

This Page:  
Flow of Western Culture

- I From Reason to Skepticism
- Philosophy
- The Arts

## Mind Games Survival Course Manual



Table of Contents

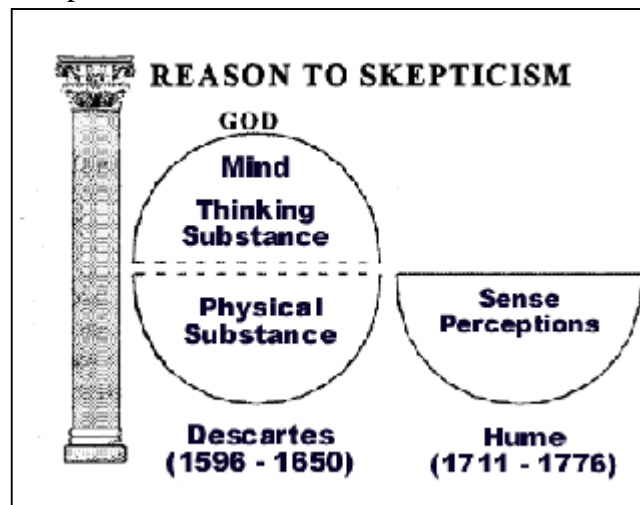
# The Flow of Western Culture

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## FROM REASON TO SKEPTICISM (1600--1750)

### I. Philosophy

During this period of roughly 150 years, from 1600--1750, philosophy drifted rather rapidly away from any moorings in the external world and became more and more entrapped by having invited the camel of "man is the measure of all things" into the tent of knowledge. For if each man measures reality for him/herself, then there is no common reality that all can agree on. The result is finally complete skepticism.



#### A. Descartes (1596--1650)

Descartes was born fifty-three years after Copernicus published *On the Revolution of the Celestial Orbs* in 1543, and died thirty-seven years before Newton published the *Principia* in 1687. His generation moved from the old world of medieval thinking to the modern ideas of science.

Descartes said *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"),{19} and from then on all was questionable. Descartes, too, used the principle of doubt,

and using it tried to prove, not only that he existed, but that God must also exist. Neither proof stands up to much examination (as was pointed out in his own lifetime by many, such as Thomas Hobbes [1588--1679], who remarked one might as well say, "I am walking, therefore I exist"). But Descartes's significance was not in the particulars so much as in his starting point, himself. This was the start of autonomous man, beginning with himself and measuring all things against himself. Thus, even while Descartes came to a proof for God, he at the same time put aside any need for an outside revelation (such as the Bible) to know what is true and based his whole philosophy on his own mind. His world view began in a biblical manner (he was educated in a Catholic school), but he changed the whole focus of discussion when he moved from beginning with God, or even the world, and centering reality in himself, where it seems to have stayed since then.

As one of the parents of rationalism, Descartes held that reason is the final judge of all things. Descartes also seems to set the stage for reductionism with his complete separation of mind and body. He was unconcerned by operations on live animals and believed they had no sense of pain because they had no souls. They were merely complex machines. Once the idea of man's having a soul was given up, this same argument was used to support the idea that humans were merely machines.

It is to Descartes that we owe the development of a profoundly mechanistic view of the universe. As the French philosopher (and Christian) Blaise Pascal (1623--1662) said, "I cannot forgive Descartes. He would have liked, in the whole of his philosophy, to be able to bypass God. But he could not help making Him give a shove to set the world in motion, after that he has nothing further to do with God."{20}

## 2. David Hume (1711--1776)

Hume took the same starting point as Descartes, but pursued skepticism more rigorously and came to the conclusion that nothing could be known, except the data that comes from our own senses. To him we have no way of proving that any external world exists, though Hume would admit that it is helpful to assume that there is a world "out there" with real horses and carriages that we should get out of the way of.

