Tutorial Letter 501/3/2022

Introduction to Western Philosophy PLS1501

Semesters 1 and 2

Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology

This tutorial letter will serve as the study guide of this module

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CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION

Dear Student

Welcome to the module: Introduction to Western philosophy (PLS1501). It has been designed to make certain significant philosophical ideas accessible and understandable to you, the student. Our goal is to familiarise you with the various themes in, problems of, and approaches to the study of Western philosophy with a particular focus on Ancient and Medieval philosophy. After you have completed this module you may then register for a module focusing on Modern Western Philosophy (PLS3702) as well as another in depth module entitled: Advanced Western philosophy (PLS3709). In this introductory module, we have given you what might be called a broad outline of the thought of the major figures in the Ancient and Medieval periods of Western philosophy. In the follow-up module, we take a more in-depth and focused approach. Nevertheless, even in this introductory module you need to understand and be able to critically assess the contributions of various philosophers to the fields of epistemology, metaphysics, political philosophy, and ethics. Note that these are traditionally regarded as the main subdivisions of philosophy. There are two fundamental ways of approaching the study of philosophy. One is to approach it in terms of its historical development (a diachronic approach); another is to systematically focus on its subdivisions. This approach obviously makes the study of philosophy manageable (because it divides up the field into manageable chunks). However, bear in mind that there are definite links between the chief subdivisions of philosophy, especially between epistemology and metaphysics and between ethics and political philosophy. More importantly, the thought of most philosophers is not neatly compartmentalised; most philosophers did not write separate works on ethics, political philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology. In a work which aims to introduce students to philosophy, an approach based on pure categorisation from runs the risk of being confusing rather than illuminating. This is why we have chosen to present philosophical ideas both systematically (i.e. focusing on the sub disciplines) and historically. Although we have chosen to present the systematic aspects of philosophy under two main headings rather than four, this is for the sake of convenience. There are closer links between each of the two pairs of subdivisions: epistemology and metaphysics; and ethics and political philosophy than between other subdivisions. Nevertheless, all of these subdivisions, as well as numerous other, more specialised, areas, are interrelated. Please make a special note of the following, important point: Western philosophy is only one among many philosophies. There is, for example, Indian philosophy, Japanese, Chinese, Russian, Latin American and African philosophies. This clearly brings to the fore the question: what is philosophy? Put differently, the question that arises is this: is there a common characteristic that is found in all the philosophies mentioned? What precisely is that common characteristic? By whom and how was it decided that this specific characteristic if there is one defines the term “philosophy"?

Different answers have been given to the above question. Here are a few. Some claim that we should look at the origin of the word “philosophy”, in which case “philosophy” means “love of wisdom”. Others claim that we should regard philosophy as an academic discipline; in other words, that philosophy is professional philosophy. Those who focus on the origin of the word “philosophy” claim that there is no community or society without philosophy. Those who emphasise the academic study of philosophy claim that only professional philosophy qualifies as “philosophy”. Of course, there are those who vigorously deny this claim and who take issue with its implicit claim to primacy.

These two answers show that the meaning of philosophy cannot be taken for granted. Nor should one lose sight of the fact that the meaning of philosophy continues to be contested. Even today, there are those who still doubt whether there can be an African philosophy. Yet there are those like Cheikh Anta Diop (author of 'The African origin of western civilization'), George G M James (author of 'Stolen legacy'), and Martin Bernal (author 'Black Athena') who have argued that, in the course of its evolution, Western philosophy, especially from Plato and Aristotle onwards, has borrowed significantly ("stolen") from ancient Black Africa. The struggle to define the meaning of philosophy indicates that all philosophies should be studied. This obviously cannot be done all at once. Nor can anybody, in the space of one lifetime, hope to do a thorough and in-depth study of all philosophies. Some selection is, therefore, necessary although it is obviously undesirable. We simply wish to draw your attention to the fact that, in this module, you are studying only one philosophy, Western philosophy. It is important to note that even within the relatively narrow terrain we define as Western philosophy, there are such divergences in approach, methods and content that there are differences between Western philosophers themselves about what precisely constitutes Western philosophy. There are broadly speaking two approaches which prevail contemporarily between what might be characterized as Analytic philosophy which has been the favoured approach in the English speaking world that is made up of Britain and her former colonies which include the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The predominance of this way of doing philosophy amongst English speaking departments has led to Analytic philosophy sometimes being described as Anglo-Saxon philosophy. The other approach to philosophy is called Continental philosophy, where continent describes the European mainland, this philosophical community is dominated by German and French philosophy but also includes Belgium, Holland and Italy amongst others. Whereas the former approach to philosophy usually prioritises the studying of the "problems" of philosophy as distinct from the history of philosophy and places a high premium on analysis and formal logic sometimes treating them as philosophy itself. The latter places a greater emphasis on the historical nature of the problems and understands even their historical unfoldment and connectedness as part of the philosophical enterprise.

Since South Africa has a history of "double conquest" which has meant colonization by both Europeans from the "continent" (namely the Dutch since 1652) and Britain since the 1800s, its Western philosophical practice also reflects this legacy. The so-called English speaking universities such as the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University and the University of the Witwatersrand mainly teach analytic philosophy. The so-called Afrikaans speaking universities such as the University of Pretoria, the University of the Free State and the University of Stellenbosch on the other hand teach continental philosophy.

Owing to a very unique history which we will touch on briefly in this module Unisa has an interesting heritage which has meant that we teach both analytic and continental philosophy as well as African philosophy. Although we will provide a very brief introduction to Western philosophy as a whole much of this module will focus on problems drawn from Ancient and Mediaeval Western philosophy. As a general point, bear in mind that you should try to adopt a holistic approach to the study of philosophy, even if you only ever study one "fragment", this guide is filled with bibliographic details for you to pursue in the fulfilment of your philosophical quest and researches.

Learning Outcomes

As you work through this study guide, you will come across ideas and explanations that you will challenge and others that you support. This is what makes learning so interesting!

This approach to learning enables you to critically analyse the ideas you come across and to consolidate, appreciate and understand the various perspectives of Western philosophy. Remember that the skills and knowledge you will obtain from studying this module can be transferred to other disciplines. Throughout the course of the guide, we shall indicate certain outcomes which you need to achieve.

The purpose of these outcomes is to inform you about what you are supposed to be able to do after working your way through a particular study unit. The outcomes will be presented in a list immediately below the title of each study unit.

Purpose of this Module

The purpose of this module is to help you develop an awareness of philosophical issues in the academic environment to help you develop appropriate critical skills that will enable you to defend your own views of certain philosophical problems systematically.

A single module on Western philosophy will obviously not instantly enable you to engage in detailed, philosophical discourse. It will, nevertheless, expose you to the main areas of philosophy. You will gain an understanding of your own and other people's epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, and political convictions within the context of Western philosophical thinking. Once you have completed this module, you will have the theoretical competence necessary for undertaking more advanced philosophical studies. More specifically, you will understand the basic theoretical frameworks and dimensions of philosophical thinking have developed the ability to think in an integrated and holistic manner have developed the ability to critically assess certain philosophical positions The particular skills you will acquire that will enable you to undertake the philosophical tasks expected of you include: analysing the structure of increasingly complex arguments, critically evaluating various viewpoints, constructing counterarguments, linking untutored convictions with specifically philosophical considerations Self-awareness and an awareness of others is important to avoid misunderstandings and to enable us to bring our convictions to the forum of philosophical dialogue. To discover (or become more aware) of one's deepest philosophical convictions is important, as is understanding the origins and reasoning for one's philosophical outlook. What is important to you in life, and how do these values influence your assessment of philosophical questions? Is there a connection between what you claim is important to you (e.g. fairness or caring for your community) and the ways in which you (and others) behave? Make no mistake: philosophy has practical implications for how we live our lives.

We hope you find this module useful and stimulating. If you already have some experience of university study, the skills and the wider theoretical framework you will gain will undoubtedly improve the many other cognitive skills which are required of you in the academic environment.

If you are just beginning your university studies, we hope that you will find this introduction to Western philosophy interesting and challenging; you will soon discover that philosophy is relevant to other areas of study.

Aim

Our aim in this introductory study of Western philosophy is twofold.

1. To help you gain adequate insight into the central questions that constitute the different fields of philosophy as these emerged in the dialogue between various influential philosophers. As we progress through this module, we shall try to help you identify and link these ideas with certain issues raised by earlier thinkers.

2. To provide you with a theoretical grounding and competence that will enable you to read and respond to philosophical texts. We have done this by systematically guiding you in the development of your own reasoned answers to these problems. We have also shown you how to integrate, in your studies, the various forms of philosophical literature (texts, explanations, provocative questions, etc) that constitute both the form and content of the module.

The Learning Design

This module is structured in such a way that you will be led, progressively, through a process that will teach you to study philosophical themes systematically. You will be exposed to the theoretically significant aspects of the thought of various influential figures within the main fields of philosophy.

In order to achieve the two aims mentioned above we will adopt the following approach: First, you need to learn the actual content of the study material. Memorisation is therefore necessary. However, it is not decisive. What is far more important is that you learn to reason. In philosophy, it is reasoning and not memorisation, that is decisive.

Second, reasoning means being able to identify and follow the arguments presented by specific thinkers being able to assess the quality and the validity of the arguments presented. Here considerations pertaining to clarity, consistency, coherence and relevance are decisive in determining the validity of the argument. But the question of the validity of an argument must be linked to yet another question: are these statements true or false?

Third, it is necessary to determine if and how the reasoning has a practical impact on the specific area of experience it relates to.

Fourth, our own reasoning and argument will emerge as a commentary upon the various positions taken and the arguments presented here.

The study material will consist of four parts. As we have already pointed out, it is important to note from the outset that there is a close connection between two ``pairs'' of sub disciplines, that is, between epistemology and metaphysics, and between ethics and political theory. This is why, at times, there will be a certain amount of overlap when we discuss some of the concepts. Similarly, some of the examples we give to elucidate a particular point will also contain concepts that are yet to be explained in a specific discussion. In other words, we will explain certain specific concepts under special headings.

History of Western Philosophy and Education in South Africa

Under this heading you will consider just how it was that Western philosophy was introduced in South Africa and what the implications are for its continued dominance today. By the end of your study of this section you will be able to consider critically questions such as:

1. Can it be said that Western philosophy’s presence and dominance in South African universities is a birthmark of colonialism?
2. Why is African philosophy marginalised in most South African universities?
3. What kinds of political phenomena influence which philosophical questions are legitimate and philosophical?

Epistemology and Metaphysics

Let us consider the first two sub disciplines (epistemology and metaphysics) together. We shall begin this study guide with an examination of the first questions raised by thinkers within the Western philosophical tradition.

Epistemology is driven by three main questions:

1. What can we know?
2. What is knowledge?
3. How do we know what we know?

A basic question asked by philosophers, a question which is fundamental to the field of philosophy called epistemology (literally, `theory of knowledge') is: What can we know? It may seem strange to ask the question ``What can we know?' After all, common sense tells us we know a great deal and that any gaps in our knowledge will probably be filled in the future.

But the philosophical question “What can we know?” is a way of challenging the common sense attitude toward knowledge. This question is meant to inquire into the scope and nature of claims concerning knowledge, belief, justification, evidence, etcetera.

An intended, but indirect, outcome of this introductory study of epistemology is to encourage you to reflect on the bases of your own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge claims.

What about metaphysics?

You will probably agree that, sooner or later, all of us wonder what reality actually is. Anybody who has made a study of Physics will find him or herself wondering about whether reality consists entirely of matter and energy or whether God exists.

Such musings bring us very close to metaphysics because when these issues are pursued clearly and with all our powers of reasoning, we are actually doing metaphysics. Metaphysics is, in fact, a sustained and rational study of what there is and the ultimate nature of what there is. Our working definition of metaphysics contains a very important and independent branch of philosophy, namely, **ontology**. Ontology means ``what there is”. In other words, ontology is the study of being. Ontology is a sustained attempt to understand why anything exists at all.

Ontology is distinct from metaphysics. Ontology wants to understand why anything exists; metaphysics seeks to find out “the ultimate nature of reality’’. However, ontological inquiry may turn into metaphysics by providing metaphysical answers to the question of being. We also need to take into account cosmology. Cosmology seeks to understand how the universe is constituted. At this elementary stage of our studies we shall use the terms almost interchangeably. So, when we come to study cosmology and metaphysics, we shall find ourselves examining the thoughts of the earliest known Western philosophers, the Milesians. We then move on to the pre-Socratic philosophers before focusing, in some detail, on the ideas of the great classical Greek metaphysicians: Plato and Aristotle. We shall also briefly examine medieval metaphysics. When you have completed this module, you should be able to explain:

- why we need to understand the history of philosophy in order to understand what philosophy is.
- briefly explain the concepts and methods of analysis that will enable you to actually understand the subjects covered by epistemological, cosmological and metaphysical inquiry and assessment.
- explain and evaluate the theories of knowledge and reality proposed by Plato and Aristotle.
- explain and critically evaluate the contributions of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas to the development of Western epistemology and metaphysics.

- explain and evaluate the rationalist and empiricist approaches to knowledge and reality. After you have worked through this module, you should have gained a command of the linguistic and conceptual apparatus needed for epistemological and metaphysical inquiry and assessment engaged in the deeper level of thinking needed to generate and assess the practical relevance of certain epistemological and metaphysical theories [note: this deeper level of thinking is known as either "second order thinking" or "meta thinking"] and reflected upon the bases of your own experiences, beliefs and epistemological and metaphysical convictions.

Ethics

We shall introduce you to ethical theory through a study of the ancient Greeks' understanding of ethics in various ways approaching the fundamental, practical question: what does it mean to live the good (ethical or moral) life?

When you have completed this module, you should be able to:

- give a general account of moral thinking with particular reference to the Western context(the ancient Greeks, the medieval tradition, and the modern tradition)
- compare and contrast some of the ethical theories covered in this module
- assess the merits of certain ethical theories by taking into account the historical conditions in which they emerged

You should also have:

- gained a command of the linguistic and conceptual apparatus needed for ethical enquiry and assessment
- engaged in the second order/meta thought needed to generate and assess the practical relevance of the ethical theories in question
- reflected upon the bases of your own experiences, beliefs and ethical convictions

Political Philosophy

We shall also introduce you to the study of political philosophy by examining the classical Greek (Plato, Aristotle) conceptions of the state.

When you have completed this module, you should be able to:

- give a general account of political authority in Ancient Greece (Plato and Aristotle)
- compare and contrast certain political theories, including Ancient Greek theories of the state and modern theories of government explain and evaluate the nature of justice (ancient Greeks)

You should also have:

- gained a command of the linguistic and conceptual apparatus needed for political enquiry and assessment
- engaged in the second order/meta thought needed to generate and assess the practical relevance of the political theories in question
- reflected upon the bases of your own experiences, beliefs and political convictions

Passing the Exam or Obtaining a Distinction

There are a number of different levels you will be expected to study this guide and textbook at in order to successfully answer the exam questions. Here they are:

- Critically analysing and comparing different philosophical theories (e.g. Discuss and compare the philosophical problems associated with Plato and Aristotle)
- Comparing two different philosophical theories (e.g. Contrast the difference between Plato's and Aristotle's quest for metaphysical and epistemological certainty)
- Critically analysing (discussing) a philosophical theory (e.g. Evaluate the problematic ethical underpinnings of Aquinas' Concept of Law.)
- Outlining or explaining a single philosophical theory (e.g. Outline St Anselm's Ontological argument for God's existence)

Some Basic Information about This Guide

Please read these few paragraphs to help you get fully orientated right at the outset of working through this study guide and some of the sub disciplines within philosophy and the questions they ask.

Point/Points to ponder

In this study guide you will come across a number of point/points to ponder. These have been specifically designed to help you to be an active rather than a passive learner. In other words, we have designed these activities to help you interact with the material, rather than just "swotting" it to pass an examination. You are encouraged to link your previous knowledge and experience with the material presented in this guide in an interactive and critical manner. Pause to ask yourself: "Do I agree with this?" and "Why do I agree or disagree with this?" In addition, given your own personal and social context, ask yourself: what is the relevance of this material to those contexts? How would you respond (or have previously responded) to some of the positions outlined here? What new insights or awareness have you gained, what knowledge, skills or practical considerations can you bring to bear on some of the issues? What do you need to reflect deeply upon in terms of your worldview, character, or living environment?

Please note: In order to derive maximum benefit from this module, you need to complete all the point/points to ponder in writing. Do not just fleetingly "read over" them. Keep all your answers in a file or notebook, since this will provide you with a record of your learning process and will also help you with examination preparation.

2 STUDY UNIT 1. CONQUEST AND THE HISTORY OF WESTERN EDUCATION AND PHILOSOPHY IN SOUTH AFRICA

2.1 Introduction

In the years following the “negotiated” settlement of the early nineties and especially since the adoption of the new constitution of the republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 (hereinafter “the constitution”), a conception of non-racialism has come to rise which dominates the public and academic as well as the legal discourse. This is so since the constitution which also pronounces itself the supreme law of South Africa in its founding provisions also proclaims South Africa as a democratic state founded on the values of “non-racialism and non-sexism” amongst others.

In the past two decades we have witnessed the rise of non-racialism in South Africa applied by the courts and supporting institutions to various situations. The courts have ruled, for instance, that the existence of “blacks only” organisations is unconstitutional. They have even gone as far as outlawing the singing of liberation songs which point to the continued racial disparity in the country on the basis of this questionable interpretation of non-racialism. In 2015, labouring under the banner of Non-Racialism, we have witnessed Afriforum lay a complaint against President Jacob Zuma in the South African Human Rights Commission for suggesting that South Africa’s modern troubles originate in 1652 – the year in which the indigenous people began their multi-century war of liberation against their European conquerors. Affirmative action and other measures at social and professional transformation of South Africa are also resisted by certain political quarters in the name of non-racialism.

The dominant conception of non-racialism which appears to prevail in South Africa is akin to what philosopher of race Theo David Goldberg has called anti-racialism which is to be distinguished from anti-racism (Goldberg, 2006: 257). Anti-racialism has its ideal effect in critical terms as the prevalence of a racism without races. In such a situation the categories of race which were used to systematically oppress the indigenous people conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation and differentiate them from the conqueror are required to fall away. This de-categorisation is no more than a name change. It is purely nominal since it is not at once the existential de-categorisation of the racialised subjects. The falling away of the categories of race neither subtracts the unjustly gained privilege and power of the beneficiaries of racism nor does it restore freedom, justice, dignity and equality to the victims of racism. The effect of this approach is ultimately to leave the consequences of a history of injustice undisturbed. This conception of non-racialism very often has left the historical victims of racism without recourse to justice. They are instead under its rule themselves accused of being racist in their pursuit of social justice.

A study of South African political history shows that this dominant conception of non-racialism discussed above originates from the political side of those who conquered the indigenous peoples of South Africa in the unjust wars of colonisation. More particularly, it originates from the English-speaking settler populations and their philosophical tradition of Cape Liberalism. Much like its more explicitly racist conservative counterpart Afrikaner Nationalism which can be traced to the Dutch settlers who began their wars of the conquest of South Africa in 1652, it also has its basis upon an unquestioned ethically questionable “right of conquest” which has its origin in Western philosophy (Day, 2008, pp. 92-111).

This dominant idea of non-racialism has also historically enjoyed and continues to enjoy considerable attention and support from academic institutions and the philosophy departments and philosophers in them. In both their tendency to universalise and coercively impose the European experience of being human upon others in the name of truth and objectivity in science, philosophy departments in South Africa have remained wilfully ignorant of African philosophy. In the case of South Africa this is particularly questionable since African philosophy is precisely the philosophy of the indigenous conquered peoples; the numerical majority in the country. It is a philosophy which has its basis in African history and culture and concerns itself with the experience of oppression and liberation from it.
It is in the light of the fore-going that we propose to examine the history of philosophy in South Africa with special regard to the problem of racism.

2.2 The Study of Racism and Philosophy in South Africa

It is the case that race and racism have until approximately the last twenty years typically received little academic attention in academic (Western) philosophy departments particularly in South Africa. A rise in the prominence of what is commonly called the Critical Philosophy of race has to some extent succeeded in making the point that racism is a philosophically relevant subject and has implications for philosophy in at least two main ways which are interrelated. The first is that (Western) philosophy has itself been complicit and continues to be either explicitly or tacitly involved, in the construction of the theoretical edifice of racism and racist thinking.
There are now countless texts which specifically examine the racism of the “great Western tradition” (Eze, 1997 and Serequeberhan, 2007), with often surprising revelations about the bodies of work of thinkers like Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Montesquieu and Voltaire (Gordon 2007, 2008; Mills 1997, 2007, 2008; Serequeberhan 1991, 2007).There are as many texts dealing with enquiries about the philosophical implications of these expositions for the meaning of their work. The second way is that even in those places where philosophy has not itself been directly responsible, it nevertheless is competent and able to assist. Where philosophy is unable to assist in the solution of problems of race, it can certainly assist us in the gaining of a better understanding about the origins of the problems, their nature and workings. Thus there is no provision for philosophy to be a passive spectator in the discourses on racism and the practical implications thereof.

In South Africa even other disciplines such as political science, sociology, history and psychology fare quite badly with regard to the taking up of the question of racism as a matter for serious scientific enquiry. The situation in philosophy is arguably even worse. Writing in the American context about a similar situation Charles Mills (1998) has suggested that part of the reason for this is “the self-sustaining dynamic of the ‘whiteness’ of philosophy, not the uncontroversial whiteness of most of its practitioners but what could be called, more contestably, the conceptual or theoretical whiteness of the discipline.”(Mills, 1998: 2)

He suggests that this theoretical “whiteness” has by itself been enough to discourage black post-graduate students considering a career in the academy which in turn causes certain traits to go either wholly or very weakly challenged so as to maintain the “consistently monochromatic” character of the discipline (Mills, 1998: 2). Problematic as this may be in the United States of America, surely the problem is even more serious in South Africa where Africans make up the majority of the population.

Racism has received very little attention in South African philosophy as can be seen in both the worlds of teaching and in publishing. Despite South Africa's worldwide fame as a "once" Racial Polity (Mills 1997), surprisingly little work has been done or rather seen light in South African philosophy specifically examining the philosophical significance of racism.
Much of this has got to do with the general under-representation of the historical victims of racism from academic philosophy in South Africa as well as the continued commitment to ignorance of African philosophy (itself arguably a consequence of racism) as can be seen by the overall commitment to continue along the colonial lines of mimesis of either continental or analytic philosophy in South African departments of philosophy.

In the next section we examine racism in the South African university both from the perspective of African philosophy and its exclusion from philosophy in South Africa.

2.3 Racism, the Eurocentric university and the marginality of African Philosophy in South Africa

2.3.1 Introduction

The school and university as they currently exist in the South African were founded by the European settler. Initially the school was to serve the settler's immediate personal interest fulfilling the wish to remain intimately connected to 'the metropolis' or "source" (of civilisation and culture). Thus the curriculum and approach to teaching were as consistent with the trends in the original home of the settler as possible. The initial objective was to ensure that the graduate of the university in the colony received an education comparable in character and quality to that of her counterpart at home. Phillips writing of the universities in the Cape Colony suggests that their founding administrators were "keen to inculcate the cultural dominance of English into the new colony" (Phillips, 2003: 123) and drew on various models of British universities. The mimesis of the universities in the metropole could be seen, according to Phillips (2003), in teaching and examining procedures as well as curricula, even "the very architecture of the seating in lecture rooms" was borrowed from Glasgow and Aberdeen (Phillips, 2003: 126). As such, the university had an unnatural existence of being deliberately ignorant of the space and experiences within the place in which it existed.

Later on the indigenous peoples conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation were admitted into schools and universities. With the disseizin of the land and its resources which had previously provided for the subsistence of the African, the conquered were thus immediately thrust into a state of severe unnatural but structural, systematic and systemic poverty. In the face of this reality, the logic of survival compelled the conquered to abandon labour as a teleological positing and to enter into the new world of employment established unilaterally by the conqueror (Ramose 2002: 4).

In the world of employment it was apparent that those with the benefit of "Western Education" enjoyed better pay and more bearable work, so the older people were forced to recognise the benefits of the education that the missionaries and state over time imposed on Africans. From the side of the colonizer who increasingly recognised the value of and encouraged the education of Africans, it was to serve the dual function of providing the job market with more skilled labour and in turn generate a new population of consumers of the products of Europe and those produced in the local factories.

The other purpose of education, supposedly an altruistic and humanitarian one was to civilise (humanise) the as yet “sub-human African” by introducing her to the culture, language, religion, values and knowledge of her supposedly superior conqueror. The assimilation of such values either by gentle persuasion or subtle coercion was deemed to be the possibility condition for the ascent to the level of human being on the part of the indigenous conquered peoples.
In all of this education of the conquered, her identity, language, historical contribution, culture and perspective were of course absent. As long ago as 1934 educationist Loram is quoted trying to explain the high-drop out and failure rates of the children of the indigenous conquered people in the formal education system of South Africa writing that “We have forced the Native child through a course of study which he can dimly conceive. We have taught him subjects foreign to his experience, and in a language which he cannot understand. At first, he comes to school eager to receive the education which he thinks has made the white man his master. For years [social pressure] causes him to continue [...] and when he wants to know the why and wherefore of things, he sees no meaning in his school work. He finds no satisfaction in doing the tasks given to him [...] no wonder he becomes listless in his school work, fails to satisfy those in authority, and either leaves school or remains there unwillingly.”(Cited in McKerron, 1934: 174)

Even after 1994, 60 years after the abovementioned study was written. A year which supposedly marked a fundamental transition in the politics and practices of South Africa from substantive injustice to hollow formal justice; from oppressive and tyrannous to democratic and fair, it would appear very little has in fact changed in the identity of the university in general, save for its admission policy which now allows for the admission of Africans to all South African universities. The identity and project of the university however remains unchanged. It continues to be as Ali Mazrui so appositely observed- “a transmission belt” of Western educational paradigm (Mazrui, 1978: 366).

Much of the curriculum in South African universities is still obdurately chauvinistic and not even, as might arguably be the case with other parts of the world, a locally-derived cultural chauvinism but the most classical and unapologetic Eurocentrism . It has a bias against and condescension towards “non-European” thought and even more especially against the African thought and experience. The scholars, theories, methods and experiences favoured are usually exclusively Western.

In the case of African philosophy for example after previewing a typical South African curriculum and teaching programme one could be forgiven for assuming that African Philosophy did not exist. In the review of many academic programmes in the country it would be reasonable to assume that there were not world-renowned African scholars. Yet, such scholars have existed long before the birth of 1994 South Africa. The historical continuity of such scholarship is present in South Africa, often expressing views different from the Euro-American and Eurocentric poles.

The reality in fact is that there is plenty of such scholarship coming out from all over the continent and throughout the African Diaspora (Mudimbe 1988, Oyewumi 2007, Adiume 2004) and this country specifically (Magubane 1970, Mafeje 1971, Nolutshungu 1975) Worse so is the fact that some of this work has specifically problematised Eurocentrism, its unjustifiability and the dangers of its dominance in Africa. This is a critique and call which although it is strangely enough ignored in South Africa has been heard in many parts of the West, with some European philosophy departments prescribing such works.

There are, of course, some exceptions in South Africa but in most cases where Africa is considered at all it is usually ghettoised, under the auspices of African Studies or Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Although the contemporary meaning of “ghetto” is “a part of the city, especially slum area, occupied by a minority group”, its original meaning referred to “the quarter of the city, chiefly Italy where Jews were restricted”. Ghettoising comes to mean then both placement of someone in an inferior and precarious place subtracting from equal citizenship as well as an ethnic quarantine where those ghettoised are identified for particular 0ethnic or racial reasons.

What one finds in practice then are African history, politics, epistemology, psychology within this Ghetto where the history, politics, philosophy and psychology departments in the same university continue to exist undisturbed in their unbending Eurocentrism and racism. In this way “that African stuff” has no way of affecting the mainstream (read Eurocentric) and dominant curriculum. The effect of the pre-fix Africa before philosophy or history is the same effect as that of scare quotes, diminution or a question mark. What happens is then that African philosophy and philosophers, history and historians may be found in the African Studies departments where real (read Western) philosophers and historians may be found in the philosophy and history departments. While Africa as a place of some Other may justify the existence of African Studies in Europe or the Americas, where the European or American is silently prefixed against other disciplines or studies, its existence in Africa suggests precisely that all else, that is, those disciplines which are not specifically pre-fixed with “African” are not African. The reason for the foregoing is the persistence of doubt concerning the reality or quality of African knowledge and the importance and value of the experience which brings it about. It is a doubt which has its philosophical foundation in the racist doubt concerning the humanity of Africans themselves. In the academe it is largely the reason for which we continue merely to have universities in Africa rather than African universities.

In light of this general history and character of the university let us now turn our attention to philosophy in South Africa specifically.

2.3.2 Some General Characteristics of South African Philosophy

The purpose of the discussion under this section is not so much to provide an exhaustive history of philosophy in South Africa but rather a brief overview of the history of institutional philosophy. Our purpose also rather than a systematic study of trends and specific contributors is to show the basic colonial, Eurocentric and racist structuring of philosophy departments and their practices since their beginnings.

In an article entitled Philosophy in South Africa Under and After Apartheid, Mabogo More argues that apartheid was merely the name of a juridical specification of a long existent, violent and racist colonialism which properly started in 1652 with the arrival of the Dutch. Apartheid as such then has limited historical significance and is often used in obfuscatory manner to distort the length of time over which liberation has been outstanding and to deflect attention from the conquest of indigenous people in the unjust wars of colonisation. More writes “the name ‘apartheid’ emerged- in its legal sense- in 1948 as a means of strengthening and perfecting an already existing system of racial discrimination and domination rooted in attitudes of whites ever since they came into contact with the African”. He concludes, in the case of academic philosophy before apartheid, that it was fundamentally and ideologically no different from philosophy during apartheid.

There have been two basic traditions of colonialism in South Africa; the Dutch and the British. The former may be traced back to the arrival of the Dutch in 1652 as well as subsequent European populations who immigrated into that community over the years.

This Dutch population has also despite its self-declared re-identification as Afrikaner and its language Afrikaans, relied on Continental Europe for inspiration of its cultural, religious, intellectual and political life. The latter can roughly be traced back to the 1820s, it was formalised and strengthened after the discovery of Diamonds and then Gold. The evidence of these two “traditions” may be seen in the systems of law in South African history which are still dominant today, as well as in language, culture and education. The nature of imitation in higher education which we discussed in above has also largely adhered to these traditional types.

Philosophy has been no exception in this regard. A self-evident feature is exclusion; the deliberate and sometimes forcible negative discrimination of the indigenous peoples conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation in order to ensure and sustain political, legal, cultural and even religious separation between them and the colonial conqueror. This logic of deadly and destructive exclusion is the enduring leitmotif guiding the conqueror in the forging of relations with the conquered.

2.3.3 The Afrikaans-Continental Tradition

The beginnings of institutionalised philosophy in South Africa were at the theological school in Stellenbosch in the mid-19th century where a number of professors offered tuition in the history of philosophy. Several Afrikaans universities were then formed in the Orange Free State, Pretoria and Potchefstroom. Amongst early notables were Dr WA Macfayden who began teaching ethics and political science at the University of Pretoria in 1911 and was appointed as Professor of philosophy and political science the following year where he taught until his death in 1924. Amongst the assortment of offerings he introduced during his tenure were essentials of later apartheid thought such as city planning and eugenics. (Duvenhage, 2008:110)

According to Duvenhage, what one sees in a study of the development of institutionalised philosophy at the Afrikaans universities during the 20th century, for instance at Stellenbosch, is the influence “of a certain blend of continental philosophy and Protestant theology (influenced by the powerful Dutch Reformed Church). This is evident, for example, in the works of Kirsten, Degenaar and Rossouw. He suggests that even in Pretoria the trend was the same but observes that the Pretorians Rautenbach, Oberholzer and Dreyer were more conservative. (Duvenhage, 2008:112)

According to More (2004), there developed from the religious and cultural traditions of the Afrikaner people- a certain distinct Calvinist and Neo-Fichtean tradition especially at Potchefstroom. Many of the advocates of this philosophy studied in Europe under philosophers such as Schelling, Herder or Fichte and were under the influence of mostly Dutch and German philosophers (More 2004: 151).From the doctrines of divine election and predestination in Calvinism were the justification for the social ideology of a chosen people which justified racial conquest and domination. From Fichte the concept of nature was invoked to justify the maintenance of separation between groups of different languages as well as his view of the individual sub-ordinate aspect of the Absolute Spirit which reveals itself historically in the life of the community. Much of this thinking was to provide a philosophical basis to apartheid under the leadership of the Afrikaner Nationalist party.

Once apartheid had commenced (after 1948) most Afrikaans university philosophers explicitly defended it. A variety of approaches were employed towards this end including Rawls’s Theory of Justice (More 2004: p.153).

