

Western Philosophy

It is generally agreed that philosophy began in the Western world in Greece with Thales of Miletus (6th cent. BCE). He is credited with accurately predicting an eclipse, which suggests that he had made a careful study of astronomy. We have only fragments of his cosmological speculation, so we are not absolutely certain what some of his cryptic statements mean, but he claimed that the basic element from which all other elements are derived was water. This spurred alternative suggestions about the primary stuff of the world (air, fire, atoms, etc.) from other pre-Socratic philosophers, including PYTHAGORAS' (ca. 582 – ca. 507) claim that it was not an element, but number or proportion. A change in emphasis came with the Greek Sophists, a group of professional teachers who trained students in various rhetorical devices to help them win court cases. Because some of these rhetorical devices were clearly fallacious, they have been immortalized in the words "sophistries" and "sophistical." Socrates (470?-399 BCE) was distressed by this trend, shifting the topic of philosophy to ethics and politics. His principal pupil, Plato (427?-347 BCE), did the same. Plato's most famous pupil, ARISTOTLE (384-322 BCE), broadened the scope of philosophy to cover all these subjects, and more. One of Aristotle's most enduring contributions was a systematic development of formal logic, which was only superseded in the latter part of the 19th century.

Some of the post-Socratic philosophers of Greece and Rome had an influence on early Christian thinkers, especially Augustine (354-430). Plato's influence can be seen in Medieval Christian philosophers up to the 13th century when Aristotle was rediscovered through the writings of Muslim philosophers, such as Ibn Sina (980-1037), whose name was Latinized as Avicenna, and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) or Averroës. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was the principal heir to this rediscovery, seeking to justify faith through reason. But it was not until the Renaissance that philosophy began to be divorced from Christian apologetics.

Most historians date the beginning of modern philosophy with Rene Descartes (1596-1650), though some would trace it back to Francis Bacon