Hume argued that miracles go against the evidence of our common experience (and the laws of nature), and therefore must not happen, but he went much further to say that even common experience does not guarantee anything, so that even the so-called "laws of nature" are only our experience, not some independent reference point. We may have seen the sun come up every day, but we have no right to state that it *will* come up tomorrow, only that it is likely.

So what was Hume's personal response to his philosophical skepticism?

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, Nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by the relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation,

and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, I am merry with my friends; and when, after three or four hours amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further. {21 }

## 2. The Arts

### A. Caravaggio (1573--1610)--*The Death of the Virgin* (1606, 145" x 96 1/2").

At first art merely moved away from an interest in the spiritual dimension of painting, but as people's world views changed, the whole question of what is worth painting changed. Painting of this period continued to be used for religious purposes, but increasingly it was a vehicle for the strictly human and everyday to be given both attention and dignity.

This painting was rejected immediately by the Discalced Carmelite Church of St. Maria della Scala. It was bought by the Duke of Mantua, on Rubens's recommendation, who just happened to be in town at the moment. Why were the Carmelites so incensed? For one thing the story was passed that Caravaggio had used a prostitute for his model. Fouquet might have been able to get away with that in the court of the king in France, but not in Catholic Italy. But more seriously, and more to the point, the picture was seen to be too impious. Mary is spread out for all to view as if she were just another dead woman. She looks far too vulnerable and human to be the Queen of Heaven. It is not a flattering picture, with her body bloated in death, and she is in a most unbecoming pose.

But what skill! Caravaggio is known for his use of light and dark (chiaroscuro), and in this picture he goes from the almost white of Mary's face to deep black in the dress of the woman behind her in one jump. There is no need for the reds and blacks in the drapery overhead. They are there to show off Caravaggio's virtuosity. Besides his skill we also see the creeping skepticism that is changing the whole Renaissance mind from faith to doubt. Mary is not shown ascending to heaven because there is no heaven to ascend to. She is dead and that is all there is.

Caravaggio's real name was Michelangelo Merisi. He lived a mostly intemperate life and fled Rome after being accused of killing a man after they disagreed over a sports contest. His paintings of men and women seem often to cross the line between sensuous and erotic, and he is reputed to have been a homosexual. He died at 37.

### 2. Frans Hals (1581--1666)--*The Jolly Drinker*.

Frans Hals painted only one thing, people, but he did it with great feeling and enjoyment. He was probably born in Antwerp, but his parents settled in Haarlem in 1591, and he spent his long life there. Twice married, he had ten children and was constantly in financial trouble. He frequently painted to pay a debt. His vigorous composition and characterization have become a symbol of the strength and healthy optimism of the men who established the new Dutch Republic. The spontaneity of his work appealed to the

generation of the Impressionists.

This particular picture of a rather self-satisfied but also quite plain-looking man about town is typical of Hal's ability to paint ordinary people and bring out their particular humanness. As William Fleming says, Hals drew his models from his fellow townspeople who "were without the moral restraints of the more sober Bible-reading burghers." {22} There is no concern for a spiritual meaning here, just life as it is. At the same time, Hal's brushwork is second to none, and his ability to adapt his strokes to form the image is both new and even now remarkable. But he is painting only the temporal, the known, the now. There is nothing beyond what we see. What we see is all there is.

**3. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606--1669)--*Self-Portrait* (1669, 23¼" x 20").**

Other painters were more technically brilliant than Rembrandt (such as Vermeer, below). A painter such as Hals was as good in his brushwork. What sets Rembrandt apart is his feeling for emotion. Not the cheap emotion of the sensational, but the deep, often subtle but mesmerizing play of feelings that fill the faces of Rembrandt's portraits. This self-portrait is one of many; he did at least 62 in his life. But like each of them, it shows us something different. This was painted in his last year of life, and Rembrandt looks almost defeated. The colors are brighter than many on Rembrandt's palette. But we see in his whole face the weight of age. He had lived a hard life and lost many things: his wife, almost all his children, even his money. But he is still the master of paint. One critique says of this picture: "Actually, we ought not to call this a self-portrait, but a portrait of Rembrandt the Man by Rembrandt the Painter. For man and artist seem to have become two different personalities, and it is precisely here that the real distress in this painting lies." {23}

