



Glossary OF Terms (1) 2940eeba6699f3129f7e23027622
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Western Philosophy (University of South Africa)



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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Absolutist: Someone who holds that there are absolute truths or absolute moral norms, or absolute knowledge, absolute meanings, only one (absolute) form of rationality.

Africanisation: As part of the post-colonialist, anti-racist discourse, it describes a renewed focus on Africa, a conscious and deliberate assertion of nothing more or less than the right to be an African. With reference to knowledge, it describes the critical questioning of dominant epistemological paradigms from an African standpoint taking the African experience in its totality as the point of departure for the construction/ generation of knowledge and its critique.

Alienation: To feel a stranger to ... , that is to become estranged from something. Marx used the term to describe what happens to a worker in a mass production plant – he/she becomes alienated from his/her labour because he/she does not produce a complete article. The worker is separated from the end product, from what is produced.

Analysis (Logical/philosophical): The critical elucidation (or explication, or unpacking) of already existing ideas and beliefs (e.g. those already existing in the sciences, in religion and in everyday beliefs about the world).

Anthropological: Human, belonging to the human being, what concerns the human being. The Greek word '*anthropos*' means 'man' or wider 'human being'. Philosophical anthropology is that branch of philosophy which reflects on aspects of human existence, e.g. what is the essence of being human?, What is a human being?, How do we conceptualize the human being?

Appeal to authority: The mistake of accepting a claim as true merely because it is made by someone who happens to be regarded/ accepted as an authority.

Assert: Someone asserts the proposition p when he/she declares that the proposition p is true.

Assumption: A presupposition, a view accepted as true, probably unstated, even perhaps unrecognized, which serves as the basis for an assertion.

Autonomy: Dictionaries tend to see this as a political term only. In philosophy it refers mostly to a person and then it means freedom consisting in self-determination and independence of all external constraint.

Axiology: Theory or science of values, i.e. a reflection on value (values such as truth, goodness, happiness, beauty) or evaluation as such. It includes all value disciplines such as ethics and aesthetics.

Axiom: A statement for which no proof is required (possible) (because, inter alia, it is held to be a self-evident truth), but which is used to substantiate other statements.

'Cogito'/ Cartesian cogito (Descartes): The thinking aspect of the human being. 'Cartesian' refers to the French philosopher Rene Descartes, Cartesius in Latin, (1596-1650). Descartes found he could doubt everything, but to doubt is to think and therefore he must be a thinking thing. 'Cogito' is the Latin for 'I think'.

Cognitive: Cf. 'Affective response'. The intellectual or knowledge aspect of the mind.

Concept: To have a concept of something (P) is to know, at least to some extent, what it (P) is or what it involves, i.e. to be able to recognize instances of P, to distinguish Ps from other things and/or to compare a P with other things. In short, to be able to think and talk about P things. The ability to define the concept is not necessary.

Conceptual: Concerning a concept or a complex of concepts. Philosophers are interested in conceptual questions, e.g. 'what is love?' where the aim is to determine the criteria for describing a situation as one of love. The same question may be factual (psychological), then the psychological characteristics of a state of love have to be determined. It is clear that the factual question presupposes an answer to the conceptual one.

Contextualize: To put in the right/appropriate/relevant context. Objects and language acts (making a statement, asking a question, giving an order, expressing a wish, etc.) have to be in a framework (context) to have meaning. Context is the setting in which a particular object or language act becomes meaningful, i.e. the circumstances surrounding it with reference to which it gets a certain meaning. The context determines exact meaning. For example, 'cause' in the context of human behaviour means something different from 'cause' in the context of natural science. In a discussion of 'cause' contextualization will therefore be very important.

Contingent: A statement is contingent when its truth or falsity depends on what the world is like, e.g. "There is a drought in East Africa".

Contradiction: The joint assertion and denial of a statement.

Correspondence theory of truth: In the widest sense it is the theory that truth is agreement with reality; that truth consists in a correspondence between a statement and the way things are. 'Snow is white' is true if snow is white.

Deconstruction: A process whereby absolutist metaphysics and epistemology are critiqued, displaced or decentred.

Deductive argument: An argument is deductive when the conclusion is contained in the premises – the conclusion follows necessarily, e.g. All Christians believe in an afterlife. Mary is a Christian. Therefore, Mary believes in an afterlife.

Denotative: The reference aspect of a statement. 'There are pine trees in the garden' is a denotative statement – it refers to a state of affairs. Contrasted with **connotation** which is the abstract meaning of a word, the dictionary definition.

Dialectic: "...the dynamic interconnectedness of things, the universality of change and its radical character: everything possessing any sort of reality is in a process of self-transformation, owing to the fact that its content is made up of opposing factors or forces of internal movement which interconnects everything, changes each thing into something else" (D.D.Runes, *Dictionary of philosophy*, 1966:79). This principle also applies to societies where, according to Marx and his followers, the evolution takes place in terms of changes in economic relations (productive forces). The formula usually used to describe the dialectical process is: a *thesis* which is opposed by an *antithesis*, and this 'struggle' gives rise to a *synthesis* which in its turn becomes a thesis and so forth.

Discursive: To do with discourse, discussion. Discursive control, for example, is the social control by means of the way people talk about social phenomena.

Disposition: To have the ability or the characteristic to act/behave in a certain way. Glass has the disposition to break on receiving a blow.

Dualism: An attempt at explaining something by reducing it to two radically different elements, e.g. the human being has a body and a soul; reality contains material and spiritual elements.

'Elan vital': 'Life force'. A term used by Bergson to denote the source of efficient causation and evolution in nature.

Empirical: To do with actual experience by means of the senses. 'This is a red rose' is an empirical statement in that the redness of the flower has to be determined by looking and seeing.

Enlightenment: "... a cultural period distinguished by the fervent efforts of leading personalities to make reason the absolute ruler of human life, and to shed the light of knowledge upon the mind and conscience of any individual" (Runes, *op. cit.*, p.92). When there is talk of *the* enlightenment the speaker usually refers to the period in Europe stretching from the early 17th century to the beginning of the 19th century.

Epiphenomenon: A secondary spin-off of a process with no influence on the process as such. The sound water makes when it passes over stones is such an epiphenomenon of the running water. Epiphenomenalists describe the mind as such an epiphenomenon of material (bodily) processes.

Essentialism: Some philosophers have the idea that objects or events have one characteristic or there is one particular aspect or act which makes that thing or event what it is – that property, aspect or act is its essence. Essentialism is the view that one has to find the essence of everything in order to understand things or events.

Evidence: Most widely used for factual statements which support, although they do not necessarily establish, another factual statement. In the case of moral judgements, precepts or principles 'grounds', or 'reasons' are preferred. In the legal context 'evidence' is used rather differently but it is not necessary to go into this here.

Existential experience: An experience related to the human being's existence, i.e. his/her being in the world. It refers to lived experiences gained from active involvement with life, in contrast to a theoretical or rational insight. Think of pain, anguish, love.

Fallacy: A false argument, the conclusion is not supported by the premises; the premises may be true but the conclusion is not valid.

Falsification: To show that a rule or a generalization or a theory is false by producing an acceptable counter-example.

Family resemblances: A model used by the Austrian philosopher, Wittgenstein, to oppose absolutisms. For example, he points out that we do not always classify in terms of strict and absolute criteria but in terms of a series of overlaps. All grandsons do not have all of their grandfather's traits but there are resemblances between them so that they can be classified as family.

Folk philosophy: According to Deacon examples of ethnophilosophy "are recognized in the folk philosophy of a people". Deacon states that this view is "premised on the assumption that there is a metaphysical and ideological system" in the traditional wisdom and institutions of a people. In Western philosophy philosophy is seen as the result of the reflections of particular individuals. Some 'theories', however, give the impression that they represent the wisdom/insights of the group, as if the group philosophizes together. There are, for example, accounts about the nature of the human being (mind/mental activities), about the world (created by God/ at the lower level of a hierarchical structure of reality), and so on. Such 'accounts' which cannot be linked to a particular thinker, but which make up the common views of a group, are labeled 'folk philosophy'. Because ethnophilosophy is abstracted from the actions and beliefs of ordinary Africans, philosophers with a Western background, tend to brand it a form of 'folk philosophy'.

Frankfurt school: A group of social scientists and philosophers with Marxist leanings who were attached to the Frankfurt university after the second world war and who reflected and did research on society and social problems and accordingly on the nature of the social sciences too.

Hermeneutics: The theory of interpretation. Originally used in theology as the discipline that concerned itself with the (correct) interpretation of the Bible, and all the problems connected to such interpretation. Later used to refer to a philosophical approach that concerns itself with the phenomenon of interpretation.

Heuristic: An act or procedure which aims at finding out about or discovering something. A methodological aid.

Historicity: Used to refer to the 'fact' that people and events have a history, are part of history, and that they cannot be understood in isolation of their historical situation. Their historicity has to be taken into account.

Holistic (holism): Holism is the philosophy that a whole is always more than the sum of its parts. To understand something we should always keep the whole in mind, e.g. analyse by starting from the whole, go to the parts and then return to the whole, or to see something in relation to other wholes rather than looking at its parts.

'Homo rationalis': Rational human being.

Humanistic: With the human being at the center of interest. In contrast to e.g. theistic where a god is at the center.

Idealism: Usually contrasted with materialism. In general idealism is the view that what is normally called 'the outer world' is the creation of the human mind.

Imply: Proposition p implies q if and only if it would be self-contradictory to assert p and deny q.

Implication: Not to be confused with cause. Events and things cause but propositions/statements imply. Implication is a relation between propositions. One proposition implies another only if it would be self-contradictory to assert the first and deny the second. 'John is a man', implies 'John is rational animal' but not 'John is the owner of a car'. A true proposition cannot imply a false one, but a false proposition can imply a true one, e.g. "The cricket world-cup tournament takes place in South Africa in 2004" is false but the implication that South Africa is the host for the competition is true.

Indigenous: relating to what is local, native and original as opposed to that which is alien and from outside.

Indoctrination: Philosophers of education have written many pages about indoctrination. It is a condemnatory term and refers to a process of causing people to hold certain beliefs and to implant unshakable commitments without allowing for critical evaluation or revision.

Inference (infer): Inferring is something done by arguers and thinkers. One infers a conclusion from premises. From 'All humans are mortal' and 'Socrates is human' we infer 'Socrates is mortal'. An inference is a logical conclusion.

Innate nature: Innate means to be inborn. Innate nature is the nature a person is born with, i.e. personality traits inherited from previous generations.

Instrumental reason: Reason geared to consequences, the results that will be obtained. Reason is thus instrumental in achieving a certain result.

Intellectualism: The view that the intellect or reason is the only factor of importance in human existence. Knowledge and truth arrived at by rational means constitute the highest values.

Intentionality: A key phenomenological concept. The intentionality of the mind means that mental acts always have an object, they always refer to something; to see is to see something, to imagine is to imagine something, to fear is to fear something. These intentional objects may be real or imagined.

Intrinsic relationship: Some properties of things are essential or internal or intrinsic to them; without them that particular thing cannot be what it is said/believed to be, e.g. a wheel must be round to be a wheel. Roundness is an essential (intrinsic) property of a wheel. Things also stand in relation to other things. The earth rotates around the sun. This relation is part of the definition of earth; therefore, this relation is internal to the concept earth. External properties or relations are contingent, i.e. they depend on the state of affairs at a particular moment in time. The redness of a rose is not essential/internal to a rose, but contingent or external.

Invented African: Mudimbe labeled the European view of Africa and the African an invention because it was not based on fact but on all kinds of assumptions.

Justification: There are two uses: justified to do something and justified to claim/state something. In the first case the question is whether the person involved has a reason/reasons which are morally or legally acceptable for acting in a certain way, e.g. Was A justified in leaving her husband and children? Was the police officer justified in shooting the man he wanted to arrest? In the second case it is matter of the availability of grounds which will logically support the claim: Was A justified to warn farmers not to proceed with planting? If he works for the weather bureau and has the necessary information about weather patterns, etc., i.e. such a warning is based on available facts which indicates that rain is unlikely, such a warning is justified.

Kant's Copernican revolution: Copernicus (1473-1543), the founder of modern astronomy, changed the perspective of astronomical studies by proclaiming the sun the centre of the universe instead of the earth. In his attempts to understand knowledge, Kant changed the

epistemological perspective by starting from the knowing mind instead of from the world. He called this insight his 'Copernican revolution'.

Life-world: The every-day, pre-theoretical milieu in which humans relate to other people and to the world. The sum total of conditions which make communication (intersubjectivity) possible.

'Logos': Greek word with different uses in philosophy. In a footnote Outlaw gives a full explanation. Read it. He uses it as an equivalent of reason/rationality.

Master narratives: Close to the idea of a paradigm. A master narrative is a 'story' about an important aspect of life or a cluster of such important aspects in terms of which people then act and/or understand. The master narrative of the apartheid-philosophy was that race is a basic category in human society.

Materialism: There is a day-to-day use where materialist means someone whose main interest is money and what money can buy, and a philosophical usage. The last is not easy to define because there are many forms of materialism. In general it means a metaphysical position in which matter (however this is defined in the particular context) and material relations are the only reality. What are usually thought of as spiritual or mental can, according to materialists, only be forms of matter. For example, one such position is that the mind is nothing but the brain (a piece of matter), and so-called mental processes are material (neurological) processes in the brain.

Meta-philosophy: 'Meta' here means 'of a higher level'. A meta-philosophical question is, so to speak, a question not in philosophy but about philosophy. This sounds strange because philosophy is the only subject where meta-questions still form part of the subject. Questions about other disciplines (e.g. meta-economic or meta-physical questions) are philosophical questions.

Methodological: The study of methods. Methodological has to do therefore with the outcome of such a study of method(s). A methodological consideration is one concerning methods.

Modalities: The nature of the way in or the method according to which people act or things happen or a task is approached or performed. For example, a language act may be a statement, or a command or a wish.

Modernity (Modernist): There is a rigid or epistemological and an 'ordinary' meaning. In ordinary discourse modernity means more or less the present in contrast to the 'old days' when we did not have the modern facilities such as electricity and water toilets. In short it refers to the period of technological advancement and the integration of technology into our lives. The more rigid or epistemological definition – the one mostly used in the study material - refers to a view of life in which one form of rationality is accepted as the correct and only one, and this is the Western idea of rationality. This means truth is what qualifies as such in terms of this view. The period people have in mind here is roughly the 17th to the early 20th Century – a period of all kinds of absolutisms and final answers. Cf. Post-modernism.

Monism: The view that there is only one basic stuff or substance in the universe. Both materialism and idealism are forms of monism.

Naturalism (naturalistic philosophy): The philosophical approach that the natural ('Nature' as an all inclusive category) is the only reality – no spiritual reality in the sense of a reality opposed to nature; only what is given in nature and their natural relations and interconnections are real.

Necessary (e.g. principles): A statement is necessarily true if its denial involves a contradiction.

Negritude: A philosophy developed by Leopold Senghor (who later became president of Senegal) and co-workers, Aime Cesaire was the most important, when they were students in Paris, France. The question they started from was about the essence of Africanness – that which makes an African an African as opposed to a European or Asian. They found this in emotion rather than logic. In the reading by Abiola Irele in Chapter 2 of *Philosophy from Africa*, Negritude is discussed in detail. Read it to get a clearer picture of this important trend in African philosophy.

Oedipal: Comes from the name of a Greek hero, Oedipus, who caused his own downfall by marrying his mother. **Ontology (ontological principle):** Ontology is the reflection of being, i.e. on what there is/believed to be, e.g. on the final nature of being – material, spiritual, both; whether there are different senses of the verb 'to exist' and different types of existence, on what it means to say something exists. Tempels claimed that the Africans' reflections are basically ontological in nature and he found one central ontological principle, 'Being is force and force is being'.

Pantareic: From the Greek *pata rei* which means always in flux. Pantareic then refers to continuous movement or flux.

Paradigm: (i) An exemplary/ideal/typical example.

(ii) A framework of assumptions (beliefs) or a basic set of assumptions in the light or with the help of which a person or group attempts to understand events and the world. Some talk of 'epistemological frameworks'.

Phenomena (phenomenon): Appearances as e.g. what we experience, as when we see a tree or a mirage, in contrast to reality or what is actually there. Different philosophies are built around the notion of a phenomenon.

Phenomenal world: Because Kant approached the world via the mind this meant that for him the world could no longer be the world as such, independent from the experiencing mind. The world can only be the experienced (phenomenal) world.

Phenomenology: Phenomenologists aim at describing meanings disregarding the reality to which they are supposed to refer. They want to find out what the conditions for the possibility of any description are. For example, before we can discuss whether miracles do occur, we must be clear about what a belief in miracles amounts to. A simple dictionary definition will not do because a definition is either an abridged or a distorted form of discourse. To find out about miracles we have to scrutinize miracle-discourse by means of examples and counter-examples so as to arrive at its essence – true meaning.

Phronesis: A Greek word referring to "practical wisdom, or knowledge of the proper ends of conduct and of the means of attaining them." The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, distinguished this form of wisdom from theoretical knowledge (science) and technical skill (Runes 1966:235).

Platonic tradition: Plato (+/- 428BCE-/- 348BCE) is a Greek philosopher. The platonic tradition is supposed to be his philosophical legacy, but almost every possible approach is to be found in Plato's works. So there is no one definite platonic tradition. Okolo in his essay has in mind Plato's procedure to explain phenomena in terms of dualisms. Later dualistic arguments were seen as in line with Plato's legacy, the platonic tradition.

Positivistic (Positivism): Also known as scientific empiricism. A philosophical approach in which science is regarded as the only source of genuine knowledge. Proponents propagate the extension of the scientific method to the study of, and for the benefit of, all aspects of human life. A characteristic of the trend is a negative attitude to theology and metaphysics.

Post-modernism: A reaction against the absolutisms of epistemological modernity. Here rationality is not a given and there are no final truths; socio-historical factors always play a role, according to post-modern philosophers. In short, epistemological relativism is accepted here.

Pragmatism: Pragmatists see end results as the answer to whatever problem they are concerned with – meaning is defined in terms of the results of statements, truth is what works, one knows if one can do something, and an act is good (ethically) in terms of its results.

Praxis: A Greek term given new life especially by Marxists. It refers to activity that has its goal within itself. Thus conduct, practical action.

Premise (premised): In logic an argument is a piece of discourse consisting of one proposition which is the point the speaker/writer is making (the conclusion), and one or more other propositions which are put forward as reasons (grounds) for assenting to the conclusion. Such a supporting proposition is called a premise (pl. premises). 'Premised' is the verbal form, i.e. a

view which one holds (e.g. all politicians are corrupt – which is a conclusion) is based on or grounded by or supported by i.e. premised on another proposition/other propositions.

Presupposition (preconceived idea): An unproven even questionable idea whereby one's thinking and/or actions are determined.

Principle of excluded middle: A statement is either true or false; there is no position in between, and an individual either belongs to a specific class or it does not belong there and again there is no position in between. A chair is either a piece of furniture or it is not a piece of furniture, an ant is either an animal or it is not an animal, 'Big Brother is reality TV' is either true or false.

Principle of non-contradiction: No statement may be both asserted and denied, either explicitly or implicitly, in the same context. A teacher cannot claim 'Sipho has passed' and 'Sipho has failed' with reference to the same person and the same test.

Proposition: Whatever can be true or false. It differs from a **sentence** which is a grammatical unit which may express one or more propositions. The same sentence (e.g. 'You are the prettiest in the world' said to different girls in different situations) may express different propositions and different sentences may express the same proposition, e.g. 'The president of South Africa is here in the hall', and 'The founder of Nepad is present'.

Reflection: Considering some aspect of some thinking activity or other, whether it be your own or that of another.

Reductio ad absurdum: Latin for reduction to absurdity. A form of indirect proof. A statement is proved by showing that its negation is self-contradictory.

Reduction: Attempts to show that things (events) of a more complex or puzzling kind, are in reality things (events) of a simple, less puzzling, familiar kind. Thus, reductionism, 'nothing but' philosophies – 'the mind is nothing but the brain/behaviour', 'morality is nothing but self-interest'.

Relativism: The view that there are no absolute standards. Truth and morality are culture/history/ context dependent.

Rheomode: Derived from the Greek verb *rheo* meaning to flow, i.e. 'the flowing mode'. The aim is to get rid of the fragmentation of be-ing, of the subject-object-verb division, caused by natural languages, and to substitute an understanding of entities as the dimensions, forms, and modes of the incessant flow of simultaneously multi-directional motion: be-ing rather than be. It takes the verb as point of departure and preserves the wholeness of the whole of be-ing. The language of *ubuntu*.

Structuralism: Some social scientists and linguists explain/understand social and linguistic phenomena in terms of underlying structures. They argue that all languages and social events/organisations have a basic structure and if we know this structure we can explain what we have in a given society/language at a given time and also predict future developments. We have an –ism when different perspectives are reduced to one perspective only. Accordingly, structuralism claims that there is only one valid way of looking at social/linguistic phenomena namely that they can be reduced to underlying structures.

Surrealism: An artistic movement which takes Freud's psychology very seriously. Surrealists claim that there is a real world that lie behind the artificial world of ordinary objects and ordinary experience. Our ordinary world is artificial because we structure and shape it through our concepts and consciousness. But we should endeavour to access the real world. They see art as a medium through which this may be achieved.

System: A system is a group of elements that function as a unit on the basis of the interrelations between the different elements. We talk of the solar system. The sun with its planets together with their satellites 'hang together' because of the interrelationships between the elements. A phenomenon such as an eclipse is then explained in a systematic way, i.e. with reference to what happens in and applies to the system. A group of propositions may also form a system when they are used to account for phenomena, e.g. propositions about a creator of the world who expects a certain pattern of behaviour from his creatures, form a system and will

in a systematic way account for events in the world, e.g. droughts, moral conduct and actions by politicians. If such a system has to do with the world or reality, i.e. if it is an account of the origin, true nature and future of the world, then it is a **metaphysical system**. **Ideology** has more to do with values and thus with action. "In the most general meaning of the word, an ideology is a system or cluster of norms and propositions (usually of a very general or high-level kind; e.g. on the nature and destiny of man) which function as a justification for a way of life, system of social organization, programme of action, etc." (Sparkes 1991:180).

Telos: The Greek word for aim, purpose, object. **Teleological** – the idea that there is an aim or purpose behind every event.

Universal (e.g. principles): Principles which apply everywhere, that is, without exception. A universal (pl. universals/universalia) is contrasted with a particular (pl. particulars). Things (e.g. a coat) are particulars; their properties (e.g. brown/brownness) are universals – they can be predicated of practically any object. The status of universals (are they real or mental 'images' or linguistic 'entities'?) is one of the standard metaphysical problems. **Universalism:** giving preference to what is (believed to be) generally applicable rather than to what has particular application.

Verification: To verify a statement is to show conclusively that it is true.