

100 Basic Philosophical Terms

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ABSOLUTE: Something that is independent of, and unconditioned by, anything external to itself (non-contingent).

ABSTRACT IDEA: A general idea; that which exists in the mind rather than in the external world.

ABSURD: In logic, that which is irrational or contradictory.

ACCIDENT: In metaphysics, a quality, property or characteristic that is not essential to the nature of a thing.

ACTUALITY: In scholastic philosophy, the state of being something in reality (or in fact) rather than being something in potential.

AD HOC: Literally, to or for this; pertaining to this one particular case alone.

AD INFINITUM: Going on forever (without end).

AESTHETICS: The branch of philosophy concerned with the study of beauty and art.

A FORTIORI: Literally, with greater force; in logic, all the more reason.

AGNOSTICISM: The belief that one does not, or cannot, know ultimate reality (especially God).

ALTRUISM: The belief that everyone should be concerned for the benefit and welfare of others.

AMORAL: That which is neither moral nor immoral; outside the moral realm.

ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY: A modern movement in philosophy (primarily in England and North America) which identifies the analysis of language as the central task of philosophy. Linguistic analysis is used as a tool to identify and resolve philosophical problems.

ANALYTIC PROPOSITION: According to Kant, a proposition (statement) that is true by definition; a proposition whose predicate is deducible from the subject, as in "All bachelors are unmarried men."

ANGST: A German term for an inner sense of despair or dread.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM: The act of ascribing human characteristics to non-humans (especially to God).

ANTINOMY: A contradiction made up of a thesis and antithesis.

ANTITHESIS: The contrast or opposite of the thesis statement.

APOLOGETICS: Literally, to give a defense; in philosophy, to give rational justification for one's beliefs.

A POSTERIORI: In epistemology, knowledge derived from, or posterior to (comes after), five sense experience. Knowledge that comes from experience.

A PRIORI: In epistemology, knowledge which is acquired prior to, or independently of, five sense experience.

ARCHETYPE: An original model, type, pattern, or paradigm.

ARISTOTELIANISM: Of or pertaining to the philosophy of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

ATHEISM: The belief that no God or gods exist in or beyond the universe (traditional usage). Sometimes defined as an absence of belief in God.

ATTRIBUTE: A quality, property, or characteristic which is attributed to, or predicated of, something.

AUGUSTINIANISM: Of or pertaining to the philosophical and theological thought of St. Augustine (354-430).

AUTONOMY: The state of being independent, self-determining, or free.

AXIOLOGY: The branch of philosophy concerned with the study of values.

BEING: That which exists, or is real (unchanging reality).

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE: Immanuel Kant's central ethical principle of conduct: "Always act so as to will the maxim of your action to become a universal law." Moral conduct should be universalized. The classic example of a purely deontological approach to ethics.

CAUSALITY, PRINCIPLE OF: Every effect must have a sufficient cause; everything that comes into being must have a cause.

COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH: Truth is determined by that which is internally and logically consistent.

CONTINGENT: The state of being dependent upon something else for existence.

CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH: Truth is determined by that which corresponds to the present state of affairs.

COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: A proof for the existence of God; derived from the Greek word kosmos (world), the argument states that a contingent world requires the existence of God as its ultimate cause. The argument appears in different forms (unmoved mover, first cause, contingency, kalam), and has been presented and defended by numerous philosophers including: Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Gottfried Leibniz, and Medieval Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazali.

COSMOS: From the Greek word kosmos, meaning world or universe.

DEDUCTIVE REASONING: Reasoning in which the conclusion of an argument follows with logical necessity (certainty) from the premises. Deductive Reasoning usually proceeds from general to particular, or from whole to parts. Contrasted with Inductive Reasoning.

DEISM: Belief in a God who created the world, but does not intervene within it (God is transcendent, but not immanent). This religious world view, which emphasizes reason over revelation, was most popular during the 17th and 18th centuries in England, France and America.

DETERMINISM: The view that everything in the universe is controlled by previous conditions, and therefore could not be otherwise.

DIALECTIC: The process of drawing out logical truths through dialogue, reasoning and argumentation.

DOUBT: From the Latin dubito, to be uncertain.

DUALISM: In metaphysics, the view that reality consists of two fundamentally distinct entities.

EFFICIENT CAUSE: The agent through which something is produced or comes into being.

EMPIRICISM: The belief that the source of all knowledge is five sense experience. All knowledge of actually existing things is acquired through five sense experience. Contrasted with Rationalism.

EPICUREANISM: A hedonistic philosophy, founded by Epicurus, which stressed long-term and higher pleasure (i.e., pleasures of the mind over the bodily appetites).

EPISTEMOLOGY: The branch or field of philosophy concerned with the origin, nature, and limits of knowledge.

ESSENCE: The nature or "whatness" of a thing. The qualities or attributes that make a thing what it is.

ETHICS: The branch or field of philosophy concerned with moral values and human conduct.

EXISTENTIALISM: A modern approach (movement) to philosophy which rejects abstractions, and stresses concrete reality, especially individual human freedom, choice, subjectivity, and existence.

FIDEISM: The view that there is no way (and often no need) to justify one's beliefs (usually religious belief). It is usually asserted that faith alone is sufficient.

FINAL CAUSE: For the sake of which an agent acts (i.e., the end or goal). One of Aristotle's four causes.

FINITE: Having specific boundaries, limitations, or an end. Limitations in attributes and character. Considered the opposite of infinite.

FORM: In metaphysics, the essence or nature of an entity.

FORMAL CAUSE: The structure, form, pattern, or configuration of which something consists. One of Aristotle's four causes.

FOUNDATIONALISM: In epistemology, the belief that all knowledge is based upon first principles (foundational truths) which provide justification for all other beliefs. Some would argue that these foundational truths are themselves not subject to any proof.

HEDONISM: The ethical viewpoint which asserts that pleasure is the summum bonum (greatest good). It is often asserted that mankind is a pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding animal. There have been several different types of hedonistic philosophies (e.g., Epicureanism, Egoism, Utilitarianism, etc.).

HUMANISM: The view that "mankind is the measure of all things." Something's value or significance is measured by its relationship to mankind.

IDEALISM: The metaphysical view that all reality consists of mind and/or ideas. Contrasted with Materialism.

IMMANENT: The state of being present with something (e.g., God is immanent [present within the universe]).

INDEPENDENT: In Metaphysics, existence that is not conditioned or controlled by something external to itself; a non-contingent.

INDETERMINISM: The view that at least some events, especially the human will and behavior, are free of causal determination.

INDUBITABLE: Beyond all doubt; absolutely or unquestionably true.

INDUCTIVE REASONING: Reasoning in which the conclusion of an argument follows only probably from the premises. Inductive Reasoning usually proceeds from particular to general, or from parts to whole. Contrasted with Deductive Reasoning.

INFINITE: Without boundaries, limitations, or an end. No limitations in attributes or character. Considered the opposite of finite.

INNATE IDEAS: The belief that at least some ideas are inborn (i.e., present in the mind at birth).

INTUITION: The faculty by which truth is immediately grasped, separate from five sense experience or reason.

LOGIC: The study of the principles of correct thinking. The science that evaluates thinking and argumentation. Considered a major branch or field of philosophy.

MATERIAL CAUSE: The matter, stuff, or substance of which something is made. One of Aristotle's four causes.

MATERIALISM: The metaphysical view that all reality consists of material or physical entities with their physical properties. Contrasted with Idealism.

METAPHYSICS: The branch or field of philosophy concerned with the ultimate nature, structure, and characteristics of reality. A narrow usage of the term refers to the study of that which lies beyond the physical realm (i.e., the supernatural realm). Metaphysics is sometimes used interchangeably with the term Ontology.

MONISM: The metaphysical view that all reality is one. Idealism and Materialism are examples of monism.

MORAL ARGUMENT: A proof for the existence of God; God's existence is the only adequate grounds to explain objective morality.

NATURALISM: The belief that physical nature is the only reality. The philosophy of naturalism is characterized by Monism, antisupernaturalism, scientism, and Humanism.

NIHILISM: The view that there is no meaning, purpose, significance, or value in the universe.

NOETIC: Pertaining to reason, knowledge, and the intellect.

NOUMENA: In Kant, the thing-in-itself, the world as it really is, apart from its appearance; as opposed to the phenomena (the world of appearance). Also referred to as the "noumenon" or "noumenal world."

OBJECTIVE IDEALISM: The belief that things (ideas) genuinely exist apart from our perception of them.

OCKHAM'S RAZOR: The explanation which fits the facts with the least assumptions is the best. Also known as the principle of parsimony.

ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: A proof for the existence of God; St. Anselm argued that reflection on God's perfect essence (or being) actually necessitates His existence.

ONTOLOGY: The study of being; often used interchangeably with Metaphysics.

PANTHEISM: A world view that makes God identical with the world; "All is God and God is all." God is wholly Immanent, and therefore not transcendent.

PHENOMENA: In Kant, the world of appearance (how things appear to the senses); as opposed to the Noumena (world of reality). Also referred to as the phenomenal world.

PHILOSOPHY: Literally, the "love of wisdom"; an attempt to provide rational and coherent understanding of the fundamental questions of life.

PLATONISM: Of or pertaining to the philosophy of Plato (427-347 B.C.)

PLURALISM: The metaphysical view that ultimate reality consists of many things. Contrasted with Monism.

PRAGMATISM: An American philosophy which makes workability and practical consequences the test for truth.

RATIONALISM: Broadly speaking, the epistemological view that stresses reason as the test of truth. In a strict sense, the belief that at least some knowledge is acquired independent of sense experience. Contrasted with Empiricism.

REALISM: The metaphysical view that asserts that physical objects exist apart from being perceived; the belief that the essences of things possess objective reality.

RELATIVISM: The belief that no absolutes exist (in truth and/or ethics). Truth and morality vary from person to person, time to time, circumstance to circumstance.

SKEPTICISM: In a loose sense, to doubt, question, or suspend judgment on philosophical issues. In a strict sense, to deny that true knowledge is attainable.

SOCRATIC METHOD: Derived from the Greek philosopher Socrates, a method for finding truth and meaning through rigorous questioning.

SOLIPSISM: "I myself only exist." The only reality that exists is one's self.

SUBJECTIVE IDEALISM: The belief that things (ideas) are dependent upon perception for their particular existence.

SUBSTANCE: A thing's underlying essence; that which makes a thing what it is.

TABULA RASA: Literally, a "blank tablet". John Locke's empirical view that human beings possess no innate (inborn) ideas or principles.

TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: A proof for the existence of God; design, beauty, harmony, and purposiveness in the universe require a cosmic architect (i.e., God). Known as the design argument, it was defended by Plato, but its most popular presentation was given by William Paley.

THEISM: The world view that affirms the existence of an infinite, personal God, who is the transcendent creator, and immanent sustainer of the world. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are examples of theistic religions.

THOMISM: Of or pertaining to the philosophical and theological thought of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

TRANSCENDENT: Beyond, or distinct from, the time/space world.

WELTANSCHAUUNG: German term, referring to a person's world view (a conceptual scheme for interpreting reality).