Philosophy

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Making sense of philosophy, whether as an idea, practice, or tradition, is not a simple task. This is largely because there is no agreement about what philosophy is or how it should be conducted. One way to make sense of philosophy is to define it etymologically. The word *philosophy* derives from the Greek words *philos*, meaning "loving," and *sophia*, meaning "wisdom." Hence, philosophy is said to be "the love of wisdom." *Philos*, moreover, denotes a special kind of love, that shown toward a friend. A philosopher is thus said to be both a friend and a lover of wisdom. These definitions, however, do not get us very far. For one thing, *wisdom* itself is a difficult concept to define. For another, every discipline values wisdom to one extent or another. We do not, however, necessarily take all disciplines to be philosophical.

A second way to make sense of philosophy is through formal definitions. In the *Euthydemus*, Plato, speaking through the character of Socrates, defines philosophy as the acquisition of knowledge. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates says that philosophy begins in wonder (*thaumazein*). In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says it is because of wonder that humanity began to philosophize. Philosophy is thus our response to the human appetite to discover. While it is somewhat helpful to link philosophy to wonder and learning, it is unhelpful to realize that the Greeks included under the umbrella of philosophy disciplines that we today do not regard as philosophical, such as the natural sciences. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, G. W. F. Hegel defines philosophy as the study of the rational in the here and now, as opposed to an otherworldly realm of transcendental rational perfection. Martin Heidegger, in what commentators refer to as "the Natorp essay," defines philosophy as the attempt to make explicit what is implicit in human life and practice. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein says philosophy is not a set of propositions, but rather an activity aimed at clarifying the meaning of propositions. Given these multiple and varying definitions, it is difficult to extract a consistent meaning for philosophy. It becomes more difficult still when we take into account the great many definitions of philosophy offered by a great many other philosophers throughout the history of philosophy.

A third way to make sense of philosophy is to understand it historically, as a grand conversation extended over time, one that began in the ancient world and that continues into the present day. This is more or less what Alfred North Whitehead had in mind when, in *Process and Reality* (1929, p. 39), he says "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." While this is doubtless a gross oversimplification, Whitehead nonetheless expresses here a practical way to make sense of philosophy. Rather than

treating philosophy as possessing some core or essence that transcends time and context, we are better off regarding it as a tradition shaped by those who have historically participated in it. This, of course, means that there are as many philosophical traditions as there have been historical conversations, European and non-European, about the subject matter to which philosophers have historically devoted their lives.

Major historical periods and schools of thought

Although curiosity and reflection about the world likely extend back in time beyond the limits of recorded history to the very origins of the human species, "philosophy" in the sense of systematic inquiry into truth, meaning, and reality is, properly speaking, a luxury of civilization. This luxury was made possible by two historical developments. The first is the rise of agriculture, which effectively eliminated the need for hunting and gathering, thereby creating the possibility of extended periods of leisure time, a phenomenon unknown in hunter-gatherer cultures. The second is the invention of writing, which greatly advanced the human capacity for abstract forms of thinking. Writing enabled vast leaps beyond the immediacy and superficiality of the here and now. It revolutionized human consciousness and phenomenal experience, giving us the ability to inquire in a systematic manner into the past and future, the near and the distant, the particular and the general, the simple and the complex. The combination of agriculture and writing thus created the conditions for thinking deeply about the world and the nature of reality. It is for this reason that many historical civilizations, in addition to giving rise to religious belief, also gave rise to something like what we today call "philosophy." Following standard historical models, we can divide the history of philosophy into four distinct periods: ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary.

Ancient philosophy

Because there are no strict or conventionally agreed-upon criteria for separating religion from philosophy, or literature from philosophy, or art from philosophy, or science from philosophy—as each of these genres of thought, expression, and practice fulfills a common range of primordial human yearnings—it is difficult to identify exactly where and when the first philosophical traditions began. Eurocentric histories typically trace the origins of philosophy proper to Greece in the 6th century BCE. However, a more broad-minded approach would acknowledge that philosophy is not necessarily of an exclusively European origin. We can, for example, identify kernels of philosophical thinking in the surviving literary artifacts of numerous ancient civilizations, including Sumeria, Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria, civilizations to which much of the moral and cultural heritage of the West can be traced.

Perhaps the oldest formal tradition of philosophy is that of ancient China, a tradition that dates back to around 2000 BCE. Because of the radically different character of ancient Chinese philosophy, there is a certain challenge in making sense of it through Western philosophical categories. The traditional focus of Western philosophy has long been the search for universal principles, whereas that of ancient Chinese

philosophy was the perfection of social and spiritual practices. The difference stems not from any superiority in philosophical sophistication in the one over the other, but rather in the starting metaphysical assumptions about the world—assumptions reflecting very different practical experiences. The relative insularity of ancient China allowed for the development of stable communities of tradition whose primary preoccupations were social and spiritual harmony. Ancient Chinese philosophy was therefore devoted to the achievement of harmony above all else. The single greatest figure of ancient Chinese philosophy was Confucius, the renowned sage of political wisdom. Confucius taught his students an intricate moral, political, and spiritual code by which to conduct public affairs, a code that has come to define the ethos of so many Sinitic cultures to this day. In this respect, it is not an exaggeration to say that Confucianism is very much a living philosophy.

The beginnings of ancient Indian philosophy date back to the 7th century BCE in the early principles of ethics, ontology, and cosmology codified in the Vedas, the core canonical texts of numerous schools of Hindu thought. These schools include Sāṅkhya, Vaiśeṣika, Yoga, and Vedānta. One of the most philosophically rigorous schools of ancient Indian philosophy was Nyāya, the school of logic, which produced systematic analyses of the aims, types, and principles of formal reasoning. Nyāya developed in response to the needs of legal courts, and in turn greatly influenced the philosophy and practice of ancient Indian jurisprudence. The most influential school of ancient India, however, was Vyākaraṇa, a tradition of linguistics and philosophy of language whose defining figure was the great Pāṇini. A large number of modern and contemporary linguists and philosophers of language have drawn direct inspiration from Pāṇini's linguistic analyses of Sanskrit, including Franz Bopp, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Noam Chomsky.

Buddhism, a spiritual movement more akin to a science of mind than a religion per se, arose within the context of 6th-century BCE Hindu thought and culture. Buddhism, then and now, revolves around the teachings of its founder, Siddārtha Gautama, otherwise known as the Buddha. Unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Buddhism is categorically nontheistic. The focus of Buddhist practice is the internal dynamics of the human mind, rather than any external or personal object of worship and devotion. Also unlike the monotheistic religions, Buddhism takes change to be the only permanent feature of reality and thus regards the human craving for permanence, especially the fixity of the self, as something to be overcome. Buddhism teaches that the craving for a stable and secure self is the root of all suffering. In fact, it regards the self as an obstacle on the path to enlightenment. Early Buddhism split into several schools, including the Abhidharma, Madhyamika, and Yogacara schools, the latter two being part of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism. These schools developed individual variations on the core Buddhist principles of ontology, epistemology, ethics, and philosophical psychology. Because faith in the unseen plays no part in Buddhist teachings, each of these schools placed an enormous emphasis upon phenomenal experience as well as logic and reasoning.

Western philosophy is commonly said to have begun in the 6th century BCE with Thales of Miletus. Thales inaugurated the tradition of inquiry into the underlying principles of reality, or what later came to be known as metaphysics. He was the

first of a diverse group of pre-Socratic philosophers, who included Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Parmenides, and Zeno of Elea. While the pre-Socratics dominated the 6th and 5th centuries, the 4th century saw a major shift in philosophical focus. This shift was brought about for two reasons. The first was the rise of the sophists, the wandering teachers of ancient Greece, who trained students and aspiring politicians in the art of persuasive oratory. The sophists brought ethics and politics to the forefront of philosophical consciousness. The second reason was the birth of the subversive style of critical inquiry of Socrates, without question the single most revered figure in the history of Western philosophy. The teachings of Socrates were captured in powerful and dramatic literary form in the celebrated dialogues of his famous student, Plato. For countless students of philosophy over the last two millennia, the dialogues of Plato have served as the clearest introduction to the central questions of Western philosophy. They cover an impressive range of topics, including ethics, politics, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, and even the nature of communication. In addition to having authored the dialogues, Plato also established the Academy, a renowned institution of learning in which he taught philosophy to generations of Athenian students. The most distinguished alumnus of Plato's Academy was Aristotle, a philosopher who rivals Plato in terms of sheer influence upon Western thought. Aristotle was a grand systematizer, a polymath who sought to understand reality in all its multifarious richness. In contrast to the light and playful literary style of Plato's dialogues, Aristotle produced a veritable library of formal treatises on a formidably wide range of topics, including physics, astronomy, zoology, meteorology, aging, and dreams. While Platonism thrived for several centuries after Plato, eventually falling into oblivion, Aristotelianism went through a much longer cycle of ebbs and flows, having all but died after the Renaissance, only to be revived again in the 20th century by European virtue ethicists.

