

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Philosophy

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## ANCIENT PERIOD - THE SETTING

**Wilderness.** The (later named) nations of Western Europe—vast areas we now call Germany, France, and England—were during the so-called Greco-Roman era relatively uncultivated wildernesses. By the time of Fall of the Roman Empire (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), the wild frontiers of what we now call Europe had begun to be ‘tamed,’ but nothing like a developed philosophy was to be found in Western Europe during classical antiquity. Awe at the wonder of creation expressed itself in brilliant works of painting, from prehistoric times on, and religious Nature and Great Mother cults had given expression to man’s need to feel at home in his universe but, to repeat, nothing like systematic, interpretive thought had been developed. There was no ‘philosophy.’

## POSTCLASSICAL PHILOSOPHY

**Christianity.** Mediaeval philosophy in Western Europe was one day to be a child of classical antiquity—the philosophers of the Greco-Roman world—but that would be more than a millennium after the death of Jesus Christ, after the dissemination of classical manuscripts and the education of the first classical scholars had made its appearance in the new Europe. By this time the Aristotle central to the thinking of pre-Christian Greek thought would have become a widely translated presence in European intellectual life. In the meantime, what we can properly call western European philosophy had taken off from a growing systematic reflection on the perspectives of the Christian religion, which was the active driver of speculative thought in the millennium that followed the death of Jesus Christ.

**St. Augustine.** The central issues of mediaeval philosophy gathered around the nature and existence of God, the nature of faith, ethical questions and their special relevance to salvation. For the greatest of the western thinkers, during this period, philosophy was considered a handmaid to theology, although the greatest of those thinkers--Saint Augustine (354-430), Boethius (477-524), Saint Anselm (1093-1109) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)-- all contributed powerfully to the basic literature of philosophical analysis. Saint Augustine opened the individual as a person in direct spiritual connection with God, and lay the foundations for inquiries, active today, into the psychology of religious experience. (His *City of God* reads human civilization as a diminished mirror of the divine presence; in *The Confessions* she makes his own weaknesses and sinful nature the core of a self-scrutiny that reduced him to his mortal weakness.

**Aquinas.** Saint Anselm (1033—1109) has been credited with formulating the ontological argument for the existence of God, and for having given philosophical underpinning to the doctrine of the Atonement. His leading formula, in which he digs back into the thought of Augustine, is that we believe in order to understand, while understanding is nonetheless an essential achievement for testing the full character of belief. Saint Thomas Aquinas systematized the consequences of faith in God, applying rigorous argument--logic, epistemology--to the salvation structure of Christian belief. His *Summa Theologiae* (1265-1274) is widely considered a Bible of mediaeval Christian thought.

## EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

**Renaissance.** The Renaissance, 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, introduces a new set of perspectives into Western European philosophy. By this time—a time when the actual manuscripts of Greco Roman thought are being unearthed, when major universities are introducing higher culture in the new cities, when secular world views are proliferating, and the Church is compromising or being ignored—by this time a range of new philosophies is spreading throughout western Europe. Travel becomes easier, There is more money to spend on personal development, and the first steps toward scientific experiment are being taken.

**Humanism.** In the thinking of such men as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Michel de Montaigne (1533--1592) we meet the Humanistic vigor of a fresh period in thought: both men fully committed to a human universe--sceptical believers you might call them--and restlessly inquiring into man's possibilities for self-understanding and social coherence. Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), for example, is an ardent plea to the King of England, to support scientific and artistic inquiry among his people. The Church is no longer, for such a thinker as Bacon, the main shaper of thoughts, as it had been in the Middle Ages. Nor is Church doctrine intimately involved with the evolution of thought, or the life and teaching of Jesus taken so singly as the example for human ethic and social behavior. Montaigne, in his essays, looks at himself as an historically conditioned creature, with intermixed faults and virtues, and in the same way looks outward like an anthropologist, to take an interest in other men in other cultures, even to dandle fascination with the noble savage, a cultural import from Europe's growing 'understanding' of the Americas.

**Mind.** Many factors contribute to a new and vigorous flowering of philosophical thought in the West, during the centuries we call the Renaissance. These centuries saw the reawakening of interest in the secular classics of the ancient Greco Roman world, in the actual reading of those texts, and in the incorporation of them into University curricula. The replacement or reshaping of Christian theology marks much of the most forceful thought of the time, as does the turn toward 'science,' which in the seventeenth century leads the way to fundamental new perceptions of the cosmos.

