

## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Field of Philosophy**

**Overview:** Philosophy (which literally translates from Greek as “love of wisdom”) is a field that focuses on rational analysis of fundamental issues dealing with knowledge, reality, and values. This class is organized around philosophical archetypes, or people who have represented an original perspective that has been very influential to contemporary life.

**Major Ideas:** After reading the material in this chapter and hearing the lecture, you should understand the following major ideas in depth, but other parts of the reading may appear on the assessment (besides names and dates).

### *Introductory Reading*

Wisdom, Knowledge, and Belief

Archetypes vs. Stereotypes

The Branches of Philosophy

Reason and Arguments

Fallacies and Biases

Common Misunderstandings of Philosophy

## Introductory Reading

### What is Philosophy?

When many people hear the term *philosophy* it calls to mind deep thinkers, pondering the nature of the world or the meaning of life. Pondering these deep questions is part of it, though philosophy is a very general, wide-ranging discipline. So, while it's true that philosophers ponder the meaning of existence, they ponder many other things as well, like the existence of God, the soul, the nature of the mind, the best way to live your life, morality, and more.

While it is true that philosophy can get abstract, in my view the best philosophers *apply* the ideas they come up with. The best philosophers see a strong relationship between the things they believe, and their resulting actions. In some cases, this application may be at the individual level (as we will see with Confucius), but in other cases, this application may be at the societal level (as we will see with Karl Marx). I hope the relationship between ideas and actions will be apparent as we go along in the class, though certainly some philosophers are better at applying their ideas than others.

Philosophy translates from Greek as “love of wisdom.” Clearly knowledge and wisdom are different things, but using reason to acquire knowledge and apply it can lead to the growth of wisdom itself, which is what philosophy is all about. But more on knowledge, wisdom, and belief later.

### The Branches of Philosophy

There are a few general branches to (or categorizations of) philosophy. *Epistemology* is the theory of knowledge, where stuff like language, logic, and critical thinking are discussed. Epistemology deals with not just spoken and written languages, but with logical languages as well. Early work in logical languages played a major role in the computer revolution (for example, logical languages like C++ and HTML underlie

the operations of computers and internet webpages). If you have ever taken a critical thinking class, you were learning epistemology.

Another branch of philosophy is *metaphysics*, which asks questions about what *is*, what exists in the universe, what is real, purpose, causality, and more. Do you believe in God? God is a metaphysical idea, in that, if God exists, he does not exist physically as we do. God's existence is about the nature of reality, or metaphysics. A category of metaphysics that we will study later is *theology*, or the study of God. But metaphysics is not just studied in relation to religion; it can be studied in science as well. When scientists discuss the possibility of parallel dimensions or vibrating strings, they are discussing metaphysics in that they are speculating about the nature of reality.<sup>1</sup>

And the other major branch is *value theory* (or axiology) which, surprise surprise, asks questions about value, often relating to ethics, politics, and society. Sometimes these last three things are separated. Sometimes ethics is listed as a branch in itself since ethics is the most widely studied subfield of values.

Whichever way the branches are divided, what's important is that you know philosophers generally discuss foundational issues relating to reality (metaphysics), knowledge (epistemology), and values of some kind.

### **So Why Does Any of This Matter to Me?**

This might sound counterintuitive at first, but you should care about philosophy because *you already do*. That's right, you already have *a philosophy*. Philosophy is *inescapable*. You already believe things. Your head, like mine, is filled with prior knowledge and experiences leading you to these various, often completely unconscious, beliefs. Sometimes our collections of beliefs are seen as *a worldview*. Some assignments in

---

<sup>1</sup> Although there are many sources today, including shows, that discuss these ideas, one of the first books to successfully popularize them is: Gribbin, J. (1984). *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat*. New York, NY: Bantam.

this class are an attempt to make your worldviews more clear and explicit.

And why should we make our worldviews more clear? Because, generally speaking, our worldviews act upon us, we do not act upon them. That is, it's likely that much of what you believe is a matter of sheer accident: you believe based on tradition, emotion, personal experiences, and so forth (see the discussion of fallacies and biases below, which are clear examples of the lack of rationality in our belief-formation processes).

The question is, do you want to believe something because you've really thought it through? Or do you want to believe something because you grew up believing it without question? Naturally, some of you might not really care whether your belief is true. You might be thinking, so what? If my belief works for me, why does it matter? This view, that beliefs are good to the extent that they are practical (pragmatism), is a view we will discuss when we get to the PreSocratics, a group of philosophers in ancient Greece who preceded Socrates.

But even if you are not a pragmatist, you might be thinking that truth itself is relative to individuals and cultures. There is no absolute, objective truth, you might argue. This view, that truth is relative, will also be a part of our discussion of the PreSocratics.

All of this discussion, of course, illustrates the power of beliefs. Thinking through the implications of beliefs is one of the great values to philosophical inquiry. Sometimes it's very valuable to know why, exactly, we believe the things we believe. And in some cases, it can be life changing to investigate the source of one's belief. Just consider someone who goes from *not* believing in higher power to believing *in* a higher power, or vice versa. Although there are many, a belief in God (or lack thereof) is just one example of how powerful beliefs can be, and how much influence they can have on our behavior.

## **Knowledge, Wisdom, and Belief**

These words get thrown around in philosophy classes quite a bit, so it's good to have some basic definitions. I implied above that *wisdom* is a state that goes beyond mere knowledge. If philosophers love wisdom, then at the least a wise person is one who knows how to apply the knowledge that she has. Wise people are often people who appear to have a deep sense of peace and understanding of their place and purpose within society and more generally the universe.

But what is knowledge, then? *Knowledge* is often defined as “justified, true, belief.”<sup>2</sup> And a *belief* can be simply defined as a subjective acceptance that something is true or right. If you believe something, that belief is *part of you*. That's why when the belief gets challenged, we often get uncomfortable. The personal nature of belief makes it difficult to discuss beliefs, but not impossible.

So, I have knowledge that the earth is round. Why is this knowledge? Because the belief is justified—there is evidence supporting it, for example, in the form of pictures from space. It is true—the earth is, in fact, round. And I believe it—I accept personally that the earth is round.

Assessing knowledge can get quite complicated with other topics, but this discussion of knowledge, wisdom, and belief at least gives us a foundation.

## **What Philosophers Do: Archetypes vs. Stereotypes**

Another way of understanding philosophy is to look at what philosophers actually do, and what they have done over the years. Like most academics, what philosophers literally do is teach, write, research and/or speak about the topics that interest them.

---

<sup>2</sup> A famous challenge to defining knowledge this way came from this publication: Gettier, E. L. (1963). Is justified true belief knowledge? *Analysis*, 22, 121-123.

But let's take a look at the general topic of religion and consider the following questions. How does a psychologist study religion? How does a sociologist study religion? How does a philosopher study religion? By distinguishing these we will be closer to understanding the concerns of philosophy.

First, the psychologist is concerned with the role religion plays in our minds/psyche. For instance, the psychologist might wonder whether a particular religious fanatic is masking some childhood trauma through his die-hard religious devotion. Second, the sociologist is concerned with the role religion plays in society. So the sociologist might investigate the social structure of religion, and how certain religions have developed over time in different cultures.

But neither psychology nor sociology is concerned with whether or not religious claims are *true*. This is the concern of philosophers. Philosophers go to the base of a problem and ask if the original justifications are worthwhile. But philosophers study many topics, religion is just one example.

All of the philosophers we'll study in this class are considered philosophical *archetypes*, or people who have expressed influential perspectives over the course of human history. Archetypes are original models that others often try to emulate. Have you ever heard the phrase *the hero's journey*? The hero is an example of an archetype, someone who goes through a set path of overcoming obstacles, dealing with hardship, and usually defeating some sort of foe or enemy. The famous psychologist Karl Jung discussed archetypes in depth, but in this class we will be studying philosophical archetypes.<sup>3</sup>

Just to be clear, an archetype is not a stereotype. A *stereotype* is a simplistic distortion, often intended to be insulting. Saying that all Irish

---

<sup>3</sup> Jung, C. (1981). *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press.

people drink is a stereotype. An archetype is a much deeper, complex, and original model.

## **Reason and Arguments**

A lot of what philosophers do on a day to day basis, however, comes down to reasoning through *arguments*. Even philosophers who have influenced the world profoundly began with arguments. Arguments are produced when we give a reason for thinking that a claim/statement is true or right. The reason given is called the *premise* and the claim being supported or proven is called the *conclusion*.

Arguments in the academic sense are not feuds or verbal fights between people. Arguments don't even require two people. We make arguments to ourselves all the time. For example, when we decide not to go Christmas shopping on a certain day because there will be too many people we are making an argument. Here the premise is: There are too many people out in the stores today. And the conclusion is: Therefore, I will not go Christmas shopping today. You might not say it this way to yourself, but at the base of your thinking is an argument that we can assess. When we think about thinking, as we're doing in this class, we try to get at the base of our thinking, to expose our reasoning process to the light of day, so to speak.

Arguments can also be very sophisticated, and we will look at many sophisticated arguments throughout the class. Arguments are important to any country's justice system. For example, each justice of the Supreme Court of the United States writes sophisticated rational justifications for their decisions. In the landmark supreme court decision that legalized abortion, *Roe vs. Wade*, a person was defined by viability (or the ability of the fetus to survive outside the mother's womb). As abstract as this is, and whatever your belief about abortion, this is an example of the usefulness of philosophical argument to society.

Donald Trump's confirmed Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch believes in a theory that draws from Aristotle called *natural law theory*.

That is, generally speaking he believes that what happens in nature is good, and what does not happen in nature is bad. It will be interesting to see how his philosophy leads him to rule on particular cases and the arguments that he presents for them.

To learn what something is, it often helps to compare it to what that thing is not. Arguments are *not* explanations, descriptions, or value judgments. If you say “I hate vanilla ice cream” you are not making an argument; it's a value judgment. There is no conclusion being supported by a premise/claim. Notice, however, that a value judgment can be *part* of an argument if it is supported by relevant reasons. For example, you could say: “It is wrong to treat people as expendable. Slavery treats people as expendable. Thus, slavery is wrong.” This is an argument since the value judgment within it is not alone, and there is a conclusion supported by a premise. Notice that the following is also an argument: “Anything that does not have rights can be harmed for the greater good. Animals do not have rights. So animals can be harmed for the greater good.”

We might disagree with the value judgment in an argument, but that is irrelevant to whether it is an argument. To be an argument, there only needs to be a relevant and coherent reason given (a premise) to support the conclusion. First determine if it's an argument, evaluating the content comes later.

There are two kinds of arguments: *deductive and inductive*. Deductive arguments provide certain conclusions while inductive arguments provide the best possible support for a conclusion. If I know that all the clothes in my closet were made by my grandmother, then if I am wearing a shirt from my closet, I know *with certainty* that the shirt was made by my grandmother—this is deduction. If I know I did well on the first two exams in my algebra class, this is at least some evidence to believe I will do well on the next exam in the class—this is induction. Notice that arguments can be written as part of an ordinary passage, or they can be written in premise/conclusion format like the following



examples. See if you can tell which are inductive and which are deductive. Ask yourself, if you assumed the premises to be true, would the conclusion follow with certainty? If the conclusion would follow with certainty, then it's a deductive argument. If the conclusion is only likely or probable, then it's an inductive argument.

### *Argument Examples*

1. Most people who work construction are pretty strong.  
2. Jane works construction.  
So Jane is pretty strong.

1. I like to exercise.  
2. I want to go biking with my girlfriend.  
Thus, I should buy a bike.

1. We are either eating fish or vegetables for dinner tonight.  
2. We are not eating fish.  
Therefore, we are eating vegetables.

1. Everyone who smokes gets lung cancer.  
2. You smoke.  
So you will get lung cancer.

### **Fallacies and Cognitive Biases**

Sometimes we try to make a good argument, and we fail. When we fail in this way, we have committed a *fallacy*, or a mistake in reasoning. Also, sometimes our minds employ unconscious tricks that derail our reasoning—when this happens, it is a *cognitive bias*. Generally, I will ask you to be aware of potential fallacies and biases in your reasoning in this class (and hopefully beyond). But let's begin with biases.

The *dual processing model of mind* says that humans engage in fast and slow thinking.<sup>4</sup> This model suggests that the human mind has two basic modes. Sometimes we think quickly, leading to unconscious, routine behaviors, like when we tie our shoes in the morning, or brush our teeth at night. And other times we think slowly, like when we carefully consider which class we will take, or when we attempt to understand what an author's intentions are while reading. But interestingly, what was once slow thinking can become fast: when we first learned how to tie our shoes, we had to think slowly, but once we learned how, the behavior became automatic, fast thinking. In this class, the focus will be slow, careful thinking.

But fast thinking can get in the way of slow thinking, as happens with cognitive biases. These biases are a type of fast thinking, the mind's attempt to simplify the vast amount of raw data (sounds, feelings, thoughts, sights, etc.) we are faced with from second to second. As you can tell by the name, cognitive biases happen when there are errors in this simplification. Below are common types of cognitive biases.

### *Types of Cognitive Biases*

Confirmation bias: The tendency to seek or interpret evidence in ways that “prove” your existing beliefs. Here's an example:

- Imagine a person tells you that God does not exist. You ask him why, and he just shows you a bunch of atheist websites to prove his point, when you know that there are plenty of websites that contradict his view as well. Because this person is only seeking evidence that supports his view, he's engaged in the confirmation bias.

---

<sup>4</sup> The originators of this theory are Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Here is their original paper: Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). *Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk*, 47(2), 263-291. Kahneman also wrote a book about the theory later: Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking Fast and Slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Availability Heuristic: unconsciously assigning a probability to a type of event on the basis of how often one thinks of that event.

- Imagine that you read about natural disasters in the paper three days in a row. You start thinking about natural disasters. You might then say that “natural disasters are happening way more often than they used to” but this isn’t how probabilities work.

False consensus effect: assuming our attitudes are shared by society at large.

- “I believe in God, so everyone must.”
- “I think this class sucks, so everyone else does.”

Negativity Bias/ Loss aversion: the tendency people have to weight negative information more heavily than positive information when evaluating things, or to be more strongly motivated to avoid loss than to accrue gain.

- Some advertisers will point out that another product doesn’t work, rather than that their product does work.
- We are more worried that we will lose money we already have, than that we might not gain money we could have gained.

In-group Bias: we find it easier to form negative opinions of those who aren’t in our group (tribalism).

- Muslims may see Christians as being less moral or “all the same” and vice versa.

Fundamental Attribution Error: failure to appreciate that others’ behavior is as much constrained by events and circumstances as our own would be if we were in their situation.

- If John trips over a rock, we assume he’s being careless. But if we trip over the same rock, we assume the rock was placed in an awkward spot.

Better-than-average Illusion: when most of a group rate themselves as better than most of the group relative to some characteristic

- People tend to think they are smarter, think more clearly, have better memories, etc., than most other people.
- “Most Americans are stupid... except me.”

The fact of our biases must be fully felt and understood. These biases are not individual prejudices, but a collective human ailment. During my first year of graduate school, I studied the confirmation bias, which again is the tendency to confirm what one already believes (by, for example, reinterpreting conflicting evidence) rather than objectively seeking out the truth. When people asked about my research and I told them I was studying bias, I often got similar responses. “Ah bias! Just like those folks at Fox news” or “Just like those republicans” or “Just like those religious folks” or whatever. The problem is that, in recognizing bias, as these quotes illustrate, our own bias comes through. The problem is that *everyone* is biased, not just republicans or democrats or atheists or whoever, as can clearly be seen from the research.<sup>5</sup> When I was writing up my thesis on the confirmation bias for my doctoral program, I at one point realized I was looking at the data in such a way to confirm my own hypothesis—that is, I was using the confirmation bias while studying the confirmation bias!

What are the implications to human bias? Well for one, it should humble us. We shouldn't be so quick to think we're right or that we've fully understood something. This doesn't mean we can't still *be* right or that we have to constantly doubt ourselves; it just means we should be more careful in forming opinions and beliefs.

But back to fallacies. Again, unlike biases, fallacies are mistakes in reasoning that almost look like an argument, but don't quite get there due to bad evidence/reasons in the premises. Although the examples of

---

<sup>5</sup> Nickerson, R. S. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 174-220.

common fallacies below are in premise/conclusion format, they are not arguments; but I keep them in that format to show you how fallacies can *masquerade* as arguments, *appear to be* arguments. Please note that not every fallacy can ultimately be defined, and the whole point of studying them is to become better at making arguments. The point is *not* to memorize them, but to understand them.

### *Types of Fallacies*

Ad hominem: attacking a person instead of her argument.

- 1. Bill cheated on his last wife.
- Therefore, we can't listen to Bill when he says that women deserve equal pay to men.

Straw man: misrepresenting someone's argument then attacking that false representation.

- 1. It's ridiculous to believe that we evolved from monkeys.
- Therefore, evolution is false.

Appeal to emotion: substituting reason for emotions like wishful thinking, pity, guilt, fear, anger, and so forth.

- 1. I *like to believe* that someday there will be world peace.
- Therefore, someday there *will be* world peace.

False dilemma: assuming that there are only two choices, when there are more, often ridiculing one choice in favor of the other.

- 1. Either you're with us or against us.
- So you better be with us!
  - A variation is the perfectionist fallacy: assuming that an option should be rejected because it's not perfect.
    - 1. The police are never going to stop all crime.
    - Therefore, we should not have police.

False cause (correlation is not causation): assuming that because two things happened around the same time, that one necessarily caused the other.

- 1. The killer was playing video games before he committed the murder.
- Therefore, video games caused him to commit the murder.

Appeal to authority: claiming that something is true simply because an authority figure says it is.

- 1. My dad says that God doesn't exist.
- So God doesn't exist.

Appeal to popularity: claiming that something is true since many people believe it.

- 1. Many people believe the earth is round.
- Thus, the earth is round.

Hasty generalization: this happens when we reach a general conclusion without enough evidence (or with biased evidence).

- 1. The swans in this park are white.
- Thus, all swans are white.
  - A variation is anecdotal evidence: using only one or two people's experiences to falsely reach a general conclusion.
    - 1. When I eat lots of salt, I am unhealthy.
    - Thus, salt is unhealthy for everyone.

Now you know that philosophy is a rational method for addressing deep problems in the realm of knowledge (epistemology), reality (metaphysics), and values (value theory). You know that philosophy is about loving wisdom. You know that philosophical archetypes typically express their ideas through arguments, a series of premises/reasons that support or prove a conclusion. You know that cognitive biases and fallacies make us less rational, and inhibit rational inquiry. Now, let's look at some common misunderstandings of philosophy.

## Common Misunderstandings of Philosophy

*Philosophy is a matter of opinion, isn't it?*

Part of the problem with this characterization of philosophy is that it's partly true—indeed, what you will learn in many philosophy classes are influential, rational opinions. But we can't underestimate the words *influential* and *rational*. There is a great difference between the sophisticated, developed opinion of Aristotle versus the ignorant, boring opinion of a white supremacist like Richard Spencer.

But more importantly, aside from the very hard sciences, every academic discipline expresses opinions. Psychologists express their opinions about how the mind works, political scientists express their opinions about government. While it's true that disciplines like psychology use a lot of experimental evidence to support their opinions, so do many philosophers.<sup>6</sup>

Also, crucially, I will not be grading you on your opinion in this class, but on your ability to understand the ideas/opinions of the philosophers we're studying and on your ability to express an opinion free from fallacies and biases.

*Anything goes in philosophy, you can argue that the moon is made of cheese if you want*

Actually, arguing that the moon is made of cheese would be seen either as a bad argument, or as no argument at all, so no philosopher would take it seriously. The point is that, contrary to what some outside of philosophy say, not anything goes in philosophy. Philosophers are still guided by common knowledge, scientific facts, and general common sense when they present their ideas. Do some of their ideas get pretty complicated? Of course, but that is due to the nature of the topics

---

<sup>6</sup> In fact, there is an entire movement called *experimental philosophy* that tries to put the focus of philosophy on scientific data. Knobe, J., & Nichols, S. (2008). *Experimental Philosophy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

themselves being complicated, not due to an “anything goes” motivation.

### *Philosophy is impractical, right?*

This misunderstanding of philosophy does not take into account the actual data on those who major in and/or have careers in philosophy. The false narrative is that philosophy majors make less money and are more likely to be unemployed while smoking weed in their parents’ basement. But the data actually shows that philosophy majors excel academically, especially on important tests like the GRE, LSAT, and MCAT. The data also shows that philosophy majors tend to make a lot more money than you might expect, relative to other majors. Finally, philosophy majors are also highly valued by some employers.<sup>7</sup>

### *The White Male Problem*

Racism and sexism are serious issues in all cultures, and it is no different within philosophy. It is unfortunate that academic philosophy often ignores women and non-Western cultures. While I always include at least some different points of view, please let me know if you are interested and I can recommend books and authors. I have been gradually adding non-Western and female perspectives into the curriculum each semester. We will be studying some Chinese, Indian, and feminist philosophy in this class.

### *If no one will ever agree on topics in philosophy, what’s the point of discussing them?*

This is the oldest misunderstanding in the book. First of all, there is an unstated premise in this misunderstanding that looks something like this: “There is no point in discussing something if the topic is difficult for people to agree upon.” Why this last claim is false should be apparent in the Roe vs. Wade example above: should the supreme court not have

---

<sup>7</sup> See the following website for the data to back up these claims about the usefulness of studying philosophy: <https://sites.google.com/site/whystudyphilosophy/#Why%20Study%20Philosophy>



discussed abortion and come to a conclusion about it just because it is a difficult topic to agree upon?

Throughout history, debates over difficult topics have helped us to progress as a society: abortion, women's rights, slavery, etc.

But more importantly, the point of discussing philosophy is for *the sake of the ideas themselves*—because discussing deep ideas generally enriches our lives, making us wiser and more open-minded. Philosophy does not teach you *what* to think, but *how* to think. Philosophy gives you a method for tackling difficult, enduring problems. We need food for the mind as well as food for the body to be flourishing human beings, which is why we need philosophy.