

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE PHILOSOPHY

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Overview A global perspective on philosophy requires a starting point definition of philosophy. Shall we say it is the study of the fundamental questions facing the human mind? Shall we then say that those questions are like this: Why are we here? What is this universe made of? How should we live our lives here? What does it mean to think, and what is the best way to think? What is virtue? What are goodness and beauty? Who made us? If we do subscribe to this list of scattershot questions, can we come to some appreciation of the global response to these questions? People throughout the globe have of course regularly asked themselves the questions above, or some of these questions, but the answers given have in certain cases been so brilliant, or so successfully part of a larger trend of thinking, that we feel drawn to try to understand those entire ways of answering. The following is one person's global map of the answers given.

Ancient philosophy: the West In the West the ancient Greeks left an indelible mark on subsequent thinking about the critical questions listed above. Poetic by nature, those early Greeks (starting with Homer) were instinctively drawn to queries into the nature of the gods, the meaning of courage, even the value of family life, and yet it is not until we get to the Milesian hylozoist school in Asia Minor, in the 6th century B.C.E., that critical inquiry is directly beamed onto questions *like what is this universe made of*. Such speculative research into the nature of the physical environment yielded answers in terms of the fundamental substance--air; water; the cosmic infinite--thus into a sense-theory of the nature of the experienced world. The highly developed thinking of Socrates and Plato, in the early 4th century B.C.E., may have taken off from the subtleties of Sophist thinking, in the fifth century B.C.E., but rapidly introduced serious hypotheses--not just rhetorical plays--about the nature of virtue, the processes of effective thought, the possibilities for political theory, and the meaning of the laws. The thinking of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) moved the imaginative, 'idealistic' thinking of Plato to a place where the whole world could be opened out, seen as a workable and intelligible whole. Aristotle's wide ranging practical mind explored the causes and anatomies of governments, of artistic works, of human behaviors, and of the plants and animals that make up the natural world. Aristotle's cosmology supported the notion of a First Cause, and rooted that theism in a cause and effect physics. (So adaptable was Aristotle's thinking, that for centuries--the European Middle Ages--his thought provided the foundation for logic and metaphysics, under the perspective of Catholic theology.)

The ancient western schools Enrichment of this classical Greek philosophical thought, still in antiquity, can be largely attributed to the profound influence of 'schools'--Cynicism, Stoicism, Scepticism, Epicureanism--which matured during the Hellenistic period (323 B.C.E.-32 B.C.E. and into the Roman Empire--in which distinctive world views were embodied, designed to provide intellectual guidance to students, scholars and citizens. The Stoics spoke to a rising 'bourgeoisie,' both in Greece and Rome, who wanted support in their control of the passions, and in their development of moral-social disciplines that marked their acculturation to society. The Epicureans followed their inspired leader's pointers toward the simple and disciplined life, in which pleasures were quiet and savored. All of these 'schools' were founded by thinkers anxious to promote civilized self-awareness.

Ancient philosophy: the East. India. Religious knowledge texts called the *Vedas*, composed 1500-1000 B.C.E., were the chief source of orthodox classical Indian philosophy. (The *Upanisads* (1000 B.C.E.-500 B.C.E.), part of the later Vedic tradition, were particularly rich in the development of Indian philosophical thought. In such texts (and earlier) one meets the arsenal of thought-shaping terms which carry much of the weight of Indian philosophical subtlety, both as it developed in Hinduism and in Buddhism, which originated in a drive to bring Hinduism back to its pure form. The terms in question are *dharma* (*law, right thinking*), *karma* (*personal destiny*), *samsara* (*cyclical change*), *moksha* (*liberation*), and *ahimsa* (*do no harm*); terms the understanding of which is already a pathway into Indian thought, with its perennial concern with rebirth, liberation from the wheel of life and death, right thinking as grounded in canonical thought, and the cyclical process of the endless lives we endure (*samsara*). (Essential to note: these terms, and their fertile meanings, adopt many and various shades as they appear in Hinduism or Buddhism, or within either one of those two central religions). While these terms were initially argument points for Indian theology, they rapidly merged with complex supporting accounts of ethical practice, with systems of fruitful mental discipline, and with systems of logic which bear comparison with the subtlest logical inquiries of academic philosophy in our own day.

