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Philosophy

FOURTH EDITION

Complete coverage of
the top thinkers and
schools of thought

An intriguing look at the
evolution of thinking

Infographics to visually
explain philosophy's
key concepts

Jay Stevenson, PhD

No one likes a know-it-all. Most of us realize there's no such thing—how could there be? The world is far too complicated for someone to understand *everything* there is to know. So when you come across a know-it-all, you smile to yourself as they ramble on because you know better.

You understand that the quest for knowledge is a never-ending one, and you're okay with that. You have no desire to know everything, just the *next* thing. You know what you don't know, you're confident enough to admit it, and you're motivated to do something about it.

At *Idiot's Guides*, we, too, know what we don't know, and we make it our business to find out. We find really smart people who are experts in their fields and then we roll up our sleeves and get to work asking lots of questions and thinking long and hard about how best to pass along their knowledge to you in the easiest, most-accessible way possible.

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So here you are, at the start of something new. The next chapter in your quest. It can be an intimidating place to be, but you've been here before and so have we. Clear your mind and turn the page. By the end of this book, you won't be a know-it-all, but your world will be a little less complicated than it was before. And we'll be sure your journey is as easy as it gets.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Sanders". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mike Sanders
Publisher, *Idiot's Guides*

**IDIOT'S
GUIDES.**
AS EASY AS IT GETS!

Philosophy

Fourth Edition

by Jay Stevenson, PhD



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ALPHA BOOKS

Published by Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) • Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore, Auckland 1311, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2193, South Africa • Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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International Standard Book Number: 978-1-61564-537-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2013956272

16 15 14 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Interpretation of the printing code: The rightmost number of the first series of numbers is the year of the book's printing; the rightmost number of the second series of numbers is the number of the book's printing. For example, a printing code of 14-1 shows that the first printing occurred in 2014.

Printed in the United States of America

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Publisher: *Mike Sanders*

Executive Managing Editor: *Billy Fields*

Senior Acquisitions Editor: *Tom Stevens*

Development Editor: *John Etchison*

Production Editor: *Jana M. Stefanciosa*

Cover Designer: *Laura Merriman*

Book Designer: *William Thomas*

Indexer: *Brad Herriman*

Layout: *Ayanna Lacey*

Proofreader: *Sara Smith*

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Introduction

To me, philosophy is not only the most interesting field to think about, it is also something that's great to think with. Once you've got a good philosophical concept in your head, you can start to see ways of using it all over the place, and you begin to see how it ties in with other concepts with which you're already familiar.

Learning philosophy, in other words, is something like installing new software in your brain. This software can give you new ways of thinking, whole new ideas about what thinking is, as well as new things to think about. But all software, like any other technology, changes and develops over time. *Idiot's Guides: Philosophy, Fourth Edition*, outlines the most famous developments, right up to the present—the ones most people interested in philosophy find most intriguing and important.

Part 1, The Basics of Philosophy, gives you a general sense of what philosophy is, breaking the subject down into the three main areas: being, knowing, and acting.

Part 2, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, describes the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece and outlines its development in the thinking of the pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Hellenistic philosophers, and the Christian philosophers of Europe during the ancient and medieval periods.

Part 3, Early Modern Philosophy and the Enlightenment, covers the major developments in Western philosophy from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, including rationalism, empiricism, the Enlightenment, idealism, utilitarianism, and Marxism.

Part 4, Modern Philosophy, explores the period known as modern philosophy, including the rise of modern psychology, sociology, anthropology, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, critical theory, phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism.

Part 5, Post-Enlightenment Philosophy, looks at what's going on in philosophy now, including post-structuralism, post-modernism, feminism, New Age philosophy, and Systems Theory.

Extras

To make browsing through this book easier, you'll find sidebars with interesting and helpful information throughout. These include definitions, facts about the history of philosophy and of philosophers, and explanations of philosophical ideas and viewpoints. Here's what these sidebars look like:



DEFINITION

These define special terms and concepts related to philosophy.



REALITY CHECK

Here you'll find an interpretation of a particular philosophy or viewpoint.



FASCINATING FACT

You guessed it—these sidebars have tidbits of information about a philosophy or a philosopher.

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The Basics of Philosophy

Because you picked up this book, you must be at least a little curious about philosophy. Learning some philosophy can help you deal with life's difficulties by taking you away from them for a while, and by leading you back into them with new ideas about what it's all about.

Philosophy doesn't have to be hard to understand. It does help if you have some basic questions and ideas in mind as you look into a new philosophy. How do the new ideas compare with the ones you already think about? What problems do the new ideas have that the old ones don't? What problems do the new thinking manage to avoid?

The first part of this book thinks about philosophy in terms of three basic issues: being, knowing, and acting. Philosophy continually asks questions about these issues: What exists? Is existence organized? What counts as knowledge? How do we know things? How should we act? Do we act according to a human nature? Keeping these questions in mind makes it easier to make sense of particular philosophical ideas and of philosophy in general.

A Broad Overview

In This Chapter

- Why philosophers philosophize
- What philosophy is
- Why there are so many isms
- What the main branches of philosophy are and how they relate to one another

Philosophers think about everything. And they tend to take a broader view of everything than most other people. They look at things as if from farther away, to see how they all fit together. This book, talking about philosophy as a whole, paints a big picture of lots of big pictures.

To some, philosophy may seem like a silly or irrelevant waste of time, a distraction from the obvious important (though often boring) things that everybody has to deal with—work, school, relationships, and bills. There is plenty of traditional support for this view. Legend has it that the ancient Greek philosopher Thales was so intent on contemplating the stars while out walking one night that he didn't see where he was going and fell into a well. Focusing on far away, irrelevant things, philosophers can sometimes lose sight of the here and now.

A Broad Overview

Let's face it: philosophy doesn't always give us something we can take to the bank. Could it be that philosophy is basically useless?

The fact is, philosophy is unavoidable. Even if you think you don't already have a philosophy, you actually do. Like everybody else, you live your life according to ideas and assumptions about what the world is like that you picked up along the way.

If you're not as satisfied with the way things are as you think you should be—and who is?—you might want to rethink your ideas about what reality is all about. This rethinking is precisely what philosophers have been doing over the centuries.

For example, many people used to think that whenever anything bad happened, the gods must be angry. They thought their gods wanted them to show their loyalty and obedience by making big sacrifices, even of their own children! Gradually, however, those people with a more philosophical turn of mind began questioning this assumption. Maybe the gods would be just as happy if we let our children live? Such an idea involved a whole rethinking of what life, God, and human nature are all about—just the kind of rethinking philosophers do. Today, of course, the incidence of human sacrifice has been greatly reduced—thanks to a philosopher.

The Uses of Knowledge

People have a lot of great—and stupid—ideas about reality. If you're able to sort out these ideas and make sense of them, you may be able to better understand your own reality. This book is intended to help you do just that. It will help you recognize and understand philosophical ideas when you come across them, and see which ones make sense for you and which ones belong on the scrap heap of intellectual history.

As you read this book, you'll learn that you think a lot of things already. Much of the thinking that important philosophers have done might have already occurred to you. Seeing where your ideas come from and how others have used them may help you make better sense of who you are and what your life is about.

Even though there is a lot philosophy can't do, such as give you big muscles like on Auguste Rodin's statue, *The Thinker*, it can do some pretty important things. In particular, it can help you think about thinking. Everybody thinks, and it's especially nice to be able to do it well, both for its own sake and for the practical benefits thinking can yield. To clarify your thinking about thinking, this book shows how philosophers throughout history have tried to shed light on the big, deep questions, and suggests ways that you can apply some of their answers to your life.