Three other major schools of philosophy shaped the intellectual climate of ancient Greece. First there was stoicism, which regarded the emotions as a source of corruption in human judgment, and which elevated duty to the status of an ideal. Second, there was Epicureanism, which regarded pleasure as the ultimate standard of practical reason, thereby serving as a rival to stoicism. Finally, there was skepticism, a movement so dedicated to inquiry that its members refused to commit themselves to any concrete conclusions about the world. The skeptics took critical inquiry to such extreme lengths that they remained in a perpetual state of suspended, inconclusive belief.

Even though Rome succeeded Greece as the political and intellectual center of the Western world, it offered little that could compare with the achievements of Greek philosophy, and this despite the generous benefaction of Marcus Aurelius, the great Roman philosopher-statesman. This lack of philosophical output, however, was due less to inability and more to a negative perception of philosophy as an effeminate activity. Nonetheless, the Roman Empire produced two thinkers who would prove to be of great importance to Western thought. The first was Plotinus, who founded the school of neo-Platonism. The second was Cicero, the philosopher-statesman who valued Greek philosophy more than did any of his political colleagues, and whose writings on oratory became part of the canon of the rhetorical tradition.

Despite its status as "pagan" philosophy, ancient Greek and Roman thought played a powerful role in ancient Western schools of religious philosophy. This debt is best exemplified in the thought of Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish Hellenistic philosopher. It can also be found in the thought of a number of early Christian philosophers, including Clement, Augustine, Origen, and Philoponus.

Medieval philosophy

The era of medieval philosophy began in the 5th century CE following the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rise of the Catholic Church. The influence of early Christian thinkers, especially Augustine and Boethius, was decisive in setting the agenda for philosophical inquiry for the next seven centuries. Augustine's philosophical approach to theological questions shaped the style of medieval philosophy, while Boethius's translations and commentaries on Aristotle's texts on logic shaped its subject matter. Medieval philosophy was, through and through, religious philosophy, addressing questions of metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, and language as they ultimately pertained to religious belief. Initially, the range of medieval philosophical inquiry was very narrow, a fact owing to the limited number of translations of Greek texts; hence the intense early focus on logic. This changed in the 12th century, however, when the great wealth of Greek texts was translated into Latin, opening up new areas of inquiry. Two other factors contributed to the form and content of medieval philosophy. The first was the birth of the university, which provided formal training in philosophy and theology. The second was the art of disputation, an art practiced within the university as part of formal academic training. The systematic philosophical treatises for which the medieval era is best known were written in the genre of the disputation.

The central school associated with the medieval university and the genre of the disputation is known as scholasticism. Scholasticism is less of a tradition of thought and more of a style of teaching and writing. Some of the most prominent thinkers associated with the scholastic movement include Peter Abelard, Anselm of Canterbury, Albert the Great, Roger Bacon, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas's philosophical treatises were so rigorous and authoritative that they soon came to represent official Catholic doctrine. Thomism remains alive and well to this day, though it is largely limited to Southern Europe. The 14th and 15th centuries also produced a large number of pioneering thinkers who would exert considerable influence upon Western thought and culture. These include Dante Alighieri, Duns Scotus, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Thomas à Kempis, and William of Occam, the English Franciscan monk who developed the critical method known as Occam's razor.

While Catholic philosophy dominated the medieval period, it was by no means the only type. Both within Europe and in the Near East, Islam and Judaism gave rise to a remarkable number of prodigious intellectual giants, many of whom had a profound impact upon Catholic thought. Some of the greatest Islamic and Jewish philosophers from the medieval period include al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Solomon ibn Gabirol, and Moses Maimonides. Writing in Arabic rather than Latin, these thinkers were often incredibly versatile polymaths who, like Aristotle before them, mastered multiple fields of knowledge and produced authoritative texts on topics

as diverse as philosophy, physics, chemistry, mathematics, psychology, medicine, and music. To many historians today, the sheer dynamism, originality, and mutual influence between the three monotheistic religions during the medieval era stand as a model for multicultural coexistence and intellectual productivity.

The rediscovery of Greek and Roman texts not only fueled a desire to exemplify the best of the classical tradition, but also eventually impelled a movement away from scholasticism toward humanism, a new intellectual style and ethos, one less dry, formal, and abstract. The birth of humanism brought about a profound change in perspective, placing humanity at the center of philosophical reflection. Suddenly, the human being was no longer just a subject who pondered the meanings of the universe, but also an object of intense wonder and fascination. Humanist philosophers marveled at the power of human faculties, especially the faculty of language—of speech, writing, and eloquence. This newfound interest in humanity was seen as a new appreciation of God, since humanity was thought to be created in God's image.

Renaissance humanist thinking was best represented by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, whose *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) offered an exalted view of humanity, one markedly different from that of the early Christian fathers, who were notorious for their characterization of human nature as irremediably sinful and even contemptible. The most prominent and influential figure of Renaissance humanism, though, was Desiderius Erasmus, a master of classical languages, scholar of classical texts, translator of early Christian patristic writings, theologian, and philosopher of humanistic education. Despite the positive and creative thrust of humanist thought and culture, there was a dark, even cynical, underside to the Renaissance. Niccolò Machiavelli's political philosophy challenged the principled stance of conventional humanist ethics and politics, arguing that the sovereign was not bound by abstract conceptions of justice, but rather was required to respond to the demands of practical circumstances, even if it meant deploying arbitrary force and violence. Michel de Montaigne, best known for the Renaissance revival of ancient skepticism, reached negative conclusions about the status of knowledge very much like those of his ancient predecessors. Montaigne also insisted that human values were culturally relative and that each culture ought to follow its own internal tradition rather than seek tradition-independent criteria of ethical judgment, a view that ran counter to the humanist belief in universal values. The Renaissance was therefore an intellectual culture of some internal tension and conflict.

Modern philosophy

Modern philosophy begins with René Descartes. Disappointed by an intellectual climate in which scripture and faith failed to provide the collective sense of certainty that so many philosophers had promised and so many others had craved, Descartes set out to discover an incontrovertible ground upon which genuine, certain knowledge could be attained. To this end, he proposed a dramatic thought experiment involving a demon, deception, and doubt. This thought experiment concluded in his now-famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum*: "I think. Therefore, I am." Although Descartes did not succeed in convincing his contemporaries or later generations of his claim to have discovered

rock-solid foundations for true knowledge, he did manage to set in motion a search for such foundations—a search that continues to this day. Of the many foundation-seeking efforts, Descartes inaugurated in particular the tradition of rationalism.

The distinctive feature of rationalism is the view that foundations can be secured through pure reason or abstraction. Because the senses are unreliable, often deceiving us as to the nature of reality, they cannot possibly be a basis for absolute certainty; hence the necessity of relying upon reason alone. After Descartes, the two leading figures of early modern rationalism were Baruch Spinoza and G. W. Leibniz. Spinoza drew from Euclid, Descartes, and Nicolas Malebranche to develop a "geometrical" form of reasoning, in which inferences proceed on the basis of multiple self-evident axioms that form a solid foundation. Using the geometrical method, Spinoza arrived at no fewer than fifty-eight propositions whose validity he took to be absolutely certain, including the claim that the universe is composed of a single substance: God. Leibniz, on the other hand, departed from Spinoza to develop an elaborate system of logical principles and an Aristotelian concept-containment theory of truth to guide philosophical inquiry. Through this complex method, Leibniz arrived at the conclusion that the material world was no more than an illusion of the human mind. All that exists are immaterial substances, which he termed *monads*.

