

What is philosophy and why studying philosophy is important

It's natural that you would be uneasy about a subject so new and different as that is different from almost all subjects---indeed philosophy and philosophers are alien to a way average people see them.

After you graduate you probably expected to be a lawyer, computer programmer, sales manager, and teacher or cooperate executive.

You may even be able to imagine yourself as a rock-and-roll singer or a movie star or the president of the United States. But who wants to be a philosopher?

You know the image most of us have---someone impractical, unrealistic and absentminded, some character with hair flying in every direction, lost in thought while pondering “great ideas”.

The image of a philosopher being “out of touch” is even suggested by the very word “philosophy”.

Literally the word means “love of wisdom”.

And who’s going to go around saying that they “love wisdom” except somebody who’s a little strange? Would anyone want to be like that?

What is philosophy about?

- What is **philosophy** about? And how is philosophy such a natural thing to do that you're probably already doing it without knowing it?
- More than anything else, philosophy is *thinking*. The main instrument that philosophers use in conducting their investigations is the human mind.
- They don't try to solve philosophical problems by conducting scientific, empirical research. They think. And so do you. You think just because you're human.

Of course philosophers don't just think about whatever crosses their minds. They think about *life's most basic questions*:

- What is the purpose of life?**
- How do we know the difference between right and wrong?**
- Are our actions free or determined?**

But who doesn't think about some very basic questions every now and then? You may not make a career out of it, but you have done it. You can't be human without doing it sometimes.

Philosophers also try to come up with answers to these questions, to explain them to other people, and to defend them against criticism and opposing answers. And you surely had done some of that.

Philosophy even tries to get something positive out of certainty, confusion and argument. If disagreeing philosophers can't prove which answer is right, they believe that discussion can still produce a greater understanding of the issues at stake. And you probably had that experience as well

Philosophy is an Activity, Not Content

- **Note in particular that philosophy is an activity as philosophy is active, not passive. It's a way of thinking, something you do, a skill you get better at as you practice it and it is not only a body of facts that you memorize.**
- **The good news is that once you get the hang of it, philosophical thinking expands your ability to see things as it also encourages you to think independently. You can entertain all kinds of ideas or theories about an issue then make up your own mind.**
- **Moreover, philosophers are not “authorities” they are only as good as their arguments as if their arguments are not convincing then forget about these arguments as the ancient Greek thinker Socrates may have been a great philosopher but that doesn't mean that what he said is true...he still must convince you.**

The Basic and Most Fundamental Issues:

Because the subject of philosophy is the “basic issues” of life, it’s not surprising that we encounter a wide range of issues when we study philosophy.

Fortunately philosophers are very logical so philosophy has been divided into several branches each devoted to different but still basic questions.

What are these issues and what are the parts of philosophy?

1- Reality:

- **What's the most elementary thing you can say about yourself? That you're tall? Short? White? Black? That you are male or female?**
- **Simpler than that. That you are human? Still simpler. Just that you are.**
- **What's the most fundamental characteristic of any object you can describe?**
- **Distinguishing characteristics? Simply that this object is real and it exists.**
- **Now we may be hitting bedrock, because the nature of reality or of existence is the most basic issue that we can talk about. So the most fundamental philosophical question then is: what is the nature of reality?**

**What do you mean when we say something is “real”?
what’s the difference between “real” and “not real” or
imaginary”?**

**Does something have to exist physically to be real? Or is
it enough that it exists in our minds? Which are more
real?**

**Chairs and tables that present themselves to our eyes but
will eventually will wear out with time...**

**or the circles and triangles that we see only with our
mind’s eye, which are “perfect” and haven’t changed or
decayed a bit since humans discovered the abstract world
of mathematics thousands of years ago?**

2- Personhood

Think again about yourself and the other things and people in your life.

We have already seen that they have existence in common. They're all alike in that they are real. But what makes each of these entities different from all the others?

One way to account for these differences is through some distinguishing set of properties or characteristics.

How are you different from this e-learning course for example? For openers, you're alive and this e-learning course isn't.

so now we are talking about the defining characteristics that make something be what it is. We're referring to what we call the "nature" or "essence of a thing".

To narrow this down, let's focus just on human nature. What are the very basic characteristics of human beings? We're alive, but then so are all nonhuman animals...so we need something more specific.

