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THE  
European Philosophers  
FROM DESCARTES  
TO NIETZSCHE

Edited, with an Introduction, by

MONROE C. BEARDSLEY



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**The European Philosophers**  
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## PREFACE

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I have aimed to exhibit the range of problems that occupied the attention of modern philosophers on the continent of Europe during nearly three centuries, and at the same time to represent the major philosophers fully enough to show their most significant ideas. Therefore I have resorted to a double device of choosing major works, or large selections from them, and adding to some of them other short passages to clarify and amplify important points. My hope has been that this book will be found capable of standing as a companion volume to the well-known collection edited by Professor Edwin A. Burt, *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*.

I should like to thank two of my colleagues at Swarthmore College: Professor Susan Cobbs, to whom I appealed for help with the classical quotations, and Professor Jerome Shaffer, who gave me generous time and excellent advice about my selections from four of the philosophers.

*Swarthmore, Pa.*  
*November, 1959*

M. C. BEARDSLEY

# Introduction

by MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

A MASTER of ceremonies assigned to introduce the twelve philosophers represented in this book will do well to keep his voice low and his speeches short. For they are eminently capable of speaking for themselves. Indeed, there is some danger of obscuring the variety and individuality of their thought by too facile a summary or survey. Between the earliest and the latest of the works included here, we have two hundred and fifty years of vigorous and adventurous philosophizing. And what a range of styles and outlooks! When we set Spinoza beside Nietzsche, for example, or Leibniz beside Mach, or Pascal beside Kant, we get some notion of how far apart on basic philosophical questions—on the nature of man, his place in the scheme of things, the sort of life he ought to lead—different thinkers can be.

And that is perhaps the first thing to be noticed and borne in mind: that each of these philosophers is thinking for himself, and trying to make his own way toward the truth. They start with very different equipment, and from different launching platforms of experience. And so, since truth (though one) is many-sided, they have grasped different aspects and different measures of it. No doubt, too, all of them have accepted some false propositions, which—not without reason—they took to be true; for philosophic truth is sometimes hard as well as complicated. Each of these philosophers is, in certain ways, unique. To read him well, to get what he has to give, we must enter inside his system, learn his technical language, follow with attention the peculiar pattern in which his argument develops. Rousseau does not think like Fichte, nor Descartes like Schopenhauer, yet each *is* thinking, and the record of his thought—its successes and failures—is here for us to learn from.

Nevertheless, individuality and difference are not the whole story of modern European philosophy. For on a closer look, we find connections and interrelations among these philosophers that give them much more the appearance of taking part in a common enterprise, even when they are reacting against each other. We recall, for example, with what uncontainable excitement Kant read Rousseau's *Émile* when it was first published, and how strongly Rousseau influenced his ethical theory; and the deep mark left by Schopenhauer's philosophy

on Nietzsche's, though his ethical theory was passionately repudiated by the latter. We must be careful not to read back into the past all the connections that we can now see from our later vantage point; for example, though Leibniz's metaphysics was a dominant influence in the eighteenth century, some of his most important ideas were hidden away in papers and not published until late in the nineteenth century; and again, Spinoza was not much more than a symbol of a heretical pantheism, abhorred but unread until rediscovered by the German romantics. Yet we can point out affinities among even apparently disparate thinkers, as when we see how much of Leibniz's analytical method is still preserved in Mach, of Pascal's mistrust of reason in Nietzsche, of Spinoza's concern with freedom in Fichte.

In this Introduction, then, we shall look for a moment at the period—if it may be called a period—as a whole. It would be hazardous, of course, to attempt to date the beginning of modern Western philosophy from the publication of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637), though probably this book has a better claim than any other, even that of its chief rival, Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620). And it would be hopeless to plead for a date to mark the end of this philosophical epoch, at, say, Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) or the death of Mach (1916). We are too sharply aware, when we read Nietzsche and Mach, of the extent to which many of the concerns, and many of the programs, of philosophers today derive directly from their thought. Yet, if the modern period can be only vaguely or arbitrarily bounded, it can at least be studied, and we can ask whether any dominant themes, overall patterns of movement, or notable achievements can be found within it. This question is one that is best asked by the reader after he has read, or read around in, these works. The present Introduction is not a retrospective review; it is only a preparation of the stage.

One parenthetical note is best inserted here. Though I refer primarily to the philosophers on the continent of Europe, it will not always be possible, or necessary, to keep them sharply segregated from the philosophers who were working at the same time in Great Britain. Some broad and pervasive differences between the Continental European and the British philosophers have often been noted and described—differences in the problems that struck them as most in need of study, or most interesting to tackle, and differences in style of philosophizing. But the period we are dealing with was, throughout most of its duration, a period of true internationality so far as the republic of letters was concerned. There were national predilections,

but there was no intellectual isolationism. Hobbes and Hume lived for a time in France, Leibniz and Rousseau visited England, but this moving about was not the main source of mutual stimulation. The period was one of extensive correspondence and exchange of books, so that even comparative stay-at-homes such as Spinoza, Locke, and Kant, were fully in touch with their leading contemporaries. Therefore much of what can be said about the Continental European philosophers can also be said about the British, though perhaps with qualifications. This applies particularly to what is said below.

When we consider European philosophy in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, we have a choice among three very different approaches.

The first might be called the *expressionistic*, or symptomatic, *approach*. Its essence is to consider philosophies, like other forms of cultural behavior, as manifestations of the minds or the societies that gave them birth. Many philosophers have been interesting in themselves simply as personalities or psychological cases, for example Pascal, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. We may treat their philosophies, like their dreams, as indications of mental peculiarities or unconscious wishes. On a larger scale, if we take the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment, or the Romantic Period (appropriately capitalized) as organic entities of some sort, then we may try the "physiognomic" method of Spengler and Egon Friedell, and read the spirit of the age from its philosophical products, with the help of cross references to its wars, its mathematics, its sculpture, its music, its laws, its technology, and so on.

For those who conceive of works of art primarily as vehicles of self-expression, this approach to philosophies turns them into objects of aesthetic contemplation—a form of poetry, though perhaps bad poetry, as Santayana suggested. Then a book like the present one becomes a guided tour (pleasant if the guide is not too chatty) through a gallery of self-portraits in prose—some of which are more beautiful than others, of course, but all of which are revelations of the thinkers or the age that produced them. As the visitors pass along, from Descartes to Nietzsche, we hear appropriate comments: "How insecure Spinoza must have been, to construct a metaphysics in which nothing is left to chance! How completely the seventeenth century's pride in its intellect, and absolute worship of rationality, is expressed in the dry propositions of Leibniz's *Monadology*! How much of the spirit of Beethoven's *Eroica* can also be found in the philosophy of



Fichte—in the self-positing of the Ego, and his calling of the German people to a new destiny!”

This aesthetic reaction to philosophical works cannot, of course, be prohibited. It remains open to any reader who is inclined that way. But in my opinion it is a questionable reaction, and if it is the only or even the chief reaction it is absurdly inappropriate. It is questionable because such psychoanalytic “interpretations” and insights into the *Zeitgeist* are very difficult to verify, and are therefore very likely to rest on loose and rather subjective associations. It is inappropriate because a philosophical work is a venture in knowledge, and therefore claims to deserve predicates that go beyond the aesthetic predicates “beautiful” and “expressive”—namely, the predicates “true” and “false.” If it does not succeed in deserving either of these predicates—if, somehow, it turns out not to be making a genuine and arguable assertion about reality—then at least it deserves an explanation of why it fails. There is nothing wrong, of course, in our responding to the eloquence of some passages (such as the Appendix to Book I) of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, or to the architectural order of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, or to the sharp and telling irony of Nietzsche’s apothegms. But the *Ethics*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and *Beyond Good and Evil* are not poems; they are statements about man and the world, and to ignore their cognitive, or truth-claiming, aspect is to lose a rare opportunity to increase the range and depth of our own philosophical knowledge.

The second approach to modern philosophy sometimes encompasses the first, but goes beyond it, and is finally different. It is the *historical approach*. If we consider philosophies as events in the history of man, then they will have connections with other events. They will have causes and effects which the historian can set himself to track down.

Now this second approach has two main subdivisions, which might be called *external* and *internal*. Something can be said in favor of both of them.

