

General Philosophy

An Introduction to Philosophical Thinking



What is Philosophy For?

In our daily lives, we constantly make judgments, accept or reject ideas, and navigate the world based on beliefs we rarely question. We trust our senses, follow customs, and accept what "everyone knows" without deeper examination.

But what happens when we pause to ask fundamental questions? When we move beyond "what time is it?" to "what is time?" Beyond accepting that "he's dreaming" to asking "what is a dream?"

This shift from passive acceptance to active questioning marks the beginning of philosophical thinking. Philosophy emerges when we stop taking reality at face value and start investigating the foundations of our beliefs, knowledge, and existence.

The philosophical attitude is characterized by intellectual courage: the willingness to question everything, even our most cherished assumptions.

The Philosophical Attitude

Imagine someone who suddenly begins asking unusual questions. Instead of accepting everyday explanations, they probe deeper: What is time? What is reality? What is truth? What is beauty? What is justice?

This person has adopted the **philosophical attitude** - a stance of critical distance from ordinary life and common sense. They seek to understand not just *that* things exist, but *why* they exist, *how* they exist, and *what* they fundamentally are.

As Socrates famously declared: "I know that I know nothing." This admission of ignorance is the starting point of genuine philosophical inquiry. Philosophy begins with wonder, admiration, and the recognition that our everyday certainties may be illusions.



Philosophy as Critical Thinking

Negative Moment

Saying NO to common sense, prejudices, unexamined facts, and accepted ideas. Philosophy rejects the uncritical acceptance of "what everyone thinks."

Positive Moment

Asking fundamental questions: What is it? Why is it? How is it? Philosophy seeks systematic understanding through rigorous inquiry and rational investigation.

Critical Synthesis

Combining skepticism with constructive inquiry. The philosophical attitude maintains perpetual vigilance against dogmatism while building coherent understanding.

Together, these negative and positive dimensions constitute **critical thinking** - the essence of philosophical practice. Philosophy challenges us to think independently, question authority, and seek rational foundations for our beliefs.

Ancient Origins: Wonder and Questioning

According to ancient Greek philosophers:

- **Plato:** Philosophy begins with *admiration*
- **Aristotle:** Philosophy begins with *wonder*
- **Socrates:** Philosophy begins with recognizing our *ignorance*

These starting points share a common thread: the disruption of comfortable certainty and the awakening of intellectual curiosity.



When we step back from familiar reality and see it as if for the first time - as something strange, puzzling, and in need of explanation - we have entered the philosophical dimension. We become like newborns encountering the world with fresh eyes, asking: What is this? Why is it so? How does it work?

What Philosophy Is NOT

Not Just Opinion

Philosophy is not merely "I think that..." or personal preference. It demands rigorous reasoning, systematic investigation, and rational justification beyond subjective feelings.

Not Market Research

Philosophy doesn't seek popular consensus or majority opinion. Truth isn't determined by polling or what most people believe at a given moment.

Not Passive Acceptance

Philosophy refuses to accept ideas without critical examination. As one philosopher said: philosophy exists "so we don't give immediate acceptance to things without deeper consideration."

Defining Philosophy: Four Approaches

Throughout history, philosophy has been defined in various ways. Understanding these different conceptions helps us grasp the breadth and complexity of philosophical inquiry:

1. **Worldview of a Culture:** The collective beliefs, values, and practices through which a society understands itself and reality. This definition is too broad, conflating philosophy with general culture.
2. **Wisdom for Living:** Contemplation leading to ethical conduct and happiness. This Eastern-influenced view emphasizes philosophy as a way of life but doesn't capture its full scope.
3. **Rational Understanding of the Universe:** Systematic explanation of reality as an ordered totality. This ambitious definition proved too totalizing for modern philosophy's more specialized approach.
4. **Critical Foundation of Knowledge:** Investigation of the conditions, principles, and limits of knowledge and practice. This contemporary view emphasizes philosophy's role in examining the foundations of science, ethics, politics, and culture.

Philosophy as Analysis, Reflection, and Critique

Analysis

Examining the conditions and foundations of science, religion, art, and morality. Philosophy dissects concepts, arguments, and assumptions to understand their structure and validity.

Reflection

Consciousness turning back on itself to understand its own capacities for knowledge, feeling, and action. Philosophy investigates how we know, what we can know, and the limits of knowledge.

Critique

Evaluating illusions, prejudices, scientific theories, and cultural practices. Philosophy serves as watchdog against dogmatism, questioning established authorities and received wisdom.

These three activities - analysis, reflection, and critique - work together to create philosophical understanding. Philosophy seeks not just to describe reality but to understand the *meaning* and *foundations* of reality and our relationship to it.

Is Philosophy Useful?

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"Philosophy is a science with which and without which the world remains just the same."

- Popular cynical view

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Common sense often dismisses philosophy as useless because it produces no immediate practical results, no material wealth, no tangible products. The "philosopher" stereotype is someone with their head in the clouds, disconnected from reality.

But this judgment assumes utility means only material benefit. What if we ask: **Useful for what? Useful for whom?** The question itself is philosophical!



The Defense of Philosophy

Science Depends on Philosophy

Scientific work presupposes philosophical concepts: truth, rationality, causation, evidence, theory, progress. These foundations aren't scientific discoveries - they're philosophical frameworks that make science possible.

Scientists work *within* philosophical assumptions about reality, knowledge, and method. Philosophy examines these very assumptions that science takes for granted.

Living Well Requires Philosophy

Even if philosophy isn't "useful" for making money or building machines, it addresses fundamental questions about:

- What makes life meaningful?
- How should we live?
- What is justice?
- What is happiness?
- What do we owe each other?

These questions shape how we actually live our lives.

The True Utility of Philosophy



Clarity of Thought

If abandoning naïveté and prejudice is valuable, philosophy is useful



Intellectual Freedom

If resisting manipulation by dominant ideas and powers matters, philosophy is useful



Understanding Reality

If comprehending the meaning of world, culture, and history is worthwhile, philosophy is useful



Conscious Living

If providing means for self-awareness and conscious action toward freedom and happiness matters, philosophy is the most useful of all human endeavors

The Origin of Philosophy

The Word "Philosophy"

The word *philosophy* comes from Greek, combining two elements:

- **Philo** (philia): friendship, fraternal love, respect among equals
- **Sophia**: wisdom, knowledge

Philosophy = love of wisdom, desire for knowledge

Pythagoras of Samos (5th century BCE) reportedly coined the term, distinguishing himself from "sophists" (wise ones) by calling himself a "philosopher" (lover of wisdom). He claimed complete wisdom belongs only to the gods; humans can only love and pursue it.

Pythagoras's Three Types of People



Merchants

Those who come to the Olympic games to conduct business - serving only their own interests



Athletes

Those who come to compete - seeking victory and glory



Spectators

Those who come to contemplate, evaluate, and judge - like the philosopher

Pythagoras likened philosophers to spectators at games: motivated neither by profit nor competition, but by **desire to observe, understand, and judge**. The philosopher doesn't claim to own truth (like merchants with goods) or compete over ideas (like athletes), but seeks to contemplate reality as it is.

Truth belongs to no one - it stands before us, waiting to be discovered by those with eyes of the spirit to see it.

Philosophy is Greek

Philosophy, as rational, systematic knowledge of reality's nature and causes, is a distinctly Greek phenomenon. This doesn't mean other ancient peoples lacked wisdom - Chinese, Indians, Hebrews, Africans, and indigenous Americans possessed profound knowledge traditions.

However, Greek philosophy developed *specific characteristics* that distinguish it from other wisdom traditions:



- Systematic rational inquiry into causes and principles
- Universal and necessary truths sought through logic
- Emphasis on demonstration and proof
- Distinction between opinion (doxa) and knowledge (episteme)
- Development of formal logic and scientific method

These distinctive features made Greek philosophy the foundation of Western intellectual tradition, influencing how we think about science, ethics, politics, and knowledge itself.

Greek vs. Chinese Wisdom: An Example

Chinese Thought: Yin and Yang

Chinese philosophy explains reality through complementary opposites:

- **Yin:** feminine, passive principle (darkness, cold, moisture)
- **Yang:** masculine, active principle (light, heat, dryness)

All things arise from combinations of these opposing forces. Reality is the dynamic interplay of contraries.

Greek Thought: Pythagoras

Greek philosophy seeks mathematical-rational structure:

- Nature as system of mathematical proportions
- Starting from unity (number 1, geometric point)
- Opposition between even/odd numbers
- Sensory qualities as appearances of mathematical structure

Reason grasps mathematical essence; senses perceive qualities.

Both traditions recognize contraries in nature, but Greek philosophy distinctively seeks *mathematical-logical principles* underlying appearance, establishing foundations for Western science.

The Greek Legacy to Western Thought

Universal Natural Laws

Nature operates according to necessary, universal principles - the same everywhere and always. Example: Newton's law of gravitation applies to all bodies, at all times, in all places.

Knowable Reality

Natural laws can be fully known by human thought without mystical revelation. Reason itself - not divine inspiration - can discover truth.

Laws of Thought

Our thinking follows universal, necessary logical principles (identity, non-contradiction, excluded middle) enabling us to distinguish truth from falsehood.

Human Freedom

Human practices - morality, politics, techniques, arts - depend on free will, deliberation, and rational choice according to values humans themselves establish.

Necessity and Contingency

The Greeks distinguished between **necessary** and **contingent** events:

Necessary Events

Governed by natural law - could not be otherwise. A stone falls because gravity necessitates it. Humans walk because their bodily structure makes locomotion possible.

Natural necessity follows from the nature of things.

Contingent Events

Depend on circumstances and choices - could be otherwise. A stone hitting someone's head while falling is contingent: if the person hadn't been there, it wouldn't have happened.

Human actions combine necessity (bodily capacities) with choice (deliberate decisions).

This distinction avoids both fatalism ("everything is necessary, we must resign ourselves") and naive voluntarism ("anything is possible if we will it"). Understanding necessity and contingency helps us recognize what we can change and what we cannot.

The Birth of Philosophy

Philosophy emerged when some Greeks, amazed by reality and dissatisfied with traditional mythological explanations, began asking new questions and seeking rational answers. They demonstrated that:

- The world and human beings can be understood through **reason** - not divine revelation
- Truth is not secret or mysterious, accessible only to chosen few
- Knowledge depends on **correct use of reason**, which is the same in everyone
- Truth can be **taught and shared** by all who think rationally

Philosophy was born with two revolutionary recognitions: that truth is public (not hidden), and that reason is universal (shared by all humans). These insights transformed how humans understood knowledge, reality, and themselves.



Listening to the Poets

Before philosophy, Greek poets expressed humanity's wonder at existence, change, and mortality. Their verses captured universal experiences:

Archilochus

"Do not forget, my heart, that human things are only uncertain changes."

Theognis

"Let us mourn both youth and old age, for the first flees and the second always comes."

These poetic insights into impermanence, change, and mortality provided the experiential background from which philosophical questioning would emerge.

Pindar

"The glory of mortals grows in a single day, but a single adverse day is enough for fate, merciless, to cast it down and it suddenly withers."

Orides Fontela (Brazilian)

"Wind, rain, sun, cold - everything comes and goes, everything goes and comes."

Ovid's Vision of Perpetual Change

In his *Metamorphoses*, the Roman poet Ovid expressed the philosophical problem that would occupy the first philosophers:

"Nothing persists in the entire Universe. Everything flows, and everything presents only a passing image. Time itself passes with continuous movement, like a river... What was before no longer is, what had not been now is, and every instant is something new."

"You see night, near its end, walking toward day, and daylight's brightness succeeded by night's darkness... Don't you see the seasons following each other, imitating the ages of our life?"

"There exists a bird the Phoenicians call phoenix. It feeds not on grains or grasses, but on tears of incense and amomum juice. When it completes five centuries of life, it builds a nest atop a great palm tree... there it settles and ends life among perfumes. From its ashes, a small phoenix is reborn, destined to live another five centuries."

The Questions of the First Philosophers



Why do beings arise and perish?

Why do similar things generate similar things - tree from tree, dog from dog, child from woman?



Why do different things generate different things?

Day seems to produce night, winter to produce spring, dark objects lighten with time?



Why does everything change?

Children become adults, mature, age, and disappear. Landscapes flourish in spring, wither in winter?



Why does unity multiply?

From one tree, countless flowers and fruits. From one cat, many kittens?



Why do things become opposites?

Transparent water becomes solid ice. Cold days become hot. Nothing remains identical to itself?



Yet why does everything repeat?

After day, night; after night, day. Seasons cycle eternally. No one is born old, but always as a child?

When and Where Philosophy Was Born

Philosophy has a precise birthplace and time:

- **Date:** Late 7th / early 6th century BCE
- **Place:** Miletus, in Greek colonies of Asia Minor (Ionia)
- **First Philosopher:** Thales of Miletus
- **Initial Content:** Cosmology



Cosmology (cosmos + logos): Rational knowledge of the ordered, organized world. Philosophy began as rational investigation of nature's order.

This certainty about philosophy's origins raises a historical puzzle: Did Greek philosophy arise independently, or did it depend on Eastern wisdom (Egyptian, Persian, Babylonian) and earlier Aegean civilizations (Crete, Mycenae)?

The Debate: Oriental Origins?

Ancient View

Plato and Aristotle claimed Greek philosophy derived from Eastern wisdom: Egyptian surveying became geometry, Babylonian astrology became astronomy, Persian genealogies became history.

1

2

Roman Period

Jewish and Christian thinkers (Philo, Eusebius) promoted Oriental origins to elevate Biblical tradition and show compatibility between faith and philosophy.

19th Century

"Greek Miracle" theory emerged: philosophy appeared spontaneously in Greece as unique, unprecedented achievement - Greeks as exceptional people.

3

Modern Scholarship

Balanced view: Greeks borrowed much from Orient and previous cultures, but transformed it profoundly through rational, systematic methods.

4



Modern Shifts (17th–18th c.)

1

Subject First

Examine the knower before nature; reflection inaugurates method.

2

Representation

Objects are known as ideas; clarity, distinctness, necessity.

3

Mathematized Nature

World as mechanical systems (Galileo, Newton); experiment and technology.



Enlightenment: Reason's Promise

The 18th century advanced the ideal of progress: reason can improve freedom and happiness; civilization perfects capacities; science and arts flourish; and economy becomes a central concern (physiocrats vs. mercantilists). Reason's light also fueled political revolutions and critiques of superstition.

Neither Oriental Nor Miracle: Greek Transformation

Modern research shows Greek philosophy emerged from both *continuity* with previous cultures and *radical innovation*. Greeks received much from Oriental and pre-Greek civilizations but transformed what they received:

1

Mythology Rationalized

Greek poets (Homer, Hesiod) humanized terrifying Eastern deities, gave rational narrative to origins, made myths intelligible

2

Practical Knowledge → Science

Egyptian surveying → geometry; Babylonian divination → astronomy; folk medicine → medical science. Universal, abstract, demonstrable knowledge

3

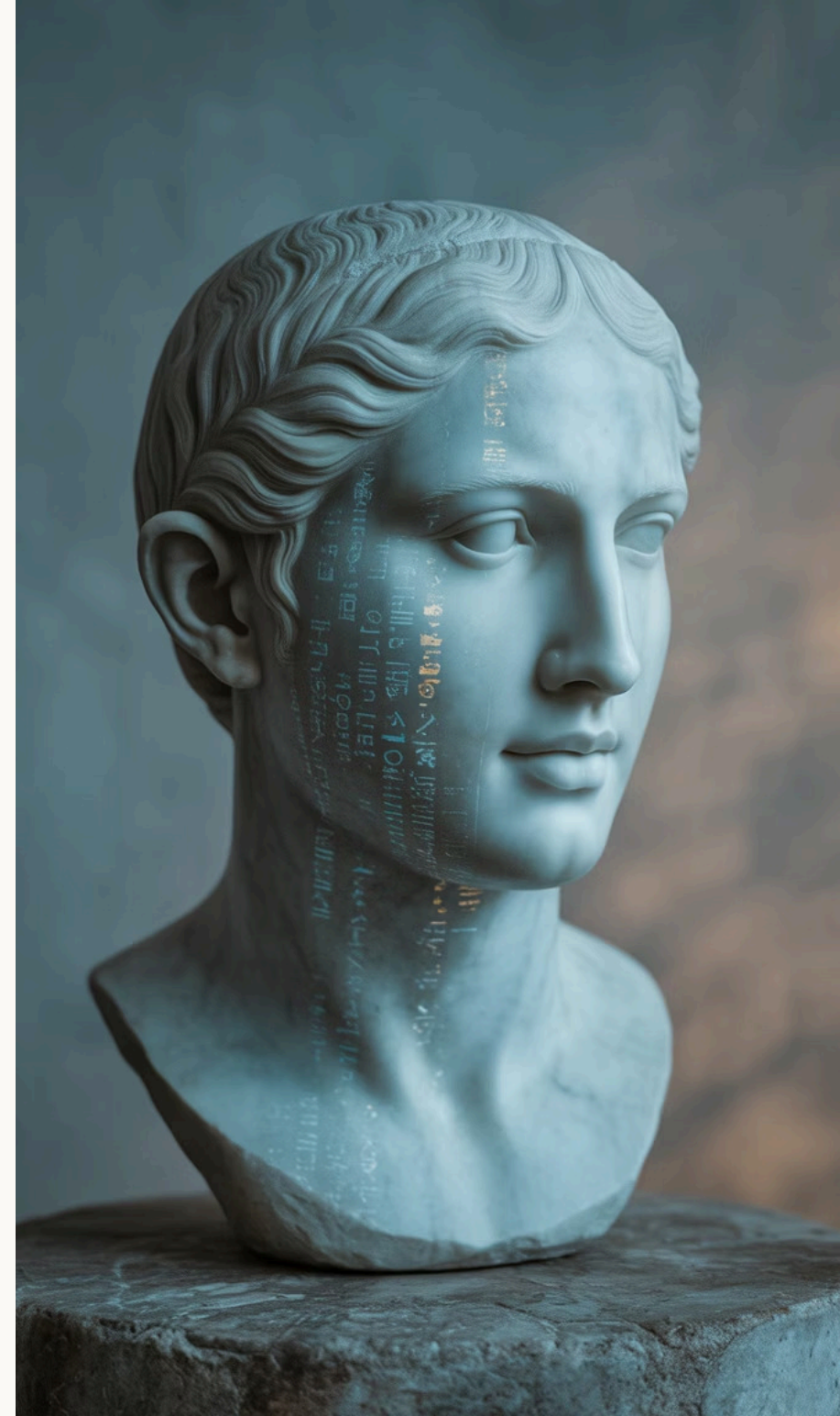
Politics Invented

Public debate, collective decisions, laws expressing public will - not arbitrary ruler's commands. Separation of political from familial and religious authority

4

Reason as Universal

Created idea of reason following systematic rules, norms, and laws valid universally - same for all times and places





Reason

Reason (ratio/logos) means ordered thinking and speaking: counting, measuring, relating, calculating. It opposes illusion, passion's blind sway, unexamined belief, and ecstatic dissolution. It affirms universal principles for thought and being, while modern science and culture challenge and expand these principles.

Myth and Philosophy

What is Myth?

A **myth** is narrative about origins (of stars, earth, humans, plants, animals, fire, death, tools, races, wars, power). From Greek *mythos* (tale, speech), derived from:

- *Mytheyo*: to narrate, tell stories
- *Mytheo*: to converse, announce, name

Myth is spoken discourse that listeners accept as true because they trust the narrator's authority.

Who Narrates Myth?

The **poet** - believed to be chosen by gods who reveal past events, showing origins of beings and things so the poet can transmit them.

The poet's word is *sacred*, coming from divine revelation. Myth is unquestionable, beyond challenge - it carries divine authority.



How Myths Explain Origins

01

Genealogy – Finding Parents

Everything arises from sexual relations between divine forces. These generate other gods, titans, heroes, humans, metals, plants, animals, qualities. Example: Eros (Cupid) born from poverty goddess Penia and cunning god Poros - hence love is simultaneously needy and clever.

02

Divine Conflict or Alliance

Events result from wars or alliances among gods. Homer's *Iliad* explains Greek-Trojan War victories by divine interventions - Zeus alternately supported each side based on which gods he allied with.

03

Divine Reward or Punishment

Gods reward obedience, punish disobedience. Prometheus stole fire for humans - was punished (chained to rock, liver eaten eternally). Humans punished too: Pandora's box released all evils into world.

Myths explain through **cosmogony** (cosmos-birth) and **theogony** (god-birth) - narratives of how world and deities came to be through generation, conflict, and divine will.

Two Faces of Reason

Objective Reason

Reality itself is rational: structures, laws, causes are intelligible.

Subjective Reason

Humans think, will, and speak according to rules; we can know and act.

Philosophy often seeks their concord: the rational world and the rational knower.

Did Philosophy Continue or Break from Myth?

A major debate in philosophical history: Did philosophy emerge *gradually transforming* myths, or through *radical rupture* with mythological thinking?

19th–Early 20th Century View

Philosophy broke radically from myth, becoming the first scientific explanation of reality. Reason replaced revelation, demonstration replaced divine authority.

Optimism about scientific power and human reason supported this "rupture" interpretation.

