

A Very Short and Selective History of Philosophy

We'll start with **Plato** (427 – 347 BCE), even though he certainly wasn't the first philosopher. He was, for example, a student of Socrates. (A. N. Whitehead did famously say, however, that European philosophy is "a series of footnotes to Plato".) One of Plato's ideas that is still powerful today is the difference between *appearance* and *reality*. Our senses don't tell us much about what's really going on, Plato said. We perceive what's really going on through our rational intellect, not our eyes. Plato illustrated his view with his famous "allegory of the cave", in the *Republic*, Book VIII. In this passage, Plato uses the character of Socrates to present his view.

SOCRATES: Imagine this: People live under the earth in a cave. Stretching a long way up toward the daylight is its entrance. The people have been in this dwelling since childhood, shackled by the legs and neck. Because they are shackled, they are unable to turn their heads around. A fire is behind them, and there is a wall between the fire and the prisoners. The fire casts its glow toward them from behind them, being above and at some distance. Between the fire and those who are shackled [i.e., behind their backs] there runs a walkway at a certain height. Imagine that a low wall has been built the length of the walkway, like the low curtain that puppeteers put up, over which they show their puppets. All along this low wall people are carrying all sorts of things that reach up higher than the wall: statues and other carvings made of stone or wood and many other artifacts that people have made. As

you would expect, some are talking to each other [as they walk along] and some are silent.

GLAUCON: This is an unusual picture that you are presenting here, and these are unusual prisoners.

SOCRATES: They are very much like us humans, actually, but back to the story. From the beginning people like this have never managed, whether on their own or with the help by others, to see anything besides the shadows that are projected on the wall opposite them by the glow of the fire.

GLAUCON: How could it be otherwise, since they are forced to keep their heads immobile for their entire lives?

SOCRATES: Now if they were able to say something about what they saw and to talk it over, do you not think that they would regard that which they saw on the wall as real things?

GLAUCON: They would have to.

SOCRATES: And now what if this prison also had an echo reverberating off the wall in front of them? Whenever one of the people walking behind those in chains (and carrying the things) would make a sound, do you think the prisoners would imagine that the speaker were anyone other than the shadow passing in front of them?

GLAUCON: Nothing else, by Zeus!

SOCRATES: All in all, I responded, those who were chained would consider nothing besides the shadows of the artifacts as real.

GLAUCON: That would absolutely have to be.

SOCRATES: Whenever any of them was unchained and was forced to stand up suddenly, to turn around, to walk, and to look up toward the light, in each case the person would be able to do this only with pain and because of the flickering brightness would be unable to look at those things whose shadows he previously saw. What do you think the prisoner would say if someone were to inform him that what he saw

before were mere trifles, but that now he was much nearer to the real things; and that, as a consequence, he also saw more correctly? And if someone were then to show him any of the things that were passing by and forced him to answer the question about what it was, don't you think that he would be lost for words, and in addition would consider that what he previously saw was more real than what was now being shown?

GLAUCON: Yes, absolutely.

SOCRATES: Now, however, if someone, using force, were to pull the former prisoner away from there and to drag him up the cave's rough and steep ascent and not to let go of him until he had dragged him out into the light of the sun, would not the one who had been dragged like this feel, in the process, pain and rage? And when he got into the sunlight, wouldn't his eyes be filled with the glare, and wouldn't he thus be unable to see any of the things that are now revealed to him?

GLAUCON: He would not be able to do that at all, at least not right away.

SOCRATES: It would obviously take some time to get accustomed, I think, if it should be a matter of taking into one's eyes that which is up there outside the cave, in the light of the sun. And in this process of acclimatization he would first and most easily be able to look at shadows and after that the images of people and the rest of things as they are reflected in water. Later, however, he would be able to view the things themselves. But within the range of such things, he might well contemplate what there is in the heavenly dome, and this dome itself, more easily during the night by looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than by looking at the sun and its glare during the day.

GLAUCON: Certainly.

The rough idea here is that our senses provide us with very indirect and incomplete information about the world. To really find out what's going on we have to use our reason and intellect, not vision and hearing. The mind perceives the real objects, as they actually are, while the senses perceive only distorted shadows of them. (Ordinary people think that material objects are more real, of course.)

