, is also the guiding standard of

eloquence ... There is a danger that instruction in advanced philosophical criticism may lead to an abnormal growth of abstract intellectualism, and render young people unfit for the practice of eloquence' (Vico 1990[1709]: 13). With excessive attention paid to natural sciences in educational methods, Vico concluded that ethics had been sidelined: 'We neglect that discipline which deals with the differential features of the virtues and vices, with good and bad behaviour-patterns, with the typical characteristics of the various ages of man, of the two sexes, of social and economic class, race and nation, and with the art of seemly conduct in life, the most difficult of all arts. As a consequence of this neglect, a noble and important branch of studies, i.e., the science of politics, lies almost abandoned and untended' (Vico 1990[1709]: 33)

In contrast to the rationalists and empiricists, another group of thinkers were influenced by different lines of thought: for example, the work of Charles-Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu (1689–1755). Montesquieu's investigations on climate, communities, laws and customs were based on a sense of self that is not above society, but located within its networks. Consequently, social explanations are needed for given phenomena. Inequality, for example, was sought in the dynamics of society, not in a return to Rousseau's state of 'natural equality' in which civilisation was a corrupting influence and ignorance had only been replaced by an emphasis on scepticism. Human freedom was paramount and that meant an emphasis on how government could be most efficiently organised to secure it. Montesquieu was also interested in the connections between people's opinions and the nature and structure of society. Through systematic study, he sought explanations of how, in ways previously unsuspected, society forms people as 'social creatures'.

Locating issues in social, cultural and historical contexts posed a fundamental challenge to the presumptions of those who sought to position their ideas as somehow free-floating over external influences. Mary Astell (1668–1731), for example, wrote in her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (Rogers 1979) that differences between the sexes should not be attributed to some examined idea of 'nature' or 'reason', upon which so many thinkers had drawn from the Greeks onwards, but to the power that men held over women in society (Griffiths and Whitford 1988). If Descartes had proclaimed reason in all, then it must also be available to all. Francois Poulain de la Barre also built on Descartes' work to argue for the social equality of men and women in *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* (1673) (Witt and Shapiro 2016). Unlike more explicitly misogynistic philosophies, such as those of Hegel, Descartes' work was seen as providing a basis for female philosophers, such as Madeleine de Scudery and Gabrielle Suchon, to claim reason as a basis for equal education for women (Atherton 1994).

## Engagement as a matter of fact

In Scotland there were a group of thinkers who continued this turn to the importance of social context in the formulation of their ideas. The 'Scottish school' included David Hume (1711–76), Adam Smith (1723–90), Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) and John Millar (1735–1801).

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Hume accepted that custom plays a central role in guiding lives, whilst ideas of what is right and good are informed by the norms of society. Although there are differences between and within societies, people exhibit common dispositions. In contrast to Cartesian rationalism, Hume believed that impressions come from experiences and they inform complex ideas. Experiential content matters and is not dismissed as mere appearance. Whilst Descartes believed that consistency over time was constituted through the exercise of reason within the individual mind, Hume challenged the idea of unity or coherence in the self – all we find when we look reflexively at ourselves are experiences. In this view, whilst we may have a psychological desire to see unity, there is none – things and people are in flux, and there is no ‘self’ as an unchanging object of our gaze.

Where earlier thought allowed the mind to discern the properties of the world through the search for causes, Hume argued that this was nothing more than habit and we had no warrant in asserting one thing causes another. Instead, we could only observe constant conjunctions: ‘there is no known circumstance, that enters into the connexion and production of the actions of matter, that is not to be found in all the operations of the mind; and consequently we cannot, without a manifest absurdity, attribute necessity to the one, and refuse it to the other’ (Hume, quoted in Lenz 1966: 171).

