

What Is Philosophy? A Tour

Introduction

Philosophy is a quest for a comprehensive understanding of human existence. The objective of philosophy is to consider the rational justification of logical inferences, human values, criteria for establishing the claims of knowledge, and interpretations of the nature of reality. Philosophers' ideas have, since ancient times, contributed much to our understanding of each of these areas.

The Field of Philosophy

Philosophy is unlike any other field. It is unique in its methods and in the nature and breadth of its subject matter. Philosophy pursues questions in every area of human life, and its techniques are useful in solving problems in any field of study. Philosophy may be described in many ways. It is a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths, a quest for understanding, and a study of principles of conduct. It seeks to establish standards of evidence, to provide rational methods of resolving conflicts, and to create techniques for evaluating ideas and arguments. Philosophy develops people's abilities to see the world from the perspective of other individuals and other cultures. It enhances one's ability to see the relationships among the various fields of study. It also deepens one's sense of the meaning of the human experience.

As the systematic study of ideas and issues, philosophy may examine concepts and views drawn from science, art, religion, politics, or any other



realm. Philosophical appraisal of ideas and issues takes many forms, but philosophical studies often focus on the meaning of an idea as well as its basis, its coherence, and its relations to other ideas.

Traditional Subfields of Philosophy

Logic aims to provide sound ways to distinguish good reasoning from bad reasoning. It helps us to assess how well our premises support our conclusions, to see what we are committed to accepting when we take a view, and to avoid adopting beliefs for which we lack adequate reasons.

Ethics takes up the meanings of our moral concepts, such as right action, obligation, and justice, and formulates principles to guide moral decisions. What are our moral obligations to others? How can moral disagreements be rationally settled? What rights must a just society accord its citizens? What constitutes a valid excuse for doing something wrong?

Metaphysics seeks basic criteria for determining what sorts of things are real. Are there mental, physical, and abstract things (such as numbers), or are there just the physical and the spiritual (or matter and energy)? Are people highly complex physical systems or do they have non-physical properties?

Epistemology concerns the nature and scope of knowledge. What does it mean to know (the truth), and what is the nature of truth? What sorts of things can be known, and can we be justified in our beliefs about what goes



beyond the evidence of our senses, such as the inner lives of others or events of the distant past?

The History of Philosophy studies both major philosophers and entire periods in the development of philosophy, such as the Ancient, Medieval, Modern, Nineteenth Century, and Twentieth Century periods. It seeks to understand great figures, their influence on others, and their importance for contemporary issues. The history of philosophy not only provides insight into the other subfields of philosophy, but it also reveals many of the foundations of Western Civilization.

Special Fields of Philosophy

Philosophy of Mind: This subfield has emerged from metaphysical concerns and deals with the mind and mental phenomena. The philosophy of mind addresses not only the possible relations of the mental to the physical (for instance, to brain processes), but also the many concepts having an essential mental element: belief, desire, emotion, feeling, will, etc.

Philosophy of Religion: Another traditional concern of metaphysics is to understand the concept of God, including special attributes such as being all-knowing, all-powerful, and wholly good. Both metaphysics and epistemology have sought to assess the grounds people have offered to justify believing in God.



Philosophy of Science: This is probably the largest subfield of epistemology. Philosophy of science clarifies both the quest for scientific knowledge and the results yielded by that quest. It does this by exploring the logic of scientific evidence, the nature of scientific laws, explanations, and theories, and the possible connections among the various branches of science.

Subfields of Ethics

From ethics, too, have come major subfields:

- (1) Political Philosophy concerns the justification and limits of governmental control of individuals, the meaning of equality before the law, the basis of economic freedom, and many other problems concerning government.
- (2) Philosophy of Law explores such topics of what law is, what kinds of laws there are, how law is or should be related to morality, and what sorts of principles should govern punishment and criminal justice in general.
- (3) Medical Ethics addresses many problems arising in medical practice and medical science.
- (4) Business Ethics addresses such questions as how moral obligations may conflict with the profit motive and how these conflicts may be resolved.

Philosophy of Art (Aesthetics): This is one of the oldest subfields. It concerns the nature of art, including the performing arts, painting, sculpture, and literature. Major questions in aesthetics include how artistic creations are to be interpreted and evaluated, and how the arts are related to one another, to natural beauty, and to morality, religion, science, and other



important elements of human life.

Philosophy of Language: This field has close ties to both epistemology and metaphysics. It treats a broad spectrum of questions about language: the nature of meaning, the relations between words and things, the various theories of language learning, and the distinction between literal and figurative uses of language. Since language is crucial in nearly all human activity, the philosophy of language can enhance our understanding of other academic fields and of what we ordinarily do.

The Uses of Philosophy

General Uses of Philosophy

Much of what is learned in philosophy can be applied to almost any endeavor. This is because philosophy touches on so many subjects and because many of its methods are usable in any field.

General Problem Solving: The study of philosophy enhances one's problem-solving capacities. It helps one to analyze concepts, definitions, arguments, and problems. It contributes to one's capacity to organize ideas and issues, to deal with questions of value, and to extract what is essential from masses of information. It helps one both to distinguish fine differences between views and to discover common ground between opposing positions. It also helps one to synthesize a variety of views or perspectives into a unified whole.