Rembrandt was generally regarded as incomparable in his mastery of light and shade, but most critics considered him a flawed genius, whose failing was his "vulgarity" and lack of decorum. The Dutch poet Andries Pels, for example, wrote in 1681: "If he painted . . . a nude woman,/He chose no Greek Venus as his model,/But rather a washerwoman . . ./Flabby breasts, ill-shaped hands, nay, the traces of the lacings/ Of the corsets on the stomach, of the garters on the legs,/ Must be visible, if Nature was to get her due." {24} In 1851 the French painter Delacroix proclaimed that Rembrandt would someday be considered greater than Raphael--"a piece of blasphemy that will make every good academician's hair stand on end"; his prophecy came true within 50 years. {25}

**4. Rembrandt--*The Supper at Emmaeus* (1648, 26¾" x 25 9/16").**

We are at the moment just before or just after Jesus has revealed Himself to His disciples. Everything in the picture leads to Him, even His placement under an arched alcove that mirrors a church setting. The setting is far more tranquil than an earlier picture of the same theme. But the light that suffuses the picture, both from the left and from Christ Himself, is what both unifies and glorifies the picture. The colors are restrained, and we move quickly from what the picture is about to thinking about what it means for Christ to be alive again and eating with two of His closest

friends.

**5. Rembrandt--*Bathsheba* (1654, 56" x 56").**

Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* is incomparable in the mixture of emotion that encompasses her face as she reads David's note. Sir Kenneth Clark writes of her thoughts and feelings being " rendered with a subtlety and a human sympathy which a great novelist could scarcely achieve in many pages." {26} Finally it is her face that we keep returning to. It is full of sadness and resignation and loss. Here is a nude that serves its story fittingly and without attracting us away from the point of the picture in the least. Her emotion almost overpowers her sensuousness. The model is Hendrickje Stoffels, his servant and mistress (after the death of his beloved wife, whose will forbade him to remarry).

**6. Jan Vermeer (1632--1675)--*Maid Pouring the Milk* (18" x 16¼).**



If Rembrandt's goal was to depict the soul through the medium of painting, to tell us about the human inside the body, Vermeer's goal was to picture reality with what we might now call photo-like precision, but organized and simplified to please the eye. Vermeer celebrated the ordinary, but with a luminescence that highlights the beauty that is actually there for anyone who really looks. Among the great Dutch artists of the 17th century, he was second in renown only to Rembrandt, but he made little mark during his lifetime and then languished in obscurity. Apart from one visit to The Hague, he is never known to have left his native Delft. Only 35-40 paintings are known--three dated--and it is unlikely that there were many more.

This is not an important moment in this rather ordinary person's day. But Vermeer transforms a moment of no particular importance to show the grace of any particular moment. From something as commonplace as the morning chores Vermeer brings out a peaceful idealism. "One could also say that Vermeer takes truth to nature to such lengths that the results strike us as some ideal version of the beautiful." {27} This is a striking statement when one thinks that Dutch painters of the period are usually said to be striving not to idealize but to paint what is there. And, in fact, they do. What is there is just more beautiful than we usually take the time to see. One need only look at a Vermeer to realize that the Impressionists did not discover light: light is almost the subject of some of his paintings.

It was sometime during this period that the balance in art between the temporal and the eternal was lost. Art left its place as an aid to the spirit. Whereas art had once pointed man to God, it increasingly pointed man towards the material world. At this point art, and culture, enter into a free fall towards decadence and despair.

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 [Table of Contents](#) 



[Return to](#) [Probe Home](#)