In terms of knowledge, it was now believed that ‘Nothing can be known to *exist* except with the help of experience. That is to say, if we wish to prove that something of which we have no direct experience exists, we must have among our premises the existence of one of more things of which we have direct experience’ (Russell 1983[1912]: 41–2; original emphasis). The door was now open to find the idea of disengagement from nature and society to be not only problematic, but also impossible. The Scottish School reinforced the idea that we find knowledge in experience, but how do we know that something we have seen in the past will resemble the same thing we will see in the future? This issue is further exacerbated given that each individual is susceptible to prejudices in their judgements. In this we see a form of scepticism, which – as we see in Box 1.3 – involves not the search for certainty but the invocation of doubt.

### ■ Box 1.3

#### **Scepticism and the importance of doubt**

In emphasising that much of our alleged knowledge involves beliefs that cannot be rationally justified, Hume has been described as a ‘radical sceptic’ (Meeker 2013), introducing the idea of doubt and the limits to knowledge. Taken to extremes, scepticism involves a rejection of the search for certainty and suspending judgement and belief. ‘Global’ or ‘philosophical’ scepticism denies the possibility of there being any certain knowledge as we may always be misled by our senses, our minds or others. This is not what Hume was proposing. Descartes had earlier raised the spectre of scepticism in his search for certainty through examining dreams, a deceiving God and an evil demon. Cartesian scepticism concerning the possibility

of certain knowledge has also been updated through Putnam's (1981) thought experiment 'Brain in a Vat' hypothetical scenario: how do we know we are not simply a brain in a jar, hooked up to a massive computer that is simulating the external world through feeding us experiences and insights? We see this metaphor infiltrating popular science fiction genres, particularly the *Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003) directed by Andy and Lana Wachowski. Here characters learn to distrust everything about themselves and the external world as they move through layer upon layer of deception and artifice, 'exposing us to the uncomfortable worries of philosophical scepticism in an especially compelling way' (Erion and Smith 2002: 29).

Whilst it has strong epistemological roots, the more popular use of the adjective 'sceptic' has different connotations. 'Eurosceptics' are not making any epistemological arguments, but are defined through a sense of distrust or suspicion of the European project. 'Climate change sceptics', on the other hand, purport to question the basis of knowledge claims and evidence of causality – taking aim at the certainty of science and appealing to a wider public distrust in scientific and technological developments (see also Chapter 6). Despite the overwhelming scientific consensus and geographic and partisan affiliations of those involved, climate change scepticism focuses on undermining the credibility of attempts to draw causal inferences and reach certain conclusions via doubt and uncertainty. This draws attention to the fine line between doubt, scientific knowledge and politics – and with it the need for reflexivity about our knowledge claims.

If our sense of who we are and what we know is limited through the particulars of our experiences, then what warrant does any thinker have for the basis of these reflections, limited as they are by the same constraints that befall us all? Is all belief just unbelievable? Hume does not go this far, and instead 'suggests that the unity of personality can be assimilated to that of a republic or commonwealth whose members unceasingly change but whose ties of association remain' (Ricoeur 1994: 128). Hume did not subscribe to atomistic ideas of the reflexive self whose mind's eye captures the Real through disengagement. His argument for the partiality of our knowledge and role of the passions in our judgements may be seen as revealing the necessity to admit to the importance of context in coming to know who we are and what we might hope for. In understanding our actions and perceptions we need to regard engagement as a matter of fact. Indeed, George Berkeley took this even further and argued that material reality was nothing more than a collection of ideas and the only reality was sensation!

Two issues arise from these latter contributions. First, the problem of induction: imprisoned by the particularity of our perspectives, how can we have general knowledge? Second, given this state of affairs, how is society possible? If people have different ideas, experiences and passions, what can they have in common? What norms and values might guide the coordination of actions among such persons? Addressing these questions points to the need to both accept and embrace our limitations. If we cannot rely on the generalising properties of reason to escape our experiences, the latter is all we have. There is no divine

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purpose of which we are a part. In these respects, Hume's aim was 'to show the house that as humans we had to live in. We anatomise the moral sentiments, in all their ultimate metaphysical arbitrariness, could-have-been-otherwiseness, in order to accept them, endorse them, know what address we are living at. Even the disengagement serves the end of an ultimate engagement' (Taylor 1992: 345).

