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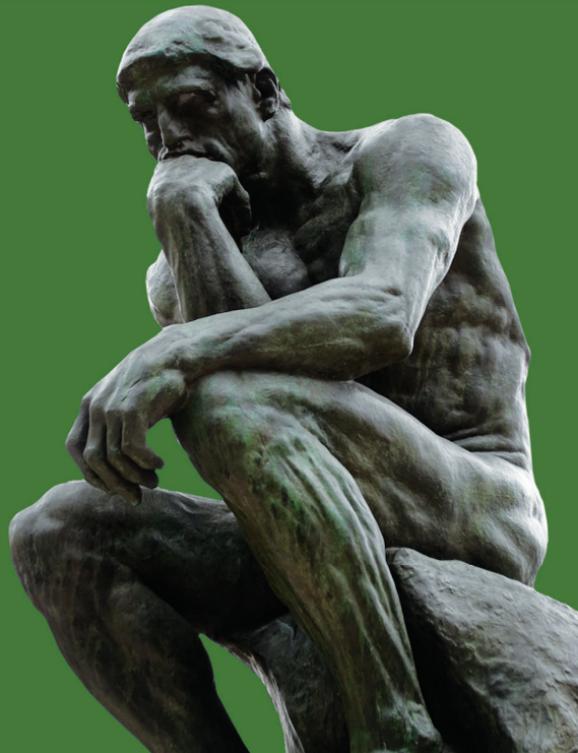
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The Great Ideas of Philosophy, 2nd Edition

Course Guidebook

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Oxford University



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The Great Ideas of Philosophy, 2nd Edition

Scope:

This course of 60 lectures is intended to introduce the student to main currents and issues in philosophical thought from the founding of the subject in ancient Greece to more contemporary studies. The lectures are organized around three abiding problems: the problem of knowledge (epistemology and metaphysics), the problem of conduct (ethics and moral philosophy), and the problem of governance (political science and law). Each of these has by now evolved into a specialized subject treated rigorously in professional texts and journals. But even in these more technical projections, the problems remain largely as they were when the schools of Plato and Aristotle dealt with them and imposed on them the features they still retain.

More than a series of lectures on the great philosophers, this course is designed to acquaint the student with broader cultural and historical conditions that favored or opposed a given philosophical perspective. Attention is paid to the influence that scientific developments had on the very conception of philosophy and on the scientific rejection of “metaphysics” that took place when the “two cultures” began to take separate paths.

Needless to say, the vast terrain that philosophy seeks to cover extends far beyond what can be explored in 60 lectures—or in 200 lectures! Entire areas of active scholarship have been ignored. But still other areas have been more carefully examined than is customary in an introductory course: philosophy of law, philosophy and aesthetics, evolutionary and psychoanalytic theory. The hope and expectation is that, informed by these lectures, the interested student will press on, will fashion a fuller curriculum of study, and will return to these lectures for the more general framework within which the specialized knowledge ultimately must find a place. ■

From the Upanishads to Homer

Lecture 1

Intellectual history presents us with a set of ideas that, building on precedents, on past mistakes, past understandings, lead us, perhaps, toward the light of progress.

We are about to embark on an intellectual journey of 60 lectures devoted to great ideas in philosophy, covering a period of time from remote antiquity to the present century. Our guide will be the history of ideas. We begin with myth, which seeks to answer perplexing questions but does so in such a way as to create and preserve a kind of civic coherence. The mythology of a people is the basis on which they recognize themselves as a people and have a coherent relationship, not only to each other but with their own past. To some extent, philosophy is disruptive in this regard. The enterprise is not an essentially civic one. It does not begin with a settled position on political and moral matters, then seek ways to enshrine the settled view. Rather, the mission is a broadly epistemological one. The search, as we shall discover, is the search for truth.

Nonetheless, the questions that mythology must set out to answer are not unlike the questions that philosophy sets out to answer. We can identify three overarching issues that consume much of the subject matter of philosophy: the *problem of knowledge*, the *problem of conduct*, and the *problem of governance*.

The first is the problem of knowledge is straightforward. How is it that we come to know anything? On what basis do we undertake to frame and seek answers to questions? Long before the appearance of philosophy, people facing the challenges of daily life were required to seek knowledge, if only practical knowledge. In philosophy, the problem reaches beyond the practical and the everyday to more general and abstract realms.

The second overarching issue is the problem of conduct is nothing less than the problem of deciding how one's life should be lived. How should I

conduct myself in such a way that my life is a satisfying one? How will I be able to act in a way that maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain? What sort of person should I strive to be? What's the nature of the relationships I have to others?

And finally the third, were there no basis on which to plan or conduct a course of life, there would be no real "problem" to be solved politically. The problem of governance arises in light of conflicts at the level of conduct. On what basis does a people come to understand itself as a people? What is the basis on which modes of leadership are chosen? What is the basis on which leaders are resisted, revolutions staged, radical upheaval fomented?

Long before the appearance of philosophy, issues of this sort were engaged, often heroically, by persons and by entire communities. Indeed, philosophy comes about at a late stage in the development of this daily encounter with the problems of knowledge, conduct, and governance.

The Upanishads are a brilliant example of the vast body of morality tales that appeared in many settled communities between 800 and 600 B.C. The etymology of the word *Upanishad* carries the action of "sitting next to," as in "sitting next to the master." The Hindu Upanishads pose philosophical questions, but the answers are mythic.

The questions posed by the Upanishads are the abiding ones: Where do we come from? How do we explain the fact that some things live and other things don't? How did this great earth come about, and what are we to make of the objects in the sea and sky? What kind of life should I be living? Why is there so much evil in the world?

Central to the Upanishads is the notion that the universe itself, and everything in it, exists in virtue of some fundamental power or force or fire, a kind of cosmic soul, *Atman*, which because of its presence, gives reality to things and to us. We share something fundamentally in common with the universe itself. We have the breath of fire within us. We have soul within us. It is an imperishable feature of our very nature. Everything that there is participates in the cosmic *Atman*. There is a sense that there is something fundamentally

identical between the life of the person and the life of the cosmos, that one is the microcosmic expression of the macrocosm.

These teachings come to equate *Atman* not only with fire and life and creativity but also with *Brahma*, a form of knowledge, knowledge as the manifestation of the spirit. The quest for knowledge then becomes quite a natural undertaking for those invested with *Atman*, and *Brahma* becomes the search that renders life meaningful.

All comes from the soul (*Atman*), even space itself. Creation is attributed to an imperishable and heavenly person, *Purusha*, who though breathless, gives breath. Again, what is *Brahma*? It is breath; it is thought; it is enlightenment. Thus, it is the macrocosm within the microcosm, which is oneself—both the self and the cosmos endowed with *Atman*. Through the Upanishads, we have the beliefs of an ancient culture, a distinctly *Eastern* culture; however, nearly all civilized people adopt the Hindu teachings on ethical grounds. The Buddha's teachings include rules against killing and theft, against any form of moral degradation, against cruelty and deception. Nonetheless, the teachings do not stand as philosophy.

The mythology of a people is the basis on which they recognize themselves as a people and have a coherent relationship, not only to each other but with their own past.

Moving from East to West, we can make certain comparisons between the Upanishads and the famous epics (composed circa 750 B.C.) of the blind poet Homer. What moves the Homeric actors is not precepts coming from above but something arising inside themselves. Diomedes, for example, is said to be overcome by *Ilyssa*, the blind rage of the wolf.

The gods in Homer are enlarged versions of the hero and, in fact, have often sired or mothered the hero. What divides humanity and divinity is mortality; otherwise, they have much in common, including little power over destiny itself.

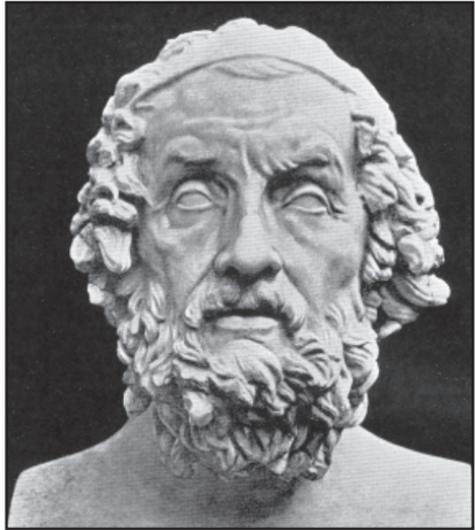
There is something terribly immediate and awesomely human and real in the Homeric epics. We find ourselves on every page. There are no final answers to the questions of why things happen. Why, for example, does the Trojan War take place? Is it the anger of the gods? The pride of men?

Iliad and *Odyssey* are entirely open-textured at the levels we call epistemology, ethics, and political science. The problem of knowledge is underscored in the epics in the form of delusional dreams, gods imitating mortals, and hallucinatory experiences.

The origin of conduct is illustrated repeatedly by our vulnerability to our own passions, our loss of rational control. The problem of governance in this war of princes and kings is written in blood and gore, where the Destinies are more powerful than the rule of law.

The Upanishads would merge us with the eternal cosmic soul, but *Iliad* and *Odyssey* assert that we are beings of this earth. Throughout the epics, the focus is on the problems of earth, on the beginning and middle and end of human life, the need for a conservative approach to life, the recognition that we are part rational and part passionate, and that there is an internal conflict taking place within us.

One character given to us in Homer, described as the most pathetic of all, the person in the worst imaginable situation, is a character described by Homer as “the heartless, lawless, stateless man.” What Homer is claiming here is quite different from the Upanishads, which promotes a kind of introspective and, indeed, isolating form of contemplative life. Homer tells us that nothing



Homer (c. 750/800 B.C.), Greek poet who wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

is worse than to be outside the civic order of things, to be separated from the laws and customs and habitats of one's people. The human condition calls for life within a settled community, a *polis*, in which one participates and from which one draws lessons for life.

A final note about Homer is that everywhere in the epics, nature is the guide. In philosophy, at least in its earliest stages, we will also see nature as a guide. How apt, in this connection, that one of the great philosophers of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, would say of his own mission as a philosopher that he attempted nothing more than "to show the fly the way out of the bottle." ■

Suggested Reading

Homer. *The Iliad*. R. Lattimore, trans. Chicago, 1951.

Hume, R. E., trans. *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*. Oxford, 1971.

Robinson, D. N. *Aristotle's Psychology*. Columbia, 1989, chapter 1.

Questions to Consider

1. Summarize the implications that follow when the soul of the cosmos is assumed to be within the person, in contrast to the sharp Homeric division between the human and the divine.
2. The Upanishads feature a search for wisdom; Homer's epics, for heroic achievement. Describe how both may be regarded as "perfectionist" in their aims but in quite different ways.