

# I The Nature of Philosophy

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## **What is philosophy?**

Two answers are frequently given to the question ‘What is philosophy?’ One is that philosophy is an activity rather than a subject – in other words, you *do* philosophy rather than learn about it. The other is that philosophy is largely a matter of conceptual analysis – it is thinking about thinking. Both these suggestions contain more than a germ of truth but are unsatisfactory, giving little or no idea of the content of philosophy. It is all very well to say ‘Philosophize’ or ‘Analyse concepts’, but philosophize about what and in what sorts of ways; analyse what concepts and how? The most direct way of seeing what philosophy is about is to look at the sorts of questions that philosophers think are important and how they go about answering them.

What is common to all such questions is that they are questions that can be answered only by reasoning. In other disciplines, there are various ways of finding out answers to questions – such as by studying

nature or ancient manuscripts, by conducting experiments or surveys, by building a piece of apparatus or a model or by running a simulation on a computer. By and large, these are what can be termed ‘empirical investigations’. The outcomes of these investigations – new discoveries, new data – will often be relevant to philosophy, but empirical investigations cannot provide the answers to philosophical questions.

## **Some philosophical questions**

Let us first look at the sorts of questions philosophers have considered and then see how they have tried to answer them:

- Do our senses, of sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell, present us with a true picture of the world around us?
- Does every event have a cause? If every event does have a cause, is this incompatible with being able to make free choices?
- We each have a body of flesh and bones, and we also have a mind; are minds separable from bodies (could we have minds without bodies)?; do minds and bodies interact and, if so, how?
- We observe certain patterns and regularities in the world around us. On the basis of such, essentially limited, experiences we propose laws of nature. These laws we take to be universal, applying to the totality of objects existing in the infinity of space and the eternity of time. Indeed, perhaps we take it that our laws apply beyond this, to possible objects in parallel universes. What can justify such claims?
- When we judge that someone has done something morally good (or bad), are we doing any more than expressing our own personal views? Can morality be anything other than subjective?
- Is it the duty of government to try to redress the imbalance of wealth within society or does any government lack the legitimacy to do this, so such attempts at redistribution are morally equivalent to slave labour?

### **Some initial thoughts on these questions**

The reason we cannot answer these questions by making observations or doing experiments differs in each case. For example, if we doubt our senses, what are we going to check them against? We have

developed all sorts of instruments capable of making more precise and more sensitive measurements than our senses, but we rely on our senses to read these instruments. In any case, if we doubt whether our senses give sufficient evidence that objects really exist, then we must doubt the existence of the instruments themselves. When we ask whether all events have causes, we can produce examples of events that do have a cause (although philosophers have questioned even this) but we cannot observe that *every* event has a cause. And if it really is the case that every event has a cause, what experiments could be conducted to show this to be compatible with free will? Our actions may appear to be free, but if this feeling of freedom were an illusion, how would we ever find out?

So far, I have suggested ways in which the questions cannot be answered. Yet, what may be worrying those new to philosophy is how we are going to make a start at producing answers. First, and this is why philosophy has been described as conceptual analysis, we can try to clarify what we mean by the terms used. When we say that one event causes another, do we mean that the cause has some sort of power over the effect? What about 'an act of free will'? Is this an act that is not affected by the events that precede it?

One of the first things we discover in philosophy is the way in which questions that at first sight look quite separate have a bearing on each other. For example, think how we might explore what is meant by 'cause'. Perhaps we will begin by considering what looks like a straightforward example, such as the sequence of events when one billiard ball collides with another. What do we actually observe in such cases? Do we literally see one event causing the next or do we see nothing more than a succession of events? This takes us back to the question with which we started: what can the senses tell us about the world? As well as seeing billiard balls, do we also see causes? If we do not literally *see* a cause, how do we know about it? Do we infer it? If it is a matter of inference, is such an inference justified?

Consider the question about thoughts and bodies. The scientific theories of Newton encouraged a picture of the universe as a system of particles in constant motion, in which the idea that every event has a cause was a natural one. But where do minds fit into such a universe? Are minds also part of the pattern of cause and effect? Do mental events have causes and effects? And, if so, are these causes and effects restricted to other mental events or can they extend to physical events? If mental interactions cannot be the same as physical interactions, what sort of interactions are they?

It may be less obvious that questions about moral judgements or political duties relate to questions about causation or the reliability of our senses, but there are connections. If every action is caused, and if this is incompatible with free will, where does this leave moral judgements? If we treat human actions as events, like any other sort of event, do they become inappropriate objects of moral judgement? Further, making a moral judgement is itself an event, caused by preceding events; does this mean that a moral judgement is simply another fact? Even if moral judgements are evaluations, the ability to make correct evaluations depends upon knowing some facts. But how do we find out the facts? Is our knowledge based on what we see, hear, touch, etc.? If so, then anything which casts doubt on the ability of our senses to give us knowledge of the world is liable to throw doubt on our ability to make moral, and political, judgements.

The last two of our original set of questions also give rise to further questions. If moral judgements are not simply the expression of personal opinion, then what are they and what are they based upon? How do we discover what is good or what our duty is? Do we discover these things through some sort of moral sense (analogous to the way in which we find out about objects in the world by using our senses of sight, hearing, etc.), through a process of reasoning, or in some other way?

Asking a philosophical question invariably leads to other philosophical questions. To add to the difficulties, there is no solid foundation on which to start building answers. Philosophy commonly questions beliefs that we usually take for granted. Philosophy may even try to question the process of reasoning itself. It is hard to begin to answer a question when nothing can be taken for granted. Perhaps this also adds to the excitement of philosophy!

## **What sort of knowledge can philosophy yield?**

If philosophical questions can be answered only by reasoning, can philosophy be pursued independently of a study of the world? Historically, this has not been the case – many of the philosophers of the past were not engaged purely, or even in some cases primarily, in philosophy. Scientific discoveries trigger philosophical speculation, while theoretical confusion in science creates the demand for philosophical analyses.

That such a relationship exists between science and philosophy is a contingent matter. This observation might provoke a deeper question: is it possible to arrive at knowledge without relying on our senses? The

knowledge we gain from experience is called 'empirical knowledge'. Knowledge that is independent of sense experience is termed '*a priori* knowledge'. The knowledge that black is black is *a priori* knowledge; it can be had independently of our senses telling us what things are black or even of the experience of anything black. Our senses tell us that grass is green, but we do not have to observe anything to know that black is black. (Whether we could understand the sentence that expresses the truth that black is black without experience of the world is a separate matter.) Are other sorts of *a priori* knowledge possible? If the answer is 'yes', we would look to philosophy to provide this knowledge.

### **Three main areas of philosophy**

There are many ways of dividing up the subject areas of philosophy. None of them is entirely satisfactory, since there will always be topics that cut across or fail to fit neatly into the divisions. None the less, we begin to get a better idea of the scope of philosophy by considering the following three broad areas.

First, metaphysics. This area of philosophy deals with the ultimate nature of reality. Is the everyday world real? If not, what is the nature of the reality that lies beneath the world of appearances? What is the nature of the space–time framework within which we and the objects around us appear to exist? Given that something exists, why that and not something else? Why that and not nothing? Why is there change? How can there also be permanence through change? Do the things that exist fall into different types, such as minds and bodies? If there are minds, are there disembodied minds? Is there a God?

Second, epistemology. Here the concern is with whether and how knowledge of reality is possible. What are the limits to our knowledge? Can we rely upon sense perception to tell us what the world is really like? Is there an unknowable reality lying behind appearances? Does science give us knowledge of a deeper reality? Does science give us knowledge at all? Can our powers of reasoning give us knowledge? Can our powers of reasoning at least correct errors that might arise from the senses? Are there other sources of knowledge, for example, ones that would enable us to perceive values or know the true nature of God?

