Philosophy Essay, Research Paper

Philosophy is the oldest form of systematic, scholarly inquiry. The name comes

from the Greek philosophos, “lover of wisdom.” The term, however, has acquired

several related meanings: (1) the study of the truths or principles underlying

all knowledge, being, and reality; (2) a particular system of philosophical

doctrine; (3) the critical evaluation of such fundamental doctrines; (4) the

study of the principles of a particular branch of knowledge; (5) a system of

principles for guidance in practical affairs; and (6) a philosophical spirit or

attitude.

All of these meanings of philosophy are recognizable in the intellectual

traditions of ancient Greece. The pre-Socratics (see PRE-SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY)

sought to find fundamental, natural principles that could explain what

individuals know and experience about the world around them. The pre-Socratics

and, later, PLATO and ARISTOTLE tried to develop a comprehensive set of

principles that would account for their knowledge of both the natural and the

human world. In developing philosophies, these early thinkers saw that their

reflections could be used as a means of criticizing and often refuting

popularly accepted mythological views as well as the thoughts of their

predecessors and contemporaries. SOCRATES, at his trial, proclaimed a basic

philosophical premise, that “the unexamined life was not worth living.” By this

he meant that if people do not examine and critically evaluate the principles

by which they live, they cannot be sure that worthwhile principles exist. As

the Greek thinkers codified their pictures of the world, they saw that for each

science or study of some aspect of the world there could be a corresponding

philosophy of this science or study, such as the philosophies of science, art,

history, and so on. Each of these involves examining the fundamental

principles of a discipline to see if they are logical, consistent, and–most

important–true. Because ancient philosophers questioned the various ways of

life by which people live and sought the most satisfactory one, they developed

their philosophical attitudes and theories as guides to practical living. From

Socrates down to 20th-century thinkers like Bertrand RUSSELL and Jean Paul

SARTRE, a major element of the philosophical enterprise has been devoted to

trying to designate what constitutes the good life for humans both as

individuals and as social and political beings.

This kind of concern has contributed to the image of the philosopher as

standing aside from and impervious to all the ups and downs of everyday

existence. Michel de MONTAIGNE declared that “to philosophize is to learn to

die,” indicating that the philosopher can be philosophical even in the face of

death. The Stoic thinkers (see STOICISM) are usually seen as the epitome of

this sense of philosophy. They maintained their philosophical attitude of calm

reflection in the face of all sorts of temporary disasters.

philosophical questions

Because the term philosophy has various meanings, the nature of the field can

be most easily grasped by examining the kinds of problems and questions the

field deals with. In the beginnings of Western philosophy, the pre-Socratic

thinkers dealt primarily with a metaphysical question: What is the nature of

ultimate reality as contrasted to the apparent reality of ordinary experience?

They tried to determine whether some ultimate constituents of the world would

be the real and basic elements, whereas everything else would be ephemeral and

merely a surface appearance. If such a reality existed, would it be permanent

and unalterable, or would it be subject to change or alteration like everything

else? The pre-Socratics generated some of the basic problems involved in

defining reality, that is, in finding something so basic that it cannot be

explained by anything else. They found their attempts to present logical

explanations of their metaphysical theories ran into paradoxical results.

Could a permanent, unchanging reality account for a changing world? ZENO OF

ELEA became famous for working out his paradoxes, which claimed nothing could

really change or move. Some of his paradoxes and some of those connected with

the Greek ATOMISM still play a role in modern theoretical physics.

Over time, some aspects of the attempt to delineate reality became separated

from the metaphysical quest and became the subject matter of the various

natural sciences. This development has accelerated since the 17th century.

The areas of study that have been peeled off from philosophy and assigned to

the natural sciences include astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology, biology,

psychology, and others. An example of this process may be seen in the

consideration of a major metaphysical question, the relationship of mind and

body. Originally, Platonic metaphysics claimed that the body and the mind were

two separate and distinct entities. Plato, in fact, claimed the body was the

prison house of the soul or mind. In the 17th century, Rene DESCARTES

contended that mind and body were two separate and distinct substances that had

nothing in common although they interact. Several Indian schools of philosophy

hold a similar view. In the West this problem was gradually taken over by

psychologists and neurophysiologists. The present tendency is to reduce mental

phenomena to brain phenomena and thereby reduce the problem from a mind-body

problem to a body problem.

Another constant philosophical question, from Greek times up to the present,

has been to try to establish the difference between appearance and reality.

Once people learned about sense illusions, the question arose of how to tell

what seems to be from what really is. Skeptical thinkers have pressed the

claim that no satisfactory standard can be found that will actually work for

distinguishing the real from the apparent in all cases. On the other hand,

various philosophers have proposed many such criteria, none of which has been

universally accepted. Another type of question raised by philosophers is:

What is truth? Various statements about aspects of the world seem to be true,

at least at certain times. Yet experience teaches that statements that have

seemed to be true have later had to be qualified or denied. Skeptics have

suggested that no evidence would be able to tell, beyond any show of doubt,

that a given statement is in reality true. In the face of such a challenge,

philosophers have sought to find a criterion of truth, especially a criterion

of truth that would not be open to skeptical challenge.

Philosophers have also traditionally raised questions about values: What is

good? How can good be distinguished from bad or evil? What is justice? What

would a just society be like? What is beauty? How can the beautiful be

distinguished from the ugly? These questions all deal with matters of

evaluation rather than fact. Scientific investigation is of only slight help

in determining if abortion is bad or if Vermeer’s Milkmaid is a beautiful

picture. The values that are at issue are not perceived in the same way as

facts. If they were, much more agreement would exist about the specific

answers to value questions. The philosopher seeks to find some means of

answering these sorts of questions, which are often the most important ones

that a person can ask and which will exhibit the basis of a theory of values.

Philosophical methods

In view of the kinds of questions that philosophers deal with, what methods

does the philosopher use to seek the answers? The philosopher’s tools are

basically logical and speculative reasoning. In the Western tradition the

development of LOGIC is usually traced to Aristotle, who aimed at constructing

valid arguments and also true arguments if true premises could be uncovered.

Logic has played an important role in ancient and modern philosophy–that of

providing a clarification of the reasoning process and standards by which valid

reasoning can be recognized. It has also provided a means of analyzing basic

concepts to determine if they are consistent or not.

Logic alone, however, is not enough to answer philosophers’ questions. It can

show when philosophers are being consistent and when their concepts are clear

and unambiguous, but it cannot ascertain if the first principles or the

premises are correct. Here philosophers sometimes rely on what they call

intuition and sometimes on a speculative reasoning process. From their initial

premises, philosophers then try to work out a consistent development of their

answers to basic philosophical questions, following the rules of logic.

Irrationalist philosophers, however, such as the Danish thinker Soren

KIERKEGAARD, have contended that the less logical the solution to philosophical

problems, the better. Philosophers such as these sometimes argue that the most

important elements of existence and experience cannot be contained by logic,

which is, after all, an element of experience itself. The part, they argue,

cannot explain the whole.

Philosophy’s relation to other disciplines

Philosophy is both related to most disciplines and yet different from them.

Almost from the beginning of both mathematics and philosophy in ancient Greece,

relations were seen between them. On the one hand, the philosophers were

strongly impressed by the degree of certainty and rigor that appeared to exist

in mathematics as compared to any other subject. Some, like the

philosopher-mathematician PYTHAGORAS OF SAMOS, felt that mathematics must be

the key to understanding reality. Plato claimed that mathematics provided the

forms out of which everything was made. Aristotle, on the other hand, held

that mathematics was about ideal objects rather than real ones; he held that

mathematics could be certain without telling us anything about reality. In

more modern times, Descartes and Baruch SPINOZA used mathematics as their model

and inspiration for formulating new methods to discover the truth about

reality. The philosopher-mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von LEIBNIZ, the

co-discoverer (with Isaac Newton) of calculus, theorized about constructing an

ideal mathematical language in which to state, and mathematically solve, all

philosophical problems. Similar views have been advanced in the 20th century

as ways of resolving age-old philosophical difficulties. Attempts to

accomplish this have found far from unanimous approval, however.

