

Philosophy: Its Nature and Purpose

by *Alexander F Skutch*

PHILOSOPHY BEGINS with wonder. To understand what it is, we must go back to its origins. First among the things of wonder is the world itself. How did it begin? Of what is it made? How is it governed? Even children ask their parents these fundamental questions.

Western philosophy today evolved from the genius of the ancient Greeks. They established and outlined it. Their ideas were such that until modern times no European thinker made any advances of outstanding originality. The earliest Greek philosophers flourished in the prosperous

Ionian cities on the Eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, in Asia Minor. They were largely interested in physical problems. Above all they sought to discover some single substance of whose modifications all the multiplicity of things is composed.

Wonder, or curiosity, is one of the fundamental attributes of the human mind, which has made us what we are. But even more deeply rooted and insistent is the desire to lead a good and satisfying life, our yearning for happiness. The penetrating intellects of the Greek thinkers soon perceived the intimate connection between their

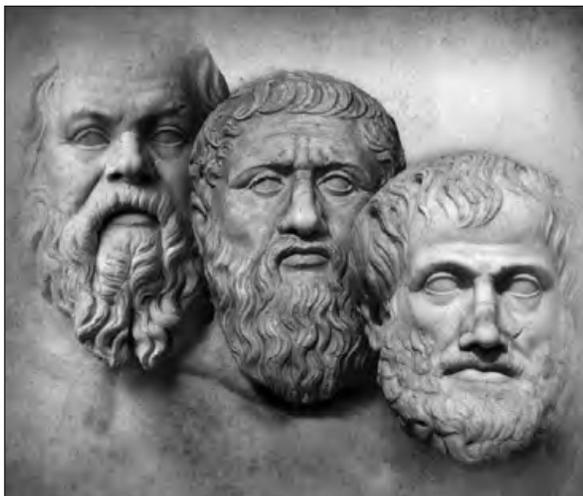


desire to know and their yearning for happiness. We do not live in a vacuum, but in a world which has definite modes of procedure, known as the 'laws of nature'. Moreover, we also have definite characteristics. We have our human nature, which is largely inherited, but subject to modification by social and individual effort. This must also be taken into account by anyone who earnestly desires a good and happy life. Only by understanding ourselves and the world can we intelligently pursue our highest goals and set happiness on a firm foundation.

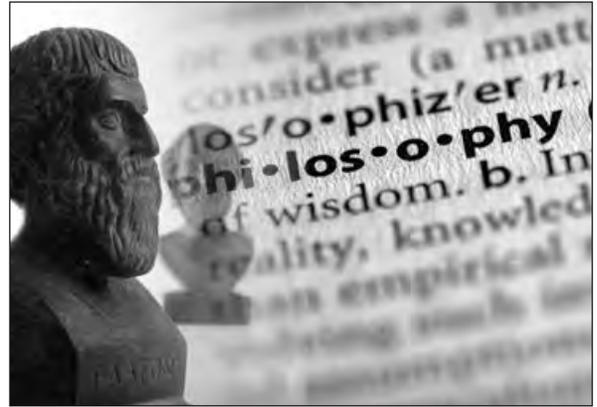
The great systems of Greek philosophy sprang from the intimate union of two fundamental and interrelated human interests: the thirst for knowledge and the yearning for happiness and fulfilment. Essentially there were three divisions to Greek thinking: logic, physics, and ethics.

- *Logic* is the study of pure thought, independent of any objects.
- *Physics* is the study of how things happen in the world of material objects.
- *Ethics* is the study of how things ought to happen in the world of human beings.

With such a vast field, the cultivation of philosophy became a large undertaking, fit to engross one's best faculties for a whole lifetime. Some thinkers placed more emphasis on one division of philosophy than on another. Socrates (c.469-399 BCE), one of the pioneers, was scarcely interested in physics; but in his later years he seems to have devoted most of his time to impressing on his contemporaries the need for expert knowledge, and a better understanding of the terms associated with the leading of a good life.



Three faces of philosophy: From the back, Socrates, his disciple Plato, and Plato's pupil, Aristotle.



Although the philosopher ardently desires true knowledge, he above all yearns for 'wisdom', which is the application of truth to life.

His disciple Plato (429-347 BCE) was far more concerned with logical, moral and political problems than with physics and cosmological speculation. Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who was Plato's pupil, is outstanding for the breadth of his interests and the scope of his writings. He wrote treatises on logic, physics (including long works on zoology), aesthetics, ethics, politics or the art of government, and even metaphysics or the discussion of

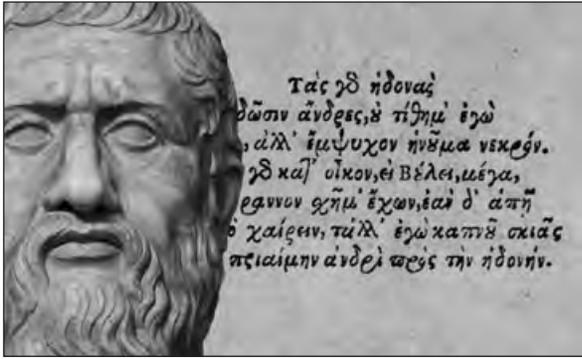
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what lies beyond the world of phenomena, especially of God. The great Stoic system is also remarkable for its vast elaboration in many fields.

The second important centre of philosophical inquiry in ancient times was northern India, where thinkers no less acute than the Greeks, turned their attention to much the same problems and reached different conclusions. The *Nyaya* school of philosophical speculation is based on texts known as the *Nyaya Sutras*, which were written by Aksapada Gautama from around the 2nd century BCE. The Indians developed a logic comparable to that of Aristotle; in the *Vaisesika*, a metaphysical philosophy closely allied to the *Nyaya* school of thought, an atomic theory developed which has some resemblance to that of Leucippus and Democritus. But the avowed end of the six classical systems of Indian philosophy (Vedic systems) is the release from suffering and the attainment of enduring happiness. Their logic, their physical and cosmological speculations, their prescribed disciplines, were means to this supreme end.

In China, the third ancient centre of philosophical activity, the correct conduct of life or the attainment of communal harmony appears to have claimed relatively far greater attention than understanding of cosmic order. This





The term 'Socratic Dialogue' refers to works in which Socrates is a character discussing moral and philosophical problems; it is a genre of prose literary works developed in Greece at the turn of the fourth century BCE, preserved today in the dialogues of Plato and the Socratic works of Xenophon.



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approach set them apart from Western philosophy where probing the nature of underlying reality was the prime end.

The Goal

What, then, is the goal of philosophy? When we consider philosophical endeavour in the light of its origins and its total scope, we might define it somewhat as follows: Philosophy is the attempt to give life significance, coherence, and stability by seeing it whole, and in relation to a greater whole. Nothing is more important to any being than its achieving a proper relation to the whole of which it is a part.

In the case of ourselves, the larger systems with which it is indispensable for us to cultivate proper relations include our families, our community, the natural world which supports us and, above all, the Universe which embraces all of these.

Philosophy and Science

To understand adequately what philosophy is, we must clearly distinguish it from certain related endeavours, especially science and religion. The scientist and the philosopher are equally dedicated to the *pursuit of truth*. In so far as they are loyal to their respective callings, they regard the acquisition and diffusion of truth or knowledge as a sacred obligation; and the deliberate distortion of truth should not be permitted.

But the scientist, in his professional capacity, is concerned merely with the *accumulation of factual knowledge*. Some scientists believe that the application of these facts to the conduct of life is no concern of theirs. The more impersonal their knowledge, the less relation it has to human problems and aspirations, the more highly they seem to value it. Although the philosopher, as the scientist, ardently desires true knowledge, he above all

yearns for *wisdom*, which is the application of truth to life. At the conclusion of the *Philebus*, a long Socratic dialogue written between 360 and 347 BCE which investigates the highest good, Plato assigned first place to measure and moderation, second place to beauty and perfection, and third place to mind and wisdom. Science and art, which include factual knowledge, came fourth from the top.

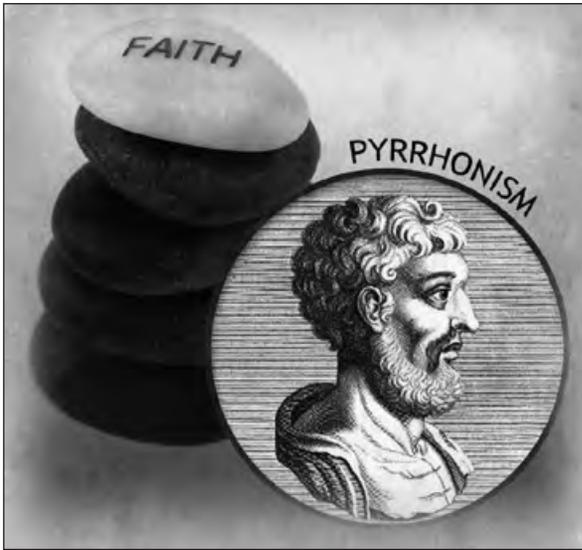
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That the truths which philosophy discovers must be related to the conduct of life is a necessary consequence of the philosophic endeavour to give life significance and stability by seeing it whole and in relation to a larger whole. Thus to define philosophy as 'love of truth' or the 'pursuit of truth' is not quite accurate; since this does not distinguish it from science. The literal meaning of the word 'philosophy' is *love of wisdom*. Wisdom is more than truth or factual knowledge, for it implies the application of this knowledge to life.

Philosophy and Religion

The bonds which join philosophy to religion are no less close than those which unite it with science, and they are even more massive. Most of the great philosophers were deeply religious men, although many could not accept the orthodox beliefs of their age and nation. And from this we may deduce the resemblances and differences between philosophy and religion. At its best, religion, no less than philosophy, strives to give life significance and stability by seeing it in relation to a larger whole. For this it needs, as in philosophy, a comprehensive view of the origin, nature and destiny of the world and of humanity. Taken together,





Pyrrho was the starting-point for a philosophical movement known as 'Pyrrhonism' that flourished several centuries after his own time. A devotee of this philosophy, Sextus Empiricus (depicted here), advises that we should suspend judgement about all beliefs. 'We should neither affirm any belief as true nor deny any belief as false. This view is known as Pyrrhonian scepticism, as distinguished from Academic scepticism, which, according to Sextus, denies knowledge altogether. (Adapted image and text source: <http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/en/02themas/h22.html>)

the biblical Old and New Testament provide a frame of reference for human life whose comprehensiveness we can hardly deny, no matter how we may judge its correctness.

The aims of philosophy and religion are then, almost identical. Both have had the audacity to ask, and propose answers to, the deepest questions, touching the grandest and most momentous problems which occur to the human mind. Yet despite their close resemblance in scope and aims, they differ profoundly in methods. This difference can be most succinctly expressed by saying that *philosophy is critical, and religion uncritical.*

Philosophy is constantly searching and testing. It desires the latest verified discoveries, from whatever source they may come. It insists on subjecting all alleged facts and all plausible explanations to merciless scrutiny, and it relentlessly rejects everything which will not withstand this probing.

Religion, on the other hand, rejects this critical examination. Once having accepted a solution of one of the grand cosmological or human problems, it regards the question as closed; no longer a fit topic for investigation and free discussion. What philosophy welcomes as indispensable to the intellectual life is anathema to an established church. For it, there is no greater crime than to question what the sacred books advance as indubitable facts, for to disprove them might undermine the very foundation of the whole elaborate doctrinal structure.

While Roman Catholicism ruled supreme in western Europe the convicted might procure pardon for some of the greatest of crimes against humanity, but to question articles of dogma was the unpardonable offence for which burning alive was prescribed.

In the measure that the human intellect is inquiring and original, the thinker inevitably comes into conflict with the dominant religious notions of the day. Any attempt to philosophise within the framework of an established religion is doomed to restriction and will not produce wisdom as we defined it above.

As has been stated, religion, no less than philosophy, strives to give life stability and significance by seeing it in relation to a larger whole. However, it is prevented from wholly achieving this because of its very dogmatic foundations. To achieve this comprehensive vision demands free inquiry and receptivity to all fresh insights, from whatever quarter they may come.

Faith

It is sometimes held that religion differs from philosophy in that the former demands faith, whereas the latter can dispense with this attribute. This is a false distinction; for *neither can dispense with faith*, although they need it in different degrees and with reference to different things. The faith required by religion often has reference to particular alleged happenings; and the more incredible they are, in the light of ordinary experience, the more merit is sometimes ascribed to unquestioning belief in their occurrence. Regarding faith as meritorious and desirable in itself, sometimes as the highest religious virtue and the surest road to salvation, religion has rarely taken pains to reduce the burden it must bear.

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Philosophy, by striving for rational demonstration in every sphere where this is possible, has tried to reduce faith to a minimum. Yet philosophy cannot dispense with faith without being driven to that extreme form of scepticism known as *Pyrrhonism*, which doubts all things, even the possibility of knowing anything. How, for example, can I be sure that I live in a world containing solid objects extended in space? When I dream, I seem to see and touch such objects, yet when I awake I recognise that they were unsubstantial creations of my own mind. Are not the things and people which I see, feel, and hear in my waking hours merely more vivid hallucinations of the same sort?



Does anything really exist outside my own mind?

Countless pages have been written on this problem, and it has become evident that the existence of an external world, containing solid extended bodies, is not strictly demonstrable *but demands an act of faith*. We need faith in the adequacy of our own psychic processes, in the essential honesty of nature of which we are parts, or, as the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) put it, *“faith in the goodness of God, who does not constantly deceive us”*.

Moreover, philosophy could hardly maintain its investigative nature if there was a lack of faith that reality is somehow rational, purposeful or friendly, so that if we understand it and put ourselves in accord with it, it will support our highest aspirations. Far from being able to discard faith, philosophy requires a deeper, more serious and fundamental faith than religion, which often demands unquestioning belief in relatively trivial matters.

A Way of Life

The philosopher’s penchant for building vast ‘systems’ embracing the whole scope of human knowledge has been disparaged in recent times. Today there are many philosophers who restrict their professional activity to the analysis of the meaning of words and phrases, to logical investigations, or to the criticism of science and its methods.

In order to avoid errors and place its conclusions on a firm foundation, philosophy needs (and from ancient times has found a place for) such preliminary labour; just as biology needs microscopes and astronomy requires telescopes. But one whose philosophical work stops short with details of this sort does not deserve to be called a ‘philosopher’ in the traditional meaning of the word. If nothing else were essential, then the microscope maker would deserve to be called a biologist and the manufacturer of telescopes an astronomer. These analyses certainly do not fall under the heading of wisdom, which is what the philosopher has from ancient times aspired to win.

Although the philosophic system need not be as elaborate as the structural concepts erected by Aristotle in ancient times, or his more modern descendents, philosophy still attempts to give life significance, coherence and stability by seeing it as a whole, and in relation to a greater whole. At very least it requires a world view or cosmological doctrine, an interpretation of the nature of man, and an ethic or doctrine of values and conduct. These must together form a coherent, self-consistent body of thought in order to form a system, or at least the essential framework of one.

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established religions to assimilate and adjust their teaching to our modern scientific understanding of the cosmos, life and man, philosophy alone can guide humanity from its present deplorable confusion to its ultimate goal. It is our best hope. Philosophy at its highest has had aims as lofty as religion at its highest, but its methods are far more adequate; for it is critical and capable of growth, whereas institutional religion clings desperately to outworn notions of a bygone age.

Philosophy, we should never forget, was in the days of its glory in the ancient world not simply an intellectual exercise but a *way of life*. The Stoic, the Epicurean, the Pythagorean, the Platonist or the Neo-Platonist did

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not merely learn the principles of his philosophy; he lived it. When we consider all that this venerable term implies, perhaps it is audacious of anyone to claim for themselves the honourable title of philosopher. But one who aspires to it must above all endeavour to live like a philosopher; for the ability to expound philosophical concepts and doctrines does not of itself entitle anyone to this designation. The true philosopher must be ready to accept obligations and endure hardships, to modify his occupations and habits, the whole tenor of his life, as his philosophy demands.