Communication Skills: Philosophy also contributes to the development of expressive and communicative powers. It provides some of the basic tools of self-expression — for instance, skills in presenting ideas through well-constructed, systematic arguments — that other fields either do not use or use less extensively. It helps one to express what is distinctive of one's view, to enhance one's ability to explain difficult material, and to eliminate ambiguities and vagueness from one's writing and speech.

Persuasive Powers: Philosophy provides training in the construction of clear formulations, good arguments, and clear examples. It helps one develop the ability to be convincing. One learns to build and defend one's own views, to appreciate competing positions, and to indicate why one considers one's own views preferable to alternatives.

Writing Skills: Writing is taught intensively in many philosophy courses, and many regularly assigned philosophical texts are considered master literary essays. Philosophy teaches interpretive writing through its examination of challenging texts, comparative writing through emphasis on fairness to alternative positions, argumentative writing through developing one's ability to establish views, and descriptive writing through detailed portrayal of concrete examples. Structure and technique are emphasized in philosophical writing. Originality is also encouraged, and students are generally urged to use their imagination and develop their own ideas.



The Uses of Philosophy in Educational Pursuits

The general uses of philosophy just described are obviously of great academic value. It should also be clear that the study of philosophy has intrinsic rewards as an unlimited quest for understanding of important, challenging problems. But philosophy has further uses in deepening an education, both in college and in the many activities, professional and personal, that follow graduation.

Understanding Other Disciplines: Philosophy is indispensable for this. Many important questions about a discipline, such as the nature of its concepts and its relation to other disciplines, do not belong to that discipline, are not usually pursued in it, and are philosophical in nature. Philosophy of science, for instance, is needed to supplement the understanding of the natural and social sciences, which is what one derives from scientific work itself. Philosophy of literature and philosophy of history are of similar value in understanding the arts. Philosophy is, moreover, essential in assessing the various standards of evidence used by other disciplines. Since all fields of knowledge employ reasoning and must set standards of evidence, logic and epistemology have a general bearing on all these fields.

Development of Sound Methods of Research and Analysis: Still another value of philosophy in education is its contribution to one's capacity to frame hypotheses, do research, and put problems into manageable form. Philosophical thinking strongly emphasizes clear formulation of ideas and



problems, selection of relevant data, and objective methods for assessing ideas and proposals. It also emphasizes development of a sense of the new directions suggested by the hypotheses and questions one encounters in doing research. Philosophers regularly build on both the successes and the failures of their predecessors. A person with philosophical training can readily learn to do the same in any field.

The Uses of Philosophy in Non-Academic Careers

Recent studies show that employers want — and reward — many of the capacities that the study of philosophy develops: for instance, the ability to solve problems, to communicate, to organize ideas and issues, to assess pros and cons, and to boil down complex data. These capacities represent transferable skills. They are transferable not only from philosophy to non-philosophical areas, but from one non-philosophical field to another. For that reason, people trained in philosophy are not only prepared to do many kinds of tasks, but they can also cope with change, or even move into new careers, more readily than many others.

Regarding current trends in business, a writer in the New York Times reported that “businessmen are coming to appreciate an education that at its best produces graduates who can write and think clearly and solve problems.” A Senior Vice President of the American Can Company once said: “Students with any academic background are prepared for business when they can educate themselves and can continue to grow without their teachers, when they have mastered techniques of scholarship and discipline,



and when they are challenged to be all they can be.”

Philosophy broadens the range of things one can understand and enjoy. It can give one self-knowledge, foresight, and a sense of direction in life. It can provide, to one’s reading and conversation, special pleasures of insight. It can lead to self-discovery, expansion of consciousness, and self-renewal. Through all of this, and through its contribution to one’s expressive powers, it nurtures individuality and self-esteem. Its value for one’s private life can be incalculable. Its benefits in one’s public life as a citizen can be immeasurable.

Conclusion

Philosophy is the systematic study of ideas and issues, a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths, a quest for a comprehensive understanding of the world, a study of principles of conduct, and much more. Every domain of human existence raises questions to which its techniques and theories apply, and its methods may be used in the study of any subject or the pursuit of any vocation. Indeed, philosophy is in a sense inescapable: life confronts every thoughtful person with some philosophical questions, and nearly everyone is often guided by philosophical assumptions, even if unconsciously.

Philosophical training enhances our problem-solving capacities, our abilities to understand and express ideas, and our persuasive powers. It also develops understanding and enjoyment of things whose absence impoverishes many lives, for example, communication with many different kinds of people and discussions of current issues. In these and other ways



the study of philosophy contributes immeasurably in both academic and other pursuits.

The problem-solving, analytical, judgmental, and synthesizing capacities philosophy develops are unrestricted in their scope and unlimited in their usefulness. This makes philosophy especially good preparation for positions of leadership, responsibility, or management. Philosophical training and the development of transferable skills are significant for long-term benefits in career advancement.



All men by nature desire to know... It is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize.

— Aristotle

All our dignity lies in thought. Let us strive, then, to think well.

— Blaise Pascal

Philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative.

— William James

Philosophy ought to question the basic assumptions of the age. Thinking through, critically and carefully, what most people take for granted is, I believe, the chief task of philosophy, and it is this task that makes philosophy a worthwhile activity.

— Peter Singer

To teach how to live without certainty and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can do for those who study it.

— Bertrand Russell

