

A
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

	PAGE
History of Philosophy	1
Science, Philosophy, and Religion	3
General Classification	3
Sources of Study	3
Bibliography	4

GREEK PHILOSOPHY

PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE

1. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY GREEK THOUGHT	7
History of Greek Philosophy	7
Environment	7
Politics	8
Literature	9
Religion	10
Philosophy	11
Survey of Greek Philosophy	11
Bibliography	13
2. DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-SOPHISTIC PHILOSOPHY	14
3. PROBLEM OF SUBSTANCE	16
Thales	16
Anaximander	17
Anaximenes	18
4. PROBLEM OF NUMBER	18
Pythagoras and his School	19
Pythagorean Number-Theory	20
Astronomy	21
5. PROBLEM OF CHANGE	22
Heraclitus	23
Union of Opposites	23
Law of Reason	25
Psychology and Ethics	25
School of Elea	26
Theology (Xenophanes)	27
Ontology (Parmenides)	28
Dialectics (Zeno and Melissus)	29
6. EXPLANATION OF CHANGE	30
Solution of the Riddle	30

	PAGE
Empedocles	31
Anaxagoras	33
Atomists	36
PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND CONDUCT	
7. AGE OF THE SOPHISTS	40
Progress of Thought	41
Greek Enlightenment	42
Sophists	44
Significance of Sophistry	48
8. SOCRATES	50
Life of Socrates	50
Problem of Truth	51
Socratic Method	53
Ethics	56
Pupils of Socrates	57
AGE OF RECONSTRUCTION	
9. PLATO	58
Plato and his Problem	58
Dialectics	60
Doctrine of Ideas	63
Philosophy of Nature	65
Psychology	67
Ethics	69
Politics	71
Plato's Historical Position	73
Platonic School	75
10. ARISTOTLE	75
Aristotle's Problems	75
Philosophy and the Sciences	78
Logic	79
Metaphysics	82
Physics	85
Biology	87
Psychology	87
Ethics	89
Politics	93
Peripatetic School	94
ETHICAL MOVEMENT	
11. THE OUTLOOK	94
12. EPICUREANISM	97
Epicurus	97
The Problem	98

CONTENTS

v

	PAGE
Logic	98
Metaphysics	99
Psychology	101
Ethics	101
Politics	103
13. STOICISM	104
Zeno and his School	104
Logic	105
Metaphysics	108
Cosmology	109
Psychology	111
Ethics	111
Politics	114
Religion	114
Résumé of Greek Ethics	115
14. SKEPTICISM AND ECLECTICISM	116
Skeptical School	116
Doctrines of the School	117
Later Skeptics	119
Eclecticism	119

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

15. JEWISH-GREEK PHILOSOPHY	120
Philosophy and Religion	120
Beginnings of Jewish-Greek Philosophy	122
Philo	123
16. NEOPLATONISM	125
Neopythagoreanism	125
Neoplatonism	126
Plotinus	127
Theology	127
Three Stages of Being	128
Human Soul	130
Mysticism	131
Porphyry	131
Jamblichus	132
Close of School at Athens	132

PHILOSOPHY OF THE MIDDLE AGES

RISE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

17. BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY	133
Revival of Religion	133
Christianity	133
Christianity and Classical Culture	134

	PAGE
Scholastic Philosophy	136
Bibliography	137
18. DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY	137
Early Theology	137
Gnostics	138
Apologists	140
Teachings of the Apologists	141
Logos-Doctrine	143
Free Will and Original Sin	146
19. WORLD-VIEW OF AUGUSTINE	147
Augustine	147
Theory of Knowledge	148
Theology	149
Psychology	150
Ethics	151
Freedom of the Will	153

BEGINNINGS OF SCHOLASTICISM

20. DARK AGES	155
New Peoples	155
Beginnings of Learning	157
21. SPIRIT OF THE MIDDLE AGES	158
Principle of Authority	158
Problem of Scholasticism	159
Characteristics of Scholasticism	161
Stages of Scholasticism	162
Sources of Scholasticism	163
22. JOHN SCOTUS ERIGENA	164
Faith and Knowledge	164
Pantheism	164
Mysticism	166
23. PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS: REALISM AND NOMINALISM	166
Early Schoolmen	166
Roscelin's Nominalism	168
Meaning of Realism	168

DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOLASTIC REALISM

24. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY	169
His Proofs for the Existence of God	169
Contemporaries	171
25. PETER ABELARD AND THE SCHOOLMEN OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY	172
Abelard	172
The School of Chartres	174
The <i>Sentences</i>	175
John of Salisbury	175

CONTENTS

vii

	PAGE
26. MYSTICISM AND PANTHEISM	175
Mysticism	176
Pantheism	177
27. SYMPTOMS OF UNREST	178
Opposition to Scholasticism	178
Organization of Learning	179
Discovery of Aristotle	180

I CULMINATION OF SCHOLASTICISM

28. ARABIAN PHILOSOPHY	181
Greek Sources	181
Different Schools	182
Rationalists	184
Downfall of Philosophy in the East	185
Spanish School	186
Jewish Philosophy	188
29. PREDOMINANCE OF ARISTOTLE	188
Scholasticism and Aristotle	188
Augustinian Theology	189
Albert the Great	190
30. THOMAS AQUINAS	191
Philosophy and Theology	191
Theory of Knowledge	193
Metaphysics	194
Theology	195
Psychology	196
Ethics	198
Politics	202
Followers of Thomas	203
31. ANTI-SCHOLASTIC TENDENCIES: MYSTICISM, PANTHEISM, AND	
NATURAL SCIENCE	203
Mysticism	203
Logic	204
Natural Science	204
Heresy	206
Raymond Lully	207

8 DECLINE OF SCHOLASTICISM

32. JOHN DUNS SCOTUS	207
Opposition to Thomas	207
John Duns Scotus	208
Faith and Knowledge	208
Doctrine of Universals	209
Theology	211

	PAGE
Psychology	212
God and the Moral Law	212
33. NOMINALISM	214
Rational Theology and Universals	214
William of Occam	215
Nominalism <i>versus</i> Realism	217
Followers of Occam	217
34. MYSTICISM	218
Orthodox and Heretical Mystics	218
Meister Eckhart	219
35. THE PROGRESS OF FREE THOUGHT	221
Medieval Rationalism	221
Rise of Nationalism	222
Heretical Tendencies	224
The Spirit of Free Inquiry	225
PHILOSOPHY OF THE RENAISSANCE	
36. THE NEW ENLIGHTENMENT	227
Reason and Authority	227
Bibliography	228
Humanism	228
37. NEW PHILOSOPHIES	229
Platonism	229
Nicolas of Cusa	230
The True Aristotle	231
Reform of Science and Philosophy	232
Reform of Logic	233
38. PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE AND NATURAL SCIENCE	233
Occultism	233
Paracelsus	234
Philosophy of Nature	235
Scientific Movement	236
39. GIORDANO BRUNO AND TOMMASO CAMPANELLA	238
Bruno	238
Campanella	239
40. NEW THEORIES OF THE STATE; PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION; AND SKEPTICISM	241
Scholastic Theory of the State	241
Machiavelli	241
The New Politics	243
Evolution of the Modern State	244
The New Philosophy of Religion	245
Skepticism	246
41. RELIGIOUS REFORM	246
Spirit of the Reformation	246

CONTENTS

ix

	PAGE
Protestant Scholasticism	247
Mysticism of Jacob Boehme	248

现代
西
哲学
MODERN PHILOSOPHY

42.	THE SPIRIT OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY	250
/	Characteristics of the Modern Era	250
108	Bibliography	252
2	Empiricism and Rationalism	252