Third, the areas of moral and political philosophy. These areas deal with how we conduct ourselves within the world. What is there, if anything, to guide our conduct? Should we follow our feelings? Can our reason tell us what is right and wrong? Can reason tell us what

political institutions to set up? Do we have obligations to the political institutions that exist in the society in which we find ourselves? Are the only values the ones that we, as individuals, create for ourselves?

There are, of course, other ways of dividing up the subject. (The above scheme is based on one suggested by Anthony Quinton in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*.) As we shall see in a moment, some schemes include epistemology as a part of metaphysics. Some separate out moral and political philosophy. Logic will often appear as a separate branch of philosophy. A more detailed analysis would produce many more branches of philosophy, some of which are highly specialized. The above is not intended to define philosophy but simply to give a broad picture that can be refined at a later date.

The order in which the three areas have been set out above might suggest an order of priority: what there is, what we can know about it and what we do about it. A moment's reflection will show this to be too simple. For example, how can we tackle the questions as to what there is without first investigating the limits of our knowledge? Are we not in danger of making grandiose claims about ultimate reality only to discover that we have no way of knowing such ultimate reality, not even whether it exists? Coming from the other direction, we may feel that moral and political questions are the ones that should be tackled first since they are the most urgent. We can postpone consideration of the ultimate reality, whereas we cannot postpone a decision about someone with a terminal illness pleading to be released from suffering. Even so, we might feel that our answers to such questions can be no more than provisional. They would have to be revised if we were convinced by arguments showing that values are subjective or that there is a God (when previously we thought values were objective or that God did not exist). The best we can say is that the three areas are interdependent and the answers we obtain to questions in one area will affect answers to questions in the other areas.

## **An explanation of the term 'metaphysics'**

### **'Meta'-activities**

A little more needs to be said about the term 'metaphysics'. The prefix 'meta' has the meaning of 'after' or 'behind' and is often used in philosophy to indicate what is referred to as a second-order activity

– an activity which, in general terms, looks at the framework within which a first-order activity takes place. Mathematics, for example, involves proofs of one sort or another; meta-mathematics, on the other hand, involves the study of formalized logical systems that underpin any proof. Similarly, while ethics deals with what is right and wrong, meta-ethics deals with what is meant by ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. A ‘meta’ subject operates at a higher level of abstraction and generality than the subject itself.

From these considerations, the term ‘metaphysics’ seems an appropriate one. Whereas physics (along with the other sciences) deals with the interactions between objects in the world around us, metaphysics deals with more general questions, such as why there is something rather than nothing, whether causation is a necessary connection, and so on. The term ‘metaphysical’ has also been used for very general, all-encompassing systems that purport to describe a reality that is beyond or that transcends everyday experience. Such transcendental (or, more accurately, transcendent) systems have been criticized for making claims to knowledge when, according to the critics, no such knowledge is possible.

There is a much more mundane account of the meaning of ‘metaphysics’. ‘Metaphysics’ was the title given in the Middle Ages to a set of lecture notes by Aristotle. Aristotle divided Science (or knowledge) into two branches, Theoretical and Practical. Theoretical Science was further subdivided into Mathematics, Physics, and what Aristotle termed the First Philosophy. A later editor of these notes placed the section on the First Philosophy after the section on Physics, and this section became known as the ‘Metaphysics’ simply because it came after Physics. This name then became transferred to the subject matter of the lecture notes.

In Aristotle, metaphysics encompassed the two broad areas of ontology and epistemology. Ontology deals with general issues relating to existence, including the existence of God, and to the processes of change, causation, etc. Epistemology is concerned with knowledge: the structure of knowledge, its origins, the attainability of knowledge and the limitations placed on it. Epistemology has already been described as one of the three main branches of philosophy, standing alongside and distinct from metaphysics. What is left, when epistemology is removed from metaphysics, is a number of different topics, often connected only tenuously. Thus, while the area of epistemology is clearly defined, metaphysics is much more of a rag-bag of topics.

When a greater emphasis came to be placed on epistemological issues, metaphysical discussions seemed to some philosophers to be too divorced from a knowable reality. Thus the term ‘metaphysical’ acquired derogatory connotations. Hume, for example, suggests that we commit works of metaphysics to the flames. More recently, metaphysical claims have been taken to be nonsense – because they are not verifiable, they were thought to lack meaning altogether. Wittgenstein, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, argues that philosophers are misled into thinking that they have asked meaningful questions and produced meaningful answers when they have used words outside their normal context, where they become meaningless. He saw his task as removing this source of philosophical confusion by bringing ‘words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (paragraph 116). Despite these criticisms, both Hume and Wittgenstein dealt with metaphysical questions, and some of the topics within metaphysics are among the most interesting and most profound in philosophy.

### **About the rest of this book**

The following eight chapters attempt to cover some of the main themes in the above three areas. Philosophy has a long history, and philosophers of the past are still read for the contributions they make in identifying, formulating and attempting to answer philosophical questions. Any introduction to philosophy should try to give the reader a feel for this historical dimension. This is not an exercise in the history of ideas, since philosophers of the past are contributors to contemporary debates.

The history of philosophy goes back at least two and a half thousand years (although philosophizing surely goes back much further) and, since it would be impossible to do justice to even the main figures in this history, coverage of this kind has not been attempted. Although earlier philosophers do get a mention, the next chapter looks at the work of a particular philosopher of the seventeenth century. In a relatively short work, Descartes introduces many of the themes that were to be central to philosophy for the next three and a half centuries.

The historical emphasis continues in chapters 3 and 4, which develop the epistemological issues raised by Descartes. Chapter 3 deals with perception and what it can tell us about the world. Chapter 4 broadens

the discussion to look at knowledge. Descartes raises the problem of scepticism in an acute form and thinks that he solves it. The prevailing view is that he has not, and Descartes' successors respond in various ways to the challenge of scepticism.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 introduce various metaphysical issues: space, time, substance and causality; minds and mental attributes; and finally the nature and existence of God. Although the questions considered are metaphysical ones, they serve as introductions to a number of other subdivisions in philosophy. These include the philosophy of science (also encountered in chapter 4) and in particular the philosophy of physics; the philosophy of mind; philosophical logic (again, also encountered in previous chapters); and the philosophy of religion.

The final two chapters, chapters 8 and 9, deal with those branches of philosophy relating to the conduct of life, in particular moral philosophy and political philosophy.

Each chapter has a short introduction, to put the topics covered into context, a summary of the main results and some of the questions raised or suggested, which you might like to think about further. There is also a guide to further reading at the end of the book, with entries for each chapter. This guide does not pretend to be complete or even extensive. The problem for the beginner in philosophy is not that of finding material on a particular subject but of trying to limit this material to something that is manageable. The recommendations made should be accessible in terms of content and they should be easy to get hold of (even without ready access to a university library); in many cases, I have found them interesting and thought-provoking. Most will have their own bibliographies to suggest further reading.

Chapters 2 to 9 appear here in the order in which they were written, although this is not the order in which they have to be read. For those with little or no prior knowledge of philosophy, it is probably a good idea to begin with chapter 2. To the extent that it is possible to deal with philosophical issues in isolation, the chapters are self-contained, but there are invariably cross-references between topics. Whatever the order in which chapters are tackled, learning about philosophy is like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. There is no best order in which the pieces should be fitted together, but the more pieces that are joined together, the clearer the picture becomes – always assuming that they have been put together correctly.

## Summary

- There are two short answers to the question ‘what is philosophy?’: it is an activity and it is conceptual analysis or thinking about thinking. A look at a range of philosophical questions shows the nature of the subject more clearly.
- Philosophy can be divided into three main areas: metaphysics, dealing with the nature of the world at the most abstract level; epistemology, dealing with whether or not we can have knowledge of this world; and moral and political philosophy, dealing with the questions of conduct within the world.