Plato's view is nicely illustrated with the problem of 'retrograde' (i.e. backwards) motion in astronomy. The *apparent* motion of Mars, as viewed from Earth, is irregular. It sometimes goes backwards (retrograde). But Plato regarded that as an illusion. In reality, he thought, Mars moves in a combination of perfect circles. Plato's student Eudoxus provided the first solution to this problem, by proposing a system of concentric spheres, centred on the earth, all turning relative to one another along different axes. In this way he reduced the irregular apparent motion of Mars to a combination of uniform circular motions.

The present theory of Mars (due to Copernicus and Kepler) is really in the same vein. Mars's apparent motion, viewed from earth, is due to the motion of the *earth* as well as that of Mars. Mars appears to go backwards when the earth is catching up with it, just as another car on the highway appears to move backwards as you overtake it. The true motion of Mars is much simpler and more perfect than its apparent motion. (Note also that the motion of each planet is really an ellipse, as discovered by Kepler, not a circle.)

In general, the practice of science today owes a lot to Plato's project of using reason to get an objective understanding of the world, to see beyond the appearances to the reality of things. Such

scientific discoveries as molecular structure, curved spacetime, and continental drift take us well beyond what the senses show us. On the other hand, scientists do take sensory knowledge much more seriously than Plato did.

The theory of Mars produced by Eudoxus (like the later theories of Ptolemy, Copernicus and Kepler) was a *geometrical* theory, involving circles. Now Plato was fascinated by geometry, and mathematics in general, for the way that knowledge of its objects comes by *reasoning*, rather than *seeing*. How do we know, for example, that the angles inside a triangle add up to 180° (two right angles)? Will observation tell us this? No. Observation can only tell us that this is *roughly* true for a *few* triangles that we've tested. Abstract reasoning tells us that this is *exactly* true for *all* triangles. "That's what I call real knowledge!" says Plato.

But what is mathematical knowledge about? What are circles, triangles, numbers, etc.? They're not physical objects, it seems. After all, while dinner plates are circular, none is *perfectly* circular. And we also say that circular plates have the "same shape", implying that there is some *single* thing, the circle, that is somehow present in all of the plates. That single "Form" is something over and above all of the material plates, and so is a non-material object.

We might be tempted to regard numbers and geometrical shapes as mere ideas, existing only in our minds. Plato firmly rejected this view, however, on the grounds that the Forms are *what make objects the kinds of things they are*. After all, the planets moved along ellipses long before humans even arrived on the scene! Even something made by humans, like a plate, has a shape in itself that does not depend on how I think about it. Is the plate circular *because* I see it that way? No, it's the other way round. I see the

plate as circular because it is *in fact* circular. The plate is *objectively* circular, and has that shape whether I see it or not. Unless the Form of the circle were somehow present in the plate, the plate could not be circular.

In this way, Plato was led to claim that there's a third realm of objects, the Forms, which exist independently of both the material world and our minds. Despite their independent existence, however, the Forms are heavily involved in both the material world and with human knowledge. Without Forms to give them structure, physical objects would just be shapeless, featureless goo. Also, humans understand the physical world in terms of the forms that are present. We understand an object in terms of its properties, i.e. the Forms that participate in it, such as the shape, size and colour. Without the Forms to enlighten us, our minds would understand nothing.

Plato's belief in the non-physical forms led him to claim that the human intellect is non-physical as well. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes Plato's view: "the intellect is immaterial because Forms are immaterial and intellect must have an affinity with the Forms it apprehends" (*Dualism*, Sec. 1.) For Plato, in other words, the Forms are higher and more real than the physical world, and the human mind is closer to the Forms than to matter. Plato's view is that mental (or spiritual) entities are more fundamental and real than physical ones.

Plato also believed that our cosmos was handiwork of a skilled and generous craftsman, a divine being called the demiurge. Plato, like many other ancients, saw the biological world as filled with purposes and functions (e.g. the eye is designed for seeing, the ear for hearing, etc.) and did not come about by chance. This is called *teleology*, from the Greek word *telos*, meaning end (i.e. goal, or

purpose). Materialists (such as the atomists discussed below) reject all teleology, except in the realm of human artifacts, i.e. things endowed with purpose by us humans. Modern biologists, in almost all cases, do the same. Evolution is considered to be an unplanned, undirected process.