By the *external historical* approach, I mean the search for causal connections between philosophical ideas and other elements found in their cultural contexts. Perhaps a psychologist could show that Rousseau’s concept of the General Will, or Nietzsche’s concept of the Superman, or even Leibniz’s concept of the “windowless” monad, were derived from unconscious leanings or yearnings. But a cultural historian might consider that a trivial truth, for suppose he could give his own evidence that these concepts were inevitable consequences of

other developments—social, scientific, religious, economic—occurring at the same time, so that if these philosophers had not thought of them someone else would have. Given the social conditions attending the decline of the French monarchy, perhaps someone would have had to consider the possibility that a community is more than an aggregate of individuals and has a psychological being of its own on which a theory of rights can be based. Given Victorian economic conditions and the Darwinian theory of evolution, perhaps someone would have had to draw the moral that man's future lies in a further development of those competitive qualities thought to be decisive in his past evolution. Once the infinitesimal calculus had been invented, perhaps someone would have had to inquire whether the problem of the relation between mind and body, as Descartes left it, couldn't be solved by conceiving of all reality as a continuum of extensionless spirit-points.

So the cultural historian might claim. And speculative as these hypotheses may be, they suggest some fruitful lines of inquiry. Here historians will differ according to the factors they consider most effective.

For example, a good case can be made for interpreting the major trends in modern philosophy as responses to developments in *physical science*. Descartes' dualism of primary and secondary qualities is anticipated in Galileo, and his whole task might be understood as one of working out a metaphysical system that would take account of seventeenth century physics—not primarily its results, which were still far from being completely seen when he was writing, but its new concepts, its method of scientific inquiry, its new combination of mathematics and experiment. And Kant, the other great revolutionary figure in this group, certainly considered it to be a major part of his task to answer the question, "How is a science of nature possible?" Indeed it was this question that gave rise to perhaps the most original and influential part of his thought. Leibniz was concerned with a metaphysics of physics, just as Mach was two centuries later. There is no major philosopher, not even Pascal and Nietzsche, whose thinking did not in some degree confront the fact of the rise of modern science, surely one of the most portentous facts in the modern world.

In these systems we also see a widespread concern with the demands of *religion*, especially in relation to science. Descartes and Pascal, contemporaneously, mark out almost the extreme bounds of response, at least in some respects. Yet each, in his own special way, was trying to make the knowledge of God's existence the absolutely independent groundwork of the whole of man's knowledge and life.

In this they were as “God-intoxicated” as Spinoza. So, too, Hegel, and Comte, and Nietzsche, again in very different ways, were preoccupied with religion and were dedicated to the purification of religious truths. Leibniz’s major work was a theodicy. One of the high points of Rousseau’s *Emile* was the “Confession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar,” which caused such a scandal at the time. And the basic division in Kant’s philosophy, between the Practical and the Theoretical (or Speculative) Reason, is over the three problems of God, Freedom, and Immortality.

Many of the philosophical ideas in this volume were in part responses to the great *social and political issues* of their day. This becomes more often evident as the period moves on. Leibniz was much interested in problems of statecraft and diplomacy, but we do not feel that his conclusions are part and parcel of his philosophy. With Spinoza the connection is closer, but still not inevitable, for a liberal political view very similar to that in his two political treatises would be equally consistent with a very different metaphysics. Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is, of course, a direct grappling with great social problems; and we see similar responses in Kant and Fichte to the period of the Revolution, in Hegel and Comte to the post-revolutionary period of reorganization in Europe, and in Nietzsche to the basic trends during the latter part of the century: empire, widening suffrage, the rise of labor, militarism and nationalism.

Or we could look for the effects, as well as the causes, of philosophical ideas—though here the search might be even more difficult. It takes little effort to observe Rousseau’s powerful effect on the French Revolution, or Fichte’s on the unification of Germany after the Napoleonic wars. Other connections, equally apparent at a hasty glance, may be much more doubtful. At least they are not to be accepted before a skeptical examination. For example, there is Nietzsche and the rise of Nazism. Certainly there is a similarity between some of Nietzsche’s ideas and some of Hitler’s, and the apologists of National Socialism were happy to quote Nietzsche on their own behalf. But it is not easy to discover to just what extent there was genuine influence, or what features, if any, of Hitler’s fantastic Third Reich would have been different if it had not been for Nietzsche. Again, it is fashionable to attribute various unfortunate tendencies in our own time to the rise of positivism in the nineteenth century—to Comte and Mach. But it takes a good deal more evidence to justify this accusation than to make it fashionable.