In contrast to rationalism, the empiricist tradition held the view that true knowledge is grounded in sensory experience. The precursors to empiricism were William of Occam and Francis Bacon, both of whom proposed theories of knowledge that elevated empirical investigation over logical necessity and self-evident truths. Another early forerunner of empiricism was Thomas Hobbes. Writing in the 17th century, Hobbes had proposed an organic conception of language according to which ideas and concepts grow from the seeds of sensory experience. The first true figure of the empiricist tradition, though, was John Locke. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke observed that thinking requires ideas, and that ideas are invariably rooted in sensory experience. Locke proceeded to develop an elaborate theory of language, one that challenged Descartes concerning the existence of innate ideas and that offered a complex taxonomy of conceptual categories and their role in personal identity. Locke's philosophy did not go unchallenged, however. Some of his fiercest early critics included Thomas Reid, Joseph Butler, and George Berkeley.

The next great empiricist after Locke was David Hume. At a young age, Hume grew disillusioned with the state of philosophy in his day, regarding it as lost in abstract speculation and burdened by irresolvable conflict. He set out to provide a new way of doing philosophy, one that would illuminate the truth about human nature in all its many dimensions. Hume's bitter intolerance for groundless speculation, whether rationalist or religious, led to a resolute insistence that true knowledge can only be derived from empirical verification. Hume was therefore the epitome of a naturalist philosopher. He developed a rigorous method of empirical inquiry by which to investigate human nature, especially the human mind. Hume's empiricism proved to be enormously influential, having either shaped or challenged the thinking of intellectual figures as diverse as Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, and Charles Darwin. Even today, Hume's philosophy remains influential in the field of cognitive science, as evidenced by the work of Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor.

Hume's thought would awaken one of the greatest philosophers of the modern era, and indeed of the history of Western philosophy, from his "dogmatic slumber." The staggering influence of Immanuel Kant upon modern and contemporary philosophy is difficult to appreciate, let alone calculate. Kant took careful stock of the longstanding rivalry between rationalism and empiricism, and realized that what had long been regarded as an irresolvable conflict was in fact a false choice. Neither was entirely correct or entirely mistaken. A true theory of knowledge, Kant believed, would need to acknowledge and synthesize insights from both traditions. Kant's model for inquiry, one that reveals the merits and flaws of both rationalism and empiricism, was the natural sciences. On the one hand, scientific knowledge is the outcome of empirical verification. On the other, scientific inquiry proceeds through a priori principles and assumptions that are not, and cannot be, the outcome of empirical verification. The question, then, was whether these principles are universally valid. Kant therefore conducted an unprecedented investigation into the nature of rationality and self-consciousness. The revolutionary view that he advances in *Critique of Pure Reason* is that we do not apprehend the world directly; we have no access to essences, the long-sought-after "thing-in-itself." Rather, our experience of the world is mediated by a priori concepts. Kant concludes that that these concepts can be shown to be universally valid, that reason is sovereign, that metaphysics is possible, and that we can indeed arrive at certain knowledge. In making this argument, he reined in the excesses of rationalism and empiricism alike. He then sought to do for ethics what he had done for epistemology, aiming to show how we can arrive at universally valid moral judgments. He sought, moreover, to provide an account of aesthetic judgments, though he denied that certainty was possible in this domain.

The priority that Kant accorded to the transcendental unity of apperception inaugurated the tradition of German idealism, a tradition that saw ideas, not things, as the heart of reality. Among the early major figures of idealism were J. G. Fichte, Friedrich Schiller, and F. W. J. Schelling, all of whom developed variations on the idealist project, and who helped shape the agenda of German philosophy for the next century. While each of them made enormous contributions, none of them compares in terms of originality, breadth, or historical influence to Hegel. If Kant is the greatest Western philosopher since Plato and Aristotle, it is no exaggeration to say that Hegel is the second. The formidable system that Hegel constructed is still being grappled with in one form or another to this day. Caught between an Enlightenment culture that exaggerated the powers of reason and a counter-Enlightenment culture that exaggerated reason's relativity and impotence, Hegel took on the task of reconciling the two cultures by preserving what was genuinely valuable in the Enlightenment without giving in to its wilder conclusions. In a number of densely argued books, the most celebrated being *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel provided an alternative to Kant's thought. While acknowledging the role of concepts in mediating our perception of reality, Hegel denied their a priori status. Instead, he advanced an organic conception of mind and language, according to which the concepts that guide thought, speech, and action develop over time through what he called "experience." This development, however, is not random or haphazard. Rather, much like a seed that eventually grows into a tree, ideas develop according to something like a genetic goal. Hegel's theory of mind was therefore also a theory of history, one driven by concepts, rather than the material

world. Hegel thus took a teleological view of reality, arguing that history is moving toward a final, grand conclusion in the form of what he termed Absolute Awareness.

While the primary focus of the rationalist, empiricist, and idealist traditions was questions of metaphysics and epistemology, modern political philosophy addressed the question of justice in the absence of divine authority. The first major figure of modern political philosophy was Hobbes, a contemporary and interlocutor of Descartes. Hobbes put forth the view that a just society is one based on a social contract between the citizens of a sovereign state. While Hobbes proposed an absolutist conception of state power, the two major subsequent figures in the social contract tradition, Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, each proposed more democratic models of the social contract based on the principles of liberty and equality. Rousseau's thought would become a major catalyst in the French Revolution, while Locke's would serve as the guiding inspiration for the political vision and structure outlined in the American Constitution. The social contract tradition remains the dominant paradigm in Western political philosophy, as demonstrated by the recent work of John Rawls.

Unlike the social contract tradition, which accorded priority to the individual, Hegel's political philosophy granted priority to the larger system of which the individual was a part (and by virtue of which the individual has any reality at all). Hegel's emphasis on systems over individuals, and wholes over parts, led to his conception of the state as an organic entity with its own historical personality and integrity. Without dissolving the category of the individual into a status of complete insignificance, his political philosophy nonetheless tempered what he took to be the disorders of modern individualism.

Shortly after Hegel died, his intellectual heirs split into two rival factions: left and right. The left faction came to be known as the Young Hegelians, the most famous member of whom was Karl Marx. Unhappy with what he took to be the useless abstraction of Hegel's writings and those of his followers, Marx reversed Hegel's order of historical explanation, arguing that economic relations, not abstract concepts, were the driving force of history. Marx retained the teleological component of Hegel's thought, but put it in the service of a radical political vision. The incredible power and appeal of this vision inspired numerous radical movements, including Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, and Maoism. Some of these movements eventually resulted in revolutions that solidified into long-term political regimes, the largest and most significant being the Soviet Union. Although it would be deeply misguided to trace each of these regimes directly to Marx, it is not an exaggeration to say that Marx exerted a profound, if indirect, influence upon world history.

The heady optimism of modern philosophy, with its promise not only of epistemological certainty but also of a rational political world, eventually confronted a deeply cynical reading of the human condition. Unlike the rationalist, empiricist, and idealist traditions, Arthur Schopenhauer rejected the view that the world was rational at all. On the contrary, he saw a deeper and far more powerful form of nonrational instincts at work, instincts that lie beneath the level of conscious awareness and that defy explicit articulation. Schopenhauer regarded these instincts as the true driving force of history, thereby reducing modern philosophy to only so much naive and wishful thinking. Søren Kierkegaard similarly perceived the limits of modern philosophy, arguing that the appeal to reason could only go so far, beyond which the decision to

adopt this or that philosophical conclusion was a matter of arbitrary choice. Despite his devout Christianity, Kierkegaard's worldview was irrationalist at its core, seeing human existence as fundamentally absurd. For this reason, he is widely regarded as the father of existentialism. By far, however, the most severe challenge to the Western philosophical tradition was that leveled by Friedrich Nietzsche. On the one hand, Nietzsche produced a devastating critique of Christianity and Western morality, a critique guided by a historical method he termed "genealogy." He then applied this method to Western philosophy, seeing it as the secular extension of religious metaphysics. As he read the tradition, what religion and philosophy alike sought to provide for humanity was truth and certainty, two Western values that Nietzsche dissected with remarkable analytical insight, and which he tore apart with great relish. Because of his unorthodox, poetic, and often-cryptic writing style, Nietzsche was an obscure and unrecognized figure during his lifetime. When his insights finally began to be appreciated shortly after his death, they ate away at the foundations of the Western tradition, leaving it in a state of disrepair from which it has never fully recovered. In a very literal sense, then, Nietzsche was the first true postmodern philosopher.

Contemporary philosophy

Because of philosophy's millennia-long history, "contemporary philosophy" and "recent philosophy" are typically used to designate the period beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and extending through to the present day. The contemporary period is usually divided by geography, with Anglo-American analytic philosophy contrasted to Continental philosophy. While somewhat useful, this division is nonetheless misleading for three reasons. First, it feeds the false impression that analytic and Continental philosophy are rival and incompatible traditions, which is not the case. There are areas of both compatibility and incompatibility between them. Second, it obscures the deep divisions internal to each of them. Third, it excludes a significant tradition that belongs to neither analytic nor Continental philosophy, and that cannot be reduced to a particular geographical region: pragmatism. Hence, some caution is required in making sense of contemporary philosophy through conventional geographic divisions.

While there is agreement that analytic philosophy began in the late 19th century, there is some disagreement as to why it began and who its founding figures were. According to one account, it was founded by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell in response to the British idealists of the 19th century: T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, and J. M. McTaggart. Moore and Russell famously despised the style and substance of British idealism, tracing its supposed confusion and obscurantism to Hegel. On this account, analytic philosophy was born of a deep animosity toward Continental thought. According to a more recent reading, analytic philosophy formally began with Gottlob Frege, who was educated into an already existing German tradition of mathematical logic. Frege's thought was hardly a reaction to Continental thinking. Regardless of which reading is correct, the original aim of analytic philosophy was nonetheless clear: to analyze language, logic, and mathematics, the core components of rational thought and inquiry, by breaking them down into their most basic, indivisible components and seeking to understand their relationship

within a complex system. Analytic philosophy is often thought to be little more than the technical study of language, though this view is deeply misleading.

In a long series of papers and books, Frege took up the legacy of Leibniz and revolutionized the fields of philosophical logic and the philosophy of language, developing a sophisticated theory of formal proofs and an equally sophisticated semantic theory. One of Frege's students was Rudolf Carnap, who, along with Otto Neurath, Kurt Gödel, Hans Hahn, and Moritz Schlick, among others, would form the group known as the Vienna Circle of logical positivism. The Vienna Circle can be seen as the wing of the analytic school addressing the philosophy of science, a field that would later be revolutionized by the work of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. Russell's contribution to analytic philosophy was similar to that of Frege, including pioneering work of lasting significance in the fields of mathematics, logic, semantics, and metaphysics. In addition to his work in philosophy, Russell was also a public intellectual who campaigned against traditional social mores, religion, nuclear technology and weaponry, and the Vietnam War, though these latter aspects of his life and thought are not necessarily reflective of the analytic school. Unlike Frege and Russell, Moore was very much a piecemeal thinker, posing isolated sets of philosophical challenges to conventional thought, but without offering systematic analyses of any kind. He is best known for his naturalistic reformulation of ethical theory, which had the effect of putting the field of moral philosophy in the English-speaking world to sleep for the next half-century.

The most famous and controversial philosopher of the analytic school was Ludwig Wittgenstein, a colleague of Russell and Moore at Cambridge. Wittgenstein's place within the analytic school is complicated by a change of heart between the early and later periods of his career. The early period is best characterized by rigorous, systematic analyses of logic, language, and the philosophy of mind; the later period, by a new view of philosophy as a form of therapy for the insatiable and misguided metaphysical yearnings of old. The later Wittgenstein has since become a source of inspiration, mystification, and confusion for philosophers both within and beyond the analytic school.

Analytic philosophy underwent something of a transformation in the postwar era. This transformation was brought about by two key developments. The first is Willard Van Orman Quine's forceful critique of the famous analytic–synthetic distinction of empiricism. Quine's critique is generally accepted today as having revealed a fundamental flaw in empiricism and logical positivism. Since Quine, a new line of thought has emerged that approaches the central questions of analytic philosophy in a less atomistic and more holistic manner, one markedly different from that of Russell, Moore, and the early Wittgenstein. Leading figures in this line include Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and Daniel Dennett. The second development is the rise of cognitive linguistics resulting from the work of Noam Chomsky. Challenging the dominant views of language and mind that prevailed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chomsky argued that the human species possesses a biological faculty for language that enables it to acquire specific languages without learning their complex rules of grammar. This thesis had profound implications, not just for psychology and linguistics, but also for the philosophy of language and mind. Contrary to the thrust of late modern philosophy, Chomsky advanced and defended a philosophy

of language whose forefather was Descartes. The ensuing explosion of scientific and philosophical interest in Chomsky's research on language and mind has ensured that analytic philosophy remains a thriving field.

Unlike analytic philosophy, Continental philosophy is not a school of thought. Rather, it is a collection of disparate and sometimes incompatible schools that have been competing for intellectual dominance in Europe since the Enlightenment. Its origins lie in Kant, Hegel, and German idealism. It also owes an enormous debt to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. At least four distinct schools of contemporary Continental thought can be traced back to these figures. The first is the school of hermeneutics and phenomenology. Although often treated independently of each other, they in fact share common origins and overlap with one another considerably. Hermeneutics began as an art of interpretation. In its contemporary form, however, it is a philosophical meditation upon language, communication, and the human condition. The early figures of this line of thought were Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. Contemporary hermeneutics regards interpretation as the key to understanding the nature of being and existence. Phenomenology, by contrast, is the philosophical study of consciousness and the structure of experience. Its founder was Edmund Husserl, who sought to provide a new form of epistemological foundations, one that could serve as a counterpart to rationalism and empiricism. Husserl's assistant, Martin Heidegger, would later take phenomenology in an antifoundationalist and anti-humanist direction, a combination that would prove incredibly potent and germinative for 20th-century philosophy. Heidegger's thought represents a synthesis of both hermeneutics and phenomenology. He greatly influenced Hans-Georg Gadamer, the representative figure of philosophical hermeneutics, as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur, the representative figures of French phenomenology. Heidegger had some influence upon Hannah Arendt too, whose political thought can be understood as phenomenological in orientation.

A second school of Continental thought is existentialism, at once a philosophical school and a literary movement. Its defining figure is Jean-Paul Sartre, who captured the spirit of existentialism both in philosophical works and in novels. While extremely difficult to define, not least because it runs against the grain of so much of traditional philosophy, existentialism can be broadly understood as the philosophical study of human existence. In this respect, it is very much a humanistic philosophy. The questions of meaning, identity, and authenticity lie at the heart of existentialist inquiry. In addition to Sartre and his lifelong companion Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneering feminist theorist, prominent 20th-century existentialist philosophers and novelists include Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, José Ortega y Gasset, André Gide, and Samuel Beckett.

A third school of thought is the German neo-Marxist tradition known as critical theory. Also referred to as the Frankfurt School, the tradition of critical theory officially began with the establishment of the Institute for Social Research in 1929. Its two major early figures were Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who together proposed a new type of philosophy with the primary goal of advancing social emancipation through social and cultural critique. The broad theoretical framework that guided this project was based on insights from German idealism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis.

Critical theory can be divided into at least three generations. In addition to Adorno and Horkheimer, the first generation includes Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal, and Herbert Marcuse. The second generation is dominated by Jürgen Habermas, whose theory of communicative action stands as among the most significant philosophical projects in Continental thought today. The third phase includes feminist philosophers, such as Seyla Benhabib, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, as well as the neo-Hegelian social philosopher Axel Honneth.

A fourth school is structuralism and poststructuralism, two theoretical approaches that, while distinct and in certain respects contrary to one another, nonetheless share common roots in antihumanist thought. Structuralism originated in the fields of linguistics and cultural anthropology. Its founding figures were Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss while its later figures include Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, and Louis Althusser. At its core, structuralism is the study of deep, underlying, universal codes or patterns that govern human thought, speech, and action—codes and patterns that belie the humanist belief in individual agency and autonomy. Lévi-Strauss sought to uncover such patterns in cultural practices as various as science, religion, philosophy, and art. Saussure, on the other hand, sought to accomplish a similar task in the domain of language. Both the anthropological and linguistic varieties of structuralism were dedicated to unlocking the supposedly universal features of the human mind. Structuralism was eventually subjected to systematic and relentless critique by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, two postwar French intellectuals who have come to occupy a canonical place in Continental philosophy. Foucault applied Nietzsche's genealogical method to numerous domains of thought and institutional practice, including the human sciences, modern medicine, and modern prison systems. Derrida, also drawing from Nietzsche, applied a method of literary criticism known as deconstruction to Western philosophy and structuralist thought. Together, they managed to bring about a dramatic paradigm shift in French intellectual life, one that now defines academic inquiry in much of the humanities and even the social sciences today.

Pragmatism, the third main paradigm of contemporary philosophy, has early roots in the conceptual idealism of Hegel and the transcendentalist thought and poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Pragmatism grew out of the Cambridge Metaphysical Club, an informal intellectual circle whose members included Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James. Peirce and James, along with John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, are today regarded as the most important figures of classical pragmatism. The heart of pragmatism is the rejection of foundations, both rationalist and empiricist, and a turn toward social practice—primarily language, communication, and inquiry—as the contingent and fluctuating ground upon which our knowledge and judgment ultimately rest. On the pragmatist view, we have no hope of ever achieving absolute certainty. Neither, however, are we floating in a sea of darkness and chaos. Rather, social practices provide us with a viable, if impermanent and evolving, basis for rational choices and practical decision-making. A driving question among the classical pragmatists was that of truth. This question led them to formulate what is today known as the pragmatist theory of truth, a theory that retains truth as a value and norm of inquiry, but that rejects the metaphysical premises and conclusions of traditional theories of truth.

Despite achieving considerable recognition during its classical phase, pragmatism eventually fell out of favor during the mid-20th century. It was later revived by Richard Rorty, Richard J. Bernstein, and Hilary Putnam. More recent pragmatists include Jeffrey Stout, Cornel West, and Robert Brandom, each of whom has developed unique approaches to the tradition. Outside of the United States, pragmatism has taken root in Canada, Germany, France, Finland, Britain, and Latin America. Notable non-American pragmatists include Cheryl Misak, Huw Price, Hans Joas, and Karl-Otto Apel. While pragmatism originated in the United States, it has since become a truly international movement.

Major branches of philosophy

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the most basic branch of philosophy. It is the most basic, not because it is the simplest, but because it asks questions about the ultimate nature of reality. Like philosophy in general, there is no standard way of doing or defining metaphysics. Historically, metaphysical inquiry has addressed two types of question. The first and primary type concerns the nature of *being*: What is existence? What is the nature of existence? What is ultimately real? By what categories do we differentiate what is ultimately real? Are those categories themselves ultimately real? Plato and Aristotle provided one of the earliest distinctions in metaphysical inquiry, that between *particulars* and *universals*. A particular is a specific instance of something, such as a tree in your backyard. Particulars can be individuated on the basis of their individual uniqueness. Hence, there is no tree exactly like the one in your backyard. Universals are the general entities of which particulars are specific instances. In the case of trees, the universal would be the category *tree*. This leads to the second type of question: Is the general category *tree* real? Does it exist independently of human language and perception? While Plato and Aristotle affirmed that universals are real, *nominalists* have argued that universals are not real; that is, universals do not exist independently of the human mind. The disagreement between those who affirm and those who reject the objective existence of universals extends to a broader disagreement between *realists* and *antirealists*. Realists affirm the existence of a reality independent of the human mind and our capacity to grasp it; antirealists deny this.

The disagreement between realists and antirealists has taken on numerous forms in the history of philosophy. In the Western tradition, it originates in the conflict between Plato and Protagoras, the latter being the most famous of the sophists. Plato had argued for the existence of a transcendental realm of universals, or what he called *forms*. Protagoras, by contrast, is reported to have said "Man is the measure of all things," which is another way of putting in question the idea of a reality independent of human perception. The most recent version of the disagreement between realists and antirealists is between *critical realists*, who do not necessarily entertain the existence of a transcendental realm of perfect forms, but who nonetheless affirm a reality independent of human perception, and *social constructionists*, who take reality to be

a synthetic projection of the human mind and of human language. The latter view is today most often associated with *postmodernism*.

Another area of metaphysical inquiry concerns the idea and status of truth. Aristotle had proposed the influential *correspondence theory* of truth, according to which truth is the property of a sentence that corresponds to some slice of reality. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says "To say that that which is, is not, or that which is not, is, is a falsehood; and to say that that which is, is, and that which is not, is not, is true." Thus, the assertion *snow is white* is true if, and only if, snow is white. Despite its enormous influence, the correspondence theory has been challenged repeatedly on the grounds that it hinges on problematic concepts. For example, what is the precise nature of correspondence with reality? What do we mean by "reality"? The correspondence theory thus defines truth through concepts that lack precise definitions.

In response to these difficulties, the British idealists of the 19th century proposed the *coherence theory* of truth, according to which truth is a feature of the internal coherence of a worldview or belief system. So long as that system enables us to make some sense of the world, then the degree to which it is internally coherent is the degree to which it is true. While the coherence theory avoids the difficulty of having to explain the nature of correspondence, it presents a different sort of problem: If two belief systems help us to make sense of the world and are both internally coherent, but lead to incompatible conclusions, then can they both be true? In response to this problem, the American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and William James proposed the *pragmatist theory* of truth, according to which a theory or belief system is true to the extent that it can produce results. Using this criterion, we can distinguish between two internally coherent belief systems by asking which of them can deliver more results. The one that offers more results would, in principle, be the "truer" theory. The pragmatist theory, too, presents a certain difficulty, however. What counts as a result? If homeopaths, astrologers, and faith healers claim to produce results, does that mean that homeopathy, astrology, and faith healing are true?

More recently, a number of philosophers have endorsed a *minimalist* and *deflationary* view of truth, arguing that the truth predicate serves a linguistic function, expressing endorsement of, or adding emphasis to, assertions. However, they deny that truth denotes a special kind of metaphysical property. According to minimalists and deflationists, to say "It is true that the king of France is bald" is to add emphasis to the assertion "The king of France is bald." Similarly, to say "Everything in the Bible is true" is shorthand for endorsing the many individual claims of the Bible. While minimalism and deflationism thus downgrade the metaphysical status of truth, they nonetheless affirm that truth plays an important role in linguistic communication. The American philosopher Richard Rorty has gone even further and compared the concept of truth to that of God, arguing that truth is an antiquated metaphysical concept that, like God, deserves no deference and therefore should be expunged from inquiry and discourse altogether. Rorty denies that discarding the idea of truth would have any adverse consequences for linguistic communication.

Another set of metaphysical questions concerns more specific problems, such as the nature of space and time, the relationship between determinism and freewill, and the relationship between change and continuity. While questions about the nature of space

and time might seem to belong to the domain of theoretical physics, the boundaries between philosophy and theoretical physics are often blurry. The central questions about time and space concern whether they are finite or infinite, whether they have an objective existence, and whether they are to be understood in relational terms. The question about determinism also overlaps with physics. Because philosophy is concerned with, among other things, the possibility of freewill and responsibility, it has been seen as necessary to discover whether our world is deterministic. To that end, metaphysical inquiry has focused on the nature of causality, seeking to make sense of the very ideas of cause and effect. Here, the central problem can be stated as follows: If the world is purely deterministic, then there is no possibility of freewill, in which case, we are prisoners of a vast and complex system of causes and therefore unaccountable for our actions.

Although not directly concerned with physics, the distinction between change and continuity is very much related. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus, for example, argued that change is the only permanent feature of reality, thereby challenging our understanding of both change and permanence. The school of *process philosophy* takes change to be its primary object of analysis. How do we make sense of change? If something changes, does it remain the same thing? If so, how can we make sense of continuity? If not, how do we explain the lack of continuity? These questions are especially significant for the understanding of personal identity. In what respect, for example, can a person be said to be the same person from one moment to another? Given a sufficient period of time, a problem arises for judgments of personal responsibility and accountability.

As a branch of philosophical inquiry, metaphysics faces a number of serious difficulties. The first is that the questions it seeks to address are notoriously difficult to answer. Because these questions are so basic, they either elude simple and straightforward answers or generate more questions with every answer. There is no sense in which metaphysical inquiry is amenable to progress. We have been asking the same questions that Aristotle posed over two thousand years ago, but without any meaningful progress. For this reason, the *logical positivists* of the early 20th century argued for dismissing metaphysics from the domain of serious inquiry. They introduced criteria to distinguish sense from nonsense, relegating metaphysics to the latter category, a move that has had a lasting effect upon philosophy. Second, because metaphysics makes strong claims about reality that can never really be justified, it has increasingly come to be regarded as bad philosophy. Many philosophers today explicitly avoid metaphysical claims and conclusions. In some circles, to do metaphysics, whether intentionally or by accident, is regarded as a kind of philosophical faux pas. A third problem concerns the disorder and randomness of metaphysical inquiry. There does not appear to be any systematic character to the field. Nothing binds one question to the next, suggesting that it is more haphazard and pointless than coherent and meaningful. For these reasons, metaphysics is today not the serious field of inquiry it was taken to be for the greater part of the history of philosophy.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of the nature, possibility, and limits of knowledge. Epistemological inquiry asks questions such as: What is knowledge? How do we

acquire it? What can and can we not know? Can we ever achieve absolute certainty? What does it mean to hold a rational or justified belief? The importance of epistemology can be illustrated through a distinction between two types of claim: faith-based and evidence-based. Consider the claims "The earth is flat" and "The earth is a sphere." In response to these claims, and indeed to every claim, we are entitled to ask "How does one *know* that?" If the answer for the first claim is "It is written in the scriptures," we are liable to regard the claim as an article of faith, not knowledge. If the answer for the second claim is "Satellite images show that the earth is a sphere," we are liable to regard the claim as knowledge. Now consider an alternative answer for the second claim: "It is written in the scriptures that the earth is a sphere." Would the second claim qualify as knowledge? We are inclined to say no, even if the claim is true, because of the type of reason offered in support of the claim. This then raises the question: What types of supporting reasons do claims require to be regarded as knowledge? Is evidence alone sufficient? If so, how do we define evidence? If not, what else would a claim require to qualify as knowledge?

Historically, epistemological inquiry has been dominated by two views. The first is *foundationalism*. According to this view, in order for a claim or belief to qualify as knowledge, it must rest on some sort of foundational premises that cannot be derived from other claims, beliefs, or premises. Foundationalism can itself be divided into two schools of thought. The first, *empiricism*, holds that knowledge is based on sensory experience. Although the mind synthesizes sensory data into meaningful thoughts, that synthesis is nonetheless secondary in the order of epistemological explanation to the raw data of sense perception. The second school, *rationalism*, holds that knowledge is based on a priori propositions derivable through rational reflection. So, for example, the claim "All squares have four sides" would be considered valid on the rationalist paradigm because it captures a logically necessary truth.

The second historically dominant view in epistemological inquiry is *coherentism*. According to this view, knowledge is derived from a web of interconnected beliefs, none of which can stand in isolation from the rest. While coherentism does not regard any one belief or set of beliefs as foundational, it does take the web itself to be foundational. In this respect, coherentism is similar to the *coherence theory* of truth.

One longstanding tradition or current of thought that has shaped epistemology through various sets of challenges is *skepticism*. Although we might want to achieve knowledge and absolute certainty, we also want to protect ourselves against the threat of falsehood and delusion. It is therefore worthwhile to subject our claims to critical scrutiny. This is where skepticism comes into play. Skepticism is to critical thinking what guard rails are to cars: They keep us on course. Skepticism is a form of critical thinking aimed at exposing potential weaknesses in our arguments. There are varieties of skepticism, the most basic form of which aims to improve our thinking by upholding truth and accuracy as the ultimate ideal of inquiry. Science thrives on this type of skepticism by seeking to disprove scientific hypotheses. Those hypotheses that can withstand the test of skepticism earn the provisional status of truth. In its more radical and subversive forms, however, skepticism subjects everything to scrutiny and extreme doubt, including the very ideals of truth and accuracy. The philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce held the view that absolute skepticism was pointless and misguided, arguing

that meaningful skepticism thrives on substantive reasons that cannot simultaneously be objects of skepticism.

Another longstanding tradition of thought that has shaped epistemological inquiry is *relativism*. In its crudest formulation, relativism is the idea that "anything goes." A more sophisticated version of relativism, however, is the thesis that there are no standards or criteria for adjudicating between different and conflicting claims to truth and that all such claims are therefore equal in status. The origins of relativism in the Western tradition can be traced back to the already-mentioned saying attributed to the Greek Sophist Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things." Although the meaning of this saying is disputed, it is commonly thought to suggest that truth is subjective. Since the time of the sophists, various versions of relativism, some more extreme than others, have arisen in the history of Western philosophy. Despite being the target of numerous refutations, relativism remains a serious concern and an ongoing topic of attention in philosophy to this day. The concern is that, if the relativist thesis is true, then it threatens the status of knowledge. It is worth noting that few philosophers would claim to be relativists, while many philosophers are often accused of being relativists. Relativism thus tends to be less of a principled position than a negative label applied to others.

Logic

Logic is the study of the rules or conditions of correct reasoning. The basic category of logical analysis is the *inference*, which can be understood as the movement from one or more premises, conventionally articulated in the form of propositions, to a conclusion by way of a rule or set of rules. Generally speaking, conclusions are judged to be true if the premises are true and the inferences are good or sound. Although we rely on logic in everyday life, we are not always aware of the rules that guide logical thinking. At its most basic, logic is the attempt to make explicit the proper rules that govern a mental process in which we all partake in our everyday lives.

There are two basic types of inference in logic. The first is known as *deductive* inferences. An inference is said to be deductive if the truth of the conclusion follows by necessity from the truth of the premise. For example, consider the following argument: "It is snowing outside. If it is snowing outside, then the sidewalk will be slippery. Therefore, the sidewalk is slippery." Here, the premise is the statement "It is snowing outside." The premise is followed by a conditional statement of the form "If x, then y." The conclusion is the statement "The sidewalk is slippery." If we take the premise and the conditional to be true, then the conclusion is true by necessity. Hence, the inference is valid.

The second basic type of logical inference is *inductive*. Unlike deductive inferences, inductive inferences begin from empirical observations, from which general conclusions are derived. For example, consider the following argument: "It is snowing outside. The sidewalk is slippery. So, when it snows, sidewalks get slippery." What is distinctive about inductive inferences is that the conclusion is not necessarily true. It could very well turn out to be the case that some sidewalks are not slippery when it snows. Inductive reasoning is common in the sciences, where general conclusions are tested for their validity rather than taken to be valid on account of logical necessity.

To facilitate the study of logic, certain recurring logical concepts, otherwise known as logical constants, are represented through logical symbols or notation. The most common logical constants are *propositional connectives*, *quantifiers*, and *identity*. The study of logic is also divided into specific fields. These include *mathematical logic*, which consists of set theory, proof theory, and model theory; *modal logic*, which examines *modalities*, or expressions of various degrees of certainty or obligation; and *propositional logic*, which examines the relationships between simple and complex propositions.

Ethics

Ethics is the study of human conduct. As a general area of study, it is ordinarily divided into four distinct fields. *Descriptive ethics* is the study of the ethical norms, values, and reasoning of a given culture. Traditionally, descriptive ethics belonged to the domain of anthropology. More recently, cognitive scientists have sought to account for the content and nature of ethical beliefs, some of which are purported to be universal, by appeal to the biology of the human mind. Between anthropology and cognitive science, then, descriptive ethics has tended to fall beyond the domain of philosophy proper. However, many philosophers hold the view that philosophical inquiry about ethics is empty and pointless without a consideration of the empirical facts of human nature. There is no value, it is said, in asserting standards of ethical conduct if no one can realistically live up to them or if they run contrary to human nature and desire. Philosophical ethics today therefore often draws from the insights of those fields that do descriptive ethics, which today include anthropology, history, psychology, and neuroscience.

Normative ethics is the study of how we should act. It seeks to answer questions such as "In events of type *x*, what is the right thing to do?" It does this by proposing normative principles that can be applied across a wide range of circumstances, thereby providing guidance for human conduct and affairs. The main challenge of normative ethics has been to propose universal principles that belong to no culture in particular, but which can nonetheless be applied to all cultures generally. Whether such principles actually exist is a matter of considerable dispute, leading to a wide range of approaches to normative ethics, including virtue ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, and, most recently, discourse ethics.

Virtue ethics is one of the oldest ethical traditions in Western philosophy, going back to ancient Athens. Unlike an ethics of permissions and prohibitions, which are characteristic of divine command ethics, virtue ethics posits a *telos*, or purpose, for human beings. Thus, just as a knife has a purpose (to cut things), so, too, do human beings have a purpose. What exactly the latter purpose is has also been a matter of dispute. For Aristotle, the purpose of human beings is to achieve happiness. In order for an entity, whether human or nonhuman, to achieve its purpose, it must exhibit certain characteristics and avoid others. In the case of a knife, the purpose of which is to cut things, sharpness of the blade enables the knife to achieve its purpose; a dull blade hinders it. In the case of a person, courage enables him or her to achieve happiness, whereas cowardice hinders it. The former type of characteristic is known as a *virtue* and the latter a *vice*. Virtue ethics therefore revolves around the human agent as opposed to the correctness or incorrectness of rules and principles. Aristotle

posited a catalogue of virtues and vices particular to human beings. However, because Aristotle's conception of the human *telos* was based on a metaphysical biology, a conception that lacked a scientific basis, it historically fell out of favor. In the 20th century, however, virtue ethics has been revived by G. E. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Alasdair MacIntyre, in a revised form that avoids some of the pitfalls of Aristotle's original formulation, including his metaphysical biology and his notorious misogyny. Because of its focus on human character, virtue ethics in its current period of revival has proven to resonate with a number of feminist ethical theorists, including Martha Nussbaum and Linda Hirschman.

In contrast to virtue ethics, *deontology* focuses on universal principles and the equality of human beings. The normative force of such principles lies not in being instrumental to a particular *telos*, but rather in their intrinsic correctness and formal validity. As such, deontological approaches are known for disregarding the contingent facts of human character. One of the most prominent figures in the deontological tradition is Immanuel Kant. The core concept of Kant's ethical theory is the categorical imperative, a simple test that enables us to distinguish valid from universal principles of human conduct. The categorical imperative may be stated as follows: "Act only according to those maxims that you could realistically will into a universal law." The core idea behind the categorical imperative is to eliminate personal whim and bias; that is, to provide a truly neutral and universal principle for all of humanity. According to the categorical imperative, the maxim "Do not lie" is universally binding because it can be willed into a universal law, whereas "Lie if you must" is not. Another prominent deontological approach is the tradition of natural and universal rights inaugurated by John Locke. According to Locke, every person is endowed with certain basic rights simply by virtue of being a person. The validity of such rights thus stands independently of the particular persons to whom they are attached. Like Kant's categorical imperative, the rights tradition emphasizes universality. Thus, the violation of a right is intrinsically wrong regardless of time, place, or circumstance. While deontological approaches to ethics have proven to be enormously influential, antifoundationalists have repeatedly challenged the purportedly universal status of deontological principles and categories, arguing that what are presented as timeless and universal foundations for human conduct are really no more than the values of one or another historically specific culture. This criticism is often turned into the charge of moral and cultural imperialism under the guise of moral universalism.

Utilitarianism is an English tradition that holds that human conduct should be evaluated by the standard of utility. Although definitions vary, utility can be understood as welfare or well-being. According to utilitarianism, an action is right if it contributes to the general welfare of people and wrong if it diminishes this. Unlike deontological approaches, utilitarianism thus concentrates upon the consequences of human actions, as opposed to their intrinsic rightness or wrongness. By focusing upon consequences, utilitarianism offers a way to calculate rightness or wrongness quantitatively, an attractive feature for policy-oriented analyses. The two most prominent theorists of the utilitarian approach are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In Bentham's classic formulation, ethical human conduct should aim to produce the greatest utility for the greatest number of people. Bentham specifically defined utility in terms of human

happiness. He has therefore been criticized for being a proponent of hedonism, making pleasure out to be the highest goal of humanity. In a reformulation of utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill sought to distinguish between different types of pleasure. Lower pleasures are those of the body and are shared by both humans and animals. Higher pleasures are those afforded by the unique nature of the human mind. Higher pleasures are intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual. Mill argued that society ought to be guided by the maximization of higher pleasures for the greatest number of people. While utilitarianism has proven to be highly attractive to legislators and policy-makers on account of its capacity for quantitative analysis, it has nonetheless been strongly criticized for placing the interests of the majority over those of minorities. By concentrating upon the overall consequences for society, utilitarianism ignores the consequences of human conduct upon individuals and minority groups. A common example used to illustrate the fundamental problem of utilitarianism concerns organ transplants. If four people require organ transplants to live, and a fifth person has the organs needed for those transplants, is it ethical to kill the fifth person and harvest his organs for the sake of the four? From a deontological perspective, the principal weakness of utilitarianism is its disregard for individual rights.

Because of the difficulties with traditional approaches to ethics, one recent school of philosophy has proposed a new approach centering on communication. Led by Jürgen Habermas, this approach is known as *discourse ethics*. There are four core features of discourse ethics that define it as a unique tradition. First, discourse ethics is committed to universality, thereby aligning it with the deontological tradition. Second, it affirms moral cognitivism, according to which moral claims and beliefs can be articulated in the form of propositional sentences and therefore be candidates for formal correctness or incorrectness. Third, it affirms the possibility of moral objectivity conceived as an external moral point of view from which to adjudicate between rival and competing moral claims. Fourth, it departs from Kantian ethics by insisting upon a *dialogical*, as opposed to a *monological*, basis for human thought and ethical judgment.

Discourse ethics builds upon Habermas's theory of communicative action, his empirical theory of everyday human communication. The theory of communicative action holds that to speak a language is to participate in a normative practice oriented toward agreement. Because assertions can be either accepted or rejected by one's audience, the implicit and pragmatic end point of linguistic communication is socially coordinated action, or communicative action. However, when this movement is obstructed by disagreement, the proper recourse is to discourse ethics, a metadiscourse designed to return speakers to the everyday practice of communicative action. Habermas proposes a test by which to determine the formal validity of a particular claim. This test consists of two principles. The discourse principle (D), which focuses upon the *form* of moral claims, distinguishes eligible from ineligible claims. By contrast, the principle of universalization (U) specifies a criterion by which to distinguish valid from invalid claims. The core of (U) lies in whether those affected by a proposed norm can consent to its consequences for their interests. If they give their consent, then the proposed norm is valid. The key lies in determining what constitutes their collective interests. To this end, Habermas proposes achieving a neutral, intersubjective moral point of view derived from the social psychology of George Herbert Mead. By stepping into each other's shoes

and seeing social reality from each other's perspectives, we can secure a shared sense of what our generalizable interests are. The judgments reached through this discursive procedure are correct in a formal and universal sense. Thus, while discourse ethics emphasizes formal and universal validity, it nonetheless also takes human consequences into account. Its unique synthesis of formalism and consequentialism has proven to be an attractive alternative to those disaffected by traditional approaches to ethics. However, because of its emphasis upon reason, formal procedures, and human interests, discourse ethics has come under fire from feminists, poststructuralists, and environmentalists for imposing a culturally specific, exclusive, and anthropocentric model of discourse that excludes the voices of the powerless and voiceless.

Political philosophy

Political philosophy is closely related to normative ethics. In fact, the two overlap considerably. However, political philosophy goes beyond questions of right and wrong to theorize about the proper arrangement of social and political life. To this end, it inquires into the nature, purpose, and structure of the basic institutions of society, the relationship between governments and citizens, the criteria for citizenship, the rights and freedoms to which citizens are entitled, the distribution of power throughout society, the structure of the legal and economic systems, and the ownership and regulation of land and natural resources. As with normative ethics, the challenge of political philosophy lies in the tension between abstract ideals and empirical realities, including the possibilities and limits of human nature. This tension is greatly compounded by the need to justify certain basic and inevitable forms of coercive power, without which no complex society worthy of the name would be possible. Moreover, the changing features of our social, political, and natural landscapes—the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires, the decline of religious power and the rebirth of religious movements, population growth, immigration, the rise of inter- and intra-cultural conflict, the differences in and depletion of natural resources—all defy the possibility of a single political model for the whole of humanity; hence the great variety of political philosophies, from the ancient world to the Renaissance, and from the Enlightenment to today.

Perhaps the most basic question in political philosophy concerns the status and legitimacy of political power and authority. How does the state come to possess such power and authority at all? In what does political legitimacy consist? One view is that it derives from a divine will, an idea that held considerable sway in the ancient, medieval, and pre-modern worlds. According to this view, power is not legitimate unless it is sanctioned by God. With a few exceptions, this view is no longer tenable, for the simple reason that we cannot agree on the content or even the existence of a divine will. The prevailing approaches to political philosophy in the modern era have therefore been overwhelmingly secular in orientation, insisting that political legitimacy is rooted in one or another nonreligious foundation typically consisting of a social contract or constitution.

