

Key Texts: Classical Anglophone Philosophy

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Philosophie · Band 33

Satz und Layout: Matthias Hoffmann

Umschlaggestaltung: Matthias Hoffmann unter Verwendung der Abbildung „Big Ben“
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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek: Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

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ISBN 978 3 8316 4431 5

Printed in EU

Herbert Utz Verlag GmbH, München

089–277791–00 · www.utzverlag.de

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Introduction to Key Texts: Classic Anglophone Philosophy

The texts of this collection were all written in the English language. Much more unites the authors of the texts, of course, but most importantly they all share that common language and the history associated with the island of Great Britain – whether they were subjects of its crown or not. That history is both distinctly European and distinct from the European continent even in the branches that developed apart from the British island, most notably in America. The 16th-century English Reformation and World War I bracket the time frame adopted for the present collection (with the qualification that Dewey’s selection reflects his earlier developments). This was a time when British political power extended around the globe – upon which the sun never set. The argument could be made that the ideas that emerged during this time had an even wider reach and impact.

What is distinct about the Anglophone philosophical tradition?

The English Reformation not only created a break with the religious and political claims of the European continent upon Great Britain, it reinforced a British identity and way of thinking that was consciously and confidently independent. King Henry VIII’s break with Rome was not primarily theological or even radical, but political and initially motivated by his desire to remarry without any intervention from the pope. With regard to the impact on philosophy, scholasticism was the most obvious and immediate casualty, and writers like Bacon and Hobbes take extra pains to point out the method’s flaws. Subsequent writers do not even consider it. Even the title “English Reformation” is an anachronism, as the period it represents began from political motives by a Catholic king fully invested in a monarchical and thus hierarchical system. Nevertheless, the Reformation had a secularizing and democratizing impact on society as experienced in religion, government, as well as the universities that prepared students for administering both church and state as those institutions became increas-

ingly distinct. Except for Berkeley, none of the authors included here had religious appointments. And while the monarchy maintained at least some role in the United Kingdom, Parliament and democratic impulses enjoyed ever-greater legitimacy in social and political arguments. Understanding contemporary secular democracy is impossible without understanding this tradition.

Anglophone philosophy possesses three distinctive elements with respect to 1. Society, 2. Violence, and 3. Reason.

1. Society: Edmund Burke most famously describes the British devotion to order preserved in customs, and this is a characteristic of all the authors included in this collection, even the later ones associated with pragmatism. Society is bound together by centuries of customs embodied in law and yet continuously pressured by the streams and variations of competing interests. Even King Henry VIII had worked together with Parliament to sustain centuries-old privileges as he innovatively reinterpreted them to establish his distance from Roman claims. Ideas of society as tradition-bound infuse and are reflected in the common law systems and sensibilities that inform all Anglophone philosophy.

This provides a tension for Locke looking to find stability during civil and political unrest, but Locke remains committed to understanding society from the perspective of a careful observer, and never steps into a role of social construction. Like Locke, the authors strive to find the deeper ties that bind society when the superficial or faulty connections are torn. The US writers find these connections in the natural rights when they can no longer reasonably consider themselves “Englishmen”.

Charles Taylor reminds us of the tameness of social contract theories such as Locke’s: “The grounding of political legitimacy in consent is not put forward in order to question the credentials of exiting governments. The aim of the exercise is rather to undercut the reasons for rebellion being all too irresponsibly urged by confessional zealots; the assumption being that existing legitimate regimes were ultimately founded on some consent of this kind.” (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2007: 159–160) What the new (post-Reformation) natural law arguments of Hobbes and Locke demonstrate is the central role of individuals as the reference point for social and political legitimation.

2. Violence: Violence is an element of the natural world that is controlled and even harnessed by a well-ordered society – and

thus violence itself is neither evil nor avoidable, any more than the oceans' tides. The role of the philosopher is to understand the tides of violence within, threatening, and sustaining social structures. On the individual level, humans fulfill social responsibilities and abide by laws because, among other reasons, non-conforming actors expose themselves to a threat of violence. On a social and inter-group level, outright war is merely a manifestation of existing violence – which otherwise exists in various forms of formal and informal agreements embodied in treaties, agreements, political relationships and class-status structures. The philosopher's awareness of violence is an aspect of a form of "materialism" that is relevant to even more metaphysical philosophical writings of Bacon and Berkeley. This materialism is quite distinct to the continental historical materialism found in Hegel and Marx. Anglophone materialism is recognizable in the clear-eyed nonsense practicalness of Hobbes as well as the rational skepticism of Hume. Smith seeks to train the force of violence in useful industry and Burke fears its release in systems underappreciating its potential terribleness. Wollstonecraft sees the impact of violence in systems that degrade women. And both white and black Americans seek systems of balancing access and thus threats of violence.

The postmoderns like Foucault who trained their eyes on unseen power embedded in structures of rationality had good teachers in Wollstonecraft, Douglass, and Du Bois – a woman and two black American men. All three acutely experienced the violence of the philosophical ideas that shaped and defended social and political systems that perpetuated inequalities among men and women, as well as slavery and degradation of persons with African ancestry. The works of Wollstonecraft, Douglass, and Du Bois are valuable in themselves, and they also offer evidence of contemporaneous Anglo-American critics fully conscious of the contradictions of political ideals of freedom and equality. The inclusion of these authors is intended to recognize and in some small way correct the violence that even a collection can perpetuate in the exclusion of historically marginalized voices.

3. Reason: The Anglophone tradition is somewhat materialistic and secular, and decidedly non-idealistic. It is rigorously based on empirically substantiated evidence. It is consequentialist in the sense that it is pragmatically ordered to demonstrable results. These authors were able to read Latin and to read, speak and write in French, with the exception of the post-revolution Americans. Nevertheless, all chose to not only write in English, but to be particularly vernacular about it. We have re-

vised the more archaic English somewhat, but hopefully not too much. These texts were written for wider audiences than the university, and they possess a flair of language and a fullness of ripe examples and analogies to convey deep ideas and plain good sense. Our aim in editing them was to make their pragmatic rationality as accessible to an audience reading these texts from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

The utilitarians Bentham and Mill bring the Anglophone tradition in a direction that continues the practical focus even while their rational grounds for such action border on the abstract, namely a notion of value based upon a rational calculus of pleasure. The abstraction together with the stoic acceptance of violence was used to allay temptations for British subjects to feel compassion for the vast misery of the people affected by British colonial policies. The Irish Famines of 1846–48 were interpreted as necessary reductions in population that would only get worse if charity were to prevent the “natural” expiration of surplus populations. Moore and Russell represent the tradition’s continuing “analytic” turn to mathematical precision applied more generally and even metaphysically. This expression of the tradition is not quite consistent with the practical hypothesis posed above, but that hypothesis is given support by the final three prag-

matist philosophers Peirce, James, and Dewey.

This selection of texts from a single tradition should also reveal the application of reason to successively wider groups of people. The ideas may have emerged from a male aristocratic society, but successive philosophers found resources within the tradition to analyze the tradition. Locke, Burke, the US Founders, Wollstonecraft, Douglass, Lincoln, and Du Bois are fiercely critical of the irrational conclusions that their immediate generations had considered tolerable. This is not just a cause for historical wonder, but is rather as Anthony Appiah argues presently, a cause for us to question ourselves – what are our present biases that afflict us today and will be condemned by future generations? Perhaps indifference to refugees, human suffering due to non-democratic theocracies, economic inequality, climate changes, human cruelty to animals ... the list is long. So careful reading of these texts requires that we look upon writers from other “rational worlds” and in doing so, we allow these clever folks to also look back at our world with brilliant and challenging eyes.

A word on the texts themselves. We collected these classic texts from a great pool of potential texts to provide a kind of introduction into a tradition. We are fully aware of the ready availability of online re-

sources and we in no way hope to replace that. Rather, we offer these texts that already exist in the public domain as a useful introduction and as an entry to online resources. Further, because we have amended these texts to make them as readable as possible, we have rendered them unfit for citing in scientific or academic scholarship. We therefore advise the reader to see this collection as pointing the way to libraries and online resources where the full and intact sources are to be found. In fact, we recommend the following online websites as useful and trustworthy places:

Fordham University's "Internet History Sourcebooks Project" edited by Paul Halsall

<http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/index.asp>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<http://plato.stanford.edu>

We offer our thanks to the help of our colleagues at the Chair of Applied Ethics at The Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, Germany, especially Stephanie Clarke who revised the texts, making them more understandable to our readers.

September, 2016, Jena, Germany