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Philosophy definitions glossary

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Aesthetics
The study of what constitutes beauty. Like ethics, aesthetics is a branch of practical philosophy, only it concerns human values rather than actions. Aesthetics considers what is appreciated as beauty in nature as well as in art, music and literature. There is considerable argument as to whether there are objective aesthetic values or whether beauty is indeed "in the eye of the beholder". Plato's Theory of Forms took the former view, claiming that "it is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful" (Phaedo 100d). At the opposite end of the scale is the view that a sense of beauty is entirely subjective and if I find something beautiful, no other can refute the claim. Kant argued that aesthetic experience is universally valid but not a matter of understanding or reason (hence not true knowledge) but a matter of judgement. ("Critique of Judgement") Although it has proved impossible to create an objective set of aesthetic values, for some philosophers (Schopenhauer, for instance) aesthetic appreciation is humanity's one true escape from the miseries of existence.

Alienation
In philosophy, a term indicating estrangement of people or things from what is considered their proper state. It was first used by Hegel to describe what happens to Absolute Mind or Spirit when it objectifies itself in the physical world of nature. The individual mind is seen as alienated from its true spirit when it fails to live in the light of self awareness, that is, participate in the realm of Absolute Mind. The term was adopted by Marx to describe the actions that deprive man of the things he produces so that he becomes enslaved.

Angst
(German - fear) A term introduced by existentialist thinkers to describe the feeling of apprehension invoked when a finite individual recognises his existence in an infinite world, when he confronts the void outside his own conscious existence.

A-priori
A term used in the theory of Knowledge to distinguish what comes before experience (the opposite is a posteriori). The principles of Logic, without which no rational experience is possible, are a priori. According to Kant, experience itself is possible only if we have certain prior notions like space and time and causality.

Asceticism
The practice of extreme self denial and abstention from all forms of pleasure. It is based on the view that the denial of bodily needs allows for a focus on the spirit and the search for truth. Diogenes and his followers, the Cynics, adopted such a view. It was carried to extreme by some in the medieval Christian church and is a major feature of some Eastern religious practice.

Atheism
A denial of the existence of supernatural forces, gods or God.

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Cartesian
Adjective referring to Descartes and his theories.

Cynicism
A philosophy, first expounded by Diogenes, that encourages indifference to social convention and material comforts in order to concentrate on self-knowledge. The aim of the Cynic was to become self-determining, hence free, by living in accordance with nature.

Determinism
The view that events do not occur by chance, but are caused by preceding events (physical determinism) or by God (divine determinism). The implication is that things could not be otherwise than they are. The opposite is self determinism which sees an individual as the cause of his own actions - there is a choice of actions and the outcome is determined by that choice.

Dialectic
A form of philosophical debate which developed from the Socratic dialogue. It is the major form of debate in Plato's "Dialogues" where the protagonist, often Socrates, provisionally accepts an opponent's view in order to explore contradictory consequences. Aristotle identified dialectic as a form of argument which started from usubstantiated opinion and which could not result in the verifiable conclusions of logical forms of argument. For the Stoics and later, for medieval thinkers, the term merely referred to a form of argument. Hegel gave new meaning to the term, seeing the dialectic as a process of reconciliation of opposites (thesis, antithesis leading to synthesis). For Hegel, the dialectic was the driving force behind historical change and an expression of a Universal Mind or Spirit.

Dualism
Any theory in which a distinction is made between two opposing concepts. Plato's Theory of Forms is basically dualistic in its distinction between the intelligible realm accessible only to reason and and the world of the senses. In religious thinking, Augustine rejected a form of dualism which saw Good and Evil as equal and opposite forces. Descartes' dualism drew a clear distinction between the Mind and the Body.

Ego
(From the Latin, meaning I.) For Freud, the mind consists of an ego which contains a person's ordinary thoughts and directs daily behaviour, and an id containing all the instincts and repressed feelings. Moral philosophy sees two possible ways of human behaviour: egoism, considering self only or altruism, considering the well-being of others. The latter term was first introduced by Comte.