A second basic question concerns the extent of state power. Should state power be absolute or limited? The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued for an absolutist model of political power and authority. Hobbes held the view that human beings in the "state of nature" were so prone to violence and war that nothing short of an absolute

monarchy could establish peace, order, and stability. In this model, the arbitrariness of the monarchy's political judgment is far less significant than the order and stability that only absolute monarchy, and no other species of government, can provide. Despite being a proponent of absolutism, Hobbes was nonetheless a social contract theorist, and in fact the founding figure of that tradition. He believed people were rational enough that they could be convinced of the necessity of obeying an absolute monarch for their own good. Thus, the power and authority of the monarchy ultimately rest on the social contract.

Drawing from Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau both proposed models of the social contract based on empirical claims about human nature. Because they did not share Hobbes's pessimistic view about human nature, however, they argued for limited, democratic forms of state power, in which the people enjoy a certain degree of authority. For Locke, the primary reason for limited government was accountability. When accountability is compromised through the unilateral acquisition and preservation of power, the people have a right to challenge the government. Although Rousseau stressed the necessity of relinquishing individual rights and freedoms for the sake of peace and order, he similarly stressed the role of collective will and governance in preventing a corrupt oligarchy from serving the interests of a narrow and elite minority. From Locke and Rousseau onward, the emphasis in political philosophy has almost exclusively centered on one or another form of limited state power.

A third question concerns the role of the state. Should the state simply maintain order and stability? Or should it go further and provide healthcare and education, regulate the economy, and advance a specific social and political agenda, including equality and social justice? If state power is limited and representative, what precise form should it take? To what extent can citizens participate in government? The relationship of governments to citizens raises an enduring theme in political philosophy: the nature of human freedom. Is freedom merely the absence of coercion, or what is sometimes called "negative freedom"? Or is freedom the possibility of achieving individual and collective creative potential through the empowering frameworks of public institutions, or what is sometimes called "positive freedom"? For example, if an individual desires to become a doctor or teacher, but cannot afford the requisite education, can he or she really be said to be free? Is freedom possible under the crippling conditions of poverty? The main paradigms addressing these questions are two branches of modern liberalism: libertarianism and social liberalism. Libertarianism is best represented by Robert Nozick and Friedrich Hayek. It regards individual freedom and the free market as the sole priority of the state. While libertarianism defends a basic political equality, it regards the pursuit of social equality as a threat to individual freedom and liberty. According to libertarianism, freedom and liberty are compromised if, for example, the wealthy are taxed at higher rates than the middle class and the poor, or if people are taxed at all for the sake of funding public schools and healthcare. Social liberalism is best represented by Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and Ronald Dworkin. It seeks to balance liberty with equality. According to proponents of social liberalism, political equality must be supplemented by a proactive agenda designed to achieve social equality. The difference between libertarianism and social liberalism ultimately hinges on their particular conceptions of justice.

A fourth question concerns international relations and foreign policy. What should the role of the state be in the international arena? Should the state simply pursue its own interests? Or should it engage with other states, either bilaterally or multilaterally, to advance a broader social and political agenda? If equality matters at home, does it also matter abroad? How should the state respond to internal violence within another state? At what point is foreign intervention necessary and justified? These questions have taken on an acute urgency following the demise of empires and the establishment of modern, sovereign states. However, because of the complexity and sheer messiness of international affairs, these questions do not admit of black-and-white normative models. Moreover, a political philosophy designed for a national context does not necessarily translate well when applied to an international context. For example, Thomas Nagel, a social contract theorist, has suggested that "the idea of global justice without a world government is a chimera." For Nagel, it makes little sense to speak of global justice in the absence of a global social contract. By contrast, Amartya Sen holds the view that the pursuit of global justice need not be predicated upon a social contract at all. Sen's capabilities approach to justice concentrates on eradicating actual instances and patterns of injustice rather than theorizing about an ideal conception of justice. Sen's demotion of the project of theorizing about justice reflects the limits of political philosophy when confronting practical questions on a global scale.

The dominant models in contemporary political philosophy face two sets of pressing challenges. One challenge is what is often referred to as the "politics of identity": the particular political struggles faced by various groups on the basis of a shared identity, including race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, and disability status. Critics of contemporary liberalism observe that institutional equality does not necessarily translate into social equality. Certain types of cultural privilege, such as male privilege, white privilege, and heteronormative privilege, place women, racialized minorities, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer) individuals at a social disadvantage. Proponents of multicultural and pluralistic social philosophies, such as Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Seyla Benhabib, and Judith Butler, seek to address social disparities stemming from cultural and institutional biases. A second challenge stems from the environmental and animal rights movements. Proponents of environmentalism and animal rights charge liberalism with being categorically anthropocentric, given its exclusive attention to human freedoms and interests, to the neglect and detriment of animals and the planet. Posthumanist philosophers, such as Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe, have sought to question the moral status of human beings as superior to that of nonhuman beings. Once the traditional division between the human and nonhuman is blurred or even dissolved, then at least some of the protections traditionally accorded to human beings are liable to be extended to nonhuman beings. This much is seen in the Great Ape Project, which fights for the recognition of basic rights for nonhuman apes.

Aesthetics

The field of aesthetics can be roughly understood as the philosophical study of beauty and the experience that beautiful phenomena induce in the human subject. Generally,

aesthetic reflection concentrates upon works of art, that is to say, material and nonmaterial artifacts of human creation. However, "art" in this conventional sense by no means exhausts the range of phenomena to which aesthetic reflection is devoted. Natural phenomena, such as a flower or a mountain—objects that are not the outcome of human design or intention—are also considered appropriate for aesthetic reflection.

Philosophical inquiry about beauty and art begins with the very meaning of these terms. How, exactly, do we define and make sense of beauty? How do we distinguish beauty from its opposite (i.e., ugliness)? Is beauty a property of an object? Or is it merely an aspect of human perception? If we judge an object to be beautiful, are we describing something about the object or revealing something about ourselves? Similar questions arise about art. How should art be defined? By what criteria can we distinguish a work of art, such as a painting or a song, from other human artifacts, such as a sidewalk or a sledgehammer? Does an artifact need to be beautiful to qualify as art? These starting questions lead to deeper questions about the categories and assumptions by which we speak about beauty and art. For example, do all works of art have certain universal aesthetic properties in common? Do art and nature share any universal properties in common? Is the category of beauty or aesthetics rich enough to encompass both art and nature? If not, what, if anything, binds it all together?

The difficulty in answering such questions has historically led certain schools of philosophy, such as the Vienna and Berlin Circles of logical positivism, to reject aesthetics as a legitimate domain of philosophical inquiry. According to the stringent criteria of logical positivism, any claim not amenable to empirical verification does not qualify as knowledge; hence its dismissal of aesthetics, among other fields of study. Yet this kind of summary dismissal disregards the patterns of aesthetic judgment between human subjects and fails to make sense of what we do when we make such judgments. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant observed that aesthetic judgments are more than prereflective, nonrational expressions of pleasure. Rather, aesthetic judgments possess four distinct characteristics. First, aesthetic judgments are disinterested. That is, they do not, in fact, reflect a subjective preference. Second, aesthetic judgments are, like moral judgments, claims to universal validity. Thus, to judge a particular work of art as beautiful is implicitly to say that such a judgment is and always will be correct. Third, aesthetic judgments are purposive and principled in form, even though they are not guided by an actual purpose. Fourth, aesthetic judgments are normative. That is, to judge an object to be beautiful is implicitly to say that others ought to reach the same judgment. Kant's complex analysis of the nature of aesthetic judgment, while by no means authoritative, has nonetheless solidified a place for aesthetics within contemporary philosophy. Precisely because judgments are involved, because art communicates, because beauty speaks, and because we find meaning and truth in art and nature, aesthetic reflection addresses a deep and enduring aspect of human experience. For this reason, aesthetics continues to command widespread interest, though by no means exclusively within the discipline of philosophy. Other disciplines include art history, literature, and communication studies.

SEE ALSO: Aesthetics; Epistemology; Hermeneutics; Objectivity and Subjectivity; Ontology; Phenomenology; Poststructuralism; Pragmatism; Structuralism

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