



What is Philosophy, Anyway?

Gardner Fair

I. Defining Philosophy

The best place to start in our attempt to define philosophy is with the etymology of the word itself. Most people are aware that the term is derived from two Greek words: philo (love) and sophia (wisdom). Philosophy, then, literally means “the love of wisdom.” We each have a sense of what love means, but what exactly is wisdom? Although there are many different ideas about what wisdom is, we can define it as “the proper understanding about the nature of reality.” The wise person, then, has a correct understand about his own nature, the nature of the universe and the nature of God (if, in fact, God actually exists). This understanding at the same time informs and influences the way he lives his life. A person is wise, in other words, if he has a correct understanding about how things actually are and lives his life accordingly.

Philosophy has also been connected with the quest for the truth. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras, for example, maintained that unlike the other human beings who are concerned with the hustle and bustle of life, “the philosopher seeks for truth.” The aim of philosophy, however, is not this truth or that truth, my truth or your truth, but “The Truth”. The truth that philosophy searches for is a truth that applies to all people at all times. This truth has been referred to as a transcendent truth, because it is not restricted to individual perceptions of what is true or false.

So now we know that philosophy involves a quest for the truth for the sake of wisdom. The next question we have to ask is how do we acquire this truth. Socrates, the father of western philosophy, once said: “The greatest good for human beings is daily to discuss virtue, and all those other things about which you hear me conversing and examining myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living.” According to Socrates, philosophy involves a critical examination of reality that is characterized by rational inquiry. A rational form of inquiry is one that is based exclusively on sound arguments and not on opinions, feelings or beliefs. Of course, there is nothing wrong with having opinions, feeling or beliefs about important matters, but the discipline of philosophy asks us to be able to justify why we hold these opinions, feelings or beliefs. If we want to be engaged in philosophical discourse, therefore, we need to support our views using logic rather than emotions.

Based upon what has been described above, our working definition of philosophy will look something like the following:

PHILOSOPHY = “A critical examination of reality characterized by rational inquiry that aims at the Truth for the sake of attaining wisdom.”

II. What Philosophy is Not

One important thing to consider when defining philosophy is to consider what philosophy is not. Most students come to philosophy when studying some natural or social scientific discipline like biology, nursing, economics, or psychology. These students may assume that philosophy is like science, and get frustrated when they are given no standard textbook in philosophy that clearly lists out important facts and formulas to memorize as well as exercises with clear cut problems and

answers to complete. But philosophy is not science. Both philosophy and science are focused on good reasoning, but scientific reasoning is grounded in mathematical precision and experimental isolation of variables while philosophical reasoning is more based in expansive, one-on-one dialogue and argument.

Philosophy also should be distinguished from religion. Just how to distinguish as well as relate reason with faith or philosophy with religion is a big controversy. If the relation is one of dependence, does philosophy ultimately depend on religious revelation to guide it, or conversely, is religious faith just a preliminary position for the layman while those who really know the truth are able to ground their beliefs philosophically? These are issues to be taken up in the philosophy of religion as well as in theology.

Finally, it is also important to clearly distinguish philosophy from art. To experience art is to be struck intuitively by something that can hardly be reduced to a cold and clear cut description. Intuition and feeling, privacy and individuality, spontaneity and creativity are primary in any artistic (or what is called “aesthetic”) experience. Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, also has an important emotional and intuitive side. But philosophy is ultimately based on dialogical reasoning and not on private, ineffable experience.

So philosophy is not science, religion, or art. It is its own thing.

II. Branches of Philosophy

The discipline of philosophy has traditionally been broken into five main branches or areas of study:

1. Metaphysics (or ontology) is the study of reality. Some of the questions that Metaphysics deals with are: (1) What is ultimate reality? (2) Is it one thing or is it many different things? (3) Can reality be grasped by the senses or is it transcendent? (3) What is the mind and what is its relation to the body?
2. Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Among the questions that Epistemology deals with are: (1) What is knowledge? (2) Is knowledge acquired exclusively through the senses or by some other means? (3) How do we know that what we perceive through our senses is correct?
3. Ethics is the study of right and wrong in human action. Some of the questions treated by the field of Ethics are: (1) What is right? (2) Are there any objective standards of right and wrong? (3) Are moral values absolute or relative?
4. Aesthetics is the study of beauty. Among the questions Aesthetics deals with are: (1) What makes a thing beautiful? (2) Are there any objective standards of beauty?
5. Logic is the study of the principles of right reasoning. Logic is the basic tool that philosophers use to investigate reality. Among the questions raised by Logic are: (1) What makes an argument valid or invalid (2) What is a sound argument?

These are the main branches of philosophy. Throughout its history, however, the discipline of philosophy has also been used as a tool to investigate other domains of life. For example:

- philosophy of God
- philosophy of religion
- political philosophy
- social philosophy
- philosophy of science
- philosophy of law

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