Empiricism
A term related to the ways in which the knowledge we can gain or claim to have is related to experience (from the Greek empeiria - experience). The opposite view to empiricism, rationalism, sees true knowledge as derived purely through thinking and reason. The empiricist view found greatest favour in British philosophy and its reaction against Descartes' concept of innate ideas, with Hume and Locke being its first great exponents. Kant tried to resolve the debate with his "critical" approach which accepted that all knowledge starts with experience but is dependent on the way the mind works and structures that experience.

Enlightenment

The intellectual movement in 18th century Europe which believed that new scientific understanding shed light upon human affairs and offered opportunuty for mankind to understand the workings of the universe through scientific method. Old superstitions and traditional religious outlooks were to be abandoned. In France, a number of thinkers, collectively known as the *philosophes* questioned all forms of authority and the first great "Encyclopedia" was compiled. In England, Hume and Locke tried to ground all knowledge in experience rather than belief.

Epistemology

A branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of knowledge and what can be known (from the Greek *episteme* - knowledge). Plato poses the question: "Is the meaning of terms like beauty or largeness or holiness etc are something we can be said to "know" or is this something we decide by agreement to use the word in a certain way?". He answers the question by conceiving of universal forms or ideas to which language should conform. He makes a clear distinction between the world of the senses and this higher level of reality in which true knowledge was accessible to reason. The debate continued down the centuries with rationalists like Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz seeing knowledge as accessible only to reason while British empiricists, like Hume and Locke, insisted that correct language conforms to an objective reality and is arrived at through sensation and experience.

Esprit humain

Lévi-Strauss postulates that cultural customs and myths emerge in different societies from a variety of fundamental and common mental structures. The various cultural systems represent mere sub-systems within the entire totality of human culture or "l'esprit humain".

Essence

That which is essential and unchanging within a person, object or idea.

Ethics

Moral philosophy, the branch of philosophy which considers issues of good and evil (from the Greek *ethikos* - concerning custom). This is a practical philosophical study of how man should best behave.

Existentialism

A philosophic outlook that stresses that existence precedes essence. We exist in the world and what we become is the result of our experience of living in the world. It is a practical rather than theoretical philosophy focussing on how man as a sentient being, living and struggling in the world, should live. Its first proponent, Kierkegaard, saw man's relationship with God as the central issue. Others, like Sartre and Heidegger, adopt an atheistic stance. Since existentialism relies heavily on raw experience, it has made much use of phenomenology, which attempts to capture experience without imposing on it any prior theoretical views held by the observer.

Heaven

A concept of spiritual bliss common to a number of monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity & Islam) involving a higher level of communion with God after death.

Hedonism
From the Greek "hedone" meaning pleasure, hedonism is a moral view that the only good thing is pleasure. Primary amongst its advocates were the Epicureans.

Hell
A religious construct which perceives the wicked and sinful to dwell in eternal punishment, often conceived to be a fiery furnace. The term in general use refers to a situation of torment. It is this context rather than a religious one that Sartre insists that "Hell is other people."

Humanism
The central theme of humanism is the affirmation, perfection, and celebration of man. One of the major features of humanism is that it places the responsibility for human happiness firmly in the hands of humanity itself. Humanists assert the fundamental value of being *human* . This glorification of humanity first found expression with the Greeks. "Man is the rational animal", said Aristotle, thereby promoting his own species above all other species on earth. Although the idea dates back to the Greeks, the term itself was coined during the Renaissance to describe certain writers and religious thinkers who affirmed the value of a joyful life on earth rather than waiting for heavenly bliss. Prominent among these was Erasmus.

Id
For Freud, the mind consists of an ego which contains a person's ordinary thoughts and directs daily behaviour, and an id containing all the instincts and repressed feelings.

Idealism
The doctrine that reality is in some way mental, related to the contents and structure of the mind. The term derives from idea rather than ideal and is more related to metaphysics than ethics, contrasting with realism and also with materialism. Plato's Theory of Forms could be said to be a type of idealism since for him, his Forms or Ideas existed at a higher level of reality than the sensible world. Yet scholars reject Plato as a true idealist since his Ideas were not merely contents of the human mind but existed as entities in their own right. The Ideas were real, what we perceive mere shadows of this reality.

The most extreme form of idealism holds that matter does not exist except in the form of ideas in the mind or as manifestations of the mind: "To be is to be perceived". (Berkeley) The mind in question may be an individual mind, minds in general or, as Berkeley supposed, the mind of God. Kant rejected this extreme form of idealism and distinguished between things-in-themselves (noumena), which exist but which we cannot know fully, and things as we come to know them (phenomena). The latter depend on the structure of the mind, are products of the human consciousness and hence, in Kant's terms, are "transcendentally ideal". We can only know what our mind is capable of knowing, so our reality is in a sense a construct of the mind.

Hegel's Absolute Idealism, explains all of reality in terms of an Absolute Mind or Spirit which reveals itself to our finite minds in every area of human knowledge. Absolute Mind is seen as a unified totality of all rational truth organising all areas of knowledge and experience into a coherent whole. Full understanding of reality will involve uncovering the underlying rational structure, the totality of Mind.

Innate ideas
According to [Descartes](), ideas with which we are born, which predate any experience, but which experience serves to remind us of.

Ionian philosophers
The earliest of the Greek philosophers tended to live in the Greek occupied area of Asia Minor known as Ionia. The Greeks described them as physicists, students of Nature. Their aim was to account for the origins and nature of the world and its phenomena without relying on the supernatural. Each tended to identify a limited number of elements and processes. Thales, the first of the Greek philosophers, spoke of water as the basic element of life. Earth, air, fire, water, singly or in combination, were seen to be the prime elements of nature. Physics, therefore, was always an important part of Greek philosophy. The Athenian philosophers were the first to broaden the realm of philosophical study and placed more emphasis on moral philosophy and logic. Hence the Ionian philosophers are often described as the Pre-Socratics.

Logic
A study of how we reason correctly. It is a formal system of argument concerned with the structure of statements and arguments rather than their contents. [Aristotle]() was the first to present a systematic account of logic. He explains the notion of terms such as inference and proposition and outlines valid forms of argument. The logic of Aristotle was interpreted and arranged by medieval thinkers and formal logic became important in philosophy. In the early 18th century, [Leibniz]() suggested that logic could be elaborated into a universal problem-solving device based on the mathematical model. Difference of opinion could be settled not by debate but by calculation. His work inspired Boole and Frege, who in turn inspired both [Russell]() and [Wittgenstein]() to develop elaborate modern logical systems. [Kant]() regarded the principles of logic as part of the framework of human understanding (built in to the human mind, not an externally developed set of rules). It is worthwhile to remember that even logicians recognise that logic as a form of reasoning can never lead to new discoveries. However, as a method of putting our findings into systematic order, it is a vital adjunct to enquiry.

Logos
The word "logos" has many meanings. It can mean thought or reason, or the words by which this is expressed. It is translated variously as thought, intelligence, and account. There is a tendency for later commentators to speak of the Logos as God. Certainly [Heracleitus]() conceived of it as immanent, divine, intelligent, creative. His human soul participated in all life through its connection with the Logos. "If you travel every path you will not find the limits of the soul, so deep is its logos." Christian thinking came to embrace this concept: "In the beginning was the Word..." (St John) [Augustine]() speaks of Christ as "the Logos made flesh".

Manicheism
A religion named after its Persian founder, Mani, which conceived Light (Goodness) and Darkness (Evil) as two equal and opposing forces. Man's soul was good, his body evil. Salvation involved freeing the spirit from the evil material element in one's nature. [Augustine]() was initially attracted to this view but after his conversion to Christianity he rejected the idea of evil as a force in its own right.

