Introduction to Philosophy (History: Ancient and Medieval)

Date: Monday, 8/29

Part I: Origins

It’s hard to pinpoint a precise moment when “philosophy” began. The accepted idea is that it started in ancient Greece, around 600 BC, a period known as the “axial age” when a wide variety of important events were transpiring around the world, simultaneously, unconnected with one another, including not only the birth of Western philosophy, but also the flourishing of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Confucius, and Lao Tzu (originator of Taoism/Daoism). If we confine our definition of “philosophy” to “Western philosophy,” this period will do just fine as a starting point and we’ll proceed from there. However, it’s good to keep in mind that just because “Western” philosophy started around 600 BC, that’s not to say that “philosophy” in a more general sense hadn’t been flourishing in the East and in Egypt and in other, even more ancient civilizations in some capacity or another, for thousands upon thousands of years prior.

But Western philosophy can be said to have started around this time when a group of intellectuals decided to reject the tacit acceptance of the stories of Homer and Hesiod (the tales of the gods, the mythologies, the Odyssey and Iliad, etc.) and begin inquiring into the world (ethics, physics, etc.) for themselves. Confident in mankind’s capacity to think for ourselves, they began to seek answers independent of the traditions that came before them. This gave rise to “philosophy” in the West as we know it, the discipline of philosophy as it exists today, and represent the first academic discipline from which all others would eventually branch off from (science, humanities, etc., would all be offshoots of philosophy).

Part II: The Four Historical Periods (in General)

Scholars tend to talk about the history of Western philosophy as broken into four distinct historical periods, each with its own origin, theme, and goals (in a general sense). We’ll go through each of these in turn, focusing on the first two this class, and the second two next class. They are:

1. Ancient. c. 600 BC – c. 50 AD
2. Medieval. c. 50 AD – 1600 AD
3. Modern. c. 1600 AD – 1850 AD
4. Contemporary. c. 1850 AD – Now

These are loose dates only. Certain key figures arose to shake things up and move philosophy in new directions, but that’s not to say it’s easy to just make convenient divisions. Let these dates just be a general idea of the rough periods we’re talking about.

Part III: Ancient Philosophy (the “Pre-Socratics”)

Starting in 600 BC, give or take, arose a group of philosophers with a wide variety of intellectual interests and some absolutely mind-blowing ideas which are still discussed and used to this day. Collectively, they are often called the “Pre-Socratics” (to give you an idea of just how famous Socrates would become, but we’ll get him in a minute). For the most part, we have only fragments of their original work, but combined with some commentaries by Plato and Aristotle not long after these Pre-Socratics lived, we can cobble together an accurate picture of their doctrines.

It’s difficult to pinpoint a precise set of “themes” they were interested in, but a general list might include:
(1) **Cosmogony.** What is the origin of the universe? Why is there something instead of nothing? Where did all this come from and why?
(2) **Physics.** How does nature work? What are things made out of it? Is there a fundamental, underlying element from which all else arose? What is the nature of change and motion?
(3) **Epistemology.** Can we know anything for certain? If not, what that imply about our knowledge?
(4) **Mathematics and Geometry.** Can we translate the workings of nature and the cosmos into a mathematically precise language in order to explain what has happened and to anticipate with accuracy what will happen in the future?

Here are some of the key figures (this is by no means an exhaustive list, just a sampling) and how they contributed to those inquiries listed above:

**Thales (c. 624 – c. 546 BC)**

Thales is often considered the first Western philosopher. He was a huge influence on Plato and Aristotle and features in much of their later work. Operating on the four element system (earth, air, fire, and water), Thales was interested in connecting his theories of motion and change (physics) with the fundamental building blocks of reality and where the universe came from and why (cosmogony). Thales saw the universe as in constant motion and change, deducing that this means the most fundamental element must be water, that which is always in motion. Thales likewise was the first on record to use geometry to successfully calculate the height of the Egyptian pyramids. Perhaps most importantly, by breaking from the old tradition of reliance on mythologies, he is arguably the first Western scholar to engage in the “scientific method” of inquiry, namely, the creation of theories and hypotheses that must be subsequently tested as to their veracity and if the tests fail to corroborate the hypotheses, the theory must change to fit the facts, rather than the facts changing to fit the theories.

**Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 BC)**

Heraclitus, like Thales, was interested in physics, both in terms of the four elements that comprise reality, and seeking that fundamental element that can be found in all creations under the sun. Heraclitus, too, saw motion as a constant everywhere, and famously said “no man ever steps in the same river twice.” But Heraclitus was also interested in theology, but not the theology of his ancient Greek forebears, but a new conception of a singular divine entity that was more of a force or presence than a singular, man-like entity. He called this the Logos (the “word”), and his ideas were profoundly influential on early Christian scholars for precisely this reason.
Democritus (c. 460 – c. 370 BC)

Democritus went deeper than many other pre-Socratics in his quest to ascertain the fundamental building blocks of reality. Bypassing the four element system, Democritus was one of a small group of scholars who looked upon nature (physics) and saw common to all things under the sun tiny, indivisible, invisible to the naked eye, building blocks that are present in all things. Subsequently, he and his cabal came to be known as “atomists.”

Zeno of Elea (c. 490 – c. 430 BC)

Zeno, and his teacher Parmenides, also feature heavily in the commentary by subsequent scholars like Plato and Aristotle in their own work on physics. In fact, Zeno was even a key figure in Bertrand Russell’s philosophical ruminations, a man whom many consider to be the greatest British philosopher of the 20th century. Zeno is perhaps most famous for his series of “paradoxes” meant to explain why motion (so important to so many other pre-Socratic figures) was merely an illusion. Like Parmenides, his teacher, Zeno maintained that contrary to popular opinion, and contrary even to what our senses seem to tell us, motion is only an illusion. If, for example, I want to walk the length of a 100m track, I’ll first need to make it to the halfway point (50m). Thus, I have 50m left to go. In order to make that distance, I’ll first have to make it halfway to that goal, which would be another 25m. With 25m to go, I’ll first have to make it to half that distance (12.5m) with 12.5m to go. In fact, I’ll have to continue to do this forever since I’ll encounter an infinite number of points between myself and the initial goal, thus never actually making it to the finish line, though getting every closer and closer, asymptotically.

Pythagoras (c. 570 – 495 BC)

Perhaps the most famous, and most mysterious, of all the pre-Socratics, is Pythagoras of Samos. Still regarded as one of the greatest mathematicians of all time have created the famous “Pythagorean Theorum,” we know his work primarily through his students, and very little (if any) of his original work survives intact. Legends are numerous, however, including tales of his mathematical acumen being regarded as “magio” by many onlookers, and trips into Egypt where he learned the secrets of the universe from ancient sages within the pyramids. What we do know is that Pythagoras, unlike anyone else in the West, maintained a fascinating theory of “reincarnation” based upon principles that Newton would later relate as “laws of energy conservation”: since the energy within human souls that animate our bodies cannot be destroyed, it must, necessarily, move on elsewhere, and return in a cyclical fashion into a new host body. He was also one of the first to recognize the importance of vegetarianism (since who knows what, or who, you could be eating).
Part IV: Ancient Philosophy (The Socratic Lineage)

Socrates, considered by many to be the greatest mind in the history of Western civilization, perpetuated his influence not only through his own life but through the work of his most famous student, Plato, and Plato’s famous student, Aristotle (and Aristotle’s student, Alexander the Great, though he wasn’t a “philosopher” in any meaningful sense, nevertheless, certainly changed the world, too, in his own idiom).

Socrates (c. 469 – 399 BC)

Socrates will be a feature of discussion when we get to the work of Plato, so I won’t linger long here. Suffice it to say, Socrates never wrote anything down, and all we know about him are from the works of his student, Plato, and a handful of other scholars working at the time. Famously, Socrates chose to never write down his philosophy for pedagogical reasons: his entire point, to put it perhaps too broadly, was to get people to think for themselves through the forwarding of challenging questions that would force his interlocutors to reflect upon their own beliefs and the origins of their beliefs to critically analyze the worth of those beliefs. He did not want people to simply accept passively, tacitly, whatever beliefs they were told to believe. Thus, in not wanting to become yet another such authority in their lives, he never gave answers to the questions he posed and never wrote down anything he discussed, not wanting to be seen as an authority simply supplanting another.

Socrates life, and death, have been inspirations for generations of scholars and activists alike, not only forming the cornerstone of Western civilization, but inspiring those like Gandhi and King to change the world for the better in ways directly inspired by Socrates’ own life.

Plato (c. 427 – 348 BC)

Socrates’ most famous student, Plato, wrote many books, on every topic conceivable. Each of these books was written in the form of a dialogue, or a play, and each featuring Socrates as the main character. It thus becomes challenging to distinguish Socrates’ ideas from Plato’s own, but in some cases, including the texts we’ll be reading, we can rest assured that these relatively historically accurate. So when you read them, though they make look like plays, remember: these aren’t fiction, but merely slightly augmented accounts of real events.