What in our life sets us apart from other living beings? Probably that each of us is a "person". This brings us to a point where we can frame another basic philosophical question: what is the essence of the special property personhood?

What does it mean to be a "person"? To answer this question try using yourself as an example and contrast your kind of life with that of plants and animals. Notice that you have a particular kind of self-awareness and high intellectual abilities. You can communicate with other people and you can control your own actions.

But are all humans "persons"? Fetuses don't have any of these characteristics, so some thinkers argue that they are not "persons" in their own right. But then infants cannot do most of these things either and most of us recognize them as "persons". Furthermore, must a "person" be "human"? How about other animals?

Some chimpanzees have learned sign language. Some people think that dolphins may be as intelligent as humans. And many individuals claim they've encounters with intelligent beings from another planet.

None of these entities are human, but they seem to have many characteristics and abilities that humans do. Should we think of them as "persons"?

3- Free Will

Consider another basic aspect of life such as think about the most basic fundamental things you can say about yourself such as you exist...you're alive...you're a person.

Part of you being a person means that you can control your actions; that is your deeds are not merely automatic products of instinct...you have what philosophers say *free will*.

But now think about it as sure we all feel free...yet isn't our choices are influenced by our upbringing, the values we're taught, the norms provided by our culture?

Perhaps some of our behavior is determined by our genetic makeup...what about the impact of our worst irrational fears? What about the power of the unconscious mind?

Perhaps you believe that God has people's lives all planned out; perhaps you believe in fate. And if the future of our lives is already determined so what room would be left for our choices? These problems lead us to yet another basic philosophical question: how "free" are we?

4- Knowledge

- Think back for a moment to our discussion of what makes a person. Surely one of the most important characteristics a person has is intelligence.
- A person can think and know things. Intellectual activity is such a basic part of human life that our species is named for this ability --- *Homo sapiens* (“thinking man”).
- This brings us to another philosophical issue: what is involved in knowing something?
- At first this might look like a simple question. We say we know something when we have acceptable reasons or proof for what we claim. I can say that I know that my computer is sitting in front of me because I can see it.
- I also know that the great English humanist Sir Thomas More died in 1535 because I’ve done research on this for years, and that is what the historical records show. I even know that the sum of the interior angles of every triangle that ever has or ever exist is 180 degrees.

Have I measured them all? Not very likely so how do I know it? Because this in fact the definition of a triangle.

Each of these three examples involves knowledge, but each example is different. I claim to know something in each case, but the reasons I give keep me changing.

As my first claim is based on direct sense experience. The second involves secondhand evidence or hearsay, ultimately based on someone else's firsthand experience. And the third doesn't rely on sense experience at all.

If they are all so different, do all these examples involve knowledge? The same kind of knowledge? As you see questions about knowledge can be quite complicated.

So far our questions have focused mainly inward, on what it means to be a living person from the inside. When we turn our attention outward, however we encounter different kinds of philosophical questions.

5- God, Life After Death and the Purpose of Life

- What do we see when we look outside ourselves? We and others of our kind, exist but we're not alone. Plants and other animals also exist.
- So does the enormous universe that surrounds us. And if we reflect on its complexity and majesty, we've got to ask ourselves, "Where did it all come from?"
- We didn't create our universe so how did it get here? Is it the result of natural processes operating over billions or trillions of years? Or did someone create it?
- Are we alone in this universe, or is there is *God* as well? Not surprisingly, proofs for the existence of God have been debated by philosophers for thousands of years.

The question of God's existence raises other fundamental questions. For example, if there is a spiritual dimension to reality, does that mean that we have "souls" or "spirits" that continue to exist after our bodies wear out? If there is a life after our death?

For that matter, have we lived other lives before this one? More people on this planet believe in reincarnation than reject the idea. Who is right?

And the idea of an afterlife or of other lives leads us to wonder what the purpose of our lives is? Is it a test of some sort? If so, what counts as "passing"?

Making lot of money and becoming rich and famous? Doing some kind of important work? Devoting our lives to helping people less fortunate than ourselves? Growing personally or spiritually as much as possible?

Questions of the ultimate purpose of life then are also are common grist for the philosopher's mill.

So far we've identified the most basic questions of philosophy:

What is the nature of reality?

What is a person?

How free are we?

What can we "know" and how can we know it?

Is there is a God?

What is the purpose of life?

These are the most fundamental, theoretical questions we ask in philosophy...