Buddhism The particular emphasis of Buddhism, as it gradually separates away from Hinduism, shaped as it was in India, but dispersed from there after the Muslim conquest of India (12th-16th centuries B.C.E.), was on dealing with suffering (*dukkha*). Life, it seemed, was at best pure illusion, at worst pain. If Hinduism derived from ancient Vedic poetic theology, Buddhism shared that backdrop but took from its founder, Gautama Buddha (563-480 B.C.E.) a stress on the inherent pain of mortal life, the consignment of us all to the wheel of life and death, and in the mental practices by which we can attempt to free ourselves from that wheel. It is impossible to disengage philosophy from theology, in the resultant profusion of Hindu-Buddhist texts, which enshrine the laws of effective thought, prescribe moral actions, and enrich the cognitive uses of meditation. The transitoriness of life and the illusory character of the self become central tenets of the matured religion, collecting around them philosophical distinctions of great refinement.

Ancient philosophy: The East. China East Asian philosophy takes different paths from the thought of the ancient West, or from that of India. This multiform body of thought took off in ancient China during the Western Zhou Dynasty; and, after that Dynasty fell, in the period of 'The Hundred Schools of Thought,' 6th century B.C.E.-221 B.C.E. During that period Chinese culture was intellectually in ferment, and movements like Daoism and Confucianism, which still thrive in China, formulated their originating principles. Those principles, like the principles of Buddhism which was to reach China in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), centered around practices of mental discipline and inner freedom, as well as ethical principles of harmony and avoidance of harm. The particular slant of Confucianism, which pervades social practice in China today, is toward decorum and harmony, proper social action, and attention to duty, while Taoism, similarly a vigorous force today, stressed and stresses living in harmony with the *tao*, the flow of things, the creative center of life. In the milieu of such social/philosophical tendencies, of ancient Chinese culture, one influential strand of Buddhism in China gradually morphed toward the form of Chan (Zen), which in both East and West, today still, has gained adherence for its effective disciplines of personal control and inner peace.

Observations on ancient Greco-Roman philosophy Ancient philosophy in the Greco-Roman tradition took off from a scientific stance--the Milesian hylozoists--and moved, with Plato and Aristotle (though very differently in the two), into probing investigations: Plato was concerned with the possibility of knowledge, the function of ideas, the relation of mind to body, the possible forms of the state, the nature of laws; Aristotle with the causes and effects which rule the natural world, the underlying principles of drama, the moral life, logical reasoning, and the observable phenomena of nature. In other words, the foundations were being laid, here, for world-views like those which 'science' would adopt two thousand years later, and with 'science' the soon to be generated 'social sciences,' the 'sciences of the mind,' and the 'sciences of the arts and culture,' in our time the inquiries of 'cultural studies.'

Observations on ancient philosophy in India and China Ancient philosophy in India proceeded in two main directions. In the first place there was the high cosmological speculation deriving from the *Vedas*, founding documents of Hindu theology. From these texts descended the elements of Hindu philosophy, and the richly interpretable system of terms we discussed earlier. Systems of logic, insights into temporality, and fervent moral principles were all wrapped into this Indian poetic heritage. From Hinduism seeped the morph into Buddhism, for which both spiritual self-control and metaphysically fruitful ethics became triggers. China, welcoming Buddhism as early as the third century B.C.E., twinned it with homegrown wisdom-systems like Confucianism and Taoism, which incorporated ethical-social principles (Confucianism) and pathways to harmony (Taoism) with which Buddhism had at least basic philosophical perspectives in common. That neither Indian nor Chinese philosophy was moving to found a 'scientific-empirical' perspective, is clear when the contrast between West and East is driven close up against us. What the great Indian and Chinese examples indicate is that mind is as ready-to-hand as nature, when it comes to coping with life and the world.