Of all of Plato’s work, his most original and most famous was his Republic wherein he describes not only the definition of true Justice, but explains this concept as a parallel relationship between an ideal society and an ideal state of the human soul:

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In the soul, reason (which seeks Truth, Beauty, and the Good) dominates the soul, commanding the more spirited, passionate drive into submission to those goals rather than to its own inclinations towards violence, physical pleasure, and so on. The foundation of all this is the “nutritive” part of the soul, which keeps the organs pumping, and the body animated. Working together, you have a healthy, wise, and virtuous soul whose passions are enlisted for the sake of the Good rather than personal gain or personal pleasures. In society, the rulers are those who seek the Truth, Beauty, and the Good, supported by a warrior caste who defends them and the peasantry. The Philosopher Kings guide the society into a prosperous future; the warriors defend the kingdom; and the workers provide food and clothing to the first two in exchange for prosperity and protection, respectively, with everyone setting aside their desires for personal gain and working, instead, only and ever for the good of the whole.

Another important aspect of Plato’s own, unique philosophy was his “Theory of Forms.” Although it’s unclear if Plato was the first to develop this idea (it is similar in some ways to Heraclitus and some Egyptian lore that preceded him), he certainly perfected it. The general idea is that there exists a certain correspondence between the earth-realm and the divine-realm of thought/mind. There exists, for example, a perfect conception of the Good (the medieval scholars will associate this with “God”). On earth, there is no perfect Good, but only things that are “good” by degree, depending upon how much of the perfect, divine form of Good they reflect. The more you reflect the form of the Good, the more “good” you are. The Good can never be seen with the senses but only known directly with the mind. Conversely, the “good” things one encounters can be known through the senses, but are only good in degree.

Aristotle (c. 384 – 322 BC)

Unlike Plato, Aristotle was a far more scientific, empirical-minded soul. Caring less about Platonic “Forms” and realms one cannot see, Aristotle wished to evaluate nature based first and foremost upon sense perception. His text, Physics, was the go-to text for physics for nearly a thousand years. His work on ethics, too, remains one of the most famous ethical doctrines of all time. Like Plato, he wrote on nearly every topic known to man, but did so, instead, with a more calculating and scientific mind. That said, his ruminations on metaphysics (the mechanisms that gave rise to nature) have become a huge influence on Christian scholars, especially St. Aquinas, arguably the greatest Christian scholar who ever lived. Aristotle, using a very mathematical mindset, described the necessity of postulating an “unmoved mover,” an “uncaused cause,” that, itself, was caused by nothing else, but existed always, in order to explain how anything at all came into being. This became a primary description of “God” in the medieval Christian philosophers.

Part V: The Wild Card

Hermes Trismegistus (c. ???.? – ???.?)

One of the biggest mysteries of the ancient period is likewise one of the most significant. Although some scholars place Trismegistus around 200 AD, most others place him around 200 BC, and there is some evidence to suggest he’s far older still, potentially even older than Plato and the pre-Socratics. It has, however, become impossible to separate fact from fiction. What we do know is that someone, going by the name Hermes Trismegistus (thrice-blessed Hermes) wrote something, these texts we have today and are readily available to read. Some claim he was a sage, contemporary with Moses (1800 BC). Others claim he was the physical embodiment of Thoth (the Egyptian god of wisdom, and correspondent with the Greek god Hermes). He’s been called the father of alchemy (eventually, our modern chemistry), the teacher of Pythagoras, the greatest magus who ever lived, a god incarnate, or simply an imaginary amalgam of Egyptian priests representing the mystery of that ancient civilization to Greek eyes. Although we may never know the truth, Hermes has gone on to feature in art, literature, poetry, and philosophy for thousands of years, appearing on the famous Rosetta Stone, mentioned (potentially) by Plato himself, cited by dozens of the greatest scholars in theology and philosophy, and featured in some of the greatest novels of all time,
including the work of Joyce and Wordsworth. All very impressive, considering he (or it?) may have never existed at all. The most famous doctrine attributed to Hermes can be found on the infamous *Emerald Tablet*, a document without clear origin, which reputedly holds either the secret of the universe or the hidden formula for how to make a Philosopher's Stone, a text which occupied everyone from Copernicus to Isaac Newton for decades of their lives. In it, the idiom “as above, so below” is found, perhaps riffing off of Plato’s own Theory of Forms, or, perhaps, that which inspired Plato, instead.

