

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ORDER



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Gaining Knowledge & the Path to Wisdom

- ❑ The notion of the ‘**philosophical order**’ comes from the Catholic philosopher **Etienne Gilson**, sometime Director of the Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies (PIMS), St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto.
- ❑ Gilson was a self-proclaimed realist philosopher and on the other hand a critic of so-called ‘**critical realism**’.
- ❑ Gilson’s notion of the philosophical order that philosophy ‘the love of wisdom’ should be considered an autonomous discipline in its own right, It is separate from, and logically prior to, each of the ‘**special sciences**’.

[Gilson, E. 1990. *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists*. San Francisco. Ignatius Press. (Translation of *Le realisme methodique*, 1935).]

An Intellectual Spectrum

Idealism

Critical Idealism

Critical Realism

Realism



Plato
Hegel



Kant



Lonergan
Bhaskar



Aristotle
Aquinas
Gilson



Lead Me Not ...

❑ Gilson specifically warned against the temptation to base philosophy on the principles of one or another of the special sciences themselves, and in his book gave two notable examples from the history of philosophy. Aristotle in the 4th century BC and Descartes in the 17th century AD.

❑ **Aristotle** was originally trained in biology and medicine by his father, the personal physician to King Phillip of Macedonia (father of Alexander the Great). Aristotle therefore based his philosophy on a biological template. The result was ultimately that mediaeval scholastic philosophy – itself heavily influenced by Aristotle - was unable to cope with the scientific revolution of the time of **Francis Bacon** (16th-17th century).

❑ **Descartes** was a mathematician and seemed to feel that philosophy should operate on a similar sort of basis to mathematics – to establish *a priori* truths, that kind of thing – thereby tipping the balance too far in the direction of ‘**rationalism**’ rather than ‘**empiricism**’.

Philosophy: ‘Queen of the Sciences’

□ Gilson on the contrary, thinks the special sciences are a ‘**discourse of methods**’ (plural, as opposed to *method* singular). Each has their own method. The mathematical method corresponds to notions of abstract quantity, the physical method to the behaviour of inorganic matter, the biological method to the behaviour of organic matter, *etc.* In Gilson’s (1990, 73), view:

... Wisdom, or first philosophy ... establishes the principles which regulate all the other sciences and, humanly speaking, depends on none of them ... the others study the various modes of being ... [Wisdom] ... studies being in itself. It is the science of being as being.

□ We think this idea of the philosophical order can be extended to the different branches of philosophy within philosophy itself. Gilson (1990, 78), eight decades earlier, seems to have pre-emptively concurred:

The first and most necessary ... [good] ... is the existence of a philosophy which is truly an autonomous discipline of the mind and a metaphysics to crown it. (emphasis added)

A Rigid Heirarchy?

□ In the previous session, we listed the following ‘branches’ of philosophy:

Metaphysics
Epistemology
Ethics
Politics

□ **John Smithin** (2013) has referred to this as a ‘rigid hierarchy’. (With metaphysics as the starting point).

[**Smithin, J. 2013. Requirements of a philosophy of money and finance. In *Financial Crises and the Nature of Capitalist Money: Mutual Developments from the Work of Geoffrey Ingham*, eds. G.C. Harcourt and J. Pixley, 19-29, London: Palgrave Macmillan.]**

The Forest or the Trees?

□ Another, fifth, branch of philosophy which is usually added to this list is **Aesthetics**. This is the study of our ideas about art and beauty.

Metaphysics

Epistemology

Ethics

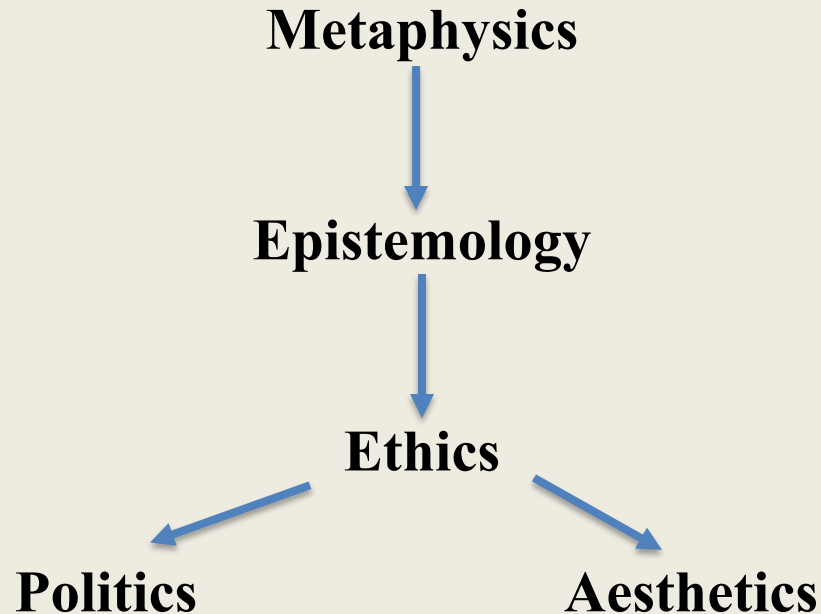
Politics

Aesthetics

□ But isn't this now starting to get a bit complicated? Should we just go on adding topics indefinitely?

