**History of Philosophy**

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| **Pre-Socratic Philosophy** |

[Western Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_western.html)- by which we usually mean everything apart from the [Eastern Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_eastern.html)of [China](http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_eastern_chinese.html), [India](http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_eastern_indian.html), [Japan](http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_eastern_japanese.html), [Persia](http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_eastern_persian.html), etc - really began in [Ancient Greece](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_ancient.html)in about the **6th Century B.C.**[Thales of Miletus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_thales.html)is usually considered the first proper philosopher, although he was just as concerned with **natural philosophy**(what we now call **science**) as with philosophy as we know it.

[Thales](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_thales.html)and most of the other [Pre-Socratic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_presocratic.html)philosophers (i.e. those who lived before [Socrates](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_socrates.html)) limited themselves in the main to [Metaphysics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html)(enquiry into the nature of **existence**, **being**and the **world**). They were [Materialists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_materialism.html)(they believed that all things are composed of **material**and nothing else) and were mainly concerned with trying to establish the **single underlying substance**the world is made up of (a kind of [Monism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_monism.html)), without resorting to **supernatural**or **mythological**explanations. For instance, [Thales](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_thales.html)thought the whole universe was composed of different forms of **water**; [Amaximenes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_anaximenes.html)concluded it was was made of **air**; [Heraclitus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heraclitus.html)thought it was **fire**; and [Anaximander](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_anaximander.html)some unexplainable substance usually translated as "**the infinite**"or "**the boundless**".

Another issue the [Pre-Socratics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_presocratic.html)wrestled with was the so-called **problem of change**, how things appear to change from one form to another. At the extremes, [Heraclitus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heraclitus.html)believed in an on-going process of **perpetual change**, a constant interplay of **opposites**; [Parmenides](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_parmenides.html), on the other hand, using a complicated deductive argument, **denied**that there was any such thing as change at all, and argued that everything that exists is **permanent**, **indestructible**and **unchanging**. This might sound like an unlikely proposition, but [Parmenides](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_parmenides.html)'s **challenge**was well-argued and was important in encouraging other philosophers to come up with convincing **counter-arguments**. [Zeno of Elea](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_zeno_elea.html)was a student of [Parmenides](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_parmenides.html), and is best known for his famous **paradoxes of motion**(the best known of which is that of the **Achilles and the Hare**), which helped to lay the foundations for the study of [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html). However, [Zeno](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_zeno_elea.html)'s underlying intention was really to show, like [Parmenides](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_parmenides.html)before him, that all belief in **plurality**and **change**is mistaken, and in particular that **motion**is nothing but an **illusion**.

Although these ideas might seem to us rather **simplistic**and unconvincing today, we should bear in mind that, at this time, there was really **no scientific knowledge**whatsoever, and even the commonest of phenomena (e.g. lightning, water freezing to ice, etc) would have appeared **miraculous**. Their attempts were therefore important **first steps**in the development of philosophical thought. They also set the stage for two other important [Pre-Socratic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_presocratic.html)philosophers: [Empedocles](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_empedocles.html), who combined their ideas into the theory of the **four classical elements**(earth, air, fire and water), which became the standard dogma for much of the next two thousand years; and [Democritus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_democritus.html), who developed the extremely influential idea of [Atomism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atomism.html)(that all of reality is actually composed of **tiny**, **indivisible**and **indestructible**building blocks known as **atoms**, which form different combinations and shapes within the surrounding **void**).

Another early and very influential Greek philosopher was [Pythagoras](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_pythagoras.html), who led a rather **bizarre religious sect**and essentially believed that all of reality was governed by **numbers**, and that its essence could be encountered through the study of **mathematics**.

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| **Classical Philosophy** |

Philosophy really took off, though, with [Socrates](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_socrates.html)and [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)in the **5th - 4th Century B.C.**(often referred to as the **Classical**or [Socratic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_socratic.html)period of philosophy).Unlike most of the [Pre-Socratic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_presocratic.html)philosophers before him, [Socrates](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_socrates.html)was more concerned with how people should **behave**, and so was perhaps the first major philosopher of [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html). He developed a system of **critical reasoning**in order to work out how to **live properly**and to tell the difference between **right**and **wrong**. His system, sometimes referred to as the **Socratic Method**, was to break problems down into a **series of questions**, the answers to which would **gradually distill**a solution. Although he was careful to claim not to have all the answers himself, his **constant questioning**made him many enemies among the authorities of Athens who eventually had him **put to death**.

[Socrates](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_socrates.html)himself never wrote anything down, and what we know of his views comes from the ***"Dialogues"***of his student [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html), perhaps the **best known**, most **widely studied**and most **influential**philosopher of all time. In his writings, [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)blended [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html), [Metaphysics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html), [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html)and [Epistemology](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_epistemology.html)(the theory of **knowledge**and how we can acquire it) into an **interconnected**and **systematic**philosophy. He provided the first real opposition to the [Materialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_materialism.html)of the [Pre-Socratics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_presocratic.html), and he developed doctrines such as [Platonic Realism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_realism.html#Platonic), [Essentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_essentialism.html)and [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html), including his important and famous **theory of Forms**and **universals**(he believed that the world we perceive around us is composed of mere **representations**or **instances**of the pure ideal Forms, which had their **own existence**elsewhere, an idea known as [Platonic Realism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_realism.html#Platonic)). [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)believed that **virtue**was a kind of **knowledge**(the knowledge of good and evil) that we need in order to reach the **ultimate good**, which is the aim of all human desires and actions (a theory known as [Eudaimonism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_eudaimonism.html)). [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)'s [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html)was developed mainly in his famous ***"Republic"***, where he describes an ideal (though rather grim and anti-democratic) society composed of **Workers**and **Warriors**, ruled over by wise **Philosopher Kings**.

The third in the main trio of **classical philosophers**was [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)'s student [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html). He created an even more **comprehensive system**of philosophy than [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html), encompassing [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html), [Aesthetics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_aesthetics.html), [Politics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html), [Metaphysics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html), [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html)and **science**, and his work influenced almost all later philosophical thinking, particularly those of the [Medieval](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_medieval.html)period. [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)'s system of deductive [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html), with its emphasis on the **syllogism**(where a conclusion, or **synthesis**, is inferred from two other premises, the **thesis**and **antithesis**), remained the dominant form of [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html)until the 19th Century. Unlike [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html), [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)held that Form and Matter were **inseparable**, and cannot exist apart from each other. Although he too believed in a kind of [Eudaimonism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_eudaimonism.html), [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)realized that [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html)is a **complex concept**and that we cannot always control our own **moral environment**. He thought that happiness could best be achieved by living a **balanced life**and **avoiding excess**by pursuing a **golden mean**in everything (similar to his formula for **political stability**through steering a **middle course**between **tyranny**and **democracy**).

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| **Other Ancient Philosophical Schools** |

In the philosophical cauldron of [Ancient Greece](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_ancient.html), though (as well as the [Hellenistic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_hellenistic.html)and [Roman](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_roman.html)civilizations which followed it over the next few centuries), several other schools or [movements](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements.html)also held sway, in addition to [Platonism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_platonism.html)and [Aristotelianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html):

* [Sophism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_sophism.html)(the best known proponents being [Protagoras](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_protagoras.html)and [Gorgias](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_gorgias.html)), which held generally [relativistic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_relativism.html)views on knowledge (i.e. that there is **no absolute truth**and two points of view can be acceptable at the same time) and generally [skeptical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)views on truth and morality (although, over time, [Sophism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_sophism.html)came to denote a class of **itinerant intellectuals**who taught courses in **rhetoric**and "excellence"or "virtue"for money).
* [Cynicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_cynicism.html), which rejected all **conventional desires**for health, wealth, power and fame, and advocated a life free from all **possessions**and **property**as the way to achieving **Virtue**(a life best exemplified by its most famous proponent, [Diogenes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_diogenes.html)).
* [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_skepticism.html)(also known as **Pyrrhonism**after the movement's founder, [Pyrrho](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_pyrrho.html)), which held that, because we can **never know**the true innner substance of things, only how they **appear**to us (and therefore we can never know which opinions are **right**or **wrong**), we should **suspend judgement**on everything as the only way of achieving **inner peace**.
* [Epicureanism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_epicureanism.html)(named for its founder [Epicurus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_epicurus.html)), whose main goal was to attain **happiness**and **tranquility**through leading a **simple, moderate life**, the cultivation of **friendships**and the **limiting of desires**(quite contrary to the **common perception**of the word "epicurean").
* [Hedonism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_hedonism.html), which held that **pleasure**is the most important pursuit of mankind, and that we should always act so as to **maximize our own pleasure**.
* [Stoicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_stoicism.html)(developed by [Zeno of Citium](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_zeno_citium.html), and later espoused by [Epictetus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_epictetus.html)and [Marcus Aurelius](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_marcus_aurelius.html)), which taught **self-control**and **fortitude**as a means of overcoming **destructive emotions**in order to develop **clear judgment**and **inner calm**and the ultimate goal of **freedom from suffering**.

[Neo-Platonism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_neoplatonism.html)(developed out of [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)'s work, largely by [Plotinus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plotinus.html)), which was a largely **religious philosophy**which became a strong influence on early **Christianity**(especially on [St. Augustine](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_augustine.html)), and taught the existence of an ineffable and transcendent **One**, from which the rest of the universe **"emanates"**as a sequence of **lesser beings.**

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| **Medieval Philosophy** |

After about the 4th or 5th Century A.D., Europe entered the so-called **Dark Ages**, during which little or no new thought was developed. By the **11th Century**, though, there was a **renewed flowering**of thought, both in **Christian**Europe and in **Muslim**and **Jewish**Middle East. Most of the philosophers of this time were mainly concerned with **proving the existence of God**and with reconciling Christianity/Islam with the **classical philosophy**of Greece (particularly [Aristotelianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html)). This period also saw the establishment of the first **universities**, which was an important factor in the subsequent development of philosophy.

Among the great **Islamic philosophers**of the [Medieval](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_medieval.html)period were [Avicenna](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_avicenna.html)(11th century, Persian) and [Averröes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_averroes.html)(12th century, Spanish/Arabic). [Avicenna](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_avicenna.html)tried to reconcile the **rational**philosophy of [Aristotelianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html)and [Neo-Platonism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_neoplatonism.html)with **Islamic theology**, and also developed his own system of [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html), known as **Avicennian Logic**. He also introduced the concept of the **"tabula rasa"**(the idea that humans are born with **no innate**or built-in mental content), which strongly influenced later [Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)like [John Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html). [Averröes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_averroes.html)'s **translations**and **commentaries**on [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)(whose works had been largely **lost**by this time) had a profound impact on the [Scholastic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html)movement in Europe, and he claimed that [Avicenna](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_avicenna.html)'s interpretations were a **distortion**of genuine [Aristotelianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html). The **Jewish**philosopher [Maimonides](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_maimonides.html)also attempted the same reconciliation of [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)with the **Hebrew scriptures**around the same time.

The [Medieval](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_medieval.html)**Christian philosophers**were all part of a movement called [Scholasticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html)which tried to combine [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html), [Metaphysics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html), [Epistemology](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_epistemology.html)and **semantics**(the theory of meaning) into one discipline, and to reconcile the philosophy of the ancient **classical philosophers**(particularly [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)) with **Christian theology**. The **Scholastic method**was to thoroughly and **critically read**the works of renowned scholars, note down any disagreements and **points of contention**, and then **resolve**them by the use of formal [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html)and analysis of **language**. [Scholasticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html)in general is often **criticized**for spending too much time discussing infinitesimal and **pedantic details**(like how many angels could dance on the tip of a needle, etc).

[St. Anselm](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_anselm.html)(best known as the originator of the **Ontological Argument**for the existence of God by abstract reasoning alone) is often regarded as the **first**of the [Scholastics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html), and [St. Thomas Aquinas](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aquinas.html)(known for his **five rational proofs**for the existence of God, and his definition of the **cardinal virtues**and the **theological virtues**) is generally considered the **greatest**, and certainly had the greatest **influence**on the theology of the Catholic Church. Other important [Scholastics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html)included [Peter Abelard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_abelard.html), [Albertus Magnus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_albertus.html), [John Duns Scotus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_scotus.html)and [William of Ockham](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ockham.html). Each contributed **slight variations**to the same general beliefs - [Abelard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_abelard.html)introduced the **doctrine of limbo**for unbaptised babies; [Scotus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_scotus.html)rejected the distinction between **essence**and **existence**that [Aquinas](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aquinas.html)had insisted on; [Ockham](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ockham.html)introduced the important methodological principle known as **Ockham's Razor**, that one should not multiply arguments beyond the necessary; etc.

[Roger Bacon](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_bacon_roger.html)was something of an exception, and actually **criticized**the prevailing [Scholastic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html)system, based as it was on **tradition**and **scriptural authority**. He is sometimes credited as one of the earliest European advocates of [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)(the theory that the origin of all knowledge is **sense experience**) and of the modern **scientific method**.

The revival of **classical civilization and learning**in the **15th and 16th Century**known as the [Renaissance](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_renaissance.html)brought the [Medieval](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_medieval.html)period to a close. It was marked by a movement **away from religion**and medieval [Scholasticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html)and towards [Humanism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_humanism.html)(the belief that humans can **solve their own problems**through reliance on **reason**and the **scientific method**) and a new sense of **critical enquiry**.

Among the major philosophical figures of the [Renaissance](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_renaissance.html)were: [Erasmus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_erasmus.html)(who **attacked**many of the traditions of the Catholic Church and popular superstitions, and became the intellectual father of the European **Reformation**); [Machiavelli](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_machiavelli.html)(whose cynical and devious [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html)has become notorious); [Thomas More](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_more.html)(the Christian [Humanist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_humanism.html)whose book ***"Utopia"***influenced generations of politicians and planners and even the early development of [Socialist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_socialism.html)ideas); and [Francis Bacon](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_bacon_francis.html)(whose [empiricist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)belief that truth requires **evidence from the real world**, and whose application of **inductive reasoning**- generalizations based on individual instances - were both influential in the development of modern **scientific methodology**).

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| **Early Modern Philosophy** |

The [Age of Reason](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_reason.html)of the **17th Century**and the [Age of Enlightenment](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_enlightenment.html)of the **18th Century** (very roughly speaking), along with the **advances in science**, the growth of **religious tolerance**and the rise of **liberalism**which went with them, mark the real beginnings of **modern philosophy**. In large part, the period can be seen as an ongoing battle between **two opposing doctrines**, [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html)(the belief that all **knowledge**arises from intellectual and **deductive reason**, rather than from the senses) and [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)(the belief that the origin of all knowledge is **sense experience**).

This **revolution**in philosophical thought was **sparked**by the French philosopher and mathematician [René Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html), the first figure in the loose movement known as [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html), and much of subsequent Western philosophy can be seen as a **response**to his ideas. His method (known as **methodological skepticism**, although its aim was actually to dispel [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)and arrive at **certain knowledge**), was to shuck off everything about which there could be even a suspicion of **doubt**(including the **unreliable senses**, even his own body which could be merely an **illusion**) to arrive at the **single indubitable principle**that he possessed **consciousness**and was able to **think**("I think, therefore I am"). He then argued (rather unsatisfactorily, some would say) that our perception of the world around us must be created for us by **God**. He saw the **human body**as a kind of **machine**that follows the mechanical laws of physics, while the **mind**(or consciousness) was a quite **separate entity**, not subject to the laws of physics, which is only able to **influence**the body and deal with the outside world by a kind of mysterious **two-way interaction**. This idea, known as [Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html)(or, more specifically, **Cartesian Dualism**), set the agenda for philosophical discussion of the **"mind-body problem"**for centuries after. Despite [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)'innovation and boldness, he was a **product of his times**and never abandoned the traditional idea of a **God**, which he saw as the **one true substance**from which everything else was made.

The second great figure of [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html)was the Dutchman [Baruch Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html), although his conception of the world was **quite different**from that of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html). He built up a strikingly original **self-contained metaphysical system**in which he rejected [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)'[Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html)in favour of a kind of [Monism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_monism.html)where mind and body were just two different aspects of a **single underlying substance**which might be called **Nature**(and which he also equated with a **God**of infinitely many attributes, effectively a kind of [Pantheism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pantheism.html)). [Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html)was a thoroughgoing [Determinist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html)who believed that absolutely **everything**(even **human behaviour**) occurs through the operation of **necessity**, leaving absolutely no room for **free will**and spontaneity. He also took the [Moral Relativist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_relativism.html)position that nothing can be **in itself**either good or bad, except to the extent that it is **subjectively perceived**to be so by the individual (and, anyway, in an ordered [deterministic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html)world, the very **concepts**of Good and Evil can have little or **no absolute meaning**).

The third great [Rationalist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html)was the German [Gottfried Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html). In order to overcome what he saw as drawbacks and inconsistencies in the theories of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)and [Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html), he devised a rather eccentric [metaphysical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html)theory of **monads**operating according to a **pre-established divine harmony**. According to [Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html)'s theory, the **real world**is actually composed of eternal, non-material and mutually-independent elements he called **monads**, and the **material world**that we see and touch is actually just **phenomena**(appearances or by-products of the underlying real world). The apparent **harmony**prevailing among monads arises because of the will of **God**(the supreme monad) who arranges everything in the world in a [deterministic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html)manner. [Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html)also saw this as overcoming the problematic **interaction between mind and matter**arising in [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)'system, and he declared that this must be the **best possible world**, simply because it was created and determined by a **perfect God**. He is also considered perhaps the most important **logician**between [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)and the mid-19th Century developments in modern formal [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html).

Another important 17th Century French [Rationalist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html)(although perhaps of the second order) was [Nicolas Malebranche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_malebranche.html), who was a follower of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)in that he believed that humans attain knowledge through **ideas**or immaterial representations in the **mind**. However, [Malebranche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_malebranche.html)argued (more or less following [St. Augustine](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_augustine.html)) that all ideas actually exist **only in God**, and that God was the only **active power**. Thus, he believed that what appears to be **"interaction"**between body and mind is actually **caused by God**, but in such a way that similar movements in the body will **"occasion"**similar ideas in the mind, an idea he called **Occasionalism**.

In **opposition**to the continental European [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html)movement was the equally loose movement of [British Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html), which was also represented by **three main proponents**.

The first of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html)was [John Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html). He argued that all of our ideas, whether simple or complex, are ultimately **derived from experience**, so that the **knowledge**of which we are capable is therefore **severely limited**both in its **scope**and in its **certainty**(a kind of modified [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)), especially given that the real **inner natures**of things derive from what he called their **primary qualities**which we can never experience and so never know. [Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html), like [Avicenna](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_avicenna.html)before him, believed that the mind was a **tabula rasa**(or blank slate) and that people are born **without innate ideas**, although he did believe that humans have absolute **natural rights**which are inherent in the nature of [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html). Along with [Hobbes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hobbes.html)and [Rousseau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_rousseau.html), he was one of the **originators**of [Contractarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_contractarianism.html)(or **Social Contract Theory**), which formed the theoretical underpinning for **democracy**, **republicanism**, [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html)and [Libertarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_libertarianism.html), and his political views influenced both the **American**and **French Revolutions**.

The next of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html)chronologically was [Bishop George Berkeley](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_berkeley.html), although his [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)was of a much more **radical**kind, mixed with a twist of [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html). Using dense but cogent arguments, he developed the rather **counter-intuitive system**known as **Immaterialism**(or sometimes as [Subjective Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html#Subjective)), which held that underlying reality consists exclusively of **minds**and their **ideas**, and that individuals can only directly know these **ideas**or **perceptions**(although not the objects themselves) through **experience**. Thus, according to [Berkeley](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_berkeley.html)'s theory, an object only really **exists**if someone is there to see or **sense**it ("to be is to be perceived"), although, he added, the infinite mind of **God**perceives everything all the time, and so in this respect the objects **continue to exist**.

The third, and perhaps **greatest**, of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html)was [David Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html). He believed strongly that **human experience**is as close are we are ever going to get to the **truth**, and that **experience**and **observation**must be the foundations of any logical argument. [Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html)argued that, although we may form **beliefs**and make **inductive inferences**about things outside our experience (by means of instinct, imagination and custom), they cannot be conclusively established by **reason**and we should not make any claims to **certain knowledge**about them (a hard-line attitude verging on complete [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)). Although he never openly declared himself an [atheist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atheism.html), he found the idea of a God effectively **nonsensensical**, given that there is no way of arriving at the idea through **sensory data**. He **attacked**many of the basic assumptions of **religion**, and gave many of the **classic criticisms**of some of the **arguments for the existence of God**(particularly the **teleological argument**). In his [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html), [Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html)stressed the importance of **moderation**, and his work contains elements of both [Conservatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html)and [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html).

Among the **"non-aligned"**philosophers of the period (many of whom were most active in the area of [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html)) were the following:

* [Thomas Hobbes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hobbes.html), who described in his famous book ***"Leviathon"***how the **natural state**of mankind was brute-like and poor, and how the modern state was a kind of **"social contract"**([Contractarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_contractarianism.html)) whereby individuals deliberately give up their **natural rights**for the sake of **protection**by the state (accepting, according to [Hobbes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hobbes.html), any **abuses of power**as the **price of peace**, which some have seen as a justification for **authoritarianism**and even [Totalitarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_totalitarianism.html));
* [Blaise Pascal](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_pascal.html), a confirmed [Fideist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html)(the view that **religious belief**depends wholly on **faith**or **revelation**, rather than reason, intellect or natural theology) who opposed both [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html)and [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)as being **insufficient**for determining major truths;
* [Voltaire](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_voltaire.html), an indefatigable fighter for **social reform**thoughout his life, but wholly **cynical**of most philosophies of the day, from [Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html)'s optimism to [Pascal](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_pascal.html)'s pessimism, and from **Catholic dogma**to French political institutions;
* [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_rousseau.html), whose discussion of **inequality**and whose theory of the **popular will**and society as a **social contract**entered into for the mutual benefit of all ([Contractarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_contractarianism.html)) strongly influenced the **French Revolution**and the subsequent development of [Liberal](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html), [Conservative](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html)and even [Socialist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_socialism.html)theory;
* [Adam Smith](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_smith.html), widely cited as the father of **modern economics**, whose metaphor of the **"invisible hand"**of the free market (the apparent **benefits to society**of people behaving **in their own interests**) and whose book ***"The Wealth of Nations"***had a huge influence on the development of modern [Capitalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_capitalism.html), [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html)and [Individualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_individualism.html); and
* [Edmund Burke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_burke.html), considered one of the **founding fathers**of modern [Conservatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html)and [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html), although he also produced perhaps the first **serious defence**of [Anarchism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_anarchism.html).

Towards the end of the [Age of Enlightenment](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_enlightenment.html), the German philosopher [Immanuel Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)caused another **paradign shift**as important as that of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)150 years earlier, and in many ways this marks the shift to [Modern](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_modern.html)philosophy. He sought to move philosophy **beyond**the debate between [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html)and [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html), and he attempted to **combine**those two apparently contradictory doctrines into one **overarching system**. A whole movement ([Kantianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_kantianism.html)) developed in the wake of his work, and most of the subsequent history of philosophy can be seen as **responses**, in one way or another, to his ideas.

[Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)showed that [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)and [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html)could be **combined**and that statements were possible that were both **synthetic**(a posteriori knowledge from **experience**alone, as in [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)) but also **a priori**(from **reason**alone, as in [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html)). Thus, without the senses we could not become **aware**of any object, but without understanding and reason we could not form any **conception**of it. However, our senses can only tell us about the **appearance**of a thing (**phenomenon**) and not the **"thing-in-itself"**(**noumenon**), which [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)believed was essentially **unknowable**, although we have certain innate **predispositions**as to what exists ([Transcendental Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html#Transcendental)). [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)'s major contribution to [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html)was the theory of the **Categorical Imperative**, that we should act only in such a way that we would want our actions to become a **universal law**, applicable to everyone in a similar situation ([Moral Universalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_universalism.html)) and that we should treat other individuals as **ends in themselves**, not as mere means ([Moral Absolutism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_absolutism.html)), even if that means sacrificing the **greater good**. [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)believed that any attempts to **prove God's existence**are just a **waste of time**, because our concepts only work properly in the **empirical world**(which God is above and beyond), although he also argued that it was **not irrational**to believe in something that clearly **cannot be proven either way**([Fideism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html)).

