

9-4-08

Our approach to this class will be topical, meaning that we will cover philosophical problems in conjunction with learning about particular philosophers. Our topical method, however, will be complemented by the Russell reading, which is an historical survey of philosophy. Students will be expected to read the chapters in Russell that correspond with the topics and philosophers we are discussing in class.

Steve will take notes. This fact was discussed at length by Prof. Beresford.

Prof. Beresford's website:

[www.adamberesford.com](http://www.adamberesford.com)

### Lecture: What is philosophy?

This class is an introduction to Western philosophy, specifically Analytic (vs. Continental) philosophy, which is a strand of philosophy closely linked with Western science.

Philosophy isn't a particular subject; it is rather a variety of subjects that are somehow connected. Though it is no single thing, it does have certain questions and ways of thinking that are considered properly "philosophical".

One way to get at the nature of philosophy is to look at its origins. Another way is to discuss what topics are considered philosophy now.

*Origins.* Western philosophy started in 582 BC. In this (the 6<sup>th</sup>) century, philosophy back then meant more than it does now. *Philosophia* literally meant "love of knowledge". This meant love of *all* knowledge.

The first philosophers were also the first scientists; the distinction between the two arrived with Socrates, who resembles our traditional idea of a philosopher – an old man with a beard discussing many topics, asking questions, etc.

Philosophy was the study of everything; thus mathematicians, as well as people who discussed politics, and scientists were all considered philosophers. It is similar to the term "academic" of today.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, there was a change in the way people thought about the world. There are two ways to think about this change.

1. There was a shift from myth to theory (science) as a way of explaining the world.
2. There was also a shift from religion to theory/science and moral philosophy.

This change represented a shift in our attitudes towards knowledge, from myth and religion to theory/philosophy.

With myths and religion, you aren't expected to question it; you are supposed to accept it as truth. Reasons and arguments are not given for it. Theories, on the other hand, are posited as guesses that might be proved or disproved. Reasons must be given for these hypotheses, and they are meant to be questioned, changed, or improved.

This is roughly the method of modern science, which early philosophy bears many strong similarities to.

People often have two attitudes towards myths, that they are either fiction or absolute truth. A theory is neither of these. It is about the way the world is, so isn't fiction; on the other hand, it doesn't claim to be unquestionably right, as it could be improved upon or proved false.

**Rationalism** = The method of inquiry described above, that posits theories.

2. Religion makes claims about right and wrong, how we should or shouldn't act. Like with myth, it is inappropriate to ask for reasons why certain rules and dogmas exist. When we ask for reasons for religious rules – when we ask for ourselves what is right or wrong, good or bad, or just or unjust – we make the same leap as we do from myth to theory, and start doing philosophy. This is ethical rationalism.

Rationalism is the formulation of theory from evidence and/or argument.

Thales and Anaximander, both from Miletus, were the first philosophers, as far as we know. Thales was famously able to predict eclipses, giving a naturalist, scientific explanation for a phenomenon previously explained by religions. Thales tried to explain the existence of human beings by asserting that humans were gestated by fish until they were old enough to survive by themselves. Thales was trying to explain how human beings came into existence. The traditional explanation is that god created humans; in all of these accounts, god created the first human as an adult that can take care of itself. Thales wanted to take god out of the picture. If there was a first human, and thus a first infant, how did that infant survive? Thales says that fish took care of the first human until it was old enough to look after itself.

Thales came up with a natural explanation for the existence of humans without using god. He was using the premise that the human species, at some point, got started, and that there was a first man from which all others descended. This assumption was wrong, but is still an example of a good *theory*.

Xenophanes is another example of an early naturalist. He said that religions were created by human beings. Evidence for this is found in the fact that human conceptions of the gods

make the gods exactly like humans, emotionally and physically. But why should gods look like humans, rather than cows or puppies? The answer, according to Xenophanes, is because humans thought up the idea of god.

Notice that Islam and Judaism forbid pictures of god for much the same reason, that god is not of any particular species and cannot be physically represented. It then became sacrilegious to make a picture of god, and thus ceased being a philosophical statement and became religious dogma, because it can no longer be questioned.

Xenophanes also said that god cannot be like mortals in body or thought/mind. Does god have a particular body, or physical form? What about god's thoughts or mind; does god have an interest in justice or in people doing good things?

Xenophanes seems to be saying that our conception of god is a projection of ourselves onto god. Plato and Christianity would say that morality is a projection of god onto us.

Xenophanes attributes wind and weather to the sea. Once again, this is an example of the shift from myth to theory discussed above. He is giving a naturalist explanation for weather that leaves out god. Throughout history, people have claimed that things like rain and earthquakes are caused by god. Xenophanes gave a totally different explanation. The same is true of his claim that the sun is an ignited cloud. He gives a natural, scientific, account of something that some people had thought of as a god.

*Today.* Philosophy is not only natural science, as it was for the Greeks. It can be divided into different sub-fields:

1. Ethics and political philosophy – discusses how people should and do relate to each other, on both large and small scales.
2. Philosophy of religion – the application of reason and argument to claims of and about religion.
3. Philosophy of Science – asks questions about the nature of science and scientific truths.
4. Philosophy of mind – study of the mind/body problem, the nature of the mind, whether or not the mind is material or immaterial.
5. Metaphysics & epistemology – metaphysics asks about what fundamentally exists, while epistemology explores what we really know and what we can and cannot know.

What all of these have in common is that they ask the biggest, deepest, and broadest questions about their subjects, with limited or no answers. This is the heart of philosophy.

Bertrand Russell says that philosophy is any question that we don't have an answer to and probably never will. At the very least, they are the very hardest questions we have, though perhaps we can eventually solve them.

Aristotle says that the purpose of philosophy is to exercise a certain part of your humanity. There is the part of you that is practical (your character, desires, emotions, instincts, etc) and the part that is intellectual (reasons and thinks). Philosophy exercises the latter portion, which people don't use enough. Philosophy is valuable because it uses the intellectual part of the person.

Is Aristotle right that there's an intellectual part of all of us that is innately philosophical? Probably; everybody has at least thought about philosophical questions, even if they don't have opinions on them. This is in contrast to topics like chemistry. It's not likely that most people have thought about or have a strong opinion on the temperature at which metals melt.