

Philosophy: Lesson 1: What is Philosophy?

Essential Questions:

1. What is philosophy?
2. What are the 5 different schools/branches of philosophy?

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Vocabulary:

1. Philosophy: the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct (What is it?/Who am I?)
2. Metaphysics: the study of existence (What's out there?)
3. Epistemology: the study of knowledge (How do I know about it?)
4. Ethics: the study of action (What should I do?)
5. Politics: the study of force (What actions are permissible?)
6. Aesthetics: the study of art (What can life be like?/What is beauty?)
7. Axiology: the study of value (What is it worth?)*

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History of Philosophy

Philosophy can be broken down into several distinct periods:

I. Pre-Socratic Philosophy (pre 4th/5th Century BCE)

- Most scholars believe that Western philosophy began in Greece around the 6th Century BCE. Thales of Miletus is considered the first philosopher, although he was interested in both philosophy as we know it AND natural philosophy (later called *science*).
- Early philosophers were mostly metaphysicians and materialists, believing that all things in the universe were composed of one substance. The substance was disagreed on.

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- Thales thought the whole universe was composed of different forms of water. Anaximenes concluded it was made of air. Heraclitus thought it was fire and Anaximander thought it was some unexplainable substance usually translated as "the infinite" or "the boundless". (Aether)
- They were also concerned with the nature and form of change.
- At the extremes, Heraclitus believed in an on-going process of perpetual change, a constant interplay of opposites.
- Parmenides, using a complicated deductive argument, denied that there was any such thing as change at all, and argued that everything that exists is permanent, indestructible and unchanging.
- This might sound like an unlikely proposition, but Parmenides's challenge was well-argued and was important in encouraging other philosophers to come up with convincing counter-arguments. Zeno of Elea was a student of Parmenides, and is best known for his famous paradoxes of motion which helped to lay the foundations for the study of Logic. However, Zeno's underlying intention was really to show, like Parmenides before him, that all belief in plurality and change is mistaken, and in particular that motion is nothing but an illusion.

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- Although these ideas might seem to us rather simplistic and unconvincing today, we should bear in mind that, at this time, there was really no scientific knowledge whatsoever, and even the commonest of phenomena (e.g. lightning, water freezing to ice, etc) would have appeared miraculous.
- Their attempts were therefore important first steps in the development of philosophical thought. They also set the stage for two other important Pre-Socratic philosophers:
- Empedocles, who combined their ideas into the theory of the four classical elements (earth, air, fire and water), which became the standard dogma for much of the next two thousand years; and
- Democritus, who developed the extremely influential idea of Atomism (that all of reality is actually composed of tiny, indivisible and indestructible building blocks known as atoms, which form different combinations and shapes within the surrounding void).
- Another early and very influential Greek philosopher was Pythagoras, who essentially believed that all of reality was governed by numbers, and that its essence could be encountered through the study of mathematics.

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II. Classical Philosophy (Socratic Period)

- Philosophy really took off with the work of Socrates and Plato (5th-4th Century BC)
- Socrates was more concerned with how people behave (father of ethics)
- He developed a system of critical reasoning in order to work out how to live properly and to tell the difference between right and wrong. His system, sometimes referred to as the Socratic Method, was to break problems down into a series of questions, the answers to which would gradually distill a solution.
- He never claimed to have all the answers himself, but his constant questioning made him many enemies among the authorities of Athens who eventually had him put to death (suicide by hemlock).

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- Socrates' student Plato blended Ethics, Metaphysics, Political Philosophy and Epistemology (the theory of knowledge and how we can acquire it) into an interconnected and systematic philosophy.
- He came up with the theory of Forms and universals (he believed that the world we perceive around us is composed of mere representations or instances of the pure ideal Forms, which had their own existence elsewhere, an idea known as Platonic Realism).
- Plato believed that virtue was a kind of knowledge (the knowledge of good and evil) that we need in order to reach the ultimate good, which is the aim of all human desires and actions (a theory known as Eudaimonism).
- Plato's Political Philosophy was developed mainly in his famous "*Republic*", where he describes an ideal (though rather grim and anti-democratic) society composed of Workers and Warriors, ruled over by wise Philosopher Kings.

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- The third in the main trio of classical philosophers was Plato's student Aristotle. He created an even more comprehensive system of philosophy than Plato, encompassing Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics, Metaphysics, Logic and science, and his work influenced almost all later philosophical thinking, particularly those of the Medieval period.
- Aristotle's system of deductive Logic, with its emphasis on the syllogism (where a conclusion, or synthesis, is inferred from two other premises, the thesis and antithesis), remained the dominant form of Logic until the 19th Century.
- Unlike Plato, Aristotle held that Form and Matter were inseparable, and cannot exist apart from each other. Although he too believed in a kind of Eudaimonism, Aristotle realized that Ethics is a complex concept and that we cannot always control our own moral environment. He thought that happiness could best be achieved by living a balanced life and avoiding excess by pursuing a golden mean in everything (similar to his formula for political stability through steering a middle course between tyranny and democracy).

