American Philosophical and Intellectual Thought: A Survey and History

Read the short summary of early American philosophical and intellectual thought. Highlight main ideas, and then summarize American thought in the colonial era in the space provided.

Part 1: The Colonial Period (1620 – 1776):

“A continuing challenge to the American intellectual scene has been provided by the successive waves of immigration, and the resulting infusions of divergent ideas. No sooner did one wave begin to be assimilated than a new force appeared. Thus America constantly added the experience and thought of older traditions to its shore; yet at the same time these traditions were themselves profoundly altered by the new habitat.” (Kurtz, American Thought Before 1900, pp. 17)

Examples of divergent beliefs & European settlements in America:

the Puritans of Plymouth,
the Anglicans of Jamestown and Charleston,
the Dutch of NY,
the Quakers and Germans of Pennsylvania,
the French of New Orleans,
and the Scotch-Irish of the advancing frontier communities.

A. The Puritans (1620 – 1700):

The Puritans wished to purge the Church of England of its “Popish practices”, dissatisfied with the reforms of the Anglican Church, they left to form a New Zion. “The Puritans were thoroughly British in culture and conventions; they differed from their contemporaries primarily in the degree of their religious dissent.” (Kurtz, American Thought Before 1900, pp. 18) Principle beliefs were Calvinistic, although they did not claim to be literal disciples of John Calvin. These beliefs were:

1. Absolute sovereignty of God and utter dependence of man on God.
2. God is all powerful & arbitrary whose ways are inscrutable to man.
3. Adam’s descendants inherited the curse of “original sin” and were irresistible given over to evil.
4. First covenant with Adam (which man was to receive immortal life), second covenant through Jesus (which man can receive salvation).
5. Salvation is not earned through good works or moral excellence.
6. God’s will has been predetermined (i.e., foreordained) and the elect (i.e., a Society of Saints) are totally dependent upon God’s grace.
7. Man must offer God faith and obedience.

For the Puritans, life was a moral process originating in sin, dedicated to faith, and culminating in the hope that salvation might be achieved. Moral virtues were emphasized: discipline, devotion, honesty, moderation, temperance, frugality, industry, and simplicity. The philosophical predestination did not lead to passive inaction because, “the dynamic activism of the American Puritan might better be explained, not by his religion or his philosophy, . . . but by the new geographical and economic necessities; here was a frontier to claim, a wilderness to conquer, a future to forge.” (Kurtz, American Thought Before 1900, pp. 19)

New England Puritanism was intolerant of dissent and heresy – in particular was the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was organized along theocratic lines. The covenant with God was more of a corporate arrangement between the whole community and God rather than a private affair. Initially there was no idea of “separation of church and state”, but as new sects began arriving and as the covenant became more secularized, freer communities began to be formed. Toleration seemed to be the only way to deal with the growing number of different denominations popping up in the new America.

B. Colonial Materialism and Immaterialism (1700 – 1776):

For the most part, practical pursuits and religious interests dominated seventeenth-century America and little time was devoted to theoretical philosophy – it was not till the eighteenth-century that intellectual philosophic and scientific interests were more directly nourished.

Primary Figures:
Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758),
Samuel Johnson (1696 – 1772),
Cadwallader Colden (1688 – 1776), and
Benjamin Franklin (1706 – 1790).
Edwards represents the most thoroughgoing use of philosophical idealism in an attempt to provide a rational philosophical vindication of the Calvinistic system against its critics. Johnson used philosophical immaterialism to combat materialism – however, neither Edwards nor Johnson could stem the tide of the new forces, especially the development of modern science and modern philosophy, which was emerging in Europe. Edwards’s most important philosophical work was, *Freedom of the Will* (1754), in which he puts forth a defense of Calvinistic determinism against the arguments for free will. Every event has a cause, but divine omnipotence, foreknowledge, and efficacious grace (all of which are Calvinistic doctrines) are consistent with moral freedom and moral responsibility. Freedom, according to Edwards, is having the power, opportunity, or advantage, to do as one pleases to do – without considering how ones pleasure comes to be as it is. Even though ones pleasure (sometimes called – will) is the product of causal principles. Edwards attempts to resolve the alleged paradox by careful linguistic definitions of key terms.

In *The Nature of True Virtue* (written in 1755, published in 1765), Edwards argued that man is naturally incapable of true virtue, being sinful and corrupt. Yet there is the grace of God that has elected some for salvation, and one sign of this is the individual’s religious affection and sense of beauty. In *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), Edwards maintains that belief in God has its source in the religious affections, love and joy, and that these are transmitted from supernatural source and are not to be comprehended by the natural senses (e.g., Deism – which Edwards considered to be the greatest abomination to Christianity). And in his, Notes on Natural Science, Edwards provides a metaphysical defense of philosophical idealism, holding that mind and spirit are fundamental to the universe.

Johnson preferred the quiet conservatism of the Church of England to the evangelical enthusiasm then sweeping through the Puritan churches of New England. Johnson was a follower of the ideas of George Berkeley, who was a critic of the materialism of Newton and Locke, which he thought would lead to skepticism, freethinking, and atheism. Spiritual, not material substances, were real, the human mind receiving what the Divine Mind impressed upon it. However, the immaterialism of Berkeley and Johnson had little effect on late eighteenth-century American thought, possibly because of its Anglican association, though their ideas would reemerge in nineteenth-century America through transcendentalism and idealism.

Colden carried on an extensive correspondence with Johnson on the topic of idealism versus materialism. Colden was not a pure materialist – he did seem to advocate a kind of dualistic theory, which allows for the existence of intelligent being. “Like body, intelligent being is active and known by its effects, but it differs from material being in its essential nature.” (Kurtz, *American Thought Before 1900*, pp. 102) Colden was sympathetic to Deism: God as First Cause gave direction to the action of matter, but did not intervene in its operations. In *First Principles of Morality* (1746), Colden presents a materialistic hedonism: the body is a machine and pleasure is the end cause of the virtues. Throughout Colden’s works one finds a modern mind, critical of “mere authority,” directing the individual to think for himself, unencumbered by prejudice and received tradition, and basing its inquiries on the methods of science. Although conservative in his political beliefs and opposed the American Revolution, he was devoted to reason and sympathetic to the Enlightenment.

Franklin applied Newton’s physical principles and illustrated Newtonian natural philosophy and the possibility of a completely mechanical explanation of the universe. Franklin also owed his philosophical reputation to the fact that he was broadly educated and interested in many fields of human endeavor – he displayed wisdom for life, both intellectual and practical. In his, *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion* (1730), Franklin espouses his deistic rationalistic philosophy of religion. [Franklin was a highly civilized man – fair-minded, humane, charitable, and a source of worldly wisdom – qualities which were unique in early America.]

Franklin’s philosophy can be summarized as follows:
1. Secularized typical Puritan virtues in ethics, thrift, temperance, punctuality, and industry.
2. Virtue and Reason are combined as revealing the true source of happiness.
3. Staunch defender of republicanism and revolution.

Summary: