

## STUDY SESSION 2

### A SURVEY OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY



#### 2.1 Introduction

In this session, you will appreciate the history of philosophy. Indeed, it will be impossible for you to embark on any philosophical journey without a reference to its history. The history of philosophy, you will come to see, is a very long one, perhaps as long as the history of man. However, philosophy as an intellectual enterprise can be dated to the point at which man began to wonder (Aristotle) and ask fundamental questions about his being. Questions like what is the primary stuff the universe is made of, the purpose of man on earth were one of the earlier philosophical questions. A philosopher would be he who goes beyond the common belief in answering such questions while a mythologist would merely echo communal consensus in his answer to such questions. The first set of people who offered answers to questions that others would have taken for granted in a manner akin to that ascribed to philosophers were the Greeks. Our task in this session will be to explore the periods in the history of philosophy, namely the Ancient, the Hellenistic, the Medieval, the Modern and the Contemporary. The division of the history of western philosophy is by no means water tight.



#### 2.1. Learning Outcomes for Study Session 2

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

1. State the various eras in the history of philosophy;
2. List the philosophers in every era;
3. Differentiate the philosophical ideas in various eras;

4. List the similarity in philosophical ideas of philosophers in various eras; and
5. List the contributions of every era to the development of philosophy.

## **2.2 The Ancient Period**

The Ancient period is divided into two sub periods known as the Pre-Socratic and the Socratic periods. The Pre-Socratic period focused primarily on Cosmos, the universe. Indeed, this period that marked the beginning of Greek Philosophy was in a way scientific as astronomical phenomena and cosmological speculation first attracted early Greek thinkers. The Socratic period or the Classical period of Ancient Philosophy denoted the period comprising Socrates himself, Plato and Aristotle.

## **2.3 The Pre-Socratic Period**

For the purpose of this we can say that philosophy is a discipline which attempts to gain knowledge of life from the perspective of the whole. Philosophy tries to see life and its attendant problems from a panoramic standpoint. Philosophy emerged as a result of man's gift of rationality with which he interacts with nature, the environment and human experiences. It began when man started to exercise his faculty of reason. Every area of inquiry can be said to have its own philosophical foundation or tradition. Nevertheless, the Greeks, who lived in Ionia in Miletus, started the first formal attempt at explaining what life was all about and what reality is. As the history of philosophy shows there were various periods, each with its attendant problems and questions about life, the issue of survival, how the society should be governed, justice, God, etc.

These philosophical problems and questions were what the early philosophers dealt with. Each period (with the philosophers of that time or epoch) answered these questions based on their various experiences, the prevailing culture and level of intellectual awareness at that time. Western philosophy began with wonder and curiosity about the nature of the universe. A few writers are of the opinion that originally philosophy did not begin in Greece but in Egypt. Others point out its ancestral home to continents such as Pangaea and Laurasia which existed before the continental drift. In the western European tradition, however, philosophy is periodized into four historical epochs namely, the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary. Here, we shall trace the emergence, growth and advancement of western philosophy from its place of birth in Greece in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The Ancient period is divided into two sub periods namely the pre-Socratic and Socratic periods. The pre-Socratic period refers to the early Greek cosmologists who mainly came before Socrates (469-399 B. C.) They are generally referred to as the representatives of the Milesian school. The history of Philosophy taught that Thales was the first representative of this school and also the first philosopher and scientist in the real sense of the word.

**Thales** (624-547 B.C.) lived in Miletus, Asia Minor. He predicted an eclipse of the sun in 585 BC. As a scientist and an advocate of philosophical materialism, he said that water was the first principle of all things. Thales, explained earthquakes as natural phenomena and not a display of activities by the gods and initiated the notion of proof by deduction.

**Anaximander** (610-546 BC) came after Thales. He affirmed that the universe originated as an amorphous, formless mass that had within itself opposites such as hot and cold, wet and dry etc. He observed that it was from the union and separation of these opposites that sea, land, air were formed. Anaximander had the unique privilege to be the first to determine solstices and equinoxes. Full of scientific curiosity, he was the first to draw a map.

**Anaximenes** (died- 528 BC). He was the third representative of the Milesian school and teacher of Anaxagoras. The Greek philosopher originated the concept of monism. For him one substance can picture the diversity of the world. He claims that the fundamental substance for other substances in the universe is air or mist. The soul is air. Fire is rarefied air. When condensed, air becomes first water, then it further condensed and transformed into earth and finally stone. Between the three Milesians, the primary stuff of the universe oscillated between water, air, and an infinite, eternal substance.

Besides the three representatives of the Milesian school, there are other great minds in this period.

**Pythagoras** (580-500 B.C.) was a great mathematician and philosopher who work focused on numbers. Pythagoras assigned to numbers mystical functions. For him, numbers explain everything in the universe. His philosophy was a synthesis of religion, mathematics and science. Famous with the Pythagoras theorem, he founded a school and religious brotherhood in Croton, south of Italy. One of the core beliefs of the school is reincarnation as the founder himself was influenced by Orphism.

**Heraclitus (544-483 B.C.)** Greek Philosopher, he suggested fire as the primordial element out of which everything has arisen. He was also credited with the crude formulation of the dialectics. Reality, according to Heraclitus is consisting of change and motion. Objects are a harmony of opposing tensions. This is possible through logos, the organizing principle akin to reason. His ideas influenced modern philosophers such as Hegel, Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

**Parmenides** of Elea (510-450) played a key role in the Eleatic school. For Parmenides, nothing changes; everything is permanently in a state of being. He emphasized the difference

between the senses and reason. With him, reason and speculation take preeminence over the evidence of our senses.

**Anaxagoras** (500-428 B.C.) He was an Ionian who was a disciple of Anaximenes. He was the first to introduce philosophy to the Athenians and the first to suggest mind as the primary cause of physical change. He argued that the Mind (Nous) characterizes consciousness.

### **The Atomists**

Leucippus and Democritus were the founders of this school. They believed that everything is composed of atoms which are physically, but not geometrically indivisible. According to the atomists between the atoms, there are empty spaces; and atoms are indestructible. There are infinite number of atoms even of kinds with different shape and sizes, always in motion. The early materialists built their philosophy on this initial conception of atoms. For instance, their influence on Karl Marx was so profound that he wrote his thesis on Democritus.

### **The Sceptics and Sophists**

In Ancient Greece, originally a sophist was a “wise man”. However, since the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, a sophist was no other than an itinerant teacher of rhetoric, politics and the art of success in life in exchange for money. Protagoras of Abdera and Gorgias represent this school. The main thrust of their position is that “nothing can be known”. Protagoras was also a sophist, in fact, the Chief sophist. A sophist is a man that makes his living by teaching young men certain things that he believes that will be useful to them in life. Sophists were itinerant teachers who taught for money. They teach those who have money to pay for lessons.

The next sub-period of the ancient period is the “Golden Age of Greek Philosophy” also known as the Socratic period.

### 2.3.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List the philosophers of the Milesian school

### 2.3.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes

## 2.4 The Socratic Period

Socrates (469-399 B.C.) did not write anything. All we know about him was through his disciples – Plato and Xenophanes. Socrates was the first person to turn philosophy from the study of cosmology and away from sophistry and set it in the homes. The Greek Philosopher was desirous to challenge the scepticism of the Sophists by asserting that genuine knowledge is possible. He compelled philosophy to consider life style, issues of existence, morals etc. As a moralist, he exemplified his moral teachings in his life style. He saw himself as a teacher sent to awaken the people's ability to use their faculty of reason and as such help them to release their inner potentials. He was tried, convicted and put to death by the Athenian authorities by drinking hemlock (poison) which led to his death.(Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 1959: 101-102)

**Plato** (427-347 B.C.) His thought is difficult to separate from that of Socrates his teacher. Plato is said to have contributed immensely to philosophy. The central teachings of Plato revolve around the notion of **Forms**. **Forms** are located outside the everyday world. They are timeless, motionless and absolutely real. He called the essences of things, **Ideas** or **Forms** which can only be known through reason and not by sense perception. Plato defined man as a

being made of the soul (reason) and the body. He founded the first university (called the Academy) in Europe where people could be taught philosophy. He affirmed that knowledge was reminiscence. *The Republic* was Plato's *magnus opus* on how the State should be organized. He covered many areas and topics in his Academy.

According to Russell, Plato's influence had a wide and great effect on his contemporaries and upon subsequent ages. The effect of his philosophy is still felt today. Plato used allegories in espousing his theories. He believed that those in government should demonstrate a high level of intelligence and moral discipline.

**Aristotle**, born in 384BC in Stageira was next to Plato. He is said to be the outcome of Plato, who was his teacher for twenty (20) years. Like Plato, his influence had far reaching consequences on his contemporaries and those of later ages. He covered such areas as logic, physics, ethnics, psychology, biology, politics, metaphysics, rhetoric, etc. He was known to have developed formal logic, which deals with the form that reasoning takes. He also founded a school known as Lyceum. The Socratic period had a great influence on philosophy. it gave birth to neo-Platonism as well as neo-Aristotelianism.

#### 2.4.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List the Philosophers in the Socratic Period

#### 2.4.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle

### 2.5 The Hellenistic period

The Hellenistic period is the period after Aristotle and before the Medieval era. Five schools thrived in that period. These schools are the Cynics, Cyrenaicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism and Scepticism.

**The Cynic** School was founded by Antisthenes who was one of Socrates's disciples. The school emphasizes a return to nature and self-discipline, and self-knowledge along with asceticism.

**The Cyrenaics** School was founded by Aristippus of Cyrene. He identified pleasure as the goal of life and made it a criterion for judging right from wrong.

**Stoicism** was founded by Zeno, This school believes that all knowledge derives from perception which is the criterion for truth. For the Stoics, all things and all events are interrelated. Thus, everything has its place in the total scheme of things. They insist that man should live according to nature, and be ruled by reason.

**Epicureanism** was established by Epicurus whose philosophy derives mainly from those of Democritus and the Cyrenaics. They emphasized asceticism to strengthen the power of reason in order to control the emotion.

**Scepticism** was established by Pyrrho of Elis. For him and his school there is no objective standard for judging morality, except to follow the prevailing customs or laws depending on the place. They do not believe that anything is certain. Therefore, neither reason nor the senses could give us adequate and certain knowledge.

### 2.5.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List any 4 Schools in the Hellenistic Period



## 2.5.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Stoicism, The Cynics, Sceptics, Epicureanism and The Cyrenaics

## 2.6 The Medieval Period

Also called the Middle Ages, it is the era in which the church brought philosophic thesis to embellish religious thought and norms so as to fit into their circumstances. The era arguably witnessed the stagnation of science and materialism. Religion became very powerful in the affairs of the state. This affected the pace of philosophical thinking. The notable church philosophers of this period were St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Boethius, St. Anselm as well as a few Jewish and Islamic scholars.

**St Augustine** was born in Tagaste in Algeria, North Africa in A.D. 354. He fashioned his philosophy after Plato. He viewed the universe as a place of cause and effect. He adopted Plato's world of ideas to represent the mind of God and the idea of good to be God. He wrote *The City of God* and *The Confessions* which were about issues of life, and philosophy.

**Boethius** wrote a famous book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. His philosophy is a combination of neo-Platonism and Stoicism. The book is based on his experience from a consul to a prisoner. He defined man as an individual substance of a rational nature. And the task of philosophy for him is to awaken and broaden man's knowledge.

**John Scotus Eriugena** was an Irish philosopher. He was highly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysus. He sees nature as the expression of God and reality. He says man is a smaller universe in which both the spiritual and physical components of nature are well combined.

**St. Anselm** belonged to the Augustinian tradition of philosophy. His ontological view is that God is a being greater than that which no one can conceive.

**Thomas Aquinas** was largely Aristotelian. He was a prolific writer. *The Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles* are his most famous books. For him, matter and form are inseparable. None of them can exist without the other. He is of the opinion that all human knowledge derives from experience. Islamic and Jewish philosophers whose works were a fusion of neo-Platonism and Aristotelians flourished during this period.

### 2.6.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Another name for the Medieval period is?

### 2.6.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

The Middle Ages or The Dark Ages

## 2.7 The Modern Period

According to J. I. Omoregbe, the Modern Period marks the period of the Renaissance to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It marked the height of the inquiries into the theory of knowledge and laid more emphasis on the role of reason in thinking, experience and observation. During this period, philosophy provided the foundation of experimental science and empirical research.

**Francis Bacon's** thesis was about how knowledge could be discovered and used by man to improve his lot and dominate nature. He wrote *The Novum Organum*. Bacon's philosophy and view on the need to purge experience of preconceived opinions of society marked the beginning of the new scientific era.

**René Descartes** introduced the fact that reason was the foundation to awareness and all experiences. He held that it came before knowledge. From the proof of his own existence

Descartes derived the notion to the methodic doubt. He brought about the problem of mind-body interaction in philosophy.

**Spinoza** (a Jewish philosopher) held man to be part of nature. And that nature or God presents itself as spirit and matter (thought and extension).

**Leibniz** (1646 – 1716) was a great mathematician and logician. He maintained that monads are the basic elementary substances of which all things are made. He is popular for his view that this world is the best of all possible worlds God could have created. The modern period also produced the British empiricists, John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley and David Hume.

**John Locke**, the father of British empiricism, says all knowledge and ideas come from sense perception or experience. For Locke, knowledge could be intuitive, demonstrative and sensitive. Knowledge is circumscribed within sense experience. He believes that morality is based on the authority of God. Locke is known as the philosopher of private property. He believes the right to own a property is a natural right. Locke's political philosophy influenced the American and British constitutions.

**Bishop George Berkeley** (1685 – 1753), feels that what we perceive are ideas in the mind, because their existence depends on what we perceived. Therefore, he opined that *esse est percipi* (to exist is to be perceived). Berkeley says that laws of nature are meant to regulate the activities of man, nature and the earth. They are independent of man, nature and the earth, but they are dependent on God's activity.

**David Hume** (1711–1776) was a lawyer turned philosopher. He wrote the famous work *A Treatise on Human Nature*. He was an empiricist to the core who believed that any metaphysics not based on sense experience could not give us adequate knowledge, but

contained sophistry and illusion. He criticizes the principle of causality because he says it can neither be demonstrated nor known by intuition.

**Immanuel Kant**, a great German philosopher, was born at Konisberg in 1724. He began his work in philosophy with an investigation into nature and the limits of human understanding. His philosophy instigated German idealism. Kant began his philosophy on a critical note. He made the distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, and synthetic a priori propositions. His main works include *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*) and *Critique of Judgment* among others. He died in the same city of Konisberg in 1804.

The history of philosophy also records that German idealism is due largely to Kant's reaction to Hume's philosophy. German idealism was led by **Fichte** (1762-1814), **Schelling** (1775-1854) and **Hegel** (1770-1831). It is largely derived from Kant's philosophy about reality being made up of noumena and phenomena. This philosophy gradually ended up in absolute idealism. Hegel, precisely took German idealism to its height. He wrote *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Philosophy of Religion* and *Philosophy of History*. Hegelianism focuses on Being as the Absolute Spirit.

**Karl Marx** (1818-1883) with dialectical materialism and historical materialism was another popular modern philosopher. He influenced socialism as an alternative to capitalism. Marxist socio-political philosophy thrived in the Far East, the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, few countries in Africa and Latin America and a few parts of the rest of the world towards the close of the Modern period.

### 2.7.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

The Modern period begins and ends when?

Another name for the Modern period is?

### 2.7.1 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

It begins from the Renaissance lasting till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is also known as the age of Scientific Knowledge.

## 2.8 The Contemporary Period

This period is one of the greatest in the history of philosophy. It comprises many philosophical movements that developed and gave a new orientation to old philosophical concepts. Such movements are known as Neo Idealism, Neo Thomism, Positivism, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Existential Phenomenology, Pragmatism, Process Philosophy, Analytic Philosophy etc.