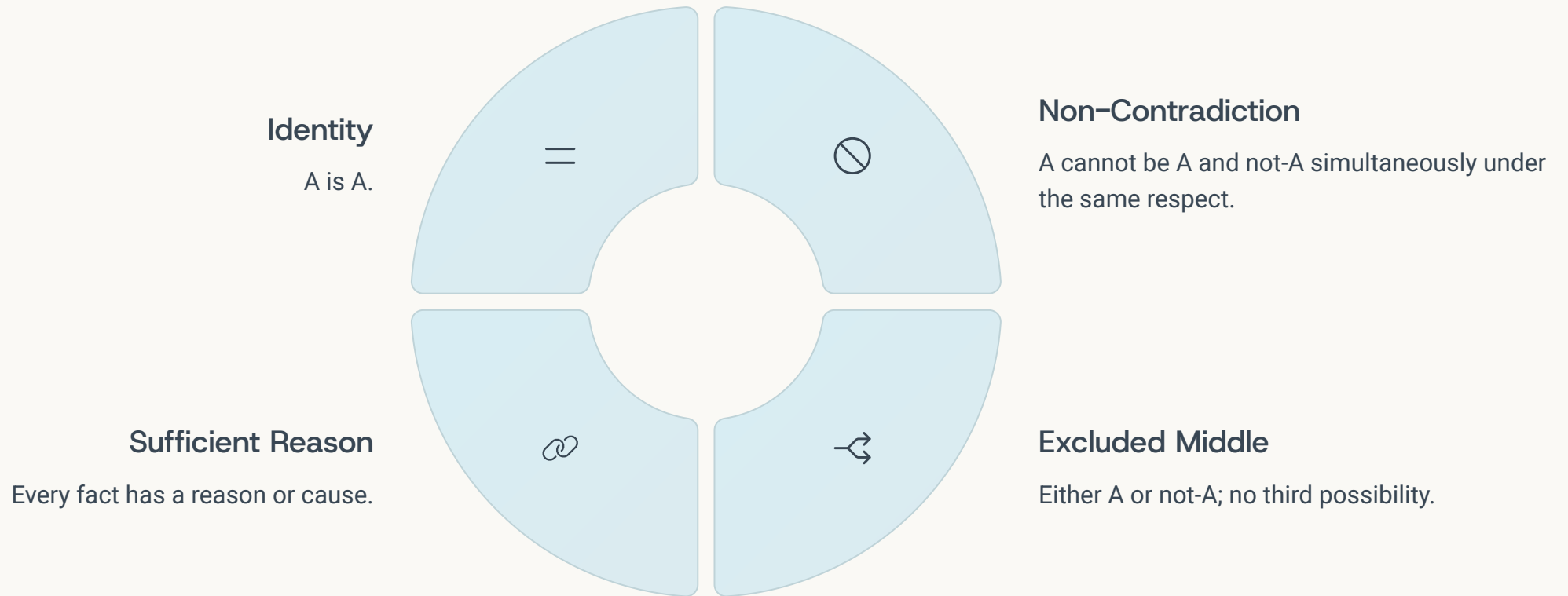
Mid–20th Century View

Anthropological studies revealed myths' profound importance in social organization. Greeks, like all peoples, believed their myths.

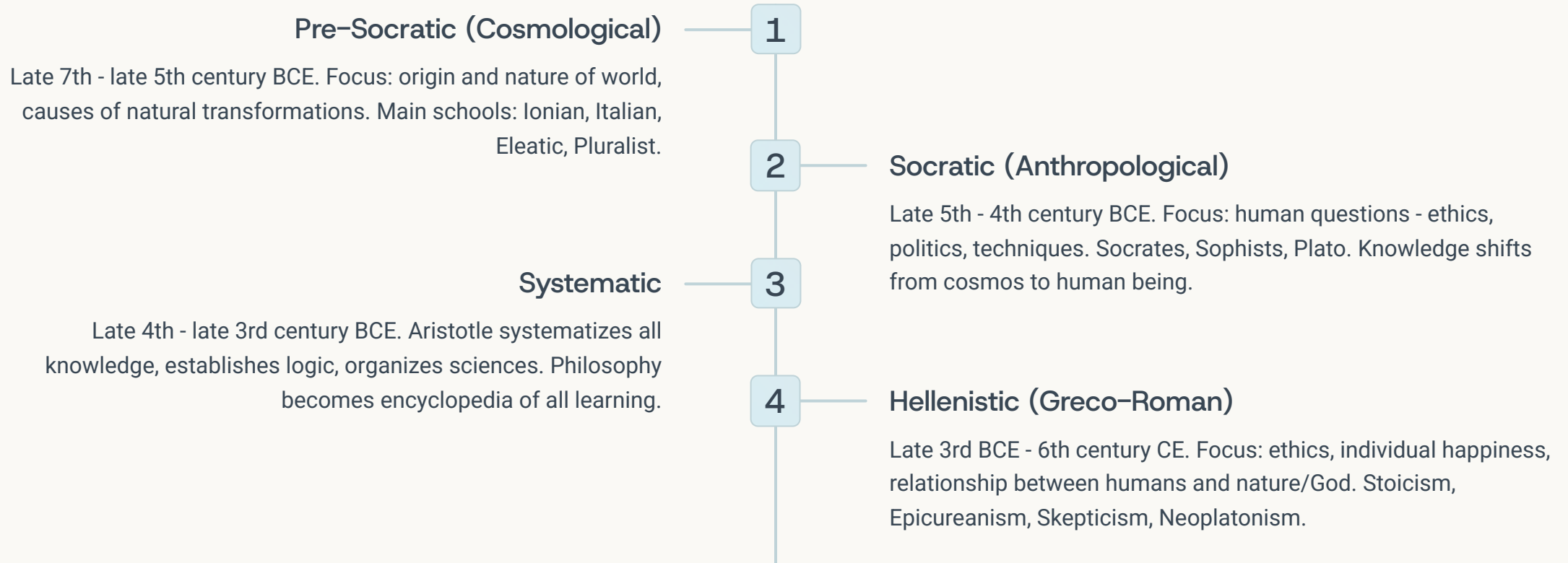
Philosophy born slowly from *within* myths through gradual rationalization - not sudden break.

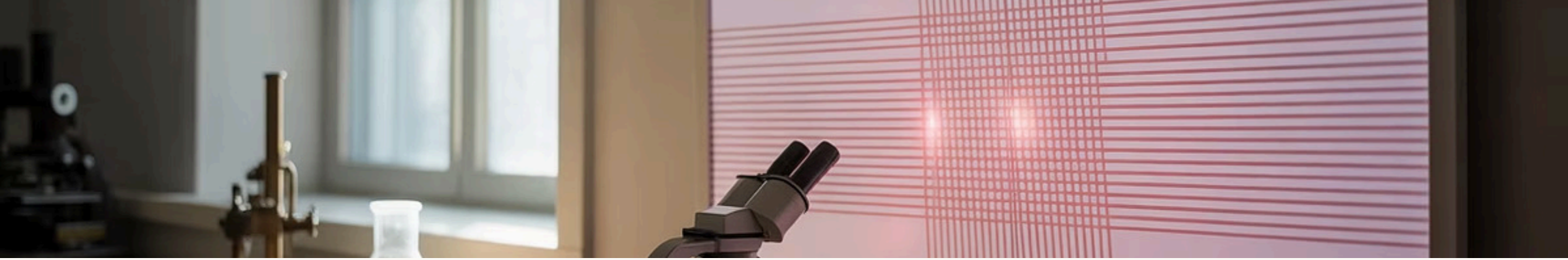
Current Consensus: Philosophy recognized myths' contradictions and limitations, then reformed and rationalized mythical narratives, transforming them into something entirely new - rational explanation based on demonstrable principles rather than divine authority.

Principles of Rationality



Periods of Greek Philosophy





Reason Expanded

20th-century developments nuanced these principles: wave–particle duality challenges a strict excluded middle; quantum indeterminacy limits classical causality; relativity ties laws to reference frames; logic reveals sense–reference distinctions (Frege); anthropology and psychoanalysis (ideology, unconscious) expose cultural plurality and non-rational depths. Result: an enlarged, not abandoned, rationality.

Rational Activity: Intuition and Reasoning

Intuition

Direct grasp (e.g., cogito; diagnostic insight). Often the starting or arriving point.

Induction

From many cases to a general law or theory.

Deduction

From general truths to necessary conclusions.

Abduction

Best explanation from clues (Peirce's "detective" logic).

Innate or Acquired?

Innatism

Plato: learning as recollection; Descartes: simple innate ideas (infinity, mathematics) guide knowledge.

Challenge: historical change and error in so-called “innate” contents.