Are you an idealist? A pragmatist? An existentialist? Do you think about things rationally? Empirically? Intuitively? Is your behavior directed by will? By other people? Is there more to reality than what we can see and measure? Reading this book will help you understand what these questions mean and why they are important.

A Broad Topic

People engage in philosophy when they think about life and everything in it. The word *philosophy*, meaning “love of wisdom,” comes from ancient Greece, where people who liked thinking about life started calling themselves *philosophers*. Of course, “life” doesn't narrow things down very much. In ancient times and for centuries afterward, philosophy had an extremely wide scope, encompassing subjects we have since separated from philosophy, such as science, math, theology, psychology, sociology, and economics.

The ancient Greeks did not distinguish these fields from philosophy. As philosophers, they practiced them all—not, of course, in the same ways that a modern scientist studies science or a modern economist studies economics. These fields have changed and developed out of philosophy.

Philosophy still applies, however, to all of these fields. It is possible to study the philosophy of science or the philosophy of religion, for example. Questions and problems that we call philosophical lie at the heart of all these subjects. Yet even after all of these fields branched off from philosophy, there are still central issues and ways of thinking that are of particular interest to philosophers. To be more specific, philosophy tends to concern itself with broad, fundamental ideas about knowledge, cosmic reality, human nature, and society. And for better or worse, it also concerns itself with words.

Divisions and Subdivisions Within Philosophy

Philosophers can be hard to understand. That's because they often use words that sound like total gobbledygook to people who aren't philosophers. They have, in other words, a highly developed *lexicon*. A lexicon is a body of special words (jargon) used by a particular group of people—in this case, philosophers.



DEFINITION

A **lexicon** is a specialized vocabulary, or group of words, used by a particular group of people and not shared by most everyone else.

The philosophical lexicon is big because philosophy has dozens of different subdivisions and categories, and every category has a gazillion different movements, or *isms*. An ism is a system of belief, or a way of thinking that considers certain ideas to be true or important while, inevitably, leaves out other ideas.

Grammatically speaking, isms are formed by turning a noun or adjective into a verb, then turning the verb back into a noun. For example, if you see knowledge as structural, and go on to *structuralize* knowledge, it means you subscribe to *structuralism*. If you believe Mickey Mouse holds the answer to life's deepest questions, and you *Mickeyize* your understanding of life, you believe in *Mickeyism*.

Some popular isms within philosophy include sophism, skepticism, stoicism, scholasticism, mysticism, Taoism, empiricism, rationalism, idealism, naturalism, materialism, pragmatism, existentialism, and antidisestablishmentarianism, to name a few. And that doesn't include all the isms named after people (like Freudianism) and periods of time (like early post-modernism). Philosophers have to invent a new ism for every point of view—and there are *lots* of points of view.

What's more, philosophers have developed subdivisions within philosophy to deal with the deep questions they like to ask. The main subdivisions have to do with being, knowing, and acting. Philosophers call these subdivisions *ontology* (the study of being, or existence), *epistemology* (the study of knowing), and *ethics* (the study of how to act as a person). The next three chapters will look at each of these subdivisions in turn. The chapters after that explore specific philosophies—the isms and the people who invented them.



DEFINITION

Ontology is the study of being, or existence. Ontologists want to know what we mean when we say something exists. **Epistemology** is the study of knowing. Epistemologists want to know what we mean when we say we know something. **Ethics** is the study of moral and social behavior. Ethical philosophers want to know what it means to be a person and how people can and should act.

How Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics Fit Together

Even though you can think about these three different subjects—ontology (being), epistemology (knowing), and ethics (acting)—separately, they all work together to make philosophy what it is. Different philosophies place different emphasis on these subjects. Most philosophers do their work by expanding on what they already think they know. Different philosophers identify different places to start—different foundational ideas on which to build their thinking. For example, Plato's

epistemology and ethics are derived from his ontology. This simply means that his ideas about knowing and about how we should act are based on his ideas about existence.