Materialism

Materialism is related to the view that everything, including minds, is matter in motion and that knowledge is causally dependent on physical processes and sensation, not simply reason. Its origins lie with the early atomists, like Democritus, who envisaged a universe composed of tiny indivisible particles moving within a void as the only true reality. The association of knowledge with sensation, led the Epicureans and later sceptics like Montaigne and Hume, to claim that knowledge was inaccessible, since all we experience is subjective, dependent on an unreliable human perception. Materialism contrasts with idealism.

Matter
The stuff of which things are composed. In physics, that which has mass. This is in contrast with the intangible and immaterial realm of ideas.

Metaphysics
The branch of philosophy that considers fundamental questions about **being**. It takes its name from the Greek:*meta* - after; *physica* - nature. It was the Greeks who first considered such questions, with Parmenides proposing that everything was actually one thing, eternal and immutable. This idea was opposed by Heracleitus who saw things coming into being and a constant process of destruction and creation. Aristotle, regarded Metaphysics as the "First Philosophy". It is the most abstract form of philosophical inquiry and seeks to lay bare the logical structure of things - the philosophical equivalent of the physicists' search for a "theory of everything"?

Mind
That part of being associated with thinking. Both Plato and Aristotle stressed the immaterial nature of the mind and, even today, the concept of mind is distinguished from that of the brain as a physiological centre of thought, although few support the radical distinction of mind and body as proposed by Descartes.

Neo-Platonism
A term used to describe a group of thinkers in late antiquity who revived and adapted earlier Greek philosophy. Although the name implies a major debt to Plato, Neo-Platonism combined elements of many early philosophies. The thoughts of its greatest exponent, Plotinus, come to us through the writings of his disciple, Porphyry. Neo-Platonism had an influence on early Christian thinkers like Augustine who translated the Neo-Platonic "One" into the Christian God.

Nihilism
A complete rejection of all religious and moral principles; an extreme form of scepticism that maintains that nothing at all has a real existence.

Pantheism
A concept of God in everything (from the Greek *pan* - everything and *theos* - god). This view that God resides in everything rather than being set above or alongside the world was most most clearly argued by Spinoza.

Paradox
A statement that appears beyond belief or outside normal expectations. (from the Greek *para* - alongside and *doxa* - belief). This was a favoured form of argument of Zeno of Elea, who used such arguments to confirm the metaphysical stance of his master, Parmenides,

that "Being is.", a statement which can not be confirmed through any experience, only through reason. The methodology proves something is by proving that the alternative is impossible.

A PARADOX ON PLURALITY

If things are a many, they must be just as many as they are, and neither more nor less. Now if they are as many as they are, they will be finite in number. If things are a many, they will be infinite in number; for there will always be other things between them, and others again between these. And so things are infinite in number.

(Zeno quoted in Simplicius *Commentary on the Physics* 140 and Aristotle *Physics* 239)

Phenomena

Facts or occurences as they appear to a consciousness or mind. The emphasis on objects as perceived is an alternative to the sceptic's view that since we cannot trust the senses, we cannot be said to "know" anything, if by know we mean an understanding of an objective reality. Kant made the clear distinction between things-in-themselves (noumena), which do exist but which we cannot know fully, and things as we come to know them (phenomena). The latter depend on the structure of the mind, are products of the human consciousness. We can only know what our mind is capable of knowing, so our reality is in a sense a construct of the mind. This is not relativism, however, since all human consciousnesses are considered to be structured similarly.

Phenomenology

The science of phenomena or things as they appear. A process of examining the being and function of intentions in the human consciousness, while setting aside the question of whether the object of our awareness exists independently of us or not. Phenomenology attempts to capture experience without imposing on it any prior theoretical views held by the observer. Husserl was the first to describe a process of phenomenological reduction. The existentialists and others have made use of this method since, while not agreeing with his views.

Philosophes

A term used to describe a group of writers, philosophers, scientists, and statesmen whose works reflected the values of the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe and America. They were bound together by a shared faith in the ability of the developing natural sciences to both advance man's knowledge of the physical world and improve his way of life. Their works are characterised by an absolute faith in the capacity of human reasoning. They rejected what were regarded as outdated superstitions and prejudices and promoted the development of more liberal and humane social and political institutions. Included among their number are Voltaire, Hume, Franklin, Buffon, and Diderot.

Positivism

Positivists hold that the only valid source of knowledge lies in sensory experience. They reject any form of metaphysical speculation and abstract theorising. The term originates with Comte who held that civilisations pass through three phases, the last of which is the scientific or positive. In the 1920's the Vienna Circle of scholars developed a form of logical positivism which stressed logical analysis of scientific language.

Physics

In Greek philosophy, the study of Nature.

Pragmatism

A philosophical stance which claims that the significance or meaning of what we say lies in its practical bearings on human activity. Developed in late 19th century America by Peirce, it was further adapted by James to state that truth is what has fruitful consequences. A belief, such as belief in God, should be accepted if it has better consequences than non-belief.

Principle of Contradiction

A principle of argument based on the idea that contradictory propositions can not at one and the same time be true. Proof of the impossibility of one propositon constitutes proof of its opposite. Its first use is attributed to Parmenides and his disciple, Zeno of Elea, who used paradox as a form of argument to prove that being is unity while the concept of many was impossible.

Rationalism

A philosophic stance that sees all knowledge based on reason (from the Latin *ratio* - reason). Its greatest exponent, Descartes, soon found his views opposed by the empiricist view of Hume and Locke that knowledge is based on sense data and experience, not pure thought.

Realism

A theory of knowledge that acknowledges a world of objects with an objective reality which we perceive when our senses interact with them. This opposes a viewpoint which claims that we can have no knowledge of the "real" world as such, only the world as it is perceived or appears to us. Realists face the task of explaining why it is that we misperceive - see things that are not there or that appear other than what they are. What then is it that we see in such cases? This argument against realism (the argument by illusion) means that the the realist must give a convincing account of error, while opponents must explain truth. The former may prove easier than the latter.

Relativism

A position in philosophy that recognises no absolute values or truths. Protagoras' "Man is the measure of all things" was an early expression of this and was formulated in opposition to the search for absolute, universally applicable definitions of such ideas as virtue and justice which preoccupied Socrates and Plato. Relativism in a softer sense means that we must consider the meaning of statements within context. In modern times, for instance, anthropologists adopt a relativistic stance and try not to interpret their observations exclusively in the context of their own cultural values system.

Romanticism

The name given to a style of thinking which became popular in the 18th and 19th century. Its outlook is not as easily defined as most "isms", partly because it stresses the subjectivity of experience. Romanticism was a reaction against the mechanistic view which sought to strip Nature bare in order to identify the laws which governed it. For the Romantic, Nature speaks to the soul, to the emotions not the intellect. Its opposite is classicism which stresses precise measurements and an outward looking search for universals. Although Romanticism has had influence upon some writers recognised as philosophers, like Rousseau and Schopenhauer, its greatest influence has been on art and literature.

Scepticism

The view that, since we can not confirm or prove that anything exists outside of our perception of them, we should deny any claims to true knowledge of them, or at least suspend judgement (from the Greek *skepsis* - doubt). When sceptics, like Montaigne, ask themselves "What can we know?" they answer, that there is nothing that we can "know" for certain in the sense of the word "know" as used by the rationalists and empiricists. This is a radical rejection of the notion of universal truths or knowledge beyond human perception.

Social contract

A hypothesis in political philosophy which postulates that societies arise from individuals who agree to abandon their individual interests, needs and desires (described as a "state of nature") for the good of the group. The first social contract theories were formulated by Hobbes and Locke in the wake of political and religious division in 17th century England. Rousseau's treatise "On the Social Contract" adopts a more Romantic vision of the process. Where Hobbes and Locke's social contract awarded sovereign power to an individual whom all agreed to follow, in Rousseau's state, the "general will" of the people is sovereign.

Sophists

The sophists were itinerant teachers in 5th century Greece. The sophists came to be, somewhat unfairly, condemned as unscrupulous men who claimed to teach easy ways to success through clever argument without regard for morality or truth. Their name derives from the Greek *sophia* - cleverness, skill. This, in the Platonic mind was far less than true wisdom which could only be attained by a select few and involved understanding of universal absolutes. The sophists believed that an action could be good or bad depending on the circumstances. Some noted sophists, including Protagoras and Gorgias, feature in Plato's Dialogues, where Socrates always gets the better of them in argument.

Stoicism

A philosophy first expounded by Zeno of Citium which taught that man's major aim should be to live in harmony with nature.

Structuralism

A doctrine that emphasises structure rather than function. Initially developed in the study of language, the concept has been applied in other fields, notably anthropology by Lévi-Strauss, as well as in literature.

Thinking

Hobbes called thinking "mental discourse" to distinguish it from speaking or "verbal discourse". This may seem a fairly obvious distinction but it raises the question "Where does the material, the stuff we think about, come from?". There have been two alternative views to this. One notion that dates all the way back to Pythagoras but was adopted in variations by Plato and Descartes, is that we are born with the contents of the mind in place and that in learning, we are recalling contents of the mind already in place. This notion was countered by Locke, who claimed that all the material of thinking derives from experience. The mind is a blank sheet upon which experience writes. Kant tried to resolve these oppositions by assuming that all minds processed information in the same way - we are born with a set of concepts and categories in common which determine how we think rather than what we think. Various techniques have been suggested to try and identify the

nature of the contents of the human mind, or as it has been called, its "life world" (Husserl). It is only when ideas are expressed, made public through behaviour, language or culture that they can be examined or studied and each of these have been studied with a view to understanding the deeper structure of the human mind. (Freud, Wittgenstein, Lévi-Strauss)

Transcendent/al

A term dating back to medieval thought used to refer to what lies entirely out of our experience and cognition. The concept relates to a somewhat mystical idea that the highest levels of understandings come only through religious revelation. Medieval thinkers also used the related term transcendental to terms in Aristotelian logic which could not be predicated - terms like "being" and "unity". The term was given new meaning by Kant, who identified various deductions as transcendental because they precede experience (ie are a priori). For Kant, transcendent in the medieval sense implies that we can know the "thing-in-itself", for him an impossibility. Kant's transcendental idealism recognises only knowledge gained from objects as perceived by the mind and rejects metaphysical speculation that claims knowledge of "being". Husserl believed that one can also discover one's own "transcendental ego", a level of ego that is pure consciousness (quite distinct from the "psychical self" of Freud).

Utopianism

A search for a perfect society (from the Greek eu well & topos place). The term derives from a 16th century text by Sir Thomas More entitled "Utopia" which envisaged such a perfect society, but utopian thought predates the term. Plato's "Republic" must be regarded as one of the earliest masterpieces of utopian literature. There have been some attempts to create communities based on utopian ideals, but largely utopian societies are literary phenomena - imaginative projections of specific political and social reform programmes which stress social harmony rather than individual freedoms. Marx's prediction of a proletariat run state in which workers benefit equally from the products of their labour is utopian.

Utilitarianism

An ethical doctrine that judges actions in terms of the amount of happiness it generates. The best action results in the most happiness and the least pain for the greatest number of people. The term originated in Britain with Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) but it bears striking resemblance to the thinking of the Epicureans. It was vigorously defended by John Stuart Mill and Hume claimed that this actually how most people make ethical decisions.

Will

The term will is generally used to refer to a faculty of the soul or mind responsible for acts of choice or decision. This was taken as a feature characteristic of man, separating him from the animals and inanimate objects. Contemporary philosophy of the mind is less accepting of the reality of such mental faculties, but the idea of will became important in Schopenhauer and was adopted and adapted by Nietzsche with his emphasis on "will to power".