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# UNIT 5 AN OVERVIEW OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHIES

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## Contents

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Ancient Western Philosophy
- 5.3 Medieval Western Philosophy
- 5.4 Modern Western Philosophy
- 5.5 Contemporary Western Philosophy
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 Key Words
- 5.8 Further Readings and References
- 5.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we attempt at presenting an overview of Western Philosophies. This unit is intended to achieve the following aims, from a synthetic point of view. By the end of this unit, you should be able to get familiar:

- 1) with the different themes, running through the history of Western Philosophy
- 2) with the different schools, which fall under the broad category called Western philosophy
- 3) with the common problems in the field of knowledge, search for meaning, ethics and politics faced by the different schools

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Alfred North Whitehead, eminent Process Philosopher and Mathematician once stated that the entire Western Philosophy was a footnote to Plato. Given the fact that Plato carried forward many of the philosophical concerns his predecessors and left his imprint on the whole of the subsequent development of Western thought, the observation of Whitehead on Plato seems in place. What is to be noted however is that, what was stated by Whitehead about Plato's philosophical impact on posterity, can be said of any other philosopher too, to a certain extent. This is because, philosophy is a pluralistic enterprise, dialectical in its nature and process.

When we say that pluralistic enterprise, we mean that philosophers approach reality and the problems posed by it, from their own historical contexts and perspectives. When we state that philosophy is a dialectical enterprise, we mean that in it, there is an interplay of the opposites, giving rise to a new ideas and phenomena.

In this Unit, which is meant to be an overview of the Western Philosophies, we shall try to capture the dialectical interplay play of ideas, in the history of Western

Philosophies. We shall also try to take note of the pluralism of approaches to different philosophical problems. In the process, we shall also appreciate the underlying unity of concerns, which are always present, throughout the course of the History of Philosophies, in spite of the differences in their professed perspectives.

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## 5.2 ANCIENT WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

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Ancient Western Philosophy is also known as **Greco-Roman Philosophy** or **Greek philosophy**, because it started in Greece, or rather with the proto-Greek people. Ancient Western Philosophy is also known as “**Greek Miracle**”. This Maritime colonial power began to flower as a centre of thought and creativity that it became a mark of all future thinking.

‘Ancient’ is a relative term. Usually it refers to things, events, persons, time which are removed from as in the past. AWP refers to the pioneers, the first to go and venture in a new field or territory. They were daring thinkers, who were ready to look at problems afresh, searching for new solutions.

*Greece is considered as the cradle of Western thought:*

### 1) Geographical conditions

The external beauty or natural environment was so favorable for their thinking. They made them wonder about the creation of the universe.

### 2) Cultural Interaction

Greeks having many harbors they could develop trade with surrounding nations or countries. People, who came for trade, brought with them their literature and culture. These helped Greece to interact with other nations. They had the possibility of knowing each other. This factor led to the universal thinking in Greece.

### 3) Political and Economic security

There was no poverty, disturbance or troubles. They had no political and economic botheration. The stable political life, flourishing democracy and abundance of leisure time helped create favourable conditions towards philosophizing.

### 4) Myths and Legends

They had many myths. The country was blessed with mythical views from which they could draw inspiration. The myths tried to convey truths about the realities of life.

### 5) Religious Freedom

**They were free to worship whichever gods they liked.**

### 6) Extroverts

The people of Greece were generally extroverts, who were sociable and other-centered.

- 1) Here they gave more importance to search for wisdom (connected with wonder).

- 2) Philosophers like Plato and Socrates emphasized the search for wisdom and others like Aristotle emphasized on the very aspect of wisdom.
- 3) Ancient people were amazed at the different realities of nature. This wonder forced them to search for wisdom.

