

PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE

AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER 1 - METAPHILOSOPHY

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1.1 What is Philosophy?

Everyone does it. I do it. You do it. Everyone does philosophy at some time or another. Everyone *philosophizes*. The child that asks “why?” and then follows with another “why?” after the first one is answered is doing philosophy. The person who wonders who they really are and what the purpose of their life is doing philosophy. The person trying to figure out what the heck is going on in the movie *The Matrix* is doing philosophy. But what, exactly is it? What is philosophy? To answer this question is to do *metaphilosophy*—the philosophy of philosophy.

The English word “philosophy” comes from the Greek words for *the love of wisdom*, but, as we will see in a

moment, there is much more to doing philosophy than sitting around and loving wisdom. Biologists, economists, and historians love wisdom as much as the next guy, but this doesn't necessarily mean they are in the philosophy business. The study of philosophy engages one with a body of knowledge on par with, yet quite distinct from, biology, economics, or history. Definitions will appear quite frequently in this text (and the accompanying glossary), so let us kick things off with a definition of “philosophy”.

Philosophy - the pursuit of *a priori* knowledge about topics fundamental to all other forms of knowledge. Among these topics are: knowledge itself, reasoning, the mind, reality, God, freedom, ethics, the state, and the meaning of life.

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You may be unfamiliar with the Latin phrase *a priori* (pronounced /AH **pree-OR-ee**/) so let's focus on that first. Two major kinds of knowledge are a priori knowledge and a posteriori (pronounced /AH **poss-teer-ee-OR-ee**/) knowledge. We will explore these notions in further detail in chapter 2, but for now we will have to do with the following relatively simplistic characterization. The main difference between a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge has to do with the difference between things that may be known *prior* to having certain associated experiences and things that may be known only *after* having certain associated experiences. Consider, for example, your knowledge of what the weather is like right now: suppose that it is raining. The only way you could know that it is raining is if you or some reliable witness looked outside and saw that it is raining. Your knowledge that it is raining is a bit of *a posteriori* knowledge because you can know it only after you or some reliable witness has the visual experience that justifies the belief that it is raining. Consider, in contrast, the following bit of *a priori* knowledge: right now it is either raining or it is not raining. You do not have to look outside to realize that this is true. You can know, prior to having any visual experience of today's weather, that it is either raining or not raining because the statement "it is either raining or not raining" is a logical truth. It can be known by reason alone. Other examples of a priori knowledge would be mathematical examples. Your knowledge that two plus two equals four does not require you to look out the window and see the numbers two and four floating around. As long as you grasp the concepts of number, addition, and equality, you can know by reasoning out the answer that two plus two comes out to four.

The two major fields of study primarily concerned with a priori knowledge are philosophy and mathematics. Mathematics is the pursuit of a priori knowledge about numbers and their relationships. The natural and social sciences give examples of bodies of a posteriori knowledge. Astronomy is the pursuit of a posteriori knowledge about galaxies, stars, and planets. The knowledge gained through astronomical investigation is based largely on observation. Biology is the pursuit of a posteriori knowledge about living organisms. Like many natural sciences biology involves experimentation as well as observation, where experimentation involves manipulating conditions before observing them. History is the pursuit of a posteriori knowledge about the past. Though it involves little direct observation or experimentation, it does involve reading accounts written by witnesses of past events.

1.2 Overview of Major Topics

Philosophy is the pursuit of a priori knowledge about topics fundamental to all other forms of knowledge. Among these topics are knowledge, reasoning, mind, reality, God, freedom, ethics, the state, and the meaning of life. Each of these topics will be discussed in its own separate chapter in this book, but let us look at each of them briefly here.

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A. KNOWLEDGE

If you are reading this, there is a high probability that you are a student enrolled in a philosophy class at a college or a university. As a student, your primary goal is the acquisition and retention of knowledge. But what is knowledge? Do you really know as much as you think you do? We commonly take knowledge for granted, but when we subject to philosophical scrutiny our claims to know stuff, it starts to look like we don't know very much at all. Right now you think that you are reading some words on a page. However, for all you know this is an incredibly realistic dream and there really is no page in front of you. Perhaps, then, you really don't know that there is a page in front of you. This kind of skeptical thinking has destructive consequences for most of our ordinary claims to know things. Many philosophers are interested in defending our common sense hunch that we actually do know quite a bit about the world around us and that we are not just living in a dream world. Defending an account of what knowledge is such that we can have quite a bit of it is one of the major philosophical projects to be discussed.

One of the most common definitions of knowledge in philosophy is the following.

Knowledge – Justified true belief.

We can spell this out in terms of an example. Consider Joe. Joe knows that he has a nickel and two dimes in his pocket. This entails first that he *believes* that he has a nickel and two dimes in his pocket. However, belief alone is insufficient for knowledge. Fortunately for Joe, his belief is a true belief. His belief that there is a nickel and two dimes in his pocket corresponds to the reality of the situation: there really are two dimes and a nickel in his pocket. However, true belief is still not the same as knowledge. If Joe's belief were true by *accident*, if he just *guessed* and got it right, that wouldn't mean that he *knows* how much change is in his pocket. In order for his true belief to count as knowledge, there has to be some *justification* for his knowledge. He has to have a *good reason* for believing that there are two dimes and a nickel in his pocket.

B. REASONING

Reasoning is a major concern for philosophers and, as we have just seen, one of the major components of knowledge. We all like to think of ourselves as reasonable people, but there is always room for improvement to become better at reasoning. One of the major ways to accomplish this is by learning about the logical structure that makes up good reasoning. Consider the logical structure of the following argument.

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Premise 1: All dogs are mammals
Premise 2: Fido is a dog
Conclusion: Therefore, Fido is a mammal

Note how the conclusion follows logically from the two premises: the truth of the two premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion. Note too that many different arguments can have the same logical form. The logical form of the above argument above is the same as the following argument.

Premise 1: All penguins are birds
Premise 2: Bruce is a penguin
Conclusion: Therefore, Bruce is a bird

There are many kinds of logical forms besides the one presented here. Our major concern in the chapter on reasoning will be to understand what they are and what constitutes the difference between good and bad reasoning.

C. THE MIND

Your mind is your engine of reason and the storehouse of your knowledge. It contains much else besides. Within your mind reside your hopes and fears, your beliefs and desires, your pleasures and pains, your memories and intentions. The mind is quite a mysterious thing, however. It is difficult to understand what the relation of the mind is to physical reality, especially the relation between the mind and the brain. Jane is asleep and dreaming of a six feet tall neon green monster. Suppose that while she sleeps we use advanced scientific instruments to scan her brain. No matter how sophisticated our instruments, we would find nothing in her brain that is neon-green or 6 feet tall. How can this be? How can a brain, which is neither neon green nor 6 feet tall, give rise to thoughts and dreams about neon green 6 feet tall monsters? Perhaps the mind is a non-physical entity distinct from the brain. This position is consistent with the belief held by many religions that the mind can survive the death of the body and go to heaven or hell or be reincarnated on earth. But this doesn't help much to solve our monster mystery. If the mind is non-physical, then it most certainly is neither neon-green nor six feet tall, for those are properties of only physical things. One thing is clear, however. The mind presents many mysteries for philosophers to wrestle with.

D. REALITY

What reality, if any, exists external to your mind? The boundary between your mind and the world marks the border between appearance and reality. We encounter many breaks between appearance and reality. A stick half submerged in water may appear bent when in reality it is straight. While dreaming, you may appear to be flying through the sky while in reality you are tucked safely into bed. A wood table may appear to be a solid object when in reality it is

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mostly empty space—the electrons, neutrons, and protons that make up the table’s mass occupy only a small fraction of the table’s volume. What is the true nature of reality? Is it ultimately physical, consisting of nothing but tiny particles whizzing through space, collecting to form the structure of every rock and tree, every animal and person? Perhaps there is no reality beyond your own mind, and the only thing in the universe is you, dreaming that there is world that exists beyond the veil of appearances. Perhaps instead reality is quite rich and includes your mind, a physical world, and a spiritual supernatural world beyond physical reality. Perhaps an all-powerful God is the supernatural foundation and source of this rich reality. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. . .

E. GOD

Debates concerning God’s existence, or lack thereof, are perhaps the most familiar to the beginning philosophy student. Millions of people practice some form of religion or other that has as a central belief the existence of a being answering to the following description: all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, perfect creator of the universe. While for many, belief in God is a matter of *faith*; here the topic will be subjected to the rigors of *reason*. We will be concerned to examine the *reasons*—the logically structured arguments—in favor of and against belief in the existence of God.

F. FREEDOM

Suppose for a moment, and for the sake of argument, that God does exist. By definition, God created the universe. Also by definition, God knows everything, including everything about the future. Even at the moment of creation, he knew everything that would happen afterwards, including what happens today. Some time today you probably made some kind of choice, like the choice of what clothes to wear or what to eat. You probably think you made this choice freely, that it was an exercise of your free will. But was it really? What ever you chose, God knew what you were going to choose. Since God knows everything, he knew, even at the beginning of time, that you were going to wear that particular outfit and eat that particular meal today. You could not have done otherwise, then, since that would contradict what God believed would happen. There seems to be a deep tension here, between the idea that you have free will and the idea that God knows everything. Removing God from the picture does not alleviate the threat to the notion of free will. Another apparent threat to the notions of freedom and freewill is a materialist worldview whereby everything is a collection of physical particles and every thing that happens is determined by the laws of physics. Even your choice of what to where is ultimately a physical event and thus ultimately determined by the laws of physics, not chosen by you. Many find these deterministic conclusions unbearable: few want to relinquish their belief that they have free will and make choices freely. We will examine in

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detail various philosophical accounts of whether or not there is such a thing as freewill.

G. ETHICS

Freewill is a crucial notion in our assessment of various ethical phenomena: right and wrong, good and evil, obligation and permission. Our assessment of whether someone deserves blame or praise for an action depends on whether they did it freely. If someone causes harm to someone else, but only accidentally, we do not consider him or her as evil or blameworthy as someone who did it intentionally, as someone who freely chose to do harm to another human being. But, questions of freewill aside for the moment, what are good and evil? What makes some actions right and others wrong? Is there some rational, objective basis for deciding, or is right and wrong merely “in the eye of the beholder”? Most questions of ethics concern the treatment of other people. Prototypically evil acts involve harm to others and prototypically good acts involve helping others. A single person stranded on a desert island has few opportunities for either good or evil. But how, precisely, should we act toward others if we want to be good and not evil?

H. THE STATE

Another philosophical topic that involves questions concerning relations between people is the topic of government. What is the rational basis for obeying the laws of a government? What is the rational source of the legitimacy, if any, of a government’s laws? Consider the following comparison between organized crime and a national government. Gangsters approach shop owners and tell them to pay “protection money”. If the shop owners refused to pay, they will be harmed in various ways. Similarly, representatives of a government approaches the same shop owners for the payment of taxes, and refusal to pay taxes also results in various sorts of harm: loss of property, and, if jailed, loss of freedom. And if the jailed store owners attempt to escape they may be beat or shot by official representatives of the government. There are thus many similarities between gangs and governments: both use the threat of force to obtain money from individuals. However, many people believe that the use of force by a government has more legitimacy than the use of force by gangsters. Is this correct? Can we spell out a rational, objective, philosophical theory of the legitimate use of power that justifies the claim that governmental actions are right but gang activities are wrong? Citizens of democracies are familiar with the idea that the superior legitimacy of governments depends on the fact that the representatives of government were elected. In theory, then, those in power had that power granted freely by citizens who agree to submit to that power. And when governmental officials abuse their role, the people retain the power to remove, by election, the offending parties. But what works in theory might fail

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in practice, and among the philosophical topics to explore in this area is the question of what the most rational form of government is or whether the most rational situation is anarchy—the absence of government.

I. THE MEANING OF LIFE

What is the purpose of existence? This question can be asked about existence in general (why is there something rather than nothing?) about human existence more specifically or about your personal existence most specifically (what is the meaning of *your* life?). What is your reaction to the proposal that the answer to each of the above questions is “absolutely nothing”? Many find the proposal that life and existence are utterly meaningless quite a depressing thought. One antidote to this sense of despair is to just not think about it, but this is not the philosopher’s way. Think deep and hard about what gives your life meaning. What have you adopted as your life goals? How do they stand up to philosophical scrutiny? Some might suggest that the purpose of life is to give glory to God. But what does God need your glory for? Isn’t he perfect and, by definition, already self-sufficient? Some might suggest that the goal of life is to help other people. But what should we help other people do? Should we help them to be happy? If so, then perhaps being happy is the true meaning of life. But what is happiness? Is it mere pleasure or something more? People that use cocaine and heroin have lots of pleasure, but are they happy? Do they have a meaningful existence? Some people seem to have defined for themselves, as their life’s goal, to make as much money as possible. Perhaps you yourself view the most important things you do as those that lead to money. Many students say that they are in college because that will help them get a good job, where “good job” means “one with a high income”. When you are getting to know another person, one thing that you ask early on is what they do for a living, which means, “what they do to make money”. But what is so meaningful about the acquisition of money? Money itself is just paper. The quest for money must really be the quest for something else: perhaps prestige or security. Or perhaps, once again, the ultimate goal is happiness.

3.3 Metaphilosophy Glossary

a posteriori knowledge – knowledge, the primary justification of which consists of perceptual beliefs.

a priori knowledge – knowledge, the primary justification of which consists of deductive logic and definitions of the relevant terminology.

ethics - a system of judgments concerning the determination of which interpersonal interactions are right or wrong, good or evil, permissible or forbidden, and obligatory or optional.

freedom - the possession of an unimpeded will

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God - The perfect, all powerful, all knowing, all loving, creator of reality.

knowledge – justified true belief

mind - A causal network of perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, desires, memories, and intentions possessed by an organism.

philosophy - the pursuit of *a priori* knowledge about topics fundamental to all other forms of knowledge. Among these topics are: knowledge itself, reasoning, the mind, reality, God, freedom, ethics, the state, and the meaning of life.

reality - the totality of that which exists. The way things are regardless of how they might appear.

reasoning - the process of inferring thoughts from other thoughts in a manner that conforms to the rules of logic

state - a collective entity, associated with a particular geographical region, designed for the regulation of the conduct of the individual persons that comprise the collective.