Branching Out

□ In fact, **Aesthetics** has much the same sort of standing as **Politics** in the list above.



□ Just as with politics, one might say questions of aesthetics can only be meaningfully considered once metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments have been made explicit.

Even More Branches

❑ In sources like popular histories of philosophy and textbooks one often sees the topic of **Logic** listed as a sixth branch. For example, Johnston (2006, 1-2) lists the main divisions of philosophy as:

Epistemology

Logic

Metaphysics

Ethics

Political Philosophy

Aesthetics

❑ But this ordering seems to us to be confused. Firstly, in *starting* with epistemology rather than metaphysics, and secondly in including logic as being a ‘branch’ of philosophy on it own, rather than merely an epistemological *method*. Why all this confusion?

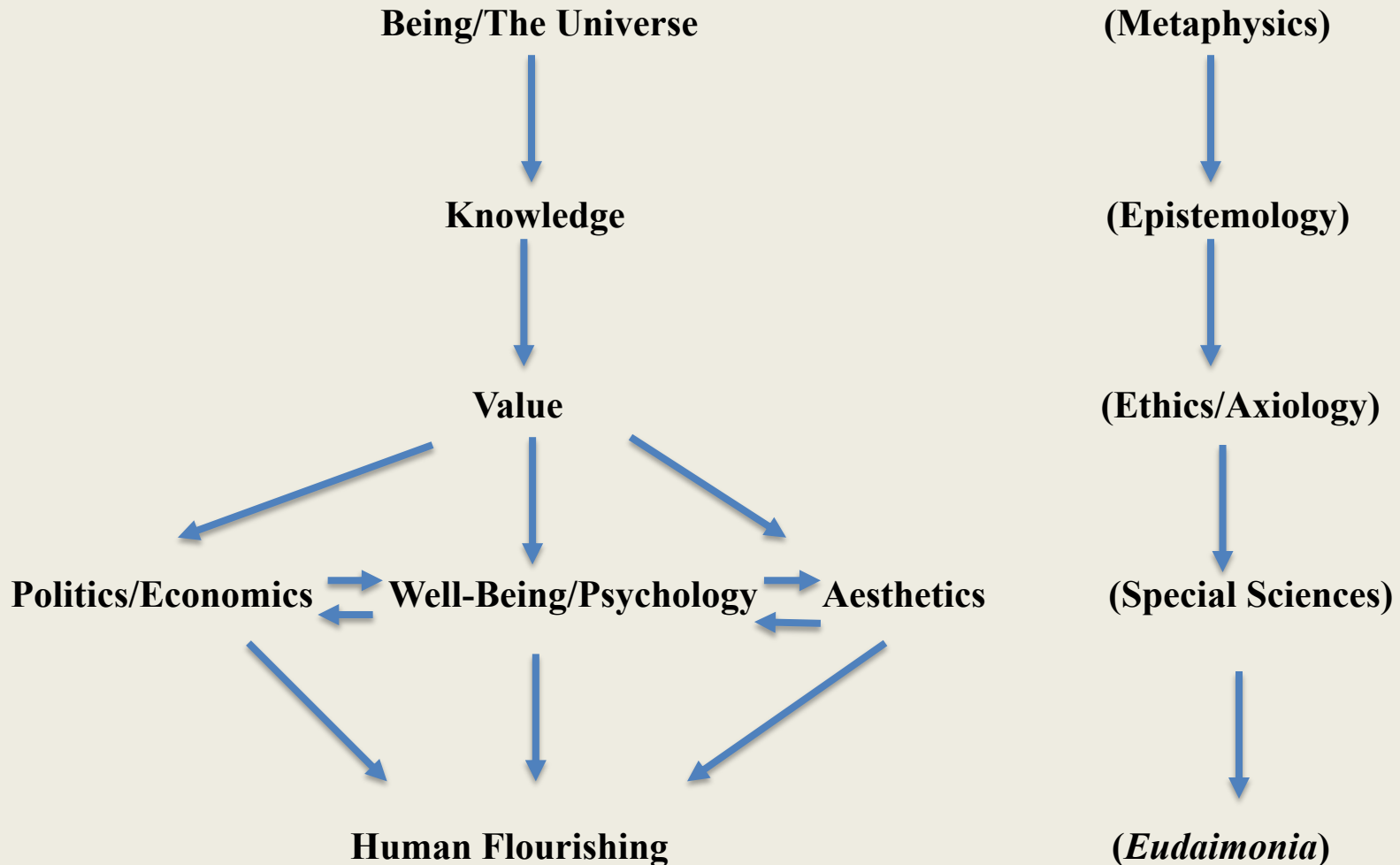
[Johnston, D. 2006. *A Brief History of Philosophy From Socrates to Derrida*. London: Continuum.]

