

Historical developments of philosophy



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The Search for knowledge

During the 1600s, European science and philosophy had been very much under minded and prevented from growing due to mainly religious obsessions, particularly Catholic churches inquisitions. Prior to the scientific revolution some things were believed to be true not because of reason or logic but rather because it's what had been traditionally accepted as the truth. Instead of believing in ideas because of faith from church sort or other government authorities, as most individuals did at the time. Methods of reasoning were mainly deductive, philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas adopt Aristotelian method to seek true knowledge which uses more of a deductive reasoning approach; however, this began to change during the sixteenth century. Using a more skeptical approach, European scholars such as Rene Descartes and Sir Francis Bacon began to popularize a new method for conceiving knowledge during the sixteenth and seventieth century. Keeping in mind that talking against the church in this time period or even doubting ancient authority could be punishable by death. Ironically a lot of philosophers like Erasmus, Martin Luther and even scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo and Newton held advanced degrees in religion.

Thomas Aquinas was a scholastic theologian born in Italy during the 13th century. Part of his work was epistemology or discovering what is intellect or what is reason and how do you define it. In his work, the Summa Theologica, a thorough and systematic book on theology that's divided into three parts in which he attempts to develop five arguments for God's existence. Each part is divided into many questions and each question is divided up into a smaller number of questions; each of which is dealt with in a certain article. Each

article is divided up in the following way: Aquinas will ask the question, then he'll give a set of reasons to answer this question in a certain way, these reasons are always called the objections because they're objections to his own views, then Aquinas will give the on the contrary, a reason to answer the question in a correct way but not always, lastly Aquinas finally answers the question. In this dialectical manner Aquinas studies, a plethora of questions and attempts to answer them.

Aquinas believes that sacred doctrine is a science because it's knowledge “revealed by God...and accepted by faith” (317) rather than human reason. Aquinas then proceeds to explain with strong arguments regarding why sacred doctrine can be useful when trying to find knowledge. With the use of deductive reasoning, Aquinas explains why philosophical sciences and sacred doctrine are both legitimate sources one can use to obtain certain knowledge. However, centuries later a new method of obtaining would arise, that is very different from the way Aquinas tried to obtain knowledge.

Rene Descartes, a 17th century philosopher, most famously known for his phrase “*cogito ergo sum*” which means I think; therefore, I exist (Discourse on the Method and Principles of Philosophy), believed that everyone is equally rational. Unlike Aristotle, Descartes believed in a method of reasoning that takes a specific set of instances and uses them to conclude a generalization, rather than trying to obtain a conclusion from a generalization. By evaluating Descartes book *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, we can understand how Rene Descartes endeavors upon his search for true knowledge. He begins by explaining why

everyone is equally equipped with the capability to reason, even though people may disagree with each other. In part one he states,

The diversity of our opinions does not arise from the fact that some people are more reasonable than others, but solely from the fact that we lead our thoughts along different paths and do not take the same things into consideration. (Descartes 18)

In part two, he provides four rules on which someone should follow in order to be certain that something is true. Rule one, “ never accept anything as ... that is to say, carefully to avoid hasty judgment and prejudice” (Descartes 11). Rule two, “ divide each of the difficulties...in order better to resolve them” (Descartes 11). In other words, breakdown a problem into its greatest number of parts rendering it easier to solve. Rule three, “ conduct thoughts in an orderly fashion, by commencing with those objects that are simplest and easiest to know, in order to ascend little by little, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things”. (Descartes 11). In other words, begin with the simplest subjects then progress through more complex subjects. Rule four, “ everywhere to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I was assured of having omitted nothing”. (Descartes 11). In other words, thoroughly review the method used to come to a certain conclusion one can be sure is true. In part three, Descartes explains why he must abide by three provisional maxims while discarding all previously held opinions in order to build a foundation certain truth. One, “ obey the laws and customs of my country” (Descartes 13) two, “ to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could, and to follow the most doubtful opinions, once I had decided on them, with no less constancy than if they had been very well

assured” (Descartes 14). (meaning believe something is true until otherwise proven false). And the final maxim,

Always to try to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world, and generally to accustom myself to believing that there is nothing that is completely within our power except our thoughts, so that, after we have done our best regarding things external to us, everything that is lacking for us to succeed is, from our point of view, absolutely impossible (Descartes 14).

In part four, Descartes presents the fundamental truth that he discovered when he applied his method. After disregarding everything he thought to be true except for his own existence he comes reaches the conclusion “ I think therefore I exist” or *Cotigo Ergo* soon, because the very acting of being able to doubt is proof one existence. This is an idea he finds impossible to be false, not becomes he reasons it but simply because he believes it to be an essential truth.