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| **19th Century Philosophy** |

In the [Modern](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_modern.html)period, [Kantianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_kantianism.html)gave rise to the [German Idealists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html), each of whom had their own **interpretations**of [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)'s ideas. [Johann Fichte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_fichte.html), for example, rejected [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)'s **separation**of "things in themselves"and things "as they appear to us"(which he saw as an invitation to [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)), although he did accept that **consciousness of the self**depends on the existence of something that is **not part of the self**(his famous **"I / not-I"**distinction). [Fichte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_fichte.html)'s later [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html)also contributed to the rise of German [Nationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_nationalism.html). [Friedrich Schelling](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_schelling.html)developed a unique form of [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html)known as **Aesthetic Idealism**(in which he argued that only **art**was able to **harmonize**and sublimate the **contradictions**between subjectivity and objectivity, freedom and necessity, etc), and also tried to establish a connection or **synthesis**between his conceptions of **nature**and **spirit**.

[Arthur Schopenhauer](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_schopenhauer.html)is also usually considered part of the [German Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html)and [Romanticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_romanticism.html)movements, although his philosophy was very singular. He was a thorough-going **pessimist**who believed that the **"will-to-life"**(the drive to survive and to reproduce) was the underlying **driving force**of the world, and that the pursuit of happiness, love and intellectual satisfaction was very much **secondary**and essentially **futile**. He saw **art**(and other artistic, moral and ascetic forms of awareness) as the only way to **overcome**the fundamentally frustration-filled and painful **human condition**.

The greatest and most influential of the [German Idealists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html), though, was [Georg Hegel](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hegel.html). Although his works have a reputation for **abstractness**and **difficulty**, [Hegel](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hegel.html)is often considered the **summit**of early 19th Century German thought, and his **influence**was profound. He extended [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)'s process of **dialectic**(resolving a **thesis**and its opposing **antithesis**into a **synthesis**) to apply to the **real world**- including the whole of **history**- in an on-going process of conflict resolution towards what he called the **Absolute Idea**. However, he stressed that what is really changing in this process is the underlying **"Geist"**(mind, spirit, soul), and he saw each person's individual consciousness as being part of an **Absolute Mind**(sometimes referred to as [Absolute Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html#Absolute)).

[Karl Marx](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_marx.html)was strongly influenced by [Hegel](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hegel.html)'s **dialectical method**and his analysis of **history**. His [Marxist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_marxism.html)theory (including the concepts of **historical materialism**, **class struggle**, the **labour theory of value**, the **bourgeousie**, etc), which he developed with his friend **Friedrich Engels**as a reaction against the rampant [Capitalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_capitalism.html)of 19th Century Europe, provided the **intellectual base**for later radical and revolutionary [Socialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_socialism.html)and [Communism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_communism.html).

A very different kind of philosophy grew up in **19th Century England**, out of the [British Empiricist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html)tradition of the previous century. The [Utilitarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_utilitarianism.html)movement was **founded**by the **radical social reformer**[Jeremy Bentham](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_bentham.html)and **popularized**by his even more radical protegé [John Stuart Mill](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_mill.html). The doctrine of [Utilitarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_utilitarianism.html)is a type of [Consequentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_consequentialism.html)(an approach to [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html)that stresses an action's outcome or **consequence**), which holds that the **right action**is that which would cause **"the greatest happiness of the greatest number"**. [Mill](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_mill.html)refined the theory to stress the **quality**not just the **quantity**of happiness, and **intellectual**and **moral**pleasures over more **physical**forms. He counselled that **coercion**in society is only justifiable either to defend ourselves, or to defend others from harm (the **"harm principle"**).

**19th Century America**developed its own philosophical traditions. [Ralph Waldo Emerson](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_emerson.html)established the [Transcendentalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_transcendentalism.html)movement in the middle of the century, rooted in the transcendental philosophy of [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html), [German Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html)and [Romanticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_romanticism.html), and a desire to ground religion in the **inner spiritual or mental essence**of humanity, rather than in **sensuous experience**. [Emerson](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_emerson.html)'s student [Henry David Thoreau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_thoreau.html)further developed these ideas, stressing **intuition**, **self-examination**, [Individualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_individualism.html)and the exploration of the **beauty of nature**. [Thoreau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_thoreau.html)'s advocacy of **civil disobedience**influenced generations of **social reformers**.

The other main **American movement**of the late 19th Century was [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_pragmatism.html), which was initiated by [C. S. Peirce](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_peirce.html)and developed and popularized by [William James](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_james.html)and [John Dewey](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_dewey.html). The theory of [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pragmatism.html)is based on [Peirce](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_peirce.html)'s **pragmatic maxim**, that the **meaning**of any concept is really just the same as its operational or **practical consequences**(essentially, that something is **true**only insofar as it **works**in practice). [Peirce](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_peirce.html)also introduced the idea of [Fallibilism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fallibilism.html)(that all truths and "facts"are necessarily **provisional**, that they can never be certain but only **probable**).

[James](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_james.html), in addition to his **psychological**work, extended [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pragmatism.html), both as a **method**for analyzing philosophic problems but also as a **theory of truth**, as well as developing his own versions of [Fideism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html)(that **beliefs**are arrived at by an an individual process that lies **beyond reason and evidence**) and [Voluntarism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_voluntarism.html)(that the **will**is superior to the intellect and to emotion) among others. [Dewey](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_dewey.html)'s interpretation of [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pragmatism.html)is better known as [Instrumentalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_instrumentalism.html), the **methodological**view that concepts and theories are merely **useful instruments**, best meaured by how effective they are in **explaining and predicting**phenomena, and not by whether they are **true or false**(which he claimed was **impossible**). [Dewey](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_dewey.html)'s contribution to [Philosophy of Education](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_education.html)and to **modern progressive education**(particularly what he called **"learning-by-doing"**) was also significant.

But **European philosophy**was not limited to the [German Idealists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html). The French sociologist and philosopher [Auguste Comte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_comte.html)founded the influential [Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_positivism.html)movement around the belief that the only **authentic knowledge**was **scientific knowledge**, based on actual **sense experience**and strict application of the **scientific method**. [Comte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_comte.html)saw this as the final phase in the **evolution of humanity**, and even constructed a non-theistic, pseudo-mystical **"positive religion"**around the idea.

The **Dane**[Søren Kierkegaard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kierkegaard.html)pursued his own lonely trail of thought. He too was a kind of [Fideist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html)and an extremely **religious**man (despite his **attacks**on the Danish state church). But his analysis of the way in which **human freedom**tends to lead to **"angst"**(dread), the call of the **infinite**, and eventually to **despair**, was highly influential on later [Existentialists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html)like [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html)and [Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html).

The **German**[Nietzsche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_nietzsche.html)was another atypical, original and controversial philosopher, also considered an important **forerunner**of [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html). He **challenged**the foundations of **Christianity**and **traditional morality**(famously asserting that **"God is dead"**), leading to charges of [Atheism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atheism.html), [Moral Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_skepticism.html), [Relativism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_relativism.html)and [Nihilism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_nihilism.html). He developed original notions of the **"will to power"**as mankind's main motivating principle, of the **"Übermensch"**("superman") as the goal of humanity, and of **"eternal return"**as a means of evaluating ones life, all of which have all generated much **debate**and **argument**among scholars.

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| **20th Century Philosophy** |

**20th Century philosophy**has been dominated to a great extent by the **rivalry**between two very general philosophical traditions, [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html)(the largely, although not exclusively, **anglophone**mindset that philosophy should apply **logical techniques**and be consistent with **modern science**) and [Continental Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_continental.html)(really just a **catch-all**label for everything else, mainly based in **mainland Europe**, and which, in very general terms, **rejects**[Scientism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_scientism.html)and **tends towards**[Historicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_historicism.html)).

An important precursor of the [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html)tradition was the [Logicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logicism.html)developed during the late 19th Century by [Gottlob Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html). [Logicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logicism.html)sought to show that some, or even **all**, of **mathematics**was reducible to [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html), and [Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html)'s work revolutionized modern mathematical [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html). In the early 20th Century, the British **logicians**[Bertrand Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html)and [Alfred North Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html)continued to champion his ideas (even after [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html)had pointed out a **paradox**exposing an **inconsistency**in [Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html)'s work, which caused him, [Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html), to **abandon**his own theory). [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html)and [Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html)'s monumental and ground-breaking book, ***"Principia Mathematica"***was a particularly important milestone. Their work, in turn, though, fell prey to **Kurt Gödel**'s infamous **Incompleteness Theorems**of 1931, which mathematically proved the **inherent limitations**of all but the most trivial **formal systems**.

Both [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html)and [Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html)went on to develop **other philosophies**. [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html)'s work was mainly in the area of [Philosophy of Language](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_language.html), including his theory of **Logical Atomism**and his contributions to [Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ordinary_language.html). [Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html)developed a [metaphysical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html)approach known as **Process Philosophy**, which posited ever-changing **subjective forms**to complement [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)'s **eternal forms**. Their [Logicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logicism.html), though, along with [Comte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_comte.html)'s [Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_positivism.html), was a great influence on the development of the **important 20th Century movement**of [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html).

The [Logical Positivists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html)campaigned for a **systematic reduction**of all human knowledge down to **logical and scientific foundations**, and claimed that a statement can be **meaningful**only if it is either purely **formal**(essentially, mathematics and logic) or capable of **empirical verification**. The school grew from the discussions of the so-called **"Vienna Circle"**in the early 20th Century (including **Mauritz Schlick**, **Otto Neurath**, **Hans Hahn**and **Rudolf Carnap**). In the 1930s, [A. J. Ayer](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ayer.html)was largely responsible for the spread of [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html)to Britain, even as its influence was already **waning**in Europe.

The ***"Tractatus"***of the young [Ludwig Wittgenstein](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_wittgenstein.html), published in 1921, was a text of great importance for [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html). Indeed, [Wittgenstein](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_wittgenstein.html)has come to be considered one of the 20th Century's **most important philosophers**, if not **the**most important. A central part of the philosophy of the ***"Tractatus"***was the **picture theory of meaning**, which asserted that **thoughts**, as expressed in language, **"picture"**the facts of the world, and that the **structure**of language is also **determined by**the structure of reality. However, [Wittgenstein](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_wittgenstein.html)**abandoned**his early work, convinced that the publication of the ***"Tractatus"***had solved **all**the problems of **all philosophy**. He later **re-considered**and struck off in a completely **new direction**. His later work, which saw the **meaning**of a word as just its **use**in the language, and looked at language as a kind of **game**in which the different parts **function**and **have meaning**, was instrumental in the development of [Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html).

[Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html)shifted the emphasis from the **ideal**or **formal language**of [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html)to **everyday language**and its actual **use**, and it saw traditional philosophical problems as rooted in **misunderstandings**caused by the **sloppy use of words**in a language. Some have seen [Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html)as a **complete break**with, or **reaction against**, [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html), while others have seen it as just an **extension**or another stage of it. Either way, it became a **dominant philosophic school**between the 1930s and 1970s, under the guidance of philosophers such as [W. V. O. Quine](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_quine.html), [Gilbert Ryle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ryle.html), **Donald Davidson**, etc.

[Quine](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_quine.html)'s work stressed the **difficulty**of providing a **sound empirical basis**where language, convention, meaning, etc, are concerned, and also **broadened**the principle of [Semantic Holism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_holism.html#Types)to the extreme position that a **sentence**(or even an individual **word**) has meaning only in the context of a **whole language**. [Ryle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ryle.html)is perhaps best known for his dismissal of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)'**body-mind**[Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html)as the **"ghost in the machine"**, but he also developed the theory of **Philosophical Behaviourism**(the view that descriptions of **human behaviour**need never refer to anything but the **physical operations**of human bodies) which became the standard view among [Ordinary Language](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html)philosophers for several decades.

Another important philosopher in the [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html)of the early 20th century was [G. E. Moore](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_moore.html), a contemporary of [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html)at **Cambridge University**(then the most **important centre**of philosophy in the world). His 1903 ***"Principia Ethica"***has become one of the standard texts of modern [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html)and [Meta-Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html#Meta-Ethics), and inspired the movement away from [Ethical Naturalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethical_naturalism.html)(the belief that there exist **moral properties**, which we can know **empirically**, and that can be **reduced**to entirely **non-ethical**or natural properties, such as needs, wants or pleasures) and towards [Ethical Non-Naturalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethical_nonnaturalism.html)(the belief that there are **no**such moral properties). He pointed out that the term **"good"**, for instance, is in fact **indefinable**because it lacks **natural properties**in the way that the terms "blue", "smooth", etc, have them. He also defended what he called **"common sense"**[Realism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_realism.html)(as opposed to [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html)or [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)) on the grounds that **common sense claims**about our knowledge of the world are **just as plausible**as those other [metaphysical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html)premises.

On the [Continental Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_continental.html)side, an important figure in the **early 20th Century**was the German [Edmund Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html), who founded the influential movement of [Phenomenology](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_phenomenology.html). He developed the idea, parts of which date back to [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)and even [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html), that what we call **reality**really consists of objects and events (**"phenomena"**) as they are **perceived**or understood in the **human consciousness**, and not of anything **independent**of human consciousness (which may or may nor exist). Thus, we can **"bracket"**(or, effectively, ignore) sensory data, and deal only with the **"intentional content"**(the mind's built-in **mental description**of external reality), which allows us to **perceive**aspects of the real world outside.

It was another German, [Martin Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html)(once a student of [Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html)), who was mainly responsible for the **decline**of [Phenomenology](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_phenomenology.html). In his groundbreaking ***"Being and Time"***of 1927, [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html)gave concrete examples of how [Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html)'s view (of man as a **subject**confronted by, and reacting to, **objects**) broke down in certain (quite common) circumstances, and how the **existence**of objects only has any real **significance**and **meaning**within a whole **social context**(what [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html)called **"being in the world"**). He further argued that **existence**was inextricably linked with **time**, and that **being**is really just an ongoing process of **becoming**(contrary to the [Aristotelian](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html)idea of a fixed **essence**). This line of thinking led him to speculate that we can only avoid what he called **"inauthentic"**lives (and the **anxiety**which inevitably goes with such lives) by **accepting**how things are in the real world, and **responding**to situations in an [individualistic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_individualism.html)way (for which he is considered by many a **founder**of [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html)). In his later work, [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html)went so far as to assert that we have essentially come to the **end of philosophy**, having tried out and **discarded**all the **possible permutations**of philosophical thought (a kind of [Nihilism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_nihilism.html)).

The main **figurehead**of the [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html)movement was [Jean-Paul Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html)(along with his French contemporaries **Albert Camus**, **Simone de Beauvoir**and **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**). A confirmed [Atheist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atheism.html)and a committed [Marxist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_marxism.html)and [Communist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_communism.html)for most of his life, [Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html)**adapted**and **extended**the work of [Kierkegaard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kierkegaard.html), [Nietzsche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_nietzsche.html), [Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html)and [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html), and concluded that **"existence is prior to essence"**(in the sense that we are thrust into an **unfeeling, godless universe**against out will, and that we must must then **establish meaning**for our lives by **what we do**and **how we act**). He believed that we always have **choices**(and therefore **freedom**) and that, while this freedom is **empowering**, it also brings with it **moral responsibility**and an existential dread (or **"angst"**). According to [Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html), genuine **human dignity**can only be achieved by our **active acceptance**of this angst and despair.

In the **second half of the 20th Century**, three main schools (in addition to [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html)) dominated [Continental Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_continental.html). [Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_structuralism.html)is the broad belief that all **human activity**and its products (even perception and thought itself) are **constructed**and **not natural**, and that everything has **meaning**only through the **language system**in which we operate. [Post-Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_poststructuralism.html)is a reaction to [Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_structuralism.html), which stresses the culture and society of the **reader**over that of the **author**). [Post-Modernism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_postmodernism.html)is an even **less well-defined**field, marked by a kind of **"pick'n'mix"**openness to a **variety of different meanings**and authorities from **unexpected places**, as well as a willingness to **borrow**unashamedly from previous movements or traditions.

The **radical**and **iconoclastic**French philosopher [Michel Foucault](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_foucault.html), has been associated with **all**of these movements (although he himself always **rejected such labels**). Much of his work is **language-based**and, among other things, he has looked at how certain underlying **conditions of truth**have constituted what was **acceptable**at different times in history, and how the **body**and sexuality are **cultural constructs**rather than **natural phenomena**. Although sometimes criticized for his **lax standards of scholarship**, [Foucault](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_foucault.html)'s ideas are nevertheless **frequently cited**in a wide variety of **different disciplines**.

Mention should also be made of [Deconstructionism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_deconstructionism.html)(often called just **Deconstruction**), a theory of **literary criticism**that **questions traditional assumptions**about certainty, identity and truth, and looks for the **underlying assumptions**(both unspoken and implicit), as well as the **ideas**and **frameworks**, that form the basis for thought and belief. The method was **developed**by the Frenchman [Jacques Derrida](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_derrida.html)(who is also credited as a major figure in [Post-Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_poststructuralism.html)). His work is highly **cerebral**and self-consciously **"difficult"**, and he has been repeatedly accused of **pseudo-philosophy**and **sophistry**.

[Aristotelianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html) and [Neo-Platonism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_neoplatonism.html) with **Islamic theology**, and also developed his own system of [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html), known as **Avicennian Logic**. He also introduced the concept of the **"tabula rasa"** (the idea that humans are born with **no innate** or built-in mental content), which strongly influenced later [Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) like [John Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html). [Averröes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_averroes.html)'s **translations** and **commentaries** on [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html) (whose works had been largely **lost** by this time) had a profound impact on the [Scholastic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html) movement in Europe, and he claimed that [Avicenna](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_avicenna.html)'s interpretations were a **distortion** of genuine [Aristotelianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html). The **Jewish** philosopher [Maimonides](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_maimonides.html) also attempted the same reconciliation of [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html) with the **Hebrew scriptures** around the same time.

The [Medieval](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_medieval.html) **Christian philosophers** were all part of a movement called [Scholasticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html) which tried to combine [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html), [Metaphysics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html), [Epistemology](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_epistemology.html) and **semantics** (the theory of meaning) into one discipline, and to reconcile the philosophy of the ancient **classical philosophers** (particularly [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)) with **Christian theology**. The **Scholastic method** was to thoroughly and **critically read** the works of renowned scholars, note down any disagreements and **points of contention**, and then **resolve** them by the use of formal [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html) and analysis of **language**. [Scholasticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html) in general is often **criticized** for spending too much time discussing infinitesimal and **pedantic details** (like how many angels could dance on the tip of a needle, etc).

[St. Anselm](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_anselm.html) (best known as the originator of the **Ontological Argument** for the existence of God by abstract reasoning alone) is often regarded as the **first** of the [Scholastics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html), and [St. Thomas Aquinas](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aquinas.html) (known for his **five rational proofs** for the existence of God, and his definition of the **cardinal virtues** and the **theological virtues**) is generally considered the **greatest**, and certainly had the greatest **influence** on the theology of the Catholic Church. Other important [Scholastics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html) included [Peter Abelard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_abelard.html), [Albertus Magnus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_albertus.html), [John Duns Scotus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_scotus.html) and [William of Ockham](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ockham.html). Each contributed **slight variations** to the same general beliefs - [Abelard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_abelard.html) introduced the **doctrine of limbo** for unbaptised babies; [Scotus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_scotus.html) rejected the distinction between **essence** and **existence** that [Aquinas](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aquinas.html) had insisted on; [Ockham](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ockham.html) introduced the important methodological principle known as **Ockham's Razor**, that one should not multiply arguments beyond the necessary; etc.

[Roger Bacon](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_bacon_roger.html) was something of an exception, and actually **criticized** the prevailing [Scholastic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html) system, based as it was on **tradition** and **scriptural authority**. He is sometimes credited as one of the earliest European advocates of [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) (the theory that the origin of all knowledge is **sense experience**) and of the modern **scientific method**.

The revival of **classical civilization and learning** in the **15th and 16th Century** known as the [Renaissance](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_renaissance.html) brought the [Medieval](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_medieval.html) period to a close. It was marked by a movement **away from religion** and medieval [Scholasticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html) and towards [Humanism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_humanism.html) (the belief that humans can **solve their own problems** through reliance on **reason** and the **scientific method**) and a new sense of **critical enquiry**.

Among the major philosophical figures of the [Renaissance](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_renaissance.html) were: [Erasmus](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_erasmus.html) (who **attacked** many of the traditions of the Catholic Church and popular superstitions, and became the intellectual father of the European **Reformation**); [Machiavelli](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_machiavelli.html) (whose cynical and devious [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html) has become notorious); [Thomas More](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_more.html) (the Christian [Humanist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_humanism.html) whose book ***"Utopia"*** influenced generations of politicians and planners and even the early development of [Socialist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_socialism.html) ideas); and [Francis Bacon](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_bacon_francis.html) (whose [empiricist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) belief that truth requires **evidence from the real world**, and whose application of **inductive reasoning** - generalizations based on individual instances - were both influential in the development of modern **scientific methodology**).

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| **Early Modern Philosophy** |

The [Age of Reason](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_reason.html) of the **17th Century** and the [Age of Enlightenment](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_enlightenment.html) of the **18th Century** (very roughly speaking), along with the **advances in science**, the growth of **religious tolerance** and the rise of **liberalism** which went with them, mark the real beginnings of **modern philosophy**. In large part, the period can be seen as an ongoing battle between **two opposing doctrines**, [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html) (the belief that all **knowledge** arises from intellectual and **deductive reason**, rather than from the senses) and [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) (the belief that the origin of all knowledge is **sense experience**).

This **revolution** in philosophical thought was **sparked** by the French philosopher and mathematician [René HYPERLINK "http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers\_descartes.html"Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html), the first figure in the loose movement known as [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html), and much of subsequent Western philosophy can be seen as a **response** to his ideas. His method (known as **methodological skepticism**, although its aim was actually to dispel [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html) and arrive at **certain knowledge**), was to shuck off everything about which there could be even a suspicion of **doubt** (including the **unreliable senses**, even his own body which could be merely an **illusion**) to arrive at the **single indubitable principle** that he possessed **consciousness** and was able to **think** ("I think, therefore I am"). He then argued (rather unsatisfactorily, some would say) that our perception of the world around us must be created for us by **God**. He saw the **human body** as a kind of **machine** that follows the mechanical laws of physics, while the **mind** (or consciousness) was a quite **separate entity**, not subject to the laws of physics, which is only able to **influence** the body and deal with the outside world by a kind of mysterious **two-way interaction**. This idea, known as [Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html) (or, more specifically, **Cartesian Dualism**), set the agenda for philosophical discussion of the **"mind-body problem"** for centuries after. Despite [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)' innovation and boldness, he was a **product of his times** and never abandoned the traditional idea of a **God**, which he saw as the **one true substance** from which everything else was made.

The second great figure of [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html) was the Dutchman [Baruch Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html), although his conception of the world was **quite different** from that of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html). He built up a strikingly original **self-contained metaphysical system** in which he rejected [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)' [Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html) in favour of a kind of [Monism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_monism.html) where mind and body were just two different aspects of a **single underlying substance** which might be called **Nature** (and which he also equated with a **God** of infinitely many attributes, effectively a kind of [Pantheism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pantheism.html)). [Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html) was a thoroughgoing [Determinist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html) who believed that absolutely **everything** (even **human behaviour**) occurs through the operation of **necessity**, leaving absolutely no room for **free will** and spontaneity. He also took the [Moral Relativist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_relativism.html) position that nothing can be **in itself** either good or bad, except to the extent that it is **subjectively perceived** to be so by the individual (and, anyway, in an ordered [deterministic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html) world, the very **concepts** of Good and Evil can have little or **no absolute meaning**).

The third great [Rationalist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html) was the German [Gottfried Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html). In order to overcome what he saw as drawbacks and inconsistencies in the theories of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html) and [Spinoza](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_spinoza.html), he devised a rather eccentric [metaphysical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html) theory of **monads** operating according to a **pre-established divine harmony**. According to [Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html)'s theory, the **real world** is actually composed of eternal, non-material and mutually-independent elements he called **monads**, and the **material world** that we see and touch is actually just **phenomena** (appearances or by-products of the underlying real world). The apparent **harmony** prevailing among monads arises because of the will of **God** (the supreme monad) who arranges everything in the world in a [deterministic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_determinism.html) manner. [Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html) also saw this as overcoming the problematic **interaction between mind and matter** arising in [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)' system, and he declared that this must be the **best possible world**, simply because it was created and determined by a **perfect God**. He is also considered perhaps the most important **logician** between [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html) and the mid-19th Century developments in modern formal [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html).

Another important 17th Century French [Rationalist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html) (although perhaps of the second order) was [Nicolas Malebranche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_malebranche.html), who was a follower of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html) in that he believed that humans attain knowledge through **ideas** or immaterial representations in the **mind**. However, [Malebranche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_malebranche.html) argued (more or less following [St. Augustine](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_augustine.html)) that all ideas actually exist **only in God**, and that God was the only **active power**. Thus, he believed that what appears to be **"interaction"** between body and mind is actually **caused by God**, but in such a way that similar movements in the body will **"occasion"** similar ideas in the mind, an idea he called **Occasionalism**.

In **opposition** to the continental European [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_rationalism.html) movement was the equally loose movement of [British Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html), which was also represented by **three main proponents**.

The first of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html) was [John Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html). He argued that all of our ideas, whether simple or complex, are ultimately **derived from experience**, so that the **knowledge** of which we are capable is therefore **severely limited** both in its **scope** and in its **certainty** (a kind of modified [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)), especially given that the real **inner natures** of things derive from what he called their **primary qualities** which we can never experience and so never know. [Locke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_locke.html), like [Avicenna](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_avicenna.html) before him, believed that the mind was a **tabula rasa** (or blank slate) and that people are born **without innate ideas**, although he did believe that humans have absolute **natural rights** which are inherent in the nature of [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html). Along with [Hobbes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hobbes.html) and [Rousseau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_rousseau.html), he was one of the **originators** of [Contractarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_contractarianism.html) (or **Social Contract Theory**), which formed the theoretical underpinning for **democracy**, **republicanism**, [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html) and [Libertarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_libertarianism.html), and his political views influenced both the **American** and **French Revolutions**.

The next of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html) chronologically was [Bishop George Berkeley](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_berkeley.html), although his [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) was of a much more **radical** kind, mixed with a twist of [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html). Using dense but cogent arguments, he developed the rather **counter-intuitive system** known as **Immaterialism** (or sometimes as [Subjective Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html#Subjective)), which held that underlying reality consists exclusively of **minds** and their **ideas**, and that individuals can only directly know these **ideas** or **perceptions** (although not the objects themselves) through **experience**. Thus, according to [Berkeley](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_berkeley.html)'s theory, an object only really **exists** if someone is there to see or **sense** it ("to be is to be perceived"), although, he added, the infinite mind of **God** perceives everything all the time, and so in this respect the objects **continue to exist**.

The third, and perhaps **greatest**, of the [British Empiricists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html) was [David Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html). He believed strongly that **human experience** is as close are we are ever going to get to the **truth**, and that **experience** and **observation** must be the foundations of any logical argument. [Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html) argued that, although we may form **beliefs** and make **inductive inferences** about things outside our experience (by means of instinct, imagination and custom), they cannot be conclusively established by **reason** and we should not make any claims to **certain knowledge** about them (a hard-line attitude verging on complete [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)). Although he never openly declared himself an [atheist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atheism.html), he found the idea of a God effectively **nonsensensical**, given that there is no way of arriving at the idea through **sensory data**. He **attacked** many of the basic assumptions of **religion**, and gave many of the **classic criticisms** of some of the **arguments for the existence of God** (particularly the **teleological argument**). In his [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html), [Hume](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hume.html) stressed the importance of **moderation**, and his work contains elements of both [Conservatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html) and [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html).

Among the **"non-aligned"** philosophers of the period (many of whom were most active in the area of [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html)) were the following:

* [Thomas Hobbes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hobbes.html), who described in his famous book ***"Leviathon"*** how the **natural state** of mankind was brute-like and poor, and how the modern state was a kind of **"social contract"** ([Contractarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_contractarianism.html)) whereby individuals deliberately give up their **natural rights** for the sake of **protection** by the state (accepting, according to [Hobbes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hobbes.html), any **abuses of power** as the **price of peace**, which some have seen as a justification for **authoritarianism** and even [Totalitarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_totalitarianism.html));
* [Blaise Pascal](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_pascal.html), a confirmed [Fideist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html) (the view that **religious belief** depends wholly on **faith** or **revelation**, rather than reason, intellect or natural theology) who opposed both [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html) and [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) as being **insufficient** for determining major truths;
* [Voltaire](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_voltaire.html), an indefatigable fighter for **social reform** thoughout his life, but wholly **cynical** of most philosophies of the day, from [Leibniz](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_leibniz.html)'s optimism to [Pascal](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_pascal.html)'s pessimism, and from **Catholic dogma** to French political institutions;
* [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_rousseau.html), whose discussion of **inequality** and whose theory of the **popular will** and society as a **social contract** entered into for the mutual benefit of all ([Contractarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_contractarianism.html)) strongly influenced the **French Revolution** and the subsequent development of [Liberal](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html), [Conservative](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html) and even [Socialist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_socialism.html) theory;
* [Adam Smith](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_smith.html), widely cited as the father of **modern economics**, whose metaphor of the **"invisible hand"** of the free market (the apparent **benefits to society** of people behaving **in their own interests**) and whose book ***"The Wealth of Nations"*** had a huge influence on the development of modern [Capitalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_capitalism.html), [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html) and [Individualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_individualism.html); and
* [Edmund Burke](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_burke.html), considered one of the **founding fathers** of modern [Conservatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_conservatism.html) and [Liberalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_liberalism.html), although he also produced perhaps the first **serious defence** of [Anarchism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_anarchism.html).

Towards the end of the [Age of Enlightenment](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_enlightenment.html), the German philosopher [Immanuel Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html) caused another **paradign shift** as important as that of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html) 150 years earlier, and in many ways this marks the shift to [Modern](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_modern.html) philosophy. He sought to move philosophy **beyond** the debate between [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html) and [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html), and he attempted to **combine** those two apparently contradictory doctrines into one **overarching system**. A whole movement ([Kantianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_kantianism.html)) developed in the wake of his work, and most of the subsequent history of philosophy can be seen as **responses**, in one way or another, to his ideas.

[Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html) showed that [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html) and [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html) could be **combined** and that statements were possible that were both **synthetic** (a posteriori knowledge from **experience** alone, as in [Empiricism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_empiricism.html)) but also **a priori** (from **reason** alone, as in [Rationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_rationalism.html)). Thus, without the senses we could not become **aware** of any object, but without understanding and reason we could not form any **conception** of it. However, our senses can only tell us about the **appearance** of a thing (**phenomenon**) and not the **"thing-in-itself"** (**noumenon**), which [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html) believed was essentially **unknowable**, although we have certain innate **predispositions** as to what exists ([Transcendental Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html#Transcendental)). [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)'s major contribution to [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html) was the theory of the **Categorical Imperative**, that we should act only in such a way that we would want our actions to become a **universal law**, applicable to everyone in a similar situation ([Moral Universalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_universalism.html)) and that we should treat other individuals as **ends in themselves**, not as mere means ([Moral Absolutism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_absolutism.html)), even if that means sacrificing the **greater good**. [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html) believed that any attempts to **prove God's existence** are just a **waste of time**, because our concepts only work properly in the **empirical world** (which God is above and beyond), although he also argued that it was **not irrational** to believe in something that clearly **cannot be proven either way** ([Fideism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html)).

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| **19th Century Philosophy** |

In the [Modern](http://www.philosophybasics.com/historical_modern.html) period, [Kantianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_kantianism.html) gave rise to the [German Idealists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html), each of whom had their own **interpretations** of [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)'s ideas. [Johann Fichte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_fichte.html), for example, rejected [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html)'s **separation** of "things in themselves" and things "as they appear to us" (which he saw as an invitation to [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)), although he did accept that **consciousness of the self** depends on the existence of something that is **not part of the self** (his famous **"I / not-I"** distinction). [Fichte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_fichte.html)'s later [Political Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_political.html) also contributed to the rise of German [Nationalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_nationalism.html). [Friedrich Schelling](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_schelling.html) developed a unique form of [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html) known as **Aesthetic Idealism** (in which he argued that only **art** was able to **harmonize** and sublimate the **contradictions** between subjectivity and objectivity, freedom and necessity, etc), and also tried to establish a connection or **synthesis** between his conceptions of **nature** and **spirit**.

[Arthur Schopenhauer](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_schopenhauer.html) is also usually considered part of the [German Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html) and [Romanticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_romanticism.html) movements, although his philosophy was very singular. He was a thorough-going **pessimist** who believed that the **"will-to-life"** (the drive to survive and to reproduce) was the underlying **driving force** of the world, and that the pursuit of happiness, love and intellectual satisfaction was very much **secondary** and essentially **futile**. He saw **art** (and other artistic, moral and ascetic forms of awareness) as the only way to **overcome** the fundamentally frustration-filled and painful **human condition**.

The greatest and most influential of the [German Idealists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html), though, was [Georg Hegel](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hegel.html). Although his works have a reputation for **abstractness** and **difficulty**, [Hegel](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hegel.html) is often considered the **summit** of early 19th Century German thought, and his **influence** was profound. He extended [Aristotle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_aristotle.html)'s process of **dialectic** (resolving a **thesis** and its opposing **antithesis** into a **synthesis**) to apply to the **real world** - including the whole of **history** - in an on-going process of conflict resolution towards what he called the **Absolute Idea**. However, he stressed that what is really changing in this process is the underlying **"Geist"** (mind, spirit, soul), and he saw each person's individual consciousness as being part of an **Absolute Mind** (sometimes referred to as [Absolute Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html#Absolute)).

[Karl Marx](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_marx.html) was strongly influenced by [Hegel](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_hegel.html)'s **dialectical method** and his analysis of **history**. His [Marxist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_marxism.html) theory (including the concepts of **historical materialism**, **class struggle**, the **labour theory of value**, the **bourgeousie**, etc), which he developed with his friend **Friedrich Engels** as a reaction against the rampant [Capitalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_capitalism.html) of 19th Century Europe, provided the **intellectual base** for later radical and revolutionary [Socialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_socialism.html) and [Communism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_communism.html).

A very different kind of philosophy grew up in **19th Century England**, out of the [British Empiricist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_british_empiricism.html) tradition of the previous century. The [Utilitarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_utilitarianism.html) movement was **founded** by the **radical social reformer** [Jeremy Bentham](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_bentham.html) and **popularized** by his even more radical protegé [John Stuart Mill](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_mill.html). The doctrine of [Utilitarianism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_utilitarianism.html) is a type of [Consequentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_consequentialism.html) (an approach to [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html) that stresses an action's outcome or **consequence**), which holds that the **right action** is that which would cause **"the greatest happiness of the greatest number"**. [Mill](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_mill.html) refined the theory to stress the **quality** not just the **quantity** of happiness, and **intellectual** and **moral** pleasures over more **physical** forms. He counselled that **coercion** in society is only justifiable either to defend ourselves, or to defend others from harm (the **"harm principle"**).

**19th Century America** developed its own philosophical traditions. [Ralph Waldo Emerson](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_emerson.html) established the [Transcendentalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_transcendentalism.html) movement in the middle of the century, rooted in the transcendental philosophy of [Kant](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kant.html), [German Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html) and [Romanticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_romanticism.html), and a desire to ground religion in the **inner spiritual or mental essence** of humanity, rather than in **sensuous experience**. [Emerson](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_emerson.html)'s student [Henry David Thoreau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_thoreau.html) further developed these ideas, stressing **intuition**, **self-examination**, [Individualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_individualism.html) and the exploration of the **beauty of nature**. [Thoreau](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_thoreau.html)'s advocacy of **civil disobedience** influenced generations of **social reformers**.

The other main **American movement** of the late 19th Century was [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_pragmatism.html), which was initiated by [C. S. Peirce](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_peirce.html) and developed and popularized by [William James](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_james.html) and [John Dewey](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_dewey.html). The theory of [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pragmatism.html) is based on [Peirce](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_peirce.html)'s **pragmatic maxim**, that the **meaning** of any concept is really just the same as its operational or **practical consequences** (essentially, that something is **true** only insofar as it **works** in practice). [Peirce](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_peirce.html) also introduced the idea of [Fallibilism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fallibilism.html) (that all truths and "facts" are necessarily **provisional**, that they can never be certain but only **probable**).

[James](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_james.html), in addition to his **psychological** work, extended [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pragmatism.html), both as a **method** for analyzing philosophic problems but also as a **theory of truth**, as well as developing his own versions of [Fideism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html) (that **beliefs** are arrived at by an an individual process that lies **beyond reason and evidence**) and [Voluntarism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_voluntarism.html) (that the **will** is superior to the intellect and to emotion) among others. [Dewey](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_dewey.html)'s interpretation of [Pragmatism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_pragmatism.html) is better known as [Instrumentalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_instrumentalism.html), the **methodological** view that concepts and theories are merely **useful instruments**, best meaured by how effective they are in **explaining and predicting** phenomena, and not by whether they are **true or false** (which he claimed was **impossible**). [Dewey](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_dewey.html)'s contribution to [Philosophy of Education](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_education.html) and to **modern progressive education** (particularly what he called **"learning-by-doing"**) was also significant.

But **European philosophy** was not limited to the [German Idealists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_german_idealism.html). The French sociologist and philosopher [Auguste Comte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_comte.html) founded the influential [Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_positivism.html) movement around the belief that the only **authentic knowledge** was **scientific knowledge**, based on actual **sense experience** and strict application of the **scientific method**. [Comte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_comte.html) saw this as the final phase in the **evolution of humanity**, and even constructed a non-theistic, pseudo-mystical **"positive religion"** around the idea.

The **Dane** [Søren Kierkegaard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kierkegaard.html) pursued his own lonely trail of thought. He too was a kind of [Fideist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_fideism.html) and an extremely **religious** man (despite his **attacks** on the Danish state church). But his analysis of the way in which **human freedom** tends to lead to **"angst"** (dread), the call of the **infinite**, and eventually to **despair**, was highly influential on later [Existentialists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html) like [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html) and [Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html).

The **German** [Nietzsche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_nietzsche.html) was another atypical, original and controversial philosopher, also considered an important **forerunner** of [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html). He **challenged** the foundations of **Christianity** and **traditional morality** (famously asserting that **"God is dead"**), leading to charges of [Atheism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atheism.html), [Moral Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_skepticism.html), [Relativism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_relativism.html) and [Nihilism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_nihilism.html). He developed original notions of the **"will to power"** as mankind's main motivating principle, of the **"Übermensch"** ("superman") as the goal of humanity, and of **"eternal return"** as a means of evaluating ones life, all of which have all generated much **debate** and **argument** among scholars.

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| **20th Century Philosophy** |

**20th Century philosophy** has been dominated to a great extent by the **rivalry** between two very general philosophical traditions, [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html) (the largely, although not exclusively, **anglophone** mindset that philosophy should apply **logical techniques** and be consistent with **modern science**) and [Continental Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_continental.html) (really just a **catch-all** label for everything else, mainly based in **mainland Europe**, and which, in very general terms, **rejects** [Scientism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_scientism.html) and **tends towards** [Historicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_historicism.html)).

An important precursor of the [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html) tradition was the [Logicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logicism.html) developed during the late 19th Century by [Gottlob Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html). [Logicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logicism.html) sought to show that some, or even **all**, of **mathematics** was reducible to [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html), and [Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html)'s work revolutionized modern mathematical [Logic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logic.html). In the early 20th Century, the British **logicians** [Bertrand Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html) and [Alfred North Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html) continued to champion his ideas (even after [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html) had pointed out a **paradox** exposing an **inconsistency** in [Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html)'s work, which caused him, [Frege](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_frege.html), to **abandon** his own theory). [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html) and [Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html)'s monumental and ground-breaking book, ***"Principia Mathematica"*** was a particularly important milestone. Their work, in turn, though, fell prey to **Kurt Gödel**'s infamous **Incompleteness Theorems** of 1931, which mathematically proved the **inherent limitations** of all but the most trivial **formal systems**.

Both [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html) and [Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html) went on to develop **other philosophies**. [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html)'s work was mainly in the area of [Philosophy of Language](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_language.html), including his theory of **Logical Atomism** and his contributions to [Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ordinary_language.html). [Whitehead](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_whitehead.html) developed a [metaphysical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html) approach known as **Process Philosophy**, which posited ever-changing **subjective forms** to complement [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html)'s **eternal forms**. Their [Logicism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_logicism.html), though, along with [Comte](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_comte.html)'s [Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_positivism.html), was a great influence on the development of the **important 20th Century movement** of [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html).

The [Logical Positivists](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html) campaigned for a **systematic reduction** of all human knowledge down to **logical and scientific foundations**, and claimed that a statement can be **meaningful** only if it is either purely **formal** (essentially, mathematics and logic) or capable of **empirical verification**. The school grew from the discussions of the so-called **"Vienna Circle"** in the early 20th Century (including **Mauritz Schlick**, **Otto Neurath**, **Hans Hahn** and **Rudolf Carnap**). In the 1930s, [A. J. Ayer](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ayer.html) was largely responsible for the spread of [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html) to Britain, even as its influence was already **waning** in Europe.

The ***"Tractatus"*** of the young [Ludwig Wittgenstein](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_wittgenstein.html), published in 1921, was a text of great importance for [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html). Indeed, [Wittgenstein](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_wittgenstein.html) has come to be considered one of the 20th Century's **most important philosophers**, if not **the** most important. A central part of the philosophy of the ***"Tractatus"*** was the **picture theory of meaning**, which asserted that **thoughts**, as expressed in language, **"picture"** the facts of the world, and that the **structure** of language is also **determined by** the structure of reality. However, [Wittgenstein](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_wittgenstein.html) **abandoned** his early work, convinced that the publication of the ***"Tractatus"*** had solved **all** the problems of **all philosophy**. He later **re-considered** and struck off in a completely **new direction**. His later work, which saw the **meaning** of a word as just its **use** in the language, and looked at language as a kind of **game** in which the different parts **function** and **have meaning**, was instrumental in the development of [Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html).

[Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html) shifted the emphasis from the **ideal** or **formal language** of [Logical Positivism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_logical_positivism.html) to **everyday language** and its actual **use**, and it saw traditional philosophical problems as rooted in **misunderstandings** caused by the **sloppy use of words** in a language. Some have seen [Ordinary Language Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html) as a **complete break** with, or **reaction against**, [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html), while others have seen it as just an **extension** or another stage of it. Either way, it became a **dominant philosophic school** between the 1930s and 1970s, under the guidance of philosophers such as [W. V. O. Quine](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_quine.html), [Gilbert Ryle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ryle.html), **Donald Davidson**, etc.

[Quine](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_quine.html)'s work stressed the **difficulty** of providing a **sound empirical basis** where language, convention, meaning, etc, are concerned, and also **broadened** the principle of [Semantic Holism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_holism.html#Types) to the extreme position that a **sentence** (or even an individual **word**) has meaning only in the context of a **whole language**. [Ryle](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_ryle.html) is perhaps best known for his dismissal of [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html)' **body-mind** [Dualism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_dualism.html) as the **"ghost in the machine"**, but he also developed the theory of **Philosophical Behaviourism** (the view that descriptions of **human behaviour** need never refer to anything but the **physical operations** of human bodies) which became the standard view among [Ordinary Language](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_ordinary_language.html) philosophers for several decades.

Another important philosopher in the [Analytic Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_analytic.html) of the early 20th century was [G. E. Moore](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_moore.html), a contemporary of [Russell](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_russell.html) at **Cambridge University** (then the most **important centre** of philosophy in the world). His 1903 ***"Principia Ethica"*** has become one of the standard texts of modern [Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html) and [Meta-Ethics](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethics.html#Meta-Ethics), and inspired the movement away from [Ethical Naturalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethical_naturalism.html) (the belief that there exist **moral properties**, which we can know **empirically**, and that can be **reduced** to entirely **non-ethical** or natural properties, such as needs, wants or pleasures) and towards [Ethical Non-Naturalism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_ethical_nonnaturalism.html) (the belief that there are **no** such moral properties). He pointed out that the term **"good"**, for instance, is in fact **indefinable** because it lacks **natural properties** in the way that the terms "blue", "smooth", etc, have them. He also defended what he called **"common sense"** [Realism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_realism.html) (as opposed to [Idealism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_idealism.html) or [Skepticism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_skepticism.html)) on the grounds that **common sense claims** about our knowledge of the world are **just as plausible** as those other [metaphysical](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_metaphysics.html) premises.

On the [Continental Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_continental.html) side, an important figure in the **early 20th Century** was the German [Edmund Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html), who founded the influential movement of [Phenomenology](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_phenomenology.html). He developed the idea, parts of which date back to [Descartes](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_descartes.html) and even [Plato](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_plato.html), that what we call **reality** really consists of objects and events (**"phenomena"**) as they are **perceived** or understood in the **human consciousness**, and not of anything **independent** of human consciousness (which may or may nor exist). Thus, we can **"bracket"** (or, effectively, ignore) sensory data, and deal only with the **"intentional content"** (the mind's built-in **mental description** of external reality), which allows us to **perceive** aspects of the real world outside.

It was another German, [Martin Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html) (once a student of [Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html)), who was mainly responsible for the **decline** of [Phenomenology](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_phenomenology.html). In his groundbreaking ***"Being and Time"*** of 1927, [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html) gave concrete examples of how [Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html)'s view (of man as a **subject** confronted by, and reacting to, **objects**) broke down in certain (quite common) circumstances, and how the **existence** of objects only has any real **significance** and **meaning** within a whole **social context** (what [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html) called **"being in the world"**). He further argued that **existence** was inextricably linked with **time**, and that **being** is really just an ongoing process of **becoming** (contrary to the [Aristotelian](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_aristotelianism.html) idea of a fixed **essence**). This line of thinking led him to speculate that we can only avoid what he called **"inauthentic"** lives (and the **anxiety** which inevitably goes with such lives) by **accepting** how things are in the real world, and **responding** to situations in an [individualistic](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_individualism.html) way (for which he is considered by many a **founder** of [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html)). In his later work, [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html) went so far as to assert that we have essentially come to the **end of philosophy**, having tried out and **discarded** all the **possible permutations** of philosophical thought (a kind of [Nihilism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_nihilism.html)).

The main **figurehead** of the [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html) movement was [Jean-Paul Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html) (along with his French contemporaries **Albert Camus**, **Simone de Beauvoir** and **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**). A confirmed [Atheist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_atheism.html) and a committed [Marxist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_marxism.html) and [Communist](http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_communism.html) for most of his life, [Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html) **adapted** and **extended** the work of [Kierkegaard](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_kierkegaard.html), [Nietzsche](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_nietzsche.html), [Husserl](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_husserl.html) and [Heidegger](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_heidegger.html), and concluded that **"existence is prior to essence"** (in the sense that we are thrust into an **unfeeling, godless universe** against out will, and that we must must then **establish meaning** for our lives by **what we do** and **how we act**). He believed that we always have **choices** (and therefore **freedom**) and that, while this freedom is **empowering**, it also brings with it **moral responsibility** and an existential dread (or **"angst"**). According to [Sartre](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_sartre.html), genuine **human dignity** can only be achieved by our **active acceptance** of this angst and despair.

In the **second half of the 20th Century**, three main schools (in addition to [Existentialism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_existentialism.html)) dominated [Continental Philosophy](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_continental.html). [Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_structuralism.html) is the broad belief that all **human activity** and its products (even perception and thought itself) are **constructed** and **not natural**, and that everything has **meaning** only through the **language system** in which we operate. [Post-Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_poststructuralism.html) is a reaction to [Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_structuralism.html), which stresses the culture and society of the **reader** over that of the **author**). [Post-Modernism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_postmodernism.html) is an even **less well-defined** field, marked by a kind of **"pick'n'mix"** openness to a **variety of different meanings** and authorities from **unexpected places**, as well as a willingness to **borrow** unashamedly from previous movements or traditions.

The **radical** and **iconoclastic** French philosopher [Michel Foucault](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_foucault.html), has been associated with **all** of these movements (although he himself always **rejected such labels**). Much of his work is **language-based** and, among other things, he has looked at how certain underlying **conditions of truth** have constituted what was **acceptable** at different times in history, and how the **body** and sexuality are **cultural constructs** rather than **natural phenomena**. Although sometimes criticized for his **lax standards of scholarship**, [Foucault](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_foucault.html)'s ideas are nevertheless **frequently cited** in a wide variety of **different disciplines**.

Mention should also be made of [Deconstructionism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_deconstructionism.html) (often called just **Deconstruction**), a theory of **literary criticism** that **questions traditional assumptions** about certainty, identity and truth, and looks for the **underlying assumptions** (both unspoken and implicit), as well as the **ideas** and **frameworks**, that form the basis for thought and belief. The method was **developed** by the Frenchman [Jacques Derrida](http://www.philosophybasics.com/philosophers_derrida.html) (who is also credited as a major figure in [Post-Structuralism](http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_poststructuralism.html)). His work is highly **cerebral** and self-consciously **"difficult"**, and he has been repeatedly accused of **pseudo-philosophy** and **sophistry**.

**Famous Philosophers**

Philosophy, which literally means “the love of wisdom,” is one of the oldest disciplines in history. There are many ideas about philosophers and what they do. Some have even considered the field to be a science that deals with logic and reason. Either way, many famous philosophers have made their contributions known to the world through their writings and their students. Below is a list of the greatest thinkers of all time along with their most important theories about human nature and other ponderings of the world.

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| [**Karl Marx (1818-1883)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/karl-marx/) **Famous For:***The Communist Manifesto, co-founder and father of Socialism &Communism* Karl Marx is better known as the “father of socialism and communism,” one follows the other. Marx has been labeled as a “*revolutionary socialist*” for his belief in what has been called *dictatorship of the proletariat*. In addition to espousing his own philosophies, he was also a sociologist, economist, journalist, and historian. | [**Voltaire (1694-1778)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/voltaire/) **Famous For:***his philosophical wit* French philosopher François-Marie Arouet was a well known during the 18th century. He is better known under his pseudonym, Voltaire. Voltaire was an advocate of some of the most basic freedoms, he believed in the freedom of expression, religion and voiced this through his witty writing. One of his favorite targets was the Catholic church. |
| [**John Locke (1632-1704)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/john-locke/) **Famous For:***theory of mind &Father of Classical Liberalism* The effect of English philosopher John Locke has on the world reverberates to this day. His part on the idea of the social contract theory was one he shared with Sir Francis Bacon. The likes of Rousseau, Voltaire, even American revolutionaries have been influenced by his writings. He also offered the theory of mind wherein he states that knowledge is something you are not born with, but learn and experience. | [**Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/simone-de-beauvoir/) **Famous For:***existential feminism &ethics of ambiguity* Simone de Beauvoir is viewed as a philosopher, but she saw herself more as a political activist, intellectual, and a writer. She authored numerous books which include *The Second Sex, The Mandarins*, and *She Came to Stay*. |
| [**Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/jean-jacques-rousseau/) **Famous For:***General Will and the moral simplicity of humanity* The political philosophy of Rousseau became the basis of the French Revolution. His ideas not only influenced nations, his work is reflected in the modern thinking in regards to education, political, and sociological matters. Two of his books, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*and *On the Social Contract*have had its effect on social and political thinking. | [**Adam Smith (1723-1790)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/adam-smith/) **Famous For:***father of modern economics* Best remembered for his writing of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Scottish philosopher Adam Smith was a pioneer in the field of political economy. His ideas in the areas of moral philosophy and economics have been studied throughout the years, and still is. |
| [**Aristotle (384–322 BC)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/aristotle/) **Famous For:***Aristotelian logic &theory of soul* The third member who has greatly influenced western philosophy, Aristotle provided ideas in the areas of aesthetics, ethics, logic, metaphysics, politics, and science. He was a student of Plato and teacher to Alexander the great. *Nicomachean Ethics*is one of the treatises that Aristotle wrote. He believed that ethics should be applied practically, not merely theorizing it. | [**Francis Bacon (1561-1626)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/francis-bacon/) **Famous For:***the “Baconian” method of scientific investigation and creator of empiricism* The English Renaissance and Scientific Revolution benefitted from the work and ideas of Sir Francis Bacon. In addition to being a philosopher, Bacon was likewise an author, jurist, statesman, orator, and scientist. He was instrumental in advocating the use of the “inductive” method when it came to scientific matters, this scientific method was also called “Baconian method”. |
| [**Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/gottfried-leibniz/) **Famous For:***Law of Continuity, Monads, and the Transcendental Law of Homogeneity* Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz holds a special place in the annals of philosophy and mathematics. As a mathematician, he refined the use of infinitesimal calculus. As a philosopher, he is best remembered for his “optimism” and as an advocate of rationalism along with Descartes and Spinoza. He also presented the Law of Continuity. | [**Confucius (551-479 BC)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/confucius/) **Famous For:***The Golden Rule and Confucianism* Born during the *Spring &Autumn*era in Chinese history, Confucius and his ideas on social and personal relationships became a school of thought that many Chinese embraced. He was a voracious writer for which includes the *Five Classics*in Chinese literature. He believed that proper moral behavior is best practiced, than morality being made a rule. |
| [**René Descartes (1596-1650)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/rene-descartes/) **Famous For:***being the Father of Modern Philosophy, “Cartesian” coordinate system &“I think, therefore I am”* Rene’ Descartes influence on the world of philosophy is evident at today’s universities. His book *Meditations of First Philosophy*is still being used. Perhaps this statement attributed to Descartes will ring a bell, “I think, therefore I am.” | [**Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/immanuel-kant/) **Famous For:***transcendental idealism &metaphysics* This 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, contends that “reason is the source of morality.” His ideas continue to resonate in the halls of academic philosophy. The influence of these ideas is evident in present day thinking on the subject of ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, politics, and metaphysics. In his publication of *Critique of Pure Reason*, this was his attempt to combine reason with experience to prove failures of “traditional philosophy.” |
| [**Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/friedrich-nietzsche/) **Famous For:***life-affirmation &statement “God is dead”* German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and his ideas covered a lot ground and as a result, people began to raise questions they normally would not. The main crux of Nietzsche’s work was the idea of life-affirmation, but he also presented ideas such as *Will to power, perspectivism, master-slave morality*, and the *Apollonian/Dionysian*dichotomy. | [**Albert Camus (1913-1960)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/albert-camus/) **Famous For:***absurdism &1957 Nobel Prize for literature* Albert Camus received a Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. The award was given in recognition for his attempt to create awareness of the plight of “the human conscience”. Camus is associated with the tenet known as “absurdism.” This French-Algeria born philosopher was also an author and journalist. |
| [**C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/c-s-lewis/) **Famous For:***The Chronicles of Narnia, “Screwtape Letters” &“Mere Christianity”* C.S. Lewis was an academic scholar and Christian apologist. Some of his works are well known, these include,*The Chronicles of Narnia, The Screwtape Letters*and *The Problem of Pain*. He and J.R.R. Tolkien were friends and part of the English department at Oxford. | [**Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/hannah-arendt/) **Famous For:***being a political theorist &concept of “Homo faber”* Hannah Arendt refused to be labeled as a philosopher on the basis that her work revolved around “men, not man.” Philosophy deals with man in the singular, solo, which is different to what she was, a political theorist, dealing with men and the world around them. Hanna’s passion involved work in the fields of authority, democracy, the nature of power, politics, and totalitarianism. |
| [**Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/thomas-hobbes/) **Famous For:***absolutism for the soveriegn &political philosophy* Thomas Hobbes is dubbed as the founder of the “social contract” tradition. This English philosopher wrote in the mid 17th century, *Leviathan*, which laid the groundwork for the introduction of the social contract theory. He also was an advocate of liberal thought and “absolutism for the sovereign.” | [**Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/bertrand-russell/) **Famous For:***being one of the founders of analytic philosophy* Bertrand Arthur William Russell is remembered in the field of philosophy as a proponent of analytic philosophy. One of his essays has been labeled as the ideal of philosophy, the essay is entitled *On Denoting*. The British wanted to go against idealism, Russell was their leader. |
| [**Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/jean-paul-sartre/) **Famous For:***the philosophy of existentialism* Jean Paul Sartre believed that “existence precedes essence.” Sartre did not shy from being linked to the ideal of existentialism. He applied his ideals on other areas of his life. | [**Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/blaise-pascal/) **Famous For:***Pascal’s law in mathematics &Pascal’s wager in philosophy* The name of Blaise Pascal is frequently associated with mathematics. As a philosopher, he proposed what we know as Pascal’s wager, in which people, in general, will bet their life on the existence or non existence of God. |
| [**Michel Foucault (1926-1984)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/michel-foucault/) **Famous For:***Structuralism and Genealogy* What does it take to make another man do your bidding? This was the goal of Michel Foucault. Most of his theories touched on the topic of the “nature of power” and its purpose. His writings revolved around the social institutions and “human science”. His published works, *The Birth of the Clinic*and *The Order of Things*helped highlight his views on “structuralism.” | [**Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/albert-schweitzer/) **Famous For:***the idea of the Reverence for Life* Albert Schweitzer was a man with many facets. His goal and philosophy of life was to have a “Reverence for Life”. He believed that civilization had cast aside its foundation in ethics. |
| [**David Hume (1711-1776)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/david-hume/) **Famous For:***problem of causation &his book A Treatise of Human Nature* One of the pillars of the Scottish Enlightenment, philosopher David Hume is credited with the “founding document of cognitive science” in his book *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume made every attempt to establish a naturalistic approach in understanding “man”. One of his arguments, *“Reason is, and ought only to be slave of the passions,”*is a longstanding idea that says, “allow desires to dictate reason.” | [**Origen (c. 185-253)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/origen/) **Famous For:***one of the early Church Fathers and theologian* Origen has been cited by scholars over the centuries, by academics, pastors, priests, and students. He wrote several treatises that covered philosophical theology, exegesis of the bible and textual criticism. He was influenced in his thinking by both Plato and Aristotle. In his discussions and writings, he always alluded to scripture, which he believed is divinely inspired by God. |
| [**Thomas Paine (1737-1809)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/thomas-paine/) **Famous For:***writing Common Sense during the American Revolution* As a political activist, Thomas Paine is regarded who helped two revolutionary wars. A pamphlet he wrote in 1776, entitled *Common Sense*was instrumental in igniting the fires of freedom and a reason to revolt during the American Revolution. Years later, he wrote *Rights of Man*that justified the French Revolution. | [**Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/henry-david-thoreau/) **Famous For:***his books Walden &Civil Disobedience*  The book *Walden*was Thoreau’s attempt to express a desire towards living a simple life in nature. Because of another book he wrote, *Civil Disobedience*, he had been viewed as an anarchist. Thoreau’s idea of giving up illusory ideals in exchange for the true needs of life was something he advocated throughout his life. |
| [**John Dewey (1859-1952)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/john-dewey/) **Famous For:***for his ideas on pragmatism &educational progressivism* One of the first men to present the idea of pragmatism as a philosophical concept, Dewey also espoused Reflective Thinking. He believed in the philosophy of education, in which he views education as a “social continuity of life.” This is why he championed *Educational Progressivism*. | [**John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/john-stuart-mill/) **Famous For:***being the “most influential English speaking philosopher of the 19th century”* John Stuart is regarded as “the most influential English speaking philosopher of the 19th century”. Mainly, he was a defender of political philosophy and he comes from the school of utilitarianism. As a member of the British parliament, he played a role highlighting “liberal political philosophy.” |
| [**William James (1842-1910)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/william-james/) **Famous For:***the philosophy of religion and theory of emotion* William James was part of the philosophical school of pragmatism. More importantly was his application of that school of thought on the philosophy of religion. He also attempted to explain why, if we see a snake, we fear the snake and run. In his theory of emotion, James contends that we see a snake, we run; therefore, we fear the snake. | [**Erich Fromm (1900-1980)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/erich-fromm/) **Famous For:***orientation of character* As a humanistic philosopher, Erich Fromm has been linked to the school of critical theory. Some of his exemplary ideas include “being and having modes of existence.” *Escape from Freedom*is one of Fromm’s books which tries to explaing man’s changing view of freedom. |
| [**Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/niccolo-machiavelli/) **Famous For:***Machiavellianism &The Prince* Italian Renaissance philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli is considered the founder of political science and an expert in political ethics. His main cointributions include political philosophy and realism. His book, *The Prince*has been viewed as a masterpiece that deals with political philosophy. | [**John Calvin (1509-1564)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/john-calvin/) **Famous For:***Calvinism &Doctine of Predestination* Calvin developed a point of reference in Christianity the has been known as Calvinism. His attempt to explain the “doctrine of predestination” as it pertains to God and salvation continues to be debated to this day. The *Congregational, Presbyterian,*and *Reformed*church base their tenets on the teaching of John Calvin. |
| [**Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/soren-kierkegaard/) **Famous For:***father of existentialism* The philosophy of religion and the idea of existentialism are two schools of thought that has been linked to Kierkegaard. Most of his ideas revolve on the issue on how a person lives as an individual. | [**Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/leo-tolstoy/) **Famous For:***War and Peace and Anna Karenina* As a social reformer and moral thinker, Leo Tolstoy is known for his novels, *War and Peace*and *Anna Karenina*. He helped shape the idea of Christian anarchist thinking and even pushed the idea of anarcho pacifism. |
| [**Parmenides (c. 515-450 BC)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/parmenides/) **Famous For:***Eleatic school of philosophy* Parmenides founded the Eleatic school of philosophy sometime in the 5th century BC. He presents us with two views of reality, “what is” and “the way of opinion.” A quote from him is telling on how he affected western philosophy, “Thought and being are the same.” | [**Mozi (c. 470-391 BC)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/mozi/) **Famous For:***Mohism* Chinese philosopher Mozi was the moving force in the establishment of the school of Mohism. Mozi was a proponent of moral philosophy and ethics. His teaching encouraged self-reflection and being real, not just obedience and ceremony. |
| [**Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/thomas-aquinas/) **Famous For:***Thomism and Summa Theologica* Even though he was a priest, Thomas Aquinas and his philosophy have influenced modern philosophy. He was the father of Thomism, he believed that the truth is true regardless of the source. His work in *Summa Theologica*and *Summa con Gentiles*are important sources of discourse that continue to be used today. | [**Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/mary-wollstonecraft/) **Famous For:***Feminist philosophy &A Vinidication of the Rights of Woman* Mary Wollstonecraft believed that women should be treated equally the same way and that the social order should be based on reason. She is considered as the earliest of feminist philosophers. Her book *A Vinidication of the Rights of Woman*speaks of women not being inferior to men. |
| [**Auguste Comte (1798-1857)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/auguste-comte/) **Famous For:***Altruism &positivism* Comte was one of the founders of sociology and the principle of positivism, better known as the positive philosophy. Historians view him as the first of the scientific philosophers. He also conceived the word *altruism*, a doctrine that says people have an obligation to help or serve others. | [**Avicenna (c. 980-1037)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/avicenna/) **Famous For:***The Book of Healing* Persian philosopher Avicenna was a proponent of Islamic philosophy on which the Avicennian philosophy is based. *The Book of Healing*is his most famous work that has become an encyclopedia on philosophy and science. In that book he discusses the philosophy of science. |
| [**Emma Goldman (1869-1940)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/emma-goldman/) **Famous For:***anarchist political philosophy* Goldman comes from the philosophical school of of anarchism.She was a vocal supporter of womens rights and other social issues. The school of anarchism believes a state is harmful, unnecessary, and undesirable, making Goldman, anti-state. | [**Epicurus (341-270 BC)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/epicurus/) **Famous For:***Epicurianism &Materialism* Epicurus’s philosophy is centered on two things, “peace and freedom from fear” known as *ataraxia*and “the absence of pain”, aponia. In his view, pain and pleasure are barometers of good and evil. This school of thought is known as Epicurianism. |
| [**Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/saint-augustine-of-hippo/) **Famous For:***Catholic Church &City of God* The idea of the “Catholic Church” comes from the work of Saint Augustine. His writings, *City of God*and *Confessions*have influenced western philosophy and are still read today. He believed that man is the unity of soul and body, a perfect combination. | [**Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)**](http://famous-philosophers.com/ludwig-wittgenstein/) **Famous For:***Philosophical Investigations &fideism* Wittgenstein was a man who buried himself in the philosophy of language, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of mind. Two of his published works, *Philosophical Investigations*and *Tractatus*are reflective of these beliefs he held. His ideas include the “picture theory of language” and “logical necessity” to name a few. |

**Top Greatest Philosophers in History**

By: [FlameHorse](http://listverse.com/authors/?FlameHorse)

This list examines the influence, depth of insight and wide-reaching interest across many subjects of various “lovers of wisdom,” and ranks them accordingly. It should be noted, first and foremost, that philosophy in its traditional sense was science – philosophers (like Aristotle) used rationality to come to scientific knowledge of the world around us. It was not until relatively modern times that philosophy was considered to be separate from the physical sciences.

John Locke

The most important thinker of modern politics is the most directly responsible for Thomas Jefferson’s rhetoric in the Declaration of Independence, and the rhetoric in the U. S. Constitution. Locke is referred to as the “Father of Liberalism,” because of his development of the principles of humanism and individual freedom, founded primarily by #1. It is said that liberalism proper, the belief in equal rights under the law, begins with Locke. He penned the phrase “government with the consent of the governed.” His three “natural rights,” that is, rights innate to all human beings, were and remain “life, liberty, and estate.”

He did not approve of the European idea of nobility enabling some to acquire land through lineage, while the poor remained poor. Locke is the man responsible, through Jefferson primarily, for the absence of nobility in America. Although nobility and birthrights still exist in Europe, especially among the few kings and queens left, the practice has all but vanished. The true democratic ideal did not arrive in the modern world until Locke’s liberal theory was taken up.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas will forever be remembered as the guy who supposedly proved the existence of God by arguing that the Universe had to have been created by something, since everything in existence has a beginning and an end. This is now referred to as the “First Cause” argument, and all philosophers after Thomas have wrestled with proving or disproving the theory. He actually based it on the notion of “ού κινούμενον κινεῖ,” of #1. The Greek means “one who moves while not moving” – or “the unmoved mover”.

Thomas founded everything he postulated firmly in Christianity, and for this reason, he is not universally popular, today. Even Christians consider that, since he derived all his ethical teachings from the Bible, Thomas is not independently authoritative of any of those teachings. But his job, in teaching the common people around him, was to get them to understand ethics without all the abstract philosophy. He expounded on #2′s principles of what we now call “cardinal virtues:” justice, courage, prudence and temperance. He was able to reach the masses with this simple, four-part instruction.

He made five famous arguments for the existence of God, which are still discussed hotly on both sides: theist and atheist. Of those five, which he intended to define the nature of God, one is called “the unity of God,” which is to say that God is not divisible. He has essence and existence, and these two qualities cannot be separated. Thus, if we are able to express something as possessing two or more qualities, and cannot separate the qualities, then the statement itself proves that there is a God, and Thomas’s example is the statement, “God exists,” in which statement subject and predicate are identical.

Confucius

Master Kong Qiu, as his name translates from Chinese, lived from 551 to 479 BC, and remains the most important single philosopher in Eastern history. He espoused significant principles of ethics and politics, in a time when the Greeks were espousing the same things. We think of democracy as a Greek invention, a Western idea, but Confucius wrote in his Analects that “the best government is one that rules through ‘rites’ and the people’s natural morality, rather than by using bribery and coercion. This may sound obvious to us today, but he wrote it in the early 500s to late 400s BC. It is the same principle of democracy that the Greeks argued for and developed: the people’s morality is in charge; therefore, rule by the people.

Confucius defended the idea of an Emperor, but also advocated limitations to the emperor’s power. The emperor must be honest and his subjects must respect him, but he must also deserve that respect. If he makes a mistake, his subjects must offer suggestions to correct him, and he must consider them. Any ruler who acted contrary to these principles was a tyrant, and thus a thief more than a ruler.

Confucius also devised his own, independent version of the Golden Rule, which had existed for at least a century in Greece before him. His phrasing was almost identical, but then furthered the idea: “What one does not wish for oneself, one ought not to do to anyone else; what one recognizes as desirable for oneself, one ought to be willing to grant to others.” The first statement is in the negative, and constitutes a passive desire not to harm others. The second statement is much more important, constituting an active desire to help others. The only other philosopher of antiquity to advocate the Golden Rule in the positive form is Jesus of Nazareth.

Rene Descartes

Descartes lived from 1596 to 1650, and today he is referred to as “the Father of Modern Philosophy.” He created analytical geometry, based on his now immortal Cartesian coordinate system, immortal in the sense that we are all taught it in school, and that it is still perfectly up-to-date in almost all branches of mathematics. Analytical geometry is the study of geometry using algebra and the Cartesian coordinate system. He discovered the laws of refraction and reflection. He also invented the superscript notation still used today to indicate the powers of exponents.

He advocated dualism, which is very basically defined as the power of the mind over the body: strength is derived by ignoring the weaknesses of the human physique and relying on the infinite power of the human mind. Descartes’s most famous statement, now practically the motto of existentialism: “Je pense donc je suis;” “Cogito, ergo sum;” “I think, therefore I am.” This is not meant to prove the existence of one’s body. Quite the opposite, it is meant to prove the existence of one’s mind. He rejected perception as unreliable, and considered deduction the only reliable method for examining, proving and disproving anything.

He also adhered to the Ontological Argument for the Existence of a Christian God, stating that, because God is benevolent, Descartes can have some faith in the account of reality his senses provide him, for God has provided him with a working mind and sensory system and does not desire to deceive him. From this supposition, however, Descartes finally establishes the possibility of acquiring knowledge about the world based on deduction and perception. In terms of the study of knowledge therefore, he can be said to have contributed such ideas as a rigorous conception of foundationalism (basic beliefs) and the possibility that reason is the only reliable method of attaining knowledge.

Plato

Plato lived from c. 428 to c. 348 BC, and founded the Western world’s first school of higher education, the Academy of Athens. Almost all of Western philosophy can be traced back to Plato, who was taught by Socrates, and preserved through his own writings, some of Socrates’s ideas. If Socrates wrote anything down, it has not survived directly. Plato and Xenophon, another of his students, recounted a lot of his teachings, as did the playwright Aristophanes.

One of Plato’s most famous quotations concerns politics, “Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils…nor, I think, will the human race.” What he means is that any person(s) in control of a nation or city or city-state must be wise, and that if they are not, then they are ineffectual rulers. It is only through philosophy that the world can be free of evils. Plato’s preferred government was one of benevolent aristrocrats, those born of nobility, who are well educated and good, who help the common people to live better lives. He argued against democracy proper, rule by the people themselves, since in his view, a democracy had murdered his teacher, Socrates.

Plato’s most enduring theory, if not his political theories, is that of “The Forms.” Plato wrote about these forms throughout many of his works, and asserted, by means of them, that immaterial abstractions possess the highest, most fundamental kind of reality. All things of the material world can change, and our perception of them also, which means that the reality of the material world is weaker, less defined than that of the immaterial abstractions. Plato argued that something must have created the Universe. Whatever it is, the Universe is its offspring, and we, living on Earth, our bodies and everything that we see and hear and touch around us, are less real than the creator of the Universe, and the Universe itself. This is a foundation on which #4 based his understanding of existentialism.

Aristotle

Aristotle topped another of this lister’s lists, heading the category of philosophy, so his rank on this one is not entirely surprising. But consider that Aristotle is the first to have written systems by which to understand and criticize everything from pure logic to ethics, politics, literature, even science. He theorized that there are four “causes”, or qualities, of any thing in existence: the material cause, which is what the subject is made of; the formal cause, or the arrangement of the subject’s material; the effective cause, the creator of the thing; and the final cause, which is the purpose for which a subject exists.

That all may sound perfectly obvious and not worth arguing over, but since it would take far too long for the purpose of a top ten list to expound on classical causality, suffice to say that all philosophers since Aristotle have had something to say on the matter, and absolutely everything that has been said, and perhaps can be said, is, or must be, based on Aristotle’s system of it: it is impossible to discuss causality without using or trying to debunk Aristotle’s ideas.

Aristotle is also the first person in Western history to argue that there is a hierarchy to all life in the Universe; that because Nature never did anything unnecessary as he observed, then in the same way, this animal is in charge of that animal, and likewise with plants and animals together. His so-called “ladder of life” has eleven rungs, at the top of which are humans. The Medieval Christian theorists ran with this idea, extrapolating it to the hierarchy of God with Man, including angels. Thus, the angelic hierarchy of Catholicism, usually thought as a purely Catholic notion, stems from Aristotle, who lived and died before Jesus was born. Aristotle was, in fact, at the very heart of the classical education system used through the Medieval western world.

Aristotle had something to say on just about every subject, whether abstract or concrete, and modern philosophy almost always bases every single principle, idea, notion or “discovery” on a teaching of Aristotle. His principles of ethics were founded on the concept of doing good, rather than merely being good. A person may be kind, merciful, charitable, etc., but until he proves this by helping others, his goodness means precisely nothing to the world, in which case it means nothing to himself. We could go on about Aristotle, of course, but this list has gone on long enough. Honorable mentions are very many, so list them as you like.