Hume rejects ideas of 'original contracts' or 'states of nature' in his writings on justice and property, and notes how people have more needs than can be satisfied. He also gave consideration to 'ties of association' in the coordination of life. It is society, with its conventions and rules, which provides a sense of justice in conditions of scarcity. Ideas of a common good were displaced in Hume's writings because the passions, not reason, directed moral judgement. Passions have a role in self-preservation, but equally we have an instinctive sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable as the moral basis of a society. It is for these reasons that the twentieth-century *laissez-faire* economist Friedrich August von Hayek regarded Hume as undertaking no less than a general science of human nature, in which morals and politics were as important as sources of knowledge. For Hayek, Hume was 'not merely the founder of the modern theory of knowledge, but also one of the founders of economic theory' (1968: 339). If reason had any role, it was simply to determine the best means to achieve what the passions desired. This is manifest now in mainstream economics textbooks which teach that calculation informs the rational pursuit of desired ends in market-based societies. We shall return to this question in Chapter 2 when we consider the concept of the 'Will'.

In the work of the economist Adam Smith, we can see the alignment of this position on moral and economic behaviour: both are informed by individual desire, without any supposition that actions might also be intended to promote the good of society. Humans like to barter and exchange, and unlike animals have a need for each other in terms of different talents and dispositions. The system of coordination that allows this to take place is the 'hidden hand' of the market. A spectator idea of moral good arises in Smith's work in which the person observing the work of another experiences a similar form of virtue in the act itself which does not harm others and is of some benefit to society as a whole. As he puts it: 'Each animal is still obliged to defend itself, separately and independently, and derives no sort of advantage from that variety of talent with which nature has distinguished its fellows. Among men, on the contrary, the most dissimilar geniuses are of use to one another; the different produces of their respective talents, by the general disposition to truck, barter, and exchange, being brought, as it were, into a common stock, where every man may purchase whatever part of the produce of other men's talents he has occasion for' (Smith in Parsons et al. 1965: 105).

Instrumental use to one another is based on an individualistic, subjective moral outlook that others cannot adequately judge. Consequently, the role of government is assumed to be limited. Taking their lead from one of the founders of the Scottish Enlightenment, Francis Hutcheson, Millar and Ferguson were to focus on securing 'the survival of civil society, by a constitutionally regulated system of government without repression and encroachment on

liberties spelling the end of the active or participatory virtues and eventually the public political spirit itself' (Strydom 2000: 217). We find a concern with this balance not only in the works of liberals such as Locke, Hume, Smith, Millar and Ferguson, but also right through to the Utilitarians and John Stuart Mill who wrote that 'It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation' (1974[1859]: 127). In this tradition we find an attempt to reconcile freedom and authority. These writers appear to solve this 'by destroying authority in the name of liberty and replacing it by society, but only at the cost of exposing freedom to society's controls' (Wolin 2004: 314).

## ENDURING CONCEPTS: REASON AND SCEPTICISM RETURN

The thinkers discussed thus far held opposing views on how we, as fallible humans, can first know ourselves and then the world: Descartes focused on non-association via withdrawal, doubt, and finally the exercise of reason; Hume reached sceptical conclusions regarding the idea that a science of cognition is anything more than mental projections into a world based on custom. Traditions of thought emphasised different sources of authority in the search for certainty and varied consequences for how society should be organised. At the same time, contexts were changing and concepts being revisited. In Germany, under the influence of change, revolution and plague, idealism was rooting reason back in history, drawing on the writings of Rousseau, Leibniz and Hume. Pietism was also influential, with its roots in Lutheranism and an emphasis upon the experiential elements of religious teaching and in German deism, with its view that the existence of God may be established through reason (Appelbaum 1995).

### Reason and being in history

Against this background, along with the scientific revolution, embodied in the works of Isaac Newton, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was awoken from his 'dogmatic slumbers'. Here was a thinker who was to restore metaphysics into an understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Kant's 'Copernican Revolution in philosophy was to invert the relationship between mind and world by theorizing human consciousness as the constitutive formal nexus of all possible objectivity and knowledge' (Sandywell 1996: 173).

Kant's ideas are highly complex. He sought to reconcile elements of rationalism and empiricism. He did not adhere to dogmatic metaphysics, but held onto the importance of the mind in relation to the external world and the validity of scientific conclusions. Although agreeing with the empiricists that there are no innate ideas and that the thing-in-itself exists

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independent of our experience, he also argued that all experience conformed to knowledge. A major contribution was to insist that categories in the mind are essential to make sense of our experiences. According to Kant, we come to understand the world through a set of *a priori* concepts – for example, space, time, causality, quantity and quality. These categories enable us to see the *phenomena* of the world, rather than their true reality (*noumena*). If we apply these categories to our experiences, we can order them in a sense-making activity, taking care not to confuse our perceptions with knowing the thing-in-itself. Kant made a clear separation between concepts and sensations. In this we can see the legacy of the Greeks, in particular Aristotle, who developed a series of philosophical categories without which scientific thought would not be possible.

How we represent things to others in our judgements then matters: it is this taking-into-account of others that increases our forms of representation, which are then neither simply objective, nor subjective. Objects of our consciousness may be produced through how we represent them – the properties of these objects are determined by the intellect. Alternatively, objects may appear within us, in which case they are determined along with the object itself. What is missing, however, is something that appears to stand before all acts of representation. Here Kant introduces the spectre of self-consciousness: awareness of oneself, others and things, but through a clear distinction between the subjective and objective. It is this distinction between sensation and thought that is so influential. As a study on the history of scientific objectivity puts it, ‘By the mid-nineteenth century, dictionaries and handbooks in English, French, and German credited Kantian critical philosophy with the resuscitation and redefinition of the scholastic terminology of the objective and subjective’ (Daston and Galison 2010[2007]: 206).

In his studies of how the mind constructed the objective world, Kant found his solution in ‘a universal subject that, to the extent it was universal, could be the subject of knowledge, but which demanded, nonetheless, an ethical attitude’ (Foucault 1997: 279). We may refer to this as the primary principle of human knowledge – the ‘I’ as in ‘I think’. As Johann Fichte (1762–1814), the post-Kantian idealist put it, this ‘actually appears within consciousness as something real, although not as a *thing in itself*; for were the I to appear within consciousness as a thing in itself, then idealism would cease to be what it is and would be transformed into dogmatism. Instead, the object of idealism appears within consciousness as an *I in itself*. It does not appear there as an object of experience, for it is nothing determinate, but is determined solely by me, and without this determination it is nothing whatsoever and does not exist at all. Instead, it appears within consciousness as something elevated above all experience’ (1994: 13, original emphasis).

Fichte takes the existence of the ‘I’ as a given, which is not provable in any way, but necessary. He fuses an awareness of the transcendental condition of our consciousness with the moral ideal of autonomy to produce both freedom and self-consciousness together: ‘In the sphere of practical philosophy human beings become persons in the full sense of the word by attaining a reflexive knowledge of the world-work of the Transcendental Ego’ (Sandywell 1996: 174–5). Fichte’s contribution to a transcendental idealism was to extend



Kant's emphasis on consciousness through highlighting the need to reflect on the process of consciousness itself.

