

Western Thought: An Understanding

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Thought is something that you think of, remember or realize. *Encarta World English Dictionary* defines "thought" as the intellectual, scientific and philosophical ideas associated with a particular place, time or group.¹ Thought or thinking is a mental process, which allows beings to model the world, and so to deal with effectively according to their goals, plans, ends and desires.²

If we embark on defining western thought, it will be difficult to put it in specific rubrics. Several attempts have been made by scholars both from east and west to define what actually western thought is? The term western world can have multiple meanings depending on their context. Originally defined as Europe, most modern uses of the term refer to societies of Europe and their genealogical, colonial and philosophical descendants, typically also including those countries whose ethnic identity and their dominant culture derives from European culture. In some cases "West" is taken to mean the industrialized capitalist countries of Western Europe and North America.³ The west is also called as occident.

More typically, the term "the west" contains a pejorative meaning simply to describe and delineate the wealthy and dominant societies from the poorer societies. Those who are believe they are subjugated economically, militarily and otherwise, by deliberate restraints placed on them by the wealthier ones. "The west" then becomes simply a term to mean wealthy, colonial, Europe descended (or allied) societies.⁴

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Origin: - The term western is usually associated with the cultural tradition that traces its origin to Greek thought.⁵ Greeks the most gifted people of the ancient world, borrowed widely from the peoples of Egypt and Asia Minor. Assimilating and redistilling what they borrowed, they produced their own individual Hellenic culture. The conquests made by the Greeks under Alexander the great (336-323 BC) were followed by an expansion of Greek cultural influence throughout most of the ancient world, making the 3rd century BC a "Hellenistic Age"⁶.

The Greeks broke with the mythopoeic outlook of the near east and conceived a new way of viewing nature and human society that is the basis of the western scientific and philosophic tradition. After an initial period of mythical thinking, by the 5th century BC the Greek mind had gradually applied reason to the physical world and to all human activities. This emphasis on reason marks a turning point for human civilization.

The development of rational thought in Greece is a process, a trend, not a finished achievement. The process began when some advanced intellects became skeptical of Homer's Gods and went beyond mythical explanations for natural phenomena. The non-philosophic majority did not, however, eliminate the language, attitudes, and beliefs of myth from its life and thought even in the mature philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, mythical modes of thought persisted. What is of immense historical importance is not the degree to which the Greeks successfully integrated the norm of reason, but that they originated this norm, defined it and applied it to their intellectual development and social life⁷.

Their culture was both extraordinary and important. Extraordinary, in that within a few generations occurred profound and wide spread changes, which were both intellectual: The rise of philosophy, intellectual questioning, logic and axiomatic mathematics; and social: the start of democracy, individualism, realistic art, non-traditional attitudes.

Important in that these changes have effected or formed the basis of much of later and present day human existence.⁸

Many schools of philosophy developed in Greece. One of these Schools rejected myths and superstitions about the nature of the physical world and attempted to give rational explanation of it. Another School of philosophers believed that all matters were composed of atoms and that the differences in arrangement of these atoms resulted in different forms of life. The greatest philosopher of this School was Democritus (4th century BC) who is generally credited with the first systematic formulation of an atomic theory of matter. His conception of nature was thoroughly materialistic, explaining all natural phenomena in terms of the number, shape and size of atoms so he denied the existence of a spiritual world, or of the soul. Then there was School of Sophists meaning 'those who are wise', that concentrated on problems relating to man rather than the physical world. The Sophists played an important role in developing the Greek city - states from agrarian monarchies into commercial democracies. Sophists believed that there was no absolute truth, but looked at every so-called truth in relation to its effect on human beings. The famous maxim of Protagoras, one of the leading Sophists, that "man is the measure of all things", is typical of the philosophical attitude of the Sophist School.⁹

The most famous personalities of the Greece were Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Socrates: - He was born at Athens in 469 or 470 BC and was condemned to death in 399 BC on the charge of 'corrupting the youth and introducing new gods'. Actually, he merely encouraged them to question everything. He spent most of his time in high philosophical discussions in public places.

