



A History of Western Thought Why We Think the Way We Do

Summer 2016

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Videos of lectures available at:

www.litchapala.org

under “8-Week Lectures” tab

A History of Western Thought

Lecture Schedule

- ◆ August 12 – **Intro/Faith** (Plato, Aristotle; Augustine; Aquinas)
- ◆ August 19 – **Reason** (Descartes, Locke, Hume)
- ◆ August 26 – **Experience** (Kant, Schleiermacher)
- ◆ September 2 – **Process** (Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Whitehead)
- ◆ September 9 – NO LECTURE
- ◆ September 16 – **Will** (Machiavelli, James, Nietzsche)
- ◆ September 23 – **Meaning & Meaninglessness**
(Wittgenstein; Logical Positivists; Derrida)
- ◆ September 30 – **Where Do We Go From Here?**



Faith – Leading up to the Modern World

Idealism

“Mathematician/Poets”

Plato (c.427-347 BC)

- ◆ Mathematician/philosopher
- ◆ Distrusted the senses
- ◆ “Ideal” forms in mind of God
- ◆ Good is the highest good
- ◆ “All since are footnotes to Plato”



St. Augustine (354-430 AD)

- ◆ Neo-Platonic Christian theologian
- ◆ Faith comes before Reason
- ◆ His theology dominated for 900 years

Materialism

“Scientists/Politicians”

Aristotle (c.384-322 BC)

- ◆ Scientist/philosopher
- ◆ Form found in matter
- ◆ Sense experience is critical
- ◆ Happiness is highest good
- ◆ “The Philosopher”



St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

- ◆ Aristotelian Christian theologian
- ◆ Reason comes before Faith
- ◆ 21 vol. *Summa* still in use
- ◆ Scholasticism



Ism's Affecting Our Culture Today

◆ **Idealism** – belief that reality (as we can know it) is mental, mentally constructed, or otherwise immaterial.

◆ **Materialism** – reliance on experience of physical/material world alone as the basis for determining what is real.

◆ **Relativism** – belief that truths (esp. ethical truths) change depending on individuals and groups holding them.

◆ **Subjectivism** – belief that individual feeling or thought is ultimate criterion for what is real, true and good.

◆ **Rationalism** – reliance on reason alone as the basis for establishing truth or value.

◆ **Sensualism** – persistent and excessive pursuit of sensual or experiential pleasures and interests.

◆ **Human Progress & Perfectibility** – belief that humanity is continually evolving into better/higher state of being.

◆ **Commercialism** – over-emphasis on materials goods or economic benefits.

◆ **Nihilism** – belief that traditional values & beliefs are unfounded; existence is senseless & useless (despair).



Rene Descartes (French, 1596-1650)

- Mathematician (“Cartesian coordinates”)
- Scientist (physiology, optics, astronomy)
- Philosopher (“I think, therefore I am.”)
- Trained Scholastic (skeptical Catholic)


◆ Key thoughts

- Applied inductive science/math principles to physical phenomena and to philosophy.
- Introduced rational skepticism (“*Cognito, ergo sum*”); you start by doubting everything but self.
- Introduced strict dualism (mind vs. matter).
- Argued for God’s existence based on rationality.

◆ Long-term impact

- Started Modern Age; modern scientific method; & modern philosophy (Idealism, Rationalism, Skepticism); along with modern belief in complete separation of mind & matter (“Cartesian dualism”) & of a purely mechanistic explanation for the universe.





Then examining attentively what I was...
from the very fact that I thought of doubting the
truth of other things, it followed very evidently
and very certainly that I existed...

... this “I”, that is to say, the mind, by which
I am what I am, is distinct entirely from the body,
and even that it is easier to know than the body,
and moreover that even if the body were not, it
would not cease to be all that it is.

... And having noticed that there is nothing
at all in this, ***I think, therefore I am***, which
assures me that I am speaking the truth, except
that I see very clearly that in order to think one
must exist...

Rene Descartes, ***Discourse on Method***

John Locke (English, 1632-1704)

- Philosopher (founder of Empiricism)
- Political theorist (democracy)

◆ Key thoughts

- Knowledge and reality can only be pursued by experience of the senses.
- At birth all people are a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) which is imprinted by experience.
- Outlined theories of political rights and majority rule that became basis for the US Constitution.
- Applied Empiricism to ethics, politics, religious belief.

◆ Long-term impact

- Accepted Descartes' Rationalism, but was against Idealism ("It's all in your mind") in favor of Empiricism ("I believe what I see.") – foundational to later radical skeptical views of existence. (Pro-Aristotle; anti-Plato.) Locke also proposed many ideas – natural rights, property rights, role of government, majority rule – that led directly to US form of government.





1. ***Idea is the object of thinking.***—Every man being conscious to himself that he thinks... it is past doubt that men have in their mind several ideas, such as are those expressed by the words whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness, and others: it is in the first place then to be inquired, How he comes by them?
2. ***All ideas come from sensation or reflection.***—Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? ...Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience. In that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself.

John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

David Hume (Scottish, 1711-1776)

- Philosopher/ethicist
- Historian
- Political theorist/economist

◆ Key thoughts

- Reason & sensation are separate things.
- There is no reasonable argument for causation; it's just a habitual way of thinking based on experience.
- Therefore, matters of fact are unknowable.
- A person is not a rational, individual “self” (Descartes); rather a “bundle of different perceptions.”
- Concept of right and wrong is not rational, but only a pragmatic attempt to achieve one's own happiness.

◆ Long-term impact

- Introduced radical skepticism into philosophy & epistemology has held philosophy hostage ever since. Laid the foundation for every self-negating ideology of the 19th/20th centuries. Economic theory influenced Adam Smith and modern capitalism.





Reason can never show us the connection of one object with another, tho' aided by experience, and the observation of their conjunction in all past instances. When the mind, therefore passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determined by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects and unite them in the imagination.

David Hume

Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

Progression of Philosophical Thinking

Idealism - We know reality with our minds

Plato (c.427-347 BC)



St. Augustine (354-430)
(faith precedes reason)



Rene Descartes (1596-1650)
(rationalism, subjectivism)



Materialism - We know reality with our senses

Aristotle (c.384-322 BC)



Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)
(reason precedes faith)



John Locke (1632-1704)
(Empiricism)



David Hume (1711-1776)
(radical skepticism)



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