The principal philosophical issues were: the nature of visible reality (changing or unchanging/ being or becoming of reality/order and harmony of the physical world); the unifying principle of multifaceted universe (arché) - the world-stuff; affirmation of the desire and capacity to know the intrinsic nature of the external world; the rational (moral) nature of human beings in the society; the place of human beings in the vast universe. The final result is: acknowledgement of the immensity of the physical universe and the inability of man to comprehend the whole reality. The chief proponents were non-believers and polytheists thinkers; their 'belief' did not affect their human speculations

The study of ancient western philosophy is very relevant even today. An educated man is a person who knows history. Unless one knows what had been taking place, one finds difficult to proceed further. This study also helps us to learn from the mistakes of the past. By studying the history of philosophy, we come to know the ideas, in either positive or negative influence. It also helps us to know that no philosophy is fully right or wrong. In reading history of philosophy doubts may arise in our minds. It creates in us an enquiring mind. Every philosophical system is a development of previous one. Ex: To understand philosophy of Aristotle, we need to study his predecessor, Plato. It is relevant because it is embedded with the spirit of searching for truth.

### **Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

- 1) Discuss about the background of Ancient Western Thought.

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- 2) What are the central issues of the Ancient Western Philosophy?

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- 3) Write about the relevance of Ancient Western Thought.

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## **5.3 MEDIEVAL WESTERN PHILOSOPHY**

Medieval philosophy is the philosophy of Europe and the Middle East in the era now known as Medieval or the Middle Ages, the period roughly extending from the

decline of classical culture and the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. “The Middle Ages” refers to the period of European history from the end of the Roman Empire in Italy until the Renaissance, i.e. from the 5th century A.D. until the 15th.

Philosophers during this time include Boethius, Anselm, Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham and many others. During the 12th and 13th centuries European philosophy was much influenced by the writings of Muslim philosophers including Avicenna (ibn Sina) and Averroes (ibn Rushd). Philosophy in the medieval style continued into the late seventeenth century. Descartes and Leibniz cannot be well understood without some knowledge of medieval thought. It is defined partly by the process of rediscovering the ancient culture developed in Greece and Rome in the classical period, and partly by the need to address theological problems and to integrate sacred doctrine and secular learning. Medieval philosophy was decisively influenced by ideas from the Greece, the East, and the patristic period, from the Jewish philosophical tradition and from Islam.

- 1) The main problematic of Medieval Western philosophy is the relation between faith and reason.
- 2) It is during this period, that Christians came in contact with Greek philosophy.

Medieval philosophy in general could be called a Christian philosophy. Christian philosophy is a term to describe the fusion of various fields of philosophy, historically derived from the philosophical traditions of Western thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, with the theological doctrines of Christianity. Christian philosophy originated during the Middle Ages as medieval theologians attempted to demonstrate to the religious authorities that Greek philosophy and Christian faith were, in fact, compatible methods for arriving at divine truth. The chief proponents were Christian thinkers – philosophers and theologians.

The problems discussed throughout this period were the relation of faith to reason, the existence and unity of God, the object of theology and Metaphysics, and the problems of knowledge, of universals, and of individuation. The chief philosophical reflection was around man’s relationship with other human beings, the world, and God. It was a period of ‘tension’ between philosophy and theology of major monotheistic religions. Often philosophical categories were made use of to explain theology, under the inspiration of ‘revealed truths’. During this era philosophy became a system, with well-established schools. The Catholic Authority had the last word on the authenticity of philosophical reflections. It emphasizes on the necessity and importance of man’s openness to transcendent reality in order to comprehend truth.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

- 1) Write a short note on the origin and importance of the Medieval Western Philosophy

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2) What are the reasons for identifying Medieval Western Philosophy as religion-oriented Philosophy?

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3) Discuss the main themes during the Medieval Western period

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## 5.4 MODERN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The focus of Modern Western philosophy was reason. This period was marked by separation of philosophy from theology and separation of philosophy from science. There are three main schools of philosophies, that of *Rationalism*, *Empiricism* and *Transcendentalism*. Rationalism was trying to give importance to reason. Method they used was deductive method. Important philosophers of this school were Rene Descartes, the father of modern western philosophy, Pascal, Spinoza and Leibniz. Empiricism spoke about sense knowledge. The method of philosophizing was inductive method. Locke, Berkeley and Hume are eminent thinkers of this school. Transcendentalism tried to bring about a synthesis between Rationalism and Empiricism. Immanuel Kant is the main figure of this school.

Etymologically, Renaissance means rebirth, renewal or awaking etc. It starts from about 1450 and stretches for hundred years. It starts with the fall of Constantine to Turks and inventing of the printing machine. Printing helped towards the faster dissemination of ideas. Renaissance is also known as “age of adventure”.

Renaissance had much to give to philosophy as it developed the thinking patterns of the people. It led to the growth of humanism i.e. a belief in man, a passion for learning, an emphasis on scholarly exactness, value of human being, his nature, his power etc., which had much influenced post-Kantian philosophers. Renaissance also led to geographical discoveries, development in art and literature, change of idea on religious thinking and development of political and economical views.

Enlightenment is the term used to describe the trends in thought and letters in Europe and the American colonies during the 18th century prior to the French Revolution. The phrase was frequently employed by writers of the period itself, convinced that they were emerging from centuries of darkness and ignorance into a new age enlightened by reason, science, and a respect for humanity.

More than a set of fixed ideas, the Enlightenment implied an attitude, a method of thought. Given the motto of the age, “Dare to know”, a desire arose to reexamine and question all received ideas and values, to explore new ideas in many different directions—hence the inconsistencies and contradictions that often appear in the writings of 18th-century thinkers.

## ***Rationalism***

This school of philosophy mainly concentrated on the reason of human being. Important philosopher in rationalism, Descartes used *Methodic Doubt* to arrive at the reality. For him the truth is “what can be clearly and distinctly thought of.” He considered man as a thinking thing. He says, “I think, therefore, I am” this is called famous **Cogito, ergo sum, i.e. primacy of consciousness**. They believed in innate ideas and later Kant remarks that they were too dogmatic about metaphysics. They tried to give definite, pristine shape to the reality with the help of reason. They had also attempted to prove God’s existence.

## ***Empiricism***

Empiricism is the view that all knowledge is derived from experience. They deny the innate ideas. Empiricism was mostly held by British philosophers who lived from 16<sup>th</sup> century to 18<sup>th</sup> century, running parallel with continental philosophers. Main theories like skepticism, enlightenment, deism, pragmatism and utilitarian ethics etc. came about because of empiricism. Locke, who held that sense knowledge alone is real and denied innate ideas and Hume, who subordinated reason to instinct and sense experience were the leading figures of this school. Kant remarks that they were too skeptic about the knowledge. They did not attempt to know the metaphysical realities. As result, they ended in skepticism.

## ***Transcendental Idealism***

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher is the founder of Transcendentalism who tried to bring about a synthesis of rationalism and empiricism. Kant speaks of impossibility and possibility of metaphysics. In his book *Critic of Pure Reason* he says that metaphysics is impossible because we cannot reach nowhere about the knowledge of God, nature, soul, freedom etc. with scientific knowledge. Thus, metaphysics is impossible. However, in his second book *Critic of Practical Reason* he concludes that metaphysic is possible, because it is a natural disposition, which ultimately leads us in search of destiny.

## ***Post Kantian philosophy.***

Continental modern philosophy is a significant strand Western philosophy. It was a culmination of the social, cultural and economical developments that developed European society. Reformation of traditions, abolishment of tradition and giving up religious thinking and humanistic approach towards philosophy were the main characteristic of this era.

We have Subjective Idealism of Fichte i.e. self or ego or subject or spirit was alone real, Objective Idealism of Shelling i.e. nature is the commander of the reality and Absolute Idealism of Hegel i.e. unity of spirit and nature. They introduced dialectical method. It is a method of reaching the reality in three steps.

Thesis  $\square \rightarrow$  antithesis  $\square \rightarrow$  synthesis

E.g. Private interest  $\square \rightarrow$  Public interest  $\square \rightarrow$  State

Voluntaristic idealism of Schopenhauer i.e. “human being is the will to live”.

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## 5.5 CONTEMPORARY WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

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If Modern Western Philosophy reached the astronomical heights of reason, the locus of Contemporary Western Philosophy was about discovering the meaning of human existence. It analyzed the existence of human being in a concrete and practical way, seeing existence as something grounded and caught up in concrete situations of life.

Contemporary Western Philosophy is a journey in which, we visit many schools of Philosophical thought to be arrived in theory and to be lived in action beginning from Pragmatism to Post-Modernism. Let us survey each of the schools of thought in brief.

**Pragmatism:** It is the starting point of journey that emphasizes the importance of action over doctrine, experience over fixed principles, meaning of the ideas reside in the practical consequences and proclaims ideas as the instruments of action. In simple words, it is a philosophy of action. The main exponents of this school are William James, Charles S. Pierce, and John Dewey. What is noteworthy about this school is that it recognized the relative, contingent and fallible character of human reason.

**Phenomenology:** It is a century old international movement in philosophy. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Johann Henrich applied it in his theory of epistemology to distinguish truth from error and in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel used it to trace the development of human spirit from mere sense experience to absolute knowledge. However, it is with Edmund Husserl, that it took its present shape and proposed it as a technique for describing things as they appear to conscience. In simple words, it is a method of approaching the phenomena in its pure state. The main exponents were Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Martin Heidegger, the student of Edmund Husserl, diverged from the thought and methodology of his master and gave an existential and hermeneutical turn to phenomenology.

**Analytic Philosophy/ Linguistic Philosophy:** It brought into light that language is not a neutral tool that serves to depict ready-made reality, instead is an active player in the very understanding and grasping of a reality. The main exponent of this school, Ludwig Wittgenstein clarified that function of philosophy was to clarify language through an analysis of words. Other exponents are A.J. Ayer, Rudolf Carnap, Frege and Bertrand Russell. This school had two main branches, namely, Logical Positivism and Logical Empiricism. Logical Positivists held the Verification Theory as key to their analysis of language. It stated that a proposition was either verifiable or falsifiable and if it could not either of these criteria, it was nonsensical. Together with the verification theory, they also held the Picture Theory of language, which assumed that language was an exact mirroring of or a one-to-one correspondence of reality. Logical Empiricism questioned the Verification Theory, as well as the Picture theory of Language, stating that each of languages was a game, and there was a Family resemblance between different games. Wittgenstein, in the earlier stages of his thought was a Logical Positivist, who later on evolved himself to be a Logical Empiricist reality, affect each other and reality is in a dynamic process, and at the same time, is dependent. The main exponent of this school is Alfred North Whitehead.

**Philosophy of Life:** It started in France and Germany. For materialists reality = matter, for idealists reality = idea and for life philosophers reality = life. The main

exponents of this school are Henri Bergson, Fredrich Nietzsche, Maurice Blondel, Teilhard de Chardin, and Victor Frankl. According to this school, the secret of the world is in movement rather than in the material things. For Henri Bergson dynamism of life is movement moving from past to present which advances into the future, for Nietzsche living out values and will to become make life dynamic, for Teilhard dynamism of life is immersing the human self in the process of evolution and become Christ realized being and Victor Frankl dynamism of life is making and producing meaningfulness in human life.

**Existentialism:** Kierkegaard combines the Individualism of Marx and Emotionalism of Shelling that gave rise to Existentialism, and thus became the father of Existentialism. It deals with the varied themes of life, authenticity and inauthenticity of existence, inter-subjectivity, estrangement, alienation, absurdity, homelessness, depersonalization, dehumanization, objectification, and the eclipse of God. It stresses the aspect of freedom, precedence of existence over essence, personal responsibility, free will and the good of the many individuals. The main exponents of the school of Existentialism are Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Heidegger.

**Philosophical Hermeneutics:** Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. Philosophical Hermeneutics broadens this understanding of interpretation to include all human understanding as a journey and process of interpretation. The main exponents of Philosophical Hermeneutics are Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

**Postmodernism:** Postmodernism is a contemporary intellectual movement that had begun in the West and now it affects the entire world. It focuses on the periphery, as contrasted to the centre – of events, meaning and ideologies, critiques human reason and presence of human self to itself as a Representation and affirms plurality of the locations of knowledge and meaning and multiplicity of selves. The main promoters of the Postmodernism are Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, Michael Foucault, and Jean-Francis Lyotard

**Process Philosophy:** It is a 20<sup>th</sup> century school of philosophy that rejects Parmenides' notion of being, its permanence and emphasizes the Heraclitus' idea of change and Aristotle's theory of becoming. It stands on the ground that events make up a Note:

a) Use the space provided for your answer

### Check Your Progress III

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Explain the school of Phenomenology

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2) Write in your own words about the School of Existentialism

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- 3) What is the special contribution of Contemporary Western Philosophy to human being?
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## 5.6 LET US SUM UP

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The task we undertook in this unit was basically an overview of Western Philosophies. We approached this process from a chronological point of view, namely, ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary western philosophies. This task could have been approached from the perspective of Kant, who summed up the entire philosophical project, under the three questions, “What can I know”, “What should I do” and “What Can I hope for?”

Human beings exist in the world and with the world. They are also capable of asking questions about themselves and the reality, in which and with which they exist. They have been asking the question about the primordial stuff of reality. The basic philosophical question has been “Why there is something rather than nothing?” All questions about reality are also questions about ourselves and the way we interpret our knowledge about reality. All philosophy of every age and place has to return to this primordial or fundamental question. The history of Western Philosophies bears testimony to the fact the questioning capacity and nature of human beings, especially under the basic thrust of Skepticism, Idealism, Rationalism and, positivism. All questions of philosophy, we have seen in the above overview, are also existential questions.

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## 5.7 KEY WORDS

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- Myth** : Myth is an imaginative story with a philosophical or theological orientation.
- Ortodoxis** : Orthodoxis means right teaching or doctrine.
- Orthopraxis** : Orthopraxis means right practice.

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## 5.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check Your Progress I

1) Greece is considered as the cradle of Western thought

*Geographical conditions – peninsula:*

The external beauty or natural environment was so favorable for their thinking. They made them wonder about the creation of universe.

*Cultural Interaction*

Greeks having many harbors they could develop trade with surrounding nations or countries. People, who came for trade, brought with them their literature and culture. These helped Greece to interact with other nations. They had the possibility of knowing each other. This factor led to the universal thinking in Greece.

*Political and Economic security*

There was no poverty, disturbance, and troubles. They have no political and economic botheration. The stable political life and flourishing democracy helped philosophizing. Since they had all these things in abundance they could spend much time in meditation or to think, they have lot of leisure time.

*Myths and Legends*

These people had many myths. This country was blessed with mythical views from which they could get inspiration. They speak about the realities of life.

*Religious Freedom*

They were free to worship the God they liked.

*Extroverts*

The people of Greece are generally extroverts who are sociable and other-centered.

