

# INTRODUCTION

SOMETHING REMARKABLE HAPPENED IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. IT TOOK PLACE BOTH ON A GRAND COSMIC SCALE AND IN THE MOST INTIMATE WAY. PHILOSOPHERS IN THE 1600S PURSUED A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNIVERSE AND A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT OURSELVES. OR PERHAPS IT IS MORE ACCURATE TO SAY THE PHILOSOPHERS PURSUED NEW *WAYS* OF THINKING ABOUT THESE THINGS, SINCE THEY WERE NOT ALL IN AGREEMENT ON HOW THE WORLD WORKS AND WHAT WE ARE. THEY WERE AT ODDS OVER WHAT BODIES ARE MADE OF AND WHAT MAKES THEM MOVE. THEY HELD DISPARATE VIEWS ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD. THEY ARGUED OVER WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS AND WHERE IT COMES FROM. MANY OF THE "NEW" THINKERS BELIEVED THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE METAPHYSICALLY AND MORALLY SPECIAL AND EXEMPT FROM THE LAWS THAT GOVERN THE REST OF NATURE - WE HAVE SOULS AND FREE WILL. OTHERS INSISTED THAT, ON THE CONTRARY, WE ARE NOT SOME KIND OF "KINGDOM" UNTO OURSELVES; OUR BODIES AND OUR MINDS ARE AS MUCH A PART OF NATURE AS ANYTHING ELSE. SOME EVEN WENT SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT WE ARE NOTHING BUT MATTER IN MOTION AND THUS NO MORE FREE FROM DETERMINING CAUSES THAN ARE ROCKS AND TREES.

DESPITE ALL THESE DIFFERENCES, THIS DIVERSE AND HIGHLY CONTENTIOUS GROUP OF PHILOSOPHERS SHARED SOME BASIC ASSUMPTIONS. THEY BELIEVED THAT THE OLDER, MEDIEVAL APPROACH TO MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD - WITH ITS SPIRITUAL FORMS AND OCCULT POWERS, ITS CONCERN TO DEFEND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND ITS OFTEN UNCRITICAL DEVOTION TO THE THEORIES OF ARISTOTLE OR PLATO - NO LONGER WORKED AND NEEDED TO BE REPLACED BY MORE USEFUL AND INTELLECTUALLY INDEPENDENT MODELS. THEY AGREED THAT NATURAL PHILOSOPHY - WHAT WE NOW CALL "SCIENCE" - SHOULD SEEK EXPLANATIONS OF THINGS GROUNDED IN THE FAMILIAR, NOT THE OBSCURE. ABOVE ALL, THEY INSISTED PHILOSOPHY SHOULD PROCEED NOT BY DEFERENCE TO WHAT ANCIENT AUTHORS HAD TO SAY OR WHAT

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES DEMANDED, BUT FROM THE CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS OF REASON AND THE EVIDENT TESTIMONY OF EXPERIENCE.

WHAT WAS THE MOST BRILLIANT CENTURY IN EUROPEAN HISTORY? COMPELLING ARGUMENTS COULD BE MADE ON BEHALF OF ATHENS IN THE FOURTH CENTURY BCE, WHERE SOCRATES, PLATO, AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES, AND ARISTOPHANES FLOURISHED UNDER PERICLEAN DEMOCRACY; THE TWELFTH CENTURY, WHICH SAW THE REDISCOVERY OF ARISTOTLE AND THE EMERGENCE OF UNIVERSITIES AND HIGH SCHOLASTIC THOUGHT; AND, OF COURSE, THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE. AND YET, FOR PHILOSOPHY, IT WOULD BE HARD TO ARGUE AGAINST THE CLAIM TO THAT TITLE MADE ON BEHALF OF A CENTURY POPULATED BY THE LIKES OF GALILEO, BACON, DESCARTES, HOBBS, BOYLE, SPINOZA, LOCKE, LEIBNIZ, AND NEWTON - A CENTURY THAT SAW THE RISE OF MODERN METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY, REVOLUTIONARY PROGRESS IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF NATURE, AND NEW MODELS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE STATE. WE MAY NO LONGER THINK IN PRECISELY THE SAME TERMS THAT GUIDED THESE EARLY MODERN THINKERS. BUT THE WAY IN WHICH WE LOOK AT THE WORLD AND AT OURSELVES HAS ITS ORIGINS IN THEIR HIGHLY CREATIVE ENDEAVORS, IN PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY THAT FLOURISHED DESPITE - OR, MORE LIKELY, BECAUSE OF - THEIR INTELLECTUAL DIFFERENCES AND PERSONAL DISPUTES AND THE TURBULENT POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS TIMES IN WHICH THEY LIVED.

WERE ALL OF THE PHILOSOPHERS IN THIS BOOK REALLY "HERETICS"? YES, IF THE TERM "HERESY" REFERS GENERALLY TO THE PROMOTION OF OPINIONS CONTRARY TO WHAT PASSES FOR CONVENTIONAL TRUTH, WHETHER IT BE IN SCIENCE, RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, ECONOMICS, ETC.. SEVERAL WERE, IN FACT, OFFICIALLY DECLARED AS HERETICS BY ONE RELIGIOUS BODY OR ANOTHER. BRUNO AND GALILEO, OF COURSE, WERE PUNISHED ON JUST THESE GROUNDS BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH; AND SPINOZA WAS EXCOMMUNICATED FOR HIS "ABOMINABLE HERESIES AND MONSTROUS DEEDS" FROM THE PORTUGUESE-JEWISH COMMUNITY OF AMSTERDAM. MOREOVER, PRACTICALLY EVERY ONE OF THE PHILOSOPHERS PORTRAYED HERE HAD WRITINGS BANNED BY THE VATICAN'S *INDEX OF PROHIBITED BOOKS*.

WORKS BY BRUNO, GALILEO, BACON, DESCARTES, HOBBS, PASCAL, SPINOZA, ARNAULD, MALEBRANCHE, BOYLE, LOCKE, LEIBNIZ, AND NEWTON ALL APPEAR ON THAT INFAMOUS LIST. RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES IN THE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN PERIODS SOMETIMES HAD A HARD TIME DISTINGUISHING INDEPENDENT THINKING FROM HERESY.

IN THIS GRAPHIC BOOK, WE TELL THE STORY OF THE MOST BRILLIANT PERIOD IN PHILOSOPHY'S HISTORY. THE THINKERS WE PORTRAY DID NOT TOTALLY ABANDON THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS OF THEIR FOREBEARS; EVEN INTELLECTUAL REVOLUTIONS AND "PARADIGM SHIFTS" MAINTAIN SOME ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PAST, AND THE DIVISIONS BETWEEN PERIODS OF HISTORY ARE ALWAYS MUCH CLEANER IN HINDSIGHT. A LOT OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, AS RECENT SCHOLARSHIP HAS SHOWN, SOUGHT TO ASSIMILATE, MODIFY, OR UPDATE SCHOLASTIC THOUGHT RATHER THAN REJECT IT OUTRIGHT. AT THE SAME TIME, THESE EARLY MODERN THINKERS WERE, QUITE SELF-CONSCIOUSLY, OUT TO TRANSFORM PHILOSOPHY AND SET IT ON A NEW COURSE. FROM GALILEO AND DESCARTES IN THE FIRST DECADES OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY TO LEIBNIZ AND NEWTON AT THE TURN OF THE EIGHTEENTH, THESE ARE SOME TRULY WONDROUS BEGINNINGS.