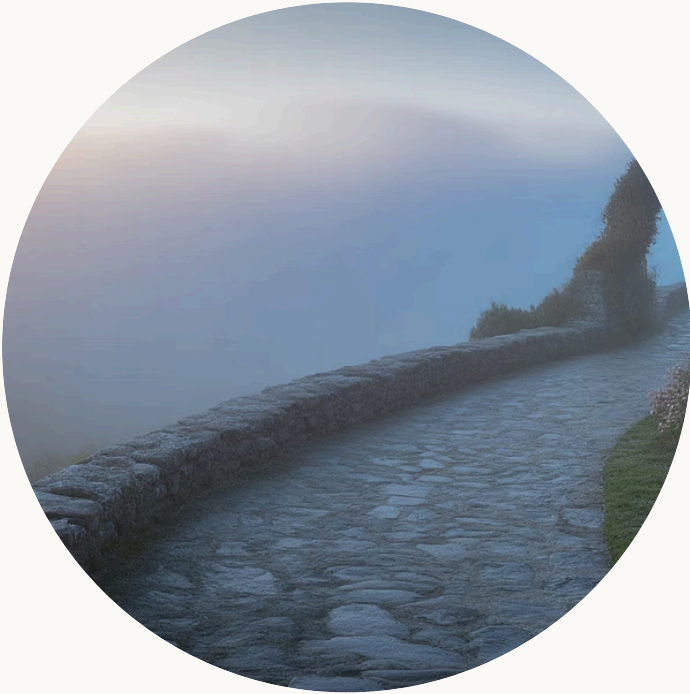
Empiricism

Locke–Hume: mind as “blank slate”; ideas from experience and habits of association.

Challenge: objectivity and necessity beyond habit.



Truth: Three Lineages



Aletheia (Greek)

Un-concealment: truth as manifest being; error as appearance.



Veritas (Latin)

Veracity and correspondence in saying what happened.



Emunah (Hebrew)

Trust/faithfulness: agreement, promise, reliability toward the future.

Theories of Truth

1

Correspondence

Idea matches reality; evidence as seeing what is.

2

Coherence

Logical fit within a system of claims; validity of reasoning.

3

Consensus

Community-agreed rules of inquiry and assessment.

4

Pragmatic

Verified in practice and experiment; fruitful consequences.

Often combined in actual research and debate.



Theories of Truth



Correspondence

Idea matches reality (aletheia/evidence).



Coherence

Logical consistency within a system.



Consensus

Agreed norms and tests in a community.



Pragmatic

Verified by successful results.



Seeking Truth: Methods and Virtues

1

Method

State terms clearly; justify premises; reveal steps.

2

Publicity

Communicable, teachable, and open to critique.

3

Veracity

Avoid ideology as concealment; aim at emancipation.



Knowledge: From Greeks to Moderns

Greeks mapped sources and grades: sensation, perception, imagination, memory, language, reasoning, intuition. Plato separates opinion from knowledge; Aristotle integrates degrees toward science. Moderns (Bacon, Descartes, Locke) place the knower at the center: analyze errors, methods, and the relation between subject and object before building science.



Logic: From Aristotle to Today

- **Aristotelian Core**

Categories, propositions (S is P), syllogism (deduction), and first principles.

- **Stoic and Medieval Advances**

Propositional patterns, quantification nuances, method of disputed questions.

- **Symbolic Logic**

Leibniz's dream realized by Boole, Frege, Russell: formal languages, models, and proof systems.

Logic: From Logos to Proof

Logic studies correct reasoning independent of content. Emerging from Heraclitus and Parmenides' tensions, Plato's dialectic sought essences beyond appearances. Aristotle forged logic as instrument (Organon): propositions, categories, principles, and the syllogism—a framework for demonstration and science.





Syllogisms and Valid Reasoning

Structure

Premise (major), premise (minor), conclusion. Example: All humans are mortal; Socrates is human; therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Terms & Rules

Three terms (S, P, M); avoid equivocation; conclusion follows the weaker (negative/particular) premise.

Avoid Fallacies

No four terms; no undistributed middle; respect quantity and quality constraints.



Further Reading

Suggested sources for deeper study:

- Chauí, M. Invitation to Philosophy.
- Marcondes, D. Introduction to the History of Philosophy.
- Luce, J.V. Course on Greek Philosophy.
- Hunnex, M. Philosophers and Schools of Thought (charts).
- Carr, E.H. What Is History?
- Aranha, M.L.A. Filosofando.