

Introduction to Philosophy

What is 'Philosophy'? It has many different meanings. In everyday life, to have a 'philosophy' means much the same as having a specified set of attitudes, objectives or values which you seek to apply consistently. One person's philosophy is to be honest, open and truthful at all times; another person is more concerned with being discreet, diplomatic, circumspect and so on. To have a philosophy can also mean having a policy of one sort or another, for example the Managing Director of a company might proclaim that his company's philosophy is to make customer satisfaction their top priority. And so on.

The word 'philosophy' has other meanings too. If you pick up a romantic novel you might read, on the last page but one, that the hero sighs 'philosophically' to his beloved and murmurs that well-known tautology, 'whatever will be, will be'. Philosophy, or 'being philosophical', is sometimes associated with taking a resigned, fatalistic attitude to life, or enquiring as to what is the purpose, or 'meaning', of life, destiny and so on. On the other hand, if you study Philosophy at a university you will find it doesn't really have a lot to do with 'fate' or 'destiny'. What is it, then, as a subject of study?

At a university the philosophy curriculum will probably include ethics, logic, metaphysics, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, semantics, scientific methodology, political theory, all studied critically and analytically. See, for example, the Department of Philosophy prospectus for Aberdeen University. Philosophy students soon discover that enquiries as to 'fate' or 'destiny' don't really lead anywhere; doctrines such as fatalism or predestination are only studied simply to show how and why they are misconceived. On the other hand, psychological *determinism*, as I'll explain in just a moment, is a little more tricky, throwing up interesting problems and puzzles in ethics and in the philosophy of mind.

Let's take a quick glance at some of the various branches of philosophy:-

Ethics, often called *Moral Philosophy*. Ethics subdivides into two main areas – *normative ethics* and *analytical ethics*. Normative ethics is to define, to propose or to specify what is good or bad, right or wrong, and to make recommendations as to human behaviour in the light of what has been defined as 'good' or 'bad'. It is concerned with ethical standards and ethical norms. Of course, different definitions of 'good' and 'bad' can be given and these have

to be discussed and clarified; consistency is another question too. An offshoot of normative ethics is *applied ethics*, so we have medical ethics, business ethics, etc. Medical ethics includes the pros and cons of abortion, euthanasia, etc.

Analytical ethics is more abstract, concerned with semantic and logical questions. For example do words such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ literally and objectively *describe* actions or events, or is it not that simple? If I say for example ‘deceiving people is wrong’, is that literally *true*, or is it neither true nor false but primarily an expression of my own personal attitude or feelings about deceiving people? The debate on whether moral statements are objectively true, or otherwise, has been going on for a long time and the literature on this question is extensive. Analytical ethics also looks at various ethical theories such as Utilitarianism for example which defines ‘morally good’ as that which promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. Philosophy students would discuss whether this definition is viable or not. Moral relativism is yet another issue which philosophers seek to disentangle.

Aesthetics, another branch of philosophy, seeks to study or to define *beauty*, either in nature or in the arts. Is beauty an objective characteristic of physical objects, of living creatures, of landscapes, of poems, of music, of paintings, or is ‘beauty in the eye of the beholder’? Or in the case of music, in the ear of the listener...? Aesthetics as a subject is closely related to artistic and to literary criticism, as well as to psychology.

Philosophy of Religion is another interesting branch of philosophy. But it is not about promoting or espousing religion or advocating a religious way of life. In fact some philosophers of religion are atheists or agnostics. Also, it is important not to confuse Philosophy of Religion with Religious Studies or Comparative Religion which is purely descriptive, comparing and contrasting different religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and so on.

Philosophy of Religion takes a more critical perspective. It regards the sentence ‘God exists’, or ‘there is a God’ as a statement which, like any other statement about any subject matter at all, requires justification, or verification. Is it true, false, or indeterminate? The arguments for and against the existence of a deity are quite complex, and students of the Philosophy of Religion study the ins and outs of the Ontological Argument, the Argument from Design, the First Cause argument, and so on. Another question they study (as do

theologians) is the problem of Evil. If evil exists, as it seems to do, how and why does it exist in a universe created by a supposedly benevolent and all-powerful deity? How can a good God permit evil, or fail to intervene?