How the Parts Fit Together

Even though you can think about these three different subjects—ontology (being), epistemology (knowing), and ethics (acting)—separately, they all work together to make philosophy what it is.



This makes Plato different from a rationalist philosopher like René Descartes, who bases his ideas about being and acting on his ideas about knowing. Similarly, both Plato and Descartes are different from a post-structuralist philosopher like Michel Foucault, who believes that being and knowing depend on how people act.

These three branches of philosophy tend to work together. In fact, it has taken some philosophical thinking to see them as separate. For example, one of the main things that distinguished the earliest philosophy from the myths the Greeks used to explain reality was the philosophical awareness that ontology, or existence, is not simply a cosmic reflection of ethics, or how people act. Whereas the myths presented reality as completely involved in, and centered around, human behavior, the first philosophers saw ontology, or existence, independently from human action.

This insight has led to new questions and answers about how people fit in with the rest of reality, and how human knowledge affects this relationship. The next three chapters talk about some of these questions, and say more about the three main branches of philosophy—being, knowing, and acting—and how they relate to one another.

The Least You Need to Know

- Whether you know it or not, you've got a philosophy. This is because you can't help but define reality for yourself.
- This book will help you sort out your ideas as well as those of others, and will help you decide which of them have meaning for you.
- Philosophy consists of all kinds of thinking, including the social sciences, natural science, math, and religious thinking.
- Three main branches of philosophy are ontology (being), epistemology (knowing), and ethics (acting).

Ontology

In This Chapter

- How philosophers think about being
- Physical and metaphysical reality
- Is there a God?
- How being relates to knowing

What is there, and what do we mean by “there” anyway? This, in a nutshell, is what philosophy has focused on for centuries, and this is what you’ll get to think more about here.

Philosophers think about ontology (being or existence) by using theories about what the world is made of, what this stuff is capable of doing, and whether reality is ordered in any particular way.

Throughout history, one of the really big ideas about existence has been God. In talking about existence, this chapter focuses on how philosophers have dealt with God. (You can read more about God and philosophy in [Chapters 9](#) and [12](#).)

Early Theories

Even before formal schools of philosophy got started, people were inventing myths to help explain reality. These myths usually portrayed natural forces as people or gods. By thinking about natural forces in human terms, people made sense of the strange and mysterious things going on around them: rain, thunder, sunshine, the seasons, birth, growth, death.

However, these myths did not attempt to explain what reality is physically made of; they were more concerned with explaining how reality affects human activities and relationships. Myths personified nature—it was one big, not-so-happy family. Earth is our mother, the sun or sky is Dad, the sea is a weird uncle, and the hill to the north is a distant cousin. Storms may be fights; a nice day may mean that the sky-daddy has found a new girlfriend; winter comes when Earth-mama finds out about daddy’s new girlfriend and gives everyone the cold treatment.



REALITY CHECK

Although it is useful to distinguish the ways myth and philosophy explain reality, the two ways of explaining are not totally separate. In fact, some consider philosophy itself a kind of mythmaking. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida describes philosophy as “white mythology”—mythology that has had all the familiar images bleached out of it.

The first philosophers differed from the mythmakers by explaining reality in more general, less familiar terms. The ancient Greek philosopher Thales, sometimes considered the first philosopher,

said that all things were made out of water—everything that exists is really water in a more or less complicated form. Other early philosophers believed that everything was made of four “elements”: earth, air, fire, and water. Still others thought the world was made of a single substance that could be broken down into tiny, indivisible particles called atoms.

These early theories about reality are not “scientific” as the word is used today—that is, they do not result from experimental tests or controlled observation. But they are impersonal and suggest rules for the makeup of reality and how it is organized. These early philosophers wanted to know not only what reality is, but also how it is shaped and how it works. They came up with *theories*, rather than stories to answer their questions.

Philosophy and Technology

Technological developments helped philosophers learn to think about reality in terms of impersonal rules of order. Practical arts like geometry, navigation, and medicine, for example, were developing in ancient Greece at about the time of the first philosophers. In fact, one of them, Pythagoras, is also known as an important mathematician. A number of other early philosophers were also extremely interested in math.



FASCINATING FACT

Mathematics was so important to Plato that he had the words “Let no one enter who has not studied mathematics” inscribed over the entrance to his Academy.

Math and other technological arts helped people stop thinking about reality as a big family of bickering gods and start seeing the world as being made of things you can use to make more things, arranged according to mathematical rules. Craftsmen and artisans started it all by inventing technical terms for their work. Philosophers went even further by creating terms for talking about reality. Many of these terms refer to physical reality, like atoms and the elements.

Metaphysics

Philosophers also came up with *metaphysical* terms, which refer not to what reality is physically made of, but to how it is organized and how it works. Some of the more famous metaphysical terms are *forms*, *substance*, *essence*, *categories*, *spirit*, *monads*, and *noumena*. God, too, is a metaphysical concept.



DEFINITION

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that studies the makeup, function, and organization of reality in general. Metaphysics is also used more specifically to refer to those aspects of reality that cannot be observed and measured, such as God and virtue.

Philosophers, of course, have come up with all kinds of theories about reality. Each new philosophical system needs another set of metaphysical terms to describe its version of reality. Some of these metaphysical terms are pretty far-out—in more ways than one! In order to understand the philosophy of being and metaphysics, let me give you an overview of how metaphysical ideas have been used and have changed through history. This will help you see why metaphysical ideas are significant.

Is There a God?

Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe and the Middle East, a philosophical battle was waged between religious authorities on one side, who felt that religious doctrine should be accepted on faith alone, and religious philosophers on the other, who were interested in combining religious ideas with the teaching of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle.

In some cases, like that of the German monk and philosopher Meister Eckhart, the attempt to square philosophy with religion resulted in charges of heresy (the crime of having religious beliefs that contradict those of established religion). Eckhart made claims that sounded like he thought God was nothing more than nature itself and that this God/nature created itself. These ideas made the German bishops so nervous they punished Eckhart. Many philosophers, though, found success in bringing philosophical ideas based on reason and nature together with accepted religious beliefs. This was true of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic philosophers.



REALITY CHECK

You might think that philosophers of the Middle Ages used philosophical ideas to prove God's existence because they wanted to encourage people to believe in God. Actually, though, God was so widely accepted that there was little point in trying to convince people—practically everyone already believed in God. A more likely reason for using philosophy in this way was to show that philosophy was not sacrilegious. Although philosophers seemed to be using philosophy to defend God, they were, in effect, using God to defend philosophy!

As a result, philosophy as practiced by the Greeks became acceptable to the new religions, Christianity and Islam. In the West, many of the most important medieval philosophers practiced one of these religions. They studied existence both as philosophers and as theologians, trying to figure out how reality works for its own sake, and trying to figure out what reality reveals about God.

The Ontological Proof of God

These philosophers used philosophical ideas about being to prove the existence of God. For example, one argument goes that because the world exists, it must have a cause, namely, God. Might the whole thing have been an accident? No, reasoned the medieval philosophers, because reality seems so well organized and able to support life that God must have planned it.

But maybe what seems planned was still just accidental, and maybe the organization that seems to indicate the existence of God is really due to the way people think. What then? Maybe order is just an idea in people's minds.

To this objection the medieval philosophers offered their most imaginative idea of all: they reasoned that the idea of God is the most perfect idea possible. They also argued that one characteristic of perfection is existence. God *must* therefore exist. This argument is known as the “ontological proof” of God's existence.



FASCINATING FACT

Many Christian philosophers believed that we can learn about God from two “books.” The first book is the Bible and the second “book” is the world itself, which, if “read” in the right way, can yield divine knowledge.