Philosophy has both influenced and been influenced by practically all of the

sciences. The physical sciences have provided the accepted body of information

about the world at any given time. Philosophers have then tried to arrange

this information into a meaningful pattern and interpret it, describing what

reality might be like. Western philosophers over much of the last 2,500 years

have provided basic metaphysical theories for the scientists to fit their data

into and as the data changed, their metaphysical interpretations have had to be

adjusted. Thus the scientific revolution of the 17th century, encompassing the

scientific work of Johannes Kepler, Galileo, and Newton, was accompanied by a

metaphysical revolution led by such thinkers as Descartes, Spinoza, and

Leibniz.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the prevailing philosophers in

England and France came to the conclusion that the sciences are, and ought to

be, completely independent of traditional metaphysical interpretations.

Instead, the sciences should just try to describe and codify observations and

experiences. This approach has led in the last two centuries to a divorce of

philosophy from the sciences. What has developed in response is a new branch

of philosophy, the philosophy of science, which examines the methods of

science, the types of scientific evidence, and the ways the sciences progress.

A third intellectual area that has been intimately involved with philosophy is

religion. In ancient Greece some philosophers like ANAXAGORAS and Socrates

scandalized their contemporaries by criticizing aspects of Greek religion.

Others offered more theoretical approaches about the evidence for the existence

and nature of God or the gods. Some denied the existence of a deity. When

Christianity entered the Greek world, attempts were made to develop a

philosophical understanding of Christianity. Finally, toward the end of the

4th and beginning of the 5th century, Saint AUGUSTINE achieved a synthesis of

some of the elements of Platonic philosophy with the essentials of

Christianity. Throughout the Middle Ages, philosopher-theologians among the

Jews, Muslims, and Christians sought to explain their religions in rational

terms. They were opposed by antirational theologians who insisted that

religion is a matter of faith and belief and not of reasons and arguments.

After the Reformation, philosophers like Spinoza and David HUME began

criticizing the traditional philosophical arguments used by theologians. Hume

and Immanuel KANT sought to show that all of the arguments purporting to prove

the existence of God and the immortality of the soul were fallacious.

Philosophers sought to explain why people were religious on nonrational

grounds, such as psychological, economic, or cultural ones. The defenders of

religion found themselves estranged from the philosophers, who kept using the

latest results of science and historical research to criticize religion. Some,

like Kierkegaard, made a virtue of this estrangement, insisting that religious

belief is a matter of faith, and therefore not a matter of reason. More

recently, since World War II, a group of theologians who are interested in

recent philosophical developments and in the relationship between religion and

contemporary culture have attempted to discover what religious statements can

be intellectually meaningful. The history of the relation between philosophy

and theology is thus a long and mixed affair, running the gamut from clarifying

religion and providing a justification for it to tearing apart its intellectual

underpinnings and trying to see what is left that a 20th-century scientifically

oriented person can believe or take seriously.

branches of philosophy

The several different branches of philosophy correspond to the different

problems being dealt with. One of the most basic is EPISTEMOLOGY, the theory

of knowledge (episteme is Greek for knowledge). It deals with what can be

known, how it can be known, and how certain the individual can be about it. It

has special branches like the philosophy of science. The kinds of answers that

emerge from a particular epistemology usually structure its METAPHYSICS.

Metaphysics is the study of nature of reality, the study of what features of

experience are real and which are apparent. Aristotle called metaphysics the

study of being as such; the term ontology is often used to describe this branch

of philosophy today. How a person gets to know about pure being (an

epistemological problem) colors what it is that is known. The reverse is also

the case. What the individual thinks the world is really like colors what he

or she thinks can be known about it. How the individual reasons about the

world and how he or she can certify knowledge belongs to the branch of

philosophy called logic. Logic provides the rational framework for all

philosophical discussion, but is also itself open to metaphysical

interpretations about what sort of world it is explaining.

