

HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Western philosophy seems to have begun when someone doubted that nature was the way it appeared to be, and looked for a deeper explanation that was not supernatural. We would call this 'science' rather than 'philosophy'. But since the enquiry was pursued by reason rather than by experiment, the world of reasoning was dramatically opened for examination. The result was an explosion of careful theorising about all aspects of existence. At first nature was the only topic of study, but the issues gradually expanded, and humanity itself was included.

Centuries of debate revolved around a small number of issues. Were the sources of knowledge and goodness to be found in nature, or in the way humans perceived them? Was pleasure the best that humans could hope for, or were loftier virtues possible? Was nature physical all the way down, or did the deepest level consist of ideals, principles, and eternal truths? Could we optimistically hope to think our way into the heart of reality, or are we pathetically inadequate and doomed to ignorance? The greatest thinkers not only explored these problems, but each tried to combine their answers into a single plausible picture.

The pagan gods were marginalised in this debate, but many thinkers began to see a single God as more plausible. This idea gathered momentum, and then God looked like an explanation for most of the philosophical problems. If God is the Creator, then nature will be understood in terms of His designs and purposes. If God is the source of values, then the good for man is to be found in the divine will. Man alone is rather inadequate, but man united with his God can aspire to something divine. In this climate the philosophers were marginalised, and eventually suppressed.

A few centuries later religions dominated culture and monopolised systematic thought, but the rediscovery of powerful ancient philosophers offered challenges to the theologians. For a while philosophy and theology worked together, but the freely critical spirit required for good philosophy became too much of a challenge, and philosophy was again ushered off the stage.

Eventually Europeans became more adventurous, and major rethinking was required when both theology and ancient philosophy revealed their limits. There were, it seemed, undiscovered parts of the world, hidden truths in biology, and a better account of the cosmos. Careful study of the facts (science) was the way forward, but the basic principles seemed muddled, and so philosophy re-entered the game. At first the puzzles concerned certainty about God, and ensuring that the new enquiries didn't rest on absurdities, but interesting new problems began to emerge. The ancients pursued careful thought without worrying too much about the thinker, but is there some entity that does the thinking, and what exactly is it? Mathematics had possessed a sort of magic for the ancients, but it was now being used to describe nature, so its rational power seemed important and in need of explanation. If the experiences of the new science reveal so much, will experience account for everything? Are religion, values, logic, self-knowledge and mathematics just products of what we perceive?

Two schools confronted one another – the modest empiricists who built everything from basic experience, and rejected any claims that seemed to go further – and the more optimistic rationalists, who hoped to reveal deep laws, self-evident certainties, and eternal necessities behind the façade of nature. For a while there was the exciting prospect that reason might give us all the answers. Religion was carefully scrutinised, and atheism became a new option. Morality was reduced to a few possible theories, rooted in either reason itself, or the emotions, or pure pleasure. Social systems could be built up from the free choices of citizens. We might even give a rational account of beauty. The most modest empiricists offered cautious accounts that connected to experience, while the boldest rationalists offered grander and more enduring theories, based on what is obvious to reason. The next project then became obvious – to examine the limits of our own understanding, and the powers and limits of experience and reason.

This enquiry sent philosophy off in two directions. The first became more abstract, aspiring to grapple with the most ideal of ultimate truths, and the second became more earthbound, tying philosophical truth to either the sciences, or to economic and social forces. The second group welcomed the proposal that human life has directly evolved out of the physical and animal world, while the first group found problems when the eternal simplicity of mathematics seemed to fragment as the subject expanded.

An agreed logic had been presupposed in all of this, but new forms of logic now emerged, to add to the worries about relativism emerging in anthropology and startling new physics. But these logics offered new tools for thinking, and theories could be 'modelled' in a mathematical way. This pushed questions of language to the fore, when a gap appeared between messy real language, and dreams of finding its exact 'logical form'. Maybe analysis would solve many of the old problems? But pessimists saw the subject being reduced to triviality, and old empiricist caution re-emerged. Maybe we just invent the logic, and precise language is waffle when it loses touch with experience?

Self-doubt about the subject began to afflict the philosophers themselves. Science was racing ahead, and maybe the old philosophical problems should be handed over too. Is 'knowing' things an observable process? Can the 'self' and 'the mind' be revealed by brain scans? Can morality be reduced to survival games? Is reality discovered in particle accelerators, and not in philosophical speculation?

In response, many philosophers immerse themselves in science, others withdraw into a detached rhetorical musing, and yet others become quasi-mathematicians, building ever more intricate models. Philosophers frequently spend more time discussing the nature of their subject, and deconstructing the prejudices and presuppositions that shape it, then they spend addressing the old problems. But philosophy is very different now. There are clearly more active philosophers today than have existed in the whole previous history of humanity, and there is not a single issue mentioned on this page which does not have an enthusiastic champion, or profound and scholarly enquirer.

Philosophy itself has no doctrine, but the history of philosophy is a map of the rational choices available to us.