Fast forwarding to the 17th century comes Sir Francis Bacon an English natural philosopher. Instead of starting with a general premise and moving on to a premise and then getting to a conclusion. Sir Francis Bacon said that we arrive at truth is to make repeated observations and then out of those observations we generalize these repeatedly observed phenomena into a probable conclusion; he outlines this method his book *Novum Organum* in 1620.

When Bacon brings forward this idea of inductive reasoning, he is challenging Aristotle and methods that people have been relying on for <https://assignbuster.com/historical-developments-of-philosophy/>

thousands of years. Bacon They can feed finds contemporary learning totally unsatisfactory and he rejected the whole Scholastic tradition taught in Universities at the time. For Bacon the Scholastic system was a huge issue in trying to understand the world. Even though there were other barriers that prevented people from gaining or getting a complete understanding of nature. True philosophers understood that the mind can create genuine barriers when it comes to obtaining true knowledge. As part of his endeavor to search for knowledge, Sir Francis Bacon identifies four idols of the mind. The idols of the tribe, cave, market place and theater. The idols of the tribe are the natural tendencies of the human mind's ability to mov from what it knew to what it did not know. Thus, relying on our senses, rushing to premature judgements and believe what we liked to be true. The idols of the cave vary from one person to another and reflects our own prejudices and distorted view of the truth acquired from our education and social customs. The idols of the market place things that are derived from language such as the terms for imaginary things. Our understanding of the world was shaped by the language we used to describe it, if the language itself may be incorrect in defining what we are observing, then that would therefore make our observation invalid. Finally, the idols of theater derived from a much bigger philosophical systems which were not based securely on experimental evidence. These were intellectual constructs which looks impressive (similarly to a well-produced theatre) but lacked real substance. These included the following: those which were based mostly or entirely on abstract argument and speculation as with the scholasticism of Bacon day, those which were based on key insight or limited research but were then over generalized to apply more widely and those which mixed philosophy with

theological concerns. With this new method Sir Francis Bacon can establish unbiased analysis of concrete data. Aristotle based many of his scientific ideas on careful observations of phenomena but for Bacon that wasn't enough because he lacked rigor in testing the generalization he had made from the evidence and relied too much on logical syllogisms. The result was that he created deductive chains of reasoning that which easily can be destroyed by the discovery of contrary instances. In contrast Baconian induction requires each generalization to be carefully tested before one can move onto the next. In the same a ladder is built, only when a lower level is completed and can be thoroughly confirmed for stability, is it possible to construct the next step above it.

Philosophers throughout history have tried discovering the methods in which one should utilize to obtain true certain knowledge. It wasn't until the 16th and 17th century that a new ideology or a new method of thinking had risen. Up until this time knowledge came from a deductive process of reasoning. Philosophers, Rene Descartes and Sir Francis Bacon popularized the idea of using inductive reasoning to establish true conclusions or generalizations. Scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo and Sir Isaac Newton use these methods to create foundations several areas a science. Another key factor that shaped Scientific Revolution and the way people had chosen to seek knowledge in the 16th and 17th century was skepticism. The Summa Theologica help try and bridge the gap between sacred Doctrine and philosophical science order to guide one in their Quest for truth. While the Summa Theologica is heavily criticized for having circular reasoning, it is one of the most influential pieces contributed to philosophy. Contrastingly the

writings such as *novum organum* by Sir Francis Bacon or a discourse on methods by Rene Descartes or created much more rigorously in order to eliminate any areas of doubt. This helped developed what we now call the scientific method. This is a method of reasoning composed of a sequence of methods used to test a hypothesis through a sequence experimentation and observation; after logical steps are taken a conclusion can be derived. The heliocentric model is an example of an idea that contrasted with traditional views but however derived from a scientific method. Galileo was another philosopher who challenged Aristotle's views, he discovered that objects of different weight fall at the same speed. However, even though the more data we obtain can bring us closer certainty, we still may not get there. This is something that David Hume a "Skeptical Scotsman" discusses. When it comes down to it, induction cannot ever lead us to certain knowledge because it presupposes that things will stay the way they always have been. For example, if one observes that the sun always rises in the east in the morning can one be certain that because it always has it always will?

Finally, because of these European scholars' fields in science such as physics, chemistry and math are all exponentially expanding. Today technology is fast growing and knowledge in certain parts of the world is available almost anywhere one goes. As a society we rely on technology for nearly survival. The search for knowledge in today's century has dramatically changed due to this.

Works Cited

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- *Thomas, Aquinas, Saint, 1225?-1274. The “ Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas*