

Tutorial Letter 201/2/2022

Introduction to Western Philosophy

Module code: PLS1501

Semester 2

**Department of Philosophy, Practical &
Systematic Theology**

This tutorial letter contains important information
about your module.

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Dear Student

1 INTRODUCTION

This tutorial letter provides you with a discussion of Assignment 1 as well as what you need to consider when preparing for Assignment 2.

Question: Short descriptions and conceptual analysis.

Describe each of the following branches or concepts in philosophy. Your paragraphs should not exceed 500 words each. **[Total: 3 x 20 = 60 marks]**

- a) Western Philosophy
- b) Epistemology
- c) Ethics

You should read your study guide and at the same time do some research. Where you use other people's ideas, please reference them properly.

Discussion

By now you must have asked and attempted to answer a few questions about philosophy. Some of the questions may have included the following: What is philosophy? What is western philosophy? When and where did it begin? What does it deal with? Who are the key figures? How does Western philosophy differ from the other philosophies from different parts of the world? What distinguishes it? The objective of assignment 1 is to compel you to address these kinds of questions and in the process place you in a position to be able understand what you are dealing with and to explain it to fellow students including others who may not know anything about philosophy. Philosophy is a quest for knowledge, and it includes an insatiable desire to understand everything including the meaning and application of concepts. Let us now try to analyse each of the concepts. Remember to select and highlight only those points which help to paint a clear picture of that branch of philosophy without exceeding the maximum number of words prescribed for each description. Draw your examples and illustrations from the theories of the philosophers covered in the study guide as much as possible instead of just following on what others say about philosophers that we are not interested with at this point. Observing the prescribed essay length is very critical.

1. Western Philosophy

The name is a combination of the terms 'philosophy' and 'western.' Before defining Western philosophy, you may wish to define philosophy. Etymologically the term philosophy comes from the Greek words *philo-* meaning love and *sophia-* that is meaning wisdom to give us the term *philosophia* –the love of wisdom and so philosophy becomes the love of wisdom. To designate a field of inquiry as Western philosophy is in line with the practice of naming philosophical traditions according to the cultures and geographical places where they originate. This is philosophical thinking emanating from the Western world. There is, for example, Indian philosophy, Chinese philosophy, African philosophy, Latin-American philosophy, Japanese philosophy among others. Western philosophy is only one among many world philosophies. Western philosophy is also referred to as European philosophy.

There are principal branches of philosophy which include: Metaphysics, Epistemology, Logic, Ethics, Aesthetics, Political philosophy. But these are not the only subdivisions of philosophy. We have environmental philosophy, philosophy of science, philosophy of education, philosophy of mind, philosophy of law, and various other areas of applied philosophy. Western philosophy as a tradition of thought has contributed to all these branches. You can give a brief description or definition of each of the principal branches such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics etc.

It is important to note that even within the relatively narrow terrain we define as Western philosophy, there are differences in the method, approach and content within that tradition of philosophy. Western philosophy is said to have originated in ancient Greece. There are three distinct divisions in Western philosophy which are Classical philosophy, Medieval philosophy, and Modern/Contemporary philosophy. For illustrative purposes you can go on to provide brief accounts of each of these as described in your study guide but remember due to the limited length of the paragraphs you should only highlight the most important points.

You could also look at Western philosophy historically as consisting of two distinct traditions/approaches to philosophy, that is, Analytic philosophy and Continental philosophy. Analytic philosophy has been the favoured approach in the English-speaking world and its predominance has led to Analytic philosophy sometimes being referred to as the Anglo-Saxon tradition of philosophy. The other approach to philosophy is Phenomenological or Continental philosophy, where continental refers to the European mainland, but this tradition also now spread to the rest of the world. Whereas the former approach to philosophy usually prioritises studying problems of philosophy as distinct from the history of philosophy by placing a high premium on logic and analysis, the continental tradition places a greater emphasis on understanding philosophical problems within the context of their history.

2. Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. It is a branch of philosophy dealing with the analysis and evaluation of knowledge claims. An entry into the Britannica Online Encyclopaedia of philosophy traces the term epistemology to the Greek words *epistēmē* (“knowledge”) and *logos* (“reason”). Epistemology is also referred to as the theory of knowledge. It concerns itself with the questions: What is knowledge? How do we know what we know? What do we mean when we say we know something? Are there any limitations to knowing? What are the different kinds of knowledge? What is source and scope of knowledge? Epistemology as the study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge has a long history, beginning with the Ancient Greeks, continuing to the present. Aristotle is said to have declared that all men by nature desire to know. Philosophers agree that human beings are distinguished from the rest of creation by the miracle of knowledge. It is something inherent in human beings that they will seek knowledge. Among the prominent theories of knowledge are Rationalism and Empiricism. The first takes reason as the source of true knowledge while the latter considers experience as the source of knowledge. The traditional definition of knowledge is that knowledge is justified true belief. For something to count as knowledge it must satisfy this criterion. There are different kinds of knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, knowing how, and knowing that- which is propositional knowledge. Epistemology also addresses the different challenges relating to knowledge including skepticism and the problems arising from the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief. What is belief? What is justification? What is truth? Epistemology and the study of knowledge is central to philosophy given that philosophy is the quest for knowledge. In your description you should also refer to the study guide and draw from the theories of Plato and Aristotle on knowledge to demonstrate your understanding.

3. Ethics

This is another principal branch of philosophy. Ethics concerns itself with the question of what is morally right and wrong. It seeks to establish the bases of morality including the principles, assumptions and values that inform human conduct. The term ethics is technically used by philosophers to mean a philosophical study of morality. Morality is as a set of social rules, principles, and norms that guide or are intended to guide human conduct, and it includes beliefs about right and wrong actions as well as good or bad character. No society can exist without a set of rules to guide the conduct or behavior of its members. Etymologically, the term ‘moral’ comes from the Latin *mos*, which means custom or habit, and it is a translation of the Greek term *ethos*, which means roughly the same thing, and is the origin of the term ‘ethics’. As a

study of morality, ethics is divided into three branches namely: Meta-ethics, Normative ethics, and Applied ethics. Your task is then to elaborate briefly on each of these branches in order to provide the reader with a clear picture of what each of these branches studies in philosophy including the questions they deal with. You should also include a brief analysis of the dominant ethical theories of Consequentialist ethics and Deontological ethics and how each one of them determines what is a right or wrong action. By drawing from the study guide you must also make use of the ethical theories of Plato and Aristotle for example to highlight the significance of virtue and the highest Good.

Points to consider as you prepare for Assignment 2

Question interpretation

I am happy to have read a number of very good and well thought out responses. I hope this will be the case in the next assignment. For those who did not do well please take note of the mistakes and comments and avoid repeating the same mistakes in your next assignment.

Some of you had difficulties with responding to the question because of failure to identify key points that should help you to understand each of the concepts. In other words, you should select the most important points and discuss only those points while making sure to leave out much that is not necessary. The idea is to try and paint a clear picture of the subject matter covered in each of these different branches of philosophy. Avoid anything that creates confusion. Remember the whole idea is to provide a clear and concise description of these branches in a way that makes it possible for someone who has no knowledge of philosophy to understand what you mean and what is involved in each of the branches. Reproducing what various philosophers have said does not help to demonstrate your own understanding. You do not therefore have to copy or simply reproduce the study guide. Try to explain in your own words as much as possible. In philosophy, conceptual analysis is very important. You want to be very clear on what is meant by each concept. Therefore, the point of these short essays is to provide the reader with a description that clearly maps the logical geography of the concept by elaborating on the key points which define that particular branch of philosophy.

Plagiarism

This is a serious academic offense with very grave consequences. While many of you tried to write your own work there are some who were simply copying – clear cases of copy and paste from the internet. That form of cheating must stop immediately. You cannot lift material from the internet written by someone else and simply put your name there and claim that you have written that work. That is a form of stealing and Unisa does not tolerate any forms of cheating.

Where you have taken ideas/statements from a source, please acknowledge with quotation marks and by providing the name, source, year, and page. See Tutorial Letter 301 for guidelines on how to reference.

Length of essay

I had problems with some who attempted to reproduce the Study Guide and documents from the Internet by writing almost everything that was said about philosophy. Please try to select and discuss only those points that have direct relevance to the question. Read, analyse and present in your own words as much as possible. Where you make use of statements from sources to explain your point cite them appropriately and correctly. Remember these are supposed to be short paragraphs of not more than 500 words each. In this module, we take all instructions seriously.

Proof Reading

Please make it a point to proof-read your essays before final submission. My task is to assess your argument and not to be the proof-reader. Avoid unnecessary mistakes because they affect the quality of your essay.

Bibliography

At this level you cannot submit an assignment without a bibliography when it is clear that the ideas you have presented are not your own. You need to reference the ideas otherwise this amounts to plagiarism. All essays must have a complete Bibliography of all sources used in the essay. You will be penalised for this and lose marks unnecessarily. Please refer to your Tutorial Letter 301 for Guidelines.

I have no doubt that if you take all this into consideration, your essay for assignment 2 will be much better.

Thank you
Prof P. Mungwini
Unisa