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**A Miscellany of
Modern Musings**
Reflections from
Modern Western
Thinkers

Peter Chong-Beng Gan

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Peter Chong-Beng Gan
Penang, Malaysia

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Chong-Beng Gan has an interest in philosophy that encompasses several fields, but his favourite is philosophy of religion. Apart from research and writing, teaching a philosophy class with enthusiastic students ever eager to engage their teacher and challenge him and their classmates with difficult and mind-blowing questions never fail to affirm him in why he's doing what he's doing.



Introduction

Abstract What is philosophy? This introductory chapter defines the method and object of philosophical inquiry, and the value of such an inquiry. Philosophy is literally “love of wisdom”. The wisdom spoken of here is said to be derived from the pursuit of knowledge via a quest for the most significant, general, and fundamental matters pertaining to life, the universe, or just reality as a whole. This chapter also provides an overview of the historical span of the philosophical tradition in the Western world. The four main divisions in this tradition are ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary. We shall explore the main differences and commonalities between them. It is important to note that there are existing disagreements over the number and form the divisions should take.

Keywords Philosophy · Wisdom · Ancient · Medieval · Modern · Contemporary

“Philosophy” is derived from the Greek φιλοσοφία (*philosophia*), which is a conjunction of φιλεῖν “*philein*” (“to love”) and σοφία “*sophia*” (“wisdom”). Hence, philosophy means “love of wisdom”. The wisdom spoken of here is said to be derived from the pursuit of knowledge via a quest for the most significant, general, and fundamental matters

pertaining to life, the universe, or just reality as a whole. Philosophers resort to the use of sense perception, reason, and imagination in order to formulate and assess arguments that pertain to their quest mentioned above. It appears that this method is also employed by the sciences and other academic researches. One way to attempt to distinguish between philosophy and the sciences is to understand that the quest in philosophy is for that which is the most general and fundamental and has significance for us and the universe. In other words, philosophers seek ultimate mechanisms rather than proximate ones. Learning philosophy should “force you to think through your ideas, connect them, confront alternative views, and understand what you prefer and why you prefer it”.¹

It has been established that René Descartes (1596–1650) marks the beginning of Modern Philosophy in the History of Western Philosophy.² However, the other contender for the title of “Father of Modern Philosophy” is Francis Bacon (1561–1626). What is interesting is that in this period, there is hardly any mention of Aristotle. Descartes, for instance, found little use for a number of Aristotle’s theories.³ Furthermore, modern philosophy is also characterized by the presence of key philosophers who are unaffiliated to universities.⁴ Anthony Kenny thinks that it is good to abandon Aristotelian physics on account of their lack of factual accuracies. However, he later notes that there are both advantages and disadvantages with leaving Aristotle out of the discourse.⁵

What stands out in the outlook of Descartes and Bacon, notes Roger Scruton, is their opposition to traditional authority and their endeavour to construct some form of a philosophical method.⁶ However, Scruton observes that while Descartes proceeded to advance in his philosophical

¹ Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy*, 8th Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2006, 2010), p. xviii.

² Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 1981, 2002), p. 12.

³ See Walter Ott, *Causation and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 39–43.

⁴ Anthony Kenny, *The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006), p. xii.

⁵ Kenny, *Rise of Modern Philosophy*, p. xiii.

⁶ Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 22.

investigations spurred on by a moving away from traditionally accepted foundations and towards a development of a key method in philosophy, Bacon did not take this direction. And so, Scruton does not think that the title “Father of Modern Philosophy” should be given to Bacon. Bacon was critical of Aristotle’s methods of science, which he saw as flawed when it comes to discovering or inferring new phenomena. This is on account of Aristotle’s leanings towards a priori, before sense observation, deductions, which lack any formation of a reliable method for scientific discoveries and inferences. Both Descartes and Bacon were aware that they were pioneers in a new beginning in the whole enterprise of scholarly philosophizing. In the face of Pyrrhonist (Pyrrho of Elis, 3rd-century BCE Greek sceptic) scepticism and criticism of the possibility of scientific discoveries, Descartes asserted that with a suitable method in science, we can arrive at reasonable scientific truths. Bacon was confident in the capacity of human beings to arrive at scientific knowledge despite the circulating belief in the decline of the human faculty of knowing. Both Descartes and Bacon insisted that by adhering to strict rules of inquiry, it is possible to engage in fruitful scientific research.

During the Middle Ages, philosophy as a discipline of research and teaching was very much placed in the Arts or Theology departments. In there, philosophy came under the close watch of the church or state and academic authorities. In Modern philosophy, we find philosophers working outside of the scrutiny of these institutions. Creative philosophers producing new ideas during this period were very much like independent researchers. Writes Steven Nadler:

By the seventeenth century, however, although it was still the case that anyone who would earn a living by doing philosophical thinking and writing had either to belong to a university faculty or to teach in a college, it had become more common to find original philosophical minds working outside the strictures of the university ~ i.e., ecclesiastic ~ framework. Newton, to be sure, did have a professorship at Cambridge; Berkeley was an Anglican bishop, and Arnauld and Malebranche were Catholic priests. But Spinoza was an excommunicated Jew; Leibniz was employed as a librarian, diplomatic adviser and historian to German dukes; and Bacon,

Descartes, Locke, Hume and many others were what would today be called “independent scholars.”⁷

Nevertheless, having mentioned the above, we should bear in mind that there was no radical departure from one period to another. What this means is that, even though it seems that Descartes marks a new shift in the landscape of philosophy, he still has some links to the preceding philosophy of the medieval thinkers, especially in his reliance on their methods in investigating metaphysical matters. Interestingly also, it is in the modern period that the natural sciences began to break away from philosophy to form their own independent academic disciplines (18th cent.), with the social sciences following soon (19th cent.).⁸ Furthermore, in spite of differences in focus, method, and theoretical presuppositions between the medieval and modern systems, philosophy still has the basic branches such as logic, epistemology, axiology, and metaphysics, which are shared by all the thinkers in their explorations and reflections throughout the different periods in history.

HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY—AN OVERVIEW

Generally, when we look at the range of Western Philosophy as stretching across history, we can say that there are four broad stages: ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary. Ancient philosophy is said to extend from around 600 BCE to around 500 CE. The closing date— is believed to be marked by an important event—“the banning of the teaching of Greek philosophy at the University of Athens by the Roman Christian Emperor Justinian, in AD 529”.⁹ Important to note that despite this ban, philosophical reflections and research still continued. The history of Western philosophy began in the sixth century BCE in Ancient Greece (though more accurately, this birth place included some islands in the Mediterranean and Asia Minor [modern-day Türkiye]), and from its development in Western Europe it spread to the rest of the world. Of

⁷ Steven Nadler, “Introduction”, in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 1.

⁸ Antony Flew, *An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Popper* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), pp. 18ff.

⁹ John Shand, *Philosophy and Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy* (London: University College London Press, 1993, 2003), p. 1.