It was, however, Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology which were put to greatest misuse. Phenomenology, for instance, was the basis of the apartheid state's philosophy of education Fundamentiele Pedagogie (Fundamental Pedagogy) the development of which was headed by the Afrikaans University of Potchefstroom for Christian Higher Education (ibidem). A study of the Christian National Education Report, for instance, will show a combination of phenomenological categories with neo-Fichtean notions.

The relationship between the academe and political power however extended beyond mere intellectual support. The historical relationship between racist ideology and practice in the development of universities reveals a tangible and historical agenda. Writing of the Afrikaner secret society known as Broederbond in 1978, political journalists Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom (2012: 14-15) state that: "The Broederbond has an abiding passion for control of education because of the obvious advantages this holds for any organisation wishing to influence the minds and lives of young people. Consequently its representation in the top echelons of all the Afrikaans speaking universities is extremely strong." In their book on the Broederbond this claim is accompanied by an extensive list of former rectors, chancellors and chairpersons of council who were well known "broeders". If the list were extended to the general professoriate and ordinary academics employed at these universities, the number would grow quite exponentially. Amongst those who would come to light are several philosophers who at one point in time taught at some of these universities. Prof Nico Diederichs was by far the most famous broeder philosopher, going on to become the first vice-chancellor of the Rand Afrikaans Universiteit (later the University of Johannesburg) and Finance Minister before becoming State President of South Africa in 1975.

Before his rise to academic administration and politics, Nico Diederichs had been chair of political philosophy at the University of the Orange Free State and had studied in both Holland and Germany (Moodie, 1975: 154), had made many politically relevant contributions in his academic career. He had, for example, theorised a social metaphysics opposed to human equality in his Nasionalisme as Lewesbeskouing en sy Verhouding tot Internationalisme (Nationalism as a Weltenshaaung and Its Relation to Internationalism) (Moodie, 1975: 154).

Just to quote an example from one of his treatises: "Only through his consecration to, his love for and his service to the nation can man come to the versatile development of his existence. Only in the nation as the most total and inclusive human community can man realise himself to the full. The nation is a fulfilment of the individual life."(cited in Moodie, 1975: 154). Elsewhere Diederichs (cited in Moodie, 1975: 154) argues: "and one man is more human than another to the extent that the spiritual powers within him are more expressed and developed … The only equality which must be accepted is the equality of opportunity for each to bring that which is within him to full expression"(Moodie, 1975: 154). More (2004: 153) argues that Diederichs' Calvinist Nationalism was during apartheid realised in all domains: social, cultural, educational, religious and political.

Diederichs was however, hardly the only politically minded and active Afrikaner academic. There were many more senior Broederbond members who had senior positions at universities. This fact is not unlikely to have affected philosophy departments amongst others, in terms of the appointment of personnel, the selection of curricula and the epistemological paradigms favoured. Amongst senior Broeders who were Vice Chancellors or Rectors of universities, for example were, Dr Hilgaard Muller (former Minister of Foreign Affairs) at the University of Pretoria, Prof Samuel Pauw, University of South Africa (Serfontein, 1979: 83; 86).

Professor WL Mouton the University of the Orange Free State, Professor EJ Marais at the University of Port Elizabeth (now Nelson Mandela Metropolitan university).

Professor Tjaart van der Walt at the University of Potchefstroom. One need only wonder whether or not there is a family relationship between these paragons of apartheid and some of the academics either still active in universities or just recently retired. If there are indeed family relationships then it is pertinent to ask how far – to translate an Afrikaans idiom – has the apple fallen from the tree.

At the University of South Africa as well there was Herman de Vleeschauwer a Kant specialist who was Chair of the Philosophy Department from 1951 through to 1965. A professor who was an escaped convict for Nazi-war crimes committed during the German occupation of Belgium during the Second World War. (Delport, 2015: 9) According to Delport (2015: 10) de Vleeschauwer's immigration was preceded by a correspondence with none other than Nico Diederichs who was by that time a member of parliament for the National Party. The aim of the correspondence was to convince the latter of his usefulness for the country. The temptation and necessity to wonder what sort of intellectual legacy these men left at these departments and the extent to which it survives to date is curbed by contemporary events and practices at these universities. Some of these events and practices will be discussed later.

The Diederichs-de Vleeschauwer amity represents a natural relationship between apartheid and institutional philosophy in South Africa. To all appearances, the successors of de Vleeschauwer as Heads of the Department of philosophy, including other academic staff, were likely to have been sympathetic to apartheid either as members of the Broederbond or the National Party. It is unlikely that at the time, Professor Samuel Pauw, himself a member of the Broederbond and Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa, would have sanctioned the appointment of academic, even administrative staff who posed a substantial and serious challenge to apartheid. The demise of apartheid delivered with it an irony in the history of the Department of philosophy in the University of South Africa. The irony is that unlike de Vleeschauwer, a Belgian fugitive from his association with Nazi-war crimes, yet another Belgian, a refugee from the injustice of colonialism, racism and apartheid in South Africa was appointed Head of the Department of Philosophy. This was Professor Ramose. A comparative study of the meaning and impact of Heads of the Department of Philosophy from de Vleeschauwer to Ramose is beyond the scope of this research. Suffice it to state that since Ramose's appointment, the struggle for epistemic justice as an ineradicable ethical imperative for social justice in South Africa became the living reality of academic discourse and, continues.

2.3.4 The Anglo-Saxon Tradition

Academic philosophy at English speaking universities began at the University of the Cape of Good Hope established in 1873(More 2004 and Duvenhage 2007). It from the off-set was characterised by a focus on the British philosophical tradition studying empiricism and figures such as Locke, Berkeley and Hume. One of the first philosophers to occupy the chair of philosophy at the South African College (later the University of Cape Town {UCT}) was R.F.A. Hoernlé. He became one of the major figures in the intellectual formulation of South African liberalism (More 2004: 153). In his inaugural address in 1923 as Professor of Philosophy at another English University, The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Hoernlé stressed the significance of liberalism in a multiracial society such as South Africa.

A text he authored in 1939 with the title South African Native Policy and the Liberal spirit argued for racial separation as opposed to assimilation or parallelism (More 2004: 153).
It is noteworthy that apartheid was exactly a tangible juridical realisation of this kind of view. It would appear as More (2004: 153) observes then that "both the Anglo-Saxon and Continental traditions may have been used to provide justification for racial and cultural discrimination before official apartheid in 1948 and during apartheid in the years that followed".

Later philosophy in the English universities, while continuing to uphold the liberal spirit, became increasingly associated with analytical philosophy (More, 2004:154). The analytic philosophers took what has been described by some as a "neutralist position." (More 2004:154) The proponents of this position held that philosophy ought to be pursued for its own sake without involving itself in social and political issues of its day. More summarises their argument as follows "since according to [them] philosophy is a second-order activity concerned mainly with the logical analysis of concepts, the task of the philosopher is therefore the clarification of the logic of concepts and their meaning. Social and political issues are not accordingly the task of the philosopher qua philosopher but qua active citizen." (More, 2004: 154) It must be noted though that despite this popular self-conception of analytical philosophy, there certainly are historical exceptions. Some analytic philosophers have been thoroughly engaged in the social and political worlds both through their activism and philosophical work. Bertrand Russell is one such example.

The a-political disposition of the English-speaking philosophers must however not be over-emphasised at the expense of examining some of the political activities that took place within these departments. In a recent article, historian Teresa Barnes writes about how the English speaking universities have, as with most individual politicians and activists, been over-celebrated for their "struggle" and "resistance" against apartheid. This mostly through the slanted discussion of their quest for academic freedom and students they produced who became antiapartheid activists. She makes the focus of her paper an examination of the extent to which the English-speaking or so-called 'open universities' were complicit in the sustenance and support for apartheid in South Africa. Dealing in particular with the case of UCT's philosophy department, some interesting details about that university's departmental history emerge which contradict the idea that philosophers "Stayed Out of Politics" to use Aronson's phrase (1990). Professor Andrew Howson Murray, who held the chair of UCT's department of philosophy and ethics from 1937-1970 was a well-known and widely employed collaborator and agent of the apartheid regime. In the course of his academic work Murray, for instance, contributed chapters to volumes published in honour of two conservative South African philosophers the Belgian ex-Nazi fugitive Herman de Vleeschauwer of Unisa and Stoker of the University of Potchefstroom (Barnes, 2015: 21). Barnes writes "As a philosopher and educator, Murray's perspective was that the concept of pluralism was the only answer to the challenges of life in a multi-racial society. Although in other settings pluralism can be a reasonable call for democratic decentralization, in Murray's hands it was deformed into an apology for apartheid" (Barnes, 2015: 22). Barnes draws on a variety of his writings as well as of his students' marked copies of examination papers to support her reading that for Murray pluralism became a "euphemistic legitimation for injustice"(Barnes, 2015: 23).

It is arguable but one might suggest that an Ethics professor's most significant work can happen outside of the classroom. Murray appeared as the state's anti-communist expert in the Treason Trial where he was "brought in as a state witness by the pro-Nazi, chief prosecutor Oswald Pirow" (Barnes, 2015: 24).Murray's main task as expert witness was to identify the accused's writings as "communist".

The defence famously successfully had him unknowingly analyse his own earlier writings which he classified as communist (Barnes, 2015: 24). According to Barnes, Murray continued to testify against anti-apartheid activists well into the 1980s. Murray also worked for the Publications Appeal Board (the main South African censorship body from the 1960s until the 1980s). (Barnes, 2015: 25)

According to Barnes, "Murray was the head of the political committee of the Board and wrote many opinions that were central in the Board's decisions to ban books and silence authors of critical political materials" (Barnes, 2015: 25). He in some instances recommended authors be investigated by military intelligence.
Barnes goes on to show that he was not the only professor at UCT who worked for the apartheid regime but that there were countless, spies and agents at the so-called open universities who did such work.

The English-speaking universities very often lay claim to producing some of the antiapartheid movement's most important liberals. Liberalism has historically been predominantly the political tradition of English speaking South Africa. It has also been rejected numerously from within the ranks of African politics. At one stage by the ANC Youth League of Anton Lembede which saw liberals as trustees that were stifling African political development and agency (Maloka, 2014: 85). The most famous critique of liberalism and its rejection however came some approximate 25 years after Lembede when a group of black students split from the liberal National Union of Students and formed the South African Students Organisation (SASO). Liberals were criticised a political hypocrites in pursuit of the enjoyment of the moral reputation of rejecting white supremacy while enjoying it fully. The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) rejected the paternalism and condescension of the liberals and their long history of speaking for the indigenous conquered people. This is practice which had a long history traceable to the petitionists of the Cape Colony in the 19th century and the Native Representative Councils in the 20th century. Most significant however was the realisation by the proponents of BCM that the liberals' rejection or opposition of apartheid was not necessarily also an endorsement of historical justice. The Progressive Party (the most influential liberal political formation since the late 50s) for instance, was still advocating for a qualified franchise for blacks in the 1980s. Many self-professed liberals also approved proposed political reforms akin to Hoernlé's 1940s parallelist social theory. Never mind the restoration of sovereignty and the titles to the territory of South Africa. It is worthwhile to note that in 2015 the "decolonisation of universities" movement was initiated at the English-speaking universities by students who echoing the course of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 60s and 70s complained about silencing, paternalism and Eurocentric cultural chauvinism at the universities.
We conclude this section simply by noting the interesting development that since the end of apartheid English-speaking white South Africans (philosophers amongst them) have become especially more openly socially and politically active.

2.3.5 The contemporary practice of philosophy and the marginality of African philosophy

Around September 2013 an incident took place which caused a bit of a disturbance in the world of philosophy in South Africa. Louise Mabille, a young lecturer in philosophy at the University of Pretoria made national news after she wrote a controversial article in the Afrikaans cultural blog PRAAG, run by Afrikaner intellectual and cultural activist Dan Roodt. In her article she wrote that black South African males rape babies as a "cultural phenomenon".

In order to support her claim she averred that they [Africans] had not even invented the word rape (and were impliedly unfamiliar with the concept) until their “meeting” with their enlightened civilisers from Europe. Mabille made these claims without recourse to historical-linguistic analysis. It is doubtful from reading the article whether Mabille speaks any Bantu language at all. She made her claims without giving reasons; supposedly the hallmark of the discipline in which she is expert.

She resigned from her appointment at the university promptly and the university was quick to distance itself from her and her writings on the blog. Before issuing their final statement on the matter the university first attempted to justify Mabille’s actions by suggesting she was writing in her personal capacity and not on an academic site, though the eventual statement was an apology and advertisement of her resignation.
More interesting was this statement from the Philosophical Society of South Africa which suggested that her writings were against philosophy. This is interesting when one considers the history of this discipline both in its silence and complicity in the past. One wonders precisely when it is that racism or silence about it suddenly became unphilosophical in South Africa.

Although the response by the philosophical community in South Africa was to distance itself from Mabille and treat her as an offender who went against established ethics, we would do well to consider her a victim of the same system that sought to distance itself from her. Mabille was after all a student at a South African university and received all her degrees from Bachelor’s to Doctorate after 1994 in one of South Africa’s best universities. What does it tell us then about the university in this country that a graduate of the highest degree in the discipline that concerns itself with the good life and good reasoning was able to write such a poorly reasoned explosion of blind hatred?

It is difficult to imagine that Mabille is a recent convert to racism. Instead, closer to the truth is probably that she has held her views and expressed them throughout her studies, teaching and social life and publicly enough to have the confidence to publish them proudly on the internet in her own name and not expect serious consequences. The people who populate the institutions that distanced themselves from her during this embarrassing incident were also likely former teachers, mentors, students and colleagues.

When one considers the history of philosophy in South Africa as well as its character today what emerges is the likelihood that far from being exceptional, Mabille is, in fact, the rule. What is exceptional about her is that she was caught out. She is the double-victim of both a poor education which was in part responsible for her perspective and a scape-goat paraded as a convenient exception; a gangrened limb amputated to save a diseased body of which she was an ordinary and consistent part before wounding herself by exposure.

Her expulsion was a wasted opportunity for thorough reflection which might get to the root cause of the problem her incident brought to light. It also prevented the philosophical community from moving a step closer to the necessary fundamental change which can liberate philosophy in South Africa. This was, however, no mistake. The body was merely preserving itself. The situation that prevails within the world of institutionalised philosophy today is little different from the process of imitation that has been going on since universities were first established in South Africa as described in the sections above.

There are those who might suggest that things are beginning to change in the world of philosophy. One of the results of the Louise Mabille affair was that the University of Pretoria (where she was employed) has introduced (since July 2014), a course on Race and the Enlightenment.

It is worthwhile to note that the University of Cape Town has also in the same period (July 2014) introduced a course on philosophy and race. This brings us to the important issue of curricula and research agendas.

We have given an historical overview of the history of education in South Africa and, philosophy in particular. In the course of this, we have identified the character of philosophy and advanced reasons why the philosophy thus characterised preferred to disregard and exclude the African experience in the composition of the educational curriculum in general and, the philosophy curriculum in particular. We have shown that both the disregard and the exclusion have been and continue to be challenged by the indigenous peoples of South Africa conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation.

It goes without saying that through time the biological misnomer “Coloured” - a veritable ethical aberration and an ill-conceived political ploy to deny the humanity of the “Coloured” – together with the South African Indian also formed part of the struggle against colonial and racial injustice in South Africa. In recognition of this history, the designation, the subjugated, oppressed and exploited people of South Africa will be used whenever contextually appropriate.

We have shown also that to date the educational curriculum in general and the philosophy curriculum in particular is the terrain of contestation for epistemic and social justice. This contestation leaves no doubt that the struggle for authentic political liberation and economic freedom is yet to be won in South Africa. We have argued that in South Africa the liberation of philosophy will be realised once African philosophy is no longer simply an exotic option in the curriculum but the very grounding of philosophy itself through which other traditions are engaged. The philosophy of liberation is on the other hand increasingly coming to light especially among the youth. It finds practitioners not necessarily recognising it as their source of activity such as the #Economic Freedom Fighters party and the #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and UPrising movements.

Self-Test Questions

1. In what sense can the practice and teaching of philosophy in South Africa be understood as colonial?
2. How and why were western philosophy and education introduced into South Africa?
3. In what ways can we speak about a “whiteness” of philosophy in South Africa?

Points to Ponder

- Is the continued dominance of Western philosophy in an African country something ethically desirable and sustainable?
- What relevance does the on-going debate and commotion regarding decolonisation have relevance in South Africa?
- Is the description of South Africa as a non-racial society logically and substantively sustainable in light of the dominance of western (white culture) including Western philosophy, English and Afrikaans and Western education?

3 STUDY UNIT 2. THE PRE-SOCRATICS, SOCRATES, PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

Learning Outcomes

In the previous chapter we conducted a brief survey of the history of Western philosophy's reception and practice in South African universities since their establishment. We now turn to the internal history of Western philosophy and its development amongst the Greeks. When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- explain why we need to understand the history of philosophy before we can understand what philosophy is,
- give an account of the *Arche* as found in the concepts of the Milesian philosophers identify the various relevant features of pre-Socratic thought that constitute the philosophical background to Socrates's approach to philosophy,
- explain and evaluate the theories of knowledge and reality proposed by Plato and Aristotle give an account of Aristotle's concepts of substance and cause by providing examples of the application of his doctrine of cause,
- briefly explain the concepts and methods of analysis that will enable you to gain a gradual understanding of the subjects covered by epistemological and cosmological/metaphysical inquiry and assessment.

3.1 Introduction

There is an awful caricature that, for good reason still exists in many people's minds. It is the picture of a philosopher who was a balding, middle aged, acerbic eccentric white male (usually a professor) who peruses a narrow band of knowledge found within ancient musty books and obscure academic journals. These publications are disconnected from other fields of knowledge and radically disconnected from the daily experience of most people. So that as the cliché goes he knows more and more about less and less. This disconnected modus operandi became epitomised and rightly caricatured. Sir Ken Robinson recently observed that possibly a university professor's body was only a biological machine to transport his mind to meetings. Today that has all changed. Maybe the idea of thinking as a detached mental process is outmoded, we should possibly use the neologism "perfink" (i.e. we perceive, feel and think simultaneously (Bruner 1986:118). Some of us might be middle aged and some bald but we as philosophers comprise a richly textured slice of humanity. There are philosophers from across the entire spectrum of humanity, young, old, gay, straight, spiritual, atheists, third world, fourth world, scientists, authors, engineers, artists, women, men, hermaphrodites and the list goes on. In fact many people recognise that today you do not have to be a salaried professional academic to be a philosopher it is a radically democratised way of being-in- the- world.

We would therefore encourage you as our student to adopt a more holistic approach to this subject, since you are a philosopher-on-the-journey. While you will be examined on the contents of this study guide and not the entire history of human consciousness, we recommend that you also begin to open your being to other possibilities! The study of philosophy becomes very exciting, as does any other academic discipline, if it is a daily lived experience, not something you have to do in order to pass an exam but something you want to do because it enriches your life.

So here are some suggestions about how you could expand your philosophical interests beyond our study guide and please do. It would, in our estimation, be really tragic if the only philosophy you read this year was the study guide. We all are our history to a greater or lesser extent, and that includes all the philosophers you will study.

The historical period that a philosopher is born into the dominant socio-political-cultural grouping s/he was socialized into the gender of the philosopher. Philosophy is located within the complex folds of history. Philosophers were and still are people who larger historical processes shape. This means that despite often being revolutionary thinkers, a philosopher is trapped within her particular historical period's world view. If you become interested in philosophy, you will enrich your academic journey by developing a parallel interest in history. As recently as a hundred years ago many academics erroneously believed that philosophy was pure objective reason, thought through by white European men and that the ability to reason could be taught decontextualised from history. When you begin to understand the world views that many philosophers lived inside of, fascinating philosophical questions appear about the nature of human consciousness. Here are two examples. Have you ever wondered how in ancient history some people claimed to literally “hear the voice of God?'' Well according to Julian Jaynes this might actually have occurred because of how the human mind was structured then, you can read more about that provocative thesis in The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind (1990) We shall begin this study unit by explaining what is understood by philosophy in the Western tradition by examining the questions posed by the earliest Western philosophers. These early philosophers are usually referred to as the philosopher- scientists; you will find out why when you read about them. Their ideas differed from their predecessors in that their philosophy did not include myth. In various ways, the philosopher- scientists' elucidation of their ideas marks the origin of Western philosophy. The general characterising feature of philosophy that is, the ongoing debate about various problems is indicated in the way philosophy systematically explores the different perspectives concerning the nature of knowledge and reality.

We shall briefly look at the opposing approaches of Parmenides and Heraclitus, whose significance as philosophers lies in the way in which Socrates and Plato both attempted to overcome the impasse created by their opposing views. We shall introduce you to the defining themes of all epistemological and metaphysical enquiry by giving you a detailed outline of Plato's theories of knowledge and reality. Epistemology is the study of the relationship between knowledge, truth, belief, and justification; metaphysics is the study of questions concerning the meaning of underlying substance and causal connections. We shall gradually encourage you to form your own responses to the views of this classical Greek philosopher. Finally, we shall turn to the other great classical Greek philosopher, Aristotle, and follow the same methods and procedures with the aim of explaining his views on epistemology and metaphysics.

3.2 What Is Philosophy?

“Philosophy'' is a word much used and little understood; a fact which is perhaps not very surprising, because philosophers themselves disagree about its precise meaning, as they do about much else. This uncertainty of meaning is not only the only thing that is likely to confuse you. To make matters worse, the subject-matter of philosophy is also rather technical and obscure, and you may also find this discouraging. However, if we take the right approach, you should be able to cope with philosophy, because the study of philosophy is really about very familiar issues. All that is difficult and unfamiliar about it is the rigorous analysis of well- known concepts and ideas.

Before continuing, though, we want to make a few suggestions. In recent years this literary genre, alongside management literature and books on esoteric subjects has mushroomed. Philosophy has come out of the academic closet in many ways. It is becoming along with poetry the in vogue cocktail party guest. One of the more productive ends of this spectrum would be to read these popular books that are written by academic philosophers. Here you will find philosophical arguments presented in light, refreshing prose that will entice you to read more. You will not pass your exam by only reading The Complete Idiot's Guide to Philosophy (2002) or Philosophy for Dummies (1999) but we guarantee it will enlarge your understanding and will help you with some of the difficult parts of this guide. There are other very useful introductory texts such as the Introducing ... series (introducing books .com), which combine high class graphic art and philosophical text to explain individual philosopher's theories. If thematic philosophical themes interest you read some of Alain De Botton works for example How Proust can change your life (1997) and The Consolations of Philosophy (2001), then are also philosophical novels which use this genre to teach philosophy one of the most popular in recent year has been Sophie's World (2007).

We cannot guarantee that all of what you read in this arena is soundly substantiated or argued, however it will certainly whet your appetite for more philosophy. That after all is said and done might be more important in the long run than fretting endlessly about making a few philosophical faux pas these authors might commit. As a not strictly popularist but certainly easy to read introduction to the subject we would recommend Rethinking Truth (2006) and Rethinking our World (2007). Philosophy has gone digital. The web fairly groans with the weight of it, in 2010 we typed the word “philosophy" into Google advanced search and it confirmed 85,000,000 hits. So there is a great deal out there even if you are far from an academic library. Where do you start? A very basic place would be Wikipedia an on line community web based encyclopaedia open to all. Then you could move on to another highly respected creative commons site The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html) is a premium, very high quality shareware source. The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy http://www.iep.utm.edu/ all of these sites are free open source sites. Have you ever participated? In an online philosophical conversation? You can and might even meet other people from all over the world like you with this interest. Both Facebook and LinkedIn are social media sites that have a host of philosophical forums. Go and join one that appeals to you. If you keep to writing in quite a clear academic style these forums will provide a wonderful place for you to practice your philosophical debating skills. Here is a site which rates the top philosophy blogs http://www.blogtopsites.com/philosophy/. There is also a forum for blacks in philosophy called the society for black philosophers which hosts a page on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/groups/SAblackphil/. It deals with issues related particularly to blacks as a marginalised group and their experiences and agenda in South African philosophy.

Then what about blogs? These are sites that are run by individuals that have an interest in philosophy. Many blogs have moved out of the purely personal expressivity mode and now are run by professional and interested people who want to share their philosophical view with others. At the time of writing this guide we would recommend http://virtualphilosopher.com/. Both of these are well worth looking at. How about going to and setting up your own blog, then invite some of the other students studying this module to join you? You could also set up a wiki, an enabled discussion platform. Now as we pointed out earlier, even professional philosophers are unlikely to arrive at a consensus about what constitutes philosophy, so there is no point us giving you a definition at this early stage. The only way to discover what philosophy is, is to do it and to construct a definition as we proceed. Let us begin with a very simplistic and provisional definition and then qualify and modify our definition as we become better acquainted with the discipline of philosophy.

This is the traditional method of philosophising, by the way: a continual debate, or running self-criticism, in which insights are acquired and developed by a continual discussion.
This is why philosophers always appear to disagree: they are pursuing the method of developing a theory by progressive criticism. Their disagreement is therefore by no means a sign of stupidity or ignorance far from it. Instead, it is a sign of progress and vitality in the pursuit of the proper method of acquiring knowledge and wisdom. Here are two very rough, but we think, basic enough definitions of philosophy for you to begin to work with. Philosophy is the rational justification of our intuitive perceptions about the what, the how and the why of existence. Put in slightly more abstract terms A piece of [philosophical] knowledge is never false or true - but only more or less biologically and evolutionary useful. All dogmatic creeds are approximations: these approximations form a humus from which better approximations grow (Ernst Mach).

Try this small philosophical experiment before you begin this course write down your definition of philosophy, when you have completed your studies go back and see what has changed. My definition now (date.....) My definition after the completion of my course (date.....).

All knowledge advances by discussion, including in the sciences. What is agreed and accepted is no longer of vital interest. The growing point of every branch of knowledge is the region of perpetual debate. This is more obviously the case in philosophy because philosophy is the intellectual discipline par excellence what the 19th century philosopher Hegel called “the thinking study of things". This is why, eventually, every science, in its attempts to interpret factual discoveries, becomes philosophical. How, then, should we describe the philosophical method? Philosophising is a method which tries to define some concept provisionally, as that concept appears to common sense (eg the common sense concept of justice). The philosophical method will then examine the definition, develop its implications to discover whether these implications are self- consistent, and correct this definition wherever it is found wanting. In doing this, philosophising will lead to a different definition and a new theory of the defined concept. Philosophy will then proceed with a critique of this new definition and theory and, in the process; this will lead to more disagreement and more advancement. This form of discussion characterises every good philosophical treatise. Indeed, the individual philosopher, if she is worthy of her calling, argues with herself, criticises the work of her predecessors and her colleagues, seeking not just to refute them but to discover what is reasonable, coherent, and true. Thus the history of philosophy also becomes a dialogue and a discussion one which is never stale or dead because the issues are still current and are always, in some way, directly or indirectly, the concern of every thinking person. (See Stumpf & Abel 2002:6;19; 551;566.)

3.3 Philosophy and the History of Philosophy

Like every other intellectual endeavour, philosophy is rooted in history, and can be properly understood only in the light of its past. We cannot fully understand contemporary philosophy or what modern philosophers are doing apart from their historical background, because the work of modern philosophers is, to a very large extent, a reflection upon the work of their predecessors. Nobody can develop an adequate philosophy for herself in complete ignorance of the philosophy of the past.

This is self-evident if one considers that philosophy arises out of our ordinary everyday ideas and experiences; also, these “ordinary everyday ideas and experiences'' are themselves the products of a particular way of living which has developed during the course of past centuries. And this way of thinking itself is saturated with concepts contributed by past thinkers.
We have incorporated these ideas and concepts “unconsciously'', without clear awareness of their origins, into ways of thinking and acting which we take to be “natural'' to us. For instance, we take it for granted today that no theory about what happens in the world around us is of much value unless it is based upon, and can be tested by, observation and experiment. But before the 17th century this approach would not have occurred even to highly educated and intelligent people; until the 17th century, everyone would have almost certainly rejected personal observations in preference to statements backed by high authority.

The modern outlook has been assimilated from our Renaissance predecessors. However, we tend to be unaware of this fact, but take it as the natural attitude of all intelligent persons. It is these sort of ideas that we are called upon to examine in philosophy and we cannot do this if we accept them in their confused popular forms and in ignorance of their historical origin and development. As we have indicated above, these ideas are, for the most part, based on philosophical theories which, in the course of time, have become accepted as true. However, to properly understand these ideas, as philosophers we must know how and when they originated. And, to understand their history, we must not only study past theories, but must rethink them, redevelop them in our own thought, and thus enable ourselves to formulate new ideas that go beyond those of our predecessors.

We now need to look at the origin of the word “philosophy''. “Philosophy'' is derived from the Greek *philein*, literally meaning “to love'' and *sophia* meaning “wisdom'', so philosophy literally means the “love of wisdom''. But what is this ``wisdom'' that the philosopher loves, seeks, and pursues? There is no specific answer to this question because every person is, in a sense, a philosopher, or has her philosophical moments. The activity which the ancient Greeks themselves came to recognise by the title ``philosophy'' (the word was apparently first used as a self- ascription by the 6th century BCE Greek thinker, Pythagoras) was preceded by a phase of thought that is usually called mythological.

3.4 The Beginnings of the Philosophical Thinking in Greece

To understand Plato, we must first understand the origins of his thought. Plato's philosophy is the product of reflection upon the thought of the two preceding centuries, one of the most intellectually productive periods of human history. In line with the method of contextualisation of ancient Greek thought, we need to begin by briefly examining the principal features of Greek mythological thought. In mythological thought, the mind is held in thrall by sense impressions. Exposure to the world of natural phenomena led the people of ancient Greece to form anthropomorphic plastic images of these phenomena. In mythological thought, natural events, such as thunderstorms, are represented as giants or gods, and nature becomes peopled with evil demons and good gods, to whose mercy which human beings feel exposed. Starting with their own subjective experiences, the mythologically-oriented Greeks peopled the universe with many gods and goddesses, all of whom personified natural phenomena such as the heavens, earth, sea, and underworld (the realm of the dead), as well as wisdom, peace, war, and fertility.

Let us take a closer look at the polytheistic world of Greek mythology. In the poems of the Greek epic poets, Homer and Hesiod, the family of the gods serve as the personification of natural phenomena. In his epic poems (Iliad and Odyssey) Homer represents the gods as aristocratic heroes who maintain order on earth and who nonetheless mingle freely with earthly mortals. Zeus, the father of the gods, rules the earth from his throne on Mount Olympus, yet becomes involved in human events such as the Trojan War.
The popularisation of these myths led to Homeric mythology becoming the object of public worship in Greek city-states such as Athens and Miletus.

The poems of the 7th century poet, Hesiod are, in certain ways, an extension of those of Homer. In his Theogony (a book dealing with the origin of the gods) Hesiod accounted for the origin of Zeus. Originally, there was only Chaos, a barren shapeless mass, which co-existed with Eros, the life-giving principle. Heaven (Uranus) and Earth (Gaia) were the first gods to spring from Chaos. From them Time (Cronos), that is, birth, change, and death, arose. Chronos's son was Zeus who, like the other children of Cronos, would have been destroyed by his father, Time, were it not for the intervention of his mother, Rhea. His conquest of his father gave him immortality and he imposed order on the universe by defeating the forces of destruction.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that mythological thought is pure imagination, with no objective foundation. Like philosophical or scientific thought, mythological thought consists of reasoned statements about underlying facts. In mythological thought, there is an attempt at discerning and establishing order. In the Homeric epic, it was the gods, who, as the guardians of the city- state, provided a firm basis and continuity for the then aristocratic political order. In the didactic poems of Hesiod, the gods became the forming principle of the universe and its phenomena. It was through Eros that form was bestowed on Chaos and that harmony, balance, and justice were recognised in the interplay of opposites: day and night, warm and cold, summer and winter, male and female. The essential difference between scientific/philosophical thought and mythological thought is that, in mythological thought, the mind is wrapped up in cosmic events to such an extent that the testimony of the senses is accepted and received in a naive, and totally uncritical, manner. But it was this same understanding which enabled the ancient Greeks to create their beautiful works of sculpture, architecture, and painting. While their sense of beauty and harmony may be said to constitute one of the principal features of philosophical thinking, the experience of the fearsomeness of nature created in Greek society a definite feeling of the tragic, of the inevitability of fate, as found in so many Greeks sagas and legends. The evolution of philosophical thought from mythology may be seen as the outcome of humankind's changing experience of reality and the specific needs arising from this changing reality. This is why the concept of knowledge changes and why the first philosophers came into conflict with the advocates of the traditional values of the city-state, values that were based on the mythology of Homer. Greek philosophy is usually taken to begin in the 6th century BCE, with the Ionian School or the Milesians, named after the city of Miletus, on the Ionian coast. The three best-known of the Milesian philosophers were: Thales (±625-545 BC), Anaximander (± 611-545 BC), and Anaximenes (±585-525 BC).

