A classical painting of a philosopher, likely Plato, shown in profile. He has a balding head, a full beard, and is wearing a dark robe. His right hand is raised, palm facing forward, with fingers slightly spread, as if gesturing or speaking. His left hand is resting against his face, with his fingers curled near his temple. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# PHILOSOPHERS

EDITOR: NICOLA CHALTON

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE WHO ALTERED THE COURSE OF HISTORY

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GARETH FITZGERALD, MEREDITH MACARDLE, ROBERT TEED

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BASEMENT PRESS

# Socrates



Socrates was primarily a critic of received opinion. He claimed no knowledge for himself, but by engaging the young aristocrats of Athens in conversation, he exposed their ignorance about matters of essential moral concern. Among his positive doctrines are the notion that no one willingly does wrong and that living virtuously is its own reward.

Socrates' mother was a midwife and his father a sculptor and it may be that he made his living as a stonemason. It is well documented that he cared little for his physical appearance, going everywhere barefoot; that he was rather ugly but possessed great physical fortitude; and that on occasion when absorbed in thought he would stand motionless for hours apparently oblivious to his surroundings. Except for his military service in the Peloponnesian wars as a young man, Socrates spent his whole life in his native city of Athens. He is said to have preferred to remain in the city because he wanted to learn from people, and there are more people in the city than the country.

His initial philosophical interest appears to have been in **natural philosophy** and he was attracted to the work of **Anaxagoras**. However, he soon became disillusioned with Anaxagoras' failure to explain the purpose for which the universe is made and turned his attention instead to **ethical** matters. Like his contemporaries, the **Sophists**, Socrates would engage the young men of Athens in discussion of moral issues, but unlike them denied he had any special knowledge to impart and refused payment. Possibly under the influence of **Zeno of Elea**, Socrates deployed the **dialectical**

method of question and answer by which he would try to discover what knowledge his interlocutors possessed. Unfortunately, he repeatedly found that they knew as little as he did. While Socrates claimed they ought to be pleased to have their ignorance exposed, many Athenians did not see it this way, and during his career Socrates succeeded in making many powerful enemies. When the oracle at Delphi proclaimed that there was no one wiser than Socrates, he professed surprise. His own explanation was that he was the one person who was not under the illusion that he knew what he did not.

After Athens' defeat to Sparta in 404 BCE, Socrates lived through the brief regime of the thirty tyrants, a period where many were executed by being forced to drink hemlock. During this time he remained true to his principles in the face of personal risk and defied the authorities by refusing to take part in the arrest of an innocent man. On that occasion he escaped punishment, but, as a thorn in the side of the restored democratic regime, he was tried and executed a few years later. Socrates faced his death with equanimity, secure in the knowledge that his personal integrity was intact and apparently confident of the immortality of his soul.

## Essential philosophy

### Socrates the gadfly

Because Socrates wrote nothing himself what we know of his philosophical outlook comes to us through the writings of his followers, most eminent among these, **Plato**. How faithful the Platonic portrait of Socrates is to the historical figure is a matter of debate. However, what seems fairly certain is that Socrates saw it as his divinely given mission to expose the muddled thinking of his contemporaries on the important matters affecting how we live. He likened himself to a gadfly: an irritant that would not allow people to become complacent in their attitudes, but constantly reminded them of the need to question and critically reflect on their assumptions. The dialectical method he employed was designed in the first instance to expose the hidden confusions in people's thinking. Typically he would pose questions such as "What is justice?" or "What is courage?" and encourage his interlocutors

to propose definitions that would capture the essential nature of such moral virtues. When the definitions were shown to be wanting, usually because they failed to identify the single feature shared by all just individuals or all courageous acts, Socrates would conclude that he and his companion clearly had no knowledge of the virtue in question.

### Socrates the midwife

But Socrates appears not to have been a **sceptic** about the possibility of knowledge and saw the recognition of one's own ignorance not as an end, but as the necessary spur to further inquiry. By continuing the dialectical process of question and answer Socrates hoped to reveal the knowledge hidden within the minds of others. This process, the dialectic or *elenchus*, he likened to giving birth and himself to a midwife, who helped others bring forth understanding.

- Socrates, as well as his contemporaries the Sophists, oversaw a shift of philosophical focus from the natural world to human conduct which profoundly influenced the future development of philosophical inquiry.
- Socrates' commitment to the unwavering search for truth and his willingness to die rather than compromise his moral integrity or philosophical principles set the standard for future philosophers.
- His influence on Plato is of particular significance and is fundamental to the whole development of **Western philosophy**. Plato appears to have accepted from Socrates that a virtuous character is of greater worth than material and social success, and much of his philosophical work is devoted to showing that it is in one's best interests to be moral.

- c.470 BCE Born in Athens, in Greece. Remains in Athens his whole life where he marries Xanthippe and has several children. According to **Diogenes Laertius**, Socrates helps to sculpt the figures of the Graces on the Acropolis. He avoids involving himself in public life, regarding it as too risky to a lover of truth.
- c.450 BCE Meets **Parmenides** and **Zeno of Elea** on their visit to Athens.
- c.432 BCE **Protagoras**, the most eminent of the Sophists, arrives in Athens.
- 399 BCE Just a few years after the restoration of democracy in Athens, Socrates is condemned to death on vague charges of impiety and corrupting the young. Although, according to Plato he has the opportunity to escape, he refuses, electing instead to accept his punishment and drink the poison hemlock.

*... it is never right to do a wrong or return a wrong or defend one's self against injury by retaliation*

Socrates in Plato's *Crito* (c.360 BCE)

*The Death of Socrates* by Jacques-Louis David, 1787.



### The Socratic paradox

Although Socrates himself never claimed to have knowledge, he does appear to have held certain positive doctrines. Principal among these is the Socratic **paradox**, that no one willingly chooses to act immorally. On the face of it this appears clearly false. After all, there are all kinds of action one recognizes as wrong but which one may choose to perform if one judges that they will bring benefit to oneself. For example, someone may choose to lie, cheat, or steal if they believe they can get away with it and gain some advantage. Socrates, however, held that this betrays some confused thinking. For in acting immorally they actually harm their own character far more than they harm their victim. While they may succeed in stripping others of material possessions and other trappings of worldly accomplishment, genuine human happiness is a matter of inner harmony and self-

mastery rather than material success. To come to this realization, however, requires some careful reflection on the true nature of virtue; reflection which will show, according to Socrates, that acting morally is the true route to personal flourishing. Hence another of his paradoxical claims, that virtue is knowledge, or, in other words, that if one truly knows what is good one cannot but choose to do it.

Whatever the details of Socrates' views on **ethics**, it is his philosophical method and the position he gives it in human life which is his important legacy. He believed that the unexamined life is not worth living and that only by subjecting our common beliefs to critical scrutiny can we hope to discover how best to live. Thus he placed the unswerving use of critical reason at the heart not just of the philosophical enterprise, but of the good life.

# Plato



Alongside his student Aristotle, Plato has had the profoundest impact on the development of Western thought of any thinker. He is the first philosopher whose works survive in significant numbers and his systematic, rigorous explorations of a great range of subjects have such profundity and are written with such literary genius that they remain the subject of intellectual fascination to this day.

From an aristocratic Athenian family, Plato is thought to have had political ambitions in his youth, but, under the influence of his teacher **Socrates**, appears to have given them up fairly early in life. A key event leading to his disillusionment with the Athenian democracy was its implication in the trial and execution of Socrates in 399 BCE. Plato, then aged 30, left Athens and traveled extensively in the Greek world, and possibly as far afield as Egypt. He spent some time in Sicily teaching Dion, the brother-in-law of the tyrant of Syracuse, Dionysius I. After his return to Athens he founded the first institution of higher education, the Academy, which survived until it was closed down by the Roman Emperor Justinian in 529 CE.

With the death of Dionysius I, Plato returned to Sicily to tutor the young Prince Dionysius II in the hope of transforming the tyrant into a philosophically enlightened ruler. However, it appears Dionysius did not have the requisite qualities, and is even said to have made Plato his prisoner. Plato eventually escaped back to Athens, where he spent the rest of his days teaching at the Academy.

