

Introduction

Doing Philosophy

The unexamined life is not worth living.
— Socrates, fifth century BC

Know thyself!
--Oracle at Delphi (Socrates' motto)

Philosophy is all about our beliefs and attitudes about ourselves and the world.

Doing philosophy, therefore, is first of all the activity of stating, as clearly and as convincingly as possible, what we believe and what we believe in. This does not mean, however, that announcing one's allegiance to some grand-sounding ideas or, perhaps, some impressive word or "ism" is all that there is to philosophy. Philosophy is the development of these ideas, the attempt to work them out with all their implications and complications. It is the attempt to see their connections and compare them with other people's views, including the classic statements of the great philosophers of the past. It is the effort to appreciate the differences between one's own views and others' views, to be able to argue with someone who disagrees, and resolve the difficulties that they may throw in your path. One of our students once suggested that she found it easy to list her main ideas on a single sheet of paper; what she found difficult was showing how they related to one another and how she might defend them against someone who disagreed with her. In effect, what she was saying was something like this: she would really enjoy playing quarterback with the football team, as long as she didn't have to cooperate with the other players—and then only until the other team came onto the field. But playing football is cooperating with your team and running against the team that is out to stop you; philosophy is the attempt to coordinate several different ideas into a single viewpoint, and defending what you believe against those who are out to refute you. Indeed, a belief that can't be tied to a great many other beliefs and that can't withstand criticism may not be worth believing at all.

To defend your ideas is quite different from insisting, no matter how self-righteously, on the mere sound of a word. To say that you believe in freedom, for instance, may make you feel proud and righteous, but this has nothing to do with philosophy or, for that matter, with freedom, unless you are willing to spell out exactly what it is you stand for, what it is that you believe, and why it is that this freedom, as you call it, is so desirable. But most students, as well as many professional philosophers, get caught up in such attractive, admirable words, which we can call "buzzwords." These sound as if they refer to something quite specific and concrete (like the word dog), but in fact, they are among the most

difficult words to understand, and they provide us with the hardest problems in philosophy. Freedom sounds as if it means breaking out of prison or being able to speak one's mind against a bad government policy, but when we try to say what it is that ties these two examples together, and many more besides, it soon becomes clear that we don't know exactly what we're talking about. Indeed, virtually everyone believes in freedom, but the question is what they believe in. Similarly, many people use such words as truth, reality, morality, love, and even God as buzzwords, words that make us feel good just because we say them. But to express the beliefs these words supposedly represent is to do something more than merely say the words; it is also to say what they mean and what it is in the world (or out of it) to which we are referring. Buzzwords are like badges; we use them to identify ourselves. But it is equally important to know what the badges stand for.

The words "science" and "art" are examples of buzzwords that seem to be ways of identifying ourselves. How many dubious suggestions and simple-minded advertisements cash in on the respectability of the word scientific? What outrageous behavior is sometimes condoned because it is artistic? And in politics, what actions have not been justified in the name of national security or self-determination? Such buzzwords not only block our understanding of the true nature of our behavior, but they can also be an obstacle—rather than an aid—in philosophy. Philosophers are always making up new words, often by way of making critical distinctions. For example, the words subjective and objective, once useful philosophical terms, now have so many meanings and are so commonly abused that the words by themselves hardly mean anything at all. Would-be philosophers, including some of the more verbally fluent philosophy students, may think that they are doing philosophy when they merely string together long noodle chains of such impressive terms. But philosophical terms are useful only insofar as they stay tied down to the problems they are introduced to solve, and they retain the carefully defined meanings they carry. Buzzwords become not aids for thinking but rather substitutes for thinking, and long noodle chains of such terms, despite their complexity, are intellectually without nutritional value.

The abuse of buzzwords explains the importance of that overused introductory philosophical demand, "Define your terms." In fact, it is very difficult to define your terms, and most of the time, the definition emerges at the end of the thought process rather than at the beginning. You think you know quite well what you mean. But when certain philosophical terms enter our discussion, it becomes clear why this incessant demand has always been so important; many students seem to think they have learned philosophy simply because they have learned a new and impressive word or two. But that's like believing that you have learned how to ski just because you have tried on the boots. The truth, however, is to be found in what you go on to do with them.

Crucial Features of Philosophy

Philosophy is, first of all, reflection. It is stepping back, listening to yourself and others (including the great philosophers), and trying to understand and evaluate what you hear and what you believe. To formulate your own philosophy is to say what it is that you believe as clearly and as thoroughly as possible. Often, we believe that we believe something, but as soon as we try to write it down or explain it to a friend, we find that what seemed so clear a moment ago has disappeared, as if it evaporated just as we were about to express it. Sometimes, too, we think we don't have any particular views on a subject, but once we begin to discuss the topic with a friend, it turns out that we have very definite views, as soon as they are articulated. Articulation—spelling out our ideas in words and sentences—is the primary process of philosophy. Sitting down to write out your ideas is an excellent way to articulate them. Still, most people find that an even better way, and sometimes far more relaxed and enjoyable, is to discuss these ideas with other people—classmates, good friends, family—or even, on occasion, a stranger with whom you happen to strike up a conversation. Indeed, talking with another person not only forces you to be clear and concrete in the articulation of your beliefs; it allows you—or forces you—to engage in a second essential feature of doing philosophy: arguing for your views. Articulating your opinions still leaves open the question of whether they are worth believing, whether they are well thought out, and whether they can stand up to criticism from someone who disagrees with you. Arguments serve the purpose of testing our views; they are to philosophy what practice games are to sports—ways of seeing just how well you are prepared, how skilled you are, and, in philosophy, just how convincing your views really are.

Philosophy Features

- Articulation: putting your ideas in clear, concise, readily understandable language.
- Argument: supporting your ideas with reasons from other ideas, principles, and observations to establish your conclusions and overcome objections.
- Analysis: understanding an idea by distinguishing and clarifying its various components. For example, the idea of “murder” involves three component ideas: killing, wrongfulness, and intention.
- Synthesis: gathering together different ideas into a single, unified vision. For example, the Pythagorean notion of the “harmony of the spheres” synthesizes mathematics, music, physics, and astronomy.

Articulating and arguing your opinions has another familiar benefit: stating and defending a view is a way of making it your own. Too many students, in reading and studying philosophy, look at the various statements and arguments of the great philosophers as if they were merely displays in some intellectual museum, curiously contradicting each other, but, in any case, having no real relevance to us. But once you have adopted a viewpoint, which most likely was defended at some time by one or more of the philosophical geniuses of history, it becomes very much your own as well. Indeed, doing philosophy almost always includes appealing to other philosophers in support of your own views, borrowing their arguments and examples as well as quoting

them when they have striking things to say (with proper credit in a footnote, of course). It is by doing philosophy, articulating and arguing your views, instead of just reading about other people's philosophy books, that you make your own views genuinely your own, that is, by working with them, stating them publicly, defending them, and committing yourself to them. That is how the philosophies of the past become important to us and how our own half-baked, inarticulate, often borrowed, and typically undigested ideas start to become something more. Philosophy, through reflection, articulation, and argument, allows us to analyze and critically examine our ideas and to synthesize our vision of ourselves and the world, putting the pieces together into a single, unified, defensible vision. Such a synthesis is the ultimate aim of philosophical reflection, and scattered ideas and arguments are no more philosophy than a handful of unconnected words is a poem.

Different Fields of Philosophy

For convenience and to break the subject into course-sized sections, philosophy is usually divided into several fields. Ultimately, these are all interwoven, and it is difficult to pursue a question in any one field without soon finding yourself in the others, too. Yet philosophers, like most other scholars, tend to specialize, and you, too, may find your main interests focused on one of the following areas:

- Metaphysics: the theory of reality and the ultimate nature of all things. The aim of metaphysics is a comprehensive view of the universe, an overall worldview. One part of metaphysics is a field sometimes called ontology, the study of "being," an attempt to list in order of priority the various sorts of entities that make up the universe.
- Ethics: the study of good and bad, right and wrong, the search for the good life, and the defense of the principles and rules of morality. It is therefore sometimes called moral philosophy, although this is only one part of the broad field of ethics.
- Epistemology: the study of knowledge, including such questions as "What can we know?" and "How do we know anything?" and "What is truth?"
- Logic (or philosophical logic): the study of the formal structures of sound thinking and good argumentation.
- Philosophy of religion (or philosophical theology): the philosophical study of religion, the nature of religion, the nature of the divine, and the various reasons for believing (or not believing) in God's existence.
- Political (or sociopolitical) philosophy: the study of the foundations and the nature of society and the state; an attempt to formulate a vision of the ideal society and implement ideas and reforms in our own society to better achieve this.
- Aesthetics (a subset of which is the philosophy of art): the study of the nature of art and the experiences we have when we enjoy the arts or take pleasure in nature, including an understanding of such concepts as "beauty" and "expression."

Concepts and Conceptual Frameworks

The basic units of our philosophical projects and viewpoints are called concepts. Concepts give form to experience; they make articulation possible. But even before we try to articulate our views, concepts make it possible for us to recognize things in the world, to see and hear particular objects and particular people instead of one big blur of a world, like looking through a movie camera that is seriously out of focus. But in addition to defining the forms of our experience, concepts also tie our experience together. Concepts rarely occur in isolation; they virtually always tie together into a conceptual framework.

An example of a concept would be this: As children, we learn to identify certain creatures as dogs. We acquire the concept “dog.” At first, we apply our new concept clumsily, calling a “dog” anything that has four legs, including cats, cows, and horses. Our parents correct us, however, and we learn to be more precise, distinguishing dogs first from cats, cows, and horses and then later from wolves, coyotes, and jackals. We then have the concept “dog”: we can recognize dogs and talk about them. We can think about and imagine dogs even when none are actually around, and we can say what we think about them in general. We can refine our concept, too, by learning to recognize the various dog breeds and distinguish between dangerous and friendly dogs. On certain occasions, therefore, the concept takes on an undeniably practical importance, for it tells us how to act, when to run, and when to be friendly in turn. But the concept “dog” also becomes a part of our vision of the world—a world in which dogs are of some significance, a world divided into dogs and nondogs, a world in which we can contemplate, for example, the difference between a dog’s life and our own. (One of the great movements in ancient philosophy was called Cynicism after the Greek word for “dog.” The cynics acquired their name by living a life of austerity and poverty that, to their contemporaries, seemed little better than a “dog’s life.”)

Some concepts have very specific objects, like “dog.” These specific concepts, derived from experience, are often called empirical concepts. We have already seen this word empirical referring to experience (for example, knowing the various breeds and behaviors of dogs). We will see it again and again; the root *empiri* means having to do with experience. Through empirical concepts, we make sense of the world, dividing it into recognizable pieces, learning how to deal with it, and developing our ability to talk about it, to understand and explain it, and to learn more and talk more about it. In addition to such specific concepts, we make use of a set of much more abstract concepts, whose objects are not so tangible or empirical and which cannot be so easily defined. These are *a priori* (Latin, “from the earlier”) concepts, because they are conceptually before empirical concepts. One example is the concept of “number.” However important numbers might be in our talk about our experience, the concepts of arithmetic are not empirical. Mathematicians talk about the concept of an “irrational number,” but there is nothing in our everyday experience that they can point to as an example of one. Understanding this concept requires a good deal of mathematical knowledge because it, like most concepts, can be defined only within a system of other abstract concepts.

Two Types of Knowledge

- Empirical knowledge: knowledge based on experience (whether your own experience or the observations and experiments of others), for example, “The temperature in Chicago today is 17°F.”
- a priori knowledge: knowledge that is independent of (“before”) any particular experience, for example, “ $2 + 3 = 5$ ” or “ $A + B = B + A$.”

The a priori concept of “number” raises problems far more difficult than the empirical concept of “dog,” and it is with the most difficult concepts that philosophy is generally concerned. Because philosophical concepts are abstract, there may be far more room for disagreement about what they mean. For example, the concepts of a “good person” and the “good life” seem to mean very different things to different people and in different societies. So, too, the concept of “God” creates enormous difficulties, in fact so many difficulties that some religions refuse to define God at all, or even give him (and not always “him”) a name. Within the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, there are very different conceptions of God, even within the Bible. When we begin to consider some of the other conceptions of God—for example, the Greek conception of Zeus and Apollo; the Hindu ideas of Vishnu and Shiva; or some modern conceptions of God as identical to the universe as a whole, or as a vital force, or as whatever a person takes to be their “ultimate concern in life”—you can see that simply agreeing on the word still leaves open the hardest questions: What is God like? What can we expect of God? What is involved in believing “in” God? What is our concept of God?

The concept of “freedom” is particularly difficult. Some people think that freedom is being able to do whatever you want; others think that freedom makes sense only within the rules of your society. But it is not as if the word freedom already means one or the other; the word and its meaning are open to interpretation, and interpretation is the business of philosophy. This is not to say, however, that what we might disagree about is simply the meaning of a word. What we disagree about is the concept, and the concept, in turn, determines how we see the world.

The concept of “self” is like this, too. In a purely grammatical sense, the word self points to a person—for example, to myself when I say, “I presented myself to the dean.” But what is this self? Again, it is not defined by the word, which only points. Is my self just the I, the voice that is now speaking, or does it refer to a whole human being? Does it include every trivial and insignificant fact about me? (For example, the fact that I forgot to brush my teeth this morning?) Or does it refer just to certain essential facts—for instance, the fact that I am a conscious being? Is my self a soul? Or am I perhaps a social construction, which must be defined not in terms of one person alone but in terms of my society and my particular role in it?

The concept of “truth” is important in philosophy. Is the truth simply the “way things really are”? Or does it depend on the nature of what and how we believe as well? Could it

be the case that we are all caught up in our limited view of the world, unable to see beyond the concepts of our own language and our own restricted range of experiences?

The most abstract and controversial concepts of all are not those through which we divide up the world into understandable bits and pieces but rather those grand concepts through which we try to put it all together. Religion is the traditional vehicle for this total understanding, but in our culture, it has been challenged by science, art, law, politics, and philosophy for this ultimate role.

These all-embracing pictures and perspectives are our ultimate conceptual frameworks—that is, the most abstract concepts through which we “frame” and organize all of our more specific concepts. The term conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of concepts and is therefore central to articulating the concepts that make up most of philosophy. But what we are calling a “conceptual framework” can also be viewed, from a more practical perspective, as a set of values and a way of looking at life, expressed as a way of living, or, in our contemporary vocabulary, as a lifestyle. If the emphasis shifts to politics and society, the framework can be called an ideology—that is, a set of ideas about the nature of society and our political roles within it, which are themselves reflected in one’s lifestyle. If we shift to a more historical viewpoint, we find that historians sometimes refer to the same thing as the “climate of opinion”. If we shift the emphasis away from the concepts through which we give form to our world and emphasize instead the view of the world that results, we can use a popular philosophical term, worldview (which is often left in German, *Weltanschauung*, because several German philosophers used this term quite often in the last century or so). But whether we use one term or the other, with one emphasis or another, the important point is that we in some sense already have such viewpoints, through which we give shape to our world and define our lives within it. When we articulate them in philosophy, we are not just creating an arbitrary structure of ideas; we are making explicit and clarifying what we already believe—to be more aware of our ideas, to be able to defend them, and, sometimes, to be able to change them.

Our conceptual framework, our lifestyle, our ideology, our climate of opinion, or our worldview is usually taken for granted as the intellectual ground that we walk on. But sometimes it is necessary to examine that ground, to look carefully at what we usually take for granted. If we are planning to construct a house, it is a good idea to investigate the ground we will build on, especially when something seems wrong—the soil is too soft, or it is on a fault and susceptible to earthquakes. This is often the case, too, with our conceptual frameworks; as soon as we look at them, they may seem soft, ill-formed, perhaps in danger of imminent collapse, or liable to disruption by a well-placed question or a confrontation with someone who disagrees with us. This is a common experience among first-year college students: they come to school with certain religious, moral, political, and personal views that they have always taken for granted and have never questioned or been forced to defend. Then they meet someone—a roommate, a teacher, a friend in a course—and these lifelong views are thrown into chaos. Students who are not prepared for intellectual confrontation

may find that they are no longer so sure; then they get defensive, even offended and belligerent. But with time and some philosophical thinking, the same students again become clear about what they believe and why. Before the ground was examined, it might have been soft or near collapse. Still, once they see where they stand, they can fill in the holes, make it solid, protect themselves against unexpected “idea-quakes,” and renew or revise their beliefs, which they now hold with a confidence much greater than before.

It is possible, of course, that you will find yourself using two or even more conceptual frameworks—for example, a scientific framework in school, a pleasure-seeking (or hedonistic) framework for Saturday night, and a religious framework on Sunday morning. The question then becomes, How do these different frameworks tie together? Which is most important? Are they actually inconsistent with one another? If our lives are to be coherent, don’t we have to unify our various beliefs so that they all hang together? Ultimately, what makes understanding concepts and conceptual frameworks so important and rewarding is that, in understanding them, we are also in the process of creating, enriching, developing, solidifying, and giving new understanding and clarity to our everyday lives.

Doing Philosophy With Style

The quality of a philosophy depends on the ingenuity with which its ideas are presented, the thoroughness with which they are worked out, the care with which one idea is tied to another, and the vividness with which the entire view comes across to the reader. Many of the views of the greatest philosophers in history—for example, Plato, Aristotle, and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant—were not so different from those of most of their contemporaries, including other philosophers whom they knew and regularly talked with. But they became the great philosophers of our tradition because they presented their ideas with eloquence, defended them so brilliantly, and put them together in monumental constructions that are wonderful (if also very difficult) to behold. Philosophy is first of all articulation and argument, but it is also articulation and argument with style. Every philosophy, and every essay or book in philosophy, is essentially making a case. That is why philosophical training is so valuable for students going into law, or politics, or business, or—ultimately—almost every career where articulation and argument are important.

Disjointed articulation and argument not aimed at making a case to some particular audience (even if that audience is only your roommate or philosophy instructor) is without a point or purpose. Philosophy should be persuasive. That means that, in addition to evidence of hard thinking and a display of wisdom, philosophical writing should be somewhat entertaining, witty, dramatic, and even seductive. It is working out common views in uncommon ways. But whether philosophy is the somewhat modest thinking of a first-year philosophy student or the hundreds of pages that make up the classic texts of the great philosophers, the activity is the same—to try to articulate and clarify and present one’s own view of the world as coherently and attractively as possible. It is possible

to appreciate philosophy only by participating in it, by being a philosopher, too. And by the time you have completed this course, you too will be a part (if a small part) of that long tradition that has come to define the world of Western philosophy, perhaps non-Western, too.

To be part of the extended conversation that is philosophy, you will need the following:

- **Your ideas:** Without ideas articulated clearly, there is nothing to think or write about.
- **Critical thinking:** Ideas unqualified and uncriticized, undeveloped and unargued, are not yet philosophy. One of the most valuable tools you can carry away from a philosophy class is the ability to read and think critically, to scrutinize ideas as well as gather information.
- **Argumentation:** Philosophy is not just stating your opinions; it is providing arguments to support your opinions, and arguments against objections to your views. The best philosophy always includes a kind of point-counterpoint format. Don't just state your views. Argue for them and anticipate the kinds of objections that will probably be raised against you, countering them in advance. ("Now you might object that . . . , but against that I want to point out that . . .")
- **A problem:** Philosophy does not consist of random speculations and arguments about some topic or other. It is motivated by a problem, a real concern. Death and the meaning of life are philosophical problems because—to put it mildly—we are all concerned with questions about life and death, our lives and deaths. Problems about knowledge arise because someone, somewhere, has challenged our ability to know as much as we think we know, and philosophers ever since have been trying to answer that challenge. (For example, how do you know that you are not dreaming right now? Or, how do you know that the world wasn't created five minutes ago, with all of its fossils and supposedly ancient relics, and with us and all of our memories of the alleged past?) Philosophy may begin by wondering about life and the world in general, but it comes into focus through attending to a problem.
- **Imagination:** A list of your ideas with qualifications and arguments might count as philosophy, but it would be uninspiring and dull. Don't be afraid to use metaphors and analogies. As you will see, some of the greatest philosophers developed their views of the world into visions that are as much poetry as philosophical essays.
- **Style:** Anything in writing is readable only if it is written in a lively style. The rules of good essay writing apply to philosophy, of course, but so do the rules of entertaining—be exciting, attractive, appealing, persuasive. No matter how exciting an idea or incisive a criticism, it always gets across better when presented with eloquence, with a personal touch and an elegant turn of phrase.

Socrates might have said, “Everyone should think about his or her life because at least sometimes that helps us out of hard situations and makes life more valuable,” but probably no one would remember it. Instead, he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” and a hundred generations have been struck by the boldness and bluntness of his statement, whether or not, on examination, they have agreed with it. Socrates’s aphorism is only a summary statement, not the whole body of Socrates’s philosophy, with all of its ideas, images, and arguments. Your philosophy, too, is nothing less than the entirety of what you believe, articulated and argued as convincingly and as elegantly as you can.

Philosophical Questions

It is now some years since I discovered how many false beliefs I had held to be true since my earliest youth. And since that time, I have been convinced that I must once and for all seriously try to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and begin to build anew, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure for my beliefs.

Renee Descartes, *Meditations*

Philosophy begins with nagging personal questions. Quite often, our philosophical awareness begins in disappointment or tragedy, when we first start wondering whether life is fair or whether we are really learning anything in school. Sometimes, philosophy begins when we find ourselves forced to make difficult decisions that will affect the rest of our lives and other people’s lives, too—for example, whether to attend college or enter a trade or the military, whether to get married, or whether to have children. We all feel a need to justify ourselves from time to time—living in relative luxury in a world in which millions are starving, attending college when it sometimes seems as if we are not really getting much out of it (or not putting very much into it), saying that we believe in one thing when our actions (or inaction) would seem to indicate that we believe something quite different.

Our philosophizing can begin with a trivial incident: we catch ourselves lying to a friend, and we start thinking about the importance of morality; we suffer from (or perhaps enjoy) a momentary illusion or hallucination, and we begin to wonder how it is that we know anything is real or even that we are not dreaming all the time; we have a quick brush with death (a near car wreck, a sudden dive in an airplane), and we start thinking about the value and meaning of life. In such moments, philosophy takes hold of us, and we see and think beyond the details of everyday life. Doing philosophy, in turn, is thinking further about these dramatic questions, which can suddenly become so important to us. In this chapter, we will consider some of these questions and possible answers.

What is Philosophy?

Philosophy, stated, is the experience of asking and seeking to answer such grand questions about life, about what we know, about what we ought to do or believe in. It is the process of getting to the bottom of things, questioning ideas that we often take for granted and probably never put into words. We assume, for example, that some acts are right and some are wrong. Why? We know that it is wrong to take a human life. Why is this? Is it always so? What about in wartime? What about the life of a person who is hopelessly sick and in great pain? What if the world were so overcrowded that millions would die in one way if others did not die in another?

However, when you respond to these difficult questions, your answers reveal a network of beliefs and doctrines that you may never have articulated before you first found yourself arguing about them. Not surprisingly, the first time an individual tries to argue about issues they have never before discussed, the result may be awkward, clumsy, and frustrating. That is the point behind philosophical questions in general: to teach us how to think about, articulate, and argue for the things we have come to believe in, to clarify and perhaps revise our views, and to present them clearly and convincingly to other people, who may or may not agree with us. Very often, therefore, philosophy proceeds through disagreement, as when two philosophers or philosophy students argue with one another. Sometimes the dispute seems trivial or just a matter of semantics. However, because what we are searching for are basic meanings and definitions, even arguments about the meaning of words—especially such words as freedom, truth, and self, for example—are essential to our philosophical positions. With that in mind, let's begin our study with a series of somewhat strange but provocative questions, each of which is designed to get you to think about and express your opinions on a variety of distinctly philosophical issues.