The deeper and more lasting philosophical influences are quite likely to be underground and hard to trace. Some of the conceptual forces set in motion by Descartes bore fruit right away, some of them not until the French Revolution, and then only by way of other minds, such as Voltaire's and the Encyclopedists'. Hegel's thinking about Absolute Spirit, history, the state, the law, and the family had a long-range impact, and still does, but much of it through the theorems and corollaries drawn by his followers and interpreters and applied by them to later conditions. Witness, for example, the transmigration of Hegelian dialectic through Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

There is, of course, a great deal more to be said about the interactions between philosophy and other areas of culture. I have pointed out but a few of the directions in which to look. This sort of inquiry is important, but like the first approach, it sometimes leads to the view that we can look at these philosophers only as units in a causal process. Just as a historian of the fine arts can, if he tries, write a whole history of the development of Mannerist and Baroque painting, considering influences and derivations, techniques and styles, without ever once saying whether any of the paintings is good or bad, so the external historian of philosophical ideas might run through the history of modern philosophy without ever using the words "true" and "false." And to forget that Descartes' *Meditations*, Hegel's *Logic*, and Comte's *System of Positive Polity* are addressed to our rational belief is to miss what is distinctively philosophical about them.

The *internal historical* approach takes us closer to the heart of the matter. Though from the cultural historian's point of view it represents a considerable abstraction, it covers a good deal of important ground. Here our interest is still historical, but we are concerned with the development of philosophy in itself; we aim to grasp the challenge and response of one philosophy to another. Just as an expert chess player, coming upon a chess match broken off in the middle, can hardly help thinking what the next move might be, so philosophers have often found their first problems and their first intellectual tools in the legacies of their predecessors. Not that philosophical thinking is exactly like playing chess, or that the history of philosophy should be regarded as an endless game. But there is an analogy. The philosopher comes upon the scene at a certain point, as others have left it, and he takes up his problems, his philosophical tasks, in the form in which he finds them. Even so original a mind as Kant's later proved to be began with the situation as it existed: with the threat that

Hume's kind of skepticism seemed to raise, not only against the rationalistic Leibnizian metaphysics Kant studied as a youth, but against the very basis of human knowledge.

The philosophers represented here provide excellent material for study of this inner causation of philosophical ideas. For we have two great phases or epochs of philosophical history, marked by the two peaks, Descartes and Kant. These two philosophers, surely among the very greatest of all time, are strikingly similar, not in their ideas but in their roles in the history of modern philosophy. Each became convinced that philosophical development had reached an impasse in his time, from which only a radical stroke would break it loose; each was determined to effect a revolution; each undertook a thorough re-examination of the foundations of knowledge; each tried to carry out his principles into a ramified system that would serve as a suitable basis for future philosophical work. And most of all, each produced a system that was at once vitally original, brilliantly reasoned out, full of fruitful new ideas, and inherently unstable. A combination like this is irresistible in philosophy: no philosopher after Descartes could fail to reckon with him in some degree (even Pascal, who recoiled from his whole mode of philosophizing); and few of the great minds could wholly keep from being drawn into the work of trying to repair the deep gaps and apparent inconsistencies in the system he left.

The great philosophers make part of their contribution in the form of distinctions which they are the first to devise or to clarify. In Descartes' case it was that between the mental and the physical realms. When such a distinction proves its great value by doing away with some unnecessary problems and helping to solve others, it may acquire a different status and become a dualism, as this distinction did in the metaphysics of Descartes. And then it may generate new problems of its own. The distinction may be one that is not easy to dispense with, and yet is seemingly impossible to resolve because the parts once put asunder resist reassembling. So Descartes, having divided mind from body, as two essentially distinct substances, left the mind-body problem, which is just the problem of explaining—as he never succeeded in doing despite a somewhat half-hearted attempt at a theory of interaction—how they can intelligibly be related. The logical possibilities are not numerous and they all had to be investigated. The materialistic hypothesis, reducing minds to material objects, was tried by Hobbes and Gassendi; the idealistic one, going the other way, was tried by Leibniz and Berkeley. Malebranche proposed a more sophisticated solution, called Occasionalism, according

to which God constantly regulates the two substances in such a way that whenever a change originates in one, the appropriate "effect"—which is therefore not really an effect at all—occurs in the other. Spinoza's proposal was perhaps the most sophisticated of all: that mental and physical events are really identical but are conceived under different aspects. The development of phenomenalism, in Hartley and Hume, and further reflections by Kant and Mach, later made possible a still different theory: that each sense-datum or element of experience can be part of either a mind or a body, depending on the way it is related to others.

The philosophy that followed Descartes, then, was in no trivial or tautological sense post-Cartesian, at least so far as its metaphysics and epistemology were concerned. To decide how far other branches of philosophy—aesthetics, political philosophy, ethics, philosophy of history, for example—were shaped by the Cartesian principles and concepts would be a lengthy task. There is no doubt, for instance, that Descartes' distinction between clear and obscure, and between distinct and confused, ideas, given redefinition by Leibniz, played an important part in eighteenth century theories of sensuous beauty and poetry, as can be seen in Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry* (1735). And his theory of innate ideas helped to bolster the doctrine of natural rights that was so fundamental in seventeenth and eighteenth century political theory up to Bentham. These are just two samples out of a large field.

Kant, too, was deeply convinced of the coherence and completeness of his system, and he never doubted—as his *Opus Postumum* shows—that the cracks that were beginning to appear could be mended. Still, his ultimate distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal world, between the world of appearance and the Thing in Itself, was an endless puzzle and a nagging thorn to his successors. The relation between the theoretical and the practical reason, between the categories of the one and the postulates of the other, Kant left in delicate balance, but the questions that were soon to arise led to painful decisions. Whenever one took from Kant something as sound and established, it seemed that something else equally dear to him would have to be given up if consistency were to be preserved. And thus we have a number of roads leading out from the Kantian fountain, many of them well-travelled, all worthy of exploration, and some of them still with many miles lying ahead of us. One could take seriously Kant's words about the meaninglessness of cosmological speculation, abandon the noumenal world as nonsense, and adopt a revived but

more critical Humeanism; this was the road taken by Ernst Mach, which led to the logical empiricism, or logical positivism, of the twentieth century. If the Thing in Itself seemed indispensable, there were various possibilities. Perhaps there was another way—an immediate, intuitive form of knowledge—by which it could be known; this was the way of Schopenhauer, who transformed the Thing in Itself into the Will to Life. Perhaps the two worlds could be gotten together by following Kant's own clue of the "primacy of the practical reason"—making the world of appearance itself a product of the self's will to selfhood; that, or something like it, was what Fichte had in mind. Or perhaps within the structure of an all-embracing Absolute Spirit, unfolding itself in history and in thought, the two realms might once more be brought into reconciliation; that was Hegel's idea. Each of these roads, in turn, was later to develop its own forks and side-branches. But nearly all of the most fruitful and vigorous philosophies of our own time—logical empiricism, analytical philosophy, the process-philosophies of Bergson and Whitehead, monistic and pluralistic idealisms, instrumentalism or pragmatic contextualism—owe a great deal, directly or indirectly, to the philosophy of Kant. Nor is this only in respect to their epistemological theses. It would indeed take a considerable essay even to summarize the long-range effects of Kant's reflections about religious belief, aesthetic value, and moral obligation.

I have not lost count of the third approach that I promised above. One further reflection on the *internal historical* approach will provide a transition to it. When we look at the history of philosophy as a continuing interplay of ideas that are directed to the solution of specifically philosophical problems, we see crises and climaxes, periods of bold assertion and of mopping up. We see new starts and the rebirth of old ideas in new forms. But that is not all we see. For, at least in the history of Western philosophy from the Greeks to the present, we also see progress.

Some philosophers believe it is a mistake, or at least very odd, to speak of philosophic progress, especially since problems (such as those that concerned the thirteenth-century theologians) may seem to be as often bypassed as solved by later philosophers. There is a complicated historical issue here, which we shall not take time to discuss: what actually happens when problems die without being disposed of. But the view I have in mind at the moment is that the history of philosophy is like the history of art, or more like it than it is like the history of science. One scientific discovery builds upon

another, and later scientific theories are better, come nearer to truth, or are more probable, than earlier ones. But modern poetry or painting or music is not necessarily better than the earlier—it is just different. Perhaps it is good, perhaps bad, in its own way, but it does not necessarily reflect progress.

How progress should be understood in the arts is an interesting question. In one sense it surely takes place, as it takes place in geographical (or interplanetary) exploration. The areas the explorer discovers and maps for the first time may be no better than those already known, but his discoveries enlarge the boundaries of our experience and thus increase our knowledge or our opportunities for knowledge. So too the painter, composer, or poet opens up new modes of experience, calls our attention to new forms and new qualities. He is an explorer of aesthetic values, of which there may be worlds yet unknown, and he makes his contribution to civilization when he creates new objects that are of aesthetic worth, whether or not they are greater than others that have already been made. Indeed, he may open up territories that later artists will mine with brilliant, unforeseeable success.

So it seems to me that the philosopher explores possible lines of thought, which must be explored even if sometimes only to show (whether the philosopher knows it or not) that they are dead ends. That will not in itself make him a great philosopher, though if he carries out his work with care and persistence, with rigor and with imagination, he will be of great service. If even with all his effort and skill he fails to solve his problems—say the mind-body problem, or the problem of free will, or the problem of justifying induction—we can be pretty sure that the method he tried is not the right one. If along the way he forges some new and significant concepts, distinctions, terms, methodological principles, then he will be making a lasting contribution, just as timelessly valid—so long as there are philosophers at work—as any knowledge. And finally, of course, he may turn up and establish with reasonable arguments some important truths that his successors can use, even though they cannot help rejecting some of his other propositions.

The modern period, from Descartes to Nietzsche, illustrates this generalization very fully. And the period itself is one of permanent achievement, in many respects, despite all the disagreements it exhibits. If the philosophers of ancient Greece showed the way to philosophy (in its Western form) by asking many of the right questions for the first time, it is the philosophers of the modern world



who have taught us to think hard about the methods that might yield satisfactory answers to those questions. Compared with Greek philosophy and medieval philosophy, modern philosophy is on the whole man-centered, self-conscious, and epistemological. The opening blasts of Descartes and Bacon made a deliberate break with the past, and called not first for more knowledge but for an examination of knowledge itself. And though our twelve philosophers were concerned, among them, with all the basic problems of metaphysics, and with theories of value as well as with epistemology, they tended, on the whole, to regard the epistemological problems as the most basic. Kant was the first philosopher who thought of making a whole philosophy out of a critique, but all of the greatest modern philosophers began with some sort of critique.

It is dangerous to generalize in such simple terms, of course, and indeed modern philosophy has too often been oversimplified. The most familiar pattern is that which divides the Continental rationalists from the British empiricists, and outlines the development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a conflict between the two schools, reconciled at last by Kant. These terms "rationalism" and "empiricism" are so widely used that they deserve a brief comment here, or at least a warning. For they are of variable meaning. If we wish to sort the British and Continental European philosophers into separate camps, we have to give these labels a very loose meaning. Thus we might say that the empiricists (the British) lay a greater stress on sense-experience in the acquisition of knowledge—or something equally rough. It is not very helpful to say this; it doesn't take us very far in understanding these philosophers. On the other hand, we can take the terms in a more recent sense, where they are fairly clear: the rationalist is one who believes in synthetic *a priori* knowledge, or in *a priori* concepts. In this definition we use terms that Kant was the first to introduce in just these meanings. So we do not find it easy to apply the definition to the pre-Kantian philosophers. But it may be clarifying to see where Spinoza and Locke, for example, stand in relation to the later distinction—to ask what they would say if forced to choose. Then our simple clash of schools will have to be abandoned, for some of the British philosophers (Locke and Berkeley, for example) will turn out to have rationalistic elements in their thinking.

But what is perhaps even more interesting is to notice how these basic distinctions were gradually forged in the thinking of these philosophers as they worked on each other's ideas. We see, for exam-