Other branches of philosophy such as ETHICS, AESTHETICS, and political

philosophy deal with evaluative aspects of the world such as what is good

conduct, what is beautiful, and what is socially and politically just. The

proposed answers to these questions are much involved with the philosopher’s

epistemological and metaphysical theories, and the values the philosopher

espouses color his or her epistemology and metaphysics. Sometimes the pursuit

of particular aspects of experience (such as sensations) or the use of

particular tools (such as the analysis of language) will reorient philosophical

inquiry or give birth to new branches of philosophy. Thus philosophy is never

reasoned in a vacuum. It is concerned not only with abstract questions; it is

also conditioned by history.

history of western philosophy

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The Pre-Socratics.

Western philosophy began in Greece, in the Greek settlement of Miletus in

Anatolia. The first known philosophers were THALES OF MILETUS and his

students, ANAXIMANDER and ANAXIMENES. Present-day knowledge of this MILESIAN

SCHOOL is based on fragments attributed to them by later writers. These first

philosophers were metaphysicians, seeking for an element or force behind

appearance that explained everything. Thales said that all was ultimately

water, Anaximander that it was boundless or the infinite, and Anaximenes that

it was air. Subsequent Greek philosophers, such as HERACLITUS and PARMENIDES,

argued about whether change or permanence was the basic feature of the world

and about whether one or more than one element was the fundamental constituent

of reality (see MONISM; PLURALISM). Greek philosophy before Socrates was

principally concerned with these metaphysical questions.

Socrates.

Socrates, an Athenian, was primarily interested in value questions that

affected what a person should do. At the time in Athens, the paid teachers,

the SOPHISTS, taught people how to live successfully; they did not raise the

Socratic question of what was the right way of life, however. Socrates did not

write anything, but he is vividly portrayed by his pupil Plato in the Dialogues

as being the “gadfly” of Athens, forever asking people why they are doing what

they are doing and making people realize that general principles were necessary

to justify their conduct. Socrates was finally arrested and accused of heresy

and corrupting the young of Athens. Socrates used his trial, described in

Plato’s Apology, as a final opportunity to make his general point. His

accusers, he showed, did not know what the charges actually meant and had no

evidence for them. He reported that the Delphic oracle had said that he,

Socrates, was the wisest of all of the Athenians. Socrates said he was the

wisest because he alone knew nothing and knew that he knew nothing, whereas

everybody else thought they knew something. In spite of his eloquence and

wisdom, Socrates was convicted and sentenced to death.

Plato.

After Socrates’ execution, his disciple Plato developed the first comprehensive

philosophical system and founded the Academy, the first formal philosophical

school. Plato contended that knowledge must be of universals (that is, of

general types or kinds) and not of particulars. To know a particular cat,

Miranda, the individual must first know what it is to be feline in general.

Otherwise he or she will not be able to recognize the particular feline

characteristics in Miranda. These universals, Plato claimed, were the basic

elements from which the world was formed. They are called the Forms, or

Platonic Ideas. Mathematics provides the most obvious cases of these Forms.

They are known not by sense perception but by reasoning. They are known by the

mind, not by the bodily organs. The world of Platonic Ideas is the unchanging

Forms of things. The philosopher should turn away from this world of

appearance and concentrate on the world of Forms. Plato, in his most famous

work, The Republic, said that the world would be perfect when philosophers are

kings and kings are philosophers. He believed that the philosopher-kings would

know what justice really is, and, based on their knowledge of the Forms, they

could then achieve justice in all societies.

For Plato the ultimate Idea, which illuminated the rest of the pure ideas, was

the Idea of the Good. As Plato grew older he became more mystical about this

idea. The school of NEOPLATONISM, which began a few centuries after his death,

stressed these otherworldly and mystical elements, identifying the idea of the

Good with God.

Aristotle.

Plato’s leading student, Aristotle, developed the most comprehensive

philosophical system of ancient times. Aristotle broke with Plato, stressing

the importance of explaining the changing world that humankind lives in as

opposed to the Platonic Ideas. Aristotle spent years studying the natural

sciences and collecting specimens, and about 90 percent of his writings are on

scientific subjects, mostly on biological ones. Aristotle believed he could

account for the changes and alterations in this world without either having to

deny their reality or having to appeal to another world. For Aristotle all

natural objects were composed of form and matter, and the changes that take

place in matter are the substitution of one form for another. This

substitution takes place because every natural object has a goal, or telos,

which it is its nature to achieve. Thus stones, because they are essentially

material, seek the lowest point, which is why they fall down. Each species is

ultimately trying to achieve a state of perfection which for Aristotle was a

state of perfect rest. The cosmos, as Aristotle saw it, is an ordered striving

for this perfection. The pinnacle of the order is the Unmoved Mover, the

ultimate cosmic agent, which fully and perfectly realizes its essence of

eternal thought. The heavenly spheres imitate the Unmoved Mover and by so

doing set the heavens in an eternal spherical motion; this process is repeated

by individual souls, and so on. Aristotle’s vision of the Cosmos remained

central to Western thought until the time of Nicolaus Copernicus.

Hellenistic and Roman Periods.

In the period from about 300 BC to AD 200 the central philosophical concerns

shifted to how an individual should conduct his or her life. The Stoics, the

Skeptics (see SKEPTICISM), and the Epicureans (see EPICUREANISM), although they

dealt with the classical epistemological and metaphysical issues, emphasized

the question of how humans should conduct themselves in a miserable world. All

these theories stressed withdrawal, whether physical, emotional, or

intellectual, from the turmoils of the day.

Medieval Period.

Greek philosophy was the major formative influence on the later philosophical

traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In all three, the theories of

the Greeks, particularly Plato and Aristotle, were employed to clarify and

develop the basic beliefs of the religious traditions.

PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA introduced Platonic ideas and methods into Jewish thought,

particularly into the interpretation of Scripture about the beginning of the

Christian era. He exerted little influence on later Jewish thought, however,

and the Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages seems to have developed as a

movement parallel to those in Islam. Important figures in early medieval

Jewish thought include Isaac Israeli, SAADIA BEN JOSEPH GAON, and the

Neoplatonist Solomon IBN GABIROL. The most important Jewish thinker of the

Middle Ages, however, was MAIMONIDES. Maimonides developed a comprehensive

interpretation of religion and understanding based on Aristotelian principles

that was influential in the Christian West as well as among Jewish thinkers.

In Judaism, as in Islam and Christianity, religious speculation and philosophy

developed in close connection. This development is particularly evident in the

Jewish mystical tradition, the KABBALAH. The esoteric teachings of these

schools have influenced much later Jewish thought, including that of Spinoza,

the most important Jewish philosopher of the early modern period. Drawing both

on his religious background and on the geometric method of Descartes, Spinoza

developed a philosophical PANTHEISM of great depth.

In the Islamic tradition as well the starting point was the work of Plato and

Aristotle. The 9th-century Neoplatonist al-KINDI was followed by al-FARABI,

who drew on both Plato and Aristotle to create a universal Islamic philosophy.

The most important of the medieval Muslim philosophers, however, was Avicenna

(ibn Sina). Starting from the distinction between essence and existence,

Avicenna developed a metaphysics in which God, the necessary being, is the

source of created nature through emanation. Both his metaphysics and his

intuitionist theory of knowledge were influential in the later Middle Ages as

well as in the later history of Islamic thought.