Socrates was the most significant influence on Plato's career. Because of him Plato devoted himself to the philosophical life, and the manner of his teacher's death seems to have prompted Plato to defend his

memory by making records of his philosophical discussions. Plato's early dialogues are clearly not verbatim transcriptions, but they are generally accepted as being fairly accurate in their portrayal of Socrates and his approach to philosophy. These works involve Socrates exploring **ethical** concepts in search of proper definitions but are largely inconclusive, so that it is not until the middle period dialogues that Plato begins to develop his own doctrines. Socrates remains the main speaker but is now the mouthpiece for Plato's views. In the later dialogues Plato begins to question some of the central doctrines elaborated in the middle period, once again making the matter of identifying Plato's own position problematic.

*If no pure knowledge is possible in the company of the body, then either it is totally impossible to acquire knowledge, or it is only possible after death ....*

Phaedo (fourth century BCE)

## Essential philosophy

### The Ideas

The central theory of Plato's entire philosophical system is the so-called "theory of **Ideas**" or "Forms". To understand the theory we need to return to Socrates' project as pursued in the early dialogues. There Plato describes Socrates' unsuccessful endeavors to discover definitions for moral qualities such as courage or virtue. The problem that Socrates draws attention to is that no particular courageous act or person is totally or perfectly courageous, but only to some degree or in some respects. Courage itself, in other words, is not the same as any particular acts of courage, rather, the general term appears to refer to what all courageous acts have in common, and which makes them courageous. This is not any particular thing in the physical world, but rather what philosophers nowadays call a "**universal**". Since universals are not identifiable with particular acts or objects that we observe with the senses, Plato reckoned that they must exist independently of them and so that they are apprehended by the

intellect alone. They are, in other words, "Ideas" – *eidos* in Greek. Platonic Ideas are perfect or ideal versions of the particular things that exist in the physical world. So an act of courage is akin to an imitation of, or approximation to, the Idea of courage.

In the same way, Plato figured that there was an ideal realm of geometric and mathematical objects which we recognize with the mind rather than the senses. Perfect circles and exactly straight lines are Ideas we grasp intuitively with the mind in order to do geometry, and yet we never encounter such things in the physical world. All circular objects are only approximately circular – they fall short of the ideal. It is unclear how far Plato was prepared to extend the theory of Ideas, but it appears he may have believed that there are Ideas corresponding to all general terms. This would mean, for example, that there is an Idea of the "bed", a perfect exemplar perceived in the mind's eye of a carpenter, which functions as a model when fashioning an actual bed.

## Legacy, truth, consequence

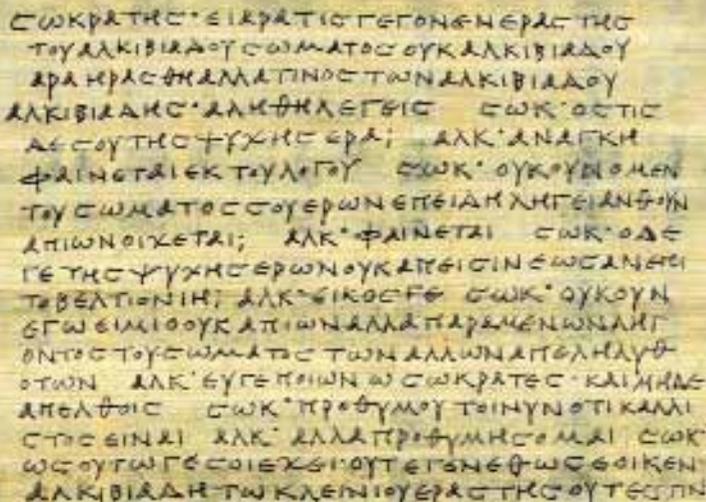
■ Along with **Aristotle**, Plato is the most influential philosopher in the development of Western thought. So significant is he, that the mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) called the whole of **Western philosophy** a series of footnotes to Plato.

■ Indirectly he influenced the development of Christianity: **Neo-Platonism**, as developed by thinkers such as Plotinus (204/5–270 CE), came to inform Christian theology. This process was so successful that in the nineteenth century **Friedrich Nietzsche** was able to call Christianity “*Platonism for the masses*”.

■ One of his key works, *The Republic*, represents the first attempt in the Western tradition to describe an ideal state or utopia. Other examples include **Saint Augustine’s** “City of God” (413–26 CE) and Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* (1516).

## Key dates

c. 428 BCE	Born in Athens, Greece.
399 BCE	Socrates is executed and Plato leaves Athens. Where he travels is unknown, although legend has him visit Egypt.
387 BCE	Arrives in Sicily where he encounters the Pythagorean school (see <b>Pythagoras</b> , pages 12–13) and becomes involved with the rulers of Syracuse.
c. 385 BCE	Returns to Athens and, with the mathematician Theaetetus (c. 417–369 BCE), co-founds the Academy, often considered the first European university.
367 BCE	Visits Sicily, and again in 361 BCE; otherwise remains in Athens.
347 BCE	Dies in Athens.



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ΑΛΚΙΒΙΑΔΗ ΤΩ ΚΛΕΝΙΟΥ ΕΡΑΣΤΗΣ ΟΥΤΕ ΣΠΗ

Papyrus fragment of Plato's *Alcibiades*, c.131 CE.

**The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed ... of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands.**

*Republic* (fourth century BCE)

### The Good

Through the use of the **dialectical** method of cooperative inquiry, philosophers can hope to analyze concepts and eventually acquire knowledge of the Ideas. This process reaches its apogee in knowledge of the ultimate Idea, the Good. Knowledge of the Good enables us to know all other things because we can then understand the ultimate purpose or reason for all things. Genuine knowledge must concern what is unchanging and eternal, namely the Ideas; by contrast, since the physical world is subject to change Plato held that it can only be an object of belief. In this way he draws a distinction between the real world of Ideas and the apparent world which is perceived by the senses.

### The soul

Since it is the mind which apprehends the unchanging Ideas, it must, like them, be incorruptible. In other words, the soul is

immortal and must exist before birth. Learning in this life is in reality recollecting what we knew before we were born, and when we die the soul will be reborn into a new body. Philosophers, in their pursuit of the eternal Ideas, prepare their souls for a return to the eternal realm and in so doing may escape the cycle of rebirth and live forever among the Ideas.

### Politics

Plato's philosophy is not purely speculative and he never lost his concern for the politics of this world, writing extensively on how an ideal state might be realized. He opposed **democracy** principally because he believed governing was a skill requiring specialized knowledge and extended training. *The Republic* (c.360 BCE) provides a detailed blueprint of the ideal of political organization in which an elite class of philosophers rules.

# Traditional Indian philosophy



Shankara

Indian philosophy has always been multi-faceted, tangled, and changing. From the Vedas originated Hinduism, as well as Buddhism and Jainism – two religious philosophies that borrowed freely from and gave back to Hinduism and each other. Then, in what is called the Classical Hindu Period from about 300 BCE to 1200 CE, the six classical systems of Indian philosophy flowered in Hindu thought.

We know very little about the lives of most of the “classic” Indian philosophers, but they might have continued the ancient tradition of propounding their views to a circle of listeners, who would gather around them somewhere in the open air.

Gautama (no relation to the Buddha) chose to write his *Nyaya Suttas* in a series of very brief **aphorisms**. He may have been a contemporary of the **Buddhist** thinker **Nagarjuna**.

Shankara, the **Vedanta** philosopher, was only 32 when he died but he was accepted as a great teacher while still young. He determined to become a monk during a crocodile attack, by

renouncing the world so he would be pure at the time of death. Upon this, so says the tradition, the crocodile let him go, and he became a wandering ascetic, teaching, debating, and founding four monasteries. He was only 16 when, having won a debate against a famous philosopher, the philosopher’s wife challenged him to demonstrate that if he had mastered everything that was important, he was also a master of sexual skills. He demanded a month’s time-out, went into a trance and, leaving his body behind, entered the body of a well-known lover, from whom he learnt everything there was to know about the “science of sex”.

## Essential philosophy

By about 1200 BCE the **Vedic** religion, the forerunner of **Hinduism**, was established in India. Using the revealed Vedas (the oldest Hindu sacred texts), which literally means “knowledge”, the religion showed how to invoke the Vedic gods, who were seen as arising from the basic essence of the universe. Centuries later commentaries on the Vedas were written (the *Upanishads*), questioning some Vedic rituals and sacrifices, and introducing new concepts such as meditation as a means of self-knowledge and a step towards directly approaching the universal essence or Brahman.

Most philosophers accepted that the essence of the individual self, or Atman, was a reflection of the Brahman, and that by understanding the true nature of self or consciousness humans could achieve a state of pure bliss, or enlightenment. This would therefore liberate them from re-birth and the pains of the physical world.

The **sceptical** trend in philosophy, about 600 BCE, contributed to the development of **Jainism** and Buddhism. Consolidated by the ascetic Vardhamana Mahavira, “The Great Hero” (599–527 BCE), Jainism teaches right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct as a way to understand the universe. A young prince, Gautama Siddhartha, born about 566 BCE, sought a middle way between asceticism and **hedonism**, and through meditation reached Buddhahood, or enlightenment, in turn teaching others his way of escaping the bonds of existence.

Buddhism and Jainism are considered to be heterodox schools or *darshanas* (meaning that they incorporate unorthodox beliefs), whereas the six classic *darshanas* (ways of seeing the divine) of Indian philosophy are all orthodox, in that they all accept the

authority of the Vedas, and just vary in their interpretations. The classic *darshanas* are as follows:

### Samkhya

Meaning “counting” or “enumeration”, Samkhya or Sankhya is probably the oldest school. It offers an explanation of human nature by proposing a **dualism** between spirit or individual consciousness (*purusha*) and primordial matter (*prakriti*). From the interactions between spirit and matter, the world is made manifest in an enumerated order such as intellect, ego, mind, senses, powers of action, material elements. Matter consists of three qualities or *gunas* – activity, pureness or steadiness, and dullness – a doctrine that was later accepted by other philosophical traditions. The Samkhya way to enlightenment or liberation is through knowledge of the essential dualism of the universe.

### Yoga

Literally meaning “union” or “yoking”, Yoga is also considered the “discipline school” in the sense of the discipline of achieving liberation. There is little intellectual discussion in Yoga, because its goal is union with pure consciousness, a reflection of the universal spirit, and neither pure consciousness or spirit can be approached through mere thoughts. Instead, practical disciplines show the way to separate matter and spirit. Although ancient in origin, the sage Patanjali drew the philosophy together into an eight-limbed system, including principles such as restraint and concentration, as well as posture and breath control. Yogic disciplines also include

## Legacy

- The six classic schools of Indian philosophy between them forged the philosophy behind modern Hinduism, a religion and a way of life.
- Some of their practices, particularly spiritual meditation and physical yoga, have become popular around the world.
- On the whole the schools of philosophy were for philosophers. Most ordinary people were more involved in devotional religious activity.

A standing Shiva sculpture, date unknown. In some Hindu traditions, Shankara is regarded as an incarnation of Shiva.



## Key dates

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 200–100 BCE  | Gautama writes the <i>Nyaya Sūtras</i> , founding the Nyaya school. |
| 200–100 BCE  | Patanjali writes the <i>Yoga Sūtras</i> .                           |
| c.788–820 CE | Life of the Vedānta philosopher Shankara.                           |

***When true knowledge is attained, wrong notions disappear; on the disappearance of wrong notions the six defects disappear; the disappearance of defects is followed by the disappearance of activity [leading to cessation of pain], followed by final release, which is the highest good.***

Gautama, *Nyaya Sūtras* (200–100 BCE)

chanting, sexual practices, and even the use of some drugs. Overall, Yoga means much more than the physical exercises of hatha yoga, the form that is most commonly seen in the West. Patanjali's treatise on Yoga, the *Yoga Sūtras*, dates from 200–100 BCE.

### Nyaya

Based on the *Nyaya Sūtras* of Aksapada Gautama, probably written in the second century BCE, this is the school of logic, literally meaning “analysis”, which used intellectual reason to uncover the true nature of reality and thereby reach enlightenment. Gautama tested how knowledge can be acquired, and how its validity can be identified, producing a system of logic and methodology that was adopted by most of the other schools.

Nyaya logic had five parts: hypothesis, reason, example, application, conclusion. The methods of gaining knowledge were: **perception** or intuition, **inference** (including logic), comparison, and testimony from a trustworthy source.

### Vaisheshika

This was an “**atomist**” school, and has been called the school of pluralistic **metaphysics**. Meaning “particular”, it proposes that everything in the physical world can be reduced to separate atoms – mind, space, self, as well as the four elements of water, earth, fire, and air. The spiritual essence of the universe is a force, giving consciousness or soul to these atoms.

Vaisheshika was very close to Nyaya, and eventually the two systems merged.

### Mimamsa

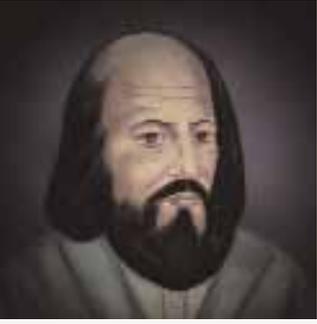
Meaning “interpretation”, the Mimamsa or Purva Mimamsa school believed simply that the Vedas supplied the only true source of knowledge, and that proper performance of Vedic rituals – sacrifices, chants, priestly prayers – was the way to liberation. Mimamsa philosophers originally felt that the other schools might have useful logical ideas, but all focused too much on individual desire for freedom, whereas the correct approach was to put aside personal desires and concentrate solely on the Vedas. This school actually had a major influence because it laid down widely accepted rules for interpreting the Vedas.

### Vedānta

Literally meaning “end of the Vedas”, Vedānta focused on interpreting the spiritual and philosophical ideas of the later or second part of the Vedas, sometimes called the knowledge part, especially the *Upanishads* but also the epic *Bhagavad Gita*. It had little time for rituals and prayers, instead stressing **mystical** methods of understanding such as meditation and self-discipline. Most Vedānta philosophers asserted nonduality, that everything in the universe is one, and that belief in the existence of individual things is due to ignorance or illusion. If this illusion is removed, one sees the truth, that individual consciousness is the same as the universal spirit.

Different sub-schools arose, but Advaita Vedānta, consolidated by Shankara (c.788–820 CE), became the central theme in Hindu thought. Advaita Vedānta is firmly nondualistic.

# Al-Ghazali (Algazel)



Known in the West as Algazel, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali was one of the greatest medieval Islamic philosophers. A mystic who wrote in depth about his own spiritual journey, he also studied the ancient Greek philosophers and explored the relationship between reason and religion. He helped ensure that Sufism, the mystical wing of Islam, was accepted by orthodox Muslims.

Al-Ghazali was a young boy when his father, a **Sufi**, died, but a family friend took him and his younger brother in, and ensured the boys had a good education. He concentrated on Islamic law or jurisprudence, and soon gained such a reputation for scholarship that he was brought to the camp court of the vizier of Iran. This was a traveling capital city that moved around the country, as big as a static city but consisting only of tents and temporary structures.

The vizier became al-Ghazali's patron and secured for him the appointment of a professor at the Nizamiyah University of Baghdad, one of the leading centers of learning at the time.

After only a few years of teaching, however, al-Ghazali went through a spiritual crisis, following which he gave up his academic pursuits and worldly interests. He sorted out his finances to ensure his family would not suffer, then became a wandering ascetic, making the pilgrimage to Mecca that every devout Muslim is supposed to make at least once in their lifetime, and roaming around the Middle East. He visited Jerusalem in Palestine (modern Israel)

and Damascus in Syria, before returning to Tus and living as a monastic Sufi, isolated from the material world and spending his time contemplating his philosophical ideas or writing them down.