"In the case of Socrates", says Bertrand Russell, "the uncertainty is as to whether we know very little or a great deal".¹⁰ The reason is that for his teaching he used the method of

conversation and wrote no book. His teachings were preserved for later generations in the dialogues of his famous pupil Plato who idealized him and made him the chief character of his dialogues. Socrates taught that every person has full knowledge of the ultimate truth contained within the soul and needs only to be spurred to conscious reflection in order to become aware of it. His contribution to the history of thought was not a systematic doctrine but a method of thinking and a way of life.¹¹

Plato: - Plato and Aristotle were the most influential of all the philosophers, ancient, medieval, or modern; and of the two, it was Plato who had the greater effect upon subsequent ages.¹² However, Plato (427-347 BC) was a more systematic and positive thinker than Socrates, but his writings, particularly the earlier dialogues, can be regarded as a continuation and elaboration of Socratic insights. Like Socrates, Plato regarded ethics as the highest branch of knowledge, he stressed the intellectual basis of virtue; identifying virtue with wisdom.¹³ However, Plato had a more ambitious goal than Socrates, more reformation of the individual. Plato also explored the fundamental problems of natural sciences, political theory, metaphysics, theology and theory of knowledge and developed ideas that became permanent elements in the Western Thought.

The basis of Plato's philosophy is his theory of ideas or doctrine of forms. He insisted on the existence of a higher world of reality, independent of the world of things that we experience every day. This higher reality he said, is the realm of ideas or forms-unchanging, eternal, absolute and universal strands of beauty, goodness, justice and truth. To live in accordance with these strands constitutes the good life; to know these forms is to grasp the ultimate truth.¹⁴ The theory of ideas, which is expressed in many of his dialogues, particularly the *Republic* (The Republic is a long work by Plato's standards. It's theme is justice)¹⁵ and the *Parmenides*, divides existence into two realms, an "intelligible realm" of perfect,

eternal, and invisible ideas or forms, and a "sensible realm" of concrete of familiar objects.¹⁶ Plato saw the world of phenomena as unstable, transitory and imperfect, while his realm of ideas was eternal and universal valid. True wisdom is obtained through knowledge of the ideas, not the imperfect reflections of the ideas that are perceived with the senses. Trees, stones, human bodies and other objects that can be known through the senses are for Plato unreal, shadowy and imperfect copies of the ideas. Beliefs derived from experience of such objects are therefore vague and unreliable, where as the principles of mathematics and philosophy, discovered by inner meditation on the ideas, constitute the only knowledge worthy of the name. Plato's concept of Absolute Idea of the good, which is the highest Form and includes all others, has been a main source of pantheistic and mystical religious doctrines in western culture. Plato's theory of ideas and his rationalistic view of knowledge formed the foundation for his ethical and social idealism.¹⁷

Aristotle: - Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) stands at the apex of Greek thought because he achieved a creative synthesis of the knowledge and theories of earlier thinkers. He began study at Plato's academy at the age of 17 in 367 B.C. for 20 years and was the most illustrious pupil of Plato, later he became tutor to young Alexander, the great. He later returned to Athens to found the Lyceum, a school that, like Plato's academy, remained for centuries one of the great centers of learning in Greece.

The philosophy of Aristotle has been of enormous historical importance. It extends the works of Plato, but emerges with a different view of reality.¹⁸ He wrote on every subject then known in the world and most of his writings have come down to us. Aristotle's early writings were mostly intended for a general public written in a polished style (some in dialogue form) and they were largely Platonic in outlook.¹⁹ The collection of his logical works is

entitled the *Organon*. His writings on what he called first principles were collected by a compiler and named *Metaphysica*, for they were placed after the writings on physics.²⁰ He wrote several works on physics, including the one called *Auscultations, Physicae* and several on the natural history of animals. On psychology, he wrote many treatises, including three on the soul. His chief ethical writing is the *Nicomachean ethics* and his works on literary arts are named the *rhetoric* and the *poetics*.²¹

In his metaphysical theory, Aristotle criticized Plato's separation of form from matter and maintained that the forms, or essences, are contained within the concrete objects that exemplify them. Everything real, for Aristotle, is a combination of potentiality and actuality. There are four fundamental principles which run through all spheres of the real world. These are:

1- matter of substratum, 2- form or essence, 3- efficient cause and 4- the end or the final cause. These principles are according to Aristotle, the causes of every thing that exists in the world.

Matter is the principle of imperfection and individuation of things. It is not non-existent as Plato had thought, but exists as a potentiality. Form consists of essential elements common to all individual objects of the same type and is the actualization of material potentiality. As forms are eternal and unchanging, they are the most knowable and the most worthy subjects of knowledge. All movement is change from potentiality to actuality, and for every thing in existence, there is a moving or efficient cause. In organic things, the essence, the efficient cause, and the end are one. The essence is shape; it shapes, and its own completion is its end. The soul is the form of the body and is its moving and final cause.²² In his theory of knowledge, he rejected the platonic doctrine that knowledge is innate and insisted that it can be acquired only by generalization from experience.²³

During the Hellenistic period (323-343 B.C.), classical Greek philosophy underwent a radical transformation. From being an

essentially Greek product, it developed into a cosmopolitan and eclectic cultural movement in which Greek, Egyptian, Phoenician and other near eastern religious and ethical elements coalesced. This transformation is best symbolized by the role Alexandria played as the hub of diverse currents of thought making of the new philosophy.

Rise of Neo-Platonism

Neo-Platonism has been described as the final summation or synthesis of major currents in Greek philosophy, Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, Platonism and Aristotarianism, into which an oriental religious and mystical spirit was infused. Ammonias Saccus and his more famous disciple platinus founded it in the third century C.E. Platinus (205-270 C.E) was born in Lycopolis in Egypt studied at Alexandria and lectured in Rome. What Platinus desired was the union with the one or the Good, sometimes called God- the source for all existence. Platinus felt that the intellect could neither described nor understand the one, which transcended all knowing, and the joining with the one required a mystical leap, a purification of the soul so that it could return to its true eternal home.²⁴ The universe emanates from the one by a mysterious process of overflowing of divine energy, in successive levels. The highest levels form a trinity of the one: the Logos, which contains the Platonic forms; and the world soul, which gives rise to human souls and natural forces. The farther things emanate from the one, according to Platinus, the more imperfect and evil they are and the closer they approach the limit of pure matter²⁵ For Platinus this world was a sea of tears and troubles and the reality was not in this world, but beyond it.²⁶ The highest goal of life is to purify oneself of dependence on bodily comforts and through philosophical meditation, to prepare oneself for ecstatic reunion with the one. Neo-platinus exerted a strong influence on medieval thought.²⁷

The ancient Greek conception of science, philosophy, democracy, architecture, literature and art provided a foundation embraced and built upon by the Roman Empire as it swept up Greece in its conquest in the 1st century B.C. For 500 years the Roman Empire spread the Greek and Latin language and Roman law across Europe.²⁶

After the fall of Rome, much of the Greco-roman art, literature, science and even technology were lost. Europe fell into political anarchy, with many warring kingdoms and principalities. The Greek and roman paganism was essentially, completely replaced by Christianity. After the west embraced Christianity, the Greco-roman strand, which shaped the western life until then, was over shadowed by the Palestinian-biblical strand. The later was introduced to the west in the shape of Pauline Christianity. Asceticism became the ideal of a virtuous life and the west was studied all over with abbeys and monasteries. Strangely, the religious leadership of the Christian Europe –the church –was in close alignment with the establishment of the day and the two together resisted all changes including advances on a science as a sign of destabilization. Consequently, scientists like Bruno and Galileo were severely persecuted. Roman Catholic Christianity served as a unifying force in west Europe and in some respects replaced or competed with the secular authorities. It actually encouraged the spreading of Christianity, which also helped to spread early western culture.

On the other hand, in the Islamic world when Abbassi khilafat was founded in Baghdad in 750 C.E., the centre of learning gradually moved to the Abbassi capital, which became in due course the heir of Athens and Alexandria as the new cultural metropolis of the medieval world. The initial reception of Greek Hellenistic philosophy in the Islamic world was mixed. It was frowned upon at first as being suspiciously foreign or pagan and was dismissed by conservative theologians as superfluous. By the

middle of eighth century C.E. the picture had changed somewhat, with the appearance of the rationalist theologians of Islam known as the mutazilites. Of these philosophers, the two outstanding figures of the ninth and tenth centuries were Al-Kindi and Al-Razi who hailed Greek philosophy as a form of liberation from the shackles of dogma or blind imitation (*taqlid*). For Al-Kindi the goals of philosophy are perfectly compatible with those of religion, and for Al-Razi, philosophy was the highest expression of man's intellectual ambitions.²⁹ There was a tremendous contribution of other Muslim scholars like Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Al Farabi and others in shaping the Greco-Roman thought which form the base for enlightening the Europe.

Muslim culture integrated within itself what is regarded as the intrinsically or pragmatically valuable parts of Arab paganism, Hellenism, Judaism, Christianity, Hindu mathematics and other subjects with its own contribution to human life and thought. The Muslims did not only annex certain areas of other lectures but they expanded their horizons much further before annexed them as integral parts of their own culture. No culture or no individual thinker makes a new start. New structures are raised with the material already produced. The past always rolls into the present of every culture and supplies some elements for its emergent edifice. A very large important part of the medieval period is covered by the phenomenal rise and development of Muslim thought, which carried human achievement in the intellectual field, as in many other fields, to one of its highest peaks.

According to a common held view or relations between Islamic culture and Latin West, the Arab philosophers absorbed, preserved and retransmitted Greek thought, notably the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, to Europe during the middle Ages, thereby ensuring the continuity of the western philosophical tradition.³⁰ The translators, who made the philosophical and scientific heritage of the Greeks available to the Muslims, worked for the most part in

Baghdad and formed two successive schools. The first reached apogee during the 9th c, when Christians (notably Hunayn bin Ishaq (192-259 A.H./808-873 C.E.) and his students) and Sābians (notably Thabit bin Qurra (218-288 A.H./834-901 C.E.)) began to translate classical texts from ancient Greek rather than merely from their Syriac versions. This involved a painstaking effort to learn ancient Greek, collect and collate Greek manuscripts and prepare polished Arabic versions that combined accuracy with a high degree of literary merit. Not a little material must have been prepared, under their oversight, by disciples and subordinates and their activity extended over the whole range of science of that day. Existing translations were improved and new ones added.³¹ The second school reached its apogee in the 10th c, when a group of Christian philosophers, translators and commentators devoted themselves almost exclusively to philosophical texts translated from Syriac, writing extensive philosophical commentaries on them, using information drawn from later Greek (Athenian and Alexandrian) commentators. Together, the two schools of translation rendered into Arabic almost the totality of Greek philosophy from Plato to Alexandrian commentators of the 6th century.³² R. Briffault remarked in his book *"The making of Humanity"* that Muslim thinkers were the first in the history of scientific thought to realize the importance of qualitative methods.³³

In the west, even up to the 9th/15th c philosophy and science were regarded as antagonistic to religion. Hence, the teachings of Aristotelianism and Averroism were banned. Muslim thinkers following Plato, Aristotle and Platinus harmonized faith with reason and made possible for themselves and for Europe, unhampered development of both.³⁴ Muslim philosophy influenced western thought in many ways. It (1) initiated in the west the humanistic movement, (2) introduced the historical sciences, (3) the scientific method, (4) helped the western scholastics in harmonizing philosophy with faith, (5) stimulated western mysticism, (6) laid the

foundation of Italian Renaissance and to a degree molded the modern European thought down to the time of Immanuel Kant, in certain directions even later.

The Muslims were the first humanists and they gave a humanist band to the western mind. They were the first to reveal to the west that outside the prevailing catholic church it was not all darkness and barbarism but untold wealth of knowledge. They captured and developed all the intellectual achievements of Greece and transmitted them to the west before any direct contact between the Greek intellect and the western mind was established.³⁵ The greatest boon that the Muslim east bestowed upon the west was the scientific or inductive method of inquiry.³⁶

Interest in Muslim philosophy develops in Europe towards the end of 5th/11th century. The Muslim rule in Spain, the Crusades, the Seminaries in Sicily and other factories necessitated relation of the west with the world of Islam. In Toledo Muslims and Christians lived side by side. It was here that Raymond T. Archbishop of the provincial capital (525/1130-545/1150) established a translation bureau to render Arabic masterpieces into Latin.³⁷ Toledo, Burgos, Sicily, and Naples became the main centers of translation. John of Seville and Gundisalves were two important translators of this period. John of Seville translated Arabic texts into Roman language/ and Gundisalves from Roman into Latin. In France and especially in Normandy, scientific trend appeared first among the monks. Robert, the king of France of the Capetian dynasty, at one time a disciple of Gilbert's, was friendly towards the Muslim scientific endeavor. At the time he invaded southern Italy, Calabria and Sicily, he observed the Italian seminaries and borrowed many things from them. In that was, the seminaries of Sicily and Naples acted as transmission media of Islamic science to the west.³⁸

The transmission of the Muslim thought to the medieval west passed through the following phases:

1. In first phase, a band of scholars went to Muslim countries and made personal studies. Constantine of Africa and Adelhard made studies of this sort for the first time. Constantine, who was born in Carthage near the end of the 5th/11th c, traveled through the east. He made translations into Latin from Arabic translations of "Hippocrates" and Galen's books in addition to those of the original works of Muslim scholars on medical sciences. Later on many students from Italy, Spain and southern France attended Muslim seminaries in order to study mathematics, physics, medicine, cosmography and other subjects, and in due course became candidates for professorship in the first western universities to be established after the pattern of Muslim seminaries.

2. The second phase starts with the founding of the first western universities. First, the Salerno seminary was founded in the kingdom of Naples. Books of the Aristotle and those on the interpretation of his philosophy were brought to Italy by way of Salerno. Emperor Frederick of Sicily was known as patron of Muslim sciences. Aristotle's books were translated from Arabic into Latin by his order. At that time, important seminaries were also established at Padua, Toulouse and later at Leon.

3. At last, the science of Muslims was transmitted to France and other western countries through Italy. Bologna and Montpellier seminaries were founded at beginning of 7th/13th C. At that time Oxford and Koln universities were established after the same pattern and thus the new science was transmitted to the England and Germany.³⁹

Roger Bacon one of the founders of empiricism had a great influence of Muslim philosophers particularly that of Ibn Sina. The word "experiment" (*experimentum*) is closely associated with his scientific and extra scientific studies. While the trends initiated by Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd constituted the roots of western rationalism. Muslim naturalists like al-Razi and Ibn-Haitham

influenced the empirical thought of England.⁴⁰ Western science profited by Ibn Haitham's detailed research on optics. He really marks the beginning of physics as well as that of the movement of empiricism in the west. In the origination of empiricism, his role is even greater than that of al-Razi. He held that knowledge combines the substance of the intellect with the content of experience and, thus, reconciled rationalism with empiricism.⁴¹

The translations from al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina helped in the establishment of Augustinian philosophy. It supplied it with affirmative arguments. Ibn-Sina's influence on medieval Christian thinkers was of primary importance since they profited by his ideas directly and also since he was useful in interpreting st. Augustine. However, the Augustinian, who were adherents of Ibn-Sina and had accepted the major ideas of the Muslim philosopher, severely attacked some of his doctrines.⁴² The famous Jabir bin Hayyān is known among the naturalists as an alchemist, chemist, and philosopher. E. Gilson, in a number of detailed studies, investigated how Aristotle's psychology reached Al-Farabi and Al-Kindi, how it developed in their hands, and how it was transmitted to the Latin world. In the west, Al-Kindi was known as one of the Aristotle's faithful disciples. With his works and those of his successors; empiricism penetrated into the west from the Arab world and helped the rise of modern thought.⁴³ The impact of translations of Arabic books was tremendous. "It was like a fertilizing rain", says Max Meyerhof. The Arabic learning awakened the slumbering curiosity of the European mind, and quickened the rational impulse. The Arabic learning prepared the soil for the seeds of the Renaissance to germinate. The Spanish Muslim civilization was, therefore, a boon for Europe. "It is, for the Arab civilization (says John Owen) that we must look after those influences of free culture that directly affected the Renaissance."⁴⁴

Owing to the influence of Arab culture – a culture that had preserved the knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome Western

Europe rediscovered its heritage in the 1300s and the renaissance was born. When renaissance came and science triumphed, the west took an anti religious direction. The Greco-roman spirit reasserted itself with a newfound vigor and materialism and secularism became the guiding principles of living.⁴⁵

After renaissance the west banished every religious relic to the oblivion and adopted man made laws and etiquette in its place. Therefore it was bound that such scholars and philosophers from the west would emerge who laid the foundation for the Godless secular fabric of its society. They were divided into rationalists and empiricists. Starting from Descartes, the western philosophers propounded systematically the theory of epistemology that banished God from the realism of knowledge and brought man to fore as a sovereign being "filling up the place" which belonged to God. To quote Dostoevsky, "if God is removed from the universe every thing will be permissible for an individual." John Locke, Hobbes and Hume also believed sense perception as the sole source of knowledge. Hobbes considered the religion as the dream of a sick man. Sensations and impressions were the stuff from which every knowledge emanates. This was a tacit denial of revelation that forms the basis of Islamic faith. Bertrand Russell is a famous advocate of this atheism who blatantly declares that; I think all the great religions of the world are both untrue and harmful. Advocating the cause of basing every thing on sense based observation and evidence, Russell thinks, "a habit of basing convictions upon evidence, and of giving to them only that degree of certainty which the evidence warrants, would, if it became general, cure most of the ills from which the world is suffering." He adds by saying that the whole conception of the God is a conception derived from the ancient despotism. It is a conception quite unworthy of freeman.⁴⁶

Renaissance western culture was spread to the new world and beyond in 1500s by explorers, traders, missionaries and

colonists. The Enlightenment of the 1700s, in turn culminated politically in the American and the French Revolution. The industrial Revolution which began in the last half of the 18th c in great Britain changed western culture to one that emphasized the notion of progress, development and change, material well being and eventually consumerism, and transformed the world. The ideas of civil right, equality before the law, procedural justice, and democracy as the ideal form of society and were principles, which formed the basis of modern western culture.⁴⁷

At a superficial level, much of the western culture has indeed permeated the rest of the world. However, at a more basic level the western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Such ideas of the west bring a reaction against rather than acceptance.⁴⁸

To conclude we can say western thought is an admixture of religio-socio-political ideas having their origin in the Greco-Roman civilization passing through the Christianization of the west. Countered or reshaped by the renaissance of the west getting its fruition in imperialism taking the shape of neo-colonialism in the modern times in the form of globalization.

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