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Other Ancient Philosophies:

Sophism: held generally relativistic views on knowledge (i.e. that there is no absolute truth and two points of view can be acceptable at the same time) and generally skeptical views on truth and morality.

Cynicism: rejected all conventional desires for health, wealth, power and fame, and advocated a life free from all possessions and property as the way to achieving Virtue.

Skepticism/Pyrrhonism: held that, because we can never know the true inner substance of things, only how they appear to us (and therefore we can never know which opinions are right or wrong), we should suspend judgement on everything as the only way of achieving inner peace.

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Epicureanism: main goal was to attain happiness and tranquility through leading a simple, moderate life, the cultivation of friendships and the limiting of desires (quite contrary to the common perception of the word "epicurean").

Hedonism: held that pleasure is the most important pursuit of mankind, and that we should always act so as to maximize our own pleasure.

Stoicism: taught self-control and fortitude as a means of overcoming destructive emotions in order to develop clear judgment and inner calm and the ultimate goal of freedom from suffering.

Neo-Platonism: a largely religious philosophy which became a strong influence on early Christianity (especially on St. Augustine), and taught the existence of an ineffable and transcendent One, from which the rest of the universe "emanates" as a sequence of lesser beings.

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Medieval Philosophy

- After about the 4th or 5th Century A.D., Europe entered the so-called Dark Ages, during which little or no new thought was developed.
- By the 11th Century, though, there was a renewed flowering of thought, both in Christian Europe and in Muslim and Jewish Middle East. Most of the philosophers of this time were mainly concerned with proving the existence of God and with reconciling Christianity/Islam with the classical philosophy of Greece.
- This period also saw the establishment of the first universities, which was an important factor in the subsequent development of philosophy.
- Among the great Islamic philosophers of the Medieval period were Avicenna and Averröes.
- Avicenna tried to reconcile the rational philosophy of Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism with Islamic theology, and also developed his own system of Logic, known as Avicennian Logic. He also introduced the concept of the "tabula rasa" (the idea that humans are born with no innate or built-in mental content), which strongly influenced later Empiricists like John Locke.

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- Averröes's translations and commentaries on Aristotle (whose works had been largely lost by this time) had a profound impact on the Scholastic movement in Europe, and he claimed that Avicenna's interpretations were wrong. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides attempted the same reconciliation of Aristotle with the Hebrew scriptures around the same time.
- The Medieval Christian philosophers were all part of a movement called Scholasticism which tried to combine Logic, Metaphysics, Epistemology and semantics (the theory of meaning) into one discipline, and to reconcile the philosophy of the ancient classical philosophers (particularly Aristotle) with Christian theology.
- The Scholastic method was to thoroughly and critically read the works of renowned scholars, write down any disagreements, and then resolve them by the use of formal Logic and analysis of language.
- Scholasticism in general is often criticized for spending too much time discussing infinitesimal and pedantic details (like how many angels could dance on the tip of a needle, etc)

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- St. Anselm is often regarded as the first of the Scholastics, and St. Thomas Aquinas (known for his five rational proofs for the existence of God, and his definition of the cardinal virtues and the theological virtues) is generally considered the greatest, and certainly had the greatest influence on the theology of the Catholic Church.
- Other important Scholastics included Peter Abelard, Albertus Magnus, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Each contributed slight variations to the same general beliefs.
- Abelard introduced the doctrine of limbo for unbaptised babies; Scotus rejected the distinction between essence and existence that Aquinas had insisted on; Ockham introduced the important methodological principle known as Ockham's Razor, that one should not multiply arguments beyond the necessary; etc.
- Roger Bacon actually criticized the Scholastic system, based as it was on tradition and scriptural authority. He is sometimes credited as one of the earliest European advocates of Empiricism (the theory that the origin of all knowledge is sense experience) and of the modern scientific method.

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- The revival of classical civilization and learning in the 15th and 16th Century known as the Renaissance brought the Medieval period to a close. It was marked by a movement away from religion and medieval Scholasticism and towards Humanism (the belief that humans can solve their own problems through reliance on reason and the scientific method) and a new sense of critical enquiry.
- Among the major philosophical figures of the Renaissance were: Erasmus, Machiavelli, Thomas More (the Christian Humanist whose book "Utopia" influenced generations of politicians and planners and even the early development of Socialist ideas); and Francis Bacon (whose application of inductive reasoning - generalizations based on individual instances - were both influential in the development of modern scientific methodology).

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