**New philosophies.** The determinant philosophies, of the mature passage into early modern thought, are those that kick in toward the end of that seventeenth century which was opened by such as Montaigne and Bacon. We come onto the moments of Rene Descartes (1596-1650.) or Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who exposed self, thought, and society to lucid scrutiny as free as they could make it from 'inherited prejudices.' Descartes, for whom 'je pense, donc je suis' heralds the inroads of epistemology, over against the ghosts of theology, brings together the genius of mathematical reason with brilliant inspection, seeking to know 'myself or the great book of the world.' Hobbes turns a pessimistic and searching insight onto the nature of the state, and of man's greed for power.

## EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

**Enlightenment.** The eighteenth century has commonly been designated The Enlightenment. During that period in Europe the liberation of thought, from inherited 'prejudices,' became a banner for the fresh breezes of 'progress.' Far in the past was the recourse to holy scripture, or to theology based on it. Spinoza (1632-1677) and Leibniz (1646-1716) created vast intellectual structures in which to formulate scientifically and mathematically coherent images of the human universe and our prospects in it. Locke (1632-1704), Hume (1711-1776), and Kant (1724-1804) all addressed the human mind from the view point of its limitations and potentials, wishing us well as minds reshaping a meaningful universe without the direct impact of its creator.

**Kant.** For each of these three thinkers is the critical climate so maturing, that they bring into view comprehensive glimpses of the power locked in the very limitations of man's mind as knowing. (Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is an ultimate in this adventure of learning blended with intellectual strictures. Immanuel Kant devoted his three *Critiques*(*Pure Reason*,1781; *Practical Reason*, 1788; *Judgment*, 1790) to the issue of the possibility of knowledge, and carried us to an altitude from which we can perceive both our limitations and our ultimate powers of understanding. So rich is the development of philosophy, in these western generations, that the West (and by increments the global

community) is manifestly starting to feel a new synthesis on the horizon. Such a synthesis—universal perspectives on the human condition—is already adumbrated in the *Encyclopedia* of Hegel (1817), with its effort to synthesize all human knowledge as living philosophy.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

**Proliferation.** By the 19th century the narrow streams of mediaeval philosophy, and even the growingly secular epistemology and science of the late seventeenth century, seem ground laying steps toward a full fledged curriculum of highly developed 'areas of philosophy,' the ethics/aesthetics/ logic/epistemology outlay with which the modern University tames the irregularities of a growingly undisciplinable discipline. As in politics, economics, and government, nineteenth century western philosophy too finds itself sprouting out in every direction.

**Idealism.** The idealism of a philosopher like Schelling (1775—1854) spins from the earlier thinking of Hegel, though the two clash sharply over whether the Absolute, God, can be thought and understood. Out of the brambles of dispute, between these two men, emerge the outlines of the most influential philosophies of the century, German—and academic. From Germanic traditions, but splaying out in varied directions, come the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1908), a German Professor of Classics, and Karl Marx (1818-1883). Each of these activists—Marx believed that the philosopher's job is not to 'understand the world' but to 'change it'—diverged sharply from the tendencies of idealism.

**Marx.** Marx turned his insights on to the injustices of the social system, which was so constructed that the workers enjoy little of their fruits of labor, and the employers (the capitalists) run away with the profits. The philosopher as social critic, in this case, is a product of his century's newest uses of the self-reflective action of the mind in philosophy. No less the critical acerb, and a bleak foe of the mediocre in mankind, Nietzsche too is a condemner of ills: of man as pompous fool; of god as illusory soft soap; of bourgeois sentimentality, with all its false hopes and simplicities.

**Philosophies of Existence.** The diversity of the period—for which the nature and construction of society, and of social behaviors, has become a target of attention—is evident in the thinking of the Danish philosopher, Soeren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), with whom we can see how unexpectedly the religious impulse we began by ausculting, can return in a modified guise—one that Marx and Nietzsche would scorn. Kierkegaard, whose thinking directly presages that of the European Existentialists of the following century, puts heavy emphasis on the life presence (and historical condition) of the thinker—as distinct, say, from the mind as naked knower (Descartes) or from the mind as concept forming and reason testing (Kant). God, for Kierkegaard, factors back into the center of thought, when once we have entered ourselves as the anxiety of why, why are we here?

## TWENTIETH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

**Themes.** Many themes share high prominence in twentieth century philosophy; themes with ample but intertangled roots in the thought of earlier centuries. Among these themes are *analytical philosophy*, particularly practiced in England, and *existential philosophy*, prominent in Western Europe with our previously discussed Kierkegaard and Nietzsche among its antecedents. Movements like *Thomism* pronounce their continuing energy, rooted in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, while both *phenomenology* and *poststructuralism* play unexpected riffs on the classical problem of how we know. It is worth note that the issues arising, in most of these 'movements,' find language at their center., and time and again revert to the question of 'what language is.'

