Schools of Western Thought

There are many important schools of Western philosophy, both ancient and modern. It is important to know both the major ideas in each school and the works and ideas of leading philosophers.

1. **Stoicism** is an ancient Greek school that idealized freedom from emotions. It was founded by Zeno of Citium, who taught at the "painted porch" of Athens. Another essential Stoic idea was "pneuma", or the "breath of life", which is the life force that structures matter and the soul. Important thinkers include Epictetus, who developed the concept of *prohairesis*, or free will, and the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who wrote *Meditations*.

2. **Skepticism** encourages the rejection of truths unless they are supported by sufficient evidence. Academic Skepticism, which states no truths can be certain, was started at the Academy and led by Carneades. In contrast, Pyrrhonian skepticism, initiated by Pyrrho of Elis, states that it doesn't even matter whether a fact is certain or not. Sextus Empiricus provides the most complete account of skepticism in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

3. **Scholasticism** was taught at medieval Christian universities and sought to reconcile Christian thought with classical thinkers such as Aristotle. This school included Thomas Aquinas, who gave five arguments for the existence of God (called the "quinque viae") in *Summa Theologica*. Other thinkers include Pierre Abelard (author of *Sic et Non*) and Peter Lombard (who wrote *The Four Books of Sentences*).

4. **Rationalism** emphasizes reason or deduction over sensory experience as a means of gaining knowledge. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato espoused this view in his Theory of Forms, which says that abstract ideas ("forms") are more real than the material world of the senses. Later rationalists include Rene Descartes (who wrote *Meditations on First Philosophy*) and Baruch Spinoza (author of *Ethics*).

5. **Empiricism** states that all knowledge is based on sensory experience. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke discussed the idea that people are born with a mind as a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate – that gains knowledge through experiences. Other philosophers include George Berkeley (author of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*) and David Hume (author of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*).

6. **Positivism** encourages the use of the scientific method to find the laws that govern society. It was founded by Auguste Comte, who believed that society develops through the "Law of three stages": the theocratic, metaphysical, and positive. **Logical positivism**, propounded by Karl Wittgenstein (author of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*), holds that only statements that are logically verifiable are meaningful.

7. **Pragmatism** is a movement that values ideas based on their practical application (in other words, their "cash value"). Famous thinkers include William James (who wrote *Pragmatism*) and John Dewey (the author of *Democracy and Education)*. Pragmatism was started by C. S. Peirce in the late 19th century, who expounded its ideas in the essays "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear."

8. **Utilitarianism** is a school that espouses action that maximizes utility, or pleasure and happiness. An early thinker, Jeremy Bentham, summed up this philosophy with the phrase "greatest happiness for the greatest number." He also coined the phrase "felicific calculus", which

describes the degree of pleasure each action can cause. Another thinker, J. S. Mill, explained this school of thought in his book *Utilitarianism*.

9. **Existentialism** is a broadly defined movement that analyzes the human condition. Many thinkers grouped here did not even accept the label "existentialist." A recurring theme is the concept of the absurd, as humans try to seek meaning in a seemingly meaningless outside world. The thinker Jean-Paul Sartre popularized the movement in the essay "Existentialism is a Humanism." Other philosophers include Soren Kierkegaard (who wrote *Either/Or*), Martin Heidegger (author of *Being and Time*), and Albert Camus (who wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*).

10. **Neoplatonism** is a reworking of Platonism, which was primarily led by Plotinus. It emphasized that the world was made of three simple principles: the One, the Intellect (or *nous*), and the Soul. Everything in the universe was believed to be a manifestation of the One. Plotinus' works were compiled by his student Porphyry into the *Enneads*.