Eventually he was persuaded to go back to the academic world, and he taught for a few years in Nishapur before withdrawing again into solitary **mysticism**. He also became associated with superstition and magic. Exploring the patterns made by religious symbols, he created a magic square out of the numbers representing the opening letters of the verses or *suras* 19 and 23 of the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an. In a magic square each line whether across or down adds up to the same figure, in this case 15. Al-Ghazali never expected it, but this magic square was named after him and was adopted for amulets and magical talismans.

Al-Ghazali was a popular lecturer, drawing more than 300 students to a talk, and his many books – at least 70 on philosophy, science, religion, mysticism, psychology, and even etiquette – also gave him a powerful reputation as a scholar as well as a magician.

## Essential philosophy

### Sufism

By the time al-Ghazali became a scholar the mystical Sufi movement was so extreme that its followers were neglecting the basic observances of Islam. He returned the movement to its religious roots, established a rigorous discipline, and showed all Muslims how Sufism could be the spiritual culmination of a devout life. Al-Ghazali explained his own spiritual journey away from rationalist explanations of religion and towards mystical experience in his autobiographical work, *The Deliverance From Error*. This book showed his passionate belief that a human being could approach God in his or her heart.

### Opposition to philosophy

Al-Ghazali was adamantly opposed to excessively **rationalist** philosophers whose speculations ran contrary to established Islamic theology. **Avicenna** was one of those whom he particularly singled out for criticism, arguing that he had reached wrong conclusions such as believing that the universe was eternal, just as God is eternal. Al-Ghazali also rejected the view that God only has knowledge of abstract **universals**, not of particular things.

He was particularly sceptical of the ancient Greeks, and he attacked in his writings those people who slavishly followed old viewpoints.

His main work opposing these sorts of scholars was *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in which he rejected the view that prophetic visions could be received by every purified person, rather than just by God's selected prophets. He therefore put forward a **sceptical** view that would not be seen again for centuries, but at the same time his opposition to rationalists led him to insist that the will of God is acted out in human interactions. Ironically, many of al-Ghazali's own works used the philosophical methods he had previously abhorred.

### *The Revival of Religious Sciences*

In his book of this name al-Ghazali examines a wide range of subjects, from his own knowledge of Islamic law to the unique reflective power owned by human beings. In a later text he points out that the human self contains two qualities that without doubt separate humanity from animals – intellect and will. He also distinguished between animal will, driven by basic instincts such as

## Legacy

- Al-Ghazali affected the course of Islamic philosophy. In his attack on thinkers who drew more on the ancient Greeks than on Islam he denounced them as corrupt non-believers, and his arguments laid out in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* were so powerful that it was a turning point in Islamic development. He helped move Islamic thinkers away from non-religious philosophical constructs towards an idea of cause-and-effect determined by God.
- His systematic explanation of the mystical and spiritual elements of Sufism helped mainstream Muslims understand and accept it as part of orthodox religion.
- Al-Ghazali's theological arguments were taken up by several Jewish and Christian **scholastic** thinkers such as **Thomas Aquinas**, who used some of al-Ghazali's ideas to assert the authority of orthodox Christianity in Europe.

Al-Ghazali visited Damascus in Syria during his travels in the Middle East.

***Do not believe that this corpse you see is myself  
In the name of God, I tell you, it is not I,  
I am a spirit, and this is naught but flesh ...***

Poem on Death (eleventh century)



hunger or anger, and human will, which is controlled by the intellect. Overall, he said, the heart rules.

### ***The Deliverance From Error***

A significant work of scholarship, the autobiographical work *The Deliverance From Error* contains a description of al-Ghazali's personal spiritual feelings that led him to extol the insights gained by the mystical path of Sufism. He argued that this sort of experience is actually superior to a systematic and logical description of religion. This is one of the few works outside Asia at the time that records an individual's non-Christian response to spirituality.

### **Senses**

Al-Ghazali was one of the first philosophers to categorize five separate external senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. He also distinguished between imagination, which he defined as the memory retaining a mental image of something that had actually happened; reflection, the ability to bring established ideas together; and recollection, the memory of the meaning and outer form of an object.

## Key dates

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1058 | Born in Tus in the Khorasan province of eastern Iran.                          |
| 1085 | Invited to join the traveling court of the vizier of Iran.                     |
| 1091 | Appointed senior teacher in the Nizamiyah University in Baghdad.               |
| 1095 | After a spiritual crisis begins a period of wandering as an ascetic.           |
| 1106 | Returns to teaching, at the Nizamiyah University, Nishapur, northeastern Iran. |
| 1111 | Dies in Tus.   |

***The true way of happiness is  
knowing what is right and  
doing it.***

*The Ten Articles* (eleventh century)

# Niccolò Machiavelli



Niccolò Machiavelli was a Florentine diplomat and political philosopher. Although his name has become synonymous with political expediency, cunning, and the acquisition of power at all costs, this pejorative sense of “Machiavellian” does the philosopher many injustices. Machiavelli was a pragmatist and a patriot who yearned for Italian political stability.

Machiavelli was born in Florence, the second son of Bernardo di Niccolò Machiavelli, a lawyer, and of Bartolommea di Stefano Nelli. After a humanist education, he entered governmental service in Florence as a clerk and ambassador in 1498, soon after the city had expelled the ruling Medici family and restored itself as a republic.

Between 1499 and 1512, Machiavelli undertook a number of diplomatic missions on behalf of the Florentine republic to the court of Louis XII in France, Ferdinand II of Aragón, and the Papacy in Rome. He also bore witness, from 1502 to 1503, to the effective – if often brutal – state-building methods of Cesare Borgia, or Duke Valentino.

During the Renaissance, Italy was a scene of intense political conflict involving the dominant city-states of Florence, Milan, Venice, and Naples, plus the Papacy, France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire. Each city attempted to protect itself by playing the larger powers off against each other. Machiavelli’s direct experience of this political turmoil during his diplomatic career was central to the formation of his **political philosophy**.

When, in 1512, the Medici family regained control of Florence, Machiavelli was banished, imprisoned, and tortured on suspicion of conspiring against the Medici. After his release in 1513, he withdrew from public life to virtual exile on his estate near Florence, where he devoted his last years to studying the ancients and to writing.

Machiavelli died in 1527, in the same year that Rome was sacked by Charles V, and the Medici rule of Florence was once more interrupted. It was not until five years after Machiavelli’s death, however, that the bulk of his writing was to be published, including *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* – works that would ensure his contribution to the development of political philosophy.

**No enterprise is more likely to succeed than one concealed from the enemy until it is ripe for execution.**

*The Art of War* (1521)

## Essential philosophy

Machiavelli’s approach to political philosophy is an **empirical** one, based on his own observations of governance in Renaissance Italy and on his interpretations of the ancient Greek and Roman systems of government. Unlike the **humanists**, he does not seek to idealize the perfect state. Instead, he takes a pragmatic approach to the achievement of clear political objectives: national independence, security, and a well-ordered constitution.

### *The Prince*

Machiavelli’s most famous work, *The Prince* (*Il Principe*, 1513; pub. 1532), was not a work of detached scholarship, but a passionate treatise addressed to Lorenzo de Medici in an attempt to regain access to the political process from which the author found himself exiled. In that respect, it failed: Machiavelli was doomed to remain on the outside of political life until his death in 1527. But posthumous publication of *The Prince* in 1532 marked a turning point in political thinking.

*The Prince* clearly sets out a vision of monarchical **absolutism** as a program for effective government. Machiavelli’s thesis is that the

stability of the state is paramount, that law and order must be imposed, and that it is the duty of a prince to bring whatever mix of force, audacity, prudence, virtue, or apparent virtue is necessary to maintain the order and stability of his state. An effective prince must “*be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves*”, matching his ferocity or cruelty to the needs of the greater good:

*“We may call cruelty well applied (if indeed we may call that well which in itself is evil) when it is committed once from necessity for self-protection, and afterwards not persisted in, but converted as far as possible to the public good.”* (*The Prince*)

*The Prince* has been interpreted in many ways: as sincere advice, as a plea for political office, as a detached analysis of Italian politics, as evidence of early Italian nationalism, and as political satire on Medici rule. The fact that Machiavelli saw fit to analyze political expediency in so ruthless and honest a fashion – or, in the words of **Francis Bacon**, that he wrote “*what men do, and not what they ought to do*” – marks out *The Prince* as a thoroughly “modern” text.

The work must also be seen as written against the backdrop of a Renaissance Italy riven by political intrigue, blackmail, and

- Machiavelli's apparent abandonment of morality in *The Prince* in favor of political expediency led to the work being placed on the *Index of Prohibited Books* by the Catholic Church in 1559.
- Other Renaissance **humanists**, such as Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) and **Francis Bacon**, also condemned the seeming immorality of *The Prince*.
- By the 1570s the term “Machiavellian” had been appropriated into the English language to mean “practicing duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct; astute, cunning, intriguing” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

- Elements of Machiavelli's ideas on statecraft, kingship, and politics, as well as the popular misconception of him as an unscrupulous power-monger, can clearly be seen in the works of Shakespeare and other dramatists of the English Renaissance (see, for example, *Richard III*, *Othello* (the character Iago), *The Jew of Malta*).
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** defended Machiavelli as “a proper man and a good citizen ... veiling his love of liberty in the midst of his country's oppression”. Rousseau believed that the *Discourses* (and the *History of Florence*) were more representative of Machiavelli's true philosophy, maintaining “that this profound political thinker has so far been studied only by superficial or corrupt readers” (*The Social Contract*).



The Medici family pictured in Sandro Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*.

**This, then, gives rise to the question whether it is better to be loved rather than feared, or feared rather than loved. It might perhaps be answered that we should wish to be both; but since love and fear can hardly exist together... it is far safer to be feared than loved.**

*The Prince* (1532)

violence, and constantly at the mercy of invading foreign powers. In its conclusion Machiavelli issued an impassioned call for Italian unity, and an end to foreign intervention.

### **Discourses on Livy**

Less widely read but more indicative of Machiavelli's politics is his *Discourses On The First Ten Books Of Livy* (1512–17; pub. 1531). In this work Machiavelli expounded a general theory of politics and government that stressed the importance of an uncorrupted political culture and a vigorous political morality:

*“In a well-ordered republic it should never be necessary to resort to extra-constitutional measures.”*

*(Discourses on Livy, Book I)*

Vaster in conception than *The Prince*, the *Discourses on Livy* clearly reveal Machiavelli's republican principles:

*“the governments of the people are better than those of princes.”*

These principles are also reflected in his *History of Florence* (1520–5; pub. 1532), a historical and literary masterpiece that is entirely modern in concept.

### Key dates

- 1469 Born in Florence, Italy.
- 1498 Made Secretary of “The Ten”, a Florentine board which had management of foreign affairs.
- 1502–03 Sent on diplomatic mission to Cesare Borgia, the Duke Valentino.
- 1503–9 Responsible for the Florentine militia.
- 1507 Sent on diplomatic mission to Emperor Maximilian.
- 1509 Florence's citizen forces defeat Pisa under Machiavelli's direction.
- 1510 Sent on diplomatic mission to France, which consolidated the alliance of Florence and France.
- 1512 Restoration of the Medici rule in Florence.
- 1513 Imprisoned, tortured, and released; writes *The Prince*.
- 1513–27 Retires to an estate near Florence, where his key works are written.
- 1521 Publication of *The Art of War*.
- 1527 Dies in Florence.
- 1531 Posthumous publication of *Discourses on Livy*.
- 1532 Posthumous publication of *The Prince* and *History of Florence*.

# Baruch Spinoza



Baruch Spinoza was one of the great rationalists of seventeenth-century Western philosophy. Rationalism played a significant role in the development of Renaissance thought, and writers in this tradition set out to try to work out a system of knowledge that was derived by pure reason, logic, and contemplation rather than by observing facts as was the practice of the empiricists. Spinoza's writings made significant contributions in many areas of philosophy, in particular in ethics.

Together with **René Descartes** and **Gottfried Leibniz**, Spinoza was one of a triumvirate of **rationalists** in Continental Europe. Each of these three writers concluded that he could build his system on the basis of the certainty of God. However, their philosophical methods undermined the medieval dependence on the priesthood as the source of authority, by emphasizing the role of the individual in seeking knowledge, laying the groundwork for the eighteenth-century **Enlightenment**.

*The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.*

*Ethics (1677)*

Spinoza came from a Portuguese Jewish family, who lived in exile in Holland. He had a rabbinical education but was expelled from the Amsterdam synagogue for his defence of heretical opinions. Studying privately, he explored medieval Jewish thought, the philosophy of Descartes, and new scientific ideas. He made a living as a lens-grinder, and his death in 1677 may have been caused by this labor.

Spinoza's early philosophical works became known around Europe, and he was offered an academic post at Heidelberg in 1673, but preferred to retain his independence. His first published work, *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* (1663), included most of the basic tenets of his philosophical system, although his monumental, five-volume *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata (Ethics)*, published posthumously in 1677, was a more detailed account. During his lifetime he also published *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (A Theologico-Political Treatise, 1670)*, in which he attacked anthropomorphic conceptions of God, proposed historical and critical methods for biblical interpretation, and defended religious toleration.

## Essential philosophy

In his philosophical writing, Spinoza took **Cartesian rationalism** as a starting point, and explored his conviction that the universe was a unitary whole. Like Descartes, he used mathematical reasoning and **logic** as his building blocks, and *Ethics* is laid out in the style of a geometrical set of definitions and self-evident **axioms**. There is also some influence in his writing from medieval **scholasticism** and Jewish tradition.

Spinoza describes the universe as a single, coherent whole in which the rigid laws of logical necessity hold sway. He talks of the single substance that makes up the universe as “God or Nature”, which for him are alternative names for an identical reality. In his view, all things are determined by God or Nature to exist and to cause effects. The complicated chain of causes and effects is something that we can only partially understand. His view of **logical necessity** and cause and effect leads him to a thoroughgoing **determinism**. As ever, determinism leads him to have to confront the problem of **free will** – humans feel that they choose their own actions, so the idea that our every move is simply an effect of logical causation conflicts with our **perceptions** of the world.

Spinoza attempts to resolve this problem by pointing to our limited comprehension of **causality**. We believe we have free will because we are aware of our appetites but can't fully understand the reasons we have them. Our genuine freedom consists in our capacity to know that our actions are determined. If we form more adequate ideas about what we do and about our emotions, then we become active participants rather than passive actors – we become freer and more like God when we accept that our actions are mere effects of God or Nature. This is an ingenious piece of thinking, and one that prefigures the later work of **Arthur Schopenhauer** and **Friedrich Nietzsche** who wrote about rationality as merely an interpretation of will. However, for many it remains a unsatisfactory explanation of free will. Spinoza accepts that his **ethical** conclusions are difficult, but suggests that our only path to goodness comes from understanding our place in the structure of the universe and accepting it.

### The unitary universe

Spinoza's entire system rests on his initial “proof” that the universe is a single substance. His justification for this conclusion depends

## Legacy, truth, consequence

- In the period immediately following Spinoza's death, he was seen as a dangerous, anti-religious thinker. Even though God was at the center of his system, many thought that Spinozism would lead on to **pantheism**, or to atheistic **materialism**.
- By identifying God and nature, Spinoza did encourage those who were looking for a less authoritarian basis for religion – his popularity through the Enlightenment was partly based on this identification of spirit and nature.
- In the long run, Spinoza's reputation is a more complex one. He is a subtle, fascinating thinker, and philosophers as varied as **Friedrich Nietzsche**, **Ludwig Wittgenstein**, and Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) have praised his work.
- Whatever Spinoza's virtues, the project of rationalism can't be seen as a complete success. Each of the great rationalists claimed their system to have been deduced unflinchingly from first principles – yet each reached very different conclusions, just as the **pre-Socratics** had when they debated the nature of reality. The differences even came down to basics such as whether the universe consists of atoms, Leibniz's "monads", or Spinoza's indivisible substance. The fact that rationalism produced such different results merely emphasized the limits of pure reason in resolving the classic problems of philosophy.

**God, or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality, necessarily exists.**

*Ethics* (1677)

on a detailed set of axioms. He assumes that substance cannot be dependent on anything else for its existence and that no two substances can share the same nature, or have a causal relation with each other. As a result he concludes that substance cannot be caused, that it must be infinite, and that there must therefore be only one substance. He essentially accepts an **ontological argument** for the existence of God, which is the argument that God's essence includes his inevitable existence and the possession of infinite attributes. So Spinoza's conclusion of a single unitary substance becomes an extreme form of **monism** in which every mind, body, thought, and action are simply aspects of God.

The two attributes of the divine substance that are known to us are "thought and extension"; that is to say we can only perceive ideas and things. Spinoza devotes some time to exploring the possibility of human knowledge, concluding that genuine knowledge is possible. He proposes practical, rational methods by which humans can attain the best knowledge of which they are capable. His **dualism** is similar to Descartes', in that he views ideas and things as separate realms, although since both are expressions

## Key dates

- 1632 Born in Amsterdam in the Netherlands.
- 1656 Excommunicated from the synagogue; devotes his life to philosophy.
- 1663 *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* is published.
- 1670 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*A Theologico-Political Treatise*) is published anonymously due to its controversial content.
- 1676 Spinoza meets with Leibniz in the Hague.
- 1677 *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (*Ethics*) is published posthumously by friends.

*Inside the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam, Emanuel de Witte, c.1680. Spinoza was expelled from the synagogue for his heretical opinions.*



of the same infinite substance they inevitably relate to each other in perfect correlation. The problem of knowledge for Spinoza revolves around our inability to be certain that the ideas in our minds have a correlation to the material facts to which we believe they relate. God's mind and body are of course in perfect correlation, but imperfect humans must struggle through rationality to approach an understanding of the universe.

### Opinion, reason, intuition

Spinoza distinguishes three kinds of knowledge. Opinion is unreliable, being sensory or language based. Reason is the operation of rationality, which can lead to indubitable knowledge only if it is based on adequate building blocks. Whereas intuition allows us to perceive the true and indubitable facts from which reason must proceed. So to discover knowledge we must ignore misleading sensory testimony and conventional learning. Then we must reason back to understand the eternal nature of God or Nature. Once we have this knowledge, our capacity for good or free actions depends on our understanding and accepting the divine nature of the universe.

# Voltaire



Voltaire (pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet) was a philosopher and man of letters, a major playwright and novelist, and a brilliant scientific and philosophical popularizer. He is remembered as a courageous polemicist who indefatigably fought for civil rights, the right to a fair trial, and freedom of religion, and as one who denounced the hypocrisies and injustices of France's *ancien régime* and the Catholic Church.

Voltaire was born François-Marie Arouet, into a wealthy Parisian family, and educated at the Jesuit school of Louis-le-Grand. Despite his father's determination that he pursue a career in the law, Voltaire evaded such a fate in favor of a literary life. (It was probably partly in rebellion against his father that he adopted the pen name Voltaire.)

His early satirical writings led to exile in Holland (1713), imprisonment in the Bastille during which time he wrote *Oedipe*, his acclaimed first tragedy (1717), and exile in England (1726–9). Indeed, much of Voltaire's life can be seen in terms of exile and opposition.

Voltaire's period of English exile imbued him with an admiration for both the **liberalism** of England's institutions, and the English intrepidity in the discussion of religious and philosophical questions. He was convinced that it was because of their personal liberty that the English were in the forefront of scientific thought. On his return to France he wrote the *Philosophical Letters on the English Nation* (published 1734), whose respect for the liberal spirit of England forced him to retire to the country to avoid arrest.

For the next 15 years he took refuge in the château of his mistress, Mme du Châtelet, at Cirey in Champagne. Together they amassed a vast library, undertook Newtonian experiments, and pursued historical, theological, and philosophical investigations.

After Mme du Châtelet's death in 1749, Voltaire spent a period in Berlin at the request of Frederick the Great of Prussia. In 1755, however, following a dispute with Frederick, Voltaire retired once more to the country, settling in a château at Ferney, near Geneva. Here he published *Essays on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* (1756); his satirical masterpiece, *Candide* (1759); his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764); histories of Peter the Great, India, and Louis XV; and his *Treatise on Toleration* (1763).

In 1778 Voltaire returned to Paris for the premiere of *Irène*, his last play. It was a triumph, and he was hailed in Paris as the greatest figure of the **Enlightenment** and his generation's most courageous spokesman for freedom and tolerance. He died in Paris soon afterwards.

## Essential philosophy

### Voltaire and England

Philosophically Voltaire absorbed the combination of science, **empiricism**, and religious awe characteristic of Isaac Newton (1643–1727) and **John Locke**, both of whom he came to admire during his period of English exile. His subsequent *Philosophical Letters on the English Nation* (1734) attacked the abuses committed by France's *ancien régime*, and held up England as a model of tolerance and liberty. The work was publicly burnt in Paris.

### Candide

Voltaire's 1759 novella *Candide* is perhaps the work for which he is best remembered. It was an unashamedly satirical swipe at the **metaphysical** optimism of **Gottfried Leibniz**, whose principle of sufficient reason posited that this was “*the best of all possible worlds*”.

In *Candide*, Voltaire satirizes Leibniz as young Candide's tutor Dr Pangloss, a character of unremitting optimism, who even when he has been infected with syphilis cannot agree with his tutee that such an act springs from the devil:

“Not at all,” replied this great man [Dr Pangloss], “it was a thing unavoidable, a necessary ingredient in the best of worlds; for if Columbus

*had not in an island of America caught this disease, which contaminates the source of life... we should have neither chocolate nor cochineal.”*

(*Candide*)

Pangloss' naïve belief in “the best of worlds”, where the arbitrary misery and brutality of the world mask a greater divine good, is held by Voltaire to be ridiculous, and offensive to his **rational scepticism**.

### Voltaire and religion

Voltaire is often misrepresented as an atheist, the chief source for this misconception being his most famous epigram: “*If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him.*” Interestingly, the poem to which this forms the opening line (*Epistle to the author of the book, The Three Impostors*) continues: “*But all nature cries aloud that He does exist.*”

In fact, like many other key figures during the European Enlightenment, Voltaire considered himself a **Deist**. He did not believe that absolute faith, based upon any particular or singular religious text or tradition of revelation, was needed to believe in God: “*Dogma leads to fanaticism and strife; morality everywhere inspires harmony.*” Voltaire's religious criticisms were not directed at the

**[Men] use thought only to justify their injustices, and speech only to conceal their thoughts.**

*Dialogues* (1763)

## Legacy, truth, consequence

- Voltaire's writings were hugely influential on the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789.
- Many themes of his writing would become key tenets of the social reform agenda of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. These included:
  - the establishment of religious tolerance;
  - the growth of material prosperity;
  - respect for the rights of man;
  - the abolition of torture and worthless punishments;
  - the right to a fair trial.
- Voltaire was one of the most prolific letter writers who ever lived – the extant 12,000 letters he wrote to over 700 correspondents are an invaluable historical source.
- Voltaire's library, much of which he amassed with Mme du Châtelet, comprised more than 6,000 books. It was bought by Catherine the Great on the philosopher's death and is now housed in the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg.

**Superstition sets the whole world in flames; philosophy quenches them.**

*Philosophical Dictionary* (1764)

concept of religion itself, but were always focused on the actions of organized Christian religion, whose baleful effects were all too visible in the world of his time.

### **Causes célèbres**

In the last 20 years of his life, while Voltaire enjoyed his role of philanthropic country gentleman at Ferney, he turned to positive social action and championed various victims of religious intolerance – most notably Jean Calas, Jean-François de la Barre, and Pierre-Paul Sirven, all of whom suffered horribly at the hands of Catholic zealots.

