RS: Philosophy of Religion and Ethics

Pre-course assignment

Aim:

The aim of this assignment is to explore two philosophical ideas what are central to many of the topics we will explore – the ideas of Rationalism and Empiricism. The following tasks and reading will introduce you to epistemology – the study of the nature and limits of human understanding, of how and what we can know.

Tasks:

1. (a) Write down five things you know.

   (b) For each of the things you have listed, consider "How do I know this?"

   (c) How can you be sure that what you think you know about the things listed is correct?

   (d) What things do you think we can know about? Is there anything we cannot know? What might this be?

   (e) Do we experience objects as they really are or might our perception be different to the reality? Can you think of any examples that might show that perception is different to reality? What might prevent us from experiencing things as they really are?

   (f) Find three examples of how animals might perceive (see, hear, taste, feel) things differently to humans. What do these examples suggest about perception and reality?

2. Read the chapters (included below) "1: Knowledge and Reason" and "2: Theories of Knowledge." There is no need to make notes – the purpose of this reading is to introduce some of the ideas which have and still do influence philosophers.

3. Read "10: Knowing through the mind" and "11: Knowing through the senses" (included below). Use the information to write:
   - A summary of Rene Descartes' ideas about what we can know and how we can know things. The following crash course philosophy episode is also helpful in

explaining the ideas of rationalism and Descartes: Cartesian Skepticism - Neo, Meet Rene: Crash Course Philosophy #5 (youtube.com)

- A summary of John Locke's ideas about what we can know and how we can know things. The following crash course philosophy episode is also helpful in explaining the ideas of empiricism and Locke: Locke, Berkeley, & Empiricism: Crash Course Philosophy #6 (youtube.com)
- A definition of rationalism.
- A definition of empiricism.

4. Based on your reading of rationalism and empiricism, what approach to knowledge do you think science adopts? Explain why? What does this suggest about scientific truths?

Extension reading (optional): "Rationalism and Empiricism" Alison wood (included below).

1

Knowledge and Reason

Plato and the Ancient Greeks

Part 1

How and What Can We Know?

EPISTEMOLOGY

'God orders me to fulfil the philosopher's mission of searching into myself and other men... I have nothing to do with physical speculations.'

Socrates, in Plato's Apology

Philosophy is about ideas—ideas about the world, ideas about people and ideas about how to live. The common picture of a philosopher is of someone locked away with a pile of books, removed from everyday life. But philosophy is about everyday life. Philosophy and the Jewish-Christian tradition are at the foundations of Western culture and civilization. All of us carry ideas around which stem from the men and women who, throughout the centuries, have helped form the way we think. But what is philosophy, and how can it possibly matter to me? Many of us believe we are too 'practical' or 'commonsensical' to bother with ideas—but that is a philosophy in itself!

Two terms run through this book: 'philosophy', meaning 'love of wisdom'; and 'theology', meaning 'talking about God'.

Wisdom is a kind of knowledge. Philosophy is generally concerned with how we know things and what we can know. Philosophy asks questions such as:

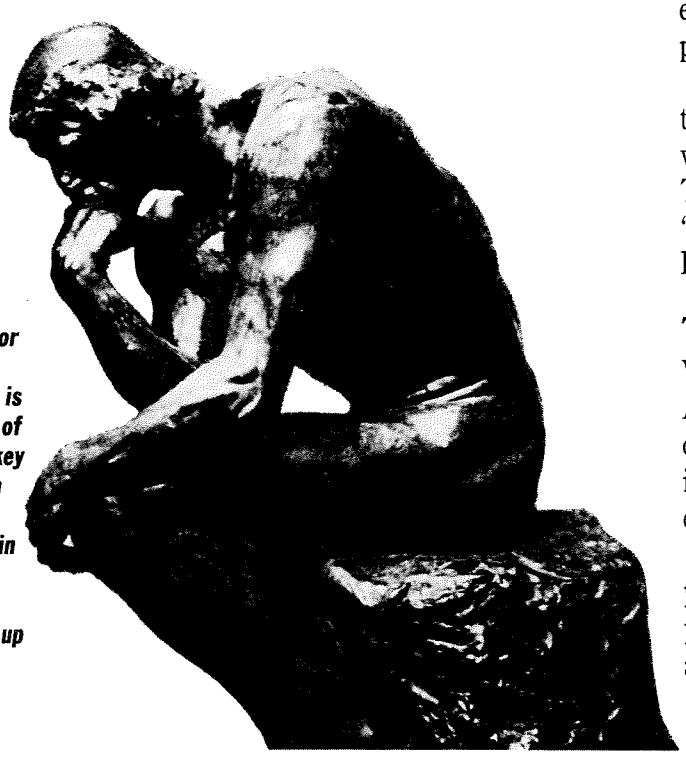
- Is there a point to the universe?
- How should we live?
- Is there an order behind nature?
- Is there a morality for everyone or does morality change at different times and in different places?

Philosophical knowledge is not scientific knowledge. In fact, many modern philosophers would claim that philosophy is a skill, a way of thinking about the world. Philosophy is not 'what you know', but 'how you think'. The point of philosophy is to frame the right questions, not to find the right answers.

At school, students may move from classroom to classroom at the end of each lesson. They may study geography, history, maths and English. In any school timetable, the knowledge to be learned is divided up into different subjects. This was not always the case. When the Ancient Greeks began to think about the world they lived in, they called their search for knowledge 'philosophy'. The history of knowledge, then, is like a tree with one trunk and many branches.

Philosophy itself has divided into the areas of ethics, political philosophy, metaphysics, philosophy of religion, logic and language.

At university students of philosophy will find that the central part of their study is concerned with the nature and limits of human knowledge. This study, named after the Greek word for 'knowledge', *episteme*, is called 'epistemology'. Epistemology is at the very root of philosophy.



Rodin's 'The Thinker'—a famous image for the life of the mind. This book is about the story of ideas: how the key questions which puzzle us have been answered in many different ways, from the Ancient Greeks up until today.

The beginning of Western philosophy

Western philosophy began 2,500 years ago in Ancient Greece at the beginning of the sixth century BC. The Ancient Greeks have had an incalculable influence on Western civilization and on how we think about the world.

The Greeks invented mathematics, science and philosophy. They were the first people to set down proper history and they thought about the world in an open-minded way, free from set ideas given by

Socrates and the Christians

The death of Socrates was seen as a martyrdom. A 'martyr' is someone who is killed unjustly for what he believes in. Socrates was seen by the Christian church almost as a pre-Christian Christian; because of his ideals and integrity, early Christian thinkers tried to adopt him as Christian. This is partly because Christianity wished to appear respectable to the ancient world by harmonizing with Greek thought, and partly because Socrates was an outstanding person.

Socrates lived, of course, several hundred years before Christ.

In his second 'Apology', written c. AD150–160, Justin Martyr wrote of Socrates as a Christian before Christ. Justin claimed that Jesus had always existed in the world as the Word of God. The Word of God influenced the world for good, even before the 'incarnation', when Jesus became a man:

'Whatever things were rightly said by any man, belong to us Christians. For next to God we worship and love the Word, who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since he also became man for our sakes, that by sharing in our sufferings he might also bring us healing. For all those writers were able to see reality darkly, through the seed of the implanted Word within them.'

any religion. Their own religion, with its variety of human-like gods, had little to do with serious speculation about the universe. Alongside philosophy, the Greeks produced great literature with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, great drama with the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, and great architecture, the ruins of which still stand today.

Greece itself was divided into warring city states, among the most important of which were Athens and Sparta. These city states had differing forms of government: some were democracies, some were ruled by an aristocracy, and some were subject to a tyrant.

The Greeks stand at the very beginning of our search for knowledge about the world. How they thought still influences how we think. To some extent their questions are still our questions.

The earliest philosopher we know of from the sixth century BC is Thales. Thales believed that everything in the world was composed of water. Water heated becomes steam and is responsible for all the gases in the world. Water, a liquid, is responsible for everything that flows in the world. Water freezes to ice, which is solid, and is responsible for everything solid in the world.

Thales, therefore, accounted for the gaseous, liquid and solid characteristics of the earth. But why?

Philosophy began as a mixture of scientific, theological, magical and ethical questions about the world or 'cosmos'. The word 'cosmos', identified with the universe, means 'right (or good) order'. The earliest philosophers wanted to discover an ordered explanation for how the world was as it was. They wanted to find universal principles which would explain the whole of nature. In one sense, they were asking scientific questions. The thought of these early philosophers survives only in fragments or embedded in later writers' work.

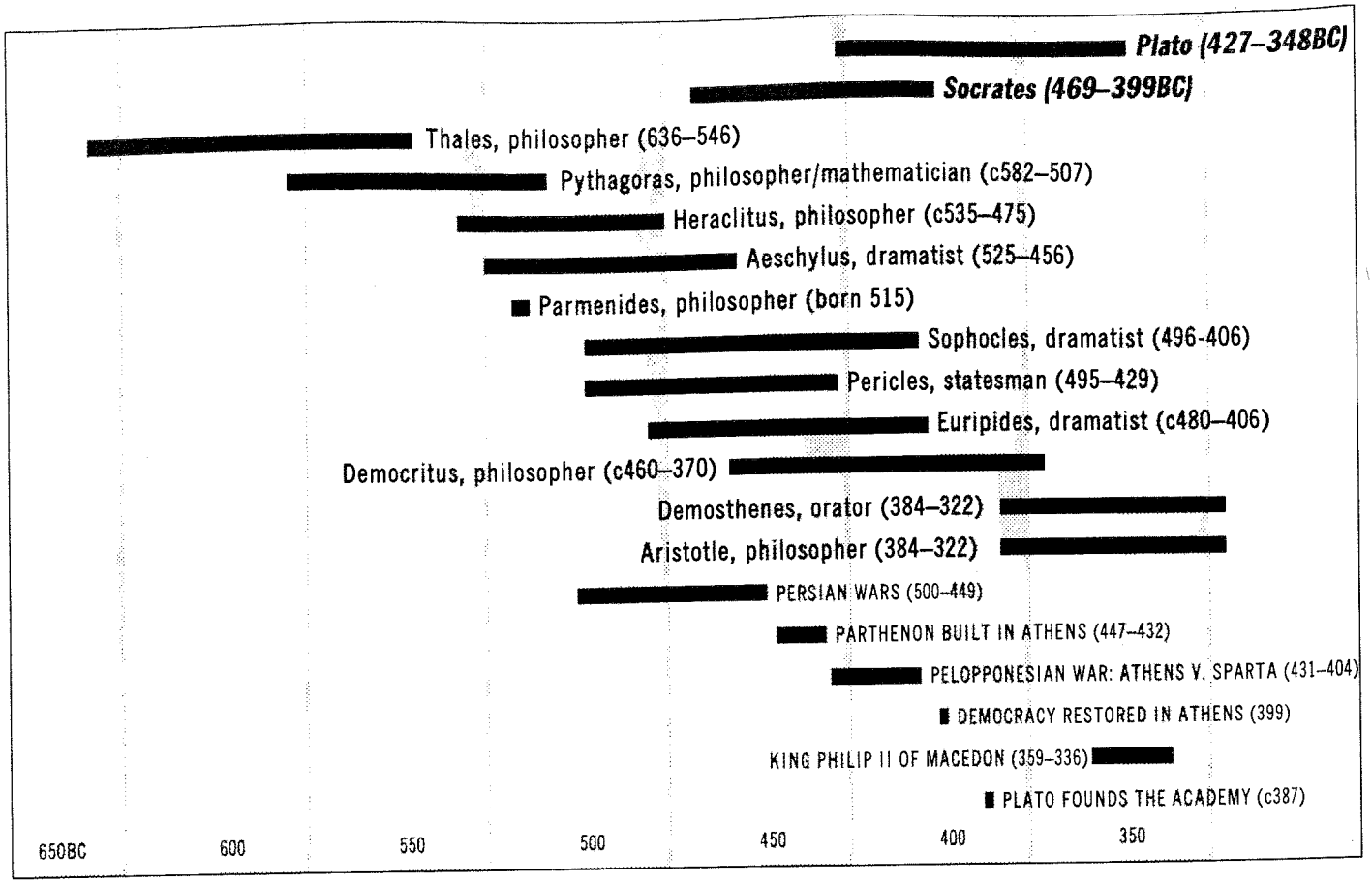
The early Greek philosophers were obsessed with the problem of the One and the Many. They saw that the world, as it appears to our senses, is full of a variety of changing things. If everything is changing all the time, how is it then possible to find an underlying coherent order in the world? Finding such an order meant finding certain knowledge about the world, and that is why these philosophers sought it so eagerly. They wanted to discover a permanent reality behind the changing appearances of the physical world. For this reason, Thales claimed that the entire world was made out of one substance, water, just as Heraclitus (another early philosopher) believed that the basic matter of the universe was fire. The Greeks had very quickly identified the four elements of water, fire, earth and air.

Some important early Greek philosophers are:

HERACLITUS who believed that everything altered and changed all the time. He believed that the world was in flux, perpetually changing. It was impossible to step into the same river twice. The only permanent feature of the world was the fact that everything changed.

PARMENIDES who took the opposite view to Heraclitus. Parmenides argued that if the world was formed from some unchanging substance, then change was impossible. As a result, Parmenides denied time, variety and motion. The permanent element in the world could not be made of matter (which would change). The most that could be said about this basic matter was that it existed. The only truth that could be discovered about permanence, therefore, is that it *is*.

DEMOCRITUS who believed that the world was made out of single, indivisible units called 'atoms'



(meaning 'that which has no part'). Each atom has a form and shape which cannot change, but these atoms are constantly moving and rearranging themselves. Democritus, therefore, advanced a clever theory which took into account both the changing and permanent aspects of the universe.

These early Greek philosophers are referred to as the 'Pre-Socratics'. They lived before Socrates. Socrates rebelled consciously against these philosophers and changed the nature of philosophy as it had been conducted up to that point.

Socrates

Socrates (c. 470–399BC) was born and lived in Athens. Most of what we know about him comes from the writings of his brilliant pupil Plato (c. 428–c. 348BC) who was the first Greek philosopher to leave writings of his own. Plato's writings are among the most important ever written and take the form of dialogues (like plays), usually with Socrates as the main character and philosopher.

In various dialogues, Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, tries to construct a theory of knowledge:

- What knowledge was available.
- How we could obtain knowledge.
- Why this knowledge is true.

Socrates' driving force was truth. How much the Socrates we have in the dialogues is an invention of Plato is an open question. Underlying Plato's brilliant literary creation, however, there is undoubtedly a basis of historical truth.

Socrates' questions were ethical and not scientific. He did not speculate about the nature of the world, but about how human beings should live. This approach changed the direction of philosophy. In the *Apology* he states: 'God orders me to fulfil the philosopher's mission of searching into myself and other men'; and again, 'I have nothing to do with physical speculations'. Early Platonic dialogues (reckoned by scholars to be the closest to Socrates' actual teaching) are concerned with definitions of ethical terms. For example, the *Charmides* is concerned with temperance or moderation, the *Lysis* with friendship, and the *Laches* with courage.

Socrates is presented by Plato as the archetypal wise man. He is sharp and humorous. Socrates himself, however, constantly states that he is wiser than others only because he knows that he knows nothing. What is most important for him is the search for truth. Seeking, rather than finding, is the mark of the true philosopher, and Socrates' view has influenced philosophy throughout the ages.

Socrates also believed that if a person knew the

right thing, then she would do it. Knowledge, therefore, is closely connected with goodness; evil is connected with ignorance. The connection between knowledge and goodness is characteristic of both Socrates and Plato. As Socrates said: 'No one does wrong willingly'.

Socrates was deeply concerned with the difference between opinion (what I think is correct) and certain knowledge (what I know is correct).

The method he used in his search was called *elenchos* scrutiny. Socrates applied this method to practical decisions about how to live. So it was that Socrates came to have a profound influence on how philosophy was done: by 'enquiry', asking the right questions without necessarily believing that you will find the right answers; and by 'dialectic', the question and answer method used by Socrates as presented in Plato's dialogues. The importance of this method is that the questions lead to more questions and not to answers. For Socrates right thinking is more important than right conclusions.

In 399BC, after the restoration of democracy in Athens, Socrates was tried on a charge of disbelief in the gods and corrupting the young. He was condemned to death. The charge was: 'Socrates is an evil-doer and a curious person, searching into things under the earth and above the heavens; and making the worse appear the better cause, and teaching all this to others.'

The effect on Plato of his teacher's death was profound and he includes Socrates' death in several of his dialogues.

THE *APOLOGY* gives Socrates' defence at his trial.

THE *CRITO* lists Socrates' reasons for not trying to escape after he had been condemned.

THE *PHAEDO* recounts Socrates' last hours arguing for the immortality of the soul. Socrates took hemlock (a poison) and continued to talk with his friends gathered round him until the poison took effect. As he died, he was happy that in the next world he could go on asking questions, unable to be put to death again since he would now be immortal.

Plato

Socrates left no writings. His pupil Plato is, in many ways, the founder of philosophy as we know it. He wrote prolifically and magnificently.

Plato was born in 428/427BC in the early years of the Peloponnesian War. He was a well-to-do aristocrat. During his life he saw the end of the Athenian Empire and the founding of a new one under Philip of Macedon. Later Philip of Macedon's son, Alexander the Great, conquered a great part of the known world. Plato devoted his life to philosophy and founded the Academy, a kind of informal university, which lasted for 1,000 years.

Plato was also influenced by the philosophers who came before him:

- Pythagoras gave Plato his belief in immortality, religion, mysticism and maths.
- Parmenides gave him the notion that reality is eternal, unchanging and timeless.
- Heraclitus gave him the conviction that there is nothing permanent in the physical world and that true knowledge cannot come through the senses.
- Socrates gave Plato his preoccupation with ethical problems and a desire to explain 'purpose' in the world. Both Socrates and Plato were concerned with knowledge of 'The Good'.

In his philosophy Plato attempted to find a resolution between the Heraclitan view of the universe, that the world of appearances is constantly changing, with the Parmenidean notion that reality is one and unchanging.

Both Socrates and Plato insisted that right opinion is not enough. Opinion is useless unless it is turned into secure knowledge by 'a reckoning of the reason'. This use of reason and the search for truth began what we call philosophy. Plato's solution was based not on physics, but on logic, metaphysics and ethics. His search for knowledge began a search which continues today and which involves us all.

For further thinking

1. What is philosophy? Discuss this in your group.

2. What was the major philosophical problem for the early Greek (pre-Socratic) philosophers? Whose views do you most value and why?

3. Arrange your own trial of Socrates. You need a prosecutor, defender and a jury. The charge is: Socrates is an evil-doer and a curious person, searching into things under the earth and above the heavens; and making the worse appear the better cause, and teaching all this to others. Was he guilty?

2

Theories of Knowledge

Plato and Aristotle

'When the mind's eye is fixed on objects illuminated by truth and reality, it understands and knows them, and its possession of intelligence is evident; but when it is fixed on the twilight world of change and decay, it can only form opinions, its vision is confused and its opinions shifting, and it seems to lack intelligence.'

Plato's The Republic

What does it mean to 'know'?

I know that Beethoven was a great musician.

I know it's going to rain.

I know that daffodils are yellow.

I know Catherine very well.

I know that God exists.

Most of us take for granted that we know things and that we can know things. But what is knowing and how can we be sure that what we know is true? If you look at the sentences above you will see that the word 'know' is used six times, but in six different ways. The word 'know' has several different meanings. So what does it really mean to 'know' something? How is 'knowing' different from having an 'opinion' or an 'impression'?

How we know and what we can know are questions philosophers have asked since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Those early Greek philosophers were faced with the problem of the 'One' and the 'Many'—trying to find a sure, underlying order in an uncertain, constantly changing world.

Even today, 'epistemology' the branch of philosophy which studies knowledge, asks:

- How do we know?
- How much can we know?
- How can we be sure that what we know is correct?

These are basic problems in philosophy. If we know that we can know basic things about the world, then science and philosophy are possible: we can think about the world and find out about the world. If we become convinced that it is impossible to know anything for certain, then knowledge becomes opinion rather than fact.

In Ancient Greece, Plato (c. 428–348BC) was a pupil of Socrates. In turn, Aristotle (384–322 BC), another highly important Greek philosopher, was a pupil of Plato. Both Plato and Aristotle formed theories concerning what we can know about the world. Their two contrasting theories are important foundations for the theory of knowledge as it has been studied since.

Plato and the theory of knowledge

Plato made two contributions to the theory of knowledge. One was that knowledge is recollecting what is in your head already, not perceiving new things. The other was his Theory of Forms, which we will consider below.

Plato was faced with two major problems when he came to consider what true knowledge is:

A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM: he had to reconcile the problem of the One and the Many.

A HUMAN PROBLEM: he had to battle against the Sophists. The Sophists were professional philosophers who lived in Athens at the time of Plato. Gorgias one of their number, had said: 'Nothing exists, and if it did, no one could know it, and if they knew it, they could not communicate it.' These Sophists were sceptics, believing there was no such thing as certain knowledge. Because of this, they treated philosophy as a skill to be sold to their students to enable them to be successful in life. Plato spoke out against the Sophists. He believed that truth, not worldly success, was the proper aim of philosophy.

In Plato's dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, Theaetetus says:

It seems to me that one who knows something is perceiving the thing that he knows, and, so far as I can see at present, knowledge is nothing but perception.

Plato profoundly disagreed with Theaetetus' notion of knowledge. Nowadays, empirical knowledge, knowledge from information which comes through the senses, is considered to be true and scientific. Plato's problem was that if the world is constantly changing, how can the world or the senses be relied on? He concluded that they cannot and that true knowledge had to come from elsewhere. He concluded that it was pre-existent.

In his dialogue, the *Meno*, Plato presents Socrates as setting a mathematical problem for a slave-boy to solve. The slave-boy has never been taught any mathematics, but he manages nevertheless to solve the problem. This is because he knows the answer already, even though he does not know that he knows. Socrates' claim is that we do not 'learn', we 'remember'. The knowledge exists in our minds all along. We possess this knowledge from before we are born.

Socrates says:

Either he has at some time acquired the knowledge which he now has, or he has always possessed it. If he always possessed it, he must always have known; if on the other hand he acquired it at some previous time, it cannot have been in this life, unless somebody taught him geometry.

For Plato the advantages of holding this view

are that: education and experience do not matter: true knowledge is innate in us. And we do not have to rely on our senses for knowledge about the world. True knowledge consists of concepts (ideas already in our heads), not information (ideas that come to us through our senses).

Plato's Theory of Forms

Plato's Theory of Forms has influenced the development of philosophy and the Christian religion to such an extent that the entire history of Western culture has been permeated by it.

Plato believed that:

THE WORLD is divided into 'reality' and 'appearance' (the One and the Many).

OUR INFORMATION ABOUT THE WORLD is divided into 'knowledge' and 'opinion'. Knowledge is what we seek, but opinion is usually all that we have. In *The Republic*, Plato advances the view that opinion usually passes for knowledge. Only what is beautiful to one person is ugly to another, and what is just to one person is unjust to another.

Opinion, then, results from objects as presented to the senses. Two people may have differing opinions, for example, about a painting or about a friend. Objects in the natural world therefore have a contradictory nature: opinions clash about them and it is impossible to have true, universal knowledge about them.

Plato went on to claim that the person who concerns herself with beautiful things has 'opinions' about them, but the person who concerns herself with Beauty itself can possess 'true knowledge'.

And those whose hearts are fixed on the true being of each thing are to be called philosophers and not lovers of opinion? Yes, certainly.

In other words, Plato believed in:

- A visible world—the world of the senses, a world of opinions.
- An intelligible world—a world beyond the senses, a world of true knowledge.

Plato used a technical word for these ideas of Beauty, Truth and Justice: he called them 'Forms'. He conceived of them as having a real existence, independent of the mental world of people's minds or of the natural world. These Forms were to him objects or shapes, though Plato defined them rather than described them. The Forms are universal. There may be particular instances of beauty in the world—a painting or a flower—but these and all beautiful things share in the universal Form of Beauty.

Plato's interest in mathematics, proportions and harmonies led him to believe that these universal Forms were connected. The highest Form of all is the Form of the Good.

The highest form of knowledge is knowledge of the form of the good, from which things that are just and so on derive their usefulness and value.
The good, then, is the end of all endeavour, the object on which every heart is set...

Knowing the Forms, for Plato, is a kind of mental seeing, and philosophy is a vision of truth.

Knowing leads to discovering the Form of the Good and, consequently, philosophy makes you a better person. The Good, in *The Republic,* is 'the greatest thing we have to learn'.

Plato's Theory of Forms is also important for classifying objects in the world and understanding their nature.

The word 'dog', for example, refers to a four-footed, barking animal with fur which is not a 'cat' and not a 'horse'. Yet, all dogs do not appear the same; their colour, size and breed are all different. All dogs in the world, however, share in some kind of 'dog-ness' (according to Plato) by which we recognize a dog when we see one. Plato believed there is an ideal dog or form of dog, just as there is a Form of Beauty or a Form of Justice. The ideal Dog is created by God and is the only real, true Dog; the other, particular dogs in the world are instances of dog and only apparent.

Plato sums up his Theory of Forms in the 'Allegory of the Cave' in *The Republic.* The character of Socrates gives a picture of people sitting in a cave, chained, their heads turned away from the cave mouth and the sunlight, facing the wall at the back of the cave. There is a fire outside the cave. They can see the flickering shadows on the wall of the people passing outside and can hear their voices. 'The truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.' These prisoners would take the shadows for reality. Socrates imagines if one prisoner were set free and were suddenly blinded by the light outside and confronted with reality. This would be distressing at first, but gradually the freed prisoner would be able to see things as they are, return to the cave, and teach the other prisoners the truth. Plato has Socrates explain the allegory:

The prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the

ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire I have expressed— whether rightly or wrongly God knows.

True knowledge, for Plato, meant abandoning the world of the senses and seeking by reason to discover the Forms or universals in one's own mind. Grasping these Forms leads to grasping true knowledge and, finally, to grasping the Good.

Plato believed that only the Forms could be 'known'. Mathematics could be 'understood', but the changing, physical world of nature could never be truly 'known' and was not a fit subject for philosophical contemplation.

Aristotle

Aristotle, Plato's pupil, criticized Plato and put forward his own theory of what we could know about the world.

Aristotle was born, probably in 384BC, at Stagira in Thrace. His father was personal doctor to the King of Macedonia. At about eighteen years of age Aristotle arrived in Athens and became a pupil of Plato. He remained at Plato's Academy for nearly twenty years until Plato's death in 348BC. Aristotle travelled and married and, in 342BC, became tutor to Alexander the Great. Aristotle founded a school in the Lyceum at Athens, which became a rival to Plato's Academy. He fled when Alexander died.

Aristotle was one of the most prodigious thinkers of the ancient world. Unlike Plato, he took a keen interest in the natural world. He wrote on ethics, politics, botany, zoology, astronomy, history, mathematics and philosophy. Only one-fifth of his vast output survives. In contrast with the polished brilliance of Plato, Aristotle's style is terse and rugged.

From Aristotle's work comes the term 'metaphysics'. One theory to explain the term 'metaphysics' is that this word entered philosophical language when a book by Aristotle was found untitled among his papers. As this work came after *Physics* it was decided to call it *Meta-Physics* (*meta* is the Greek word for 'after').

'Metaphysics' involves searching beyond the world of the senses for an explanation of why the world is as it is, looking for the 'One' behind the 'Many'.

Aristotle's criticism of Plato

Aristotle severely criticized Plato's Theory of Forms.

Plato's Mysticism

Mixed in with the theory of knowledge put forward by Plato in the *Meno* is some degree of mysticism. Plato's interest in mysticism and mathematics came from Pythagoras, one of the Pre-Socratics. The Pythagoreans were involved in mystery cults. They believed in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls (the same soul moving from body to body after death). These beliefs had a strong influence on Plato.

If a 'particular' dog is merely a picture of an 'ideal' Dog, is there then a third dog—an ideal of the 'ideal'—behind the ideal? If so, is there one behind that, and one behind that? What is the sense in talking about an 'ideal' Dog at all?

While Forms of 'Beauty', 'Truth' and 'Dog' might appear plausible what about one-legged pirates, or blind white rabbits? Are there 'ideal' Forms of those? Aristotle argued that, pushed to its logical conclusion, Plato's Theory of Forms appears slightly ridiculous.

He began with a 'commonsensical' rather than an 'idealist' view. For Aristotle:

- Knowledge *is* perception: 'And for that reason, if we did not perceive anything, we would not learn or understand anything, and whenever we think of anything, we must at the same time think of an idea.'
- The natural world is the real world
- Perception and sense-experience are the foundations of scientific knowledge.

For Plato, the reality of the world is in the Forms as apprehended by the intellect.

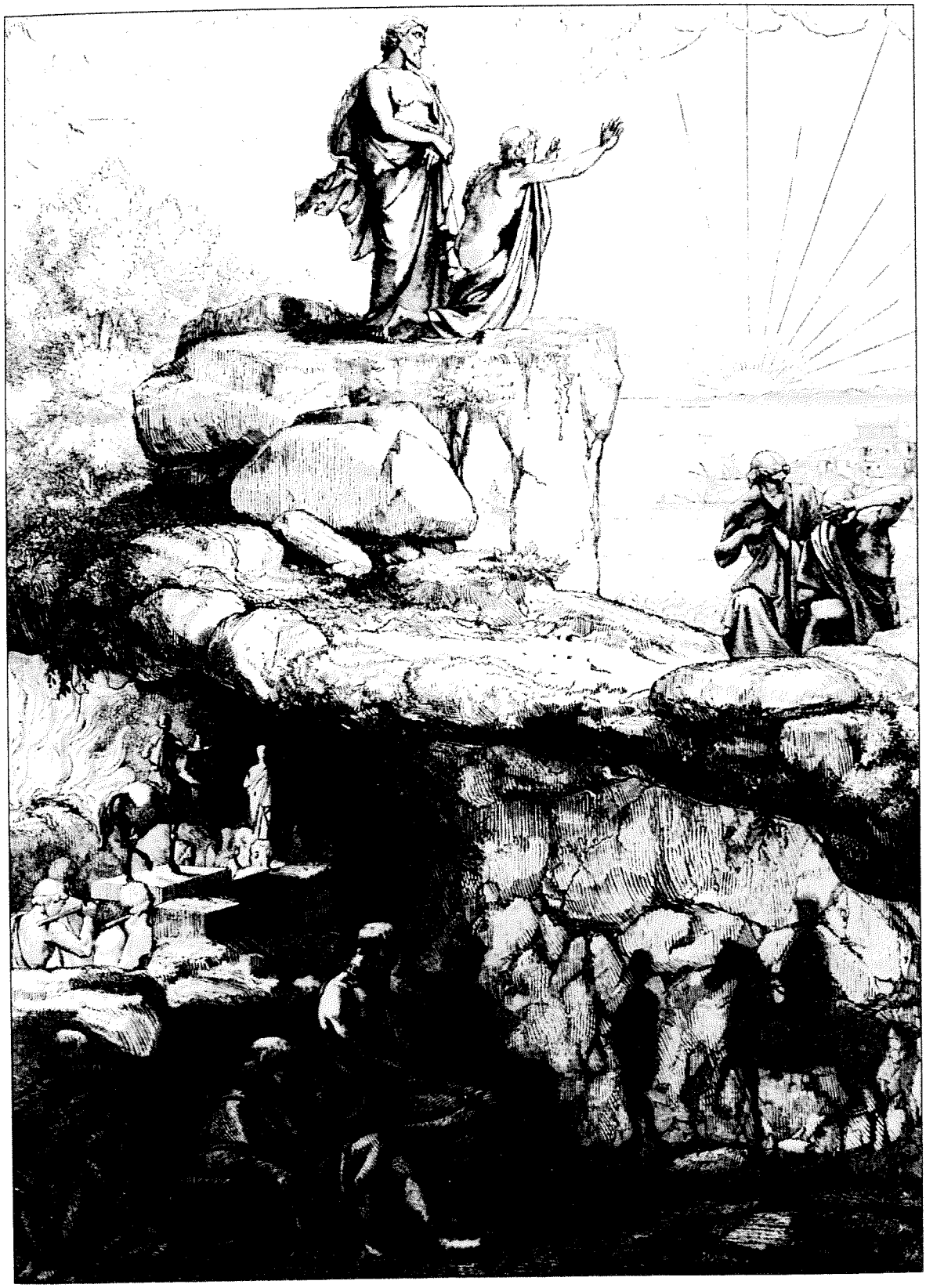
For Aristotle, the reality of the world is in 'matter', the stuff the world is made of.

Like other Greek philosophers, Aristotle was fascinated by change. Plato could state that an acorn changes into an oak and retains its nature by sharing in the 'ideal' Oak. Aristotle had shut off that option. So he wondered, if an oak and an acorn appear to be two entirely different things, where is the continuity? Aristotle deals with the question of change in the *Physics*. He came to realize that material substances are, in fact, composite. A house is made of bricks and mortar, but it contains a structure—a 'house-ness'—that makes it not a garage or a shop. A statue is made of marble or bronze, but is cast into a certain

shape. All substances, Aristotle decided, have two parts: material and structure—or 'matter' and 'form'. Matter and form belong to this world, not to a world beyond this world, like Plato's Forms. These two contrasting theories are basic to how we understand the world and gain knowledge from the world.

Form is the organizing principle which turns matter into recognizable objects. According to this belief, Aristotle was able to say that the 'soul' is the form of the body.

Objects change and their change has a purpose or goal. Objects have an actuality or a potentiality. Acorns turn into oaks; children turn into adults. This change Aristotle called 'teleological' as it had an 'end' (*telos*) in view. As objects are composed of



A nineteenth-century artist here tries to express Plato's allegory of the cave. This allegory is meant to show the relationship between the things we know in this life, and their ideal Forms beyond this life.

Plato, Aristotle and Christianity

Plato's Theory of Forms has had an enormous influence on the development of Christianity. Early Christian thinkers used Plato's idea of a world beyond this one—an ideal world which gives value and meaning to our own—to develop ideas about the Christian heaven. His elevation of the soul and denial of the body and matter as inferior has been an important strain of Christian thought throughout the ages.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato describes the demiurge or 'Logos' (the 'Word') through which the world is created and through which the ideal Forms are imposed on the ever-changing cosmos. Plato's Logos, as developed in later Greek philosophy, was identified by the early Christians with Jesus, the Word (or 'Logos') of God.

Aristotle believed in an 'Unmoved (or Prime) Mover', a remote, changeless being who imparts change to the world. Change, Aristotle argued, results from love and the desire to attain the perfection of the Unmoved Mover. The Christian church came to adopt Aristotle's Unmoved Mover as the Christian God. As centuries passed, Aristotle's philosophy became the cornerstone of medieval theology.

matter, and matter is always subject to change, objects can never become perfect. Only God, who exists as 'form without matter', is perfect. Human beings, however, can draw close to perfection by contemplating pure form by means of pure thought.

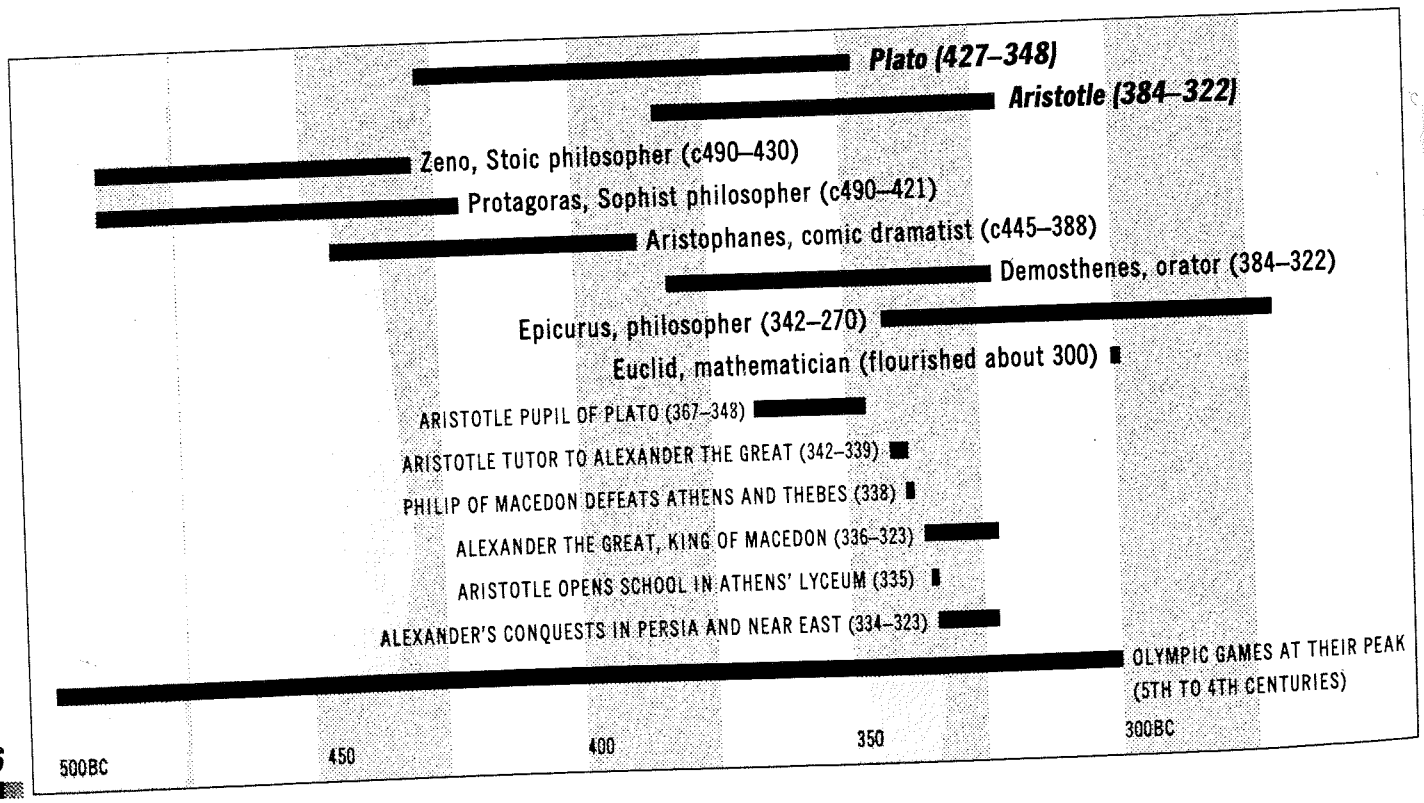
Plato started with the intellect; Aristotle started with perceptions of the natural world. Plato's understanding was mathematical - dealing in concepts which can be worked out without relation to the natural world; Aristotle's understanding was scientific, based on perception, observation and investigation. Both these important thinkers developed ways of knowing about the world which are still important today.

For further thinking

1. How do Plato and Aristotle differ in their philosophy?

2. How has Plato's Theory of Forms influenced the development of Christianity? Is this good?

3. What is meant by Metaphysics? Has the study of Metaphysics any importance in our world today? Get into groups of two or three people. Choose one of the following viewpoints to defend: 'The study of Metaphysics is of real importance in the twentieth century.' 'The study of Metaphysics is outdated and unnecessary in our society today.' List all your reasons for supporting the preferred view. Then either find a group which disagrees with your group and argue your points with them or take the other side yourself and see if you can imagine objections to your preferred view.



10

Knowing through the Mind

René Descartes

Part 4

Routes to Knowledge

RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

'I became aware that, while I decided to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something . . . I think, therefore I am.'

Imagine watching television. Suddenly there comes a newsflash. Scientists have just discovered that the moon is made of green cheese. Green cheese! What is more, the earth was pyramid-shaped and balanced on the back of a gigantic turtle . . . What would you think?

This information would be a lot to take in. You might think it ridiculous, a joke—how could it be true? If it were true you would have to change the whole way you thought about the world. Suddenly, nothing would seem sure any more. You would begin to doubt.

René Descartes

René Descartes (1596–1650) lived at a time when beliefs about the world were changing. During his life beliefs based on Aristotle were giving way to the new discoveries of science. Many people did not know what to think and had become sceptics—doubting if it were possible to prove that anything was absolutely and certainly true. As the rise of science seemed to conflict with a sure belief in God, the church was bitter in its attacks on developing scientific ways of thinking. There was religious conflict—Catholic against Protestant, church against science; and also scientific conflict—Aristotle's views against Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo.

Descartes was born in 1596 at La Haye, near Tours in North-west France. His father was a lawyer. He was educated at the famous Jesuit College at La Flèche, where he received a traditional Aristotelian schooling, but also studied some of the modern advances in science. In his own mind, Descartes was first and foremost a scientist, but he is remembered as a philosopher.

Descartes became a soldier in Holland, but left the army in 1621 to devote himself to science and philosophy. On 10 November 1619, while at Ulm in Germany, he shut himself away in a stove-heated room; there he had a daytime vision and three dreams which he believed were a revelation from God about his life's work. This was to be the unfolding of a wonderful new science. He went back to France, but moved again to Holland in 1629 and stayed there, more or less alone, for twenty years.

His *Discourse on Method* was published in 1637, and he began his *Meditations* in 1639, in which he set out his philosophy. His work was aimed at the public, not just at philosophers, and he wrote in French, not Latin.

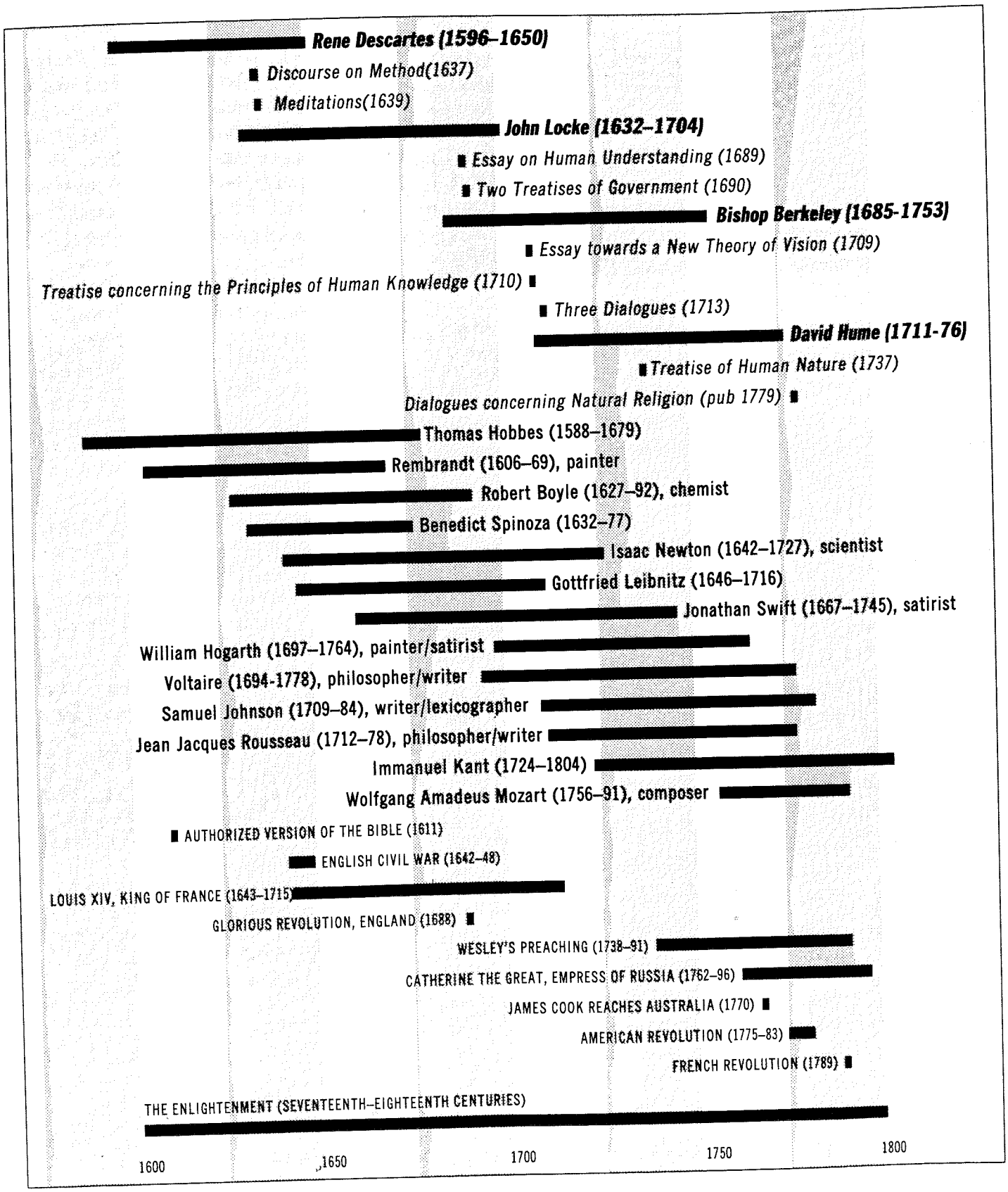
Descartes' writing provoked harsh arguments with some Dutch theologians, and in 1648 he accepted an invitation from Queen Christina of Sweden to teach her philosophy. This decision was disastrous; Descartes was unhappy at court and the Swedish winter did not agree with him. He

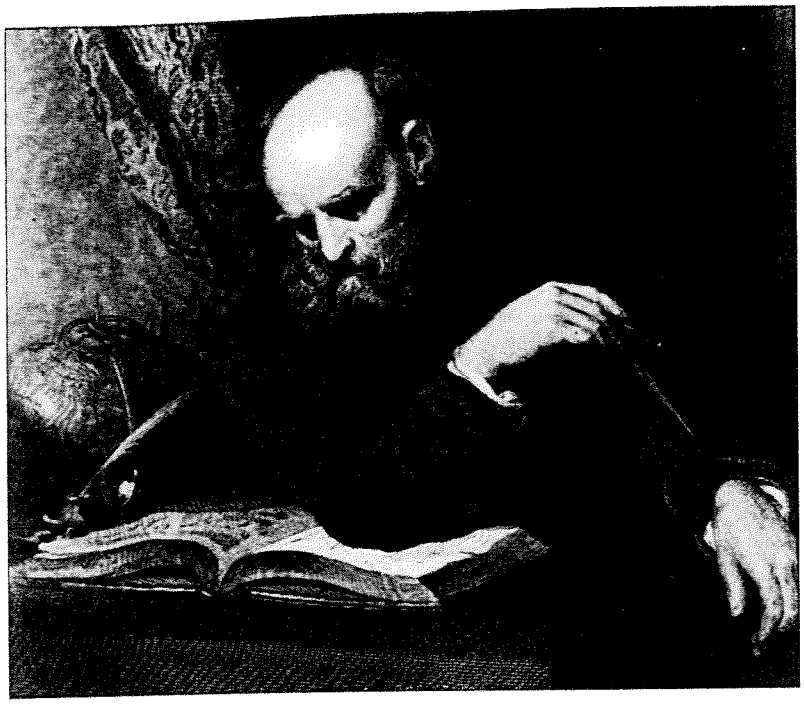
died in Stockholm in 1650.

Descartes' Method

Descartes' work is post-medieval. It shows a break with Aristotle and the beginning of modern philosophy. At a time when religion was suspicious of science and science was sceptical of religion, Descartes wanted to show that you could have both. He wanted a science acceptable to religion. Even so, his work was dominated by scientific questions.

Descartes wanted to put knowledge to the test, in order to find a sure foundation on which to build the entire structure of human understanding.





Galileo's views on the nature of the universe had brought him into conflict with the Aristotelian thinking prevalent in the church. The seventeenth century was a time of ferment in the history of ideas, and Descartes sought to establish a firmer footing for philosophy.

To advance in science he found that he had to make a detour into philosophy. For this, Descartes devised a method: a method of doubting. He learned the method from his Jesuit education; the doubting came from the age he lived in. Descartes wanted to peel away everything that could possibly be doubted in order to find something that could not be doubted at all. He wanted to find certain knowledge.

His method was:

- Only accept self-evident truths (as in mathematics).
- Divide difficulties into smaller parts to make it easier to solve them.
- Order your thoughts to start with the simplest and work up to the more complicated.
- Make sure you have taken everything into account.

He set about subjecting all his opinions to this test, though he laid aside religion and morality as a kind of 'temporary shelter' while the 'house' of his beliefs was being rebuilt.

I think, therefore I am

Descartes said that we all experience being deceived by our senses. Oars appear to bend in water and people spotted in the distance turn out to be trees. If our senses can give us such faulty information, how can we know that we are not being deceived all the time? In fact, if I can dream I am awake while I am asleep, how do I know that I am not dreaming all the time and that what I see and experience is an illusion?

But, thought Descartes, if everything is an illusion—can parts of that illusion still be true? *For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three together always make five, and the square can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity or uncertainty...*

This appears to be sure. But is it? Descartes goes on to doubt further: what if there is a deceiving demon loose in the world who can persuade me that even false mathematical knowledge is true? Then, I can know nothing—and I am in despair.

However, after casting doubt on sense information, scientific information and mathematical information, Descartes came to his famous conclusion:

I resolved to pretend that nothing which had ever entered my mind was any more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterwards I became aware that, while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something; and observing that this truth, I think, therefore I am, was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Even if the demon can lie to Descartes about everything else, he cannot lie about the fact that Descartes exists and is thinking:

- I think, therefore I am, or, perhaps a clearer translation, I am thinking, therefore I am.
- No one can deceive me into thinking I exist if I do not exist.
- I cannot think that my existence is false, because if I think this, then I am thinking and my existence must be a fact.

After establishing the existence of the self, can he go on to do anything more? Descartes goes on to establish the existence first of God, and then of the external world.

Descartes' view of God

Descartes' argument for God still uses reasoning that comes from Aristotle. He argues that his method is a method of doubting. As it is greater to know than to doubt, Descartes concludes that he is imperfect. He also concludes that he cannot

be God, otherwise he would have created himself perfect—and he is not.

To know is greater than to doubt, and to be perfect is greater than to be imperfect. Descartes has an 'idea' of what a perfect being is like, but he is not perfect. The idea of perfection must come from somewhere. It must come from God, as Descartes is too imperfect to think of it himself. Therefore God exists.

Descartes uses Aristotelian reasoning. Aristotle believed in a chain of different kinds of reality. The cause of an idea has to belong to the same category as the thing it is an idea of. The idea of God has to be caused by an infinite substance, but there is only one infinite substance—God. Therefore God exists.

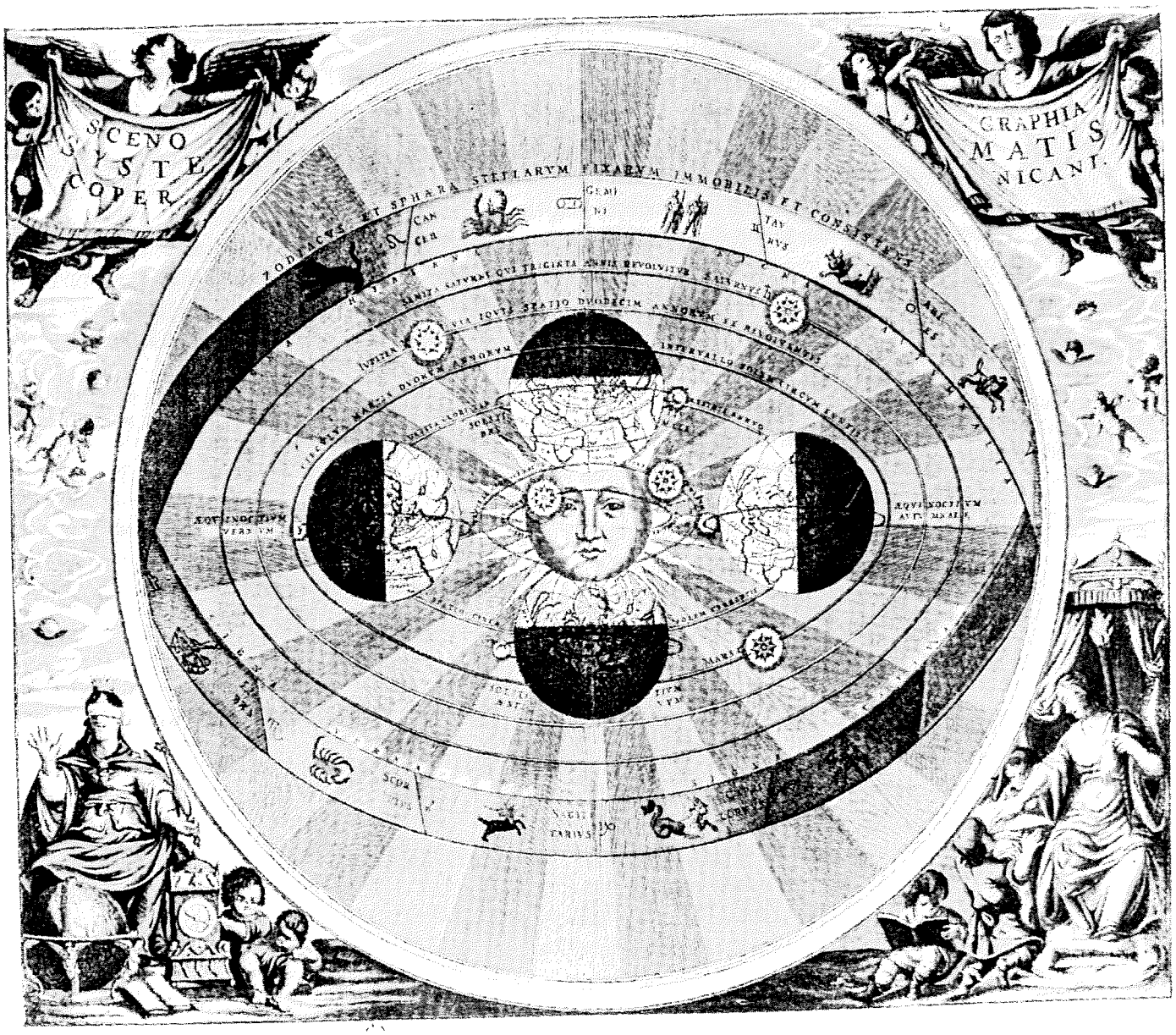
Descartes uses the ontological argument. God is perfect. It is more perfect to exist than not to exist. Therefore God exists. God's existence is in the definition of God. Just as a triangle has three angles, so God exists.

Descartes goes on to use God as an insurance and a guarantee for the existence of the external world. If God is perfect, then he is perfectly incapable of deceiving us. Therefore there can be no deceiving demon, as God would not wish us to be deceived.

Every clear and distinct conception is certainly something, and therefore cannot come from nothing, but must necessarily come from God—God, I say, who is supremely perfect, and cannot be the cause of any error.

His argument proceeds in this way:

- My mind receives ideas and is passive. If my mind were only passive it would be inert, so there must be an active part which is separate from my mind.



This representation of the system of Copernicus, with the sun at the centre not the earth, shows human thought trying to break through from one way of understanding to another. The images are a mixture of scientific observation and superstition.

- Ideas in my mind must be caused by active things—bodies, in other words. Therefore, I have a body, ideas in my mind come from bodies and so my body and objects in the world exist.
- The world appears to be there, and as God does not want us to be deceived we can trust that the world is there.

Even so, Descartes insists that only the mathematical properties of objects are certain: shape, size and so on. The sensible properties—colour, smell—are always open to doubt. Descartes drew a line, therefore, between the quantitative properties of an object and the qualitative properties. We can be sure about the first, but not about the second.

Descartes' philosophy has its own peculiar stamp. The soul is separate from the body. We are minds, or thinking things, attached to bodies. Because of this, the soul is immortal. His philosophy advocates a complete split between mind and body, and this is called 'dualism' [see Chapter 5].

Descartes believed that people were born with innate ideas. In this he is like Plato. We have an idea of God, but we never encounter God with our senses. We have an idea of a perfect circle, but we never encounter one in the world and so we are born with certain ideas in us which we can discover through reason: 'Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I found within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number.'

These innate ideas give us:

- Knowledge of ourselves.
- Knowledge of God.
- Knowledge of mathematics.

Descartes' philosophy, therefore, is rationalistic, in that we can arrive at sure knowledge by reason and need not rely on our senses.

In Descartes' philosophy belief in God comes before belief in science. But his God is not necessarily the Christian God, concerned with salvation, rewards and punishments, and his soul is not necessarily the Christian soul.

Descartes wanted to be the Aristotle of the modern age. History has not granted him this, but his philosophy has opened the door to modern science and, in the modern age, reason still reigns supreme.

Founders of Modern Astronomy

Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543) was born in Poland. He was the founder of modern astronomy, and showed that the earth was a sphere which circled the sun. His work was condemned by the church because it showed humankind no longer at the centre of the universe.

Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) was a German astronomer who showed that the orbits of the planets were not perfectly circular as had been previously thought.

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) founded modern mechanics and maintained, along with Copernicus, that the earth went round the sun. For this, he was forced by the church in 1633 to reject his own views and was placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life. Galileo argued, among other things, for a separation of science and theology.

For further thinking

1. Do our senses always deceive us? Is everything an illusion? Discuss.

2. How convincing is Descartes' certainty that 'I think, therefore I am'? In groups of two select one person to defend Descartes' view and the other to oppose it. List your arguments and see if they can be improved by discussion with others.

3. Are our minds and bodies separate entities? Who might disagree with this view, and why?

11

Knowing through our Senses

John Locke and Bishop Berkeley

A telescope can see further than the human eye. It can see out into space to the planets and the stars. It would be possible to build a powerful telescope and send it up above the atmosphere, above the dust and pollution, to observe the night sky in perfect conditions. From there we could know more. From using scientific instruments we could learn more—much more than just standing at the end of the garden squinting up into space.

Scientific discoveries have shown us our limits and our shortcomings. We are not as accurate as the instruments we can create.

The Empirical philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were aware of this. They believed that all we knew came through our senses, but our senses were 'faulty' and did not always give us accurate information, so:

- What can we know?
- How well can we know it?
- What are the limits to what we can know?

These are the questions empirical philosophers asked. They asked them against a background of practical scientific enquiry. Two of the most famous empirical philosophers are John Locke (1632–1704) and Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753). They are among the most famous of British philosophers and their ideas are still important today.

John Locke: knowledge through experience

John Locke had a Puritan background and a strong sense of duty. He went to Westminster School and Christ Church College, Oxford, and trained to be a doctor. His life changed dramatically in 1666 when he met Lord Ashley, later the Earl of Shaftesbury, an important political figure at the court of Charles II. Locke went to work for Shaftesbury and became involved in politics. In fact, his political writing is as important as his philosophy; his democratic ideas have had a great influence in Europe and America. Locke fled to Holland in 1683, afraid of being implicated in a plot against the king. He returned in 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution, when William of Orange and Mary his Queen replaced the Roman Catholic James II.

Locke published *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1689, and *Two Treatises of Government* in 1690. Fame came late to him, but these works did make him famous. He became a Commissioner of Trade and worked on new editions of the 'Essay' until his death in 1704.

Locke's 'Essay' sets out to give an 'Account of the Ways, whereby our Understandings come to attain those Notions of Things we have'.

Locke was in France from 1674 to 1679 and had studied the work of Descartes. He began by rejecting Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas. Locke did not believe that human beings were born with knowledge. He pointed out:

- Just because something is universally agreed, it is not necessarily true.
- Just because something is universally known, it is not necessarily innate.

Locke believed that all knowledge comes through experience. The mind is a blank sheet, written on by what comes to us through our senses:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer in one word, from experience: in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself.

Locke wrote: 'All ideas come from sensation or reflection.' But what do these three nouns mean?

- An 'idea' is a 'mental image', a notion of experience. We perceive ideas, not the things themselves.
- 'Sensation' is perceiving through the senses.
- 'Reflection' comes after sensation. Reflection is any mental activity such as wishing, thinking, doubting and so on.

'Suppose the mind to be white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? . . . To this I answer in one word, from experience.'

John Locke, Essay concerning Human Understanding

Spokesman for the Middle Classes

In his political writing, Locke became a spokesman for the parliamentarian middle classes who had emerged from the English Civil War and the Restoration Settlement. His politics influenced his philosophy in his dislike of extreme conclusions. His Protestant world-view encouraged his philosophical world-view of a rational, self-conscious individual facing a Newtonian universe.

How do we know that all our knowledge comes through sensation and reflection? The problem is that there is no empirical way of being an empiricist.

And is all our thinking really 'empirical', derived from experience? Does our knowledge of the soul, of God, of mathematics really rely on sense-perception?

Plato and Descartes believed one thing; Locke believed another. The question is still open.

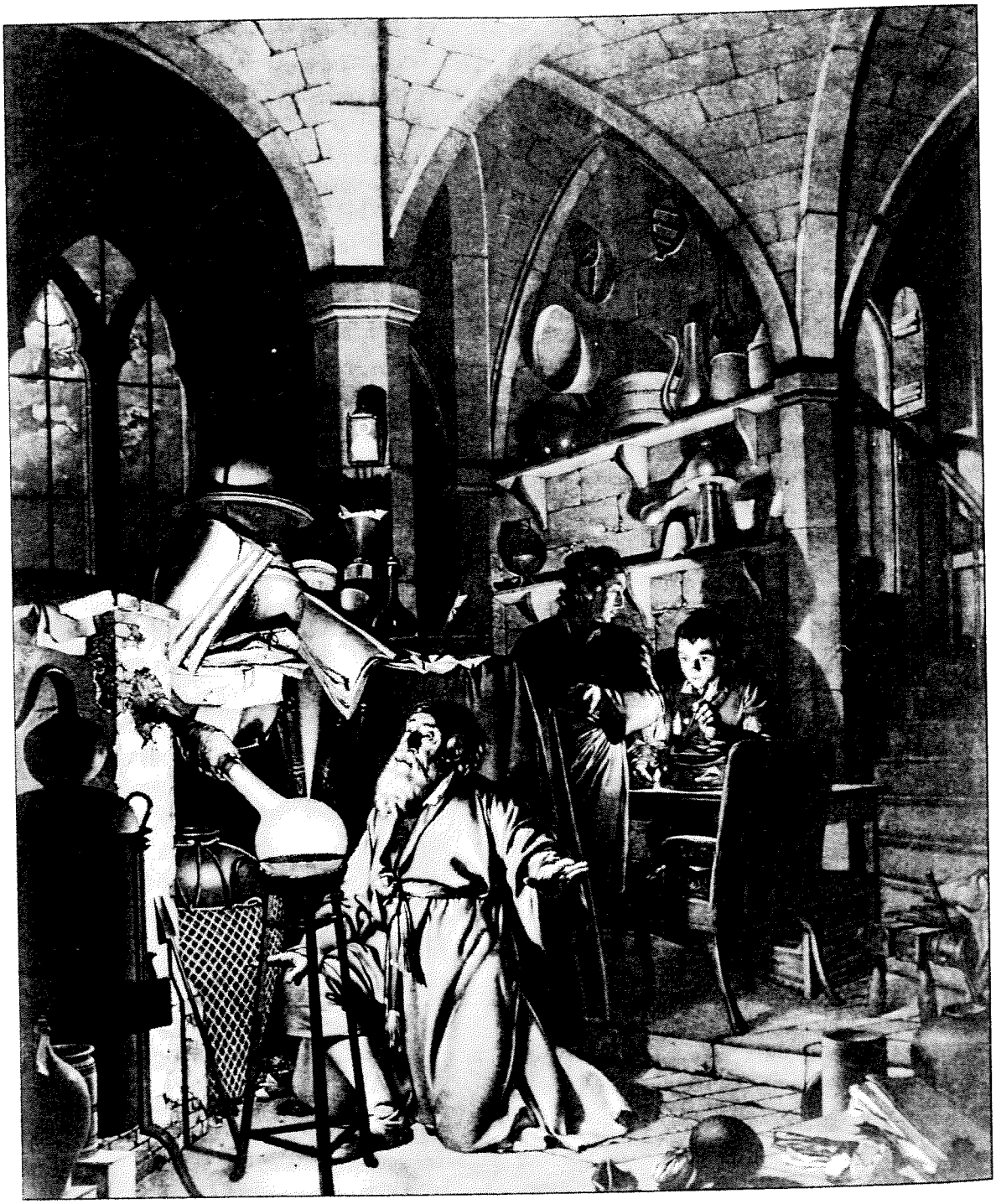
Locke's theory of knowledge

Locke divided ideas into simple and complex. A simple idea is 'in itself uncompounded'. We cannot

Newton and Boyle

Isaac Newton (1642–1727) is one of the most famous of British scientists. He formulated the theory of gravity and made important contributions to mathematics and optics. His work profoundly influenced the empiricists to ask scientific questions in a scientific way.

Robert Boyle (1627–1691) was the founder of modern chemistry. He divorced chemistry from the magic of alchemy, and conducted his work on an experimental basis—that is, a modern and scientific basis.



By Locke's time, the alchemists, with their mixture of experiment and esoteric mysticism, were a thing of the past. Locke and the other empiricists tried to give a philosophical basis for scientific observation.

produce it from nothing with our imaginations, but receive it passively. A complex idea is made up of simple ideas. We use our imagination to produce these actively.

When it comes to physical objects, Locke assigns these 'primary' and 'secondary' qualities. Primary qualities are mathematical ones such as shape, size and so on. Secondary qualities are 'sensible' ones such as colour, smell...

The particular bulk, number, figure and motion of the parts of fire, or snow, are really in them, whether anyone's senses perceive them or no; and therefore they may be called real qualities, because they really exist in those bodies; but light, heat, whiteness or coldness, are no more really in them than sickness or pain is in manna.

What Locke is stating is that without ears there would be no sound, without eyes no colour, without noses no smell. He is following the scientists of his time in believing in a colourless, tasteless, soundless universe.

Locke goes on to claim that the properties we perceive must be held together in something. But what? He concludes that they must be held together in material substance; therefore matter exists.

We perceive the idea, but cannot know the thing and this is as far as Locke is able to go.

The implications of Locke's view are that we can never truly know the natural world. As a result, science is based on guesswork, not knowledge. Science can never be more than a belief, a kind of faith, and this view has persisted.

Locke believed in three kinds of knowledge:

- Intuitive knowledge, through which comes knowledge of the self.
- Demonstrative knowledge, through which comes knowledge of God.
- Sensitive knowledge, through which comes knowledge of the external world.

Only the first kind of knowledge, intuitive knowledge, is absolutely certain. The second, demonstrative knowledge, is sure in the way a mathematical proof was sure. Sensitive knowledge is problematic—at best good guesswork.

Even so, Locke said that while proof is one thing, ordinary commonsense is another, and sensitive knowledge is enough for the purposes of everyday life. He wished to demonstrate morals as well as science, but had to admit failure. He was aware that without God morals dwindle to a matter of taste, not duty. But, though he drew a fine line between faith and scepticism, Locke did believe his philosophy led to a knowledge of God.

Locke said that, given cause and effect, if something exists, something must have always existed, and this something is the cause of that which exists. What has always existed must be eternal, all-powerful and all-knowing—in other words, God. Locke's God, however, is a philosopher's God and not the Christian God. He admitted that the Christian God could only be known through revelation. Also, this God 'who sees men in the dark' is the only God capable of enforcing morals. Even so, Locke believed in subjecting revelation to reason and making reason the final arbiter, and he failed to find a Natural Law

Bishop Berkeley reacted against the materialism of his day. In contrast, he doubted the reality of material things, and taught that everything is an idea in the mind of God.

A Piece of Philosophical Doggerel

Ronald Knox summed up Berkeley's philosophy in a famous limerick:

There was a young man who said, 'God,
I find it exceedingly odd
That this tree which I see
Should continue to be
When there's no one about in the Quad'.

Reply:

'Dear Sir: your astonishment's odd.
I am always about in the Quad;
And that's why the tree
Will continue to be
Since observed by
Yours faithfully,
God.'

independent of revelation.

Bishop Berkeley: mind more important than matter

Bishop Berkeley (1685–1753) was a stout believer in God, who worried that the science and philosophy of his time were encouraging atheism.

If the thinkers of his day appeared to be pushing God out, Berkeley wanted to pull him back in. Berkeley was Irish; a fellow of Trinity College, Dublin. Three of his most important books: *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) were all written by his mid-twenties.

He went to America in 1728 to found a new college, but returned empty-handed in 1731, though he helped found Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania. He mixed with the leading figures of his day in London, became Bishop of Clyne, Ireland, in 1731, and died in Oxford in 1753.

Berkeley took empiricism to some of its logical conclusions. As a Christian, he had a horror of materialism and so advocated 'immaterialism' instead. In his view, only the contents of our experience can be said to exist; he denied the existence of matter. Berkeley said that 'things' are a philosopher's invention; all people see are the 'ideas', and so only they can be said to exist. 'To be perceived', wrote Berkeley, 'is to exist.'

In his *Three Dialogues*, Philonous (mind) and Hylas (matter) debate the question. Philonous declares:

To me it is evident, for the reasons you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that, seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other mind wherein they exist. As sure, therefore, as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit, who contains and supports it.

Put another way, if things are perceived there must be a perceiver. Therefore I have a notion of myself. But, as things continue to exist whether I perceive them or not, there must be a Perceiver. Therefore I have a notion of God.

Everything, therefore, is an idea in the mind of God.

Berkeley thought his ideas were sensible and commonsensical; his contemporaries thought them fantastic.

Yet, if we have inherited the idea from Locke that matter is more important than mind, perhaps we should still look to Berkeley to argue that mind is more important than matter. And Berkeley's idea of the subject as perceiver is one which stubbornly refuses to go away even though many philosophers have tried to explain it away.

If Locke's legacy was the European Enlightenment, perhaps Berkeley's work has its own legacy and still has something important to say to us today.

For further thinking

1. Locke wrote, 'All ideas come from sensation or reflection.' What problems does this pose for a Rationalist?

2. Imagine a discussion between either Descartes and John Locke on the subject of God, or John Locke and a scientist on the subject of scientific knowledge. Write down a conversation that would reflect both views. Read it out to others in your group.

3. If you took seriously Bishop Berkeley's view that only the contents of our experience can be said to exist, what effect would this have on the way you live your life and the way you think?

Rationalism and Empiricism

Alison Wood

Throughout this article, there are questions and activities. Try to answer or do them for yourself, before reading on. The point of this article is not to tell you everything about Rationalism and Empiricism. It is not to tell you about the different arguments for the existence of God. It is not even to present a fair and even handed discussion about whether or not God exists – you've seen all that before. It is to get you to start to think about the basis on which we make claims to know things. It might even persuade you to read a bit of non-religious Philosophy. I do hope so.

Write down five things that you might think that you know - any five at all.

Here's my list:

I know that Washington is the capital of the USA.
I know that 2+3=5
I know that fairies have got wings.
I know that I am writing this article.
I know that daisies are white and yellow.

Now look at them and ask youself "How do I know them?"

Some of them, you will know because you have experienced them. For example, I know that daisies are white and yellow, because I have seen them outside on the grass. Some things you will know because you have been told about them or have read about them in books. I have never been to Washington, but I have been told about it by someone who has. I know that fairies have got wings, because I have seen pictures in books. I know I am writing this article, because I can see the words on the screen in front of me. I know all these things, because I have had certain experiences. I have seen things and heard them and touched them and tasted them and smelled them.

But how do I know that 2+3=5. Well, some people might argue, it is because you have experienced two things and three things, making five things. This is possible, but I know all sorts of sums which I have not experienced. How can I know them? Some people argue that I know that 2+3=5 because I have reasoned it out myself.

Here, we can see two quite different kinds of knowledge: knowledge which comes from experience and knowledge which comes from reasoning.

There has been a long debate in Philosophy about how we acquire our knowledge. Some philosophers argue that all our knowledge comes from experience. Without experiences, we know nothing at all. When we are born, we are like 'blank slates' and our experiences provide the 'writing' on the slates. These philosophers are known as Empiricists.

Do you think that, when a baby is born, it is like a 'blank slate'? Is there any way in which you could find out?

Other philosophers disagree. They argue that there is some knowledge which does not come from experience. There are some things which we can know, without needing to have experiences. We know by reasoning or thinking alone. These philosophers are known as Rationalists. Rationalists argue that there are certain ideas which we are born with. These are known as *innate ideas.* We do not need experience to acquire these innate ideas.

Can you think of anything which might be an innate idea?

Whether you are a rationalist or an empiricist will determine the kinds of arguments which you use to prove the existence of God.

What *starting point* would (a) an Empiricist and (b) a Rationalist use in any argument for the existence of God?

An Empiricist has to start with what is experienced, so any proof of the existence of God needs to start with experiences. Some people claim that you can experience God directly, through a Religious Experience. This might be an empiricist argument for the existence of God. Other people claim that you can experience design (as purpose or regularity) in the world and this might be the starting point for an empiricist argument for the existence of God.

These two suggestions raise interesting questions for Empiricists and for empirical arguments in general.

The first argument, that we can experience God, leads us to the very general question, which empiricists answer in very different ways: “If all knowledge comes from experience, what exactly do we experience?”

Some people say “Well, we experience objects, as they really are?” So, what I experience are tables and chairs and flowers and trees.

Can you think of any immediate problems with the claim “Well, we experience objects as they really are?”

The difficulty with this claim is that we very seldom actually do experience objects as we think they really are. Many of our claims about what we experience are not at all about what we actually do experience.

Look at the table in front of you - what are you experiencing?

Most people would claim that they are experiencing a hard, rectangular object, of a certain colour. If you think again, and say what you really are experiencing, you might well say something rather different.

Look again - *exactly* what are you experiencing?

Your experience is not of something which is rectangular in shape (unless you are hovering directly above it). Your experience is actually of something that is changing shape, as you move. Your experience is not of something which has a certain colour. Look again - the colours change as you move. If the sun is shining, certain parts of the table are white and shining; other parts are

dark. The table is all sorts of colours.

Such arguments have led certain Empiricist philosophers to put forward a theory - Sense Data Theory. This theory points out that we do not experience objects themselves, but their qualities. In the case of the table, I do not experience the table itself, but the qualities of the table. These qualities are experienced as my Perceptions, or Sense Data. So, instead of saying "I am experiencing a table" if we are good empiricists, we should say "I am perceiving brownness and hardness and so on." If I want to talk about a physical object table, I have to make an inference from my sense data. I have to say "I am perceiving brownness, hardness etc, *therefore*, I am perceiving a table." I must remember, however, that I am not perceiving the table itself, but only its qualities. Anything I want to say about the table is an *inference* - I am making a claim which goes beyond the evidence I have.

Now, watch *Total Recall* or *Red Dwarf - Back to Reality*. Go on, it's homework!

Whatever you have watched should have shown you that there can be occasions when my sense data can seriously mislead me. It can seem to me that I am having certain experiences, when, in fact, I am not. All that is happening is that I am experiencing certain sense data and inferring, on the basis of that sense data, that I am having experiences. So, in "Back to Reality" the crew are not really going through the events they are experiencing; they are in a virtual reality. They are having exactly the same sense data as someone who is really going through the events in question, but this does not mean that the events are really happening. In "Total Recall" Arnie is in exactly the same situation (and we do not know, even at the end, whether his adventures are real or not).

So, on Empiricist grounds, we cannot make claims about reality on the basis of our experiences, as easily as we first thought. These claims are inferences from what we experience and, as the Virtual Reality example showed, all sorts of inferences are possible from our experience.

Now, let's look at the Argument from Religious Experience. Someone might claim, on the basis of an experience, that they have empirical reasons for believing that there is a God.

Look back at the argument above. What special problems might someone who claims to have experienced God have, in putting forward an empiricist argument?

The first problem is that God does not obviously have the kind of qualities which an empiricist is used to experiencing. God is not a thing, or a person, in the usual sense of the word. He does not have a shape, or a size, or a colour or a texture! When someone claims to have experienced God, they are claiming an experience of qualities (or sense data) which are radically different from those in other experiences.

Find an account from someone who has claimed to have experienced God. How are the qualities of God different from the qualities of other things? What problems does this cause?

The second problem is that, even if we accept that certain qualities are experienced, we still have to justify the inference from "I am perceiving certain qualities" to "I have experienced God."

On the basis of the actual experience that someone has when s/he claims to have had a

religious experience, which other inferences might be made? How might you decide which inference is the correct one?

If we are choosing between inferences, there might be a strong temptation to argue that the most reasonable inference is "I am having a hallucination," especially given that religious experiences tend not to be public, or repeatable. To justify the inference "I am experiencing God," that inference must be the most likely of all possible inferences.

So, here is the empiricist's problem. How does she move from her own experience (from her sense data) to claims about things existing independently of her sense data. How does she get beyond her own experiences?

So, as an empiricist, I can construct arguments for the existence of God, but those arguments are not conclusive. That is the downside for a religious empiricist. The upside is that, as an empiricist, I can construct arguments for the existence of an external world, but those arguments are not conclusive either. That is the upside for a religious empiricist.

The question (and I leave it with you) is, "On empiricist grounds, is the existence of God more likelv or less likely, than the existence of an external world?"

Turning to Rationalism, if you want a rationalist argument for the existence of God, you need an argument which you can do entirely without needing to appeal to experience. You need an argument which you can do with your eyes shut and your fingers in your ears!

The most famous rationalist argument for the existence of God is the Qntological Argument. In essence, the Ontological Argument goes:

God is a perfect being.
A perfect being is: omnipotent
omniscient
omnipresent
morally perfect
A perfect being is also existent (because if it didn't exist, it wouldn't be perfect).
Therefore God exists.

The reason why the Ontological Argument is a rationalist argument is because - allegedly - you can prove the existence of God just by thinking about the definition of 'God'.

There are all sorts of problems with the Ontological Argument and I expect that you know them all very well. The issue that I would like you to consider now is:

Is it possible to prove the existence of anything, purely by thinking about it?

Consider the argument below:

I can prove the existence of the Missing Link between people and apes, just by thinking about it. I know that people and apes share many characteristics and we are very similar. We are not exactly the same, however, so there must, at some point, have been some creature, the Missing Link, which was between people and apes. It was more like people than apes are and more like

an ape than a person is. No one has ever experienced the Missing Link, therefore this cannot be an empiricist argument. So, purely by reasoning, I have shown that there must have been a Missing Link.

Why isn't this a rationalist argument?

The reason why this is not a rationalist argument is that it depends on all sorts of knowledge from experience. It depends on knowledge from experience about apes and people and genes and evolution and all sorts of other things. There is reasoning involved, but it is reasoning about things which we have experienced. Of course, there is also reasoning about something which we have not experienced (the Missing Link itself), but this is just an extension of the empirical reasoning.

The Ontological Argument is rationalist, because, once you know what the definition of 'God' is, you know that God must exist, because 'exists' is in His definition.

And here is the big problem with the Ontological Argument. Many people say that all the Ontological Argument is doing is playing with words. If you define God as a perfect being and you say that perfection includes existence, they argue, of course God exists. You have defined him as existing and then proved that he does!

And so here is your problem. As a Rationalist, how do you get beyond your mind? How do you move from what you can think about to what exists, out there, independent of your thoughts? How do you reason to the existence of something outside your mind?

This should sound familiar. The Rationalist is now in a rather similar position to the empiricist. Both want arguments for the existence of God. Both can construct arguments, but neither of them seems able, without problems, to move beyond themselves, to make claims about what is the case "out there." The empiricist is stuck with her experiences; the rationalist with her chain of reasoning. Although Rationalism and Empiricism are diametrically opposed philosophical positions, they do seem to end up, in this particular case, with a very similar problem.

In fact, the Rationalist and the Empiricist share another, very fundamental problem. It is possible, for Rationalist or Empiricist reasons, to believe in Solipsism. Solipsism is the theory that you are the only person who exists. More on this (maybe) in a future edition …

Suggested reading:

For an interesting, story based discussion of whether or not there are innate ideas, and specifically whether "God" is an innate idea, read *A Knowledge of Angels* by Jill Paton Walsh.

The empiricist argument about the table is taken straight from Chapter 1 of Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*. This is an excellent introduction to some of the major ideas in Philosophy (well, to be honest, it's great up to the end of chapter 6, then it's all downhill after that).

For a good, activity centred introduction to Philosophy in general, try reading *Philosophy in*

Practice by Adam Morton.