The ‘Universal Philosophical System’ (UPS)

- ❑ **Alla Marchenko** has suggested a diagram to summarize the argument so far and give an overview. Alla calls this the ‘**Universal Philosophical System**’ (UPS).
- ❑ The diagram uses more ‘everyday’ or understandable terms for philosophical concepts, such as **being, knowledge, value, etc.** Some view of these things must be formed before there can be any talk special sciences. Ayn Rand was particularly concerned with political economy, as are several friends and Associates of the API, albeit with different opinions. As mentioned, another field of study often listed is **aesthetics**. We also include a third area of interest, namely **well-being** or **psychology** which we feel is equally important, and to which philosophy can make a big contribution.
- ❑ We could have included any number of the other special sciences on this line of the diagram but have limited the choice to just three for space considerations. It is important, also, to note the multiple feedback loops between each of them.
- ❑ The *ultimate* goal of philosophy & the special sciences is *eudaimonia* or **human flourishing**.

(Alla’s idea really seems to have caught on quickly. There are UPS outlets everywhere!)

The UPS Diagram



The Big Issue?

❑ Realists say that the general problem with modern/post-modern philosophy, which means most of mainstream Western philosophy since Descartes, has been a turning away from metaphysical questions, and a focus on epistemology. Metaphysics was displaced from its pre-eminent position in the philosophical order. But this tendency would ultimately make philosophy itself redundant. The ‘Queen of the Sciences’ has abdicated.

❑ API Associate Graham Hubbs (2021) has argued that for two prominent 20th century **analytical philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein** and his Associate **Elizabeth Anscombe**, their reaction to ‘British Hegelianism’ of the late 1800s was a profound distrust of metaphysics as such. Fair enough perhaps regarding Hegel, but should all metaphysics should be discarded? In any event, if this was the route taken by **linguistic analysis**, it was *even more so* for the rivals of analytical philosophy, **pragmatism**, **existentialism** (a misnomer), and **post-modernism**.

[Hubbs, G. 2021. Elizabeth (G.E.M) Anscombe: *Intention*. Paper presented to the *Aurora Philosophy Institute, Aurora ON, May.*]

The Law of Unintended Consequences?

□ The upshot of these trends was that through the 20th century most academic philosophy focused almost exclusively on epistemology including the supposed implications of the epistemological *connundra* for discussions of ethics and politics. The result was a descent into pure relativism, an attitude of ‘anything goes’. Searle (2010) has gone further back than the 20th century, and also speaks (like Gilson) of the deep-seated historical roots of the tendency. Only recently (21st century) has there been (something of) a **realist turn**.

This ... investigation is historically situated. It is not the sort of thing that could have been undertaken a hundred years ago, or even fifty years ago ... from the seventeenth century until the late twentieth century most philosophers in the western tradition were preoccupied with epistemic questions. Even questions of language and society were ... largely epistemic: How do we know what other people mean when they talk? How do we know that ... statements ... about social reality are true? ... These are interesting questions but I regard them as ... peripheral ... In the present era ... we have ... overcome our three-hundred-year obsession with epistemology and skepticism.

[Searle, J.R. 2010. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. New York: Oxford University Press]

Ten (or More) Philosophical Mistakes?

- ❑ On the multiple wrong turns in modern, and *a fortiori* post-modern, philosophy **Aristotle** had a very prescient quote:

The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied a thousandfold.

- ❑ See also the important book (in our view) by **Mortimer J. Adler** (1985), *Ten Philosophical Mistakes: Basic Errors in Modern Thought*.
- ❑ Adler admits that there are more than just 10 mistakes. He means **‘ten subjects about which philosophical mistakes have been made’**.
- ❑ Gilson says that the abandonment of metaphysics is the root of the problem.

[Adler, M.J. 1985. *Ten Philosophical Mistakes: Basic Errors in Modern Thought – How They Came About, Their Consequences and How to Avoid Them*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.]

Ten Subjects About Which Philosophical Mistakes Have Been Made

1. Consciousness and its Objects
2. The Intellect and the Senses
3. Words and Meanings
4. Knowledge and Opinion
5. Moral Values
6. Happiness and Contentment
7. Freedom of Choice
8. Human Nature
9. Human Society
10. Human Existence