To understand the beginnings of Greek philosophy, we need to understand its historical context. The Greek city-state of Miletus increasingly needed to trade with people across the seas, a fact which modified its outlook and, eventually, changed its economic, social, and political conditions. Greek philosophy is mainly the offspring, as it were, of material and economic needs and interests.

The change from an agricultural society to a society of sea-faring traders focused the Greeks' attention on the need to study the cycle of winds, the tides, the seasons, and the stars. In the process, the Greeks discovered in nature a rhythm and regularity, an eternal cycle of rise and decay, which convinced them that there was a life-forming principle that governs the world. It is thus hardly surprising that the earliest western philosopher, Thales, was also a noted astronomer.

3.5 Pre-Socratic Philosophy: The Quest for The First Cause (Arche)

The Milesians were all preoccupied by a single problem, namely: What is the first governing principle of the world by which chaos (unformed or amorphous matter) is turned into cosmos (formed or intelligible matter)? They each suggested different answers to this question. The prevailing wisdom of the time, which was part of Greek mythology, was that there are four basic elements, namely Air, Earth, Fire, and Water. However, the Milesians disagreed with this view, and claimed that a single element was somehow more basic than the others. Such a reduction of the many (in this case, four) to the one is called monism. The Milesians defended their positions, although the details of their arguments are unclear, having been transmitted by various sources, and preserved only in fragments. Nevertheless, as philosophers, we will try to reconstruct their arguments.

3.5.1 Thales

Thales suggested that the underlying first principle was Water. He may have thought that, if the initial state of things was a mass of water, and the earth arose out of water, what is underneath the earth, supporting it, but the water out of which it arose? If there was, in the beginning, nothing else to support water why should water need support now? This view is not surprising in a dry region like Asia Minor, where water is felt to be the very elixir of life. Perhaps Thales was impressed by such considerations as the deposit of soil (silt) at the mouth of rivers as an instance of Earth arising out of Water, just as, in a different way, ice solidifies from the liquid water. Another consideration linking the traditional view of the four elements is: (1) the phenomenon of spring water gushing from the earth; furthermore, (2) water can be changed into air when it evaporates; water vapour becomes liquid as rain; (3) water takes on the appearance of fire when a volcano erupts. Whatever it was that impressed Thales, there is no question that, like the other Milesians, and he saw the Arche itself as being alive. The view that matter itself is alive is called hylozoism. Despite its primitiveness, hylozoism was a forerunner of the modern scientific concept of matter in motion.

3.5.2 Anaximander

In a manner characteristic of philosophy, Thales's view was criticised by fellow Milesian, Anaximander. Anaximander's purpose was to describe the inhabited earth geological, biological, and cultural. Anaximander was at once astronomer and geographer, cosmogonist and genealogist, meteorologist, biologist, anthropologist, and historian in short, he was profoundly committed to the knowledge of all that there is in this world.
One of his most striking hypotheses is that the cosmos of earth, sun, moon, and stars is not unique. Anaximander claimed that there is, at any moment, an unlimited number of such worlds, all of which arise from “the unlimited'' (*apeiron*). This *apeiron* is that from which all the worlds and all that is in them are separated out and into which they are again absorbed. It is a boundless expanse of infinitely different ingredients. So Anaximander's objection to Thales is that, since water is quantitatively exhaustible, it could not be the *arche*. The *arche,* therefore had to be something in which the elements rested in a perfectly unmixed state, hence his conception of the *apeiron*.

3.5.3 Anaximenes

Anaximander's successor, Anaximenes, lacked his predecessor's encyclopaedic interest, but focused upon precisely those aspects of the physical processes concerning which Anaximander's account was vague and unsatisfactory. The numberless differences in our world had not really been explained by Anaximander at all. (For example, Anaximander made no attempt to explain the process of “separating out" or even what it logically involves.) Anaximenes suggested a single natural operating mechanism, for which he found evidence in the physical world. This was the mechanism of condensation-rarefaction. All change of every kind he regarded as the result of this one mechanism. For example, if we compress the air we exhale with our lips it appears cold; if we relax our lips in exhalation, it is rarefied and becomes hot. If then it is compressed further, it becomes water and finally earth and stones; but if further rarefied, it becomes fire. These changes of one thing into another are really an indication of a change in the density of the underlying element which Anaximenes called air. Anaximenes's analysis of all objects and events in the physical world as aspects and functions of a single quantitative process is the ultimate achievement of Milesian philosophy.

NB! Point/Points to ponder

Why do you think the problem of the arche arose when it did among the ancient Greeks?

Feedback

The lifestyle of the inhabitants of Miletus gradually changed from being an agricultural one to a maritime one. Their increasing reliance upon regularity in natural occurrences (tides, winds, etc.) encouraged them to find out as much as they could about the patterns in nature. However, just why they thought a single cause was better than a variety of causes is unclear, even today.

Points to ponder

Anaximenes claimed that water is air that has been re-arranged by compression, and that air is water that has been re-arranged by rarefaction. Does it therefore follow that nothing is anything but a different degree of anything else, and that only the process itself remains fixed?

If all is one and unchanging, how can it appear to be many and variable?

3.6 Other Significant Pre-Socratics

The Milesians' crude materialistic approach to the problem of the Arche’ was opposed by both Heraclitus (± 540-470 BCE) and Parmenides (±540-480 BCE). Both thinkers thought that the arche was not accessible to sense perception, but could only be grasped by rational insight and intuition. Nor could the arche, like Anaximander's apeiron, merely be said to contain all the elements in an unmixed state. However, Heraclitus and Parmenides gave diametrically opposed accounts of the nature of underlying reality.

3.6.1 Heraclitus

Rather than search for an underlying unity, Heraclitus got rid of the difficulty of reconciling permanence and change by claiming that nothing in the universe is permanent. Everything, he claimed, is continually changing. All things are in a constant state of flux. “One cannot step into the same river twice." Heraclitus regarded Fire as the ultimate reality because, like nature itself, Fire is forever passing away and renewing itself. The universe, he believed, was a perpetual conflagration in which solid earth melted to water and evaporated to air which was then transmuted into fire. Smoke and ash from fire descended upon earth and were rekindled into fire, thus beginning the cycle again. “The world is an ever-living Fire, with measures of it kindling and measures going out."

In addition to the doctrine of change, Heraclitus recognised a principle of nature which he called the logos. The logos is the principle that everything changes. It is a universal principle and remains unchanged. The logos states that all things pass into their opposites, or are constituted by the union of their opposites. The union is not permanent, but a tension between forces driving them either on the path to Fire which is, at the same time, the starting point of the endless repetition of the cycle of transformation.

Heraclitus's disciple, Cratylus, saw that if one took this theory seriously, no permanence would be left, not even the permanence of the law of change. If everything changes, even the words we use, the meanings they have will constantly change. In other words, we could not have a constant language to describe the world we live in. So Cratylus concluded that one cannot step into the same river even ONCE, because, by the time one stepped into it, the river had changed. Because he thought that word-meanings were constantly changing (indeed, the speaker, the words, their meanings, and the listener, all change), it is said that Cratylus therefore refused to make statements. Instead, he would just wiggle his little finger when spoken to, to indicate that he had heard. It would have been futile for Cratylus to make any response, for the universe would not stand still long enough for him to make his response!

Implications of Cratylus's Thought

In Cratylus's thought, it is clear that certain presuppositions (which we commonly make) about knowledge are in operation. To begin with, it is assumed that only what is true can rank as knowledge and that truth is absolute - either all or nothing. In other words, what is not quite true is not true at all and so is not knowledge. It is also assumed that what is true is always true, which means that the object of knowledge must be true and unchanging. What constantly changes cannot be an object of knowledge.
What changes never remains (and so never properly is) what at any moment it is said to be. Instead, it is constantly becoming something else what it is not. It neither is nor is not precisely anything and yet it is both something and something else a very confusing state of affairs indeed!

3.6.2 Parmenides

Recognising that the doctrines of Heraclitus and his followers led to absurdities, Parmenides took the view that what we call change is an illusion. One may briefly summarise his argument as follows: true change must mean that something that was not at one time, later comes into being. But how can something come into being? Only in one of two ways: either from something else or out of nothing.

If it comes out of something else, it already existed; if it came out of nothing, then “nothing" must be treated as though it had some being; otherwise it would be absurd to think that something could come out of nothing, or out of nonbeing. Either way, then, the phrase “comes into being" must mean that what we call change refers to what already exists, in which case there is no real change.

This conclusion can also be reached by reasoning as follows: what is could never have come into being, because that would imply a time when it was not when nothing was which is impossible. It could not come into being from what is other than being, because there is nothing other than being. For the same reason, “what is" cannot cease to be for then it would pass into what is not being and that, too, is impossible. Likewise, if being is identical with itself, it must be indivisible because if “what is not, is not" and “being is", it follows that what could divide any one portion of it from any other could only be “what is not". If it were anything else, it would be identical with being and there would be no division. It follows, further, that no part of being can be other than or different from any other part of being, because what is other would be other than being not being and there is no not being, and so no other.

Parmenides concluded thus that being is one, uncreated and indestructible. There is no “other" and so there cannot be a “many" or more than one. Because there cannot be a change within the one, there can be no movement, for movement is a form of change. There is no place where “what is" is not, so “what is" cannot move. Consequently all variety, movement, multiplicity, difference, and so on, is illusory and mere appearance. The theories describing the world in these terms are what Parmenides called “The Way of Belief " as opposed to his way, which was “The Way of Truth".

Parmenides was quite unable to offer any explanation as to how the nature of the real (i.e. Being) could make the variety of appearances possible. According to Parmenides's theory, no such appearance could occur, and our experience is thus left unexplained by Parmenides's theory.

The significance of this logical, but peculiar, argument is seen when we contrast it with the views of Heraclitus. Whereas Heraclitus recommends disregarding sensation and paying attention to a logos which we may discover through introspection, Parmenides denies that introspection is any more reliable than sensation. The logos which Parmenides recommends us to follow is pure reason, which is the source of Being itself: the structure of rational thought reflects the nature of Being itself. Parmenides's argument sets out to prove that the identity of what is precludes the possibility of any characteristic except just being. The essential nature of Being, the inner necessity that a thing is identical with itself, does not permit it to come to be nor to pass away.

The impossibility of any and all process is established by the logical consequences of identity. In opposing the featureless Being to the world of apparent change, Parmenides established a dualistic picture of the universe. This duality is overcome only by suspending the senses and, along with the senses, all spatial and temporal motion and by pure thinking. In other words, by tracing the One in the Many. This view of the One in the Many makes Parmenides the precursor of Plato.

Point/Points to ponder

Pre-Socratic thinkers were especially preoccupied with the search for the single substance (the One) underlying the apparent diversity (the Many) in nature. Explain how their interaction in dialogue advanced the philosophical quest.

Feedback

The groundwork for the thought of the ancient Milesian cosmologists was the then current theory that the world consists of four basic elements (air, earth, fire, and water). All pre-Socratic philosophers, however, considered that ONE element was more basic than any other (they were monists). Thales decided that water is somehow the most basic element. Anaximander disagreed and settled upon an unspecified element that he saw as undergoing transformation. Anaximenes was unhappy with the vague account of transformation suggested by Anaximander and suggested another element and, more importantly, a detailed account of the process. Heraclitus took a broader view of the process of transformation and identified fire as the symbol of eternal change. Parmenides totally disagreed with him and, indeed, with all his predecessors. Parmenides tried to show the contradiction involved in speaking about change when the language of change is subjected to strict logical analysis. His peculiar conceptual logic serves to elucidate some of the implications of such strict logical thought.

3.7 The Sophists

The Sophists were a group of 5th century (BCE) professional educators. They did not pursue truth for its own sake but, instead, counselled their students or clients on how to win their cases before the law courts. The 20th century British philosopher Bertrand Russell compared the Sophists to American corporate lawyers! The Sophists emphasised persuasion rather than knowledge as the ultimate goal of argument. They represent a shift in interest away from the problems of explaining nature to the problems of explaining human conduct and relationships. The following principal ideas were characteristic of the Sophists' approach to knowledge:

- Philosophy has proved that no two philosophers think alike. If there is no change, there can be no knowledge because, in that case, we cannot describe anything. (Because description implies that a thing which is identical with itself is also something else.)
- If things change, the same is true because, where nothing persists, we cannot attribute anything to anything.
- If we can know things only in so far as they influence our senses, we also cannot know, because then the nature of things eludes our grasp.
- We cannot solve the riddle of the universe.

From this it is evident that the Sophists realised that the human mind plays an important part in the acquisition of knowledge. If Heraclitus had overlooked the fact that knowledge acquired through the senses would never provide certain knowledge, Parmenides, by assuming the competence of reason to reach the truth, had neglected to criticise reason itself. The Sophistic position on knowledge is that there is no objective truth - only subjective opinion. The individual is a law unto himself in the matter of knowledge.

Point/Points to ponder

Many people, before they have studied philosophy realize that there seem to be two sets of laws that operate in the world. There are for example the laws of nature, gravity being the obvious one. If I decide to jump out of a 5 story building I will hit the ground and the impact will kill me. Everybody else who similarly attempts this feat without a safety net will in all probability also die. The laws of nature thus appear to be universal.

Then there are laws that appear to belong to particular societies. For example different religious groups stop work and celebrate different days of the year they deem sacred. These laws for these observances only apply to followers of these societies. Thus laws pertaining to religious customs appear to be particular to a given religious group. The Sophists moral genius, or some would argue infamy, was that they on the back of the expansion of the Greek empire under Alexander the Great learnt about and accepted this cultural relativity, especially in the area of ethics and morality.

In our day many postmodern philosophers adopt the Sophist stand point. Here is one example, it comes from John Caputo's book Against Ethics (1993). Notice what he is saying that there is only meaning to be found in singular events. There are no laws endorsed by God or any system of philosophy that we can claim are universal and thus gives us a way to interpret the ultimate meaning of our lives.

“It does not take much for the tenuous gossamer web of life to come apart. A stray bullet, a stray chromosome, a stray virus and wanton cellular division - and the flesh is hopelessly ruined. Events strike a very delicate balance; they form frail, fragile, vulnerable configurations and micro connections. They are easy prey to chance and misfortune and mishap. Joy is sustained on a tissue-thin surface, a tissue of flesh. [...] To speak of what happens is to give up looking for the meaning of events, because while events give joy or sorrow, they do not, as a whole have Meaning. While there are numerous meanings in events, there is no meaning to events overall, no overarching meaning which is their point, their logos or telos, their sum and their substance. The sum and substance of events are nothing other than the events themselves. There is no deep structure that sustains what we believe or cherish, what we savour in life, none at least that we know of." (Caputo 1993:234-235)

If you find Caputo's statement shocking ask yourself why. Could you find the moral motivation from this sort of belief to live a moral or even meaningful life? The Sophists claimed you could if you were brave enough to accept this radical scepticism.

3.8 Socrates

We have no written records of the ideas of the historical Socrates, any more than we have of Thales. What we do have are the writings of his famous pupil, Plato. Because the dialogues of Plato are the only worthwhile source for the philosophy of Socrates, it is usual to attribute the following ideas to Plato (who used the name “Socrates” as a character in his philosophical dialogues) rather than to Socrates. One of the most striking characteristics one encounters in reading Plato's dialogues is the practice of the Socratic method. In Plato's dialogues, the Socratic method takes the form of a systematic questioning, a search for a defensible (acceptable) definition of a word. Such a definition would give an exact account of the essential nature of the object to which it referred. By “essential” is meant something which is peculiarly central to the object.

This essential then needs to be stated in a way that gives us, in a nutshell, enough information to tell us what that object really is.
Socrates suggested no formal rules for arriving at satisfactory definitions. Instead, his approach was the argument of negativity. In other words, he would argue that, merely enumerating instances of, say, “true" statements could not serve as a definition of justice. Instead, he supposed that, because all true statements were called “true", there was something they had in common apart from the use of the term “true" and it was this “something" that was to be defined or accounted for. Also, Socrates would not accept as a definition a word or phrase that contained, either explicitly or tacitly, the word to be defined because, he claimed, this was circular reasoning. If a suggestion passed these grounds, it was then tested by reasoning. Socrates took the definition as one of the premises (initial assumptions) of the argument, the others being agreed upon, sometimes after yet further consideration. Deductions were then made from this set of premises, and the result might be unsatisfactory either because a contradiction was reached or because a conclusion was drawn which was in conflict with the obvious facts. In either case, it followed that there was something wrong with the premises. Since all of these except the suggested definition had been agreed upon, it had to be the definition itself which was faulty, and which therefore had to be rejected.

Below is an example of the famous Socratic Method. Read this famous dialogue of Socrates (in reality, this was written by Plato). It could have been based on one of the memorable conversations he had with Socrates or he was present when this occurred or he wrote it to illustrate the discursive method his teacher used.

Now try answer these questions based on the sections of text we have highlighted, this might help you see the genius at work here.

1. Why does Socrates ask such a simple question?

2. What is the purpose of the ambiguity that Socrates creates?

3. At this stage of the argument Laches' definition of courage has changed quite considerably. Do you think it is a better definition? Why?

4. At this point in the argument how would you describe Laches' feelings? If you think he is becoming frustrated, you would be correct. Why would a great teacher like Socrates want to provoke his pupil like this? If you study philosophy, are you comfortable being provoked, or as we might say in a more contemporary image, “pushed out of your comfort zone”?

Soc. Then, Laches, suppose that we first set about determining the nature of courage, and in the second place proceed to enquire how the young men may attain this quality by the help of studies and pursuits. Tell me, if you can, what is courage?

La. Indeed, Socrates, I see no difficulty in answering; he is a man of courage who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy; there can be no mistake about that.

Soc. Very good, Laches; and yet I fear that I did not express myself clearly; and therefore you have answered not the question which I intended to ask, but another.

La. What do you mean, Socrates?

Soc. I will endeavour to explain; you would call a man courageous who remains at his post, and fights with the enemy?

La. Certainly I should.

Soc. And so should I; but what would you say of another man, who fights flying, instead of remaining?

La. How flying?

Soc. Why, as the Scythians are said to fight, flying as well as pursuing; and as Homer says in praise of the horses of Aeneas, that they knew “how to pursue, and fly quickly hither and thither"; and he passes an encomium on Aeneas himself, as having a knowledge of fear or flight, and calls him “an author of fear or flight".

La. Yes, Socrates, and there Homer is right: for he was speaking of chariots, as you were speaking of the Scythian cavalry, who have that way of fighting; but the heavy-armed Greek fights, as I say, remaining in his rank.

Soc. And yet, Laches, you must except the Lacedaemonians at Plataea, who, when they came upon the light shields of the Persians, are said not to have been willing to stand and fight, and to have fled; but when the ranks of the Persians were broken, they turned upon them like cavalry, and won the battle of Plataea.

La. That is true.

Soc. That was my meaning when I said that I was to blame in having put my question badly, and that this was the reason of your answering badly. For I meant to ask you not only about the courage of heavy-armed soldiers, but about the courage of cavalry and every other style of soldier; and not only who are courageous in war, but who are courageous in perils by sea, and who in disease, or in poverty, or again in politics, are courageous; and not only who are courageous against pain or fear, but mighty to contend against desires and pleasures, either fixed in their rank or turning upon their enemy. There is this sort of courage-is there not, Laches?

La. Certainly, Socrates.

Soc. And all these are courageous, but some have courage in pleasures, and some in pains: some in desires, and some in fears, and some are cowards under the same conditions, as I should imagine.

La. Very true.

Soc. Now I was asking about courage and cowardice in general. And I will begin with courage, and once more ask: What is that common quality, which is the same in all these cases, and which is called courage? Do you now understand what I mean?

La. Not over well.

Soc. I mean this: As I might ask what is that quality which is called quickness, and which is found in running, in playing the lyre, in speaking, in learning, and in many other similar actions, or rather which we possess in nearly every action that is worth mentioning of arms, legs, mouth, voice, mind - would you not apply the term quickness to all of them?

La. Quite true.

Soc. And suppose I were to be asked by some one: What is that common quality, Socrates, which, in all these uses of the word, you call quickness? I should say the quality which accomplishes much in a little time whether in running, speaking, or in any other sort of action.

La. You would be quite correct.

Soc. And now, Laches, do you try and tell me in like manner, What is that common quality which is called courage, and which includes all the various uses of the term when applied both to pleasure and pain, and in all the cases to which I was just now referring?

La. I should say that courage is a sort of endurance of the soul, if I am to speak of the universal nature which pervades them all.

Soc. But that is what we must do if we are to answer the question. And yet I cannot say that every kind of endurance is, in my opinion, to be deemed courage. Hear my reason: I am sure, Laches, that you would consider courage to be a very noble quality.

La. Most noble, certainly.

Soc. And you would say that a wise endurance is also good and noble?

La. Very noble.

Soc. But what would you say of a foolish endurance? Is not that, on the other hand, to be regarded as evil and hurtful?

La. True.

Soc. And is anything noble which is evil and hurtful?

La. I ought not to say that, Socrates.

Soc. Then you would not admit that sort of endurance to be courage ± for it is not noble, but courage is noble?

La. You are right.

Soc. Then, according to you, only the wise endurance is courage?

La. True.

Soc. But as to the epithet ``wise'' ± wise in what? In all things small as well as great? For example, if a man shows the quality of endurance in spending his money wisely, knowing that by spending he will acquire more in the end, do you call him courageous?

La. Assuredly not.

Soc. Or, for example, if a man is a physician, and his son, or some patient of his, has inflammation of the lungs, and begs that he may be allowed to eat or drink something, and the other is firm and refuses; is that courage?

La. No; that is not courage at all, any more than the last.

Soc. Again, take the case of one who endures in war, and is willing to fight, and wisely calculates and knows that others will help him, and that there will be fewer and inferior men against him than there are with him; and suppose that he has also advantages of position; would you say of such a one who endures with all this wisdom and preparation, that he, or some man in the opposing army who is in the opposite circumstances to these and yet endures and remains at his post, is the braver?

La. I should say that the latter, Socrates, was the braver.

Soc. But, surely, this is a foolish endurance in comparison with the other?

La. That is true.

Soc. Then you would say that he who in an engagement of cavalry endures, having the knowledge of horsemanship, is not so courageous as he who endures, having no such knowledge?

La. So I should say.

Soc. And he who endures, having a knowledge of the use of the sling, or the bow, or of any other art, is not so courageous as he who endures, not having such a knowledge?

La. True.

Soc. And he who descends into a well, and dives, and holds out in this or any similar action, having no knowledge of diving, or the like, is, as you would say, more courageous than those who have this knowledge?

La. Why, Socrates, what else can a man say?

Soc. Nothing, if that be what he thinks.

In this section we shall focus on the problems associated with definitions (ie philosophical problems) in the sphere of knowledge epistemology. Epistemology is the theory or science of the methods or grounds of knowledge. Basically, epistemology wrestles with the question *What can I know?* Our historical account so far has been an exercise in the practice of the epistemology and metaphysics *(What is the fundamental nature of reality?)* of the pre-Socratic thinkers. When we turn to Socrates, though, we are introduced to the entire range of philosophical problems from problems concerned with knowledge *(epistemology);* with underlying reality *(metaphysics);* with grounds for distinguishing good from evil *(ethics);* and with grounds and principles upon which laws and states are constituted *(political philosophy).*

3.9 PLATO

1. We are incarnated into the physical world of the senses and lose our memory of our prior existence in the world of the Forms.

2. We perceive the physical world through our senses but intuitively know that because it is always changing, it only appears real.

3. In order to have essential knowledge then we need access to knowledge that is unchanging and eternal which is located in the world of the Forms.

4. For the above to happen we need to be able to remember the eternal truth and perfection that existed in the eternal world of the Forms. This can only happen if we spend time being educated by philosophers, spend time in intellectual contemplation and abstain from over indulging our physical appetites.

At the heart of Plato's philosophy lies his belief that the ordinary world we know through our five senses cannot be fully real. Plato thought that this world is filled with change and decay (as Heraclitus and Parmenides had shown). But if we can ever be said to know something, that which we know must be true, and always remains true despite changing and deceptive appearances. So unless one adopts the methodic doubt of the Sophists that knowledge is unobtainable, there must be a world of stable and perfect objects behind the changing objects of sense perception. The ultimate task of the philosopher was to explore this world. This was Plato's way of resolving the dilemma faced by the successors of Heraclitus and Parmenides - it was his (and Socrates's) answer to the Sophists.

What are the characteristics of Plato's theory of knowledge? Well, basically, he argued that knowledge is inseparable from ethics - knowledge is virtue *(arête).* “Virtue" did not have the same meaning for Plato as it does for us. The western concept of virtue comes from the Christian heritage, whether or not we are Christian believers. For the Greeks, *arête* could not stand on its own as “virtue" can for us. For them, to be virtuous or to be good was to be virtuous in respect of something or to be good at something. So one would talk of a governing *arête* (good at governing), or a military *arête* (good at military affairs). Plato speaks of the *arête* of dogs and horses, that is, their ability to perform their special function as dogs and horses. Plato reasoned that there must also be a human *arete,* shown by a person who was good at being a person, that is, at performing specifically human functions. The virtuous person was good at conducting his or her life as a human being.

Plato would only accept as knowledge what was completely beyond doubt and **necessarily** true. What was true but might have been otherwise, that is, what was a **contingent**, rather than a necessary truth, could only be an object of opinion. At best, this could be held as true belief, never as knowledge. For example, it is necessarily true that circles are round. However, it is only contingently true that balls are round. But one does not know that circles are round merely by looking at circles. The ideas of roundness being identical to circularity are arrived at by rational intuition (see below). One “sees" this in one's “mind's eye", as it were. This kind of “seeing" is very different from visual seeing, for instance. In fact, Plato believed that the bodily senses interfere with the pursuit of knowledge because they naturally lead to feelings and desires and these distort our powers of judgment and infect them with prejudice. Sense perception often misleads us and subjects us to illusion.

If we are to know to discover the truth about things we can only do so, said Plato, by gradually ceasing to rely upon the information of our senses and seeking, instead, that which is solely intelligible. A first approximation of examples of these readily available, intelligible items of knowledge are mathematical truths.
The Platonic upliftment of thought even in fact becomes mystical. In its pursuit of knowledge, the soul (or mind) withdraws, as it were, from the body, suppresses the passions and desires to which the body gives rise, and confines itself to its special activity, namely, thinking. It is through pure thinking that one achieves wisdom. Wisdom is taken as the ultimate good because thinking and knowing are alleged to be the pure activity of the soul, doing what it can do best and what it can do better than any other agent. Since the philosopher pursues wisdom and truth, the philosopher must keep his soul pure of bodily contamination, from passion and desire and free himself from sensory illusion. The philosopher can never hope to do this completely until he dies, for death is the separation of soul from body. Consequently, said Plato, the philosopher will welcome, rather than fear, death (Stumpf & Abel 2002:265-271).

It was suggested above that one does not know that circles are round merely by looking. How do we determine what the real size and shape of bodies are? In the case of size, do we not rely upon measurement? But measurement requires the precise comparison of quantities, something which our senses cannot do. Furthermore, mere comparison is not enough we need to adopt precise units and count them. So we must use numbers. But these are not objects of sense perception. The notion of unity is purely ideal. We can, no doubt, apply it to whatever sensory object we please we may use any convenient quantity or thing as a unit (consider, for instance, the way we teach children arithmetic). But what a unit is, as such, we can never perceive directly. Unity is purely conceptual.

Likewise, shape and the precise determination of shape, involve the use of geometrical concepts such as point, line and curve. Although these can be represented in sensory fashion, we never take the sensory diagram as more than an approximate illustration, nor is it ever completely accurate. Hence the ideas of line, circle, angle, etcetera are all ultimately abstract ideas, never strictly realisable in material media. So perhaps Plato has a point, after all.

3.9.1 Knowledge and the reality of Forms *(Universals)*

In a well-known passage from his book Republic, Plato distinguishes between knowledge and opinion. He argues that knowledge is of the real, but that opinion is only of what seems to be the case but is in some way doubtful, confused or fluctuating, or all three together. Since, by definition, knowledge must imply truth, Plato thinks that the proper object of knowledge is actual reality (what the Greeks called Being). Plato then asks what would be the proper object of ignorance, and gives the obvious answer that it would be nothing (Nonbeing). He then makes the assertion that the object of opinion is a combination of being and nonbeing, which he calls Becoming. For instance, we could say that a boy is a man, yet he is not a man but only a child. To give a precise account of anything that changes continuously we have to make seemingly contradictory statements about it. Or, take another example: no human being adequately represents or embodies what we mean by humanity, yet everyone does in some way represent and embody what we mean by the term. So, here again, we tend to say “it is" and “it is not" of the same object. In all such cases Plato thought the object of our awareness is imprecise, uncertain, and indeterminate. We can only have opinions about such matters, never knowledge. What is real must be unchanging, absolute, and universal.

Let us approach the matter in a different way. How do we characterise any object we try to know? We specify its particular attributes and properties. For example, let us consider how we try to know what a box is, or how we try to describe it accurately. First, we specify its shape, its size, its colour, the material out of which it is made, the use for which it is intended (its function), and so on. The box has any one of these properties in common with many other things if it is brown; other things (which are not boxes) are also brown. Each general term applying to a special property is common to many other kinds of object. Each is a universal and the box is described by means of a number of different universals. In order to know what the box is like we must know each of the universals we apply to it in description independently of, and prior to, knowing about the box itself. For example, we cannot say that it is rectangular unless and until we know what it is to be rectangular. Now there is a general character which a box shares with all other boxes, whether the box is used to hold pins, or cards, or apples. We may, for convenience, call it “boxness". Again, if we did not know what this was we could not recognise or identify boxes when we saw them. At the same time, no individual box is identical with boxness.

These universals are usually translated by Plato's translators as Forms (Stumpf & Abel 2002:38). The Forms are similar to mathematical entities in that they are not accessible to sense perception it is just as difficult to find a perfectly just act, good person or beautiful statue in the experienced world as it is to find a perfectly straight line or pair of parallel lines. In addition to beauty, justice, and goodness, Plato recognised Forms for the horse, the mountain, and so on. Generally speaking, there is a Form corresponding to every kind of thing there is. But the Forms, for Plato, are not merely concepts or ideas in our minds. They were supposed by him to exist quite independently of us and our thoughts. For Plato, they were the permanent objective reality to which, if we applied our mental powers, our concepts might correspond. Plato took a realist view of Forms (universals). This means that, whatever reality is ascribed to the objects which we are aware of through sense perception, is based on the fact that these objects of sense perception share, though to a limited and imperfect extent, in the nature of the Forms (universals).

The particulars which we perceive, for instance, particular acts of justice, particular beautiful things, exist as just acts and as beautiful things by virtue of their participation in the Forms justice and beauty. Likewise, particular mountains and horses exist as mountains and horses in virtue of their resemblance to the Form mountain and the Form horse. Though it is not possible to have knowledge of any particular which is observed we may aspire to knowledge of the Form. For instance, we cannot have knowledge of any particular horse because of its ever- changing qualities, but we can aspire to knowledge of the Form horse because the Form would have the permanent and unchanging qualities which are essential to the nature of all horses.

You may now appreciate the philosophical interest of the dialogue as to the essential nature of piety (holiness) which is your first textual reading (Stumpf & Abel 2002:6-19). If we can find the essence of piety (not just an accidental property), we can apprehend the Form, and so acquire knowledge of piety. But the question which immediately arises is how can we know the nature of the Forms without being presented with these imperfect copies which will always tend to mislead us in our pursuit of the truth (the Forms)? Plato recognised that he could not demonstrate the existence of Forms by means of rational deductive argument. He also acknowledged that, in the end, his account had to be accepted on the basis of an intuitive belief that ultimate reality is immaterial and not accessible to sense perception.

But we should not on such grounds immediately dismiss the Platonic theory, for any theory that we give about the nature of the world must ultimately rest on intuitive beliefs which cannot be rationally justified.

As can be seen from another reading (Stumpf & Abel 2002:38-43), Plato is well aware that our primitive and unreflecting belief is that the external world which we know through our sense perceptions is the real world. Through metaphor he hopes to convince his readers that this belief is mistaken. If we rely on sense perception, we remain like the prisoners in the cave and are aware only of shadows which we take to be reality. But if we use our understanding and aspire to the light (i.e. try to become enlightened) then the bonds of sense perception may be broken. At first we shall feel puzzled and afraid, but once we have become used to the light we shall appreciate that we have knowledge that was not available in the cave. However, if we go back to the cave, we may find ourselves laughed at and even in danger because, having been enlightened, it will be difficult for us to see things as we used to see them and in the way that those in the cave still see them.

It has perhaps occurred to you that Plato has to explain, more explicitly, how it is that we possess even the beginning of the notion of Forms. He has to explain how we come to apprehend Forms so that they can illuminate us, so that we thereby begin to come to an understanding of true reality. Plato's explanation is that, by thought, we can remember the world of Forms which the soul inhabited before its earthly life began. Plato's “Theory of Forms'' depends on acknowledging that the soul is immortal, or, at the very least, that it existed before it came to the material world.

3.9.2 The doctrine that knowledge is anamnesis *(recollection)*

Plato thought that the immaterial soul is independent of, and superior to, the material body. This view of the body and soul as two different substances is a form of dualism which is the dominant tradition in western metaphysics. As we shall see later, Plato's dualism is in many ways similar to that of the 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes, whose version also landed him in insurmountable difficulties. In any case, Plato thought that the soul belongs to the changeless world of Forms rather than to the changing world of sense perception. After death, the soul might go back to the world of Forms, although it might return once more to the material world at some later stage. But each time it returned within a body it was as though it had been once more imprisoned. It longed for release in order to return to the world of Forms. While in a material body the soul became polluted, and for this reason it would at least partially forget the world of Forms. Sense perception might serve to remind the soul of that world, but it could only begin to apprehend Forms because it had once known them fully. This explains the sense of familiarity with which people grasp a new point, the flash of recognition which accompanies new knowledge. As Williams (1967:69) puts it, it is “the power of a priori reason to grasp substantial truths about the world'' which constitutes the essence of knowledge. But Plato wants to establish more than this. The anamnesis argument is not only that the soul is the principle of life it is also reason (or mind). It is by the exercise of reasoning that the soul/mind awakens to its true potential and may eventually transform the objects of its understanding from a lowly condition of mere opinion to the supreme state of knowledge.

One might well wonder why Plato placed such emphasis upon anamnesis and why knowledge was possible only if there was recollection. Well, Plato had to suggest some basis or grounds for knowledge and, since he rejected the implications of relying upon sense perception, the source of knowledge must be the mind. Still, one might wonder why it was that the mind did not arrive at knowledge by interpreting the data of sense. Plato did concede that true belief (which is based upon sense perception) might prompt the mind, but it was prompted to remember. As noted above, Plato thought that merely by perceiving imperfect particular things, we could not possibly comprehend the corresponding Form the best that perception could do was to remind us of the Form. For example, no two lines are of exactly equal length, and no two objects are of exactly equal weight, yet we do have an understanding of equality, that is, of the Form equality. Since we cannot possibly have received this apprehension by direct observation, we must have remembered it. We must have been reminded by the nearly but not quite equal things which we observe in the material world, of the absolute equality which we knew in the world of Forms. Similarly, there is no object in the material world which is completely and absolutely beautiful, but observation of objects which reveal beauty in some degree would remind the mind of the Form of beauty it had known previously.

3.9.3 Summary

It may be useful at this stage to provide a brief summary of the chief aspects of Plato's theory of knowledge:

- Knowledge is permanent and certain, that is, it is not subject to correction.
- It is not possible to claim knowledge on the basis of sense perception and therefore it is not possible to claim knowledge of any object or event in the material world. The best we can aspire to is true belief.
- True belief can guide us and prompt the mind to remember the world of Forms.
- Forms are eternal and changeless and therefore they can be the objects of knowledge.
- Forms cannot be perceived by the senses; it is only the mind which makes us aware of them.
- Thus we can know only by virtue of our mind, and by its capacity for recollection.

Point to ponder

Taking the above into consideration, plus the remarks made in the final paragraphs of 2.9 about mathematics, do we need to suppose the existence of Forms and the pre-existence of the mind.

Feedback

Mathematics is a form of knowledge that is independent of experience in a way that empirical sciences (e.g. chemistry) are not. But for that very reason we do not need to suppose pre-existent minds to explain how we may acquire it. All that is required is an understanding of the meanings of the terms used, such as straight line, triangle, or the words for numbers, together with certain assumptions about them which, in the case of Euclidean geometry, are derived from our experience of the world about us. They remain assumptions, however, and we argue only that if they are true, certain theorems resulting from them are also true. If a geometrical proof is set out formally, some of these assumptions will be treated as starting points (axioms), and the special terms used will be defined carefully. It then becomes clear that all we need for knowledge of geometry is the ability to understand these axioms and definitions plus the ability to draw deductive conclusions. This is the ability we use when we infer from the statement that Ben has a brother-in-law that Ben has a married sister. Plato's argument proves only that people naturally have this kind of reasoning ability and not that they existed before birth!

Point to Ponder

How does Socrates's claim to preach a doctrine of ignorance differ from that of the sceptical Sophists?

Feedback
The Sophists adopted a Parmenidean sceptical approach to the problem of knowledge and defended any thesis as providing an opportunity to demonstrate their dialectical (argumentative) expertise. Socrates, however, sought intellectual (philosophical) clarity as an end in itself, even if that meant challenging common sense opinion. A belief which is difficult to grasp other-worldly truth underlies Socratic dialogue, whereas the sole aim of the reasoning of the Sophists was the transmission of technical expertise.

Points to ponder

Why did Plato think that virtue depends on knowledge?

Does Plato's allegory of the cave explain how we come to have knowledge of the Forms?

3.9.4 The relationship between knowledge, truth, belief, and justification in Plato

The meaning of the word “knowledge” is such that, if I claim to know something, that something must be logically true if I am making a serious claim to knowledge. In his writings Plato argues that knowledge must be true: if something is not true, he says, we cannot know it. According to Plato, it is only in so far as an individual mental state participates in the truth that we can call this mental state “knowing”. And, as we have seen, truth, for Plato, consists essentially in the degree to which any particular thing conforms to the archetype of that thing in the realm of Forms. Knowledge consists fundamentally in perceiving the conformity (or extent of this conformity).

As far as the mental states involved in the process of knowing are concerned, modern thinkers often tend to contrast *knowledge* with *belief.* This is possibly because knowing implies some kind of acceptance or assertion of a fact: “This is dog”, “A cold wind is blowing”. The question of knowing would not arise unless there was someone who claimed to know something. For Plato, as for anyone who overemphasises the role of reason, knowledge is an individual intellectual state or act of recognition of the truth. Knowledge is all inside the head what lies outside in the material world are just the contingent, deceptive appearances of knowledge (See Stumpf & Abel 2002:29-43). Following the established procedures and focusing the mind upon the Forms will lead to knowledge of what our minds have previously “forgotten".

But Plato sees that more is needed to explain how people come to have knowledge of the physical world. In one of his dialogues he speaks of the necessity of knowledge being “tethered" to the real world. He seems to mean that there must be some link between the thing or fact which is known, and the belief that this thing or fact is true. The knower cannot just come by his or her piece of knowledge by sheer accident, or acquire it coincidentally. Plato seems to be suggesting the need for some kind of justification, a kind of “reason-giving" step. Certainly one might want to argue that because, for Plato, there is such a chasm between knowledge and belief, it would be ridiculous to suggest that he might accept the popular philosophical definition of knowledge as being equivalent to *true justified belief.* What is interesting to us is that his writings demonstrate a fair degree of sensitivity to the modern position.

3.9.5 Criticism of Plato's theory of knowledge

Like all good philosophers, Plato was quite critical of his own philosophy. Having anticipated weaknesses in his philosophy (which others, of course, were not slow to identify), Plato constantly subjected his philosophy to self-criticism. The main difficulties are to explain how the Forms are related to one another and to the particular things which exemplify them. Consider the Form of virtue. How is it related to the Forms of courage, self-control, justice, as well as to the moral qualities that go by these names in individual men and women? Is virtue (or goodness) the Form of all of these or is it not? And what about special Forms of, for instance, courage? There is physical courage, moral courage, cool, calculated fearlessness, to mention just three. Must each of these types of courage have a separate Form, in addition to the more universal notion of courage?

We can continue this criticism in another way. Consider animals. They all participate in the Form “animality''. But does not each of them also participate in the Form of its own species: horse, dog, and so on? If so, will there not also be Forms of sheep-dog, bull-dog, etcetera? But if there are also these “sub- Forms,'' why not go on until we can particularise completely and have a separate Form for each individual thing?

Another difficulty is to understand how things “participate'' in the Forms. Is one to say that the Form as a whole is in each thing particular? Surely not, for the Form is one and single, whereas the particulars are indefinitely many. If the Form were, as a whole, in each particular, there would be as many copies of the Forms as there are particulars. But if each particular contains only a part of the Form, this would fragment the unity of the form and leave us with no deciding principle on how it is to be divided. The notion of participation is explained in the Republic as being similar to the relation of a physical thing to its shadow. However, the analogy breaks down at just the point at which it is supposed to help us.
The relationship between object and shadow is spatio-temporal. But how can this spatio-temporal relationship throw any light on a relation that cannot be spatio-temporal, since one of the two terms in the relationship (the Form) is, by definition, non-spatial and non-temporal? In the absence of any answers to these questions, Plato's theory of Forms stands condemned.

Does it help to say that the particulars imitate or approximate to the Form? If we do, we are alleging that the particulars are like the Form in some way and in some degree. But, as we have seen above, they are not similar to it in all respects. There must, then, be some special respect in which they are alike. But it is just because the particulars resemble each other in a special way that we bring them under the Form, so should we not do likewise with the Form and the particulars if the relationship between them is imitation or likeness? Should we not suppose yet another Form (as one term of the relation of similarity) and the first Form (as the other)? If so, we shall then be in need of yet another Form to explain the relation of the first (and the particulars) to the second, and so on indefinitely. This, in effect, is Aristotle's criticism, commonly known as “the third man argument”: if the Form of Man is the thing that all men resemble, is it not just another man? If it is not, how can men resemble it?

Plato faces an impasse. If the Forms are not distinct from particulars, they would not be true objects of knowledge, for there would be nothing to have knowledge of. If, on the other hand, they are quite separate from the particulars, they are unknowable because no satisfactory theory uniting Form to particular has been given. Plato's theory of Forms would appear to be beyond rescue.

Point to ponder

Can you think of any criticisms of your own against Plato's theory of Forms?

Feedback
It may have occurred to you that certain general terms are basically relational. For example, terms such as “tall”, “short”, “heavy”, and “light” seem to have no absolute meaning, but imply some reference to a standard of comparison. Without such a reference the term is without meaning. There can be no Form of tallness, since if there were to be, the same individual would be “tall” when compared with one individual and “short” in comparison with another. Or consider a heap of salt. If one were to add a bit of salt to it, the heap would increase in size; but if one were to add a piece of “smallness” to something, that something would logically decrease in size. So one must either deny that relational qualities can possibly be Forms, or be led into contradiction.

Point to ponder
Do you agree with Plato that universals must be known prior to our being able to know the individual things to which we apply them as descriptive terms?

Feedback: A realist approach to universals, such as that taken by Plato, implies that classes are themselves objects of knowledge and completely independent of particulars as objects of knowledge. The difficulties encountered in explaining just how each can be equally legitimate objects of knowledge within the confines of a coherent epistemology suggest problems for the defence of a realist position on universals.

3.10 ARISTOTLE

1. We perceive the world through our senses but realise that our perceptions are only partial representations of reality because the world is constantly changing from potentiality into actuality.

2. In order to discover the essence of what we perceive, we have to use our reason to arrive at the qualities of a thing that are unchanging.

3. This is firstly done by categorising all knowledge at its lowest level as contingent (undifferentiated and changing, e.g., plants), then universal or genus (qualities shared by a particular group e.g., trees) and finally essential or species (qualities uniquely specific e.g., oak trees that have acorns). Essential qualities answer the question why by establishing a chain of cause and effect reasoning.

4. Essential properties can also be inductively arrived at by understanding the four causes (reasons) that give rise to existence.

A solution to the problem we have been examining was suggested by Plato's famous student, Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Aristotle agrees with Plato that the ever-changing particulars cannot be objects of knowledge as particulars, but he thinks that sense perception can, and indeed must, play a part in the acquisition of knowledge. This is because he has a different view of the nature of the particulars and of the relation of Forms (universals) to particulars. This means that he has a different view of how we come to apprehend Forms.

Aristotle does not think that Forms can exist independently of particulars. The relationship between them is not comparable to the relationship between an object and its shadow. He thinks that Forms and particulars are interdependent; in other words, neither can exist without the other. For example, a particular horse can only be a horse because there is a Form horse the complex of characteristics the possession of which by a creature makes it a horse but the existence of the Form horse depends on there being at least one particular horse.

Moreover, Aristotle does not believe that our knowledge of Forms is innate, depending on recollection from an existence in the world of Forms. Plato, you will remember, claims that sense perception might help to remind us of our innate memory, but Aristotle maintains that sense perception is required for the development of our ability to apprehend the Forms. In Aristotle's thought, sense perception is not just an aid it plays an essential role. According to Aristotle (1953:13), “the act of sense perception is of the particular but its content is Universal". To illustrate his point: we can only recognise Winnie Mandela as a woman if we already understand what it is to be a woman. In other words, we must apprehend the universal (the Form) in order to interpret the particular; but we have to have sense experience of particulars to apprehend the universal.

An established hierarchy of Forms gives us a classifying scheme and any Form can be defined by its place in the scheme. The lowest Form is a species, which is contained within a higher Form, its genus. A species is distinguished from other species in the genus by its unique and essential characteristics. For example, the species “Man" belongs in the genus animal, and is differentiated from other animals by its unique and essential characteristic of rationality therefore “Man" is the species of rational animal. (In fact, Aristotle classed “Man" *as political animal*, “political" meaning “living in a social group" and deriving from the Greek *polis* [city]. The specification “rational" comes from medieval philosophers.)

As mentioned earlier, an important feature of Aristotle's scheme of classification and of knowledge is that it is only possible to have knowledge of Forms, not of the particulars which make up the species. This is because particulars cannot be defined. To appreciate this we must understand the difference between a definition and a description. A particular can be described and identified, but it cannot be defined. That is, there are no properties which are essential to it *as a particular*, no properties which are required to make it the particular object which it is. For instance, consider a particular woman, Winnie Mandela. She can, of course, be described: in 2019, she was the late former wife of the late former President of South Africa, she was a South African political figure, she was a divorcee, she had two daughters, and she was a certain weight, and so on. These descriptions identify her, but are any of these properties essential to her being Winnie Mandela? Would she be regarded as Winnie Mandela if she lacked any or all of these? As *an individual* she has no essential properties and therefore she cannot be defined. The essential properties she does possess she possesses as a member of the human species!

3.10.1 Aristotelian epistemology

The classificatory scheme of knowledge devised by Aristotle can be more fully explained if one considers various examples. Let us first consider geometrical figures. One must appreciate that defining properties (or attributes) are essential to a geometrical figure being that figure, and that further properties can be logically deduced from these essential attributes. For instance, the defining and essential attribute of circles is that all points on the circumference are equal distances from the centre, and all figures with all points equal distances from their centre are circles.

Taking this definition along with various other geometrical axioms that effectively enable the construction of a hierarchy within the classifying scheme, we can deduce other attributes of circles and thus obtain scientific knowledge this being knowledge which cannot be otherwise.

But the situation is different when we come to consider objects in the world. For even if we assume that species (e.g. human beings or horses) have essential attributes (and we shall question this assumption later) we cannot hypothesise these in the same way as we can the attributes of a geometric figure. However, Aristotle does not think that it is impossible to discover these essential attributes. He appreciates that we cannot start by defining an existent species in the way that we can define a mythical creature like a winged horse, but he thinks that there is a defining attribute (or, sometimes, a set of defining attributes), and by observing the particular individuals, this defining attribute can be discovered. This process of generalising, that is, making general assertions about properties by appealing to evidence from observation of particulars, is known as induction. It is important to note that Aristotle did not think that induction must necessarily lead to knowledge of essential attributes. Instead, his view is that it is a method a guide to possible essential attributes. The method of induction cannot give us certain knowledge because, even if an attribute were observed to be common to all individuals of a species and unique to those individuals, it might not be an essential attribute.

For example, observation shows that all human beings are featherless bipeds (two-legged creatures) and that only featherless bipeds are human beings, so it may be assumed that this is an essential attribute, one which is universal. But Aristotle would have denied this. He would accept that it is universal, but deny that it is essential. In other words, although as a matter of contingent fact all human beings are featherless bipeds, that attribute is not necessarily part of the essential nature of human beings. It might be, but this must be established by means other than observation. To show that it is essential, we must show why human beings possess the attribute, otherwise it can only be rated as an accidental or contingent property, just as the attribute of loving God is an accidental or contingent property of piety (See Stumpf & Abel 2002:6-19).Aristotle (1953:75a) holds that such contingent or accidental properties could not give knowledge since accidents are not necessary, one does not necessarily have reasoned knowledge of a conclusion drawn from them. (This is so even if the accidental properties are invariable ... for though the conclusion be actually essential, one will not know it is essential nor know its reason); but to have reasoned knowledge of a conclusion is to know it through its cause.

It is only if causal connection can be established that it becomes justifiable to assert that a property is essential and therefore necessary. Having shown a causal connection, a plain fact becomes a reasoned fact. For example, take the plain fact that the planets do not twinkle; non twinkling is an attribute of all planets. It is made into a reasoned fact by the causal explanation that the planets are nearer than the stars to the earth.

Aristotle (1953:93a 16; 93a 3) emphasised that we have to observe the plain fact in order to be able to show that it is a reasoned fact, although the fact and its reason may be apprehended simultaneously:

> When we are aware of a fact we seek its reason and though sometimes the fact and reason dawn upon us simultaneously, yet we cannot apprehend the reason a moment sooner than the fact; and clearly in just the same way we cannot apprehend a thing's definable Form without apprehending that it exists, since while we are ignorant whether it exists we cannot know its essential nature.

> Moreover we are aware whether a thing exists or not sometimes through apprehending an element in its character, and sometimes accidentally, as, for example, when we are aware of thunder as a voice in the clouds ... As often we have accidental knowledge that the thing exists, we must be in a wholly negative state as regards awareness of its essential nature; for we have not got genuine knowledge even of its existence, ... the degree of our knowledge of a thing's essential nature is determined by the sense in which we are aware that it exists ... [And] to know its essential nature is, as we have said, to know the cause of a thing's existence, and the proof of this depends on the fact that a thing must have a cause.

So, Aristotle's answer to the question about how we know that we have indeed obtained knowledge and a true understanding of reasoned fact is that we know this by intuition or what he called nous. Nous is a superior kind of apprehension. It is more reliable than deduced, scientific knowledge, since truth is known directly. If you go on to study our 3rd year course in Modern Western Philosophy you shall go on to see that the 17th century philosopher, Descartes, had precisely the same opinion regarding the superiority of intuitively apprehended truths over those which were arrived at by demonstration, that is, by logical deduction.

3.10.2 Summary

At this stage a summary of the important features of Aristotle's analysis of knowledge may be helpful:

- Like Plato, Aristotle was a realist; the Forms have an objective existence about which he was as sure as he was of the existence of physical objects.
- Unlike Plato, Aristotle believes that Forms cannot exist without particulars: they are interdependent.
- For Plato, knowledge can only be gained by recollecting the Forms which the mind had known in its pre-bodily existence. For Aristotle, knowledge is gained with the help of the sense perception of particulars.
- All Forms have necessary attributes which define them and on the basis of which (along with their relations to other Forms) their properties can be logically deduced. Observation helps us to discover essential properties by showing the plain facts of association of properties.
- Nous (intuition) reveals causes of associations and therefore reveals reasoned facts.
- Reasoned facts are the basis of scientific knowledge and further scientific knowledge is reached by deduction. This knowledge is necessary it cannot be otherwise.
- Empirical inquiry (inquiry into the world as we perceive it), therefore, can give us knowledge which is as certain as mathematical knowledge.

As far as the relationship between knowledge, truth, belief, and justification are concerned, Aristotle accepted the general conditions that knowledge was connected to truth, to belief, and to justification. But in his case, the “mental state" aspect represented by the belief condition is not very strong. In fact, Aristotle's work is inspired by a vision of empirical knowledge as a body of facts, collectively put together by individuals over the whole course of human history, for him empirical knowledge included only those truths which have withstood the trials of reality over a long period. The question of which specific mental states (beliefs?) are preconditions for the accumulated theories of science, or whether these individual beliefs were justified or not, is not an issue for Aristotle.

He is more concerned with the justification of a scientific statement - of whole systems of statements, that is, of theories, or of science as a whole - than with a single psychological state of believing something to be true.

However, Aristotle places great emphasis upon the other two conditions. Truth, for him, is not the faithfulness of an entity to a general type or Form, which reason allows us all, in some degree, to perceive. Knowing is not recognising, in an internal act, that something is a fairly faithful representation of its type. In a well-known passage of his Metaphysics Aristotle writes that “to speak the truth is simply to say of what is, that it is, or of what is not, that it is not; and to speak falsely is to say of what is, that it is not, or of what is not, that it is". It is the whole act of predication that Aristotle sees as important in analysing truth. The attribution of truth is restricted to the statement of fact facts being made up of particular things (eg a cat) and their predicates (qualifying terms e.g. black). So, for Aristotle, we can establish truth, or likely truth, by observing the world as closely and carefully as possible. Compared with Plato's view, this is an empirical and external view of truth.

Aristotle also pays close attention to justification. He emphasises the need for extensive and careful observation, and places a high value on the tireless investigation of scientific matters, an investigation which, in principle, might be never-ending since new evidence is always coming to light. This is where the individual scientist’s basic justification lies in her application of technique and the manner of her inquiry. Since an individual observer does not have unlimited ability or time for investigation, Aristotle is prepared to allow that scientific truths can be accepted on the strength of expert testimony. He himself kept up professional contacts with fishermen, bee-keepers, hunters, farmers, and the like, so that he could learn from the experts about any new or strange things discovered in the natural world that they dealt with every day. So another source of justification for Aristotle is reliable evidence from an expert source or authority.

It is evident that Aristotle was a scientist just as much as he was a philosopher. The force which drove him, and the source of his enormous intellectual energy, was a passionate desire to know, to increase the sum of human knowledge, to discover the truth about the world and everything in it. We observed earlier that Aristotle wanted to know the reasoned fact why things are as they are. Why do magnets attract iron? Why are fish able to breathe under water? Why does an acorn turn out always to be an oak, and not a pine or a willow? These questions aimed at an explanation of the data, which took the form of a general theory or covering principle under which all instances of some sort could be included. This is the structure of all scientific explanation. For instance, if the question is *Why do fungi grow in dark, damp places*?, the answer would be: *Because the moisture in such places causes their spores to germinate.*

Consider another example of the sort of questioning that motivated Aristotle: *This child has a headache, a rash and a sore throat, but why?* It is not sufficient merely to observe the child's condition what is needed is to get at the causal structures operating in the material world which determine the nature of things, and, moreover, give the knower the power to predict and control her environment. Knowledge of the child's condition would include being able to say: *The child has measles. That is what is causing these symptoms. We can expect a fever to develop and last for three or four days, this being yet another effect of the virus.*

This kind of explanation depends on the structures of cause and effect that govern the physical world. We know that fungi grow in damp places, and we know why they do when we know the general law: moisture causes fungi spores to germinate.

We know that this is a case of measles when we know that these symptoms are effects of the virus, and we can then predict the temperature increase since it is also invariably an effect of the virus. For Aristotle, the sort of understanding (nous) which real knowledge involves is a grasp of the cause- effect relations that hold true in the world of physical things.

Point/Points to ponder
How do you think we can know that we have indeed found a true definition and a true cause (“reasoned fact")? How does Aristotle explain the transition from plain fact to reasoned fact?

Feedback

When we are aware of a fact we seek its reason and, although sometimes the fact and reason dawn upon us simultaneously, yet we cannot apprehend the reason a moment sooner than the fact; clearly, in the same way, we cannot apprehend a thing's definable Form without apprehending that it exists since, while we are ignorant of its existence, we obviously cannot know its essential nature. Moreover, we are aware whether a thing exists or not sometimes through apprehending an element in its character, and sometimes accidentally, as, for example, when we are aware of thunder as a voice in the clouds. Since we often have only accidental knowledge that the thing exists, we must be in a wholly negative state about our awareness of its essential nature; for we have no genuine knowledge even of the thing's existence. The degree of our knowledge of a thing's essential nature is determined by the sense in which we are aware that it exists. And to know its essential nature is to know the cause of a thing's existence, and the proof of this depends on the fact that a thing must have a cause.

Point to ponder
For Plato the ultimate real features of the universe are the Forms; for Aristotle they are the individual things that make up the world. Which view do you think is correct and why?

Feedback
As a pointer to a response to this complex question, one might suggest the following. One could argue that neither is correct that talk about “the ultimate real features of the universe" is idle, etcetera but that would not be a philosophical answer. Clearly some (brief) exposition of both Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysical views is required, together with critical evaluation of the limitations of each. That would be the correct interpretation and response to this somewhat difficult question.

3.10.3 The doctrine of the four causes

There are, according to Aristotle, four general kinds of cause which may operate in determinative way on anything, or be given in answer to the question of what something is, or why something is the case. The material cause of anything is the stuff of which it is composed, its constituent matter. Thus Aristotle says that the material cause of a statue might be bronze, of a tray, silver. It certainly makes sense to say, in reply to the question: What is the statue/tray?, “It is bronze/silver". Furthermore, it is an important part of the knowledge of anything to know what it is made of, since we may assume its properties are dependent, to a large extent, on what kind of stuff the thing is.

The second kind of cause Aristotle identified is usually referred to as the formal cause. Here we have to do with the shape, pattern, composition or structure of something. The statue's shape might be that of a horse, or of a little boy. Form is always distinguishable from matter. The same form might be realised or represented in a variety of materials the statue could be bronze, wood, clay, etcetera and yet be exactly the same shape every time. These first two kinds of cause (and, as we shall see, the last kind as well) are not dynamic causes, in the sense of forces bearing upon the object and bringing about some change in it, nor are they objects different from their effects.

The third cause is dynamic and distinguishable from its object. It is the efficient or motive cause the initiator of the process by which something comes into being, sometimes natural, sometimes involving a deliberate action. In the example of the statue, the efficient cause is the sculptor who works with the materials, moulding the clay and casting the bronze to produce the finished work. Again, consider, this cause in connection with the questions of "What?" or "Why?". The questions What is the statue? Why did the statue come into being? are quite adequately answered by saying: the statue is the result of a moulding and casting process, and it came about because the sculptor planned and executed it so.

The fourth Aristotelian cause is the final cause. This is the goal or end of anything; in other words, for the sake of which something occurs. The final cause of the statue, for instance, is to give aesthetic pleasure. Notoriously, works of art do not have a practical purpose, so the statue does not provide the best example of a final cause. But take something like a claw hammer, and ask "What is it?", and the answer "Something for driving in nails and levering them out" is perfectly acceptable. It is perhaps odd to call the purpose of anything, its "cause", but its purpose does determine what kind of thing it is, and reference to its goal certainly helps us to explain something.

Point to ponder

Explain what a motor car tyre is, in terms of the four causes. Begin each of the four answers with "A motor car tyre is ...".

Feedback

Material cause: a motor car tyre is **made of** rubber with chemical additives, sometimes with steel wire reinforcing, and a steel rim.

Formal cause: a motor car tyre **is patterned on** a circle, about 20 centimetres deep, with a textured surface.

Efficient cause: a motor car tyre **is produced by** melting and moulding rubber.

Final cause: a motor car tyre **is aimed at** producing a safe, smooth car/road interface. Something of this sort would have done. Note the characteristic phrases in bold type!

3.10.3.1 Metaphysical implications of the doctrine of the four causes

Aristotle sees knowledge as an ordinary matter which is within the grasp of all those who take enough pains to observe the world around them. It is not, as Plato believed, a mystical communion with ghostly Forms that only the exceptionally gifted person, the Philosopher-King, blessed with Reason in the highest degree can achieve in full, and which most ordinary people are destined never to have. Can we understand everything, then? Yes, says Aristotle, except those things which happen by accident and are not determined by causal laws. If we cannot understand something, for example, why a man of 20 goes bald, when normally baldness is caused by the ageing process, then we cannot understand it precisely because we cannot assign a cause to it. That which happens by chance does not happen in accordance with a causal law, and is not knowable in the full sense because we cannot understand or explain it we just observe it uncomprehendingly.

The second point to be made about this doctrine is that it goes hand in hand with a particular theory of what there is (ie a metaphysics). Observable causal relations are the route to knowledge, the objects of knowledge being the things that are fixed by those relations, and these things are ordinary physical objects like tables, cats, and cups.
There is no hierarchy of being with Forms at the top and physical objects at the bottom, as we find in Plato. The physical objects of knowledge are all there is. For Plato, “the real" is identical with “the true"; reality is the suprasensible world of Forms accessible only to the faculty of reason. The real cat is the archetypal Form of the cat in this world and not the imperfect thing on the mat which could call itself “a real cat" only in so far as it exemplified the perfect Form of cathood. For Aristotle, on the other hand, “the real" is synonymous with “the material". Reality has to be contrasted with the unobservable or the insubstantial. If we cannot perceive it, it is not real. Aristotle's real cat is the furry four-legged piece of matter lying on the mat.

Summarising his four causes Aristotle notes that “all things that come to be come to be by some agency and from something, and come to be something". He goes on to elaborate his notion that form and matter never exist separately. In nature, generation of new life involves, according to Aristotle, first of all an individual who already possesses the specific form which the offspring will have (the male parent).There must then be the matter capable of being the vehicle for this form (this matter being contributed by the female parent). From this comes a new individual with the same specific form. In this example, Aristotle indicates that change does not involve bringing together formless matter with matter-less form. On the contrary, change occurs always in, and to, something that is already a combination of form and matter and that is on its way to becoming something new or different.

As we have seen, Aristotle asked the question: What is the essence of things? This question also has metaphysical significance and is answered in terms of Aristotle's concept of actuality which represents the dynamic relationship between matter and form. According to Aristotle, matter is potentiality and form is actualised matter. In contradiction to Plato's dualism whose substances are Forms, of which the phenomena of the world are mere imitations, Aristotle argues that the particular substances are first substances in which through their form the universal is expressed. The first substances are thus real they are the foundations of experience, without which the universal could not be understood. The universal is a posteriori, in other words, it follows experience and does not precede it, as Plato claims. All things, says Aristotle, are involved in processes of change. Each thing possesses a power to become what its form has set as its end. There is, in all things, a dynamic power of striving toward their “end". Some of this striving is toward external objects, such as when a man builds a house.

But there is also the striving to achieve ends that reveal one's internal nature, such as when a person fulfils her nature as a person by the act of thinking. This self-contained end of anything Aristotle called its entelechy. It is the idea that things have ends which leads Aristotle to consider the distinction between potentiality and actuality. This distinction is used by Aristotle to explain the processes of change and development. If the end of an acorn is to be a tree, in some way the acorn is only potentially a tree but not actually so at this time. A fundamental mode of change, then, is the change from potentiality to actuality. But the chief significance of this distinction is that Aristotle argues for the priority of actuality over potentiality. That is, although something actual emerges from the potential, there could be no movement from potential to actual if there were not first of all something actual. A girl is potentially a woman, but before there could be a girl with that potentiality, there had to be prior to her an actual woman.

Since all things in nature are similar to the relation of a girl to a woman or an acorn to a tree, Aristotle was led to see in nature different levels of being. If everything were involved in change, in birth and decay, everything would partake of potentiality. But we have seen that, for there to be something potential, there must already be something actual. To explain the existence of the world of potential things, Aristotle thought it was necessary to assume the existence of some actuality at a level above potential or perishing things. He was led to the notion of a Being that is pure actuality, without any potentiality, at the highest level of being. Since change is a kind of motion, Aristotle saw the visible world as one composed of things in motion. And to explain motion ultimately led Aristotle to speak of the Unmoved Mover.

Point to ponder
The central concern of metaphysics is the study of substance, the essential nature of a thing. How does Aristotle's theory of reality (metaphysics) clarify this issue?

Feedback: Aristotle draws a distinction between matter and form. According to Aristotle, matter is potentiality and form is actualised matter. He believes that the particular substances are first substances in which through their form the universal is expressed. The first substances are thus real they are the foundations of experience, without which the universal could not be understood. Each thing possesses a power to become what its form has set as its end. There is, in all things, a dynamic power of striving toward their “end." Some of this striving is toward external objects, such as when a man builds a house. But there is also the striving to achieve ends that reveal one's internal nature, such as when a person fulfils her nature as a person by the act of thinking. This self-contained end of anything Aristotle called its entelechy. Substances are beings which have fulfilled their entelechies.

3.10.3.2 The Unmoved Mover

For Aristotle, the Unmoved Mover does not mean the same thing as a first mover, as though motion could be traced back to a time when motion began. Nor is the Unmoved Mover considered by him a creator in the sense of later theology. From the previous distinction between potentiality and actuality, Aristotle concludes that the only way to explain how motion or change can occur is to assume that something actual is logically prior to whatever is potential. The fact of change must imply the existence of something actual, something purely actual without any mixture of potentiality. This Mover is not, according to Aristotle, an efficient cause in the sense of exerting a power or force, or as expressing a will.