英
知
ENGLISH EMPIRICISM

43.	FRANCIS BACON 中. 培根	255
	Reform of Science	255
	Inductive Method	257
	Program of Philosophy	260
	Philosophy of Man	260
	Metaphysics and Theology	262
	Bacon as an Empiricist	263
=	44. THOMAS HOBBS 利. 霍布斯	263
	Aim and Method	264
	Theory of Knowledge	265
	Metaphysics	267
	Psychology	268
	Politics	269

欧
大陆
CONTINENTAL RATIONALISM

- 45.	RENÉ DESCARTES 笛卡尔	272
	The Problem	272
	Classification of the Sciences	274
	Method and Criterion of Knowledge	274
	Proofs for the Existence of God	277
	Truth and Error	279
	External World	279
	Mind and Body	281
	Emotions	284
	Innate Ideas	286
=	46. SUCCESSORS OF DESCARTES 笛卡尔之后	287
	The Problems	287
	Occasionalism	288
	Arnold Geulincx	289
	Idealism (Nicolas Malebranche)	289
	Mysticism (Blaise Pascal)	290
	Skepticism (Pierre Bayle)	291
三	47. BENEDICT SPINOZA 斯宾诺莎	292
	Rationalism	292
	Method	294

	PAGE
Universal Substance	295
Attributes of God	296
Doctrine of Modes	298
The Human Mind	300
Theory of Knowledge	302
Intellect and Will	303
Ethics and Politics	305
Notion of God	307

DEVELOPMENT OF EMPIRICISM

48. JOHN LOCKE	307
The Problem	307
Origin of Knowledge	309
Nature and Validity of Knowledge	313
Limits of Knowledge	315
Metaphysics	318
Ethics	322
Free Will	325
Politics	326
Education	328
49. SUCCESSORS OF LOCKE	329
Influence of Locke	329
Deists	330
Psychology	330
Ethics	332
Political Economy	334
50. GEORGE BERKELEY	335
The Problem	335
Objects of Knowledge	336
World of Bodies	337
World of Spirits	339
Objections Answered	340
Knowledge of Ideas, Spirits, and Relations	342
Refutation of Dualism, Atheism, and Skepticism	342
51. DAVID HUME	345
The Problem	345
Science of Human Nature	346
Origin of Knowledge	347
Cause and Effect	348
Validity of Knowledge	352
Knowledge of the External World	354
Soul-Substance	355
Freedom and Necessity	356
God	357
Anti-Intellectualism	361

CONTENTS

xi

		PAGE
52.	RATIONALISTIC REACTION IN ENGLAND	362
	Cambridge School	362
	Samuel Clarke	362
	Scottish Common-Sense School	363

DEVELOPMENT OF RATIONALISM IN GERMANY

53.	GOTTFRIED WILHELM LEIBNIZ	364
	Rise of German Culture	364
	The Problem	365
	Notion of Force	367
	Doctrine of Monads	368
	Theology	373
	Ethics	375
	Logic and Theory of Knowledge	376
54.	SUCCESSORS OF LEIBNIZ	380
	Philosophy of Common-Sense	380
	Mysticism	381

PHILOSOPHY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

55.	PROGRESS OF ENLIGHTENMENT	382
	Eighteenth Century	382
	Voltaire	383
	The Enlightenment in England	384
	The German Enlightenment	385
	Materialism and Evolutionism	386
	Sciences	388
	Jean Jacques Rousseau	389

CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF IMMANUEL KANT

56.	IMMANUEL KANT	391
	Progress of Modern Philosophy	392
	Mysticism	393
	Problem of Kant	393
	Problem of Knowledge	397
	Theory of Sense-Perception	399
	Theory of the Understanding	402
	Validity of Judgments	403
	Knowledge of Things-in-Themselves	406
	Impossibility of Metaphysics	408
	(a) Rational Psychology	410
	(b) Rational Cosmology	410
	(c) Rational Theology	415
	Use of Metaphysics in Experience	417
	Use of Teleology in Nature	420
	Practical Use of Reason and Moral Theology	421
	Ethics	422

	PAGE
57. SUCCESSORS OF KANT	426
The Problems	426
Idealism and the Thing-in-Itself	427
Critics of the New Philosophy (Herder, Jacobi, Fries)	428
<i>R</i> <i>W.D. in 1802</i> GERMAN IDEALISM	
58. JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE	431
Post-Kantian Philosophy	431
Fichte's Principle	433
Aim and Method of the Science of Knowledge	435
Knowledge of the Ego	437
The External World	440
Objective Idealism	441
Moral Philosophy	445
59. FRIEDRICH WILHELM SCHELLING	448
The New Idealism and Romanticism	448
Philosophy of Nature	450
Philosophy of Mind	454
Logic and Intuition	455
60. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER	458
Philosophy of Religion	458
Knowledge and Faith	459
God, the World, and the Individual	460
61. GEORG WILHELM HEGEL	462
Hegel and his Predecessors	462
Problem of Philosophy	464
Dialectical Method	467
Thought and Being	469
Logic and Metaphysics	471
Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of Mind	472
Philosophy of Right	474
Art, Religion, and Philosophy	476
Hegelian Schools	476
<i>3-13 4</i> ↳ GERMAN PHILOSOPHY AFTER HEGEL	
62. REALISM OF JOHANN FRIEDRICH HERBERT	478
Opposition to Hegelianism	478
Realistic Ideal of Philosophy	479
Metaphysics	480
Psychology	482
Science of Values	484
F. H. Beneke	485
63. PHILOSOPHY OF WILL: SCHOPENHAUER AND HARTMANN	485
A. Schopenhauer	485
The World as Will and Idea	486

CONTENTS

xiii

	PAGE
Will in Nature and in Man	486
Ethics of Pity	488
Philosophy of the Unconscious (E. von Hartmann)	490
64. NEOKANTIANISM	491
Reaction against Speculative Philosophy	491
Materialism	492
Revival of Criticism	493
Immanent Philosophy	494
Theological Neokantians	494
65. THE NEW IDEALISM	494
Metaphysics and Natural Science	494
Hermann Lotze	495
Mechanism and Teleology	495
Gustav Theodor Fechner	498
Friedrich Paulsen	498
Wilhelm Wundt	498
Philosophy of Value	500
Wilhelm Windelband	500
H. Rickert, H. Münsterberg, W. Dilthey	501
Rudolph Eucken	502

PHILOSOPHY IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND

66. POSITIVISM AND ITS OPPONENTS IN FRANCE	503
Reaction against Sensationalism	503
Saint-Simon	504
Auguste Comte	505
Reform of Society and the Sciences	506
Evolution of Knowledge	507
Classification of the Sciences	508
Social Science	509
Ethics and the Religion of Humanity	510
Idealistic Opposition to Positivism	511
C. Renouvier	511
A. Fouillée	512
67. SCOTTISH RATIONALISTIC PHILOSOPHY	513
William Whewell	513
Sir William Hamilton	514
68. EMPIRICISM OF JOHN STUART MILL	516
Empiricism and Positivism	516
Science and Social Reform	518
Logic	519
Inductive Inference	519
Warrant of Induction	520
Law of Causation	521
<i>A priori</i> Truths	524
The External World and the Self	525