Metaphysics is another branch of philosophy. ‘Metaphysics’ is a difficult word to define (to say the least), but the basic idea is that “it deals with the most *fundamental concepts* such as existence, reality, necessity, cause and ultimate causes. The metaphysician claims there is an ‘ultimate reality’ *beyond* the perceptions of our senses, and our knowledge of this ‘ultimate reality’ is based on *a priori* ‘rational analysis’, deduction or ‘insight’ into basic principles”. If anybody finds this difficult to follow, you’re in very good company. Many philosophers reject metaphysical philosophy in its entirety as literally nonsensical; others are not so sure.

Philosophy of Science is a fairly new branch of philosophy, steadily replacing Metaphysics over the past couple of centuries or so. It is nothing to do with promoting or defending the advancement of science; it is principally concerned with the clarification of scientific concepts. It might surprise many a newcomer to learn that strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a scientific ‘law’. Ordinary laws are passed by governments, legislatures of one sort or another, but scientific laws are not passed by legislatures. In fact they are so different from ordinary laws that the word ‘law’ is seriously misleading. It is more accurate to speak of a probable hypothesis to which there is not as yet any evidence that contradicts it. Philosophy of science studies the nature of scientific explanation, what validates one theory as against another one, and it is pretty technical, probability theory coming into it as well.

Philosophy of Mind is another branch of philosophy which is full of puzzles. For example we perceive the world around us through our senses. We are aware of our perceptions, obviously, but how do we know that our perceptions correspond to a real, objective reality ‘out there’ that exists whether we are perceiving it or not? What if the entire universe consists of *nothing but* me and my perceptions (which could be illusory) with no possibility of assuring myself that what I perceive or think I perceive isn’t one long dream? This is called *solipsism*, and first-year philosophy students are sometimes challenged to explain how and why it is mistaken. The whole idea is crazy, but to refute it, that is, to prove that it is mistaken, is not quite so straightforward.

Rather more seriously, another issue is *determinism*. I believe I am free to choose between alternatives (would I like a glass of whisky or would I prefer gin?), but, other than being ‘free’ in the sense of being ‘at liberty’ to choose, isn’t my choice predetermined in some way by my preferences? Was I born with a built-in preference for sweetness as against bitterness, or for sharpness as against mellowness? If my likes and dislikes, my preferences and aversions are built-in in some way, then does it follow that my choices are in some way pre-determined and therefore not as ‘free’ as I thought they were? What if determinism pervades every action, every choice, every decision? Do I really have free will? And am I *responsible* for my choices if they’re predetermined?

Social Philosophy covers a range of interesting topics such as freedom, law, rights, conflict of rights, obligation, social justice, legal justice, punishment, coercion and so on. Many of the concepts it deals with are tricky to define, for example what is the difference between ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’? What is the definition of ‘justice’? Books have been written on that question alone. What is ‘equality’ if we are all so different? What is a ‘right’? Is it purely a legal concept, or do we all have ‘natural rights’ whether there are laws or declarations about them or not? If so, what *is* a ‘natural right’?

Political Philosophy There is a sense, of course, in which anyone who has clear, well thought out views on how society should or should not be run is in a manner of speaking a ‘political philosopher’. But over the past couple of thousand years or so there have been some big names around who have had a lasting influence on political thought, on political institutions and on modes of government. I would include Plato, Aristotle, Macchiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and many others. Some of these have produced some important and lasting ideas; others, though, I think have been hopelessly wrong.

Logic – last item on the list. Reasoning is very important in Philosophy, or in any other subject of course. If we are discussing important questions such as ethics, rights or the existence or otherwise of a Deity, we don’t want to trip ourselves up through a simple error in our reasoning. Yet it’s easily done. It seems very cogent to say for example ‘it is natural to procreate, therefore it is right to procreate’, but on that basis we might just as well say ‘it is natural to be selfish, therefore it is right to be selfish’. But we don’t want to say *that*. What’s gone wrong? Another example, ‘all cats are mammals [true], all dogs

are mammals [true], therefore all cats are dogs [false!]'. This is an argument with true premises but a false conclusion. What's gone wrong?

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle studied these sorts of problems very carefully and he identified *rules of inference* which determine whether an argument is valid or not. He was not concerned with an argument's subject matter; he was looking purely at its *structure*. He was a genius; the rules of inference which he identified are as true today as they ever were. The main change was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Aristotle's logic was not replaced but augmented by the German mathematician Gottlob Frege and the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. Modern mathematical logic was 'up and running' by 1912.

Since ancient times logic and philosophy have been as closely related to each other as mathematics and physics are in our own day. That's why philosophy students, as well as studying the Big Questions, also have to get their theorems right when they do symbolic logic.

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