The philosophical tradition did not go unchallenged, however. The 11th-century

theologian and mystic al-GHAZALI mounted a critique of philosophy, specifically

Avicenna’s, that is rich in argument and insight. Al-Ghazali’s Incoherence of

the Philosophers provoked a response by AVERROES ibn Rushd entitled the

Incoherence of the Incoherence, in which al-Ghazali’s arguments are countered

point for point. Averroes was best known, however, as an interpreter of

Aristotle and excited great influence on all subsequent thinkers in the

Aristotelian tradition. In the later Middle Ages the historian and philosopher

IBN KHALDUN produced a trenchant critique of culture, and the elaboration of

metaphysics and epistemology was carried on in the theosophical schools of

Islamic mysticism.

The first systematic Christian philosophy was that of ORIGEN, but for the

European Middle Ages no authority could rival Saint Augustine. Augustine

elaborated a Neoplatonist vision combining the metaphysics of PLOTINUS with an

elaboration of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. To this he added an

epistemology in which knowledge is achieved through illumination by grace. No

substantial movement arose beyond Augustine until the 12th century, when new

interest arose in logic and theory of knowledge. In this connection the most

important figures are Saint ANSELM and Peter ABELARD.

In the late 12th and early 13th centuries the writings of Aristotle were

reintroduced into the West, first in translations from the Arabic and later in

direct translation. After some initial resistance Aristotle became the

dominant philosophical authority and remained so until the Renaissance. First

Saint ALBERTUS MAGNUS and then Saint Thomas AQUINAS combined Aristotle’s

philosophy with the tradition of Augustinian theology to produce a synthesis

holding that Aristotle was right about those things that are within the grasp

of reason, while what was beyond reason could only be known by faith. Thus

reason could prove that God exists, but his nature could be known only by

faith. More extreme Aristotelian schools developed and came into conflict with

the church, which, in 1277, issued condemnations of many positions held by

Aristotle and Aquinas, among others. In the 14th century two figures dominated

the scene: DUNS SCOTUS and WILLIAM OF OCCAM. Scotus developed an extemely

complex philosophy based on a number of earlier positions, and Occam’s

critiques of metaphysics and epistemology remain paradigms of philosophical

argument.

Rationalism.

The synthesis of Christianity and Aristotelianism was a major form of

SCHOLASTICISM, which dominated European philosophy into the 17th century.

During the Renaissance other forms of ancient philosophy began to be revived

and used as ammunition against the scholastics. This involved the Renaissance

Platonists and the Skeptics, as well as others interested in esoteric doctrines

like that of the Kabbalah. In terms of the future development of philosophy,

the revival of ancient skepticism played the greatest role. This view,

popularized by Montaigne in the late 16th century, raised the fundamental

epistemological problem of what can be known. The methods of the new

scientific schools conflicted with, and thus brought into question, the

principles inherited from the Middle Ages. Rene Descartes proposed a method

for guaranteeing knowledge. He argued that in order to provide a secure

foundation for knowledge it was necessary to discover “clear and distinct

ideas” that could not be doubted and could serve as a basis for deriving

further truths. He found such an idea in the proposition “I think, therefore I

am.” Using this as a paradigm, Descartes drew a distinction between thinking

substance and extended substance, or mind and matter. He went on to draw

conclusions about God, nature, and mind that continue to be influential. For

this reason Descartes is often considered the founder of modern philosophy.

A few years after Descartes’s death, Baruch de Spinoza offered his theory to

improve on that of Descartes. Spinoza insisted that only one substance, God,

exists, and that two of his attributes are thought and extension. Everything

that is and that can be known about is an aspect of God. Spinoza’s God,

however, was the antithesis of the God of traditional religion. God, or Nature

(as Spinoza put it), was the laws from which everything followed. In Spinoza’s

pantheistic world everything had to be what it was, and everything was to be

understood rationally. The mind and body were two aspects of the same thing,

which was to be understood either logically or in terms of natural science. A

third great 17th-century rationalist was Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. The

basic unit of his metaphysics, equivalent to a substance, was the monad, a

center of force or energy. Each monad was internally determined by its

definition. Monads could not interact, but, due to a “preestablished harmony,”

the action in one monad coincided with that in another. God chose the monads

in the world s