	PAGE
Mental and Moral Sciences	527
Ethology	529
Social Science	529
Ethics	532
69. EVOLUTIONISM OF HERBERT SPENCER	535
Ideal of Knowledge	535
Relativity of Knowledge	537
Persistence of Force	539
Mind and Matter	540
Law of Evolution	541
Biology	542
Psychology	543
The External World	544
Ethics	545
Politics	547
70. NEW IDEALISM IN ENGLAND AND IN THE UNITED STATES	549
Influence of German Idealism	549
Thomas Hill Green	550
Metaphysics	551
Man's Place in Nature	552
Ethics	553
F. H. Bradley	555
Metaphysics	555
Immediate Feeling and Thought	557
The Absolute	558
Josiah Royce	559
Contemporary Idealists	562
 ✓ CONTEMPORARY REACTION AGAINST RATIONALISM AND IDEALISM 	
New Tendencies	562
71. THE NEW POSITIVISTIC THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE	564
Ernst Mach	564
R. Avenarius	566
72. PRAGMATISM	566
William James	566
John Dewey	571
Other Pragmatists	574
Friedrich Nietzsche	574
73. THE INTUITIONISM OF HENRI BERGSON	577
Intellect and Intuition	577
Metaphysics	579
74. REALISTIC REACTION AGAINST IDEALISM	580
The Neo-Realists	580
75. RATIONALISM AND ITS OPPONENTS	582
Merits of Anti-Intellectualism	582

CONTENTS

XV

	PAGE
Appeal to Reason	583
Intelligence and Reality	584
Aim of Philosophy	586
The Block-Universe	587
Intellect and Intuition	588
Conclusion	589
INDEX	593

A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

INTRODUCTION

The history of philosophy aims to give a connected account of the different attempts which have been made to solve the problem of existence or to render intelligible to us our world of experience. It is the story of the development of reasoned human thought from its earliest beginnings down to the present time; not a mere chronological enumeration and exposition of philosophical theories, but a study of these in their relation to one another, the times in which they are produced, and the thinkers by whom they are offered. While every system of thought is more or less dependent on the civilization in which it arises, the character of preceding systems, and the personality of its author, it in turn exercises a potent influence on the conceptions and institutions of its own and succeeding ages. The history of philosophy must, therefore, endeavor to insert each world-view in its proper setting, to understand it as a part of an organic whole, to connect it with the intellectual, political, moral, social, and religious factors of its present, past, and future. It must also attempt to trace the line of progress in the history of human speculation: show how the mental attitude called philosophy arises, how the different problems and the solutions that are offered provoke new questions and answers, and what advance has been made, on the different stages, towards reaching the goal.

In dealing with the different systems, we shall be careful to let the authors present their ideas without extensive criticism on our part. It will be found that the history of philosophy is, in a large measure, its own best critic; that a system is continued, transformed, supplemented, or overcome by its successors, that the errors and inconsistencies contained in it are brought to light; and that it is often made the starting-point of new lines

of thought. The historian should assume an impartial and objective attitude in his study, and, so far as he can, guard against obtruding his own philosophical theories into the discussions. It will, however, be impossible to eliminate the personal element altogether; to some extent the historian's preconceptions are bound to shine through his work. They will manifest themselves in many ways: in the emphasis which he lays on particular philosophies, in his notion of what constitutes progress and decline,—even in the amount of space devoted to different thinkers. All this is unavoidable. The philosopher, however, should be permitted to tell his own story without being interrupted by constant objections before he has had the opportunity of stating his case completely. And we should not criticise a system solely in the light of present achievement, that is, measure it by present standards to its hurt. Compared with modern theories, the early Greek world-views seem naïve, childish, and crude, and it would be no great mark of intelligence to ridicule them; whereas, regarded from the standpoint of their times, as the first efforts of a people to understand the world, they may well stand out as epoch-making events. A system of thought must be judged in the light of its own aims and historical setting, by comparison with the systems immediately preceding and following it, by its antecedents and results, by the development to which it leads. Our method of study will, therefore, be historico-critical.

The value of the study of the history of philosophy ought to be apparent. Intelligent persons are interested in the fundamental problems of existence and in the answers which the human race has sought to find for them on the various stages of civilization. Besides, such a study helps men to understand their own and other times; it throws light on the ethical, religious, political, legal, and economic conceptions of the past and the present, by revealing the underlying principles on which these are based. It likewise serves as a useful preparation for philosophical speculation; passing, as it does, from the simpler to the more complex and difficult constructions of thought, it reviews the philosophical experience of the race and trains the mind in abstract thinking. In this way we are aided in working out our own views of the world and of life. The man who tries