Such acts would imply potentiality, as, for instance, when one says that god “willed" to create the world. This would mean that before God created the world, he was potentially capable of creating it, or intended to create it.

Aristotle does not think of the Unmoved Mover as a Being that thinks or prescribes purposes for the world. In a sense, the Unmoved Mover does not know anything. It is not a kind of being. Instead, it is a way of explaining the fact of motion. All nature is full of striving to fulfil all its particular entelechies. Each thing is aiming at perfecting its possibilities and its end, aiming that is, at becoming the perfect tree, the perfectly good person, etcetera. The totality of all these strivings constitutes the large-scale processes of the world order, so that one might say that all reality is in the process of change moving from its potentialities and possibilities to the ultimate perfection of these potentialities. To explain this comprehensive or general motion, to make it intelligible, Aristotle introduces the notion of the Unmoved Mover as the “reason for" or the “principle of " motion. Hence, it is the actual as well as the *eternal* principle of motion.

From the point of view of the doctrine of the four causes, Aristotle considers the Mover as the final cause, in the way that the form of woman is in the girl, directing the motion of her change toward a final, that is, a fixed and appropriate natural end. By being a final cause, the Unmoved Mover thereby, in relation to the world, becomes also efficient cause through the power of attraction, by inspiring the striving towards natural ends, a process that goes on eternally. Aristotle's Unmoved Mover is found within the world, and makes the world an intelligible order.

3.10.4 Critical observations

Here we must begin to assess and criticise: we need to sift among these views and find which, if any, among them remains defensible. We can accept, in a general sense, the reliance on reasoned understanding (nous) because, in the end, we must rely upon our intuition we must trust our powers of thought and reason. But we can object to the assumption that reason is an infallible guide to causes of events in the world, and that it can show us that attributes are necessarily associated. We must also object to the assumption that there are some properties which are necessarily associated and so we must object to the inference, from that assumption, that a system of classification based on supposedly necessary associations of properties will reflect a necessary order in nature.

The view that knowledge about the world could be found by making logical deductions based on associations of essential properties, and that this knowledge was certain and beyond dispute, persisted well into the 17th century. This view of knowledge later permeated the philosophy of Descartes and Locke's view of empirical knowledge. Both the rationalist Descartes and the empiricist Locke regarded mathematical knowledge as the paradigm of knowledge. It was the paradigm of knowledge because mathematical knowledge could be arrived at by deduction from the defining (and therefore the essential) properties of mathematical entities.

We learn by experience that certain properties are regularly associated and therefore that certain schemes of classification are useful. We may indeed feel that there is some logical inevitability about familiar associations: we have an expectation that the transparent odourless liquid coming from the tap must quench our thirst if we drink it, must boil if we heat it, must eventually solidify if we cool it, etcetera. But as modern empiricist philosopher Hume argued that there is, in fact, no logical justification for these expectations. Familiarity masks the fact that the associations are contingent and not logically inevitable.

Systems of classifications may help scientists to discover unknown species. Observation of properties of chemical elements led to creation of the periodic table, an extremely successful classificatory device. When it was first proposed, in 1869, the periodic table was, like classifications of plant and animal life, based on empirical facts, not on reasoned facts. But, while we may recognise the value in this Aristotelian device, we do not thereby conclude, as Aristotle does, that necessary associations of properties exist. After the acceptance of the electronic theory of atomic structure it could be said that the periodic table represents a necessary classification, but it was only necessary in relation to the theory; it was not necessary in an absolute sense. So, although it is true that many of our scientific laws are deduced from an explanatory theory (for instance, Newton's laws of motion, which he deduced from his theory of gravitational attraction) we differ from Aristotle in that we do not therefore regard these scientific laws as embodying logically necessary truth. We may have found a reason for the fact, but that does not guarantee essential or indubitable knowledge. Whether our theories are speculative conjectures or well-established, they are always subject to correlation and even to rejection.

Neither Plato nor Aristotle considered the possibility that different kinds of knowledge, that is, knowledge about different kinds of objects (mathematical entities as opposed to empirical facts) might be justified in different ways. For them, all knowledge had to be logically necessary and beyond any doubt. For Plato, the objects of knowledge were Forms, intuitively apprehended by mental contemplation. For Aristotle, there could only be knowledge of existing entities in so far as the properties of a species (their universal attributes) are concerned. So to have knowledge (nous) of the “Evil Eye", of the black cat, would be identical to linking various particular and evident facts seeing the universal (cat-ness) in that particular cat.

Points to ponder

Are classifying schemes merely devices for grouping entities together on the basis of certain property(ies) which they **happen** to have in common?

If they are, the association of these properties is a contingent association, not a necessary association. Is essential knowledge still possible?

Do you agree with Aristotle that scientific laws embody logically necessary truth?

Feedback: Aristotle did not consider the possibility that different kinds of knowledge, that is, knowledge about different kinds of objects (mathematical entities as opposed to empirical facts) might be justified in different ways. For him, all knowledge had to be logically necessary and beyond any doubt. Before Hume (1711-1776), Aristotle and the philosophers and scientists who came after him continued to believe in the possibility of discovering the true causes of physical events. Aristotle thought that this would provide the logically necessary connection between events. He believed that this logically necessary connection must be deduced from intuitively self-evident premises, and, taking this as his starting point, he explored nature, developing his theory of the four causes as a consequence of his view of logical necessity. But modern scientists are unanimous in siding with Hume against Aristotle on this matter.

3.11 Summary

In this study unit we introduced you to the discipline of philosophy by pointing out that philosophy is actually an ongoing discussion between various thinkers on some very fundamental, yet quite general, issues. The issues we examined here are What is knowledge? (theory of knowledge, epistemology) and What is reality? (metaphysics). We explored the questions and answers suggested by the earliest thinkers in the Western tradition in these areas of inquiry. By tracing the debate among the Milesians concerning the first cause (arche), you were shown how philosophies “develop" over time.

At the core of this study unit are the philosophical positions of Plato and Aristotle. However, in order to adequately understand their approaches we needed to explore the debates among their predecessors. This led us to a brief examination of the contributions of Heraclitus and Parmenides to philosophical dialogue. The further dispute between the conflicting approaches of the Sophists and Socrates served as the setting for introducing Plato's epistemology and metaphysics.

Aristotle sees knowledge as an ordinary matter which is within the grasp of all those who take enough pains to observe the world around them. Knowledge is not, as Plato believed, a mystical communion with ghostly Forms that only the exceptionally gifted person, the Philosopher-King, blessed with Reason in the highest degree, can achieve in full, and which most ordinary people are destined never to possess. However, both philosophers have a concept of knowledge as a necessary relation between events and both philosophers believe that this knowledge lies within our grasp if we adopt the procedures and methods which they recommend. Although it is not always made explicit, the intention lying “behind" this introductory study of epistemology (and metaphysics) is to encourage you to reflect on the bases of your own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge claims.

3.12 Self-Assessment Questions

We suggest you treat these questions as a kind of revision exercise. Please note that many of them are not intended to be examples of questions which may be set in your examinations. Instead, they should be regarded as drawing attention to parts of the study material which require further consolidation and reflection. After formulating your responses to these questions, you should be in a better position to develop your ideas in the systematic manner required to answer the longer, essay-type examination questions. You will receive some examples of examination questions in the follow-up tutorial letters which will be sent to you some time after the assignment closing dates.

1. How would you describe the philosophical method? (You will definitely not be asked this kind of question, but you ought to be able to formulate your own answer to it by the time you have worked through this module.)

2. Describe the main differences between mythological and scientific/philosophical thinking.

3. “Milesian philosophy is the earliest attempt at providing a scientific view of the universe." Discuss. (This is a complex question and one that might appear as an examination question.)

4. How do early Milesian philosophers and Heraclitus explain the fact of change? Which of them, if any, do you agree with? Give reasons. (This, too, requires a lengthy answer.)

5. What a priori arguments does Parmenides give concerning the nature of Being?

6. What would you say is an epistemological question? Give a few examples of your own. (This is definitely not a suitable examination question. However, it is vital that you reflect upon and answer this question if you want to gain clarity about philosophy and the philosophical method.)

7. Do you think that the Socratic method is preferable to the approach of the Sophists? Why?

8. Explain the progress of thought from imagining to intelligence as Plato depicts it in his simile of the divided line.

9. Comment on the significance of Plato's allegory (or simile) of the cave for epistemology.

10. Do a beautiful sunset, a beautiful horse, a beautiful song, and a beautiful painting have something in common? If so, is that “something" physical?
11. Briefly describe the chief aspects of Plato's theory of knowledge. (This question might be used as a possible examination question.)

12. Is Plato correct that the objects of knowledge must be unchanging?

13. What do you consider the most powerful objection against Plato's theory of Forms? Why?

14. Describe the four causes of things or events as outlined by Aristotle.

15. How does Aristotle's concept of the Unmoved Mover compare with your concept of God?

16. Assess Aristotle's contribution to epistemology. (This question is much too difficult to be used as a possible examination question, but it may form part of an examination question.)

17. Compare and contrast Aristotle's view of knowledge with that of Plato's. (This question is much too difficult to be used as a possible examination question, but it may form part of an examination question.

4 STUDY UNIT 3: MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY [AUGUSTINE, ANSELM AND AQUINAS]

Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- indicate how the various aspects of Augustine's theory of knowledge are linked
- explain and critically evaluate Augustine's synthesis of Platonic and Biblical doctrine
- explain and critically evaluate Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God
- explain and critically evaluate Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God
- compare and contrast Anselm's ontological argument with any of Aquinas's proofs for the existence of God
- indicate how Aquinas's conception of the workings of nature reflect his understanding of the role of theology

4.1 Introduction

Having completed the previous study unit by exploring the epistemological and metaphysical positions of the ancient Greek philosophers, we now turn to an important phase in Western philosophy known as "medieval philosophy" (philosophy in the Middle Ages from about 400 CE until about 1400 CE). There were significant post-Aristotelian philosophers in both Greece and in Rome, but if we were to consider their thought, even briefly, this study guide would become rather unmanageable in terms of volume and scope. We shall therefore now jump forward and consider the impact of Christianity on the Western philosophical tradition by examining some of the epistemological and metaphysical ideas of the two greatest of the medieval philosophers: St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas.

The historical circumstances of the 4th century CE were largely responsible for Augustine's attempt to harmonise certain ideas of Plato with certain biblical notions in such a way that it exerted considerable influence upon the western mind for centuries afterwards. Likewise, the preoccupation with rational proofs for the existence of God, such as we find in St Anselm, reflects the re-emergence of belief in the human powers of reasoning after centuries of turmoil (the "Dark Ages") in Western Europe. This confidence reached its peak after the rediscovery of the classical works of Aristotle, in the great synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology worked out by Thomas Aquinas.

4.2 The Historical Background

St Augustine's life (354-430) spanned a period which included the most dramatic phases of the "decline of the Roman Empire". By the time Augustine died, the classical era had come to an end and the middle Ages were just beginning. Augustine witnessed the Christianisation of the ancient world and the sacking of Rome by a group of invaders called the Goths. So, in an important sense, his life may be said to coincide with the historical transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages.

During its many centuries of pre-eminence, Roman civilisation had colonised many parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Augustine was an African who spoke Latin and who lived in what is present-day Algeria. Just as today many educated Africans often spend a few years in London or in Paris (depending on their colonial heritage), so Augustine lived for periods of his life in Rome and Milan before returning to his native country. On his return he began writing the works for which he was to become famous.

These were not philosophical in the sense in which you have become familiar with from your study of ancient philosophy. Instead, they were intended to help resolve disputes which had arisen within the Christian church during its spread among the peoples of the world, especially those who lived within the Roman Empire.

4.3 AUGUSTINE's Approach to Human Knowledge and the Nature of Reality

1. If you think of something, for example a man, that thing you are thinking of must exist at a bare minimum in your understanding because you cannot think about what is not in your mind.
2. If you think of the greatest possible being that exists (God), this being cannot only be contained in your mind but must also exist in reality external to your mind.
3. Therefore God as the greatest possible being must exist.

Augustine interprets philosophy as love of wisdom which, for him, means love of God. He resolves to achieve wisdom by following the teaching of Christ "with the greatest subtlety of reason". There could be no such thing as a purely natural human creature without some ultimate spiritual destiny. In order to understand the concrete condition of the human being, she must be considered from the perspective of the Christian faith. So, for Augustine, reason and revelation are both needed if true philosophy is to be achieved. There could be no distinction between theology and philosophy. Clear thinking, for Augustine, is only possible under the influence of God's grace. In his first "philosophical" writings, he proclaims his position that all knowledge upon all subjects must take into account the revealed truth of Scripture along with the insights of philosophy. It is, in particular, Plato's philosophy that Augustine seeks to harmonise with Christian doctrine as he understands it. As Aquinas (quoted in Stumpf 1966:144) said about Augustine later:

> Whenever Augustine, who was imbued with the doctrine of the Platonists, found in their writings anything consistent with the faith, he adopted it; and whatever he found contrary to the faith, he amended.

Augustine begins his philosophical argument by trying to show that the sceptical position on knowledge is mistaken. He argues that even sceptics have to concede that the act of doubting is itself a form of certainty, for a person who doubts is certain that he doubts. Here, then, is another certainty the certainty that I exist, for if I doubt, I must exist. Whatever else one can doubt, she cannot doubt that she doubts, or in Augustine's words *si fallor, sum* (if I am deceived, I am). To object as the sceptics did that a person could be asleep and only dreaming that he sees things or is aware of himself, does not seem to Augustine to be a good argument, for in reply he wrote: "whether he be asleep or awake he lives".

It is sometimes held that Augustine anticipated the Enlightenment philosopher, Descartes, in his arguments against scepticism. But, unlike Descartes, who formulates a similar argument which he uses as a foundation for his system of philosophy, Augustine is content merely to derive from the fact of doubt a refutation of the sceptic's basic premise that no knowledge is possible. Instead of proving the existence of external objects, Augustine refers to these objects chiefly in order to describe in some detail how the mind achieves knowledge in relation to things.

4.3.1 Knowledge and Sensation

When a person senses objects, he derives some knowledge from his act of sensation. But, according to Augustine, such sensory knowledge is at the lowest level of knowing. Still, the senses do give us a kind of knowledge. What puts sense knowledge at the lowest level is that it gives us the least amount of certainty.

What reduces the certainty of sense knowledge is two things: first that the objects of sense are always changing, and, second, that the organs of sense, change. For these two reasons, sensation varies from time to time and between persons. Something can taste sweet to one person and bitter to another, warm to one and cold to another. Still, Augustine believes that the senses are always accurate as such. It is unjust, he says, to expect or demand more from the senses than they can provide. For example, there is nothing wrong with the senses when the oar in the water appears bent to us. On the contrary, there would be something wrong if the oar appeared straight, since under these circumstances the oar ought to seem bent. The problem arises when we have to make a judgment about the actual condition of the oar. One would be deceived if she gives assent to the notion that the oar is in fact bent. To avoid this error, says Augustine, “Don't give assent to more than the fact of appearance, and you won't be deceived.'' Just how the senses give us knowledge Augustine indicates by analysing the nature of the mechanics of sensation.

In order to answer the question concerning what happens when we sense an object, Augustine turns to Plato's interpretation of the human being. A person is a union of body and soul. However, in describing how the soul attains knowledge, Augustine departs from the Platonic theory of recollection (see study unit 3.9.2). Knowledge is not an act of remembering, but an act of thinking guided by divine illumination (see 4.3.2 below). When we see an object, the soul (mind) fashions out of its own substance an image of the object. The object cannot make a physical “impression'' upon the mind the way a signet ring makes its mark on wax because the soul is spiritual, not material. Accordingly, it is the mind itself that produces the image. Moreover, when we sense an object, we not only see an image: we also make a judgment. We look at a person and say that she is beautiful. This act of judgment indicates that we not only see the person with our senses, but that we also compare her with a standard to which our minds have access in some realm other than the sensory realm.

Sensation, then, gives us some knowledge, but its chief characteristic is that it necessarily points beyond its objects. From the sensation of an oar we are moved to think about straightness and bentness and from the person we are led to think about beauty. Here the description of the human being becomes decisive again, since the description of the mechanics of sensation leads to a distinction between body and soul. Sensation requires the body insofar as some physical organ is required to sense things but, unlike animals, human beings not only sense things, they have some rational knowledge of them and make rational judgments about them. When a rational person makes such judgments, she is no longer dependent solely upon the senses, but has directed her mind to other objects such as Beauty and the truths of mathematics. A careful analysis shows, therefore, that the act of human sensation involves at least four elements, namely (i) the object sensed;(ii) the bodily organ upon which sensation depends; (iii) the activity of the mind in formulating an image of the object; and (iv) the immaterial object (for example, Beauty) which the mind uses in making a judgment about the sensed object. What emerges from this analysis is that there are two different kinds of objects that human beings encounter: the objects of the bodily senses and the objects of the mind. These different objects account for the different degrees of intellectual certainty, because a person will obtain a less reliable truth when her changeable sense organs are directed toward changing physical objects than when her mind contemplates eternal truths independently of her senses. Knowledge moves from the level of sensed things to the higher level of general truth. The highest level of knowledge is, for Augustine, the knowledge of God. Sensation plays its part in attaining this knowledge in that it directs the mind upward.

4.3.2 The Doctrine of Illumination

In his account of the relation between sensation and knowledge, Augustine is left with the problem of how the mind could make judgments involving eternal and necessary truths. Since the mind itself is a creature and is therefore finite and not perfect, how does it attain ultimate truth? Plato answered this question by his doctrine that knowledge is recollection, whereby the soul is made to remember what it once knew before it entered the body. Aristotle, on the other hand, argued that the eternal universal ideas (Forms) were abstracted by the intellect from particular things. Augustine accepted neither one of these solutions.

Augustine is not so much concerned with the origin as with our awareness of the certitude of some of our ideas. In a famous passage, he proclaims

I do not know in order to believe; I believe in order to know.

Rejecting recollection and some version of innate Forms, Augustine comes closer to Aristotle's notion of abstraction. He says that the human being is made in such a way that when the eye of his body sees an object, the mind can form an image of it provided the object is bathed in light. Similarly, the mind is capable of ``seeing'' eternal objects provided that they, too, are bathed in their own appropriate light. The nature of the intellectual mind was so made that, by being naturally subject to intelligible realities, according to the arrangement of God, it sees these truths such as mathematical truth in a certain light, just as the eye of the body sees the things all around it. In short, the human mind requires illumination if it is to “see” eternal and necessary truths.

If this analogy (comparison) or metaphor is to be taken seriously, the divine light must illuminate something that is already there! For if the divine light performs a function analogous to the function performed by sunlight, it must illuminate our imperfect ideas. This divine light is not so much the source of our ideas as much as it is the condition under which we recognise the quality of truth and eternity in our ideas. It is through divine illumination that we are able to recognise that certain ideas contain necessary and eternal truth. In so far as our human intellect operates under the influence of God's eternal ideas, it is possible for it to overcome the limitations of knowledge caused by the changeability of physical objects and the finitude of our minds.

4.3.3 God

Many great thinkers in the history of Western philosophy have held that the existence of God need not be a matter of faith. They have insisted, instead, that we can prove that there must be a Supreme Being. Anyone with a philosophical mind, even one who is deeply religious, is primarily interested in the nature of reality. Augustine belongs, in this respect at least, to the same traditions as Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, but with the important difference that whereas their interest in the nature of reality is mainly secular, his is primarily religious. It is not a desire to solve the problem of knowledge that leads him to investigate the nature of reality, nor is it the hope of providing a firm basis for social ethics. Augustine's motive is to find a satisfactory object of religious faith. What he finds, then, is a different kind of reality from his predecessors. Whereas Plato and Aristotle employ either a relatively neutral term like ``form'' or ``matter'' or an ethically coloured term like “the Good'' to refer to what they hold to be ultimate reality, Augustine uses a purely religious term, “God”.

Augustine is not interested in mere speculations about the existence of God. Since knowledge of the eternal ideas cannot originate in his limited or finite mind, Augustine concludes that unchangeable truth has its source in God. What leads to this conclusion is the similarity between the characteristics of some of his knowledge and the attributes of God for instance, that both is eternal and true. The existence of eternal truth means for Augustine the existence of the Eternal Truth, which is God. Augustine thus moves through various levels of personal experience and spiritual quest to what amounts to a “proof" of the existence of God.

Since God is Truth, God is in some sense within humankind, but since God is eternal, He also transcends humankind. But what else can we say by way of describing God? Taking the scriptural name for God given to Moses, namely “I Am That I Am", Augustine takes this to mean that God is being itself. As such He is the highest being, the “something than which nothing more excellent or sublime exists", a phrase that influenced Anselm to formulate his famous ontological argument (see study unit 4.4.1). As the highest being, God is perfect being which means that He is self- existent and unchangeable. His knowledge, wisdom, goodness, and power are all one and constitute His essence (nature). Moreover, Augustine thinks that the world of everyday things reflects the being and activity of God. Although the things we see are changeable in that they gradually cease to be, nevertheless in so far as they exist, they have a definite form, and this form is eternal and a reflection of God the source of all beings.

God as the source of being and truth and the one eternal reality becomes for Augustine the legitimate object both of thought and affection. From God there comes both enlightenment for the mind and strength for the will. Moreover, all other knowledge is possible because God is the standard for truth. All things are finite reflections of God's eternal thought even though God is not identical with, but transcends, the world. Because there exists this relation between God and the world, to know one is to know something of the other. That is why Augustine maintains that the person who knows most about God can understand most deeply the true nature of the world and, especially, the true nature and destiny of humankind.

These views represent Augustine's attempt to explain not only the possibility of knowledge, but also the nature of the world. If the world is God's creation, it must be something it cannot merely be appearance or illusion. On this point it may be helpful briefly to compare Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine. Both Augustine and Aristotle agree that Plato goes too far in denying reality to the world of sensation. But whereas Aristotle was impressed by the actuality of the sensory world, Augustine is impressed by the creativity of God. Hence, whereas Aristotle ended up with a unified world, conceived of as a group of individual substances, each an amalgam of form and matter (see study unit 3.10.3.1), Augustine is left with a divided world an active God confronting a passive creature.

One may conclude that Augustine does not so much solve Plato's problem of the relation between universal and particular as substitute another, and more difficult, one. Instead of the old puzzle of the relationship between appearance and reality, we now have a new one: the puzzle of the relationship between the creature and the creator.

4.3.4 The created world

Even though Augustine concludes that God is the most appropriate object of thought and affection, and that the physical, changeable world cannot provide humankind with true knowledge or spiritual peace, Augustine nevertheless pays considerable attention to the material world. After all, human life must be lived in the physical world, and one needs to know how to understand this world in order to relate oneself appropriately to it. Just how God is related to the world is explained by Augustine in his unique theory of creation.

4.3.4.1 Creatio ex nihilo (creation from nothing)

Augustine's distinctive doctrine is that God created all things ex nihilo, that is, out of nothing. This is in contrast to Plato's account of the world which is not “created", but is an extension of the Forms. In contrast, Augustine claims that the world is the product of God's free act, whereby He brings into being, out of nothing, all the things that make up the world. So, although all things owe their existence to God, there is a sharp distinction between God and the things He creates. Even though all things originate from God, He has created them to be changeable. Augustine needs to make this claim otherwise he would be suggesting, by implication, a limitation on God's free activity.

4.3.4.2 Rationes seminales (seminal principles)

Augustine is struck by the fact that the various species of things never produce new species. Horses produce horses, and flowers produce more flowers; at the human level, parents produce more children. What fascinates Augustine about all this was its relevance to the general question about *causality*. Although, in a sense, parents are the cause of children and flowers the cause of new flowers, still none of these things are able to introduce new forms into nature. In the created order, existing things can only help in the transformation of existing forms into completed beings. Augustine concludes from this fact that the causality behind the formation of all things is God's intelligence. In order to explain how things, animals and humankind produce anything, Augustine suggests that, in the act of creation, God implants seminal principles (*rationes seminales)* into matter, thereby setting into nature the potentiality for all species to emerge. These *rationes seminales* are the germs of things; they are invisible and have causal power. For instance, a rosebud is not yet actually a rose, but will develop into a rose given the presence of the necessary positive factors and the absence of negative or preventive conditions. Thus all species bear the invisible, potential power to become something they are not yet. Originally, God, in a single act of complete creation, furnished the germinating principles of all species.

4.3.5 Critical observations

From our perspective at the beginning of the 21st century, Augustine's views may appear to be such an intertwining of theology with philosophy that we may be puzzled as how to respond. If we see philosophy as a way of salvation, as legitimately dealing with such themes as the meaning of human existence, a Christian thinker can hardly be expected to suspend her convictions when reflecting on such themes. Thus, even if we are not ourselves Christians, we might find value in examining the ways in which epistemological and metaphysical positions are inspired by Christian beliefs and the desire to harmonise existing theories with these beliefs.

As noted earlier (4.3), Augustine's theories of knowledge and reality were not constructed as systems of thought so much as they were attempts to help Christian believers at a particularly difficult historical period. Augustine's own deepest needs and those of his culture were a desire for peace. By seeking peace in God, Augustine shows how difficult it is for serious thinkers to construct theories based upon the material conditions of the time. If the “peace of God'' did not dominate Plato's account of reality, it was because Plato was more interested in social and epistemological problems and felt more secure in his environment. In contrast, the imminent collapse of the Roman Empire and the conflicts within the early Christian church undoubtedly contributed towards the development of Augustine's philosophical theory. But there are certain positions within this theory that are in conflict with one another.

In his metaphysical analysis of God's nature, Augustine employs terms similar to, and in some cases derived from, those of Greek philosophy. But he also wishes to remain faithful to the biblical image of God as the divine Person (Father) in active contact with humankind. There are elements of overlap between these different conceptions of divine qualities. For example, the notion of goodness is shared by both the ultimate reality of metaphysics (at least, in Plato's thought) and the God of religion. Another notion which they hold in common is that final end at which all things consciously and unconsciously aim. But there remains a huge difference between the abstractions of metaphysics, reached by rational analysis, and the Person imaged by religious piety or discovered in religious intuition. What is an infinite personality? For instance, all the people we know interact socially with other people and social interaction, by its very nature, entails the idea of some sort of restriction or limitation of each of these people; in other words, the people we know are finite and have a “beginning and end” (otherwise, they would be unable to interact with each other). But an infinite person would act, not interact. The difficulty lies in trying to discover what God is like by extrapolating, from some finite and limited quality of which we do have experience, to the infinite version of this quality (of which we have no experience). Unfortunately, since the “infinite version'' of a finite quality would not be a version of that quality, but something utterly different from it, this does not help us understand God's nature at all. We can only conclude, therefore, that Augustine's attempt to connect the personal God of Christianity with the ultimate reality of Greek metaphysics fails.

Point to ponder
What value (if any) do you think there is in Augustine's concept of divine illumination?

Feedback: You might consider Augustine's problem of trying to discover truths that go beyond the limited powers of our senses. What is the status of universals? Are there such items of thought, or can we only know particulars? Just how you answer these questions will provide you with some preliminary ideas on the question. Of course, the merits (if any) of Augustine's “solution” in terms of divine illumination can be determined to some extent by comparing it with other “solutions” which you have previously encountered in this module.

Point to ponder
Do you think that Augustine's notion of seminal principles can be compared to modern theories of the evolution of species? Why? Why not?

Feedback: There is no “correct'' answer to this question. We want you to think about this issue.

Point to ponder
Do any of Plato's problems re-emerge in the theories of Augustine?

Feedback: Plato's attempt to explain how we can recognise truth when we encounter it and his solution (by means of recollection) can be said to re-emerge in a different way in Augustine's concept of divine illumination. Plato's account of the world of experience as a poor copy of the world of Forms has a parallel in Augustine's position that only by entering into dialogue (prayer) with God can we discover truth.

Point to ponder
Can the biblical idea of a personal God be satisfactorily connected to the notion of the (Form of) Absolute Goodness found in Plato's metaphysics?

Feedback: In his metaphysical analysis of God's nature, Augustine employs terms similar to, and in some cases derived from, those of Greek philosophy. But he also wishes to remain faithful to the biblical image of God as the divine Person (Father) in active contact with humankind. There are elements of overlap between these different conceptions of divine qualities. For example, the notion of goodness is shared by both the ultimate reality of metaphysics (Plato's Absolute Goodness) and the personal God of Biblical religion. Another notion which they hold in common is that final end at which all things consciously and unconsciously aim. But there remains a huge difference between the abstractions of metaphysics, reached by rational analysis, and the Person imaged by religious piety or discovered in religious intuition. What is an infinite personality? For instance, all the people we know interact socially with other people and social interaction entails the idea that each of these people is subject to some sort of restriction or limitation. But an infinite person, on the other hand, would act, not interact. The difficulty lies in trying to discover what God is like by extrapolating from some infinite and limited quality of which we have experience to the infinite version of this quality. Unfortunately, since the “infinite version" of a finite quality would not be a version of that quality, but something utterly different from it, this does not help us understand God's nature. The conclusion is that Augustine's attempt to connect the personal God of Christianity with the ultimate reality of Greek metaphysics fails.

4.3.6 Conclusion

As we said at the beginning of this study unit, Augustine's ideas played a significant role in Western thought. For example, Augustine had an extremely pessimistic view of humankind and, for more than a thousand years, Augustine's opinion of the miserable predicament of humankind was a basic conviction shared by everyone. Even those who oppose his views will find that in some ways they have come under his influence. To mention a trivial example, many people today mistrust an antiseptic that does not sting when applied to a wound. The belief that “it can't be good if it doesn't hurt" is Augustinian. More seriously, while his ideas remain a cornerstone of the Catholic Church, it was to him that the leading Protestant thinkers turned when they rebelled against Rome (in the 16th century). His views, although somewhat differently interpreted, also constitute the core of most Protestant sects. Importantly, it was through his writings that the letter and the spirit of Greek philosophy remained alive throughout the Dark Ages following the collapse of Rome. Augustinianism, then, is still very much alive today!

4.4 ANSELM AND THE PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

1. The physical world is always changing as are our physical senses. Therefore, unaided we are unable to reach any knowledge that is certain.
2. God provides physical light to illumine the world so that we can see. However, more importantly, through the divine illumination of our reason we are able to judge our perceptions (mental impressions) to be either true or false. Hence for Augustine, "believing is seeing."
3. God has implanted in all of realty the seminal principal, his "energy" that ensures that existence is possible and continues in all of its unique diversity. By analogy today we could see this seminal principal as the DNA molecule found in biological life.

St Anselm (1033-1109) was himself an Italian Augustinian whose fame rests on his belief that faith is prior to reason:

> *I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this I also believe - that unless I believed, I should not understand.*

After we have accepted on faith the revelations given through Scripture and through the Christian fathers (like Augustine), reason can fulfil its role of clarifying meanings and providing proofs. However, Anselm employed his powers of reason in order to establish, by rational argument, the existence of God. We shall now examine this position in some detail.

4.4.1 Anselm's ontological argument

In two famous works *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, Anselm developed various proofs for the existence of God:

1. According to his first argument, the goodness of things in this world must be caused and must therefore stem from one thing that is good, or from many things that are good. But if many causes have their goodness in common, it is because of this goodness that they cause good things; therefore, we must assume a common source. In either case, whether the cause be one or many, we are led to a single unitary source of all goodness. Since it is the source of all goodness, this source is not good because of something else, but is itself Goodness. God is Goodness itself, not something that possesses goodness.
2. Since whatever exists must have a cause and since an infinite regress of causes is impossible, there must either be one ultimate, non-finite cause or several causes. If there is one cause, we have encountered God. If there are several, then either they support each other mutually or they exist independently. But the former is impossible, for that which is supported cannot be the cause of that which supports it. But if there are several independent ultimate causes, each must exist through itself, and therefore they must share this common power. Now, since it is this common power that is the source of all else, there cannot be several causes but only one. God is not something that has this supreme power; he *is* this power.

Dissatisfied with his formulation of these proofs, Anselm finally developed his famous ontological proof (Stumpf & Abel 2002:105-108). When we are really thinking of something (and not merely uttering the associated verbal symbol), that thing is in our understanding. Of course, we need not understand that it exists, for we may be thinking of something which we believe does not exist (e.g. the unicorn), or we may be thinking of something of whose existence we are uncertain. But in any of these cases, if we are thinking of something, if we understand it, then it, and not something else, is in the understanding. This point applies to our thought of anything, including God. However, in the case of God, we are thinking of a unique thing, for we are thinking of the greatest thing conceivable, the being "than which nothing greater can be conceived" (Stumpf &Abel 2002:107).

Now if a being exists in the understanding alone, it cannot be the greatest conceivable thing, for a being that exists in reality as well as in the understanding would be greater.

