



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

Summer 2016

Ross Arnold

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

**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?**



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)

↓
Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
(rationalism; subjectivism; relativism)

↓
Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)
(radical subjectivism; relativism)

Materialism— We know reality from 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)



Progression of Philosophical Thinking

Subjectivism/Rationalism – “It’s all about me; what I think, experience or prefer; rationality is the only source of truth.”

Descartes – “I think, therefore I am.”

Kant – “Reality is created as my brain organizes my experiences.”

Schleiermacher – “Religion is not about God, but about my experiences of the divine.”

Scientism – “Science and empirical observation are the only sources of truth.”

Locke – “Humans are *tabula rasa*, with no content prior to experience of physical phenomena.”

Skepticism – “But how do you KNOW anything?”

Descartes – “Start by doubting everything, except my own awareness of myself.”

Hume – “Nothing can be proven from past experience; cause-and-effect is not rationally provable; how do you KNOW?”

Relativism – “Truth is not absolute, but varies with different experiences.” (Hume, Kant, Schleiermacher)



G.W.F. Hegel (German, 1770-1831)

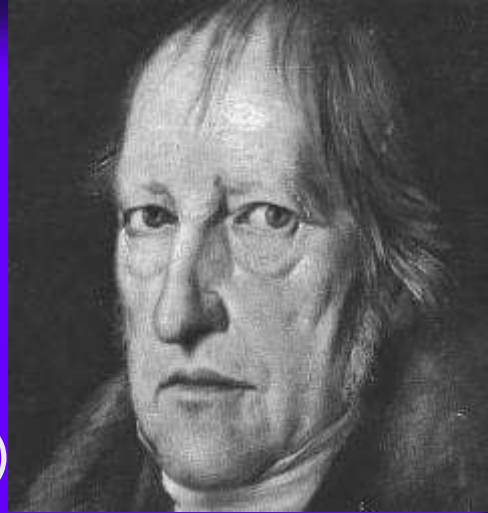
- Probably 2nd only to Kant as influential modern Western philosopher

◆ Key thoughts

- All experience & thought of all time fit together in a dialectical process (“reality”) as history unfolds and the Absolute Spirit evolves towards supreme self-consciousness.
- Thesis + Antithesis = Synthesis (etc.) – Conflict drives history.

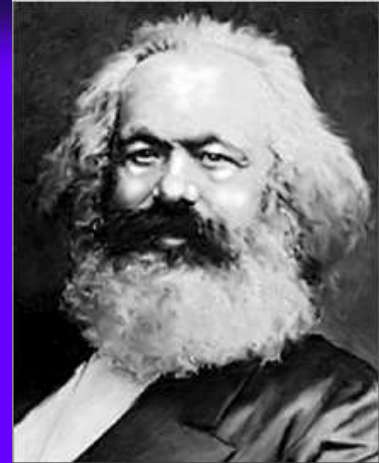
◆ Long-term impact

- Introduced the concept of a non-personal “Absolute” as an evolutionary force in history that comes to know itself through human progression on three levels: art, religion, and philosophy. Philosophy is supreme because it deals with rationality, the highest faculty. (“Reason is the Sovereign of the world...the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process.”) Human progress is inevitable as the Absolute unfolds in a progression of human history.



Karl Marx (German, 1818-1883)

- Cofounder w/ Friedrich Engels of scientific socialism (modern communism), and so one of history's most influential thinkers.



◆ Key thoughts

- Every era in history has been defined by prevailing economic systems, especially the process of economic struggle between ruling classes and working classes.

◆ Long-term impact

- Marx took the dialectical idealism (thesis/antithesis/synthesis conflict) of Hegel and adapted it to the political/economic theory of dialectical materialism – the philosophical basis for modern communism. This idea – that the conflict between classes is the primary building block in historical evolution – was the foundation for the modern workers movement and the dominant (though now failed) political theory of the 20th century.



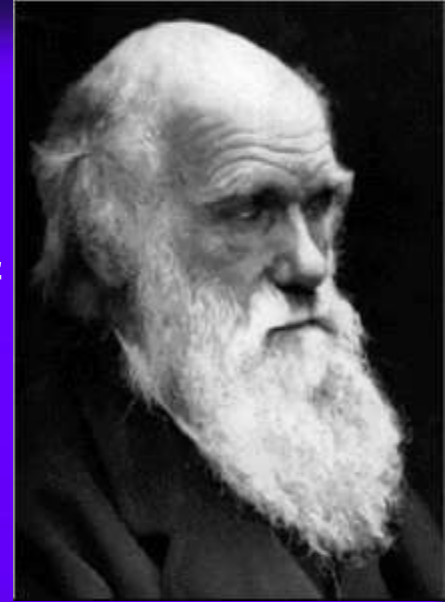
Charles Darwin (British, 1809-1882)

Key thoughts

- Darwinism – the theory that all forms of life occur through a random process of evolution by natural selection.

Long-term impact

- Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection gave skeptics an argument against what had remained the strongest defense for belief on God: the need to explain how the complexity of life – especially human life – could come into existence except by the act of a Creator God. This became and remains the primary platform for scientific atheism/agnosticism. It also gave birth to Social Darwinism – the sociological argument that, since humans are animals subject to the same laws as all animals, survival of the fittest applies as a justification for the strong to rule over the weak (contrary to Christian compassion).



Alfred North Whitehead

(British, 1861-1947)

- Brilliant mathematician and philosopher; one of the great thinkers of the 20th Century

◆ Key thoughts

- Process philosophy/philosophy of organism reality is best described as an evolutionary process; a constant flux and change.

◆ Long-term impact

- Whitehead opposed a philosophy of substance – the idea that reality is a fixed and permanent thing underlying the fluctuations of experience. But if everything is in process, where can we plant our feet? What can we depend on? Especially since “process theology” – the theological outgrowth from process philosophy – says that all things (even God) is still in process and under development. (This is how the problem of suffering is answered – God is doing the best He can, but He’s still “in process” just like us, and so not able to do all things.)



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)

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
(rationalism; subjectivism; relativism)

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)
(radical subjectivism; relativism)

Georg W.F. Hegel (1770-1831)
(rationalism; perfectionism)

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947)
(process; relativism)

Materialism – We know reality from 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)

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)
(materialism; scientism)

Karl Marx (1818-1883)
(dialectical materialism)



Progression of Philosophical Thinking

Subjectivism/Rationalism – “It’s all about me; what I think, experience or prefer; rationality is the only source of truth.”

Descartes – “I think, therefore I am.”

Kant – “Reality is created as my brain organizes my experiences.”

Schleiermacher – “Religion is not about God, but about my experiences of the divine.”

Hegel – “Rationality is the highest faculty.”

Scientism – “Science and empirical observation are the only sources of truth.”

Locke – “Humans are *tabula rasa*, with no content prior to experience of physical phenomena.”

Skepticism – “But how do you KNOW anything?”

Descartes – “Start by doubting everything, except my own awareness of myself.”

Hume – “Nothing can be proven from past experience; cause-and-effect is not rationally provable; how do you KNOW?”

Relativism – “Truth is not absolute, but varies with different experiences.” (Hume, Kant, Schleiermacher)

Humanism – philosophical and ethical emphasis on value & agency of human beings, preferring critical thinking & evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over dogma. (Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Whitehead)



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

**Videos of lectures available at:
www.litchapala.org**

under “8-Week Lectures” tab



