

# **What is Philosophy?**

**Address to Roseville Chase Rotary Club**

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At my College every student has a Tutor. I was talking to my tutor before dinner one night and I noticed that he had flowers on his tie. I suggested that the reason he had flowers on his tie was because he was a botanist and he said that that was correct. I told this to a lawyer who agreed that it would be very good if everyone in the College had a picture of what he studied on his tie. So I asked him what would be on a philosopher's tie. He immediately replied, "Lots of question marks!" I think that was a good reply. For if botanists investigate flowers and lawyers investigate laws, philosophers investigate questions.

Asking questions is what philosophers like doing, and perhaps what they pride themselves on doing well. There are no questions that philosophers won't ask. But to begin at the beginning, what is the first question that we should ask? The first question that we're going to ask in this course is What is Philosophy? I'm going to suggest that there are three ways that we can answer this question. First, we might say that philosophy is an historical tradition. Secondly, we might say that philosophy is the study of a certain topic or topics. Thirdly, we might say that philosophy is a special way of thinking about problems. We need to consider each of these answers in turn.

The first way in which I suggest we can answer the question is by conceiving of philosophy as a particular historical tradition. This history has three main periods. Philosophy, or to be precise Western philosophy, has its origin in ancient Greece. The single most important event in this tradition occurred in 399 B.C. when Socrates, a retired warrior was tried for impiety (dishonouring the gods) and corrupting the youth. He was found guilty and sentenced to death by drinking a cup of poisonous hemlock. Socrates got in trouble because he used to ask questions. He asked what it meant to live a good life and dared to suggest that perhaps the way people lived in Athens was not the best way to live. He influenced Plato who wrote dialogues recording Socrates's arguments and developing his own comprehensive system of philosophy. This in turn was scrutinized by Plato's own student, Aristotle, who developed an equally comprehensive system of philosophy in response to Plato's. Subsequent generations of philosophers in Greece and then Rome studied and developed the arguments of Plato and Aristotle and these works ultimately fell into the hands of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church developed out of the Roman Empire and was the dominant institution in European history for over a thousand years, certainly from A.D. 400-1400. During this second period of philosophy's history, the Church developed a body of thought that explained the nature of the world and how people should live. In doing this, the Church's philosophers, men such as Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, returned to the works of Plato and Aristotle and developed their own systems of philosophy that brought together Christian theology and Greek philosophy.

The influence of the Church changed however with the dawning of modern philosophy at the time of the Renaissance or rebirth in the fourteenth century. This was a time at which artists and thinkers took a new interest in ancient Greece and Rome. This stimulated a new interest in independent thought in the third period of philosophy's history. Philosophers started to think about problems for themselves again and over the next three hundred years we find modern philosophy getting into gear. Rene Descartes, who is often regarded as the father of modern

philosophy started writing and his ideas about the nature of the world, of human beings and of God were developed and criticised by successive philosophers such as the English and Scottish philosophers, Locke, Berkeley, and finally Hume who heralded a new empirical or scientific way of thinking about the world. Finally, philosophy comes out with the bold claim of agnosticism. The agnostic holds that we cannot know from our experience of the world that God exists.

This was a fundamental challenge to the Christian view of the world that had dominated European culture. We can see the origin of all modern thought in this period. In Germany, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel develop sophisticated responses intended to preserve older ideas whilst at the same time developing new ways of thinking about them. There is an attempt to protect the place of God in our worldview. It is in response to these approaches that the important nineteenth century philosophers, Nietzsche, Marx, Bentham and Mill write.

This gives us the background for understanding analytic philosophy which started in Cambridge about a hundred years ago with Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These philosophers were interested in the same problems as their predecessors, but they found a new way to think about the problems: they started to analyze closely the way we use language in order to find out about the world. This way of doing philosophy became very popular and now dominates Britain, the United States, most of the English-speaking world, and beyond.

I don't expect you to have a complete understanding of the last 2,500 years of Western philosophy from listening to what I have just said. But what I hope you do have is a sense of an historical tradition. There have been successive generations of philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome, through the Catholic Church in the mediaeval ages and then into the modern world who have received ideas from the earlier generations and built on them. Sometimes they embrace them, more often they reject them. But they don't start from scratch; they don't reinvent the wheel. They respond to the philosophers who came before them. This long conversation between each generation of philosophers and the next might be what we mean by philosophy.

The second way in which I suggested that we might answer the question is by conceiving of philosophy as the study of some particular topic or topics. Every discipline is concerned with one subject or another. Sociologists study societies, linguists study languages, lawyers study laws. A discipline might study more than one subject, however. It might consist of sub-disciplines in which different parts of the broader subject matter are studied. Science, for instance, is broadly the study of the natural world. But it consists of very many sub-disciplines that study different aspects of the world: physics studies the physical laws, chemistry studies the molecular structure of substances, astronomy studies the heavenly bodies, biology studies living organisms, geology studies the earth's rocks and so on. Similarly, there are six main sub-disciplines within philosophy and we might define philosophy as the study of these subjects. This is the way we will basically tackle the study of philosophy in this course.

First, there is metaphysics. Metaphysics aims to study reality at its most basic level. Does God exist? Do minds exist? Is the mind separate from the brain, or are we really just physical bodies without a separate mind or a soul?

Secondly, there is epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. It is one thing to ask what we know, it is another to ask how we know it or what it means to know anything at all. Knowledge is often connected with accessing truth. But what is truth? There are lots of things that we take for granted that we know, but do we really know that they are true, how can we be sure? These questions are very important to philosophers because they determine what, if anything, we might know about the world at all.

Thirdly, there is ethics or moral philosophy. Each of us has his own life. There are very many different ways in which we might live our lives. Ethics is the study of the good life; of how each

of us should live our life if we are to be happy. Ethicists ask what it means for a way of life or a particular action to be right or wrong, or for it to be good or bad.

Fourthly, there is political philosophy. The English poet, John Donne, once wrote that “No man is an island”. People cannot live on their own without other people. We are born into families, we make friends, we live in communities, we are citizens of countries. We rely on other people to provide for our various needs: food, shelter, clothing, entertainment, and generally for our happiness. But the history of the world has shown that more often than not when people interact with each other there is much unhappiness, and some people’s basic needs may not be met. Political philosophers ask questions about the terms on which we can best live together. Politicians have to make these decisions and political philosophers ask how they should make them and what are the right decisions to make?

Fifthly, there is aesthetics. In ethics and political philosophy we are interested in whether things are right or wrong. This is one form of value that things have for us. But there is another form of value that things have. Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with art, beauty and aesthetic value. Aestheticians seek to understand what it means for something to be beautiful or what it means for something to have aesthetic value. In particular, we often think that art is beautiful or aesthetically valuable. But what does it mean for something to be a work of art? What counts as a work of art? Should a work of art have moral value or only aesthetic value?

Finally, we come to the last branch of philosophy, logic. In one sense logic is really the first branch of philosophy. It is the science that investigates the principles governing rational inference. Logicians want to know how we can get from claims that we know to be true to new claims which we did not know before but which we can find out by combining claims which we already know.

So now we have two ways of answering the question, What is philosophy? We can answer by talking about an historical tradition that consists of three main periods or we can answer by talking about the subject matter – or six subjects – that that tradition has been concerned with investigating. Now for the final way in which we might answer the question. Philosophy, it might be said, is not so much an historical tradition or the study of a particular subject matter as it is a particular way of thinking about the world.

Philosophers characteristically proceed by argument. They are struck by some problem and they think about how they might make sense of it using clear thinking. Their tools are reason, logic, and argument. They create arguments and look for problems in arguments. When they work out why arguments are wrong they discard them and look for new arguments. They are interested in the different ways in which we might think about something and the different ways in which such thinking might go wrong.

This way of proceeding is not restricted to the investigation of any particular part of the world. It is a method that we ought to be able to apply to any part of the world that we are capable of arguing about. Whether we are enquiring into the existence of God, the relationship between the body and the mind, the ethical status of abortion, the proper structure of the state, or the nature of our experience of art, we ought to be able to ask the same sort of questions, reflect on our intuitions, distinguish alternative positions that might be held in response to those questions, and scrutinize arguments for inconsistencies and other errors in the same sort of way. In other words, we ought to be able to think carefully about all these problems. It might be said that this is what philosophy is: philosophy is thinking carefully about fundamental problems.

I began by posing a question and I have now given you three possible answers to that question. So you should be a bit confused. What is philosophy *really*? Is philosophy really an historical tradition? Is philosophy really the study of certain subjects? Is philosophy really a particular way

of thinking? We started off with one question and now we have three. I said that philosophers like asking questions and they like answers that give rise to even more questions.

How are we to deal with this situation? Which if any of these three is the correct answer to the question? There is one important thing that we have not done and which we must do before we can draw any conclusions about the nature of philosophy. I suggested three different answers to the question and we investigated what it would mean to answer the question in each of these three ways. We thought about how each answer might tell us something about the nature of philosophy. But there is something very important that we did not do. We did not ask what might be wrong with each answer. We did not look closely to see whether there are any weaknesses that might encourage us to reject a particular answer to the question. Now we must look for the weaknesses in the three possible answers to the question.