In his campaigns to right these and other abuses, Voltaire employed one of his most famous phrases: “*écrasez l'infâme!*” or “*crush the infamy!*” The “infamy” in question was not the monarchy itself, as future revolutionaries might claim, but the corrupt and bigoted aspects of the aristocracy and Catholic Church, and the superstitious intolerance that had been encouraged within the French people.

Voltaire remains a supreme example of the philosopher as a politically engaged, socially reforming liberal **humanist**.



**The Arrest of Voltaire, a nineteenth-century engraving. Voltaire was imprisoned for 11 months in the Bastille in 1717, during which time he wrote *Oedipe*, his first tragedy.**

## Key dates

- 1694 Born in Paris, France.
- 1713 Exiled in Holland.
- 1717 Imprisoned in the Bastille. Writes *Oedipe*.
- 1726–9 Exiled in England. Meets with key literary and political figures of the day. Attracted to the philosophy and science of Locke and Newton.
- 1734 Publishes *Philosophical Letters on the English Nation*. Forced to flee Paris.
- 1735 Takes up residence with Mme du Châtelet, at Cirey in Champagne, France.
- 1749 Death of Mme du Châtelet.
- 1750 Accepts invitation of Frederick the Great of Prussia to visit Berlin.
- 1755 Forced to leave Berlin after disagreement with Frederick.
- 1756 Publishes *Essays on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*.
- 1758 Settles in voluntary exile at Ferney, near Geneva.
- 1759 Publishes *Candide*.
- 1762 Campaigns to clear the name of Jean Calas, a Toulouse Huguenot wrongly accused and put to death on the wheel by the Catholic authorities.
- 1764 Publishes *Philosophical Dictionary*.
- 1765 Jean Calas found not guilty. Begins campaign to help Pierre-Paul Sirven, a Protestant wrongly accused of murder.
- 1766 Intervenes to clear the name of Jean-François de la Barre, a Protestant nobleman beheaded and burned for blasphemy.
- 1771 Sirven family exonerated. Sirven writes to Voltaire: “*By enlightening people you have succeeded in making them human*”.
- 1778 Dies in Paris and is buried in Champagne, although in 1791 his remains are interred in the Panthéon in Paris.

# Adam Smith



Adam Smith was a pioneering political economist and moral philosopher. A key figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, he is known primarily as the author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), which argued that rational self-interest and the competition of a free market can lead to economic well-being and prosperity. Smith's work laid the foundations for the modern academic discipline of economics and provided one of the best-known rationales for free trade and capitalism.

Smith was born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, and raised by his widowed mother. He won scholarships, first to Glasgow University and then to Balliol College, Oxford, after which he returned to Scotland in 1748 to lecture in Edinburgh under the patronage of the Lord Kames. During these years he first became acquainted with the philosopher **David Hume**, who became a close friend, and other figures of the Scottish **Enlightenment**.

In 1751 Smith was appointed professor of logic at Glasgow University, transferring a year later to the chair of moral philosophy. He lectured on natural theology, **ethics**, jurisprudence, and economics.

In 1759, at the age of 36, Smith published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a groundbreaking work on **moral philosophy** which incorporated some of his Glasgow lectures. His abilities caught the eye of the Duke of Buccleuch, who between 1764 and 1766 engaged him as tutor to his son on the Grand Tour of Europe. During his travels Smith met other eminent thinkers such as **Voltaire**, **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, and Benjamin Franklin.

On his return to Britain, he concentrated on the writing of his greatest work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. This was finally published ten years later, in 1776, the same year that Smith moved to London.

*The Wealth of Nations* was the first major work of political economy, and it was almost immediately successful, securing Smith's financial future. His appointment as commissioner of customs for Scotland in 1778 took him back to Edinburgh, where he made his home with his aged mother in Panmure House, which still stands in Edinburgh's Canongate. Here he regularly entertained such Enlightenment figures as the physicist Joseph Black, James Hutton the geologist, and his old friend the philosopher David Hume.

Smith died in 1790 after a painful illness. He had left instructions to his executors to destroy all but his most notable papers. His *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* were duly published posthumously in 1795.

## Essential philosophy

### *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

This work, which established Smith's reputation in his day, was based on Hume's doctrines. Smith argued that the essence of moral sentiments was sympathy – but a specialized, conscience-stricken sympathy, like that of an impartial and well-informed spectator. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* established a new **liberalism**, in which social organization is seen as the outcome of human action but not necessarily of human design.

### *The Wealth of Nations*

*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* examined in detail the consequences of economic freedom, such as **division of labor**, the function of markets, and the international implications of a **laissez-faire economy** (although that term was not used by Smith and did not cross the English Channel until the nineteenth century).

The basic doctrine of *The Wealth of Nations* was that labor is the only source of a nation's wealth. Smith advocated division of labor in the productive process, stressed the importance of individual

enterprise, and argued the benefits of **free trade**. The true wealth of a nation, he held, lay not in gold but in the achievement of an abundance of the necessities of life; and he warned against unnecessary intervention by the state in this process.

***It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.***

The Wealth of Nations (1776)

- The science of political economy, and indeed of economics as a whole, can be traced directly back to the publication of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1776.
- *The Wealth of Nations* also provided one of the best-known intellectual rationales for free trade, the laissez-faire mode of government, and **capitalism**.
- Smith greatly influenced the writings of later economists, most notably Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), David Ricardo (1772–1823), and **Karl Marx**.
- Smith's political influence was also great, his advocates including William Pitt the Younger (1759–1806), Charles Fox (1749–1806), and Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821).
- Smith stipulated four maxims of taxation that are still held true today: proportionality, transparency, convenience, and efficiency.

**How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.**

*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)

Detail of a page of *The Wealth of Nations* showing the prices of wheat.

- 1723 Born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland.
- 1726 Kidnapped by travelers but is recovered by his uncle.
- 1737 Enters Glasgow University, studying moral philosophy under Professor Francis Hutcheson.
- 1740 Enters Balliol College, Oxford, as Snell Exhibitioner.
- 1746 Leaves Oxford and returns to Kirkcaldy.
- 1748 Invited to lecture on *belles-lettres* and jurisprudence in Edinburgh under Lord Kames.
- 1750 Meets David Hume, who becomes a close friend.
- 1751 Elected professor of logic at Glasgow University.
- 1752 Transfers to the chair of moral philosophy at Glasgow University.
- 1759 Publishes his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.
- 1764 Leaves Glasgow to become tutor to the young Duke of Buccleuch on the Grand Tour of Europe.
- 1766 Returns from the Grand Tour, is elected a fellow of the Royal Society.
- 1776 *The Wealth of Nations* is published.
- 1778 Appointed commissioner of customs for Scotland and moves back to Edinburgh.
- 1783 Becomes a founding member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.
- 1790 Dies after a painful illness, and is buried in the Canongate Kirkyard in Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

**Free trade**

When *The Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776 there was a strong sentiment for free trade in Britain and in America, which had just declared its independence and was ready for a new system to alleviate economic hardship. This helps to explain the immediate success of the book both in Britain and abroad – it underwent five publications in Britain alone before Smith's death in 1790.

For centuries before 1776 it was taken for granted that it was the task of the government to regulate trade in what it thought was the best interests of the community. Smith challenged this system of regulation (known as mercantilism), whose main feature was a structure of tariffs on commodities.

The ideas of free trade expressed in *The Wealth of Nations* were enthusiastically taken up in Britain by William Pitt the Younger, who became prime minister in 1783. Pitt's reforms of trade tariffs were halted, however, by the French Wars (1792–1815) and it was not until the 1820s that momentum could be built once more to make Britain a free-trade nation.

**The “invisible hand”**

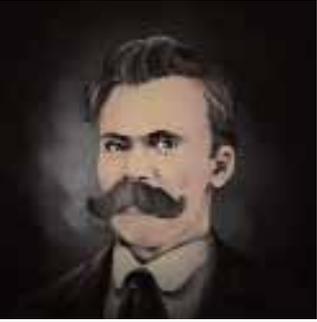
One of the main points of *The Wealth of Nations* is that the free market, while appearing chaotic and unrestrained, is actually guided to produce the right amount and variety of goods by a so-called “invisible hand”:

*“By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.”*

*(The Wealth of Nations, IV)*

The image of the invisible hand was previously employed by Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and is a metaphor which has become synonymous with Smith and later advocates of free trade. Understandably, it has many detractors, who see the metaphor as central to the weaknesses of free market economics. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz has written: “the reason that the invisible hand seems invisible is that it is often not there” (*Making Globalization Work*, 2006).