The logical positivists who emerged in this era (as the **Vienna circle**) reacted against the neo-idealists philosophical thought. The logical positivists include Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath, Richard Von Misses, Hans Reinchenbach, Moritz Schlick among others. The main thrust of their argument is that science is the only valid way to attain knowledge; thus for them, verification principle became the instrument of verifying meaningfulness, falsity and truth. Such areas as metaphysics, religion and ethics are irrelevant because no knowledge can be derived from them.

**Pragmatism** was established by C. S. Pierce, and further developed by William James and John Dewey during this period. Their main thesis is that what works in practice is true.

**Phenomenology** was developed by Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938) in the early part of this period. Its work was with analyzing human experience without prior bias or presumption.

**The Analytic Philosophy** brought about by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell is a contemporary philosophy. Ludwig Wittgenstein is a product of this school. They are of the view that philosophy should concern itself with analyzing language. The argument against this view is that analysis is one of the tools of philosophy and by its wide area of interest and activity it cannot be its main task.

**Existentialism** founded by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) became established in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a modern philosophical movement. Existentialism pictures human life in an absurd and meaningless universe where individuals are responsible for and the sole judge of their conducts as they affect individual beings. In *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard admits that the ways of an individual's life manifest in three stages which are the ethical, aesthetic and the religious, upon which human existence was based. Existentialism thrived immensely as philosophy concerned with man's existence in the world. It produced many notable philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) among others.

From what you have learnt so far, you can now see that the importance of the history of philosophy cannot be overemphasized. Philosophy is its history and the history of philosophy gives live to the practice of philosophy. The history of philosophy is the one without which philosophy is incomplete. The entire past is imbedded in every moment of philosophical interrogation. Indeed, all philosophy includes the entire history of philosophy. If it did not, it will not be intelligible, and, what is more, it could not exist.... There is an intrinsic link between philosophy and the history of philosophy. Philosophy is historical and its history is an essential part of it. (Julia Maria, *History of Philosophy*, Quoted by Roy Mach in "History and Theory", Vol. 26, No 3 Oct. 1987 p.287). Philosophy and its history are one. You cannot embark on one without referring to the other as it is essential to an adequate understanding of

philosophical problems, issues that one understands them genetically. (See Roy Mach p 17-30). The history of philosophy is the history of ideas, the sum total of philosophical problems in time and space. Philosophy has a history, an indestructible tradition and that no philosophy can detach itself from this tradition which always shapes it.

### 2.8.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List at least three (3) movements that characterize the Contemporary period?

### 2.8.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Existentialism, Post-modernism, Phenomenology, Neo-Idealism, Process Philosophy, Action Theory etc.

## 2.9 Summary of Study Session 2

In this study session, you have learnt that you cannot fully comprehend the various areas of philosophical thought, if you do not understand the history of philosophy. The importance of the history of philosophy is that it enables us to have knowledge of the purpose of philosophy in the quest to understand reality and to show man's attempt at unfolding his potential in interaction with the environment. You have seen the various periods of philosophy, showing its emergence and growth, as well as the various contributions of various philosophers at different periods and through relative movements, ideas and thought process.

Also, through our study of the history of philosophy we are endowed with the knowledge which comes about as a result of a continuous quest meant to deal with perennial problems. The history of philosophy shows us that there is continuity in philosophy. It also registers a strong point which is that philosophy is all about life and how we should live it especially in relation to the problems we encounter daily.

The philosophers of the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary periods dealt with perennial problems which they attempted to answer based on the nature of their circumstance and level of intellectual awareness and activity. The same questions they asked are still being raised today based on our experiences and the fast advancing pace of our technology and education. Man, as a result of the gift of conscience, is philosophical, and philosophy will continue as long as the earth, her elements and man endure. Man cannot but think, and consciousness, which thrives on reason, is the foundation of all experiences.

### **2.9.1 References/ Suggestions for Further Reading**

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