The Middle Period

The Medieval West (5th-16th centuries C.E.) Mediaeval philosophy in the West is both a child of antiquity and a new address to fundamental questions in the light of Christianity, which since the last centuries of the Empire, in Rome, had assumed central importance for Western philosophic thought. Old problems--the basic issues of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics central to Aristotle and Plato-- were reviewed in a new light, though Aristotle himself formed a constant background theme to those new inquiries. This thinker, whom Dante called 'the master of

those who know,' provided frameworks and methods, for addressing fundamental issues, which would not be seriously challenged until the Renaissance.

Mediaeval Christian philosophy Most western philosophy, during this period when nation states were dissolving and beginning to reform, clung to the centrality of Sacred Scripture. The central issues 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, Thomas Aquinas, Boethius, and Saint Anselm--all contributed powerfully to the basic literature of philosophical analysis. Saint Augustine opened the individual to the person-hood of God, and lay the foundations for inquiries, active today, into the psychology of religious experience. Saint Thomas Aquinas systematized the consequences of faith in God, applying rigorous argument--logic, epistemology--to the salvation structure of Christian belief. Saint Anselm (1033 C.E.-1109 C.E.) has been credited with formulating the ontological argument for the existence of God, and for have given philosophical underpinning to the doctrine of the Atonement.

'Mediaeval' philosophic trends in the ancient Middle East The development of philosophy in the western mediaeval period does not correspond chronologically with the developments of philosophical thought in the Middle East. From the earliest period of human civilization, the residents of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt created sophisticated systems of thought. There was a tradition of wisdom literature in Egypt, and a Babylonian philosophical literature, grounded in astronomy, which may have left its imprint on ancient Greek thinking. While these movements of thought are not 'mediaeval,' according to the western time frame, they flow into and belong with the subsequent Middle Eastern philosophies that coincide with the Western Middle Ages.,

Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages Jewish religious-philosophical traditions were elaborated, onto a Talmudic foundation, by the *Geonim*, or Babylonian Talmudic Associations which elaborated thought grounded in the Torah, while a major Jewish philosopher like Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 C.E.) synthesized classical Torah positions with the western practices of Aristotelian philosophy.

Islamic philosophy in the wake of the Muslim conquests The rapid fire Muslim conquests, which followed in the 7th and 8th centuries C.E., on the foundations laid by the Prophet Muhamad (571 C.E.-632 C.E.), disseminated new philosophical perspectives throughout the Middle East. The Golden Age of Islamic philosophy, coinciding with the Mediaeval Western high point in the 10th-12th centuries C.E., represented a rich interfusion of Middle Eastern with Western perspectives. *Kalam* (speech) was the name for a movement of sharply self-reflective versions of Muslim thought which directed attention to the Islamic sacred scriptures, and equipped Muslim intellectuals to meet the objections of Jewish and Christian contemporaries. The Islamic intellectual movement of *Falsafa* (philosophy) covers a wide variety of Muslim responses to central philosophical questions formulated long before in Aristotle and among the Neoplatonists. Among the outstanding thinkers of this period are *Al-Kindi* (801C. E.-873 C.E.), a prodigious mathematical philosopher, *Avicenna* (980 C.E.-1037 C.E.), a prolific author both on medicine--the theory of the body--and on logic and metaphysics, once again in fervent dialogue with Aristotle, and *Averroes* (1126 C.E.-1198 C.E.) a metaphysician and philosopher of history, as well as the supreme apologist for Islam.

India and East Asia in the Mediaeval Period The so-called Hindu synthesis emerged between 200 B.C.E. and 300 C.E., and represents an effort of Hindu Vedic thought, orthodox in purpose, to clarify the distinctive traits of Hinduism--distinguishing the Hindu philosophy from those of the Buddhists, Jains, and others. By the time of the Islamic conquests in the subcontinent, Buddhism had largely disappeared from the region--moving East, while Hinduism was spreading--also eastward, to Cambodia and Indonesia. This still Vedic--inspired wave of Hinduism continued to recognize the claims of both theology and philosophy, each feeding off the other.