The Ancient Atomists

Not everyone in the ancient world agreed with Plato about mind being more real and fundamental than matter. Those who opposed this view were called materialists, or atomists, the most famous atomists of them being Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus. Rather than believing that Forms and the minds that perceive them are fundamental and eternal, atomists saw the ultimate reality as consisting of unbreakable particles of matter (atoms). While single atoms are too small to see, atoms have a tendency to stick together (rather like Lego blocks) to form large objects that are visible to us. The objects we see around us are huge collections of atoms. It is easy to see on this view how things change – a problem that ancient philosophers spent a lot of time thinking about. In short, atoms *move*. An atom becomes detached from one collection, drifts for a while, and then sticks to a new bunch. In this way plants grow, mountains erode, and so on.

Even living organisms are mere collections of atoms according to materialists. There is no magic about life, no spiritual “life force” than animates living matter. This includes humans, and even the human mind. Thought is just a special kind of motion of atoms – an activity of the brain, according to Democritus. See how this is the exact reverse of Platonism, where (in effect) matter is a product of mind. This dispute between Platonists and atomists continues to

the present day. Are minds a product of matter? Or is matter somehow a product of minds (or the Mind)?

The atomists did not see the cosmos as the handiwork of a craftsman, as Plato did. There are no minds in the cosmos, apart from beings like us that are made of atoms. The atomists were also atheists, in other words, and rejected all the deities of the ancient world. (The gods in those days were a pretty terrifying bunch. Freed from fear of these gods they could relax, have fun, and pursue pleasure – as Epicurus is famous for doing.) In the absence of a God or demiurge, however, where did life (including human minds) come from? This is a difficult problem for atomism.

Although the atomists have considerable success in making it plausible that a simple ontology of atoms and void, with the minimal properties of the former, can account for a wide variety of differences in the objects in the perceptible world, and also that a number of apparently orderly effects can be produced as a byproduct of disorderly atomic collisions, the kind of functional organization found in organisms is much harder to explain. Democritus held that human beings arose from the earth.

(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Democritus”)

The parts of a biological organism seem to have obvious purposes, as with the parts of a human artifact such as a watch. How could such things come to exist purely by chance, without any purpose? Perhaps one can appeal to “worlds enough and time”? Given enough planets, and vast eons of time, anything that is possible is likely to happen at some point.

On the topic of perception and knowledge (Stanford Encyclopedia again):

The atomists accounted for perception by means of films of atoms sloughed off from their surfaces by external objects, and entering and impacting the sense organs. They tried to account for all sensible effects by means of contact, and regarded all sense perceptions as caused by the properties of the atoms making up the films acting on the atoms of animals' sense organs. Perceptions of color are caused by the 'turning' or position of the atoms; tastes are caused by the texture of atoms on the tongue, e.g., bitter tastes by the tearing caused by sharp atoms; feelings of heat are ascribed to friction.

These ideas will come up again in Locke's theory of perception.

The atomist Democritus thought that atoms all move *deterministically*, i.e. they rigidly follow fixed laws. This had the unfortunate consequence of ruling out human free will (or so it seemed). For, if a human is simply a collection of atoms, each of which is following fixed laws, then the whole human is also precisely constrained to follow an exact future path. What control does one then have over the course of one's own life? Epicurus, a later atomist, was bothered by this problem and proposed that atoms undergo an occasional random swerve, i.e. they depart from the path determined by physical law. In this way, free will is possible after all. (But does this really solve the problem?)

Medieval Philosophy

Christian philosophers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas inherited many texts of the ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle and the atomists. In general, they rejected atomism but agreed with many of Plato's and Aristotle's ideas.

It was natural for Christian thinkers to interpret Plato's Forms as being ideas in the mind of God. This allowed them to agree with Plato in holding the Forms to exist independently of the human mind. Also, since the Forms are actually ideas on this view, it is easy to see why our human ideas are able to correspond to the Forms. According to Christian theology the human mind is modelled after the divine mind, and so has similar ideas.

Another aspect of Platonism that especially appealed to Christian thinkers was Plato's view that the Form of Good is highest and noblest of all the Forms, described by Plato as, "the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual [world]". These thinkers saw Plato as describing God, or an aspect of God, here.

Medieval philosophers, influenced especially by Plato, saw God as necessary for human knowledge. Plato compared the sun's role in rendering the material world visible to the Form of Good's role in making the Forms intelligible. Thus, Christian philosophers wrote of "divine illumination", and compared the sun to God. In particular, they held that God placed innate ideas in our minds, that enable us to form thoughts that fit the world we're in. God may also have provided us with innate knowledge.

These views of knowledge had a strong influence on early modern science. The astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571 – 1630), for example, believed that God used mathematical patterns (such as the ellipse) to give structure to the created (i.e. natural) world. God then placed these mathematical ideas into every human mind, so that we are born with the cognitive tools we need to understand nature, i.e. to do science.

Modern Philosophy

“Modern” science began with Copernicus (1473-1543). Note that “modern” here doesn’t mean recent or contemporary, but is a certain period in the history of ideas. In a similar way, “modern” philosophy began with René Descartes (1596-1650), and continued till about 1920. Modern philosophers revived and developed many of the views of the ancient world, especially atomism. There was a particular focus on the question of human knowledge – how we know things. Modern philosophy began with a strong rejection of medieval, “scholastic” philosophy, so there is a sharp discontinuity between medieval and modern philosophy. Modern philosophy was closely tied with the modern science of Galileo, Boyle and Newton. However, one still sees the influence of medieval philosophy on modern philosophers. In Descartes, for example, we find the claim that God has endowed the human mind with some innate knowledge, so that we know some things by “natural light”.

Early modern philosophers are largely *dualists* about the human mind, believing that while the human body (including the brain) is purely material, a collection of atoms, a person also has a non-physical mind (or soul). The mind is the seat of consciousness,

rational understanding and decision making. Dualism has the advantage of allowing a person to live on as a spiritual being after the death of the body, facilitating a future resurrection or reincarnation. Thus, some form of dualism is affirmed by many religions.

In later modern philosophy, and especially contemporary philosophy, materialism (or physicalism) becomes increasingly dominant. Thought is again considered, as Democritus said, to be just the motions of atoms in the brain.

Early modern philosophers (Descartes, Locke and Berkeley) are theists, believing for example that the world was created by a transcendent rational being. Later philosophers, such as Hume and Hobbes, are often either sceptical of theism or reject it altogether. For much of the 20th century, theism was considered untenable among philosophers, yet it has enjoyed a small revival in recent decades.

The Mechanical Philosophy

The mechanical philosophy was developed by early modern scientists and philosophers. It was essentially a revival of ancient atomism, except that it was restricted to inanimate physical systems. The mechanical philosophy said that physical systems are composed of particles (or ‘corpuscles’) which have size, shape and motion – and nothing else. This idea was used by Robert Boyle to lay the foundations of modern chemistry.

The mechanical philosophy was not applied to the whole of reality, since it did not seem to account for the human *mind*. Is it possible that the human mind is just a collection of geometrical particles?

Early modern philosophers, such as Descartes and Locke, regarded this as absurd. For example, human minds have sensory experiences, such as the experience of seeing a ripe red tomato. Is the experience of *red* just a certain motion of particles in the brain? In that case, the red experience can ultimately be defined geometrically, just as “equilateral triangle” etc. can be. But some feel that *red* is completely unrelated to any geometrical quality, and conclude that the human mind must somehow lie outside of the material world altogether.

Descartes and Locke (and others) were thus dualists, believing that the mind and body were separate things. Later, however, problems with this view, and advances in understanding the mind in physical terms, led to the widespread rejection of dualism. There was no need, it was argued, to postulate a non-physical mind, in addition to the brain. We can make sense of all mental phenomena in terms of brain’s enormous complexity—a view called *materialism*, or *physicalism*.

Hume, Kant and the rise of anti-realism

A standard conviction of all philosophy, from Plato to the early moderns, is that human *reason* is a useful and reliable guide to what reality is like. Recall Plato’s cave, which illustrates the view that the senses only tell us how things appear on the surface, whereas using philosophical reasoning one can discover how things really are in the objective world. (In Plato’s view the most real things are the Forms, which can be known only through the intellect, not the senses.) For example, any claim that entails a contradiction is false, and every logical consequence of a true claim is also true. By and large, this Platonist view of reason was

preserved through the medieval period. Now it is also true that medieval philosophers were almost all theists (Jews, Muslims and Christians) and you may have heard that such religions are opposed to rational thinking. However, the idea that religion is opposed to reason and science is a very recent one, and did not exist before the middle of the 19th century (i.e. the mid 1800s). As mentioned above, all the medieval and early modern philosophers and scientists were theists, and saw no contradiction at all between following logical arguments and accepting a religious framework. In fact, the famous universities of Europe began during the High Middle Ages (11th century onwards) and grew out of earlier cathedral and monastic schools. (One of the main subjects studied was logic.)

Thus, for over 2,000 years, reason was seen by all (even empiricists like Locke) as an essential guide to truth. Challenges to reason began to emerge, however, during the late modern period, starting with the work of David Hume (1711 – 1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804). Hume, as mentioned above, was one of the first European philosophers to argue against traditional theism. (He argued, for example, that the argument from design was unconvincing at best, that there could never be good evidence for miracles, and that the existence of evil proved that God couldn’t be both all-powerful and morally perfect.) In addition, Hume argued that reason was a pretty useless guide to objective reality.

For example, while Hume accepted mathematics and logic in a sense, he denied its importance by claiming that statements of mathematics and logic merely express relations between our own ideas, and thus have nothing to do with external reality (reality outside the mind). This is of course a far cry from the medieval view that logic and mathematics describe the architecture of God’s

mind, and that these abstract patterns also constrain the created order! Even more controversially, Hume denied that reasoning (together with empirical observations) can provide any scientific knowledge at all. (The argument for this ‘inductive scepticism’ of Hume will be covered later in the course, but his key premise is that there cannot be any innate knowledge.) To cap things off, Hume also denied that reason can give us any knowledge of moral truths either, for moral statements (Hume said) merely express our feelings of approval and disgust. “Reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions”.

In taking these views, Hume planted the seed of an anti-realist philosophical tradition that rejects reason as a guide to reality. A key figure in this tradition is Immanuel Kant, who was very disturbed by Hume’s sceptical arguments and tried to respond to them.

The big question for Kant is how we can have innate knowledge, for Kant actually agreed with Hume that, in the absence of innate knowledge, we could never do science. Mere observations, as Hume argued, never (as a matter of logic) tell us anything about matters that have not been observed. Thus, Kant reasoned, we must be born with some knowledge of how the world is. But how could we have knowledge of the world before we access it ourselves, through the five senses? The only viable answer, according to Kant, is that the world we experience (the “phenomenal world”) is at least partly a creation of our own minds! Reality *as we see it* is not the same thing as reality as it exists in itself. According to Kant, when our minds understand the world, we use a set of ‘a priori’ concepts they were born with, and so these concepts are imposed upon the world, and indeed create the phenomenal world. (These concepts include such basic properties as geometrical shapes, relations of cause and effect, and

numbers.) The objective world, the ‘noumenal’ world, does exist, but since our concepts don’t apply to it we cannot understand it at all. In the phenomenal world, fire causes smoke, the earth is a sphere, a human hand has 5 fingers, etc. but the noumenal or real world has no such relations and properties. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy puts this as follows:

The sensible world, or the world of appearances, is constructed by the human mind from a combination of sensory matter that we receive passively and a priori forms that are supplied by our cognitive faculties. We can have a priori knowledge only about aspects of the sensible world that reflect the a priori forms supplied by our cognitive faculties. In Kant's words, “we can cognize of things a priori only what we ourselves have put into them”.

In this way Kant thought that the rationality of science could be defended from Hume’s attack. But there is a substantial cost to this, since the world (the phenomenal world) that science reveals, according to Kant, is one that is largely of our own making. Concerning the noumenal world, the real world that exists independently of human thought, reason has nothing to say. This is of course a radical break from Plato, for whom reason does indeed tell us about the ultimate reality that lies behind the phenomena (appearances).

Kant was also a deeply religious thinker, having been raised as a Lutheran (in a Pietist sect that stressed moral conduct above belief in doctrine). Kant is sometimes considered to be thoroughly secular, due to his view that there is no such thing as religious knowledge, so that all of the traditional ‘proofs’ for God’s existence fail. In saying this, however, Kant actually aimed to *protect* religious faith from the rational attacks of Hume and other

Enlightenment thinkers. For Kant, religious belief is not rational knowledge, but a very different kind of justified assent that is connected with the basis of morality. Reason has a very narrow field of application, being limited to the realm of what can be experienced, and is thus unable either to support or weaken religious belief.

Kant's idea of religious thought as being quite separate from empirical evidence and reasoning, while a very recent invention, has been very influential. Standing in this tradition are such well-known thinkers as Hegel, Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, who all saw religion as something fundamentally irrational – but none the worse for that. Moreover Hegel had many secular followers, such as Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, who endorsed his view that that reality is absurd from a rational perspective, so that reason is therefore trumped by claims based on feeling, instinct, or leaps of faith. This is the tradition that led (in the 20th century) to the anti-realist 'postmodernism' of Derrida and Foucault.

Analytic Philosophy

Kant died in 1804, and (roughly speaking) his views reigned supreme during the 19th century. By the late 1800s, however, some philosophers (notably G.E. Moore, Gottlob Frege, and Bertrand Russell) began a revolt against the anti-realism of Kant and his followers. Inspired by the clarity and objectivity of mathematics and the natural sciences, and using Frege's new system of 'predicate logic', they attempted to put philosophical argument on a rational, objective footing. This movement later became known as 'analytic philosophy'.

Analytic philosophy is more of a set of methods than a shared set of beliefs. Some analytic philosophers, such as Frege, took views similar to Plato's concerning the status of mathematics, and this led them to view 'propositions' as objective logical entities that give rational structure to the world – a similar role that Plato assigned to the Forms. Other analytic philosophers, such as the members of the Vienna Circle, firmly opposed such 'metaphysics' and believed only in entities that could be observed. Among analytic philosophers today, Kant's views are studied and taken seriously, but most reject his anti-realism, especially as it concerns science. For one thing, Einstein's relativity theory explicitly rejects the Euclidean geometry and Newtonian mechanics that, according to Kant, is built into the human mind. Actually Kant might be right that these theories are innate, since we find them so easy to understand, whereas Einstein's alternative seems bizarre and impossible to visualise. Nevertheless physicists are able to understand relativity using abstract mathematics, calculate its observable consequences, and find that those predictions agree with what is actually observed. Apparently rational methods can access the noumenal world after all, vindicating Plato over Kant!

Concerning the long debate between dualism and materialism, most analytic philosophers today are materialists (i.e. physicalists) of one kind or another (there are many different versions). Some philosophers continue to reject physicalism, however, for the same kinds of reasons as Descartes and Thomas Reid. It just doesn't seem that a bunch of geometrical particles should be conscious of anything. The enormous advances of neuroscience, while impressive, haven't made an inch of progress on the 'hard problem' of consciousness, they claim. Also, if physicalism is true then it seems that we cannot have free will, as all of the choices we make will be the necessary outcome of earlier physical processes

that we have no control over. In fact, it appears that a person, as a unique self that exists from birth until death, cannot even exist if physicalism is true. For the cells and atoms of a person's body certainly are not permanent – they are continually passing out of the body and being replaced. According to physicalism, therefore, a person cannot literally be an individual thing (or “substance”, in philosophy jargon). The different stages of a person's life are connected only by resembling one another, having similar properties (such as personality and memory) and by the earlier stages causing the later ones. Thus a person becomes an illusion, or perhaps a useful fiction.

The contemporary philosophers who reject physicalism do not, in most cases, believe in a spiritual mind that is separate from the body, however. Most of them are ‘monists’, who believe that the mind is just the brain. What they do say is that the brain is not a purely physical object, since it has mental properties that ‘do not reduce’ to its physical properties, or something of that sort. Old-school *substance* dualists, like Descartes and Reid, are pretty rare nowadays.

Conclusion

Philosophy is just like science in its main aim, namely to use *reason* to find out how the world *really is* (not just how it appears to us). Philosophy is also very different from science in one key respect, however. While scientists can point to a wide-ranging scientific consensus of “settled science”, there is very little “settled philosophy”. Even the term itself sounds odd!

Science textbooks, used in high-school and college, present a ‘scientific worldview’ that virtually all scientists accept. In

mechanics, for example, Newton defeated Descartes (in Latin, *Cartesius*), and so there are no Cartesians in any physics department today. In analytic philosophy departments, on the other hand, you still find Cartesians, and Platonists, alongside their bitter foes (such as Humeans and Kantians). There is very little consensus here.

The absence of consensus in philosophy means that, in a philosophy class, your job isn't to learn the *right answer* to each question we examine. Even though each question *has* a right answer, presumably, I'm not able to tell you what it is. Even though I sometimes *think* I know the right answer, my job isn't to tell you about that, but instead to present a range of possible answers, and examine the arguments for and against them. Your job is to study and try to understand these arguments, and so come to your own conclusions. Your work will be judged not by the conclusions you reach, but by how clearly you can articulate and defend them.

The lack of consensus in philosophy also means that old ideas are often taken just as seriously as new ones. Recall that, in the 1800s, Kant was the latest and greatest philosopher, while Plato was hopelessly out of date, and yet Plato prevailed (on one key point at least).¹ Until we have the right answers, we cannot dismiss the writings of philosophers from hundreds (or even thousands) of years ago. So in this course we will study texts from Descartes onwards.

¹ Also, some of the best 20th century logicians (Frege and Gödel) were pretty hard-core Platonists.