

PRE Homework 1 – Notes On Philosophical Theories.

The Idealists

Idealists believe that the external (outside), material world (things we can see and touch) is produced by the mind or ideas and that it cannot exist separately. Reality therefore begins inside the head, not out on the street. An object has no meaning until the human mind gives it some meaning.

Hegel thought that reality was the creation of a cosmic mind. Everything in the universe is connected with everything else and is constantly changing.

According to Hegel each part of our history is helping humans move towards understanding everything and this will reveal the mind of God.

The Materialists

The materialists hold the complete opposite view to the idealists on the nature of reality. Materialists believe that everything that exists is either matter or depends on matter for its existence. The real world is out in the street, not in the head. The only things that exist are those that are actually made of something – as a consequence this makes the existence of anything 'supernatural' impossible.

Karl Marx was influenced by Hegel. However, he thought that changes in the way people lived developed new ideas. This means that physical objects and actual things that were created led to new ideas on how to live. For example the creation of machinery led to humans relying on making and selling things to live – capitalism. Hegel thought this was the other way around – the idea of capitalism gave meaning to the machines.

The Rationalists

Rationalists consider that truths about our reality can only be revealed through reason – using a sensible argument that is built on logic, not by believing what the senses tell us about the world. Rationalists believe that we have ideas that are inside us right from birth – we are born with them. As a result we all know right from wrong from the moment we are born.

Renee Descartes used his knowledge as a scientist to develop this theory. He used constant questioning to help him gain answers and to seek the truth. The best example of this is Descartes reasoning for his own existence. His famous phrase “I think, therefore, I am” was Descartes way of saying that because he can think it must mean he exists.

The Empiricists

Empiricism is the complete opposite of rationalism. Empiricists believe that true knowledge of the world is obtained through the senses, not by reason. These philosophers argue that we have ideas only because we have perceptions. All knowledge is based on experience.

John Locke believed that people were not born with ideas but got them through experience. According to Locke, the mind of a newborn baby is a blank slate. From then on, the mind is bombarded with a massive input from the senses. These might include experiencing the colour yellow or the weight of an apple. They are "simple" ideas, which cannot be broken down any further. If someone does not understand yellow, it can only be shown, not explained. Simple ideas are the building blocks of all knowledge. From these simple ideas the mind can then combine them to create more complex ideas.