Consequently, since God is the greatest being conceivable he must exist in reality as well as in our understanding. Or, to put it another way, if the greatest conceivable being exists in the understanding alone, then it is not the greatest conceivable being - a conclusion which is absurd.

4.4.2 Objections

On reflection, it may occur to you that Anselm's proof is open to objection on two points:

1. Do we in fact have an idea of an absolutely perfect being? This was the question posed by Anselm's contemporary, Gaunilo, who noted that the sceptic who is not convinced of God's existence would not grant Anselm's assumption that people have an idea of a most perfect being. To this Anselm could have replied that he was not trying to convince sceptics that God exists, but to provide Christians with a rational understanding of Christian truth ("I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand"). In any case, he would have maintained that he could prove that people have an idea of a perfect being. This proof is similar to Plato's position that we have ideas such as that of absolute (the Form of) equality. Anselm actually argues that we have various experiences of "degrees of perfection'' for instance, we experience some things as better or more beautiful than others. We can make this kind of relative judgment only because we have a standard of comparison: the idea of absolute perfection.
   It will be seen that the argument here turns on the question how can a finite mind transcend and reach an understanding of an infinite object? What a finite mind feels to be an intellectual grasp of an infinite object may be only an emotive response. One ought to remind oneself of the need to distinguish between emotive understanding and the kind of meaning needed for philosophical communication. So, although "most perfect being" has a powerful emotive meaning, has Anselm actually provided this phrase with of a meaning that enables us to discuss "the most perfect being'' philosophically and unemotionally?

   2. *Is existence indeed an added perfection?* That is, is a being that exists necessarily greater (more perfect) than one that does not exist? Allowing that people have an idea of a most perfect being, does it follow that a being corresponding to this idea must exist? Anselm's assumption is that existence is indeed an "added perfection." If existence is not an added perfection, there is no contradiction in allowing that the most perfect being exists only as an idea. Gaunilo's point is precisely this! If one wants to call existence a "quality" of existing things a property they possess (in the sense that colour is a property of coloured things) it is important to see that it is a different kind of quality or property. While one does add something to the nature of an uncoloured thing by colouring it, one does not add anything to the nature of a non-existent thing by bringing it into existence!

Points to ponder

Would you say that you know (in the strict sense of the word) that God exists, or would you prefer to say that you believe that God exists?
If you chose the former alternative, how do you know this?

If you answered in the affirmative to either of the alternatives above, what do you base your knowledge/faith upon?

Feedback: Philosophical enquiry about our ways of thinking about the existence of God is one of the most fundamental epistemological and metaphysical issues. The point of this enquiry is not to persuade any person to change their deepest convictions about this (or any other) matter, but rather to consider the reasons for upholding whatever beliefs and convictions one wishes to uphold. In this way, one sharpens one's critical faculties, while incidentally engaging in reflection upon matters which may deeply affect one's outlook on life. You may need to turn back to the discussion in section 2.9.4, on how to understand the relationship between knowledge, truth, belief, and justification (in Plato's thinking).

Point to ponder
How does Anselm proceed from the concept of God to prove that God exists in reality?

4.4.3 Conclusion

What is significant about Anselm's attempt to prove God's existence using reason alone is that it demonstrates the possibility of a distinct contrast between faith and reason. Questioning such proofs inevitably raises issues about the relation between faith and reason. Even in an age of faith, human beings could not get on without using their reason. Clearly, they need to know where reason is appropriately used and where it should be set aside. They need a logical, decision process that shows what a valid proof is. If this decision process discloses that certain articles of the Christian faith cannot be proved, then they need a theological doctrine that shows how faith and reason are related at the point where reason leaves off and faith takes over. So Anselm's failed attempt helped clear the ground for such an attempt by the greatest of all medieval philosophers St Thomas Aquinas.

4.5 THOMAS AQUINAS

1. By observing the natural world and the principles operative in it, one can argue, inductively and deductively, towards a proof of God's existence.
2. All reality is in motion (process) there must have been a force or energy that initiated the original motion. (e.g., if you saw a ball rolling across the floor, you would naturally assume somebody initially pushed the ball.)
3. Everything that exists has a cause (the entity that brought it into existence). A first cause for everything must exist (e.g., if I found a cell phone on the street, I would assume that somewhere there must exist a cell phone manufacturer).
4. All things in that natural world appear to be impermanent (possible), they exist for a while then die. However they then “start up” or grow again. This implies that at the heart of reality is an eternal (necessary) creative power that sustains things in existence and that was always there, this must be God. (e.g., a tree lives and dies but then the seeds from it sprout new trees).
5. We are able to make valid judgements and comparisons only because in reality everything that exists has a maximum state. So for example, by analogy, we recognise that a tear drop is a minute quantity of salt water because we know that the ocean is a vast quantity of salt water. By implication we only can make sense of our present transient existence because an infinitely larger existence (God) frames our present reality.

6. Everything in existence appears to have an inbuilt orientation to fulfil a specific purpose and not another. This “purposeful intelligence” must have been implanted by another higher being (God).
   For example in a modern day business each employee carries out a specific job function. This we know has occurred because the person has been given this job description by a CEO or manager who is coordinating their functions.

The great achievement of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is that he brings together into a formidable synthesis the insights of classical philosophy and Christian theology. More specifically, Aquinas “Christianises” the philosophy of Aristotle. Augustine, as we saw, formulated an earlier synthesis of philosophy and theology by combining the Christian faith with elements of Plato's thought. Both medieval philosophers wrestle with the twin problems of the relationship between faith and reason, as well as with the problem of universals. Through his efforts, Aquinas perfected the “scholastic method”. Scholastic philosophy is an attempt to put together a coherent system of traditional thought, rather than a pursuit of genuinely novel forms of insight. It relies on strict logical deduction and finds expression in intricate systems of thought in which theological considerations dominate philosophical ones. Aquinas's major works are *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica.* These works consist of huge, logically organised structures of assertions (propositions) in which the place of every proposition is determined by its logical relations to all the others to those on which it depends and to those that depend on it. *Summa Theologica* can, in fact, be taken as a reflection at the level of thought of a structured, ordered hierarchy of matter and form, which, following Aristotle (see study unit 3.10.3.1), is what Aquinas takes the whole universe to be.

The biggest difference between earlier medieval philosophers and Aquinas is that, whereas his predecessors all maintain that faith and reason do not conflict, none of these assertions could be regarded as convincing as long as various biblical authorities could be quoted for or against the assertion that faith and reason are not in conflict. Aquinas develops a method that actually resolved these contradictions, thereby providing “proof" that faith and reason do not conflict with each other.

4.5.1 Proofs for God's existence

That God exists is, of course, an article of faith; but it is also, Aquinas holds, a proposition capable of proof by natural reason. He offers, in all, five proofs for God's existence (Stumpf & Abel 2002: 112-114). In each, Aquinas starts with some particular occurrence (for example, some fact of experience, like motion) and argues that, but for such-and-such an attribute of the divine nature, this occurrence would never have occurred. Thus Aquinas's proofs have a causal form the changes that we observe occurring can only have God for their cause. We shall next consider each of these proofs in turn, together with certain clarifying and critical comments.

4.5.1.1 Proof from motion

Aquinas argues that “whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another". Any motion must ultimately go back to a first mover a mover that imparts motion to other things, but is not itself in motion (compare study unit 2.10.3.2) for if it were in motion it would need a mover. Since there evidently are things in motion, there must be “a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God” (Stumpf & Abel 2002:113).

4.5.1.2 Proof from efficient causality

Aquinas's second proof is based on the notion of efficient causality. An efficient cause is an agent, a maker, something that brings something else into being. Just as there cannot be an infinite series of movers (proof from motion), so there cannot be an infinite series of efficient causes. There must be a first efficient cause, which brings about effects but is not, itself, an effect.

No matter how many caused causes there are in a series, there must be an uncaused cause (a first cause) that is responsible for the chain of causality that runs through the whole series. To this cause, “everyone gives the name of God” (Stumpf & Abel 2002:113).

4.5.1.3 Proof from possibility and necessity

The third way to prove God's existence begins with Aquinas drawing a distinction between possible beings and necessary beings. In nature we find that it is possible for things to be and not to be. Such things are possible or contingent because they do not always exist. For example, there was a time when a tree did not exist; it exists, and finally it goes out of existence. For this reason, something that is possible which cannot-be, in fact “at one time is not”. But if there was a time when nothing existed, then nothing could start to be, and even now there would be nothing in existence, “because that which does not exist begins to exist only through something already existing” (Stumpf & Abel 2002: 113). But since our experience clearly shows us that things do exist, this must mean that not all beings are merely possible. Aquinas (Stumpf & Abel 2002:113) concludes from this that there must be something the existence of which is necessary ...This all men speak of as God.

To these three proofs it is possible to reply that no one doubts that motion occurs, that events have causes, that there is an order in the world, and that there are degrees of temperature, and so on. Aquinas's position is that the only way to account for such facts is through the hypothesis that God exists and that these are His effects. With respect to his first proof, the question we can ask Aquinas is whether motion can be accounted for without the assumption of a first unmoved mover. Many people, undoubtedly, will initially agree with Aquinas that the whole world process must have begun by an initial movement. But both ancient materialists (such as those who proposed the concept of atoms as basic constituents of matter) and modern ones have denied both the intelligibility and the need for a first cause. Their position is that, no matter how far back in time one goes, one can always find a cause for any specific movement. But this cause is itself some other movement of the same kind. As long as there is an infinite series of motions, any particular motion can be explained by other motions. Hence the need for a first cause to explain the occurrence of motion does not arise.

The question, however, is whether such an infinite series of motions (or causes) is conceivable. Aquinas denies that it is. In reply, the series of positive numbers 1, 2, 3, and so on could be mentioned. It is clear that this series does not have a last term, since after any number n, however large; there is another number n + 1. Similarly, it could be maintained that, before any time t, however remote in the past, there was an earlier time t-1, in which motion was occurring. If there is no greatest positive number, why need there be any first motion? Why, as a matter of fact, if the notion of a greatest positive number is really a contradiction in terms, is not the same true of the notion of a first, unmoved mover? Aquinas begins by arguing that every event must have a cause, and since he denies that an infinite series is possible, he concludes that there must be a first cause. But since a first cause is uncaused, his conclusion contradicts his original contention that every event has a cause.

But this analysis of Aquinas's position is over simple. He agrees with the natural scientists that it is impossible to explain the totality of events in the same way we explain particular events. But he differs from the scientists in that he insists that some other kind of account of the totality of events can be given. Whereas scientists are chiefly concerned with explaining particular events and are totally uninterested in the totality of events (if they even find such a concept intelligible), Aquinas has the kind of mind that is deeply interested in such totalities. Aquinas saw that, if any account of such an idea is to be possible, such an account must be in terms other than those in which we explain parts. His name for these other terms was “God".
The basic difference in outlook between Aquinas and the scientists reflects the gulf between the religious and the scientific outlook a radical parting of the ways.
This often happens in philosophical inquiry, since the function of philosophical analysis is not so much to find the answers as it is to make clear what the alternative answers are!

4.5.1.4 Proof from the degrees of perfection

In our experience we find that some beings are more and some less good, true, and noble. But these and other ways of comparing things are possible only because things resemble, in their different ways, something that is the maximum. In other words, there must be something that is truest, noblest, and best. Aquinas argues that the maximum in any category (genus) is the cause of everything in that category. From this Aquinas concludes that “there must be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God” (Stumpf & Abel 2002:114).

Aquinas's proof from the degrees of perfection also appeals to an empirical fact the fact that differences of degree exist. He argues that such differences can be accounted for only on the hypothesis of an objective standard. It is meaningless to talk about “more" or “less" except in terms of a norm from which these are deviations, and this norm, this absolute criterion, is God. But although we cannot talk about “more" or “less" without some sort of standard, it does not follow that this standard must be absolutely objective. The argument only proves the existence of an absolutely objective criterion if we assume an absolutely objective “more" and an absolutely objective “less”, and this is precisely the point at issue. In other words, Aquinas's argument is based on the unproven assumption he then claims to prove.

This criticism can also be stated in terms of the distinction that has been drawn between “accounts inside the system" and “accounts of the system as a whole". Comparisons inside the system are meaningful, but conclusions drawn from them are always relative to the area of the system included in the account. If we want to arrive at a more definitive comparison we can take a larger part of the system into account. Since the system is indefinitely large, it is always possible for us to get a more definitive comparison than the one we have at the moment, however definitive this comparison may be. That is, we can always find another criterion for checking our present criterion of “more” and “less”, and all these criteria are within the system as a whole. Thus, for ordinary purposes of checking our conclusions up to any degree of precision we choose, we do not need an absolute criterion at all. On the other hand, if we want an absolutely objective criterion of “more” or “less”, we must go outside the system to a consideration of totality and, in doing so, we are then committed to giving a different kind of account.

4.5.1.5 Proof from the governance of the world

Aquinas's final proof is based on the premise that, if something acts in order to achieve a goal, there must be a being with the intelligence to know what the goal is and how to attain it. So while a natural body such as a tree is not itself intelligent, its goal-seeking activities must be caused by an intelligent governor. This governor who directs all unintelligent natural things to act purposefully is God. The proof from the governance of the world is sometimes referred to as the proof from teleology, that is, the purposefulness of all existence. What was said about the proof from the degrees of perfection above can also be said about Aquinas's fifth proof from the governance of the world.

Arguments that are valid about governance inside the system are not relevant to the governance of the system as a whole. But here a prior point must be dealt with.

Does the argument about governance really hold even with respect to events inside the system? The ends to which material things appear to be aiming may, in fact, be only projections of our human hopes and fears. If this is so, it is unnecessary to assume “the existence of an intelligence which directs them to their end”, that is, God. Consider, for instance, the temperature range of this planet. Temperatures very much colder or very much hotter than those that occur on earth would make life as we know it impossible. Aquinas could have argued that, since we cannot suppose that the temperature itself has willed to adjust itself to our needs, we must conclude that it was directed to this good end by a divine intelligence. But this conclusion does not follow. First, this temperature range is ``best'' from our point of view merely because we have an interest in the continuation of the human race a matter in which we are, after all, somewhat prejudiced witnesses! And, second, we know that all sorts of temperature ranges exist on other planets. This planet happens to be one that permits life like ours. What seems to be design may, in fact, be coincidence? To take an example: the card game of bridge. If we were dealt a straight suit of spades on the first and only occasion anybody anywhere ever played bridge, we might regard this “good thing” as evidence of purpose on somebody's part. But when we know that millions upon millions hands of bridge are being played all round the world, it should not surprise us that this combination is sometimes dealt. That it happens to be dealt to us is obviously the “best” for us, but we do not attribute it to a kindly card-playing providence who wants us to win rather than other bridge players!

To summarise this long discussion, it can be said that if Aquinas's proofs appear to be valid, he has so far established the existence of (1) moved mover who is (2) the first cause of all that is, (3) an absolutely necessary being, (4) the final criterion of value, and (5) the governor and designer of the universe. But are they valid? This depends on whether the empirical facts to which they appeal can be accounted for in some way other than by tracing their causes back to God's activity. And to this question, as we have seen, it is impossible to give a simple answer. Whether or not we think the empirical facts can be accounted for in some other way will depend on how we define “account” and whether we are satisfied with the kind of account that can be given of parts inside systems.

Point to ponder
Are there similarities between Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God and Aquinas's proof from the degrees of perfection (the fourth way)?

Feedback: There clearly are similarities, as can be demonstrated by direct comparison of the views of the two philosophers which are found in both the study guide and in the actual formulations of the philosophers.

Point to ponder
Do you agree with Aquinas that there cannot be an infinite series of movers or of efficient causes, but there must be a first mover and a first efficient cause?

Feedback: This is a question of evaluating the opposing lines of analysis taken by the scientific (piecemeal) approach as opposed to the religious (totalising) approach. As pointed out, the basic difference in outlook between Aquinas and the scientists reflects a radical parting of the ways. This often happens in philosophical inquiry, since the function of philosophical analysis is not so much to find the answers as it is to make clear what the alternative answers are! Here you are encouraged to formulate your own response to the question in terms of these alternatives
Points to ponder
Do you think that a cogent (that is, compelling convincing) proof for the existence of God is needed to support a person's religious faith?
Which arguments for or against the existence of God do you find most persuasive?

4.5.2 The physical world

We now turn from Creator to creature, from God to the universe of things. For Plato and Aristotle, an account of God's nature was intended merely as an aid to under- standing nature. For Aquinas, the study of nature is a part of theology. For him, the chief task of the scientist is to provide an adequate interpretation of the account of creation given in Genesis (thereby removing any occasion for scepticism) and to reconcile Aristotle's physics with this biblical account.

According to Aquinas, all the many movements that can be observed in the universe the behaviour patterns of living creatures or the motion of material objects are nothing but the ways in which all these things, each in its own way, seeks God. Aristotle had said much the same thing, but without the religious overtones: everything seeks its good and its fulfilment.
The Aristotelian universe that Aquinas accepted is a hierarchy of individual substances in which the place of each substance is determined by its degree of actuality. At the bottom of the hierarchy, being and reality fade into nothingness into the mere possibility of being something. At the top of the hierarchy is God, who is pure actuality, complete being, perfect fulfilment. No other substance is wholly actual, but every substance is actual to the extent that it is at all. In so far as it is already something, it has form; in so far as there is something about it that might be but is not yet, it is matter. Everything has in it a drive to become, in so far as it may, fully and actually all that it might be. Thus all movement and change is a coming-to-be, a fulfilment of something's nature.

For example, consider some substance A, which is completed by B. B is A's good. Since B is what A, in so far as A is able, aims at, it can be said that B is A's end. Again, since A's recognition of B's goodness is what moves A to act, it can be said that B is the cause of A's action. Thus the problem of a duality of goods can be re- stated in causal terms:
How can there be two causes for A's behaviour B and God?

If we are forced to say that either B or God is the cause of A's behaviour, and if we adopt the first alternative, we end in a completely secular philosophy: B is A's cause; C is B's; D is C's; and so on. We have a godless universe in which, because God is inactive, knowledge of reality does not depend in any way on the divine nature. If, on the other hand, we adopt the second alternative, we have to conclude that changes on earth are the direct products of divine activity.

We have to say, for instance, not that fire causes heat, as it certainly seems to be, but that “God causes heat in the presence of fire.” Things, that is to say, are not real, nor are their apparent causal activity real. They are merely the symbols of a reality separate from them and above them.

From Aquinas's point of view, there is one major objection to the latter alternative. If the natural world is not real, God's creative act and Christ's incarnation are both illusions, and God is not a transcendent being since there is nothing for His nature to transcend.
This is why he adopted the concept of a dual causality wherein God's causality is considered to be compatible with causality among the things of the world. An example will (hopefully) clarify this concept of Aquinas.

When Macbeth (in Shakespeare's play) cries, “Out, out, brief candle!” he is responding to the news of his wife's death. Word of this death, brought by the doctor, might therefore be said to be the “cause” of the exclamation. But in a larger sense, the cause of Macbeth's exclamation is his ambition and Duncan's assassination and the knocking at the gate and the murder of Banquo and the flight of Macduff indeed, the whole play. So it is the play as a whole that explains any particular part of it for instance, this exclamation. Likewise, Aquinas takes the view that things can be understood as causing other things to react in certain ways, but if one is looking for a larger overall explanation of the events, one will need to refer to God's purpose in willing nature to take the form that it does.

4.5.2.1 Theology and the sciences

The conception of dual causality, described above, determines Aquinas's conception of the relation that holds between theology and the other sciences. In a purposefully structured universe, all scientific knowledge is teleological (oriented towards an ultimate end) in character. Since all things aim at ends, the movements they make are efforts to realise these ends. Hence, if we want to understand some particular object's behaviour, we must ask to what end it is moving. Every science is, as such, the knowledge of ends. The particular sciences are devoted to various limited ends. But since theology is the science of God, and since God is the supreme end that all things seek, all the particular sciences are “perfected” by theology. Physics, psychology, botany, and all the other particular sciences give us true knowledge, but only about relative ends. Therefore, they all require supplementation by theology, which gives us knowledge about the perfect and complete end.

Point to ponder
How does Aquinas's conception of the workings of nature reflect his understanding of the role of theology?

Feedback: In his conception of dual causality Aquinas tries to show how understanding the workings of nature in sciences such as physics, psychology, botany, and so on ultimately depends on theological presuppositions.
In a purposefully structured universe, all scientific knowledge is teleological (oriented towards an ultimate end) in character. Since all things aim at ends, the movements they make are efforts to realise these ends. Hence, if we want to understand some particular object's behaviour, we must ask to what end it is moving. Every science is, as such, the knowledge of ends. The particular sciences are devoted to various limited ends.

But since theology is the science of God, and since God is the supreme end that all things seek, all the particular sciences are “perfected” by theology. Physics, psychology, botany, and all the other particular sciences give us true knowledge, but only about relative ends. Therefore, they all require supplementation by theology, which gives us knowledge about the perfect and complete end.

4.6 CONCLUSION

We have examined two major concerns of Aquinas that exercised a lasting influence on the course of philosophy. His proofs for the existence of God show the basic difference in orientation between the religious perspective and the common scientific outlook.
As an exercise in philosophical analysis, our critical clarification of his position stands on its own, and is intended to neither undermine nor support either worldview.

The reason for exploring Aquinas's view of nature was not so much to set his position on this topic apart from his notion of God, as to show how his conception of God is intimately connected to his view of nature. By showing this interrelationship between God and nature, in terms of Aquinas's concept of causality, we have attempted to demonstrate, to you, the dominant role that theology played in medieval philosophy.

Looking back upon medieval philosophy from our current vantage point, we may find it difficult to sympathise with this premodern perspective. However, let us not be too hasty. A little reflection will reveal the extent to which, today, we struggle with the fragmentation of experience that has resulted from the scientific worldview. Although Augustine and Aquinas's attempts to construct an all- embracing worldview seem Utopian to us, we have a problem: how can we replace cultural pluralism with some vision of cultural unity that will include all members of the human race? Medieval philosophy in general and the thought of Thomas Aquinas in particular achieved a level of cultural integration that has been absent from Western philosophy until the present day. Significantly, while this state of affairs may be accepted by many today, it is accepted with a measure of resignation and sadness.

4.7 Summary

To repeat what we indicated at the end of the previous study unit: the intention behind this study unit is to encourage you to reflect on the bases of your own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge claims. In this study unit we continued our examination of epistemology and metaphysics by investigating philosophy in the middle Ages (the medieval period); this period dates from the time of Augustine until the systematic work of Aquinas. While Augustine's synthesis of Plato with certain biblical doctrines helped preserve the influence of platonic philosophy in the “Dark Ages” after the fall of Rome, it was Aquinas who showed how the ideas of that other great classical Greek philosopher, Aristotle, could be used to re-establish and consolidate the development of Western cultural thought at a time when Western society lagged behind other cultures. The careful analyses of the existence of God suggested by Anselm and Aquinas and the lively debate on this matter that these two men inspired laid the foundation for the next major period in the history of philosophy: the Enlightenment period (often, somewhat oddly, referred to as “modern” philosophy).

4.8 Self-Assessment Questions

1. Explain the role of the five senses in attaining knowledge in Augustine's epistemology.

2. Comment on Augustine's concept of divine illumination in relation to Plato's notion of anamnesis and Aristotle's conception of the relation between universal and particular
3. Explain how Augustine's view of the role of God represents his attempt to explain not only the possibility of knowledge, but also the nature of the world.

4. What implications can you see in Augustine's doctrine that God created all things ex nihilo, out of nothing?

5. What criticisms do you personally have of Augustine's theories of knowledge and reality?

6. Do you agree with Anselm that “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand"? Give reasons for your position.

7. Explain and evaluate Gaunilo's objections to Anselm's proof for the existence of God.

8. Outline Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God.

9. Do you think that Aquinas succeeded in proving the existence of God? Give reasons by referring to the various objections levelled against Aquinas's views.

10. Explain Aquinas's conception of dual causality.

11. Do you consider Aquinas's metaphysical views to be an “improvement” of Aristotle`s? Give reasons.
12. Do you think there is any value in studying medieval philosophy?

5 STUDY UNIT 4: GREEKS II – PLATO AND ARISTOTLE’S THEORETICAL ETHICS

Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- describe what ethics is
- list and describe the major questions and themes in Western ethical theory
- give a critical account of Socrates's ethical theory
- outline and critically evaluate Plato's conception of ethics
- explain and evaluate Aristotle's approach to ethics

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 What is ethics?

Ethical theory is concerned, primarily, with the question of what constitutes (morally) right and wrong action. More specifically, it inquiries into the theoretical possibility of establishing the principles, assumptions and values that inform our moral conduct. As a theoretical enquiry into the nature of right and wrong action, the ethical theorist seeks to discover the normative or regulative basis of our moral actions by examining our conception of moral duty and obligation, our sense of right and wrong and, in certain instances, our sense of good and evil.

Even though the discipline of ethics is primarily of a theoretical nature, it would be misleading to suppose that it is one of those fields of philosophical enquiry that is “up in the clouds". On the contrary, ethics seeks to establish the principles, values and assumptions that are implicitly presupposed in our ordinary, everyday moral life. Such principles then become the basis for evaluating our moral experience. In the final analysis, it is only to the extent that such principles and assumptions can be shown to have a bearing on our ordinary moral experience that we are willing to be persuaded.
It is for this reason that certain ethicists are of the opinion that there is more to ethics than simply providing a normative basis for our notions of right and wrong. Such ethicists claim that the question of right and wrong cannot be separated from questions of human goodness or the “good life".
This focus on the “good life" emphasises the concrete nature of ethics as a discipline which confronts the individual in his or her every day, existential situation as a “real” person faced with various moral dilemmas which are not always easy to solve. From this perspective one can understand why the question of the “good life" has invariably been linked with questions regarding the “true" purpose of human existence.

According to this approach, the ethical questions of right and wrong are determined by our view of life. And, if such a view is something along the lines of: “human beings are rational beings", or, “we (Christians) are all God's children", the situation can become oppressive for those who do not share our particular worldview. It is very easy to assume that rationality or reasonableness means the same thing to all people. For certain people, it is irrational (because it is immoral) under any circumstances to take another person's life, because, they argue, life is sacred. In this example we can clearly see that the sense of rationality regarding conduct has its roots in the values that inform people's lives. The challenge for the ethical theorist lies in determining how to proceed in a multicultural society such as ours, where our sense of right and wrong is rooted in different cultural traditions. Are moral questions ultimately reducible to the cultural values and traditions that inform them, or can we still provide a more universal basis for our moral actions? These are just a few of the questions that we are currently faced within the field of ethical theory.

We often tend to confuse the business of the ethical theorist with that of the moralist. It is therefore important to bear in mind that the moralist is primarily concerned with the quality of moral life in his or her community. This concern usually translates into various forms of exhortation, censure, persuasion and prescription, aimed at changing people's lives in accordance with the moralist's set of beliefs and system of values.

The ethical theorist, on the other hand, is more concerned with providing standards for action based on a critical examination and evaluation of the underlying assumptions and principles governing our present moral lives. Thus the ethical theorist is not really concerned with converting others to a particular point of view; instead, she is primarily concerned with trying to understand “why we do the things that we do”.

5.2 What Are The Major Questions And Themes In Western Ethical Theory?

5.2.1 The Greek tradition: what is the highest Good?

Within the Greek tradition, the central focus is the question of the highest Good (or moral excellence or perfection). The possibility of moral perfection is linked to the possibility of establishing the appropriate political institutions for the pursuit of the highest Good. From the Greek perspective, ethics and politics are inseparable.

Within ancient Greek culture, ethics was conceptualised as relating to the “good life", which was mainly associated with the nature and pursuit of human happiness.

Aristotle, for example, was of the opinion that ethics, which focuses on the question “How should I live?", cannot be approached independently of the question of the highest Good, or that which is the noblest and most worthy purpose of human existence.
For Aristotle, human happiness is the highest Good, and the ethical question of “How should I live?" cannot be divorced from the possibility of living a life aimed at attaining happiness of the highest intellectual or spiritual order.
On the Aristotelian account, our understanding of the good life determines how we should live, and the pursuit of the highest Good in accordance with the highest faculty in human beings: the faculty of reason. The pursuit of happiness is therefore a rational activity made possible by the rational “nature of human beings".

5.2.2 Ethics in the Judeo-Christian tradition: how is moral conduct to be defined?

The Christian thinker adds to the Greek tradition the notion of love, defined in terms of compassion and sensitivity to suffering. But, in the Christian tradition, unlike the Greek tradition, there is a clear separation between the ethical and political. The supremacy of the authority of the church over the authority of the state, resulting from a Christian worldview, has meant that the question of ethics and morality has invariably been connected with Christian values.
In the Judeo-Christian tradition, “God" is the central figure. Thus ethical life within this tradition is based on such principles as righteousness before God, love of God and love of one's neighbour. Saint Augustine (354-430 CE), for example, bases his ethical teachings on the Christian creed as set forth in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, where God is characterised as the omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent Creator of humankind and universe. The human being, who is situated (spiritually) somewhere between the angels and the “lower" forms of life, is blessed with a free will, and therefore with the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. According to Augustine, the central purpose of life is love.

Thomas Aquinas, like Augustine, has a vertical view of life in which God who is believed to be in heaven is in direct control of human beings who are bound to the earth. According to Aquinas, our ultimate destiny as human beings is to be united with God in heaven. He (Aquinas) argues that, through philosophical reflection on our human nature, we can understand ourselves on certain moral laws that are part of us.

For Aquinas, these moral laws are based on inclinations which are an integral part of our nature. He therefore calls his ethical theory “natural law".

5.2.3 Ethics in the modern tradition: how is moral conduct to be defined?

5.2.3.1 Consequentialist ethics

In terms of this approach, the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the value of its consequences. Utilitarianism, conceived of as right action insofar as it contributes to the general happiness of the greatest majority of people, is the most popular version of consequentialist ethics. This approach was made popular by the British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73). The utilitarian claims that right action must be understood in terms of human good or wellbeing, which is conceptualised as pleasure, desire-satisfaction or, more generally, happiness. Right action is accordingly defined as action that leads to the greatest balance of happiness or pleasure over pain.

5.2.3.2 Non-consequentialist or deontological ethics

According to this approach, the rightness of an action is not determined on the basis of the possible value of its consequences, but on the basis of the value or moral significance of the action itself. In contrast to the consequentialist, whose actions are aimed at bringing about the best state of affairs (happiness), the deontologist is more inclined to concentrate on actions that are generally considered to be wrong for example, promise-breaking.
This approach challenges the consequentialist approach in that it cannot accept that the rightness of an action is determined by the wellbeing of the majority. Thus the deontologist claims that it is wrong to let one innocent person die so that two or more persons may live, since the act of murder in itself is wrong. The deontological approach to ethics is associated with the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

5.3 SOCRATES (470-399 BC)

Socrates was born in 470 BCE in the Greek capital, Athens. His beliefs are known only through the writings of his pupils Plato and Xenophon (see study unit 2). He was indicted for impiety and corruption of youth and was sentenced to death. In 399 BCE, at the age of 71, Socrates drank the deadly hemlock (poison) in compliance with the death sentence imposed by the court.

Socrates is one of the most significant, but also one of the most enigmatic, figures in the history of philosophical thought. His significance stems from the fact that he has influenced the thought of one of the greatest philosophers of all time: Plato. As we have already pointed out, Socrates never wrote anything so we have to rely on the reconstruction of thinkers such as Plato for an account of the Socratic teaching. In the Dialogues written by Plato (with the exception of The Laws), Socrates is the main character. This situation presents us with the problem of not really being able to identify and distinguish the thinking of the historical Socrates within the writings of Plato, simply because we don't really know where Socrates ends and Plato begins. What we do associate with Socrates, however, is the question-and-answer method of philosophising (dialect) which he used in conjunction with his pretence of ignorance (known as Socratic irony). This pretence of ignorance enabled him to question the knowledge of others (usually experts in their field) on the traditional virtues of Greek culture: piety *(Euthyphro),* temperance *(Charmides),* and friendship *(Lysis).*

It was Socrates's belief in the objective existence of these virtues, the knowledge of which was, in principle, attainable within a process of rational discourse, that set him in conflict with the thoughts of one of the most celebrated thinkers of the 5th century BCE, Protagaros (490-420 BC), who claimed that “man is the measure of all things''. This teaching introduced a relativistic approach to ethics, and the question of right and wrong ultimately assumed an individualistic approach in which virtue was no longer a subject of rational inquiry, but a matter of individual taste or preference.

In his search for a more objective and universal basis for ethics, Socrates turned away from the naturalistic speculation of his predecessors, such as Thales (6th century BC), Heraclitus (500 BC) and Parmenides (480 BC), whose primary concern was to establish the ultimate nature of reality. More significant for Socrates instead was the teaching of Pythagoras (550-500 BC) from whom he appropriated the religious notion of “the soul'' or “the mind'' as a rational faculty which attests to the uniqueness of the human being. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that we learn from Socrates that the highest duty of the individual resides in the “improvement of the soul'', which takes the form of a process of rational enquiry, argumentation, and discourse because, for Socrates “the unexamined life is not worth living”.

For Socrates, virtue is teachable, hence his credo “Virtue is knowledge'', but part of the teaching process is to uncover the problematic nature of the principles and assumptions on which our moral actions are based.
Even though Socrates's search for universal standards did not produce the desired results (given his self-professed “philosophy of ignorance''), he did provide his contemporaries with a new sense of purpose guided by the principles of rational conversation and enquiry. His endless questioning came at a time when Athens was in need of political stability, hence the charges of corruption brought against him. Socrates's inability to provide the answers to the questions about the general principles of ethics, together with the underlying belief that the ethical theorist must provide a rational basis for the principles of moral conduct, provided the impetus for Plato to make his contribution to the Greek tradition of ethics. Unlike Socrates, who depended on his “inner voice” or “divine sign'' when he could not provide a rational account of ethical principles from a universal perspective, Plato believed that the question of ethics (the question of right and wrong) cannot be separated from the political question of justice.

Point to Ponder

Consider the following extract about Jesus's crucifixion and explain the similarities between the trial of Jesus and the trial of Socrates.

A physician testifies about the crucifixion “After the arrest in the middle of the night, Jesus was next brought before the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas, the High Priest; it is here that the first physical trauma was inflicted on him. A soldier struck Jesus across the face for remaining silent when questioned by Caiaphas. The palace guards then blindfolded him and mockingly taunted him to identify them as they each passed by, spat upon him, and struck him in the face. In the early morning, battered and bruised, dehydrated, and exhausted from a sleepless night, Jesus is taken across the Praetorium of the Fortress Antonia, the seat of government of the Procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate. You are, of course, familiar with Pilate's action in attempting to pass responsibility to Herod Antipas ... It was in response to the cries of the mob that Pilate ordered Bar-Abbas to be released and condemned Jesus to the scourging and crucifixion.'' (By Dr CT Davis, Founder and President of the Excellent Trinity Christian School in Mesa Arizona) The Review of the NEWS, April 14, 1976.

Feedback: Socrates, like Jesus, was accused of corrupting others and thus threatening the state. His method of questioning his opponents in the search for truth earned him enemies in the ruling elite and this led to the accusations made against him. The way in which Socrates helped a slave boy to recover his knowledge of geometry led to the charge that Socrates corrupted the Athenian youth. All these accusations, none of which could be proved, led to Socrates's trial and death. As the extract shows, like Socrates, Jesus was given no real opportunity to defend himself.
As in the case of Socrates, Jesus's execution was orchestrated by a group of powerful people who wanted to see him dead. And, like Socrates, Jesus was not given a proper trial. Socrates was given the option of ceasing to do philosophy or face the death sentence. He showed his commitment to what he was doing by choosing death. In the same way, Jesus showed his commitment to his message for humankind by choosing death rather than asking for pardon.

Further Reading: Plato. 1980. **Apology.** Plato. 1972. **Phaedo.**

5.4 PLATO (428-347 BC)

Plato was born into one of the most successful and distinguished of Athenian families, and this gave him the opportunity to thoroughly absorb Athenian culture of the time. There is a belief that his early training must have included ingredients of Athenian culture in the arts, politics, and philosophy.
Plato's ethical system takes the form of an enquiry into the nature of the “highest Good". Unlike his mentor Socrates, for whom ethical enquiry takes the form of an attempt to provide definitions of the various Greek virtues (such as piety, courage, and friendship), Plato goes one step further in that he seeks to establish the common basis for all such virtues. He refers to this common basis as the “highest Good". Plato's concern with the “highest Good" represents an attempt to overcome the Socratic position of universal ignorance concerning the essential nature of human goodness.

You will remember that Socrates's position is based on the assumption that, while we may be able to recognise certain moral qualities in others, as long as we lack conceptual clarity on the essential nature of such qualities, we cannot really have knowledge of human goodness as such. Hence the Socratic creed of universal ignorance. In order to overcome this impasse in Socrates's position, Plato reinterprets the Socratic notion of ignorance in terms of forgetfulness. He thus develops his own theory in which he tries to demonstrate that knowledge is just a matter of recollecting or remembering the things that which we once knew, but which, as a result of our human frailties, we have been forgotten. Plato's response to Socratic ignorance is therefore his theory of recollection. In the Meno, Plato attempts to validate his theory of recollection by posing a series of questions to a slave with no formal education. The lesson to be learned from this exercise is the significance of logic and the process of deductive reasoning. Thus one can logically deduce that if a = b, and b = c, then c = a.

Plato uses this form of reasoning as the basis for his theory of recollection which, in turn, provides the answer to the Socratic position of universal ignorance. Plato argues that Socratic ignorance is based on an implicit desire for knowledge of the highest Good. Plato's ethical theory is thus based on the assumption that humankind is potentially omniscient, and that this potential omniscience makes possible moral perfection, which coincides with insight or knowledge of the Form or Idea of the Good.

Here we can see that, for Plato, the discipline of ethics cannot be separated from either the discipline of metaphysics (which deals with the ultimate nature of reality) or epistemology (which deals with the status of our knowledge regarding that reality). In his metaphysical theory, Plato argues for the existence of Ideas of Beauty, Courage, Truth, etcetera, as if these Ideas or Forms enjoy an objective existence (that is, independently of the human mind), with the Form of the Good being superior in status to the other Forms.

The possibility of our knowledge of these Forms depends on a stringent process of philosophical education in which "the mind" or "the soul" seeks to be released from its mortal or temporal limitations in order to enter the eternal realm of absolute knowledge of "the Good'' the ultimate objective of all moral behaviour.

It is worth mentioning at this stage that Plato conceptualises the notion of perfection in a manner similar to that of the Christian tradition. He bases his ethical theory on a belief in transcendent (divine) realm of eternal bliss. This hope of immortality lies at the basis of every truly universal religion. However, the Greeks, unlike the Hebrews, had no messianic expectations, and so they turned to poets, and not prophets, for their moral instruction. But, given his faith in the capabilities of a well-trained philosopher, Plato believed that the task of moral instruction would ultimately become the responsibility of the philosopher, for whom rational insight was superior to all forms of mysticism, especially that which claimed to be based on divine inspiration. But then we have to ask: What is the nature of the knowledge claims assumed to be capable of accounting for that (Reality) which transcends the finite condition of human beings? Or, as Socrates expresses it in the Meno:

> But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come up right against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know (1961:81d-e).

In Plato's system, the key to the highest Good can be found in the Orphic- Pythagorean doctrine of a purified soul, free from the limitations imposed on "the mind" by the body. In the *Phaedo* Plato writes (1972:67a-b):

> It seems to me that, as long as we are alive, we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body, except when they are absolutely ready, and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until God himself gives us deliverance. In this way, by keeping ourselves uncontaminated by the follies of the body, we shall probably reach the company of others like ourselves and gain direct knowledge of all that is pure and uncontaminated, that is, presumably of truth. For one who is not pure himself to attain to the realm of purity would no doubt be a breach of universal justice.

Plato thus puts his faith in the soul or mind, which seeks to dwell in the Parmenidean realm of being, as opposed to the body, which he relegates to the inferior realm of becoming, as propounded by Heraclitus. What are the implications of his speculation about the previous existence of the soul (that is, as existing in a disembodied condition in which it knows everything)? The main implication is that Plato views our moral existence on earth in terms of abstaining from physical pleasure. In certain respects, his ethics resemble the fundamental assumptions of the Hindu religion, where a clear distinction is made between the body and the soul, the temporal and the eternal existence of human beings, in which the selfish interests of the ego or the "I" are overcome in the discovery of an immortal primal Self.

For Plato, we are limited by the imperfections of the body in which the soul is temporally incarnated. But the experience of death holds out the promise of reincarnation, an experience that can repeat itself until the person is considered worthy of regaining a state of perfection, free from all bodily impediments. According to Plato, although human beings have fallen from a state of perfection, this does not mean that we are condemned to a life of moral imperfection. It is through a process of recollection that we can regain our former state of perfection. It is in this context that Plato speaks of knowledge and virtue as coinciding with a direct insight into the highest Good.

By assuming the existence of the Form of the Good, Plato places his faith in the existence of a Higher Self, the attainment of which is the potential of every individual. The striving for knowledge and truth cannot therefore be separated from the striving for human goodness or perfection. It is this striving that makes the individual lose his or her identity as a separate being on earth because alienation, for Plato, means being cut off from your “true” Self. In the *Republic,* he writes (1955: 508 d-e):

> When (the soul) is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason, but when it inclines to that direction which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts its opinions hither and thither, and again seems as if it lacked reason ... This reality that gives its truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of the good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth insofar as known.

For Plato, the search for the highest Good is synonymous with the search for the meaning of life; it is a search for coherence in the light of which the passing reality of our temporal existence can be explained. In the Republic(Book vii), Plato likens the human condition to a state of imprisonment within a dark cave, where the only source of light comes from a fire behind us, and the only source of life are the shadows cast by the firelight on the wall before us. In this condition we are not aware of the illusory nature of our condition until we turn our heads away from the shadows before us. Behind us we see a procession of men and woman walking back and forth before the firelight. We then recognise the shadows on the wall for what they are an illusion. At this stage of the allegory, the prisoner is entirely free until he has finally left the cave and, once outside, he realises that it is the sun that is the source of all light and all life. In the allegory, the sun is compared to the Form of the Good. It is only once we behold the sun and realise its ultimate significance in our lives that we reach the condition of moral perfection which, for Plato, is the true meaning of our lives.

As Plato he puts it:

> This image then ... we must apply as a whole to all that has been said. Likening the region revealed through sight to the habituation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since this you desire to hear. But God knows whether it is true. But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that, in the region of the known, the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things, of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private and public life must have caught sight of this (1955:517b-c).

> Plato's vision of the potential perfection of humankind in and through reason causes him to turn his attention to a question that has become the central focus of political theory: What is justice? With this question in mind, Plato seeks to spell out the practical (political) implications of his ethical theory.

In concluding this section, it is important to bear in mind that, for Plato, and indeed for Aristotle as well, the notion of the highest Good is not just based on a particular understanding of historical tradition, but also on a particular interpretation of "human nature". Plato has been accused by Aristotle of being too idealistic in his claims regarding the moral potential of human beings in general for whom, the expectation to act morally is of greater importance than the pursuit of the highest Good for its own sake. Plato does indeed distinguish between the rational, the emotional, and physical needs of the individual but, for him, the meaning of life lies in the challenge of subordinating our emotional and physical desires to the rational component of "the mind" or "the soul, because it is only when reason is allowed to prevail that the individual is in harmony with him/ herself, with others, and the cosmos, the harmony of which ought to be reflected in the life of every human being. It is from this perspective that Plato seeks to develop his principle of justice in political life, where justice ultimately becomes synonymous with harmony ``within'' (ethically) and "without" (politically).

Point to ponder

Reflect on the following newspaper article and analyse the moral of the story within the context of the allegory of Plato's Cave. (If you remember, in this allegory, the prisoners in the cave mistake shadows for reality, just as we do, according to Plato, when we try to rely on the senses rather than on reason.)

In the following excerpt former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was quoted as saying, ahead of World Aids Day, that many political leaders still simply do not care enough to fight the disease, which has killed 28 million people since it was first reported among homosexual men in the United States in 1981:

> "I am not winning the war because I don't think the leaders of the world are engaged enough", Annan said. "I feel angry, I feel distressed, I feel helpless ... because I live in a world where we have the means ... to be able to help all these patients, but what is lacking is the political will. ... Access to anti-retrovirals around the world is minimal in the poverty-stricken countries worst affected by the virus; of the 4,2 million people who need them in sub-Saharan Africa, only an estimated 50 000 get supplies, health officials say. Experts say the WHO will also promote the provision of emergency response teams to guide the purchase and financing of anti-retrovirals for poor countries where treatment is sparse. The United Nations says the epidemic, fuelled by drug abuse and unprotected sex, is spreading in India, China, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, Russia, Ukraine, Estonia and Latvia." (Sowetan 2003, December 1)

Feedback: Elected political leaders are role models for many people. This means that the behaviour of these ordinary people is easily influenced by how their leaders approach critical issues that influence ordinary people's lives. If political leaders adopt the "I don't care attitude" in dealing with HIV and AIDS, their followers are likely to follow suit. The reason for this is simple. Many people believe that political leaders, and in particular, the political leader of the party they voted for, cannot and should not be questioned. It is this kind of unquestioning attitude that makes the people prisoners of their own circumstances (their "caves"). If my leader says that there is no such thing as AIDS, why should I take care of my behaviour? If he/she says AIDS does not exist, then it does not exist.

It is in a situation like this that the people “mistake shadows for reality'' and the end result, as in this case, is death. If there is no AIDS-related death in your family or community, do not assume that AIDS does not exist or that it belongs to specific communities/groups. If you do, you may find yourself trapped in a cave of your own thinking. It is important for us to use our power of reason when it comes to what is happening around us rather than to rely on untested assumptions or, worse still, to simply rely on what other people tell us. Plato argues that we are prisoners living in a world of untested assumptions and we are not aware of how much we are missing. “We are living in the dark, both literally and figuratively'', he says.

Further Reading: Plato, 1972. Phaedo; Plato, 1961. Meno; Plato, 1955. The Republic (part vii).

5.5 ARISTOTLE (384-322 BC)

Aristotle's ethical position can be found in major works such as his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudaemian Ethics*. Nicomachean Ethics is especially important for our purposes since Aristotle himself wrote it in conjunction with another major work, Politics. These two books must therefore be seen as part of a single project: an investigation of human conduct or “practical reason''.
The notion of “practical reason'' is especially important in the Greek tradition of ethical and political thought, and it is especially in Aristotle's work that the significance of ``practical reason'' finds its fullest expression. You will remember that Socrates introduced the method of “question and answer”, and that Plato developed Socrates's “conversational approach” into the “dialogues”. In these dialogues, Socrates sought to defend and develop the integrity of the “spoken word'', that is, reason in dialogue as a search that includes every interlocutor as an equal partner in dialogue with others. The implication of this method is that every opinion that is expressed is seen as an important contribution to the general search for “Truth”. This “dialectical process” is thought to be a rational process in which a guiding sense of “truth”, as it finds expression in various opinions and arguments, ultimately leads to the discovery of “Truth”. So, for Socrates and Plato, the rationality of dialogue (critical discussion and argument) is the condition of the possibility of knowledge.

But in moral- political matters, however, the Greek philosophers embraced a conception of “theoretical” rationality (episteme) that applies to the natural sciences. This form of rationality differs significantly from both the “practical rationality” (praxis) that applies to the moral-political aspects of human conduct, and from the “technical'' rationality (techne) that applies to craftspeople (for example, the skills needed by the artisan to build a house). The Greeks therefore hold that the rationality of scientific knowledge must at all times be distinguished from the rationality of moral- political conduct. Scientific knowledge is therefore different in status from “practical” knowledge. It is for this reason that Aristotle seeks to base his ethics on generalisations that derive from an inductive process of reasoning, that is, reasoning based on empirical observation rather than deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning, you will remember, is based on logical abstraction and seeks the precision and necessity of mathematical and scientific reasoning in real life. Furthermore, the advocates of this form of abstraction believe that there is a realm of knowledge ``above'' the heads of ordinary men and women.

In his ethical investigations Aristotle, like his predecessor Plato, seeks to define the highest Good. In the introductory chapter of the Nicomachean Ethics, he defines the highest Good as “that which all things aim at” (1947:109 4a).

Aristotle assumes that “there is some one End which we desire for its own sake ... (namely) ... the Chief Good (1094a). Aristotle writes further:

> If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake ... clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? (1947:109a)

According to Aristotle, in our moral lives we have an end in view, namely the “the achievement of the Good Man” (1947:1094b). Aristotle, who fully realised that few would take issue with the assumption that human happiness is the highest Good, is nevertheless equally aware that happiness means different things to different people. This does not deter him, however, because he believes that the various activities of human beings can be traced back to three distinct generalizable elements within the human personality structure. Here, Aristotle distinguishes between the rational dimension (which, as the highest faculty, constitutes the unique character of human existence) on the one hand, and the emotional and physical dimensions of human life on the other. The emotional and physical dimensions, as important as they are for the survival of human life, cannot be exalted to the same status as the rational dimension because we share these dimensions with other forms of life.

For Aristotle, therefore, any attempt to define the highest Good must take into account the essential “nature of human beings”, which derives its uniqueness from its capacity to reason. This rational capacity presupposes the possibility of education for the sake of moral excellence; it also presupposes the possibility of deliberation and free choice. Virtue is a matter of exercising deliberate choice. It is determined furthermore by reason, and a person acts wisely when he or she opts for “the least of the evils as the safest plan’’ (1947:1109 a). Aristotle's argument here is based on a profound conviction on his part that it is “hard to be good" and “goodness is rare" (1947:1109 a).

The various types of moral excellence admired by the Greeks, friendship, fairness, self-discipline, and courage, are also accepted by Aristotle. But he also wants to emphasise that “perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the good man is his seeing the truth in every instance, he being in fact, the rule and measure of these matters" (1947:1113a). With regard to the question of truth, Aristotle emphasises the importance of (i) friendship and (ii) the contemplative life.

5.5.1 Friendship

Aristotle distinguishes between two basic types of friendship. Firstly, he identifies the type of friendship where the “object of our friendship is indeed beloved in that he is the man that he is" (1947:1156a). Secondly, he identifies friendship as a form of strategy aimed at one person's advantage. Aristotle claims that the very young and the very old are incapable of true friendship. This argument is based on the assumption that the young are unduly driven by passion and, this being the case, the object of their friendship will change in accordance with their changing passions. The elderly, on the other hand, are more interested in what is profitable to them. Using the principle of “the golden mean", Aristotle proceeds to argue that true friendship exists between these two extremes where we will find those who are good and whose friendship is based on their common identification with goodness as the only criterion of friendship. In this regard, “the good alone can be friends" (1947:1157a), as a matter of “mutual confidence", for “requital of friendship is attended with moral choice" (1947:1157 b), as “the good, in loving their friend, love their own good" (1947:1157 b).

Furthermore, “good men, being stable in themselves, are also stable as regards others'' (1947:1159 b), which is a prerequisite for the “communion'' on which friendship is based. Aristotle also argues, rather controversially, that there can be no friendship between a “free man'' and a “slave'', because the slave is lacking in the “common humanity'' that unites all “free men''. It is also interesting to note that Aristotle explains the institutions of marriage in terms of friendship (1947:1160a-1161b) but, throughout his writings, the family is found to be “prior in order of time and more absolutely necessary than the community in general'' (1947:1162a). The wife and husband have differentiated functions according to their gender in a friendship which “is thought to combine the profitable and the pleasurable ... (and) ... will be also based upon virtue if they are good people'' (1947:1162a). A primary norm in social friendship is equality in economic terms. Aristotle believes that “the cobbler, for instance, gets an equivalent for his shoes according to a certain rate; and the weaver, and all others in like manner, a common measure, which is provided in money (1947:1163b-1164a).

Aristotle claims that “man” is a “social animal” (1947:1169b), and that “the happy man does need friends'' (1947:1169 b). In addition, “virtue itself can be improved by practice, from living with the good'' (1947:1169b-1170a). He believes that “living is in itself one of the things which is good and pleasant (for life constitutes something that is “whole'', and whatever is such is also good).
This also implies that the good are pleased at the good fortune of their friends, and that the community of friendship makes it possible to do things in solidarity with others.

5.5.2 The contemplative life

According to Aristotle, true happiness is not found in physical pleasure, but in “the workings of excellence ... the highest principle which, in its own nature, is divine or the most divine of all internal principles''. Aristotle has no doubt that “it is contemplative'', for “since the intellect is the highest of our principles ... (it is evident) ... that the pursuit of science is thought to contain pleasures which are admirable for purity and permanence''. Aristotle argues that “pleasure must be, in some way, an ingredient in happiness ... (while) ... the self-sufficiency people speak of will attach chiefly to the contemplative working'' (1947:1177a). The “highest principle in us'' (which seems to make us like immortals) and “would seem to constitute each man's Self, is most truly man, (and is therefore) also the happiest’’ (1947:1178 a).

Aristotle believes that “in proportion as people possess the act of contemplation so far they also have the ability of being happy'' (1947: 1178b). This happiness is different from the kind of happiness that derives from physical pleasure, wealth, honour, health and nourishment. Aristotle seeks to justify his ethical theory by inviting his reader to examine his statements in the light of ``facts and actual life, and when these statements harmonise with facts we may accept them, and when they are at variance with them, we may conceive of them as mere theories” (1947:1178 a).

5.5.3 Summary

Nature, custom and teaching are all acknowledged as determining factors in the attainment of the good life. But while Aristotle acknowledges that private education has certain advantages over public education, such as individual attention, “the fact remains that generalities are the object matter of the sciences” (1180b). Aristotle feels that “political science” is wanting in this respect, for the “matters of statesmanship which the sophists profess to teach are not practised by themselves.

This is “left to those actually engaged in it: and these might very well be thought to do it by some singular knack and by mere practice than by any intellectual process; for they can neither write nor speak on these matters'' (1181 a). According to Aristotle, correct judgment in statesmanship requires not only theory, but practice as well. It is this conviction that inclined him to the study of “human philosophy''. For Aristotle, this study means taking into account “what it means to be human''. The Aristotelian conception of ``human nature'' is one that views human beings as physical, emotional, and intellectual beings. But, in the final analysis, we are directed (as moral and political beings) by the education of the soul which, if it is allowed to function in accordance with the principle of reason, will lead to human happiness. For Aristotle, then, the experience of happiness is a product of reason, and not a product of the pleasures of the body. But for human beings to be happy, we must acknowledge the “sensuous” as well as the “spiritual” dimensions of the human personality.

5.6 Self-Assessment Questions

1. “Virtue is knowledge''. What do you think Socrates meant by this?

2. Do you agree with Socrates that the purpose of life is “to care about the greatest improvement of the soul”?

3. Explain the Socratic notion of “the soul”.

4. How would you explain Socrates's reliance on a “divine sign'' or “inner voice”?

5. To what extent does Plato integrate traditional religious beliefs into his ethical system?

6. Discuss critically the implication of the Socratic-Platonic argument that “knowledge is virtue”.

7. Give a critical account of Plato's theory of “human nature”.

8. Explain briefly what Aristotle means by the “contemplative life”.

9. Compare and contrast Aristotle's ethical theory with that of Plato's.

10. Discuss the significance of the distinction between “theoretical reason” and “practical reason”.

6 STUDY UNIT 5: MEDIEVAL ETHICS [AUGUSTINE AND AQUINAS]

Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- Give an account of Saint Augustine's ethical approach which depicts God as the chief good of humankind.
- Give an account of Thomas Aquinas's ethical theory as “natural law”.
- Evaluate the respective merits of these two influential figures in the Judeo-Christian tradition

6.1 St AUGUSTINE (354-430 CE)

Augustine was born in Tagaste in the African province of Numidia. His father was a pagan, but his mother was a devout Christian and it is likely that it was his mother who was the deciding influence in his life. In 396 CE he became Bishop of Hippo, the seaport near Tagaste. The driving force of his philosophical activity was his intense concern over his own, personal destiny.

6.1.1 Introduction

Augustine's concern for his personal destiny prompted him to raise critical questions about himself and humanity in general. What puzzled him was the ever- present problem of moral evil. It was difficult for Augustine to explain the existence of evil in human experience. Augustine, like many others, found it difficult to reconcile Christianity's portrayal of a good creator God with the fact of evil. If God is a loving God, how can he allow evil to rule “a world that a perfectly good God had created"? Because he could find no answer in the Christianity that he supported as a young man, Augustine turned to the Manichaeans. The Manichaeans were a group who claimed intellectual superiority over others. But, despite this attitude, the Manichaeans were sympathetic to some Christian views. They openly rejected “the basic monotheism of the old Testament and, with it, the doctrine that the Creator and Redeemer of man are one and the same” (Stumpf 1983:130).

As a group, the Manichaeans taught a doctrine of dualism, which stated that the universe rested on two basic principles, the principle of light or goodness, on the one hand, and the principle of darkness or evil, on the other. The two principles were seen to be in conflict with each other. Human life mirrored this conflict in terms of the conflict between the soul, composed of light, and the body, composed of darkness. Dualism as a doctrine solved Augustine's problem of the contradiction of the fact of evil in a God-created world, but it raised a host of new problems. He later turned to Platonism which enhanced his intellectual standing, Augustine's dramatic change occurred in 386 CE, when he decided to devote his life to the pursuit of philosophy. For him, the sudden change did not conflict with his Christian values, because his pursuit of philosophy also meant the knowledge of God. He made his intentions clear when he made the following confession (Stumpf 1983:131):

> I am confident that, among the Platonists, I shall find what is not opposed to the teachings of our religion. ... from this moment forward, it is my resolve never to depart from the authority of Christ, for I find none that is stronger. ... I must follow after this with the greatest subtlety of reason.

Augustine's pursuit of philosophy made him true to his Christian values because he realised that true philosophy encompassed both faith and reason. He acknowledged the fact that reason without faith was possible, but claimed that it would never be complete. In this study unit, we are going to examine Augustine's arguments as follows: firstly, that God is humankind's chief good, and secondly, that we have a choice to align ourselves with the city of God or the earthly city. We are also going to consider Thomas Aquinas's ethical theory as “natural law”.

6.1.2 Augustine's ethical theory

Augustine's ethical theory regards morality as the ground of everything. This becomes clear from his explanation on how human beings should conduct themselves on their road to happiness, which is the goal of all human behaviour. Every human being should live in a way that brings him/her happiness. Augustine, like the Greeks, argues that happiness is the thing that all human beings desire the most.

6.1.2.1 God as our chief good

For Augustine, happiness is achievable if we do not confine ourselves to the natural, but turn to the supernatural. Human beings are not nature's creation, but God's creation. It is from this perspective that we need to understand that it is only when we possess and love our chief well that we will be happy. Our chief good cannot be something within the realm of the natural. Augustine therefore points out that our “highest good is God, who is Goodness itself and the source of limited goodness that any creature has". What Augustine says is in line with the biblical teaching that we are all made in the image of God. It is therefore no accident that we all seek happiness. That we seek it is a consequence of our incompleteness, our finitude. Augustine clarifies the aspect of our incompleteness/finitude through the doctrine of love. (For a detailed discussion of God as our chief good, read Stumpf & Abel [2002: 360]).

6.1.2.2 The role of love

Augustine believes that there is no way of separating human beings from love. In his (Augustine) own words, “man inevitably loves”. It is human finitude that makes it inevitable that human beings will love. We can choose to love physical objects, other persons (including ourselves) but for Augustine we make a serious mistake when we love all lesser goods more than God. How can lesser goods be as good as God who is perfect and who is Goodness itself? Imperfect goods are in a perpetual state of change, but God is eternal and unchanging. All lesser goods are legitimate objects of love because they have been created by God. Instead of using lesser goods as means to God, we use them as an End in themselves, argues Augustine. “Man's moral problem consists not so much in loving or even in the objects he loves as in the manner in which he attaches himself to his objects of love and in his expectations regarding the outcome of his love.” Human beings expect to find happiness from love, yet what they experience instead is misery, helplessness and unhappiness. According to Augustine, the reason for the above is our “disordered” love. How often have we been told that material possessions will never bring us happiness? According to Augustine, nothing is evil in itself; what is evil is our love of lesser goods. Stumpf and Abel (2002:361) justify this argument with the example of overeating:

> It is fine to desire food, since food is part of creation and God wants us to eat in order to keep healthy and be able to serve God. But to desire food to the point of gluttony and obsession is a disordered desire because it lets a creature interfere with our proper relationship to God.

Augustine acknowledges the fact that all things in the world are objects of love because they are God's creation. But his main concern is our love of things for the sake of ultimate happiness. He calls this kind of love disordered love. “Disordered love consists in expecting more from an object of love than it is capable of providing.”

6.1.2.3 Free will as the cause of evil

Augustine claims that the evil comes about through free will. His starting point is that free will is a gift given to all of us by God, and any misuse of the gift cannot be blamed on God. In short, we are free. The choices we make are our own free choices. We choose to turn toward God or away from God. It is on the basis of this view that Augustine argues that “moral evil is due to our own free choice”. Human beings are capable of directing their affections exclusively to physical objects, other persons, themselves and away from the Creator. As Augustine points out, any course of action that we take is voluntary. The above argument is evident in the following story (Stumpf & Abel 2002:361):

> Adam and Eve misused their free will and were justly exiled from the Garden of Eden, just as certain angels, before the creation of the world, misused their free will and were banished to hell. To say that free will is not a good gift because it can be misused to prefer the finite or the infinite, is like saying that hands are not good gifts because they can be misused to commit theft.

The above explanation shows that Augustine rejects both the Manichaeans' and Plato's teaching on what causes evil. The Manichaeans taught “that we do not come entirely from God, but in part from an evil power", and Plato argued that “the cause of evil is simply ignorance”. For Augustine, evil is a product of the will. (For a more detailed discussion of free will as the cause of evil, see Stumpf & Abel [2002:361-362]).

6.1.2.4 The two cities

Augustine's The City of God brings into sharp focus his concept of free will; according to Augustine we have an alternative: to align ourselves with the City of God or to align ourselves with the earthly city. Once we align ourselves with the city of God, we have moved out of the realm of the temporal and finite (natural) and have entered the realm of the eternal and infinite (supernatural). In other words, we have chosen God over the things of the world. But if we align ourselves with the earthly city, we remain in the realm of the temporal and finite (natural). This implies that we have chosen the lesser goods over God. Judgment Day will reward each group according to their choice and this choice will become evident as the two cities are separated.

Point to ponder
Read and reflect on the following newspaper article and analyse it in terms of Augustine's ethical concepts: God as our chief good, love, and free will.

> “The perceived “horror” of the gay debate splitting the church should not be feared", writes Cedric Mayson. Many religious people have attacked homosexuality as a heinous sin, an evil to be cast out and a devilish distortion. Some, from cardinals to bush Baptists, have condemned homosexuality as unnatural and something to be rejected. ... Those who claim that “the Bible condemns homosexuality" need to be careful. Scripture certainly condemns lust, but that applies to the misuse of all sexual activity. Only three texts appear to specifically denounce homosexuality. Two, from Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, see it as an abomination that should be penalised by death. But few people who use these texts to condemn gays and lesbians would have them killed as scripture commands.

They recognise that, just as Jesus moved beyond the Law of Moses, so God has guided us to progress beyond the need for the death penalty.
They believe that humanity has evolved since the days of Leviticus, in this and many other ways. Why do they feel that they know better than Leviticus with regard to killing, but not with regard to homosexuality? Paul's condemnation of those who indulge in “shameful acts'' (Romans 1.26-27) is also instructive. Walter Wink, a professor of religious studies, points out that Paul had no concept of homosexual orientation. (The word was only coined in 1869.) Paul had no idea that homosexuality was natural to many people. Neither did Paul make the distinction between sexual orientation over which we have little choice and sexual behaviour, where we make moral choices about responsibility, love, promiscuity and lust, whoever our partners are. The Bible sets out an unfolding and developmental view of human awareness that constantly challenges inherited concepts with the spiritual progress of the human community. Human sacrifice and ritualism were replaced during the Old Testament period and attitudes to gentiles, women and the poor changed in the time of the New Testament. Jesus was killed precisely for questioning the religious traditions of the time. There has been constant developments in the 2000 years of Christian history. Slavery, the oppression of women, the divine right of kings and men, the deification of wealth and the glorification of race have all been defended by religious institutions on the grounds of scripture; and defeated on the grounds of obedience to the spirit (Mayson 2003).

Feedback: Augustine is aware of the fact that ethics is about how we should live. His starting point is that “we should live in a way that brings us happiness, since happiness is what we all ultimately desire''. We can only achieve happiness if we possess God as our chief good.
The fact that we commit immoral actions does not convince Augustine that we are not good creatures. He takes the position that we are good creatures created by God, who is Goodness itself. According to Augustine, “moral evil is due to our free choice'', since we are all blessed with free will. What appears to be critical in his argument is the fact that: “God gave us free will with the intention that we use it to love God above all things.'' If you have a homosexual who has freely chosen to love God above all things because this brings him/her happiness, do you really think that God would reject such an individual because of his/her sexual orientation? Augustine makes it clear that everything in the world is good because everything comes from God. As a result, “all things are legitimate objects of love''. He also emphasises the fact that “man's moral problem consists not so much in loving or even in the objects he loves, as in the manner in which he attaches himself to his objects of love''. According to Augustine, there is nothing wrong in loving or with the objects of love, if we are conscious of the fact that our highest good is God, who is Goodness itself.

6.1.3 St. THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-1274)

Thomas Aquinas's father placed him in the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino at the age of five, and for the next nine years he pursued his studies in this Abbey. At the age of 14, he entered the University of Naples. Four years later, he moved to the University of Paris, where he was influences by Albert Magnus's scientific and philosophical ideas.

6.1.4 Introduction

Albert Magnus believed that philosophy and science were important subjects in Christian thought. He considered Aristotle as the greatest of all philosophers, and this prompted him to study Aristotle's philosophy in detail.

Thomas Aquinas's respect for Magnus's knowledge encouraged him to follow in his teacher's footsteps and he, too, studied Aristotle's philosophy.
One of the issues that made an impact on Aquinas was his realisation that the teachings of Aristotle and the Christian faith were in harmony with each other. It is therefore not surprising that he used Aristotle's theory of ethics as the foundation of his ethical theory. Aquinas, like Aristotle, considered morality to be a quest for happiness. He also agreed with Aristotle that a human being's happiness was connected closely with his/her end/ purpose. Aristotle articulated only a naturalistic morality “whereby men could achieve virtue and happiness by fulfilling their natural capacities or end".

However, as a Christian thinker, Aquinas taught that human beings could achieve happiness by fulfilling both their natural and supernatural end. Despite the fact that Aquinas agreed with most of Aristotle's principles, he argued that Aristotelian ethics was incomplete because it lacked the dimension of faith. Aquinas, like Augustine, was of the opinion that the source and ultimate end of human nature was God. Both Augustine and Aquinas were convinced that true and perfect happiness was only possible through God (that is, when human beings possess God). Aquinas was of the opinion that certain moral laws could be derived from our human nature. For him, we could arrive at these moral laws by philosophical reflection on our human nature. It is this vision that made Aquinas call his theory of philosophical ethics “natural law" (see previous study unit).

6.1.5 Aquinas's ethical theory

6.1.5.1 The concept of law

The foundation of Aquinas's ethical theory is natural law. In one of his works, *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas provides us with a general definition of law as “a dictate of practical reason emanating from the ruler who governs a complete community”.
It is within the framework of this general definition that Aquinas examines the following kinds of law: (1) eternal law, (2) natural law, (3) human law, (4) divine law, and (5) law of sin. Aquinas defines **natural law** in terms of eternal law. According to him, eternal law is the all-encompassing law by which God governs the universe. He (Aquinas) calls it eternal because it comes directly from God (who is eternal). All the inclinations that are part and parcel of all the creatures in the universe fall within the boundaries of eternal law. The law of gravity is given as an example of eternal law because it governs all physical beings. Eternal law is in line with the criteria contained in Aquinas's general definition of law as follows (Stumpf & Abel 2002: 370):

> It is a command of practical reason, since these laws issue from God's reason, used to direct the activity of all creatures in the universe; it is issued by someone with legitimate authority over the universe, namely the Creator; and it aims at the wellbeing of the universe as a whole.

6.1.5.2 The concept of natural law

Aquinas does not view morality as an arbitrary set of rules governing human behaviour. According to Aquinas, the basis of moral obligation is located in the nature of human beings. Built into all things, including human beings, are various inclinations that enable all things to participate in eternal law. Aquinas points out that participation “which consists in being ruled by eternal law is passive participation”. But it is also important to understand that rational creatures such as human beings participate actively in natural laws, as we have already shown.
As human beings, we can use our reason and free will to regulate some of our inclinations. For example, it is possible for a human being to decide whether to eat or postpone a meal.

6.1.5.3 The precepts of natural law

Aquinas defines natural law as “the active participation by human beings in fulfilling their natural inclinations''. According to him, inclination has a double sense: in the first sense, there is just one inclination; in the second sense, there are several. Our basic inclination as human beings is to “seek our human good''. This implies that the basic moral truth is to “do good and avoid evil''. Aquinas considers this as the fundamental precept of natural law, which includes all of philosophical morality. The general nature of the fundamental precept of natural law prompted Aquinas to clarify its double sense as follows (Stumpf & Abel 2002:372):

> Although the natural law in a sense contains only one precept, in another sense it contains several. These several precepts result from analysing the good that we naturally seek. There are various basic dimensions to the human good, and these multiple dimensions give rise to several precepts of natural law.

Aquinas points out the three levels of natural human inclinations that are in line with the three main groups of beings to which human beings belong as follows: “On the most basic level, we are substances (things), and an inclination that we share with all things (animate and inanimate) is self-preservation. Second, we are animals, and an inclination of all animals is to preserve all their species. Third, we are rational animals, and as rational animals we have a tendency to seek the truth (including the most important truth of all, truth about God) and to live in society.''(Stumpf & Abel 2002:372).

All the above basic human inclinations reflect part of the human good. The fundamental precept to “do well and avoid evil'' brings with it specific commands. Aquinas articulates these commands as follows: “We are to preserve our own being, have children and raise them, seek the truth, and live harmoniously in society.'' Now to be a moral being consists in following these precepts. The idea is that if we follow these precepts, we will live well and achieve happiness. But it is important to realise that Aquinas's natural law does not have all the answers, it only serves as a framework for moral decision making. (For a more detailed discussion of the precepts of natural law, see Stumpf & Abel [2002:371-373].)

Point to ponder
Consider the following extract and use it as your starting point to challenge both Augustine and Aquinas's idea that the fundamental command of ethics is to love God.

> Human freedom is a given if we accept the theological position that God created the universe as a reflection of divine love. It would be a most unsatisfactory situation if we had no option but to love God. Although all of us have wished we could command someone to love us, it takes only a moment’s reflection to realise that forced love is not love at all; only when someone freely chooses to love us do we feel loved. God is in more or less the same position: for our love to be freely given to God, we must have the option not to love God. Yet God knows what our choices will be since God knows everything. (Mitchell1996:182)

Feedback: God is characterised as the omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent Creator of humankind and the universe. The two thinkers argue that God has given us free will to enable us to make free choices. If we commit immoral actions, we are asked not to blame God because moral evil is due to our own free choice. Why is it, then, that we are punished when we exercise our free choice not to love God?

If free will is a gift given to us by God, this implies that God was aware from the beginning that some of us might choose not to love him.

6.1.6 Summary

The ethical theories of Augustine and Aquinas acknowledge the fact that happiness is our end/purpose. They also agree that the only way in which we can achieve happiness is through God. Their acceptance of philosophy as an important area of human activity does not move them away from their Christian values. They therefore argue that philosophy (reason) without faith is incomplete. A thorough analysis of their approaches shows that the two thinkers use both reason and faith in building their ethical theories. What this means is that any aspects of their theories that cannot be rationally explained move into the realm of the supernatural (faith).

It is important for us to understand the spirit of the period in which these two thinkers developed their theories: the medieval period (1000 to 1500 CE). During this period, theology dominated every sphere of human life. Ethics and morality were regarded as rooted in Christian doctrine and the authority the church reigned over the authority of the state. Human beings have free will, and this enables them to make moral choices, that is, to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. Failure on the part of any human being to make appropriate moral choices cannot be blamed on God because the “moral evil is due to our own free choice". However, ethical theories show that, despite our common understanding of the basic moral truth: to “do good and avoid evil", our approach to this basic moral truth will always differ.
The Christians and all those who fall outside Christianity agree that it is important to “do good and avoid evil", but different people follow this precept in very different ways.

6.2 Self-Assessment Questions

1. Briefly explain Augustine's concept of love.

2. Briefly explain Augustine concept of happiness.

3. What do you make of Augustine's distinction between God as our chief good and lesser goods?

4. Why is it necessary for us to love God?

5. In Augustine's view, what is the proper way to love temporal, finite beings?

6. Do you think it is possible for finite human beings to possess the infinite God? If so, in what way?
7. Briefly explain Aquinas's concept of law.
8. Briefly explain Aquinas's concept of natural law.
9. What do you make of Aquinas's idea that eternal law is the all-encompassing law of God that governs the universe?
10. In your opinion, are all human inclinations good?
11. In what way is the basic moral truth “do good and avoid evil" universal?
12. “Faith begins where reason ends." To what extent is this true?

7 STUDY UNIT 6: ANCIENT GREEK POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- describe what political philosophy is
- give an account of Plato's theory of the state
- give an account of Aristotle's theory of the state
- compare and contrast Plato and Aristotle's theories of the state

7.1 Introduction: What is political philosophy?

It is generally accepted that no human individual is self-sufficient. From the cradle to the grave we are dependent on others. And even in certain instances where we are not dependent, we are expected, from a moral and political perspective, to interact with others, even as we pursue or own interests, in a manner that is acceptable to society.

In one of his private meditations, the English poet, John Donne (1572-1631), points out that “no man is an island". These words, if interpreted in a gender- neutral way (which has not always been the case) underline the central theme of political philosophy. Given the view that, as human beings, we are first and foremost “social and political animals" (Aristotle), a discipline such as “political and social philosophy" finds its justification in the need to examine certain normative aspects of our social and political lives.

The work of the political philosopher overlaps with that of the sociologist and the political scientist, in that all of them are engaged in research into matters of a social or political nature. However, what distinguishes the work of the political philosopher from that of her colleagues is political philosophy's central preoccupation with normative questions regarding, among other things:

- The nature of political authority (the central theme of political philosophy)
- The nature of justice (the central preoccupation of ancient Greek philosophy)
- The liberty and rights of the individual (the central focus of modern liberalism)
- “man" as a social-political being (the central focus of Marxism)

Discussions in political theory have invariably ranged between two extreme perspectives: the one emphasising the primacy of the individual (in society, in the community, and in the family), and the other emphasising the primacy of the state (the authority of “the political"). This is a very controversial debate in political theory, but for our purposes we will maintain a distinction between “the state" and “society". This distinction will furthermore help you to understand that, for the most part, when political philosophers refer to “the state", they are in fact invoking a normative concept. This implies that we must guard against the tendency to identify the state with the government (of the day). Thus, when a political philosopher analyses certain political problems (be it the marginalisation and oppression of blacks or women, the exploitation of the workers, the stigmatisation of queer people), the point of departure is normally a normative perspective. In other words, the political philosopher proceeds from the perspective of the “ought" question, that is, the question of values, rather than the “scientific" question of “the facts", that is, the question of social reality as it exists here and now.

7.2 A Brief Overview of Our Focus

Political philosophy in the Western world begins, as this study guide began: in ancient Greece. We shall be paying particular attention to philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. The Greeks were mainly concerned with the question of justice in community life, the city-state or polis (the Greek word from which “political" is derived). The Greek philosophers pursued the question of justice from the perspective of a central assumption: “man" is a social-political animal, with different needs, interests, aptitudes, talents, competencies, and so forth. Given this assumption, the question that arises is the following: what is the best form of government? More to the point, how can a society, based on the principle of collective harmony and cooperation, be established that is acceptable to all of its citizens, given the fact that there is always a potential for conflict among individuals who are essentially different in terms of personality, needs, talents, dispositions, and so forth.

The issues discussed by Plato in his Republic provide the impetus for the development of the Western tradition of political philosophy. In this work, Plato discusses the central theme of political life, namely the nature of justice. This discussion leads him to a consideration of many important questions regarding political life. These include a consideration of the following: human psychology (the “nature of man"); the moral question of “the good life"; the nature of “the ideal state"; the role and status of political leaders (and the legitimacy of their authority); the question of private property; the role of education in the moral and technical development of the individual (male and female); the question of individual political obligation and responsibility; the role of the military; the “best" economic structure; and the status of the family. It is against the background of all these questions that Plato asks the question: *What is justice?*

Plato seeks to answer this question from a utopian perspective of the “ideal state". His student, Aristotle, however, is critical of the utopianism at the root of the Platonic state, although he agrees with his mentor that the city state (polis) is “prior" to the individual. Thus, instead of using an “ideal state" as a blueprint for our political orientation, Aristotle prefers a more empirical route; to this end, he examines a number of different political constitutions and attempts to answer the question: what is the best form of government? In attempting to answer this question, Aristotle combines his ethical theory of ``happiness'' as the highest Good with his political theory of the state as the provider and guarantor of those institutions (political, social, educational) that are best at ensuring the development of the moral excellence of its citizens. In spite of the significant difference in orientation between Plato and Aristotle on how to arrive at the “best form of government", for both philosophers the state is a “natural" entity, without which the individual ceases to be human.

We will not have too much to say about the medieval period between Aristotle and the rise of the modern state. This does not mean, however, that the mediaeval thinkers had nothing significant to offer. On the contrary, in the works of Augustine (City of God) and Aquinas *(Summa Theologiae)* we find some of the most profound reflections on the nature of authority of the Church in relation to the authority of the State. The fact that the role of religious institutions in community life is still a very significant question today, in secular and non- secular societies, attests to the importance of these medieval thinkers.

In the modern context, the focus shifts way from the metaphysically oriented speculations of Greek thinking, and the theological orientation of medieval thinkers, to a secular approach.

The issue now becomes the authority of the state and how to balance this against the autonomy of the individual. In the modern context, the individual is conceptualised as a being endowed with a range of inalienable rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and legal protection from harsh and unfair treatment by the state, its institutions, and society at large.

As stated above, for both Plato and Aristotle, the city-state *(polis)* is a natural phenomenon which grows out of the physical and psychological needs of human beings. The association of human beings within the formal structures of the state introduces, however, the need to establish the basic conditions for social harmony which, for the Greek philosophers, required an understanding of the virtue of justice as an expression of the highest Good.

7.3 PLATO

In the *Republic*, Plato investigates the possibility of founding a state based on the principle of justice. Plato tries to convince his reader that the happiness of the individual can only be achieved if the principle of justice is adhered to; and the principle of justice, in turn, depends on knowledge of the highest Good, the source of all virtues. Plato's theory of political justice is a projection of his interpretation of the physical, psychological and social needs of the individual. From this perspective he argues that the state is nothing more than the individual "written in large letters". In the *Republic*, Plato presents his argument as follows (Plato 1955:368):

> Let us suppose we are rather short-sighted men and we are set to read a distant notice in small letters; we then discover that the same notice is up elsewhere on a larger scale and in larger lettering: won't it be a godsend to us to be able to read the larger notice first and then compare it with the smaller, to see if they are the same ... Justice can be a characteristic of an individual or a community.

With the assumption of the community as the individual in "larger lettering", Plato proceeds to construct his ideal state along the lines of three fundamental considerations:

1. The economic infrastructure (the artisans)
2. The military infrastructure (the auxiliaries)
3. The political leadership (the guardians)

According to Plato, if justice is to prevail, all three classes are to function in accordance with the principle of specialisation. Each person must be allowed to do what he or she does best, and thus contribute the fruits of his or her specialised labour to the common good. This means that, depending on their natural aptitude and capacities, the citizens in Plato's state are obliged to serve in one of the three classes, and this will ensure that they themselves will enjoy the best from various specialists in other fields.

In keeping with his argument that the state is a dynamic outgrowth of "human nature", Plato proceeds to offer a theory of "man" in terms of three primary dimensions of human nature or "three parts of the soul": the physical, the emotional, and the intellectual.

Plato argues, accordingly, that the economic class originates in our physical needs (for food, shelter and clothing); the military class is based on society's need to be protected from internal and external conflict; and that the highest authority is given to the rulers of the state, based on their understanding of the importance of the principle of reason, not only for the "proper functioning" of the individual, but also for the "proper functioning" of the state as a whole.

In the final analysis, the principle of justice is seen as a principle of harmony within the life of the individual and the life of the community at large. It consists in allowing each part of our human constitution to function to the best of its ability, but always under the guidance of reason. Similarly, in the community, justice means allowing each class to function in accordance with the principle of specialisation, but always under the guidance of the rational authority of the guardians of the state, who for Plato, are the most important class because of their understanding of the highest Good. In the ideal state, justice ultimately means “minding your own business” that is, doing what you do best, but always in the interest of the common good.

It should be noted that, although Plato distinguishes three classes in his ideal state, this does not mean that he wishes to promote the interests of any class at the expense of any of the others. He writes (Plato 1955:420):

> Our purpose in founding our state was not to promote the happiness of a single class, but, as far as possible, of the whole community by securing the happiness not of a select minority, but of the whole.

Plato's theory of the state is based on the conviction that justice is a virtue worth pursuing for its own sake, and in the practical context of social life this translates, as stated above, into the principle of minding one's own business (Plato 1955:433):

> I believe that justice is the principle we laid down at the beginning and have consistently followed in founding our state ... We laid it down if you remember, and have often repeated, that in our state one man must do one job, the job he was naturally suited for ... justice consists in minding your own business and not interfering with other people.

From the passage above it is evident that Plato's ideal state is a meritocracy that is the rule of the very best is the fundamental consideration on which the Platonic state is based. The question that arises here is the following: how (if at all) does Plato propose to translate his vision of an ideal state into a practical reality? The answer to this question has to take into account two important aspects of his political theory:

- myth as a means of persuasion
- the rule of the “philosopher-king”

7.3.1 Myth as a Means of Persuasion

The central issue in Greek thinking is that the interests of the community take precedence over the interests of the individual. Plato's acceptance of this as the starting point of political theory finds expression in the importance which he attaches to “the universal” dimension of human existence, that is, man as a “spiritual being” whose primary objective is a life of moral excellence, to be achieved in a life beyond his or her mortal existence on earth. Plato's arguments regarding the “immortality of the soul” must therefore not be isolated from the “practical” (political) context as the path to “eternal bliss". In the simile of the cave, when the prisoner is finally released from a life of bondage, ultimately realising that it is the sun (symbolic of the highest Good) that is the source of all life and light, Plato's “ex-prisoner” is forced to return to the depths of the cave in order to convert his former associates to his new vision of the highest Good.

Because Plato is realistic enough to realise that rational persuasion in the form of philosophical debate ("dialectics") is not every person's strong point, he feels that the establishment of a social framework aimed at the common good (based on the principle of justice) justifies recourse to myth as form of persuasion. In the Republic, Plato presents his "magnificent myth" or "noble lie" as follows (Plato 1955:415):

> You are all of you in this land, brothers. But when God fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers (which is why their prestige is greatest); he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the rest. But since you are all of the same stock, though children will commonly resemble their parents, occasionally a silver child will be born of golden parents, or a golden child of silver parents, and so on.
>
> Therefore the first and most important of God's commandments to the Rulers is that they must exercise their function as Guardians with particular care in watching the mixture of metals in the character of the children. If one of their own children has bronze or irons in its make-up, they must harden their hearts and degrade it to the ranks of the industrial and agricultural class where it properly belongs; similarly, if a child of this class is born with gold or silver in its nature, they will promote it appropriately to be a Guardian or an Auxiliary. For they know that there is a prophecy that the State will be ruined when it has Guardians of silver or bronze.

At the root of Plato's "magnificent myth" is the conviction that the concrete life of the individual can truly assume its full potential and significance within the larger context of the state. One can understand the scepticism of Glaucon, one of Socrates's interlocutors, when confronted with the latter's vision of the ideal state. He accordingly challenges Plato's Socrates as follows (Plato1955:471):

> I grant all of this, and a thousand other things too, if our state existed ... Let us now concentrate on the job of proving that it can exist and how it can exist (Plato's emphasis).

Glaucon's challenge brings us to the second important aspect of Plato's political theory, the status and authority of the philosopher as political leader.

7.3.2 The Rule of the "Philosopher-King"

When Glaucon confronts Plato's Socrates with the challenge of demonstrating the practicability of his vision of the state, it soon becomes obvious that Plato is quite aware that what he has described is an ideal which we can approximate at best, but which we can never hope to achieve (Plato 1955:472):

> We were looking for an ideal when we tried to define justice and injustice, and to describe what the perfectly just or unjust man would be if he ever existed. By looking at these perfect patterns and the measure of happiness they would enjoy, we force ourselves to admit that the nearer we approximate to them the more nearly we share their lot. That was our purpose rather than to show that they could be realized in practice.

In keeping with his ethical theory, Plato sees the state as the practical context for the striving of moral goodness and perfection and, because the philosopher is best equipped to understand the nature of the highest Good, Plato does not hesitate to entrust the responsibility of political leadership and authority to him or her (Plato 1955:473):

> The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there can be no end to the troubles of states ... or humanity itself, till the philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands ... This is what I have hesitated to say for so long, knowing what a paradox it would sound, for it is not easy to see that there is no other road to happiness, either for society or the individual.

In Plato's thought we witness an underlying paradox and tension in terms of the main preoccupation of philosophy (knowledge of the highest Good), and the business of politics, which is often degraded to the pursuit of power, domination, wealth, and so forth. It is for this reason that he feels compelled to assign political authority and leadership to the philosopher-king, in view of latter's characteristic reluctance to take an active interest in matters political. Plato cannot think of anyone except a well-trained philosopher as a guarantee against the abuse of political power (Plato 1955:521):

> Unlike present leaders, they will approach the business of government as an unavoidable necessity. The truth is if you want a well-governed state you must find for your future leaders some career that they like better than government, for only then will you have a government of the truly rich, those, that is, whose riches consist not of money, but of the happiness of a right and rational life. If you get in public affairs men who are morally impoverished that they have nothing that they can contribute themselves, but who hope to snatch some compensation for their inadequacy from a political career, there can never be a good government. They start fighting for power, and the consequent internal and domestic conflicts ruin both them and society.

If knowledge of the Form of Good is the condition for the possibility of realising the ideal state, this does not mean that Plato himself can provide us with such knowledge. In the final analysis, the ideal state is an act of (rational) faith, because the knowledge that we strive for and actually achieve is, at best, a “mere copy” of Truth. As Plato's Socrates puts it (Plato 1955:533):

> My dear Glaucon you won't be able to follow me any further, not because of any unwillingness on my part, but because what you would see would no longer be an image, but truth itself, that is, as far as I can see it. I wouldn't like to be sure that my vision is true.

Let us briefly conclude by summarizing Plato’s political theory.

1. The ideal state needed to mirror the ideals of justice and harmony that was located in the world of the Forms.
2. Plato proposed that the state be constructed as a hierarchical meritocracy with the power to rule being given in greater proportion to those who were better able to understand these ideals. A rigid pyramid of different classes was thus constructed.
3. Instead of only utilizing brute force to keep this strong social pyramid in place, Plato suggested that the philosopher kings use the latent socializing power of religious mythology. They would thus explain to the populace that this social structure was a sacred one handed down to them from the Gods. And since they were more powerful and insightful than human beings, this is how society should be run.

Point to ponder

Despite being utopian in nature, Plato's political theory raises some critical questions which have a direct impact on today's Western democracies. Consider the following passage and analyse it in the context of Plato's mistrust of the people's ability to choose (democratically) a good leader.

"It is of no use to say: Democracy is the rule of the people. This is nothing but the literal meaning of the word democracy. But throughout history this rule of the people presents itself in many various forms. And have we not even been told by dictators that true democracy has been realised only under their regime, as they have been entrusted with the power they wield by the overwhelming majority of the people? This shows the inadequacy of the definition of democracy as the rule of the people". (Rauche 1963:192)

Feedback: Plato's main question is: why is it that human beings have no problem recognising the need for an expert in many other spheres of life except in politics? If you have a legal problem, you ask advice from a lawyer (legal expert). If you have a medical problem, you ask advice from your general practitioner (medical expert). Now, why is it that in politics we believe that anyone who can collect the necessary votes is able to rule? Do you automatically become an expert by collecting the necessary votes without relevant education and proper training? Plato sees this as a serious shortcoming of democracy. In today's politics, politicians use the services of public relations companies and the media o project a positive image to the voting public. And, as we all know, politicians are full of promises before an election. More often than not, they get elected on the basis of how they project themselves and not because of their expertise. Is this not one of the reasons why some of the politicians find it difficult to relinquish power when it is time to do so? Plato advocates that leaders be carefully educated and trained from their youth.

Perhaps Plato's approach can help us in eliminating dictators throughout the world, men (usually) who take advantage of their citizens whether educated or not and persuade them to vote them into office. How many times have you heard people complaining that they made a serious mistake when they voted politician X into office?

7.4 ARISTOTLE

Aristotle's Politics and Ethics are two complementary works with a common objective: an understanding of the good life. In the Politics, however, the question of the good life is posed within the context of the socio-political order, where the role of the legislator as the provider of a good life for all the citizens of the polis is the primary task. Aristotle develops a political theory in terms of "a community of wellbeing in families and aggregations of families for the sake of a perfect and self- sufficient life". According to this community-based view of political life, the state is the highest and noblest form of human association. In our discussion of Aristotle's political theory of the state, we will focus on the following:

- His naturalistic theory of the state
- The purpose of the state (as discussed in Stumpf & Abel 2002:465)
- the stability of the state

7.4.1 Aristotle's theory of the state

In his Politics, Aristotle emphasises two important ideas of the state:

- The state is a community.
- The state is the highest of all communities.

As far as (1) is concerned, Aristotle advances an organic or “natural” view of the state. This means that he views the state as the natural outcome of an evolutionary process of social institutions, starting with the family, then the village, and finally developing into the city-state. In this historical process, the state is the natural, final and highest outcome of the evolution of all social institutions. It is in this regard that Aristotle speaks of the “political nature of man”, since the state is a form of human association that testifies to the progressive advancement of the human species. It is in this teleological sense (that is, “final end” sense) that Aristotle asserts the “naturalness” of the political condition as a form of association in which the community can achieve the common good. Aristotle does not, however, defend the progressive status of the state on historical grounds only; he also defends it on metaphysical and logical grounds. He claims:

> The state is, by nature, clearly prior to the family and the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part. This brings us to the second idea above, namely, the state as the highest community.

Whereas the family and the village are basically forms of association that are primarily focused, respectively, on self-preservation and the satisfaction of the social need for companionship, the state, as the third and highest form of association, derives its superiority from its intrinsic value and purpose. Aristotle claims that the “state exists for the good life, and not for the sake of life only ... (and) political society exits for the sake of noble actions, and not of mere companionship”.

Aristotle thus bases his theory of the state on the “nature of man”. In this regard, Aristotle argues that, in the context of the family, the human being reproduces itself; in the village or the community it finds companionship; but in the community of the state, however, it finds the possibility of the noble life, because the state is designed to fulfil the highest potential of the individual as a moral being, whose life is inextricably associated with his or her fellow-citizens.
For Aristotle, therefore, the state's legitimacy rests on its moral authority, since the purpose of the state is not to impose its will on the community, but instead to ensure that the community can flourish together “in friendship”.

In trying to establish the best form of government, Aristotle, instead of following the idealistic leanings of his predecessor, Plato, for whom the “the ideal state” could only be achieved “in heaven”, makes an empirical study of virtually all forms of government and constitutions known to the ancient world. Whilst appreciating the normative significance of Plato's theory of the state, Aristotle is realistic enough to know that “politics is the art of the possible”. He is therefore of the view that, because the best is not always possible, the statesman must not only be mindful of the best in an abstract sense, but also in a practical sense, that is, a political sense.

Aristotle's study of the various forms of government and constitutions of the time is motivated by the principle of finding the one which best serves “the common interest”. Aristotle identifies three forms of government: kingship or noble monarchy, aristocracy, and constitutional democracy. Aristotle’s monarchy, conceptualised as one who is “preeminent in virtue”, resembles Plato's “philosopher-king”, and as such he/she is above the law. Aristotle, however, is realistic enough to realise that, if such a person does exist, he or she must surely be a god among mere mortals. But if such a godlike person is an impossibility by nature, Aristotle does not doubt the reality of the noble monarch's opposite: the political tyrant of whom there were many examples in Aristotle's time.

The aristocratic form of government is Aristotle's second choice. He defines aristocracy as a “government formed of the best men absolutely”, as opposed to those whose goodness depends on the contingency of circumstances. It is important to note that, for Aristotle, the notion of aristocracy is not to be associated with wealth as was the custom in ancient Greek society. Like Plato, he is also seeking to establish a meritocracy, that is, a government by the best (in a moral sense) for the sake of the best (the common good). Aristotle contrasts this form of government with its opposite: oligarchy, which is also an aristocratic form of government but whose political status is based on wealth. An oligarchy is unacceptable because it is based on the (economic) interests of the minority, and not on the common good.

The third form of government is that of constitutional government, a form of government in which the majority of citizens legislate in the interest of the common good. This form of government is situated somewhere between the two extremes of “absolute freedom” and “absolute wealth”. Constitutional government must not be confused with absolute democracy which, for Aristotle, is an invitation to anarchy because it is based on the “rule of the poor”. The benefits of constitutional government are comparable to a feast prepared by many, instead of just one or a few people. When they attend this feast, the guests will benefit from the collective experience of the many. It is important to note that the merits of constitutional government are determined by the citizens themselves, just as the benefits of the feast depend on the guests themselves, and not on the chefs. In a constitutional government, the rulers clearly understand that they are there to serve their subjects. In this form of government, a balance is reached between the principle of freedom and the principle of wealth. As we shall see below, Aristotle sees poverty as the primary cause of social instability and revolution.

7.4.2 The stability of the state

According to Aristotle, the common good can only be achieved in a situation of political stability, and this implies that everything possible must be done to neutralise the threat of a revolution. Aristotle maintains that the greatest threat to stability of the state is poverty, because “a state in which many poor people are excluded from office will necessarily be full of enemies”.

Aristotle is realistic enough to realise that the monarchic as well as aristocratic forms of government (as the best forms of government) are not real options. He therefore opts for constitutional government based on limited suffrage, in which a balance, as stated above, can be reached between freedom and wealth. Constitutional government is a “mixed” government because it is based on more than one principle. If a state is based on one principle only, be it class, wealth, or race, it would necessarily exclude those who do not belong, and because it is not based on the common good, it can only lead to social unrest and revolution. It is interesting to note that Aristotle is of the view that “poverty is the parent of revolution and crime”. He argues further that, where there is no middle class, and the poor outnumber the rich, the violent overthrow of the state is inevitable. Aristotle's recommendation for a state based on an equitable distribution of wealth in practical terms translates into a call for the establishment of a strong middle class to act as a buffer between an extremely wealthy class (“an oligarchy”), on the one hand, and the extremely poor class (a property less proletariat), on the other hand.

Let us briefly conclude by summarizing Aristotle's political theory.

1. Aristotle understood the state to be the noblest social institution which provides best possible framework within which the family and the village could optimally develop. The state's legitimacy rests on its moral authority alone to ensure that human beings can flourish.
2. The middle class, (male) land owners elect politicians to represent them as a set of constitutional advisors to the king.
3. This middle class thus provides a "pressure valve" between the lower and upper classes. This allowed for representation and social progression whereby a member of the lower artisan class could theoretically become wealthy and progress towards becoming a nobleman who advised the king.

Point to ponder

Consider the following question in analysing Aristotle's argument that the common good can only be achieved in a situation of political stability… Is poverty the greatest threat to democracy? How serious is poverty in South Africa and to what extent does this threaten the country's political stability?

Feedback: South Africa has before been described as a country of two "nations". The first "nation" is extremely rich and the second is extremely poor. The majority of the poor are black people in general and Africans in particular. The extremely rich consist of white people.

The main question is: is this a threat to South Africa's political stability? If Aristotle's point of view is seriously considered, the answer is "yes", given the fact that the poor are in the majority.

The general instability that comes into play as a result of poverty will, in the end, lead to political instability. If this happens, will the common good ever be achieved? There are already cries in South Africa that "a hungry person is an angry person".

With the poorer countries now being swept up into the globalisation process, leaving many poorer than they were before, the question is: what is the future of the democracies in these countries?

7.5 Self-Assessment Questions

1. What do you think John Donne meant by the words, "no man is an island"?

2. How would you distinguish between the work of a political scientist or sociologist, and the work of a political philosopher?

3. Suppose a friend were to ask you to explain the difference between "the state" and "society". What would you say?

4. What would you say is a normative question? Give a few examples of your own.

5. Why is Plato's theory of the state described as "natural"?

6. Why does Plato conceive of the state as the individual "in large letters"

7. Briefly describe Plato's theory of the state.

8. Explain Plato’s understanding of justice.

9. Describe the role and significance of myth in Plato's thinking. Do you think it can be justified?

10. Comment on the significance of Plato’s simile (or allegory) of the cave.

11. Do you agree with Plato’s argument that society will only be free of evil when politicians become philosophers, or philosophers become kings?

12. Describe Aristotle’s organic (natural) theory of the state.

13. Explain the historical and metaphysical basis of Aristotle's theory of the state.

14. Describe the three orders of government that Aristotle considers the monarchy, the aristocracy, and constitutional government. How does each of these degenerate into its opposite the political tyrant, the oligarchy, and democracy?

15. What, according to Aristotle, is the purpose of the state?

16. Why does Aristotle prefer a constitutional government?

17. Do you agree that “man is a political animal”?

18. Compare and contrast Aristotle's view of the state with that of Plato's.

19. What do you think of Aristotle's argument that “poverty is the parent of revolution and crime”?

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