

Phil 660A 2019
Seventeenth-Century Philosophy
Prof. Alison Laywine (a.laywine@mcgill.ca)
Thursdays 10:35-12:35
Leacock 927

Provisional Outline

This seminar will take up two (sets of) topics: one will be wide in scope; the other(s) narrow – such that the latter will be encompassed by the former.

The topic wide in scope will be nature. Our question will be how philosophers in the early modern period tried to distinguish the natural from the non-natural. To be more specific, it will be how they tried to distinguish whatever is universally constitutive of human nature from the conventional, cultural or artificial effects of human ingenuity. A cheap criterion for drawing the distinction – available to them and to anybody interested in the question – is just to look for invariance: if we find – either by argument or by observation or some combination of both – elements of human life that are common to all people and cultures, we may take them to indicate what is natural to human beings; the differences we find among people may then be taken to express differences of conventions, culture and personal idiosyncracies. The problem, of course, is how to specify the criterion to make it useful. What is the evidence that any seeming commonality is indeed what we take it to be, and why be confident that it will never change? (That is the challenge raised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his discourse on inequality among human beings, against Thomas Hobbes' description of the 'state of nature' in *Leviathan*.)

The topic narrow in scope could be manifold. I am proposing one such topic (I will explain briefly the reasons for my proposal in what follows). But participants in the seminar are invited to propose others (provided they are willing to take responsibility for the readings and leading discussion of them.)

The topic I propose is music. The question is to what extent early modern philosophers interested in it took music or any part of it to be any part of human nature. It may well seem obvious to us that music making as such is part of human nature, since all peoples known to us engage in it to some extent, but no given musical practice or idiom is more 'natural' than any other, since musical taste differs widely from culture to culture – indeed it differs widely even within any given culture. The historical and anthropological evidence in the early modern period seemed to pump in favour of the claim just stated. It came from contact with the Ottomans, the peoples encountered in the 'new world' and from contact with surviving and newly recovered scraps of notated music from ancient Greece. But even people sympathetic to the claim just stated – Rousseau, for example – were on the hook to say something about the relationship between cultural and personal differences in musical expression, on the one hand, and whatever it is in human beings that (naturally?) leads them to express themselves musically at all. Of course, some people in the early modern period believed that the different forms of musical expression on record had more in common than initially meets the ear and that this commonality might well be 'natural'.

I am proposing music as the topic 'narrow in scope' for two reasons. The first is that I believe it is intrinsically interesting. But the second is that it is an especially interesting test case, just because music-making always happens at the interface between human beings and physical nature, and the physical side of music-making can be understood with great precision. (Indeed, the early modern period marked significant advances in our understanding of this.) That fact suggested (to early modern, and ancient and medieval, philosophers) that human nature is somehow musically receptive to the physical world of which it is a part and that it would tell us something about ourselves (whatever culture we come from) if we could make sense of this feature of our 'nature'.

I have not yet worked out a complete reading list for the seminar. But our readings will certainly include selected works by Galileo and his father Vincenzo, Descartes, Marin Mersenne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, D'Alembert, Euler, Girolamo Mei (a contemporary of Galileo's father who excited interest in ancient Greek musical practices), and the relevant ancient sources. These readings were not all written in the seventeenth century. We will use the title of the seminar to establish a rough window in history, but we cannot be hostage to the title. That is why I have consistently spoken of 'early modern philosophers' throughout this document – rather than 'philosophers of the seventeenth-century'.

It is obvious that music is not the only narrow-scope topic we could discuss in this seminar. There are many others: language, poetry, politics, the institution of the family, religion would also be interesting. Participants in the

seminar interested in exploring these topics and sharing their thoughts about them with us are warmly invited to do so.