First of all I defined philosophy as an historical tradition. But is this really what philosophy is? Science is also the product of a particular tradition: gradually scientific methods and ideas changed, and changed for the better. To be a scientist is to engage with science as it is in the twenty-first century. To engage with the tradition that gave rise to how science is done in the twenty-first century is not to be a scientist but to be an historian of science. The history of science is very important but it is different to science. We might say the same thing about philosophy: there is philosophy as we do it now and there is the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy is important to study, but it is important to study because it helps us to understand the story that led to philosophy being what it now is. If we are studying philosophy or science we are studying what we now think, not the process that led us to think what we think.

This suggests that we should not answer the question “What is philosophy?” with the answer “Philosophy is a particular historical tradition” anymore than we should answer the question “What is science?” with the answer “Science is a particular historical tradition”. What I want you to see is that we now have an answer to the original question which tells us something important, but we also have a reason for thinking that it might not be what we are looking for. It tells us something that is true but not relevant.

What about the second answer, in which I suggested that philosophy is the study of six things (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, aesthetics, and logic)? There several are reasons for thinking that this is not the right way to understand what philosophy is. These topics are not studied exclusively in philosophy. Theologians study God, psychologists study minds, political scientists study political theory, art critics study art. So it is wrong to say that simply thinking about any of these things means that you are doing philosophy. You may be doing philosophy, but you might also be doing theology, psychology, political science, art criticism, or something else.

If philosophy is not to be defined in terms of the subjects that it is about, perhaps it is defined in terms of the unique way in which philosophers approach those subjects. This brings us to the third answer I suggested earlier, that philosophy is a way of thinking. This seems very plausible. If we can identify one particular way of thinking which philosophers specialize in, and we can show that it applies to all different subjects, then surely philosophy is a matter of thinking about any subject in that particular way. So what’s the problem? I said before that philosophers proceed in a particular way, that they use argument and reason to clarify problems. This makes it sound as though philosophers agree with each other about how they work, and that they have always worked in the same way. This could not be further from the truth. Whilst it is true that in a very broad sense they are all in agreement that what matters is arguments and reasons, they differ very much with other philosophers past and present about how to do this.

Some philosophers think that the way to think about the world is to analyse how we use language and to find out what this tells us about the world. Others think that what matters is how we see or

experience the world, that this is what we have to find ways of attending closely to. Historically, it was thought that what mattered was how one analysed or interpreted earlier texts. So there is disagreement about how philosophers should make arguments and give reasons. We cannot expect that there will be a great similarity between the way that two philosophers work even if they are contemporaries. Often changes have occurred in philosophy when people have challenged the way we ought to do philosophy. So it seems that we cannot define philosophy as a particular way of thinking because many philosophers think in different ways. The best philosophers even change the way they think over the course of a lifetime.

So what are we to do with the three answers? At first it seemed that we had to choose between three answers which all seemed correct and now it seems that we have to choose between three answers none of which seem correct. It's a bit like the game paper, rock, scissors: philosophy is not the history of philosophy, it's what we study now; but the things we study now are also studied in other disciplines so philosophy must be the way we study not what we study; but philosophy is studied in different ways by different contemporary philosophers who only have in common the fact that they have emerged out of the same historical tradition of philosophy; but philosophy cannot be that tradition because ... and we're back to where we started.

The question What is philosophy? is a difficult question to answer. There is no easy answer. It raises more and more questions as we try to answer it. But this is precisely the sort of question that philosophers like to ask. I said that I wanted to tell you what philosophy was and maybe you think I haven't done that. I haven't actually answered the question I posed at the beginning, I admit that. But I hope that I have done something else. I hope that I've done some philosophy in front of you. I've shown you how philosophers work: they think about problems that other people don't see; they consider all the possible answers, they evaluate those answers. At the end they might not be satisfied that they have found the correct answer, but they have a better understanding of the problem. And most importantly, they've thought about the problem for themselves.

I shall offer you one final way of answering the question What is philosophy? It is not a philosophical answer to the question but an etymological answer. The etymology of the word 'philosophy' is derived from the ancient Greek words for love and wisdom. Philosophy is the love of wisdom; the desire for knowledge; the seeking out or striving for understanding. A lover of wisdom is not someone who claims to have wisdom, he is someone who desires it; who values it; who wants desperately to have it one day and so keeps on asking more questions that he doesn't know how to answer. That, I think, is common to all philosophers. I hope that philosophy involves acquire a love of wisdom, you can see why it is worth thinking about difficult questions; and most of all that you will try to think for yourself – that at any rate, is what I aim for in my students.