An observation on philosophies of The Middle Period Christianity and Islam, two religions still unknown to the flourishing period of ancient philosophy, when foundational philosophic work was being carried out East and West, enter the picture in the Middle Period, tweaking philosophic thoughts--which increasingly turn to questions of salvation, evil, cosmic return, life as fallen--but In doing so hewing to the classic hermeneutic issues raised by metaphysic and epistemology among the Greeks, Buddhists, and early Hindus.

The Modern Period

Modern philosophy: The West The Renaissance (14th-mid 17th centuries C.E.) takes its name from the rebirth of interest, throughout Europe, in the culture of classical Greece and Rome. (Not to mention the developments of urbanization, capital economy, and military fire power which gradually triggered a world of nation states and increased communication.) In the thinking of such men as Francis Bacon (1561 C.E.-1626 C.E.) and Michel de Montaigne (1533 C.E.-1592 C.E.) we meet the Humanistic vigor of this 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 basic 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 these thinkers, the pivotal shaper of thoughts, as it had been in the Middle Ages.

17th-18th centuries Many factors contribute to the vigorous flowering of philosophical thought in the West, in the centuries leading from the Renaissance to our time. The replacement or reshaping of Christian theology marks much of the most forceful thought, as does the turn toward 'science,' which in the 17th century leads the way to fundamental revised perceptions of the cosmos and globe we find ourselves in. The determinant philosophies, of this first part of the modern period, are those of thinkers like Rene Descartes (1596 C.E.-1650 C.E.) or Thomas Hobbes (1588 C.E.-1679 C.E.), who exposed self, thought, and society to lucid scrutiny as free as they could make it from 'inherited prejudices.' The 18th century was commonly called *The Enlightenment*, for during that period in Europe the liberation of thought, from inherited 'prejudices,' became a banner for the freshly minted doctrine of 'progress.' Baruch Spinoza (1632 C.E.-1677 C.E.) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646 C.E.-1716 C.E.) created vast intellectual structures in which to formulate scientifically and mathematically coherent images of the human universe and our prospects in it. John Locke (1632 C.E.-1704 C.E.) and David Hume (1711 C.E.-1776 C.E.) 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.

19th and 20th centuries So rich is the development of philosophy, in the last two western centuries, that the west (and by increments the global community) must feel a new synthesis on the horizon. Such a synthesis was already adumbrated in the *Encyclopedia* of Hegel (1817 C.E.), with its effort to synthesize human knowledge as living philosophy. Immanuel Kant (1724 C.E.-1804 C.E.) devoted his *Three Critiques* to the issue of the possibility of knowledge, and carried us to an altitude from which we can perceive the intricate contribution of mind to the understanding of the object world. In the later 19th century we were to see powerful perspectives competing over the still vivid corpse of orthodox Christianity--Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 C.E.-1900 C.E.) devoting his fiery critiques to a Christianity which could still sting; Soeren Kierkegaard (1813 C.E.-1855 C.E.) finding in a dialectical access to Christianity a way to deal with his day's ethical pressure points; and Karl Marx (1818 C.E.-1883 C.E.) turning his back on every corner of the theist tradition, in which he saw pure superstition by which mankind delayed its own development. The twentieth century, enriching this challenging panorama, introduced a bevy of creative *isms*--Existentialism, Logical Positivism, Pragmatism--into the picture forming, dissolving, and then reforming over the noosphere of a new world.

Islamic philosophy in the modern world While Ibn Khaldun's dates (1332 C.E.-1406 C.E.) might seem to place him in the 'Middle Ages,' his daring social scientific studies--reflecting on the nature of history writing, the meaning of conflict and 'generation' in societal life, the significance of urbanization--would make him good conversation today. Subsequently, the traditions of classical Muslim philosophy were carried on in Persia, where speculative/metaphysical traditions like Illuminationism and Sufism--the latter globally strong to this day--kept the implications of intellectual Islam alive. The *Al-Nahda* movement erupted largely in Egypt, in the 19th and 20th centuries, contributing a modernist voice to the revision of Islamic doctrine and philosophy.

