

The History of Western Philosophy Part 1

Thales, a Greek living around the turn of the 6th century B.C., is rightly called the first philosopher ('philosophy' (philos sophia) = 'love of wisdom'), for he asked the question: 'What is the One thing underlying the Many? What is the world made of?' He thereby created the earth-shattering distinction **between appearance and reality** (between what things merely *seem* and how they actually *are*), and (implicitly) the **distinction of the human mind from the natural world**.

Starting with Thales, we look at the varying answers to questions about what reality is, who we are, and how we should live. This term we do selected great philosophers up to, and including, Descartes. Part 2 (the Enlightenment) goes from Locke to Kant, and Part 3 from Schopenhauer to the present day.

COURSE OUTLINE

This is a ten-week course in which we will look at the topics below, some of which will occupy more than one session.

- 1. Presocratic philosophy: 'What is the One underlying the Many?' Appearance and reality, being and becoming, flux and is-ness. The concept of *psyche* as life force becomes the concept of a human's conscious essence.**
- 2. Socrates and his pupil Plato: 'What is knowledge? How can we know anything?' The Forms as the ultimately real archetypes, the Cave as the human condition. The ideal Republic with its philosopher kings. The soul, and the theory of recollection.**
- 3. Aristotle, polymath and taxonomist. Metaphysics and the nature of being, substance and qualities, matter and form, logic, virtue and happiness.**
- 4. The Stoics: nothing can make us suffer unless we choose to let it do so.**
- 5. Medieval philosophy: arguments for the existence of God; human nature and what exactly sinning amounts to; the soul.**
- 6. Descartes, father of modern philosophy: the opposite to Plato – seemings as certainty. The thinking 'I' as starting-point and final arbiter. Re-drawing the boundaries of the mental.**

7. Locke: the senses as grounds of knowledge. The tabula rasa mind and the veil of perception; self as process and memory. Language as referring to ideas, not things. Liberalism and its limits.

READING LIST

General histories of Philosophy

- Magee, Bryan *The Story of Philosophy* (Dorling-Kindersley)
Magee, Bryan *The Great Philosophers* (Oxford University Press)
Kenny, Anthony (ed) *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford University Press)
Gottlieb, Anthony *The Dream of Reason* (Penguin)
Shand, John, *Philosophy and Philosophers* (UCL Press)

It would be a good idea to buy one of these books. Kenny's and Popkin's books have scholarly essays on each of the philosophers by experts in the respective fields, although maybe Popkin's tries to include too much. Any of Kenny's longer books on the history of philosophy (there are four volumes) are also recommended.

Magee's and Gottlieb's books are immediate and accessible, although Gottlieb only covers the Presocratics to the Renaissance. Also well worth getting as a book or dvd is Magee's wonderful television series *The Great Philosophers*, which consists of interviews with great philosophers about even greater philosophers (from Plato to the present).

Philosophy as issues and concepts

- Blackburn, Simon *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press)
Nagel, Thomas *What does it all mean?* (Oxford University Press)

Philosophers in their own words

- Ayer, A.J., O'Grady, Jane (ed.) *A Dictionary of Philosophical Quotations* (Blackwell)

Although I say it myself, this is a useful book in which excerpts from the great philosophers (arranged alphabetically) give you some of the key things they said, which is a useful starting-point from which to develop and expand your knowledge.

Philosophy chronologically (books with asterisks are the most recommended)

- *Guthrie, G. K. C. *The Greek Philosophers* (Methuen)
Guthrie has written a 6-volume history of Greek Philosophy, but this little book, which you can get from Amazon or Abe, is utterly brilliant.

- Either
Kirk, Raven, Schofield *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press)
Or
Barnes, Jonathan *Early Greek Philosophy* (Penguin)

*Plato Dialogues (various translations. The Penguin ones are useful; the translation by Benjamin Jowett) can be downloaded from the web, as can Aristotle's works <http://www.archive.org/details/basicworksofaris000728mbp>.

Aristotle extracts from in *A New Aristotle Reader* ed. J L Ackrill (Oxford University Press)

Andrew Kenny on the medievals, either in his short history, or in the volume devoted to medieval philosophy.

I won't spend long on the medievals, but here are 3 possible books:

Augustine *The Confessions* (Oxford University Press (or other))
The City of God (Penguin Classics)

Abelard, Peter *Ethics*

*Descartes, Rene *Meditations on First Philosophy* (in numerous translations and editions, maybe the best being the Cambridge University Press one, edited by John Cottingham).

Locke, John *Essay concerning Human Understanding*
(various editions) *The Second Treatise of Government*