- 2) The principal philosophical issues were: the nature of visible reality, the unifying principle of multifaceted universe,; affirmation of the desire and capacity to know the intrinsic nature of the external world; the rational nature of human beings, the place of human beings in the universe, acknowledgement of the immensity of the physical universe and the inability of man to comprehend the whole reality. The chief proponents were non-believers and polytheists thinkers; their 'belief' did not affect their human speculations.
- 3) An educated man is a person who knows history. Unless one knows what had been taking place, one finds difficult to proceed further. This study also helps us to learn for the mistakes. If we reflect upon our past mistakes, we can learn from them. By studying the history of philosophy we come to know their ideas either positive or negative, thus we do not make them in the future. It also helps us to know that no philosophy is fully right or wrong. In reading history of philosophy doubts may arise in mind. It creates in us a skeptical (cynical) mind. Every philosophical system is a development of previous one. Ex: To understand philosophy of Aristotle, we need to study his predecessor, Plato. It is relevant because it is embedded with the Spirit of searching for truth. They were very anxious to know the truth.

### **Answers to Check Your Progress II**

- 1) Medieval philosophy is the philosophy of Europe and the Middle East in the era now known as medieval or the Middle Ages, the period roughly extending from the decline of classical pagan culture and the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. "The Middle Ages" refers to the period of European history from the end of the Roman Empire in Italy until the Renaissance, i.e. from the 5th century A.D. until the 15th. Philosophers during this time included Boethius, Anselm, Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham and many others. During the 12th and 13th centuries European philosophy was much influenced by the writings of Muslim philosophers including Avicenna (ibn Sina) and Averroes (ibn Rushd). Philosophy in the medieval style continued into the late seventeenth century; Descartes and Leibniz cannot be well understood without some knowledge of medieval thought. It is defined partly by the process of rediscovering the ancient culture developed in Greece and Rome in the classical period, and partly by the need to address theological problems and to integrate sacred doctrine and secular learning. Medieval philosophy was decisively influenced by ideas from the Greek East, the patristic period, from the Jewish philosophical tradition, and from Islam.
- 2) Medieval philosophy in general could be called a Christian philosophy. Christian philosophy is a term to describe the fusion of various fields of philosophy, historically derived from the philosophical traditions of Western thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, with the theological doctrines of Christianity. Christian philosophy originated during the Middle Ages as medieval theologians attempted to demonstrate to the religious authorities that Greek philosophy and Christian faith were, in fact, compatible methods for arriving at divine truth. The chief proponents were Christian thinkers – philosophers and theologians.
- 3) The problems discussed throughout this period are the relation of faith to reason, the existence and unity of God, the object of theology and Metaphysics, and the problems of knowledge, of universals, and of individuation. The chief

philosophical reflection is around man's relationship with other human beings, the world, and God. It is a period of 'tension' between philosophy and theology of major monotheistic religions. Often philosophical categories were made use of to explain theology, under the inspiration of 'revealed truths'. During this era philosophy became a system, with well-established schools. The Catholic Authority had the last word on the authenticity of philosophical reflections. It emphasizes on the necessity and importance of man's openness to transcendent reality in order to comprehend truth.

### **Answers to Check Your Progress III**

- 1) It is a century old international movement in philosophy. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Johann Henrich applied it in his theory of epistemology to distinguish truth from error and in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel used it to trace the development of human spirit from mere sense experience to absolute knowledge. However, it is with Edmund Husserl, that it took its present shape and proposed it as a technique for describing things as they appear to conscience. In simple words, it is a method of approaching the phenomena in its pure state. The main exponents were Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Martin Heidegger, the student of Edmund Husserl, diverged from the thought and methodology of his master and gave an existential and hermeneutical turn to phenomenology.
- 2) Existentialism is a combination of individualism of Marx and emotionalism of Shelling. Soren Kierkegaard is the father of Existentialism. It is a school of thought that emerged after the war and concentrated mainly on the existential problems of human existence about meaning in life, authentic and inauthentic existence, absurdity, inter-subjectivity etc., The main exponents of the school of Existentialism are Jean Paul Satre, Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Heidegger.
- 3) The special contribution of Contemporary Western Philosophy to human being is that, the philosophers of this period concentrated on discovering the meaning of human existence. It analyzed the existence of human being in a concrete and practical way. In simple words, Contemporary Western Philosophy is a shift from orthodoxis to orthopraxis.