# Friedrich Nietzsche



A moralist and culture-critic, Nietzsche challenged the very core of Western moral values and Christianity. Controversial and unconventional, he proved deeply influential in artistic and avant-garde twentieth-century Continental Europe, particularly after the misappropriation of his theories by the Nazis and Fascists had receded. He is often referred to as one of the first “existentialist” philosophers.

Born in Germany, to a Protestant pastor father, Nietzsche was a deeply religious child. He proved to be a brilliant student at university. The cultural and literary movement known as **Weimar classicism** had an impact on him, and his interests turned to philosophy, in particular, to **Arthur Schopenhauer**, whose atheistic and turbulent vision of the world, and passion for music, appealed to the young Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was a strange individual: a passionate loner, and a frequent traveler in search of climates that would aid his faltering health. Perhaps remembered most for his sustained attack on Western moral culture of the last 2,000 years, he criticized the “Apollonian” forces of logical order and stiff sobriety, which he saw as emanating from the classical Greeks. He hoped for a cultural rebirth of the instinctual, amoral “Dionysian” energy within **pre-Socratic** Greek culture, which he regarded as infinitely more creative and healthy. In his first book, *The Birth of*

*Tragedy* (1872), he advocated the resurrection and fuller release of the Dionysian artistic spirit. In effect this adulated the German artists of the time, especially Richard Wagner, whose operas he greatly admired and considered to be the true successors to Greek tragedy, though later he was openly to criticize him.

His mental breakdown in 1889 was triggered when he witnessed a horse being whipped by a coachman in Turin. He never recovered his sanity. His sister Elisabeth, having returned from Paraguay after attempting to set up an Aryan, anti-Semitic German colony there with her husband, assumed responsibility for Nietzsche’s welfare and the promotion of his work. It was through her solicitations with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini that the Nazis and Italian Fascists came to selectively assemble quotations from Nietzsche’s work and use them to justify their doctrines, which most scholars today regard as a perversion of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

## Essential philosophy

### Perspectivism

Written early in his career, the unpublished essay “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” is considered by some commentators to be the key to Nietzsche’s thought. In it, he rejects the idea of universal constants: “truth”, he claims, is nothing more than the invention of fixed conventions for practical purposes. The *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) includes a clear expression of his idea of “perspectivism”: that there is no absolute, “God’s eye” standpoint from which one can survey everything that is, and therefore it is important to draw upon many different perspectives when analysing something.

### “God is dead”

Nietzsche was convinced that no religion was really true, and, like the French **philosophes** who preceded the 1789 Revolution, he objected to the submission to the will of God. He thought that Christianity fosters weakness in men, and by devaluing aspects of life that are naturally attractive to humans it dampens vitality and creativity. Likewise, most moral systems he held are contrary rather than conducive to the enhancement of life and need to be re-evaluated. In particular, the dominant “slave” morality, as typified in Christianity, is based on a “herd-animal” instinct ideally suited to

mediocre and weak types. In modern times it has eclipsed the “master” morality peculiar to the aristocracy. Life has become dominated by the all-too-human needs and weaknesses associated with less favored human types and is rarely lived to the full. It is only through art that we are afforded a rare glimpse of the type of life that could be lived. Both Christianity and our present moral systems have run their course and should be replaced.

### “Supermen” and the “will to power”

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) Nietzsche challenged accepted views of what is “good” and what is “evil”. He strongly resisted the **democratic** urges of the times, seeing them as producing a dominion of “inferior” men. His conviction that the moral basis underpinning Western civilization was fundamentally flawed led him to search for a new alternative for humanity to avoid the advent of **nihilism**. His concept of “the will to

***That which is done  
out of love is  
always beyond  
good and evil.***

*Beyond Good and Evil,*  
Aphorism 153 (1886)

## Legacy, truth, consequence

- Nietzsche was influential in **Continental philosophy** and the emerging movements of **existentialism** and **postmodernism**. He particularly influenced **Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, and Sartre**.
- The Nazis and Fascists during the 1930s and 1940s were able to latch onto elements of Nietzsche's work. They saw it as promoting a "desire for and of power"; some Nazis even upheld a biological interpretation, giving it a meaning relating to **Social Darwinism**. Heidegger criticized this misreading, arguing that Nietzsche's concept was closer to an inner force of nature, a fundamental instinct or drive.
- His other great influence has been among literary and artistic circles. His "God is dead" declaration, perspectivism, and emphasis upon the "will to power" provided inspiration in the 1960s-80s to consider the foundations of our basic assumptions in life.
- His sister Elisabeth's edited and altered collection of Nietzsche's writings, published after his death as *The Will to Power*, did much to harm his reputation in the twentieth century, despite concerted efforts by academics to set the record straight.

***I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous — a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite.***

*Ecce Homo* (1888)

power" is the urge within an individual to take charge of his own life, and is something to be pursued and affirmed. The strong have learnt to channel the will to power into a creative force and are more complete as human beings. His ideal is to create a society where this type of "strong" being is the norm. Often translated as "superman", the sense is more an "overman", or someone who stands over and above humans as they exist at present: a different type of man representing the highest passion and creativity possible, who lives at a level of experience beyond our standards of good and evil. In order to bring this superman into existence it is necessary to destroy the way man currently thinks, his ideas of good and evil. Ultimately, this is an internal battle: the values of good and evil are within ourselves.

### Doctrine of eternal recurrence

In *The Gay Science* (1882) Nietzsche set forth the idea that one is, or might be, fated to relive forever every moment of one's life. This was intended to turn our attention away from all worlds, heavenly or otherwise, towards the one in which we currently live, since eternal recurrence precludes the possibility of any final escape from the present world.

## Key dates

- 1844 Born in Röcken bei Lützen, Germany.
- 1864 Enters University of Bonn as a theology and philology student.
- 1868 Meets composer Richard Wagner.
- 1872 Publishes his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which contrasts the Apollonian arts with the Dionysian arts.
- 1873 Completes the unpublished essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense".
- 1873-6 Completes a series of four studies on contemporary German culture: the *Unfashionable Observations*.
- 1876 His marriage proposal to Dutch piano student Mathilde Trampadach is refused.
- 1878 His book *Human, All-Too-Human* marks the end of his friendship with Wagner.
- 1879 Resigns from professorial post in Basel following a deterioration in health.
- 1880-9 Lives a nomadic lifestyle between cities in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. His marriage proposal to 21-year-old philosophy student Lou Salomé is refused.
- 1882 Publishes *The Gay Science*, setting out some of his existential ideas (e.g. "God is dead").
- 1883-5 *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a philosophical work of fiction, establishes his version of the Schopenhauerian "will to power".
- 1886 *Beyond Good and Evil* is published.
- 1887 His critique of Christianity is advanced in *Genealogy of Morals, A Polemic*.
- 1888 In *The Case of Wagner, A Musician's Problem* Nietzsche "declares war" on Wagner and his music. *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Antichrist* are published.
- 1889 Suffers a mental breakdown in Turin.
- 1900 Dies aged 56 of pneumonia and a stroke.

Lou Andreas Salomé, Russian-born psychoanalyst and author, Paul Rée, author and compulsive gambler, with Nietzsche (right) in 1882; all three were close friends and traveled together, but Salomé and Nietzsche fell out after Salomé believed that he was desperately in love with her.



# THEY CHANGED THE WORLD

All over the globe, in both Western and Eastern traditions, philosophers have searched for answers to life's fundamental questions. Beginning with the Ancient Greeks and Chinese, through the founders of modern philosophy, to the present day, they have inspired legions of followers, some have generated fear, and many have made such an impact as to alter the course of history.

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