The basis of human knowledge is the initial Act of Consciousness and it is through reflecting on this process itself that we bring ourselves into being. As Joseph Schelling, a student of Fichte's, put it, 'this Being which is assumed as prior to knowledge is no being, even it is not knowledge either; it is real self-positing, it is primal and basic willing which makes itself into something and is the basis and foundation of all essence' (1992[1936]: 63). It is for such reasons that Bertrand Russell regards Fichte as carrying 'subjectivism to a point which seems almost to involve a kind of insanity' (1955: 744). Fichte critiqued Descartes' foundational claims, but exhibited an ambivalence encapsulated in his 'adherence to the traditional idea of knowledge as demonstrable and demonstrated on the one hand, and the conclusion to which he himself comes in his own analysis of the theory of knowledge, that claims to know are finally indemonstrable' (Rockmore 1994: 100). This is significant. The foundationalist thrust of his argument comes from the influence of Kant extended through the work of Karl Reinhold (1757–1823) in terms of specifying the grounds for knowledge. Yet from a reflexive point of view, can we both make consciousness possible through the Act and at the same time be aware that we are acting? 'The inconsistency is that if the Act is prior to and a condition of consciousness, we cannot also be aware of its intellectual intuition' (Rockmore 1994: 102).

What we have is a chicken-and-egg situation – what comes first, the 'I' or awareness of the 'I'? How can we have one without the other? 'Since thought needed to be like its object in order to know it, and since reality itself was circular or spherical, thought also must be circular' (Rockmore 1994: 104). Such views were rejected by Aristotle and Kant, but strongly shaped Fichte's ambivalence concerning necessary but not provable first principles, as indicated in his writings on *Foundations on the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge). In insisting that the first principles of science must be assumed but are not provable, Fichte held a non-foundationalist view: instead of searching for certainty, all we can ever hope for is probability. Perhaps we are not subjects whose reflexive relations to our consciousness enable us to stand at the centre of reality, but are instead finite and caught in circumstances which always elude a full understanding? We will find these issues appearing again and again in this study: for example, in a non-foundationalist view of knowledge which is apparent in the work of Jean-François Lyotard (see Chapter 5). In this respect, as well as in the tradition of German Idealism as a whole, Fichte is a major thinker whose work still resonates with contemporary issues.

As we enter the nineteenth century we do so at a time of French and American revolutions and contestations over their sources and meaning, as exemplified in the writings of the conservative Edmund Burke (1729–97) and the more radical Thomas Paine (1737–1809). They developed ideas on the self into arguments about the roles of government. As we see in Box 1.4, such was the significance of these debates that they continue to influence the organisation of societies today.



## ■ Box 1.4

### Finding the self in society

From his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke charts a different path from the Cartesian dualists and the principles of rationalism and humanism by locating the source of knowledge in the body and the emotions and passions. This privileging of the 'sense-experience over the intellect' (Jeter 2014) results in a three-step process in acquiring knowledge: the pleasures of the senses; the pleasures of the imagination; and the conclusions of the reasoning faculty. It is this emphasis on emotions and experience that he takes into his propositions for the roles of state and community in the organisation of social life. Burke is perhaps best known for the following statement: 'to be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love of our country and to mankind' (Eberly and Streeter 2002: viii). In this he was referring both to the importance of ties between members in social subdivisions and to the desire of people to seek security in the traditions of authority and morality. It is for these reasons that Burke is sometimes seen as the father of modern conservatism. He was actually rallying against the French Revolution and in favour of a strong role for the aristocracy in ordering society.

More recently, his ideas have been taken as the foundation of the UK Conservative Party's concept of the 'Big Society' in which state functions are delivered by community and third-sector organisations. Jesse Norman, a British Conservative MP, has argued that Burke's ideas underpin the concept of the Big Society, as opposed to Big Government, which is pro-social, anti-statist and conservative. Combining both the rhetoric of community engagement and top-down paternalism (B. Taylor 2013), the Big Society is seen to draw on many other influences – including the radical social action in 1930s Chicago of Saul Alinsky, the cooperative movement which started in Rochdale in 1844 and Robert Putnam's theory of social capital (House of Commons 2011). That one concept can be claimed by such different traditions illustrates the power of rhetoric, language and politics in linking rival ideas of the self to ideas of society, a theme we continue in Chapter 2.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was one thinker who built on the legacies of Kant and Fichte in terms of thinking about the limitations to knowing ourselves and the worlds we inhabit. In so doing he transposed 'the epistemological limitation into ontological fact: the void of our knowledge corresponds to a void in being itself, to the ontological incompleteness of reality' (Žižek 2012: 149). Hegel invoked relations between reason and history, but without turning us into atomised and isolated subjects whose ethical acts and basis of knowledge rest upon the exercise of practical reason. Human 'being' must be defined, not as something external to people but through the internal relation within and between people. For Hegel, reality is linked to the process of our becoming as rooted in history; reason could become manifest in history which unfolds in dialectic from thesis

and antithesis to synthesis. Hegel examined the unfolding of societies over time according to a Spirit: 'This self-contained existence of Spirit is none other than self-consciousness – consciousness of one's own being. Two things must be distinguished in consciousness; first, the fact *that I know*; secondly, *what I know*. In *self* consciousness these are merged in one; for Spirit *knows itself*. It involves an appreciation of its own nature, as also an energy enabling it to realize itself; to make itself *actually* that which it is *potentially*. According to this abstract definition it may be said of Universal History, that it is the exhibition of Spirit in the process of working out the knowledge of that which it is potentially. And as the germ bears in itself the whole nature of the tree, and the taste and form of its fruits, so do the first traces of Spirit virtually contain the whole of that History' (1991: 17–18; original emphasis).

Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) was a study of how minds appear to themselves. Kant had argued that reality could never be known as it was, but only comprehended through the a priori categories of thought. These, to recap, are not part of reality, but the means through which it is grasped – the instruments we deploy to understand reality, rather than reality itself. The separation between our being and knowledge of reality forms the basis of Hegel's critique of Kant's epistemology: 'The empirical principle that Kant retained by making reason dependent on "given" objects of experiences is here completely rejected. In Kant, Hegel declares, reason is limited to an inner realm of the mind and is made powerless over "things-in-themselves"' (Marcuse 1969: 48).

For Hegel the starting point for knowing reality is consciousness of that reality. Through examination we can discover the limitations of consciousness; this enables the development of more sophisticated forms of consciousness and so on ... until 'absolute knowledge' is reached. Hence, there is no need for a Kantian 'appearance of reality' as knowledge can be gained of reality itself. Hegel regards knowledge as historically constituted, linking 'being' with history: 'History is the substance of society, since the substance of society is nothing more than continuity. Humanity's being therefore lies in its historicity' (Heller 1984: 28). The 'ideal' is then to realise our potential in reality. We are learning subjects whose knowledge of who we are and what we know is a dialectical process of reflection rooted in history. Hegel acknowledged Kant's achievements and built upon these through 'true forms of thought' expressed in a unity of opposites through the triad of 'subject, object, and their synthesis' (Marcuse 1969: 49).

In contrast to liberal individualists, such as Rousseau, Hegel saw that freedom needs to be acquired and won, through the discipline of knowledge, willpower and the development of self-consciousness. People are socially constituted and so there must be a relation between our internal consciousness and the external sphere of the societies we inhabit: a social means through which we are recognised as 'free agents'. The means is 'possession' and its social manifestation is 'property' (see Ryan 1986). To return to an earlier discussion, there must be some regulatory relation between the seeking of individual ends and the wider society in order that it is both maintained and reasonably stable. It is at this point we find Hegel's critique of atomism, including social contract theory and his reading of British political economy.

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Hegel finds his answers in writings on the State and ethical forms of life in ties of association that provide for both unity and the promotion of individuality. The State is a fusion between self-consciousness and its objective manifestation in social, political and economic relations. The rights of the individual and universal reason can thereby be united and the social problems created by competitive societies tempered. What Hegel termed 'civil society' may be moderated by this higher unity, without which there would be an 'alienation of the spirit'. By this, Hegel meant the duality within people to regard their freedom as freedom from the constraints of the material world and to strive to be purely spiritual, whilst at the same time recognising that they are part of that world and thus cannot escape nor transcend it. This suggests that reflexivity is a task that needs to take account of the facticity of existence.

