In that most hackneyed of phrases, the search for the truth. There are various ways to conduct this search that properly belong within the discipline and various domains of nature into which it has, over the millennia, led. The most convenient division is to break philosophy into two broad subdisciplines: EPISTEMOLOGY and METAPHYSICS. The former encompasses efforts to understand the origins, nature and limits of thought and human knowledge, the latter embraces similar attempts to comprehend the ultimate reality of existence. Other prominent branches are aesthetics, ethics and logic.

From The Columbia Encyclopedia

[Gr.,=love of wisdom], study of the ultimate reality, causes, and principles underlying being and thinking. It has many aspects and different manifestations according to the problems involved and the method of approach and emphasis used by the individual philosopher. This article deals with the nature and development of Western philosophical thought. Eastern philosophy, while founded in religion, contains rigorously developed systems; for these, see Buddhism; Confucianism; Hinduism; Islam; Jainism; Shinto; Taoism; Vedanta; and related articles.

Distinguishing Characteristics

This search for truth began, in the Western world, when the Greeks first established (c.600 B.C.) inquiry independent of theological creeds. Philosophy is distinguished from theology in that philosophy rejects dogma and deals with speculation rather than faith. Philosophy differs from science in that both the natural and the social sciences base their theories wholly on established fact, whereas philosophy also covers areas of inquiry where no facts as such are available. Originally, science as such did not exist and philosophy covered the entire field, but as facts became available and tentative certainties emerged, the sciences broke away from metaphysical speculation to pursue their different aims. Thus physics was once in the realm of philosophy, and it was only in the early 20th cent. that psychology was established as a science apart from philosophy. However, many of the greatest philosophers were also scientists, and philosophy still considers the methods (as opposed to the materials) of science as its province.

Branches

Philosophy is traditionally divided into several branches. Metaphysics inquires into the nature and ultimate significance of the universe. Logic is concerned with the laws of valid reasoning. Epistemology investigates the nature of knowledge and the process of knowing. Ethics deals with problems of right conduct. Aesthetics attempts to determine the nature of beauty and the criteria of artistic judgment. Within metaphysics a division is made according to fundamental principles. The three major positions are idealism, which maintains that what is real is in the form of thought rather than matter; materialism, which considers matter and the motion of matter as the universal reality; and dualism, which gives thought and matter equal status. Naturalism and positivism are forms of materialism.

The History of Philosophy

Historically, philosophy falls into three large periods: classical (Greek and Roman) philosophy, which was
concerned with the ultimate nature of reality and the problem of virtue in a political context; medieval
philosophy, which in the West is virtually inseparable from early Christian thought; and, beginning with
the Renaissance, modern philosophy, whose main direction has been epistemology.

Classical Philosophy

The first Greek philosophers, the Milesian school in the early 6th cent. B.C., consisting of Thales,
Anaximander, and Anaximenes, were concerned with finding the one natural element underlying all
nature and being. They were followed by Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Leucippus, Empedocles,
Anaxagoras, and Democritus, who took divergent paths in exploring the same problem.

Socrates was the first to inquire also into social and political problems and was the first to use the
dialectical method. His speculations were carried on by his pupil Plato, and by Plato’s pupil Aristotle, at
the Academy in Athens. Roman philosophy was based mainly on the later schools of Greek philosophy,
such as the Sophists, the Cynics, Stoicism, and epicureanism. In late antiquity, Neoplatonism, chiefly
represented by Plotinus, became the leading philosophical movement and profoundly affected the early
development of Christian theology. Arab thinkers, notably Avicenna and Averroës, preserved Greek
philosophy, especially Aristotelianism, during the period when these teachings were forgotten in
Europe.

The Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century

Scholasticism, the high achievement of medieval philosophy, was based on Aristotelian principles. St.
Thomas Aquinas was the foremost of the schoolmen, just as St. Augustine was the earlier spokesman
for the church of pure belief. The Renaissance, with its new physics, astronomy, and humanism,
revolutionized philosophic thought. René Descartes is considered the founder of modern philosophy
because of his attempt to give the new science a philosophic basis. The other great rationalist
systems of the 17th cent., especially those of Baruch Spinoza and G. W. von Leibniz, were developed in
response to problems raised by Cartesian philosophy and the new science. In England empiricism
prevailed in the work of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume, as well as that of George
Berkeley, who was the outstanding idealist. The philosophy of Immanuel Kant achieved a synthesis of
the rationalist and empiricist traditions and was in turn developed in the direction of idealism by J. G.

The romantic movement of the 18th cent. had its beginnings in the philosophy of J. J. Rousseau; its
adherents of the 19th cent. included Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as the
American transcendentalists represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Opposed to the romanticists was
the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx. The evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin profoundly
affected mid-19th-century thought. Ethical philosophy culminated in England in the utilitarianism of John
Stuart Mill and in France in the positivism of Auguste Comte. Pragmatism, the first essentially American
philosophical movement, was founded at the end of the 19th cent. by C. S. Peirce and was later
elaborated by William James and John Dewey.

The Twentieth Century

The transition to 20th-century philosophy essentially came with Henri Bergson. The century has often
seen a great disparity in orientation between Continental and Anglo-American thinkers. In France and
Germany, major philosophical movements have been the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the
existentialism of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Positivism and science have come under the
scrutiny of Jürgen Habermas of the Frankfurt School; he has argued that they are driven by hidden interests. Structuralism, a powerful intellectual movement throughout the first half of the 20th cent., defined language and social systems in terms of the relationships among their elements.

Beginning in the 1960s arguments against all of Western metaphysics were marshaled by poststructuralists; among the most influential has been Jacques Derrida, a wide-ranging philosopher who has pursued deconstruction, a program that seeks to identify metaphysical assumptions in literature and psychology as well as philosophy. Both structuralism and poststructuralism originated mostly in France but soon came to influence thinkers throughout the West, especially in Germany and the United States.

Major concerns in American and British philosophy in the 20th cent. have included formal logic, the philosophy of science, and epistemology. Leading early figures included G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein; Anglo-American philosophy was later exemplified by logical positivists like Rudolph Carnap. In their close attention to problems of language, the logical positivists, influenced by Wittgenstein, in turn influenced the work of W. V. O. Quine and others in the philosophy of language. Later Anglo-American philosophers turned increasingly toward ethics and political philosophy, as in John Rawls' work on the problem of justice.

Bibliography


APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/philosophy
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA