

The Name Game

Where do we go now? This chapter will be a collection of ideas we need in order to continue. First, and after our last chapter, in what would seem to be beating a dead horse, we still have one more discussion of ‘thinking’. So far, in an effort to shift our way of thinking toward theological understanding, we have looked at what philosophy is, what its tools are, how to go about ‘thinking’, what are some good habits to develop as well as what are some faults to avoid, and even how to think about a possible place to start. Let us take some time to look at places to stop.

When we begin to look at the ‘bigger picture’ ideas like the ones we explored in the last chapter, we begin to see the limits of systems and argumentation. But it does not mean that we do not seek ways to discuss these difficult topics. After all we are seeking wisdom and there are difficult questions which must be asked, some of which we may not be able to answer within our present framework, but will open up after consideration of other systems.

The limitations and boundaries of discussion have been the focus of previous examinations of the subject. Now we will take some time and examine the playing field itself. *Caveat Emptor*: Still, as the author of this work, I feel it is my duty to say that I am not really sure where this section is going but that has never stopped me before. Hopefully by the end we can all make some sense of it.

It’s All Just Semantics

The ‘final’ (at least in this conversation) roadblock to understanding is ironically the road itself. While the discipline of Symbolic Logic (a branch of Logic) seeks to avoid confusion by logical communication through the use of only symbols (hence the symbolic part) – thereby reducing any confusion there may be by eliminating language – it may be considered a bit ‘cold’ or un-nuanced. It also could be considered, depending upon how you define ‘language’, merely another ‘language’ among the myriad ways of human communication.

So that is what we tackle here. Language is the most complex of human characteristics and developments. One moment, it is a shared meaning, i.e. a word is attached to a concept by which we communicate the same idea to another, no matter what the language being used (‘hat’ or ‘chapeau’). The next it is a confusion of meaning, i.e. the concept behind the word evokes different meanings (‘love’). And furthermore, it might contain several meanings evoked by the user, all, some or none of which might be available to the hearer. But I ramble.

Often in philosophy, in order to be unmistakable about a concept, a word from the writers’ native language will be used, for example *zeitgeist*¹. Like so many words in English, that word becomes an entity unto itself, holding a different meaning than just the plain word or words from which the ‘term’ is derived.

Since words are the main means of the communication of ideas, we must also be prepared to learn to keep words within their context, that is, a word used in Greek times may be re-used in Medieval times and then again later, but with *different meaning* each time; we need to keep the

¹ Ger. *Spirit of the time*.

meanings separate and within their time context. This may also be true between methods and systems of the same time/thought period.

Sometimes the thing itself drives the meaning, for instance, as from above, 'hat' or 'chapeau'; either word works for that thing which you set on your head. Often though, it is the word which drives the meaning, for instance, as from above, 'love'. English uses the word 'love' for many things, to cover many concepts and it is the context alone which gives the meaning, whereas the Greeks use five different terms, *eros*, *agape*, *philia* (the three main ones), *storge* and *thelema* with each one carrying its specific meaning, that is, having no need for context.

All this worthy of its own discussion but I think you get the idea so I will finally move on. We do not want to get bogged down here, as semantics can be a branch of study all on its own – and that is another chapter, one not in this book incidentally. Suffice it to say that verbal context is another factor to keep in mind when approaching systems or methods. Put it also in the context of biases; some words may just get your hackles up unless you can keep them compartmentalized in their proper place.

The Branches of the Philosophical Tree

There are several 'flavors' of philosophy, each fixing on some of the great questions of the world (and many conveniently laid out by Aristotle – therefore easily recognized, like fallacies, because they are in Greek) such as:

- **Epistemology – the mind:** How do we know? What do we know?
- **Ontology – the soul or being:** What are we? Why are we?
- **Aesthetics – the senses:** What is beauty? What is art?
- **Hermeneutics – the mouth (communication):** How do we understand written texts? How should they be interpreted?
- **Ethics – praxis (putting thought into actions):** How should we live? How do we live together?
- **Theology – the Other:** What/who is God? What is the relationship between God and humans?

List 1: The Disciplines of Philosophy

The Flowering of Philosophical Thought

Why did we put Theology under Philosophy? At this time, for ease of association. Each of these branches can involve one or all of the other branches. So the answer is that there is a parallel of philosophy and theology, and at times one has seen as the 'handmaid' of the other, and we will discuss this later. When we look at each of these we see some of the basic avenues of thought. Why do humans think? What is thinking? Am I something special or just a figment of mine or someone else's imagination? Why do I care about things that most creatures do not? Why can we speak? Does it matter how I act?

If we want to put a name on the rose, it might be how the Greeks thought of wisdom, as understanding truth, and from that truth, meaning and action.

Final Thoughts On The Subject

Each discipline can help to give us consistent language within an idea which may be incorporated or utilized within a system or method, as well as a place to refer to, a well pre-thought out series of truths on which we can rely, keeping most systems from wandering too far or reaching a dead-end.

Think about it this way, if you were to define a system, where would you start? How long could you discuss before wandering? Having these areas of pre-defined discussion can be an aid in our own journeys into understanding.

We Have A History

Okay. Another way of categorizing is through the lens of history. It seems that nowadays no one can agree on a basic principle or even what language to use or how to approach a problem or question. Still, we might, through the means of looking at philosophical systems over time, be able to find a few basic principles and terms

The History of Philosophy

In one of the greatest simplifications of this over-simplified discussion, we can probably make a generalization that there are two branches of philosophical thought: Dynamic and Static or as they are often designated 'Western' and 'Eastern'.

East vs. West

Well perhaps it is not so aside, because when we speak of Eastern versus Western thought we must be aware of the direction the sun moves in the sky. In a further example of previous discussion about understanding in context, earlier thinkers spoke of the whole world in terms of that path. "From East to West" meant everywhere. Okay, digression done, really. Where we geographically draw the philosophical line for East/West is about as arbitrary as the one we use for maritime purposes.

(Warning: author influenced attempts at explanation to follow, which even my mother may disagree with even though she loves me)

It might be safe to say that even though 'Western' thought developed from Greek thought, Greek thought is 'Eastern' in nature. That said, while there may be a difference in approach, all basic philosophical thoughts are all 'Eastern' in basis, which is to restate that people are people, no matter where they live. They just develop different ideas of what is important and what is not and these differences are often culturally based.

At the risk of seeming trite or of reducing all of human thought to a couple of catch-phrases, let me put forth that Eastern thought tends to seek 'enough' of an answer – at the risk of leaving some things 'unanswered' (*mysterion*), hence its more 'static' nature, whereas Western thought tends to want the final answer, splitting hairs to leave no stone unturned, producing a more dynamic nature in thought.

Think of it like 'liberal' and 'conservative' in their broadest of meanings. Conservatives, seeking to conserve, present a very static system; liberals, seeking to broaden, present a very dynamic system. People's tendency toward one system or another is dependent on many factors, including place and time. More on that later.

Either way, each system has strengths and weaknesses. The East can make grand pronouncements leaving you thinking ‘yeah, but what does that *mean*?’; the West can beat a horse to death, leaving you thinking ‘okay, but where is the answer?’ As an example, the words *catholic* as in Roman Catholic and *orthodox*, as in Greek Orthodox reflect these two positions, and as such can be seen within their respective theologies.

Geographically

Philosophies are sometimes associated with a specific geography or country, and as such are often labeled ‘Greek’ or ‘Chinese’ or ‘German’. This is usually because philosophies can often be culturally related. Socrates and Plato are directly related not only to each other but to the Sophists before them (incidentally they are grouped together because all we know of Socrates comes through the writings of Plato, but that is another chapter). Aristotle depends directly upon them. Hence there is a Greek ‘school’ of philosophy, though the systems are not necessarily congruent in time or thought.

Chronographically

Philosophies are also associated with specific times, such as ‘The Enlightenment’, grouping several philosophers or systems together by time frame. Often, the systems grouped this way are more congruent because the authors are building on similar ideas within a similar framework, even though they are spread out over different systems.

Philosophically

Philosophies are most often grouped by system, ‘Pragmatism’ or ‘Existentialism’. These systems are related by an idea or grounding, and are usually different approaches to the same situations. An example would be *Empiricism* or *Rationalism*, which gives you an idea of the nature of the thinker even though they may be spread out over time and reach different conclusions. For our purposes, we will proceed by looking at the idea of philosophical thought through time, and the parallel impact on theology.

Pre-History

Think back to our original discussion of the meaning of philosophy: *the love or search for understanding*. In its earliest practice, human communication takes many forms, a majority of which are non-verbal. We can look at cave paintings or material artifacts² and get an idea of what people are/were thinking. We look at burial practices, religious or cultural buildings, listen to oral stories handed down, observe tribal behavior untainted by modern society or thinking and we will hear what is important to people.

When humans looked out and tried to live in their world, they came up against a broad range of obstacles: Nature, limitations of the human body, cruelty, death. Life could seem very arbitrary. If the rain came, you were fine. If the rain did not come you were in a world of hurt, so to speak. Slowly the cycles of nature became apparent, but still arbitrary events happened,

² This would be such things as pottery, weapons, housing, or art.

earthquakes, floods, sunshine, crops, death. Stories developed to pass on the knowledge of the seasons, of the dangers of life, and of life lessons.

These stories often took the form of myths. The telling of a myth involves the exchange of an idea in a teaching format. Like Aesop's fables there is always a moral at the end in a form which can be understood, and reached 'logically' by the individual. Looking at our myths (even the Judeo-Christian ones) we see a vast amount of understanding especially of human nature. Are these 'myths' factual? Yes, inasmuch as they reveal 'truths' about ourselves and our world to us (c.f. M. Eliades or J. Campbell for good discussions in this realm). Even as our scientific knowledge grows we still must make facts fit into our understanding. Einstein shifted the way we look at time, yet the Greeks already had a concept of time which was relative (*Kiaros* versus *Chronos*).

The search to explain and to transmit that explanation is at the root of the human experience. Without such thinking and transmittal we would not have made it very far. Myth and ritual are the reference manuals by which we can operate. When we begin to have a good operations manual, we begin to branch out beyond just the basic, what shall I eat, what shall I wear, where will I sleep existence. The questions of life, death, birth, illness, love, happiness, fear begin to rise up in our minds beyond the level of physical survival to that of mental survival.

Philosophy then, is not a 'modern' invention. People have always sought understanding and systems have developed, usually what we call religions or sacred rituals, myths and thoughts. The validity of these myths or religions lies not in their 'scientific' or 'factual'³ nature but in their 'true' insights and archetypes.

History

Within our 'recorded' time we start with snippets of writings which continues until today. What would be the difference between pre-history and history? Nothing really, except that we have datable, serial understanding and a greater practical knowledge of the workings of the universe which a) causes us to re-evaluate and b) gives us deeper understanding. Again, though, this is not better or worse. Truth comes to us through both a priori and a posteriori means. Perhaps then the main difference is the systemization of philosophical thought, aside from and somewhat independent of the a posteriori nature of the earlier period. Here we develop logic and other a priori methods of coming to knowledge and understanding. Philosophy becomes detached from survival concerns (why doesn't it rain?) and becomes more humanistic (why do I...?).

Putting It Together

The first thing we will notice is that some questions are eternal. They have always been asked and they will always be asked: Why are we here? What makes something beautiful? What makes us human?

We need to evaluate each idea or system within its own framework, but mainly within the body of established 'truth', not by some unrelated standard. We are striving to develop objective criteria for critical thinking. This is not promoting a face-value, non-critical evaluation but the exact opposite. As we plow through writers and writings, we must listen, as we might to a myth

³ At least not how we define science and fact today.

or allegorical story, for the ‘truth’ within it, as well as the fallacies which hinder the truths. Through this we can build a broad and deep understanding of ourselves and our world.

As we discussed earlier (well at least I did), many understandings and ‘truths’ can be lost by invalidating systems based on hubris and bias, and no time in human development and history should be discounted, even though the ‘factual’ nature of the observations may be suspect to our modern ears. As a final judgment call, we can categorize most philosophical ‘thought’ of this period is *a posteriori* or experiential in nature.

Here you are trying to learn something, while here your brain is doing you a favor by making sure the learning doesn't stick. Your brain's thinking, "Better leave room for more important things, like which wild animals to avoid and whether naked snowboarding is a bad idea."

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