**Existentialism.** Existential philosophies take it as their starting point that the engagement of the thinker's self is already, from its thought act, a powerful component of the thinker's position. We always think, Existentialism puts it, 'in a situation,' as historical beings fraught with unsureness but impelled to formulate. We have linked Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to the foundations of this kind of philosophy as action; for both men the discovery of personal authenticity, in the knowing act, has much to do with the quality of that thought. Of the western European thinkers, whom we would link to this movement, are the French Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1960), Albert Camus (1913-1960), and Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973).

**War.** It will be no surprise, given the thrust of this philosophy and the fact that it was particularly generated by participants in the second World War, who were by definition engaged by their situation in the actions of their minds, that the participants in this movement were also writers—in whose novels they embedded individuals faced with the basic conditions of daily life—boredom, anxiety, and hope.

**Analytic philosophy.** The movement we now call Analytic philosophy takes its impulse from German philosophy, but for the most part, after it finds its power, remains on the British side of the channel. At the roots of the movement lies the thinking of the Logical Positivists, much of it generated in Berlin and Vienna in the first quarter of the twentieth century, fundamentally aligned with the assumptions of empirical science, and in particular with the niceties of verification. Such logicians and mathematicians as Rudolf Carnap and Bertrand Russell led the way to the use of symbolic logic and mathematics to dissect thought structures. The analytic movement was given great impetus by the work of the Oxford professor Ludwig Wittgenstein—*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922)—which laid the foundations for what became called ‘ordinary language philosophy,’ and was furthered by British thinkers like Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin.

**Phenomenology** was developed by Edmund Husserl (*Ideas*; 1913), who generated many precise and original innovations in the study of consciousness and doing, attaining new levels of analysis of the phenomena of mind. The phenomena of mind capture the central attention of many productive successors: Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) whose *Being and Time* produced a lucid and detailed analysis of the role of mind in formulating the position of thought in Being; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) continually blends innovative perspectives in empirical psychology with precise methods for examining phenomena in mind.

**Post structuralism**, whose deepest triggers lay in the work of the Frenchman Jacques Derrida (*On Grammatology*, 1967), came onto a continental scene in which Structuralism (Levi-Strauss; de Saussure) had barely completed its renovations of the ways we format the structures of our thinking, stressing the constructive manners in which sign and signifier are interwoven for the construction of meaning. Deconstruction reversed the implications of Structuralism, positing a reality in which mind never reaches the signified, but in each quest for the stability of the signified ends up generating new signifiers, placing the object to be known at the end of an ever unreached quest. In this quest, man the *maker* of language is converted into man the *product* of language.

**Thomism.** Though the revival of Thomism, a contemporized remodel of the thinking of Saint Thomas Aquinas, is hardly a full scale movement, within twentieth century thinking, it is worth attention for two reasons. Its proponents—both theist and atheist—have advanced stunning philosophical perspectives. And, reason two, by attending to this development we can illustrate the richness by which the Western European philosophic (and in this case Classical) tradition can at times return onto itself enrichingly. In the present instance, a variety of thinkers, both British and American (MacIntyre, Anscombe, and Footnote) work with the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas to reformulate a world-explanatory account, by which to give the meaning inherent to it, to a world-view that orthodox Christian theology established long in the past.

## Readings

Baird, Forrest, *Philosophic Classics: Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, Harvard, 2002.  
Dummett, M. *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1996.  
James, Susan, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, Oxford, 1999.  
Schroedinger, Andrew B., ed., *Oxford Readings in Mediaeval Philosophy*, Oxford, 1996.  
Lagerlund, Henrik, *Encyclopedia of Mediaeval Philosophy between 500-1500*, Dordrecht, 2011.

## Discussion questions

What role did the first western universities play in the development of mediaeval western philosophy?

What relations do you see between the urbanization and economic growth of the Renaissance and the philosophy that emerged from the period? Think of Bruno, Erasmus, Bacon.

From Augustine to Saint Thomas Aquinas is a long time. What traces of Augustine's thought and sensibility remain in Saint Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*?

What is the interrelation between mathematics and philosophy in the Analytic Tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? What was the contribution of Russell and Whitehead to that mathematical thought?

Saint Thomas drew heavily on the thought of Aristotle, whom he called simply 'the philosopher.' What are the main uses Thomas made of Aristotle's thought?

What is 'enlightened' about the 18th century Enlightenment? What are leading philosophic perspectives of Diderot, Voltaire, Lessing?