

Introduction to Philosophy

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What is Philosophy?

- One of the most commonly asked questions about philosophy is “what is it?”
- There are several ways to answer the question.
 - Thematic: Philosophy treats certain subject-matters.
 - Methodological: Philosophy uses certain methods.
 - Descriptive: Philosophy is what people do in their capacity as “philosophers.”
- “Philosophers” have treated many subject-matters using many methods.
- There is much disagreement among “philosophers” about whether specific subject-matters and methods are “legitimate.”

The Subjects of Philosophy

- Among the areas generally recognized as subjects of philosophical investigation are the following:
 - Metaphysics: the general nature of reality.
 - Epistemology: the nature of knowledge.
 - Ethics: the values of human action.
 - Aesthetics: the nature of art or beauty.
 - Logic: the correct forms of inference and “logical truths.”
 - Philosophy of x (x = science, mind, language, etc.)
 - History of philosophy.

The Methods of Philosophy

- Among the activities widely used by philosophers are these (with an example following each):
 - Analyzing language or concepts (what does ‘good’ mean? what is goodness?).
 - Giving an account of mental activity (how do we reason?).
 - Theorizing about what is beyond experience (does God exist?).
 - Theorizing at a high level of generality (what is a thing?).
 - Posing and trying to solve puzzles (is it wrong to kill in order to save a life?).
 - Defending claims about how philosophy should be done (historically? ahistorically?).

Philosophical Theories

- Although a number of methods have been employed by philosophers, there a common framework for most philosophizing.
- Philosophy is pursued through the use of language, both oral and written.
- The primary unit of language for philosophers is the *declarative sentence*.
- Using declarative sentences, philosophers express *philosophical theses*.
 - The universe has a beginning in time.
 - There is a world external to my own mind.
 - It is wrong to harm others.
- A set of inter-related philosophical theses is a *philosophical theory*.

Defending Philosophical Theses

- Philosophical theses are advanced by philosophers in books, papers, blogs, oral discussions, etc.
- In general, philosophers attempt to provide *support* for their theses.
- Support is intended to produce agreement concerning the truth of the thesis.
- The most common way of providing support is by producing an *argument* in defense of the thesis.

- Alternatively, a philosopher may advance a thesis as needing no support from an argument because it is.
 - *Self-evident*,
 - *Common-sensical*,
 - *Intuitive*.

Arguments

- An argument consists of a set of sentences designated as its *premises* and a single sentence designated as its *conclusion*.
- Here is an example of an argument.
 1. The breaking up of ice caps is an event taking place in time.
 2. Every event taking place in time has a cause.
 3. Therefore, the breaking up of the polar ice caps has a cause.
- The first premise is empirically verifiable on the basis of scientific measurement.
- But the second premise is a philosophical thesis that requires some kind of philosophical defense.

Evaluating Arguments

- We may evaluate arguments in one of two ways.
 - Materially, with respect to whether the premises are true.
 - Formally, with respect to whether the premises really support the conclusion.
- *Logic* evaluates the formal aspect of arguments.
- Premises may formally support conclusions to a greater or lesser extent.
 - An argument is *deductively valid* when it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.
 - Deductively invalid arguments, such as those used in science, may provide very strong support.
- Similarly, the premises themselves may be impossible to deny, impossible to accept, or have any degree of plausibility in between.

Empirical Premises and Theses

- *Empirical* premises and theses concern features of experience.
- The first premise in the argument above, that the ice caps are melting, is such a premise.
- Empirical premises and theses may be defended by appeal to such evidence as:
 - Personal experience,
 - Testimony of others,
 - Authority of experts,
 - Other kinds of empirical evidence.

Non-Philosophical Defenses

- In general, philosophy demands that what is used to defend theses should be in some way *reasonable*.
- Some non-philosophical ways of supporting premises are by appealing to:
 - *Faith*,
 - *Inspiration*,
 - *Strong conviction*.
- Such appeals can be characterized as being *dogmatic*.

Defeating Premises and Theses

- General premises and theses, of the kind found in philosophical arguments, can be attacked in a specific way.
- One may produce a *counter-example*, which is a case which is held to be true but which conflicts with the general statement.
- Consider the following:
 - Every case of true belief is a case of knowledge.
- As Plato pointed out in his dialogue *Theaetetus*, one can have a true belief that is not knowledge.
 - A jury might be convinced of the true guilt of a defendant, on the basis of hearsay evidence, by a persuasive lawyer.
- Much of the activity of philosophers consists in advancing counter-examples to general philosophical theses and then trying to provide improved general theses that are not subject to counter-example.

Skepticism

- Philosophical *skeptics* hold that philosophical theses cannot be reasonably defended.
- Some hold that because of their great generality, philosophical theses cannot be defended by appeal to experience.
- They go on to question whether there can be any other reasonable basis for defending the theses.
- Other skeptics emphasize the prevalence of disagreement over the truth of philosophical theses and claim that no argument is capable of settling such disagreement.

The History of Western Philosophy

- The history of western philosophy can be broken down roughly into several phases.
 - Hellenic (6th-4th cent. BC)
 - Hellenistic (3rd cent. BC to 2nd cent. AD)
 - Medieval (5th-15th cent. AD)
 - Renaissance (16th cent. AD)
 - Modern (17th-19th cent. AD)
 - Contemporary (20th-21st cent. AD)
 - * Analytic
 - * Continental
- Philosophers in each period differed in their methods, but the split between analytic and continental philosophy seems more profound.

Some Superstars of Philosophy

- The following are generally acknowledged to be among the greatest Western philosophers:
 - Plato (4th cent. BC)
 - Aristotle (4th cent. BC)
 - René Descartes (17th cent. AD)
 - David Hume (18th cent. AD)
 - Immanuel Kant (18th cent. AD)

Plan for the Course

- The course will be organized around the historical development of two broad subjects.
 - Ethics.
 - Metaphysics and Epistemology.
- Classes will cover readings from classic texts in the history of Western philosophy.
- Emphasis will be on influential philosophical theories and the basic arguments given to support them.