Ontology and Knowledge

The ontological proof shows that when you push hard enough on the idea of *being*, the question of *knowing* comes up. To put it another way, whether or not you accept any one explanation of reality depends partly on the question of how you know things, and how the ability to know things fits in with the question of being.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. You'll have to wait until [Chapter 3](#) to see how the study of knowing figures into philosophy in general. For now, the point to understand is that the way we think about knowledge influences how we think about God.

Many philosophers in the West have associated God with knowledge. Some have said that human beings are not capable of understanding God, so we have to take his existence on faith. Others said that knowledge reveals God's nature.

One of the more astonishing examples of this second view was put forward by the Portuguese-Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who believed that matter itself could think! He believed that things like rocks and water and trees and tile grout—all of reality—are alive and capable of knowing—a view called *vitalism*.

Not only can reality think, said Spinoza, but reality itself *is* God. God and nature, for Spinoza, are two sides of the same coin.



DEFINITION

A **vitalist** believes that everything that makes up reality is alive and capable of thinking. A **dualist** believes that reality can be separated into two components: material and spiritual. The spiritual part of reality makes thinking and knowledge possible.

Dualism vs. Materialism

As you might imagine, Spinoza's ideas attracted a lot of attention—and criticism—from other philosophers and theologians. A more popular and influential belief about the relationship between being and knowing is *dualism*, the idea that the world is made up of material and spiritual aspects. The spiritual aspects of reality are those capable of thinking, while the material aspects cannot think. Spiritual reality includes the human mind.



Dualism vs. Materialism

As you might imagine, Spinoza's ideas attracted a lot of attention—and criticism—from other philosophers and theologians. A more popular and influential belief about the relationship between being and knowing is dualism, the idea that the world is made up of material and spiritual aspects. The spiritual aspects of reality are those capable of thinking, while the material aspects cannot think. Spiritual reality includes the human mind.








The most famous dualist of the seventeenth century was the French philosopher René Descartes. He believed that a spiritual portion of the mind allows us to understand perceptions that are conveyed to us physically by our senses. Descartes believed that the spiritual portion of reality was confined to God and the human mind alone; the rest of reality was simply physical. Descartes's dualism was widely accepted by other philosophers and eventually by theologians as well.

Descartes's dualism made a neat separation between physical and metaphysical reality. An important result of this separation was that it allowed philosophers and scientists to study the natural world without having to worry about supernatural questions. In fact, since Descartes's time, many philosophers have argued that we should stop asking metaphysical questions—questions about God and anything else that we can't verify through observation.

Even so, other philosophers continued to see knowledge itself as metaphysical, much as Descartes did. Starting in Descartes's time—the seventeenth century—philosophers began arguing for or against two distinct ways of relating being to knowing. These ways are known as *rationalism* and *empiricism*. Rationalism sees knowledge as metaphysical, existing independently of physical reality. Empiricism, on the other hand, sees knowledge as based on observable, physical reality. We'll learn more about rationalism and empiricism in [Chapter 3](#), which covers epistemology, or knowing.

i Philoso-Fact
Here are some of the more important ideas philosophers have come up with to understand being and how it works:

				
Plato	Aristotle	Thomas Aquinas	Spinoza	Descartes
Perfect, unchanging, ideal forms lend order and understanding to physical reality	Each identifiable thing has an essence that supplies it with a purpose culminating in the prime mover	Reality was created by God according to his plan (confirmed by the "ontological proof")	Reality is all one substance, including God and nature; everything that exists is a part of this one substance, which is capable of thought (vitalism)	Physical reality works according to mechanical principles. In addition, there is spiritual reality, including God and the mind, that can think (dualism)

The Least You Need to Know

- The first ancient Greek philosophers made a distinction between physical reality and human social reality.
- Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that studies how reality functions. The term is also used to refer to whatever cannot be verified through observation, including God.
- Ideas about God often depend on ideas about knowing.
- Descartes theorized a clear separation of physical and metaphysical reality in the seventeenth century.

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