



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

Summer 2016

Ross Arnold

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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?**



Progression of Philosophical Thinking

Idealism – We know reality with our minds

Plato (c.427-347 BC)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Materialism – We know reality from our senses

Aristotle (c.384-322 BC)

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

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John Locke (1632-1704)
(Empiricism)

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David Hume (1711-1776)
(radical skepticism)

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

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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; Kant; Schleiermacher; Hegel

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

- Locke; Darwin, Marx

Skepticism – “But how do you KNOW anything?”

- Descartes; Hume

Relativism – “Truth is not absolute; it varies with different experiences.”

- Hume; Kant; Schleiermacher; Whitehead

Humanism – “There is no God or supernatural; truth is found in humans and science rather than revelation from a supernatural source.”

- Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Whitehead, James, Nietzsche

Pragmatism – “If it works, it must be right and true; if it feels good...”

- Machiavelli, James

Nihilism – “God is dead; nothing has meaning; strength rules.”

- Nietzsche, (Machiavelli)



Ludwig Wittgenstein (Austrian, 1889-1951)

Key thoughts

- Language is key; philosophical problems are the result of misuse of language; untangle language and problems dissolve. Apart from issues of language, philosophical problems are nonsense.

“Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.”

Long-term impact

- Wittgenstein changed the focus of philosophical thinking away from rationality, experience and will to the idea of meaning in language. Language gives us the basic “word pictures” that constitute reality. But only word pictures that represent facts – propositions of science – are meaningful. Metaphysical and ethical statements are not meaningful.
- Since the meaning of a word (and what that word represents) is in its usage in language, there is no such thing as inherent or a priori meaning or value apart from language.
- Wittgenstein has had tremendous influence on those who followed him – first the Logical Positivists, then the entire philosophy of language movement, and finally Jacques Derrida and the Deconstructionists. Starting with his influence, almost all philosophy today is at least somewhat an exercise in philosophy of language.



Logical Positivists (early 20th Century)

Key thoughts

- Basing their thinking on philosophers Auguste Comte, David Hume and Wittgenstein, the “Vienna Circle” proposed Logical Positivism as a philosophical system that insisted the only meaningful statements were those either inherently true in the abstract (i.e., mathematics) or scientifically verifiable.
- Logical Positivism was very intentional in its goals of “eliminating metaphysics through the logical analysis of language” and – once all “metaphysical nonsense” was done away with – insisting that people “confine themselves to verifiable, scientific statements.”

Long-term impact

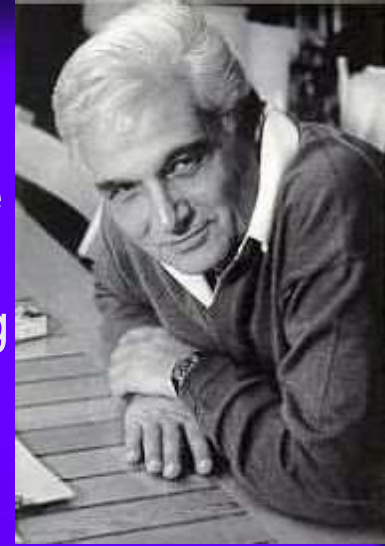
- There are no living logical positivists, and their influence in the early 20th century has been called “that justly famous episode of black comedy in the history of philosophy.” (David Stover)
- Even so, influence of the logical positivists can be seen in the modern insistence on the preeminence of science and empirical verification (“scientism”), the complementary predominant assumption that metaphysical or religious beliefs are inherently incredible or even ridiculous, and even modern moral ambiguity.



Jacques Derrida (French, 1930- 2004)

Key thoughts

- The problem in Western philosophy is belief there is an inherent and reliable connection between language & things language represents. Meaning is unavailable in language, and since no meaning exists beyond language, no meaning is available. There is no transcendence. Stop looking. This is “Deconstruction.”



“Deconstruction is the dance of death on the tomb of God.”

Carl Raschke

Long-term impact

- Derrida has argued that belief in inherent transcendent meaning in the universe cannot be proven and so must be questioned. Since belief in transcendence is the basis for all philosophy and theology, as well as all religious belief, Derrida has discounted all of these. Life, he says, is a dark and meaningless place; the best you can do is put your head down and try to get through.
- Radical interpretations of Derrida are by others, especially Americans Mark C. Taylor, Richard Rorty, Carl Raschke, who seem to think we should see the darkness & desolation of deconstruction as a good thing.





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(process philosophy)

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(will to power)

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William James (1842-1910)
(pragmatism; subjectivism)

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Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)
(will to power; nihilism, radical pragmatism)

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Logical Positivists (early 20th century)
(scientific verifiability)

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Jacques Derrida and Deconstructionists (1930-2004)
(meaninglessness; loss of transcendence)



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- Hegel; Darwin; Marx; Whitehead; James; Nietzsche; **Wittgenstein; Logical Positivists; Derrida**

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- Nietzsche; (Machiavelli); **Derrida**



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