Indian philosophy in the modern world The story of Indian philosophy in the 'modern world' is still the story of Vedic foundations, now in the guise of Hindu nationalism. This deeply traditional, but at the same time flexible world view spoke to the founders of the modern Indian nation--Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekenanda, and Sri Aurobindo--all of whom were original philosophers, highly steeped in world traditions, and 'activists.'

Buddhist philosophy in the modern world During the Buddhist 'early modern period,' that is in the first five centuries of the common era, Buddhism realized its exceptional fertility, expanding into issues of psychology, metaphysics, and ethics which have no parallel for their subtlety. (We want to think of the chief voice of Mahayana

Buddhism, Nagarjuna (150 C.E.--250 C.E.), and of the monk, Vasubandhu (4th-5th centuries C.E.), whose epistemological idealism reawakens our sense of Immanuel Kant's work.) Contemporary Buddhism, both within the Far East and in the West which has awoken to it in our time, is one of humanity's hot growth spots at our moment. Its influence in American culture, from the hippies on, has been revelatory.

East Asian philosophy in the modern world Modern East Asian philosophy has borrowed extensively from Western and earlier Chinese trends: Mao Zhedong threw on the work of Karl Marx, while the influential school of Neo-Confucianism, promoted by Hu Shih, fed on the thought of Xiong Shili (1885 C.E.-1968 C.E.), who was himself a philosopher of consciousness, working to counter the Buddhist notion of emptiness. Japan was active, by the late 18th century, in appropriating the ideas of the Western Enlightenment--*Rangaku* is the descriptive term for this movement, which passed through a certain Dutch trading conduit into the Japan which was otherwise closed to foreigners. The Kyoto School, which developed into the early 20th century, foregrounded western-aware Professors, at the University of Kyoto, who were prepared to blend western scientific arguments into practices which derived essentially from Zen and other currents of traditional Japanese thought.

Observations on the whole foregoing review

1 It is evident that the slant of this review has been from the 'Westerner' angle. Had we begun with early Buddhist or Hindu thinking, which preceded Greco-Roman thought by centuries, we would have come out with a different product.

2 If the notion of philosophy is shifted to include theological issues, as well as more academic intellectual issues--like epistemology, logic, and ethics--our range of concerns here widens. I have tried for a wide sense of the term 'philosophy.'

3 If we widen our inquiry, as in the above point, we find ourselves wanting to include, say, 'African philosophy' or the 'philosophy of the Americas,' and certainly other largely oral culture-philosophies like those of the Maoris or the Inuit, which do not customarily hit the textbooks, but represent long seasoned thought on matters of human nature and destiny. That would be a wider set of issues than we can deal with here.

Readings

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Questions for discussion

Does theological speculation often overlap with philosophical thought? Give examples from world philosophy.

In the 17th century, in the West, there was a long lasting quarrel among intellectuals: who was greater, the Ancients or the Moderns? On the whole, do you think ancient philosophies were greater than modern philosophies?

What is the broad difference between Western and Asian philosophies? At what points do they intersect? Does our global, internet age lead to a merging of East with West, in philosophic thought?

Is the development of philosophy dependent on the use of writing? Is there anything distinctive to be said for oral philosophical traditions?

To what extent are major philosophical traditions dependent on their region of origin? Is Greek philosophy intimately linked to the country and region in which it was created? Hindu philosophy?

Is there progress in philosophy? Or is every age characterized by its distinctive set of concerns and responses, so that there is no progress?

You may have noticed that where there is reference, in our survey, to individual philosophers, it is always to men. Why no women?

The western ancients were concerned with the relation between poetry and philosophy. Does that relationship seem to be important, in the development of global philosophy?

Do the perspectives of the social sciences seem to you to belong to the province of philosophy? Or does the 'science' component, of the social sciences, disqualify them from the category of philosophy?

Is there something special to be learned from studying the development of philosophy from a global--as distinct from a national or regional--perspective?