

Describe two key moments in the development of philosophical thought from the classical to contemporary period.

The ancient Greek philosophers The Sophists, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle set the foundation of Western philosophy during the 5th and 6th Century BCE. Each of these questioned the meaning of human existence. The search for meaning continued on after the era of these Ancient Greek philosophers but the direction of this search changed. The emergence of Christian philosophers in the late classical medieval world, the philosophy of Rene Descartes during the Enlightenment and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche during the Age of Existentialism are primary key moments in the development of philosophical thought from the classical to the contemporary and are the key moments I will be describing in my essay.

After Jesus' death the religion of Christianity emerged and with it Christian theologians. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-400CE) was a Christian theologian and philosopher born in Tagaste near Carthage. Augustine followed Manichaeism as a young man. This sect is very materialistic and has a determinist belief that no being can change their destiny. In 387 the bishop of Milan, Ambrose, convinced Augustine to convert to Christianity, he did and in 395 he became a bishop. His infamous book 'The Confessions' is about his conversion. His conversion was a key moment in the development of philosophy as it encouraged future thinkers to always question their own beliefs and to not accept the status quo. Influenced by Plato and Christianity he began to have a more spiritual understanding of the world. Augustine predominantly focused on free will, happiness, lack of search, love and truth. He came to believe that all humans have the ability to influence what happens in their lives.

This was an important development as he introduced the idea of free will to society. He also believed that all of humanity is on a journey in search for happiness. His Christian faith convinced him that this happiness could only be found with the assistance of the Lord and in the Lord

himself 'you have made us for yourself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you' (Confessions I:I). However Augustine recognised that not all people were on a journey to search for true happiness. According to Augustine these people were in a state of despair and could not understand what happiness was or that they were so full of pride that they convinced themselves they did not need God. He therefore concluded that the mistaken belief of one's own self-sufficiency blocked the search for happiness. The importance of love and friendship cannot be overstated in the philosophy of Augustine. This was also important to Plato. However, Augustine went beyond the Greek understanding of love and friendship that was influenced by Plato as he stated it included enemies. Augustine believed that above all else humans want to love and be loved. This was an important development as during this time people usually entered marriage based on social status and the common purpose of marriage was survival, not love. He believed that God seeks us and offers us his love and through the experience of being loved by God, we ourselves have the ability love others. Augustine also emphasised the importance of searching for truth, like love, it was a gift from God.

Another Christian theologian and philosopher was Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274CE) born in Aquino, Italy. Although 8 Centuries apart, the two men worked to combine the thought of the Greek philosophers with the Christian faith. Aquinas was a member of the Dominican Order and studied, as well as lectured, in Paris. He was influenced by the teachings of Aristotle. His most famous work was 'Summa Theologica'. Aquinas predominantly focused on human happiness, purpose and the idea of the ultimate goal which he considered to be God. Like Augustine, Aquinas questioned human happiness. He concluded that love could not be found in materialistic delights such as riches, honour, pleasure or fame. He instead suggested that only God can fulfil the human desire for happiness. Like Aristotle, Aquinas stated that only those who seek good and live a virtuous life will achieve happiness. Aquinas also thought that all of nature, particularly humans, pursue goals 'properly human action is action that pursues goals'.

A simple thing such as a movement is dependent on a goal and it is the reason for an action i.e. the goal, distinguished that which is good from that which is bad. For example if the reason for an action was purely selfish, then the action is bad because the intention and purpose is bad. He further extended this thinking to suggest that all of human nature has an ultimate goal.

He accepted that although all agree they are searching for an ultimate goal, not all people agree God is the ultimate goal 'so all (people) agree in pursuing a ultimate goal and seeking their own fulfilment, but they disagree as to where this fulfilment can be found' (Summa Theologica). Aquinas concluded that people can be misled as they seek their ultimate goal in materialistic items, yet he acknowledged that different people have different beliefs. Aquinas was an important philosopher in the development of philosophy from the classic to the contemporary as his teachings brought the concepts of philosophy and religion closer together.

The father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes (1596-1650CE), is the first contemporary philosopher I will discuss. He was born in Tours, France during the Enlightenment, a time of tense conflict between the scientific and religious worlds when people began to think for themselves across a wide scale. Descartes travelled a lot and on his journey through Europe he decided to delve more deeply into the philosophical questions of life. Descartes was primarily concerned with the question of human existence. By rejecting the fundamental elements of ancient philosophy, Descartes gave life to modern philosophy. He believed humans were rational, in that we have the ability to reason and make sense of things, and autonomous, in that we can do things for ourselves with other influences. This was important in the development of humanism as he emphasises the self-sufficiency of humans and opposes that the person is entirely at the mercy of a divine authority. He believed rationalism and autonomy were gifts from God. Like Plato, Descartes believed that by rejecting any prejudices and beliefs perceived that have been acquired by the senses we can gain truth. This can be achieved by questioning all of the beliefs and assumptions we have picked up throughout our lives and seeking knowledge within oneself as the self is the starting place of knowledge.

This was an important development in the emergence of scepticism. Descartes rejected almost all knowledge picked up by the senses and other people. The only thing he knew for certain was that he existed. He believed this was certain because he could think. Thinking requires a thinker and a consciousness. This was clear to Descartes as thinking does not occur in mid-air. Simply thinking about your existence proves you exist, as your mind exists to do the thinking. This is known as the Cogito Argument. Descartes coined the infamous term 'Cogito Ergo Sum' (I think therefore I am) to explain this concept. Descartes maintained the idea that God existed.

He came to the conclusion God existed by rationally reflecting on human existence and the world. Descartes doubted everything, but never lost sense of a perfect entity, which for him was God. He said that the idea of a perfect entity cannot have originated from one who was himself imperfect. He believed that God gave us this idea when we were born and therefore is innate within us. This is an important development in philosophy as it formed a foundation for all knowledge in Western philosophy and further encouraged the use of human reason without abandoning religious belief.

The final philosopher I will discuss is the prominent contemporary Prussian philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1890). He was an excellent student and was awarded a professorship of classical philosophy the young age of 25. Due to ill health he had to resign from lecturing, however he travelled and wrote extensively for the next 11 years. Like the Sophists, Nietzsche believed there was no absolute truths. He was a sceptic that insisted there were no moral truth or scientific truths. He believed that truth solely exists because society needs to maintain control over its people in order to function effectively. This is like the Sophist Thrasymachus' belief that 'justice is in the interest of the stronger'. His refusal to accept absolutes contradicted the central teaching on moral absolutes of the Catholic Church.

Nietzsche identified that Christians led 'moral lives' according to their beliefs and accused Christianity of producing, what he called 'slave morality' because it tells people what is right and wrong. Instead he proposed that human behaviour be judged in terms of greatness and excellence. The power of will was deemed important by him. Therefore one's life would only be deemed successful if they achieved greatness or excellence in leadership or other areas. He once infamously proclaimed that essentially 'God is dead' and had been killed by the new faith in science. He supported this claim by arguing that in a world where reasoning and rationalism can explain most things without reference to a higher being, faith in God was no longer credible. As a result he warned that society should be prepared to face the consequences of this moral gap as the old moral order would collapse and give rise to a new philosophy of extreme scepticism called nihilism.

I have clearly demonstrated the development of philosophical thought from the classical to contemporary period using four pivotal philosophers. Each philosopher shares the same

intention of encouraging society to use reason and logic so that they can formulate rational ideas rather than just accepting the status quo.