**Part VI: Medieval Philosophy**

With the life and death of Christ, philosophy turned from the ruminations of the Greeks to the more theological motifs of the medieval period. The overriding theme, in both Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophy during the medieval period was this: the Greeks were simply right about a great many things, from physics to ethics, from literature to logic, but all of them pre-dated the Gospel of Christ and the life of Muhammad. As such, the goal of this period was to find a way to reconcile what the Greeks had said with what the Gospel, the Talmud, and the Qur’an do say. It became a fusion of Greek philosophy and modern theology, in such a way as to demonstrate that the Greeks were anticipating the religious doctrines to come. This is also the longest of the historical periods, in no small part because what could be said and written on religious matters was highly policed by the religious leaders, and one had to work within the confines of that idiom. Here are a smattering of some of the key figures but, again, because it’s such a vast period, this is only the tiniest sampling:

**St. Augustine (354 – 430 AD)**

Augustine, along with figures like Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry, is known as a “Neo-Platonist,” that is, a follower of Plato’s doctrine as applied to issues of faith. Like Plato, Augustine believed in a theory of forms, merely supplanting notions like “The Good” with “God” and demonstrating how our mortal laws must reflect the divine law of God. He was also a bit of mystic, believing wholly in man’s ability to leave the flesh and unify with God, only to return to the body, while still alive, a transformed and enlightened being in what’s known as an “ecstatic experience” (ex-stasis, that is, out of state, out of body).

**St. Anselm (c. 1033 – 1109)**

Another Christian philosopher, Anselm became famous for demonstrating a rational proof for God’s existence, establishing a practice that one should appeal to *philosophy* not *theology*, *reason* and not *faith*; to prove God’s existence if one has any hope of converting non-believers for whether one is a theist or an atheist, the common denominator is mankind’s capacity for rational thought. Anselm’s famous proof revolved around the necessity for a perfect being to exist. The only way mankind can have a conception of *imperfection* is if we tacitly have some idea of what perfection, itself, might be. Perfection exists nowhere on earth so where does this idea come from? It must exist in very Platonic form elsewhere, but exist it does, and if the idea of a perfect being exists in my mind, it follows that such a perfect being must exist likewise in *reality* or else it would not be a perfect being if it did not exist in both the mind and the universe beyond the mind.

**St. Aquinas (c. 1225 – 1274)**

Arguably the greatest Christian scholar of all time, Aquinas wrote the largest and most encyclopedic text on Christian theology the world has ever known, called the *Summa Theologica*. In it (a text which, itself, dwarfs the Bible in size and scope), he discusses everything from the nature of God, God’s knowability, ethics, law, politics, physics, angelic beings, and so on. Famously he proves God’s existence through an appeal to reason alone not once but five times, in five different ways. Unlike many of his predecessors, however, Aquinas was more drawn to Aristotle’s more mathematical model than Plato’s more ethereal model of the cosmos.
Geber (real name, Jabir ibn Hayyan, c. 721 – c. 815).

While much of the West was struggling through the dark ages, Islam was thriving as an academic hub. Having saved many of Plato's and Aristotle's texts from the fires of Alexandria and other similar events, Islamic scholars translated the Greeks into their own local dialects, thus preserving them for the Christian and Jewish scholars of later generations to rediscover and translate back from the Arabic. Geber was what's called a polymath, someone who is a genius-level mind in a wide variety of different disciplines including astronomy, theology, geography, mathematics, geometry, physics, and medicine. It was Geber who helped transform “alchemy” as a quasi-scientific but also quasi-religious practice into the full-fledged science we know today as “chemistry.” So profound were his medical breakthroughs that scholars have unabashedly said that had he not lived and thrived when he did, it would have set medicine and chemistry back centuries if not for his brilliant insights.

Moses Maimonides (c. 1134 – 1204)

Maimonides is often considered the Jewish parallel to the Christian Aquinas, writing the most encyclopedic, thorough, and philosophically rich fusions of Greek philosophy and Abrahamic theology. Indeed, Aquinas often cites Maimonides in his own work on a wide array of topics, such was the respect he had for the man. Maimonides thrived in both Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines, finding ways to fuse them with Judaica in such a way to be accessible not only for Rabbis of Talmudic lore, but for the common man, as well, to gain spiritual insight first and foremost through reason.