There can be no doubt that Hegel's work has continued importance for our understanding. In his theory of recognition (see Chapter 4), Axel Honneth has taken the insights of authors, including the young Hegel, to make the point that they 'wanted to imagine a future of modern society in such a way that it brought forth a new, open value-system, within the horizon of which subjects learn to esteem each other mutually with regard to their freely-chosen life-goals' (Honneth 1996: 178). Yet Hegel, as with us all, is a product of his time. We can see this in, for example, his writings on the State, where he cannot conceive of the formation of political will as anything other than residing in a monarch, or his misogynistic constructions of 'cunning' as a female characteristic.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), who set the stage for existentialism, felt that allusions to spirit undermined the importance of subjectivity, individual choice, the truth and the role of the particular over the general. He was not, however, the only critic of Hegel. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) was a 'Young Hegelian' who examined the ideas and role of 'religion' and 'God' in Hegel's writings, but in so doing adopted a position opposed to it. Broadly speaking, he argued that God was a creation of human beings and not the other way round, arguing for an anthropological rather than philosophical basis for knowledge: 'Everlasting happiness will begin with the transformation of the kingdom of heaven into a republic of earth' (Marcuse 1969: 267). The figure that stood between Feuerbach's writings and these reflections of Herbert Marcuse was another young Hegelian: Karl Marx.

## Making societies

The Industrial Revolution in Britain took place in the late eighteenth century, alongside the French Revolution. This was a time of extraordinary growth in wealth, in which attempts to organise labour were met with the deployment of armed forces in France and Britain to quash uprisings – all of which contributed to the making of the English working class (Hobsbawm 1962; E.P. Thompson 1968). By the revolution of 1848 famines, uprisings and numerous conflicts had taken place. Alternative advocates to this forward march of capital, namely the followers of Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825) in France and Robert Owen in Wales (1771–1858), had dissipated. Saint-Simon, with his notion of a

science of society expressed in terms of ‘social physiology’, regarded a moral vacuum as underlying social disorganisation. His influence was to continue in the work of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and, later, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). The followers of Robert Owen turned their ‘intellectual energies to spiritualism and secularism, their practical energies to the modest field of cooperative stores’ (Hobsbawm 1975: 158).

In the face of these circumstances, Karl Marx and his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels took forward their writings under the influence of German philosophy, French political thought and British political economy. Marx engaged with epistemological and ontological debates and linked the search for certainty to the material conditions under and through which we live. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx praised Feuerbach as the only person who had taken a critical attitude to Hegelian dialectics. He regarded Feuerbach’s achievements as demonstrating that philosophy was nothing but religion expressed in thought. He sought to establish a real science through making the relations between people the principle of his theory and demonstrating that the transcendental is nothing more than that which affirms theology. In the process he regarded Hegel’s idea that speculative thought would end in absolute knowledge as ‘nothing but the estranged mind of the world thinking within its self-estrangement – i.e. comprehending itself abstractly’ (Marx 1981: 129).

Whilst Hegel argued that social relations were dependent upon the ‘Idea of the State’ manifested in reason, Marx argued that consciousness did not create institutions but the material conditions under which people actually lived: ‘To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea”, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea”. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought’ (Marx 1983: 29). For Marx, it is not spiritual attitudes that shape us and society, but the wealth people have, their labour and the ruling interests in particular epochs. Our reflexive difficulties are not given by the ways we relate to ourselves, but to the world as a whole, structured as it is by the concentration of power in the hands of relatively few: ‘In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness’ (Marx 1980: 181).

Marx embarked upon an empirical examination of capitalism and a critique of the narrowness of the economic ideas that seek to provide for its legitimacy. Economic exchange is not some ‘accidental fact’: ‘The only wheels which political economy sets in motion are greed and the war amongst the greedy – competition’ (Marx 1981: 62). Labour and the need to sell labour to capital, for the extraction of surplus value, oil the capitalist machine for the benefit of the few, not the many. Although Hegel was correct to connect ‘being’ to

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social relations and restore history and meaning to the human realm, he was wrong to view this in terms of something called 'will'. For Marx, the implications of this position were clear: 'What is society, whatever its form may be? The product of men's reciprocal action. Are men free to choose this or that form of society? By no means. Assume a particular state of development in the productive faculties of man and you will get a particular form of commerce and consumption. Assume particular stages of development in production, commerce and consumption and you will have a corresponding social constitution' (Marx to Annenkov in Marx and Engels 1953: 40).

Marx moves us from relations of personal dependence in earlier societies to those founded on material dependence and from there to relations of trade, luxury, money and exchange values: 'Exchange, negotiated through exchange value and money, implies a universal independence between the producers, but at the same time the complete isolation of their private interests and a division of labour, whose unity and mutual fulfillment exists as an external, natural relationship, independent of the individuals. The tension between universal supply and demand constitutes the social network that binds the indifferent individuals together' (Marx 1979: 78–9).

Many insightful volumes have been written on the legacies and importance of Marx and Engels for contemporary times (see, for example, Derrida 1994; Gibson-Graham 1996; Žižek 2009; Holloway 2010; Harvey 2014). It is not difficult to find examples in popular media which support the view of Marx as the thinker we should turn to in order to understand the dynamics of capitalism and its effects upon our lives in the twenty-first century. As Mills noted, 'the "social science" in the name of which Marxism is ignored or rejected is, more often than not, a social science having little or no concern with the pivotal events and the historic acceleration characteristic of our immediate times' (1963: 12).

Different traditions of Marxist thought have developed which have implications for our study of reflexivity, given by the dynamic interplay between subject and object. At times his followers have led us to ask, 'if the moral impoverishment of advanced capitalism is what so many Marxists agree that it is, whence are these resources for the future to be derived?' (MacIntyre 1985: 262). This leads to a whole difference in traditions between the more positivist Marx – with the law-like unfolding of history to an end state of communism – and the Marx of *praxis* – whereby the fusion of practice, experience and theory leads to greater self-consciousness, and with that the overthrow of a repressive regime that disadvantages the many and benefits the few. These ideas have been mobilised in support of multiple causes, not least feminism, as writers have sought to make sense of how capitalism produces and reproduces systemic marginalisations and exclusions. We will return to these issues when we discuss social scientific knowledge and action in Chapters 3 and 5.

## SUMMARY: REFLEXIVITY ROOTED

We have been through a fast-paced journey to explore the roots of reflexivity. We have examined the history of ideas and their relation to reflexivity in terms of the exercise of reason,

the senses, social institutions, customs, and the forces and relations of capitalist production. Writings have oriented around different poles of thought. Ontological concerns about the nature of things are reflected in the different traditions of idealism and materialism; epistemological reflections on the basis for knowledge are addressed through rationalism, empiricism and scepticism. For some, self-consciousness and reason place us at the centre of the world, providing for a duality between the mind and the world or between the subjective and objective. For others, we can see the importance of context, social relations and material conditions in shaping what we are and the basis of knowledge claims.

Each emerging discipline over the course of this history seeks its monopoly on the questions of what and how we know and with what consequences. Yet whilst the search for certainty underpins this journey, the extent to which thinkers and writers are bound up in their own contexts and circumstances is clear. They were influenced in different ways by civil unrest, war, theology and the scientific revolution, and the Age of Enlightenment. A central theme is that of individualism and individuality as thinkers sought to make sense of who we are and why we act. Are we governed by our passions or our reason, our emotions or our intellect? As this period gave way to the Romantic era, these questions took centre stage with a backlash against scientific rationality and an increasing focus on the 'Will' in accounting for human action as a reaction against reason and certainty.

