

# What Is This About?: Philosophy's Aims and Methods

## 1. The Main Aims and Methods of Philosophy

Although the word “philosophy” seems to have been coined in Greece approximately 2,500 years ago, it still largely refers to the same activity today as it did then—an activity devoted to the pursuit of truth, wherever it takes us, no matter what our expectations, preferences, or prejudices are. The word “philosophy” derives from the combination of the Greek word *philo*, meaning “love or pursuit,” and the word *sophia*, meaning “wisdom or knowledge.” When we acquire wisdom or knowledge, we believe ourselves to have grasped something true. So, philosophy is, above all, an activity of inquiry that aims at the truth.

But the fact that philosophy is first of all the pursuit of the truth must not be confused with the idea that philosophers ever think they have found “The Truth,” or that philosophers believe they will one day accomplish the complete grasp of some transcendent, objective standpoint from which “The Truth” for all people, of all times, everywhere will be known. The philosophical aim to grasp the truth is more complex than this, because reality is complex. In a sense, the truth is an aim for philosophers that philosophers do not expect to ever accomplish, but that we are constantly making progress toward. Such a paradoxical pursuit makes sense when you consider that most things worth inquiring about in life are complicated. Because this is so, to know something well, is to be aware of its complexities, nuances, paradoxes, and subtleties. Most of the time we tend to forget this because we spend our time trying to make things seem simpler and neater than they really are. Most of the time our studies are geared toward the immediate practical needs of life. As a result, they intend to familiarize us with the assumptions and settled knowledge of a particular area of investigation, and as a matter of course must take a lot of these things for granted.

Because the philosophical pursuit of truth aims to recover and appreciate the complexity of things, philosophy is one of the few fields of study whose primary intentions include seriously questioning what we take for granted. This makes it unlike most other studies, where we start out knowing relatively little about the subject matter and end up knowing relatively more. In philosophy, in addition to knowing more, the *quality*, (as well as the *quantity*), of what we know improves. When we know something after careful scrutiny we know it better than at an earlier time when we may have taken our knowledge of it more-or-less for granted.

As you might have guessed, this aspect of philosophy leads to another interesting paradox, this one associated with its basic *methods*: philosophical activity leads to both a greater understanding of the things philosophers think and talk about, and also a deeper sense of puzzlement and more questions about them. As philosophers come up with answers to the questions they ask, every new answer

increases the number and depth of questions we have. But this somewhat annoying fact that philosophy continues to generate more and more questions instead of final answers is not a sign that philosophy is somehow “broken.” Actually, the reverse is true: philosophy is failing when it stops generating new, deeper questions. When someone imagines the world is simple enough for them to have figured everything out and answered all the important questions they are being unphilosophical. The central method of philosophy is therefore persistent questioning, in a manner that resists accepting any one set of answers as final and complete. This resistance isn’t due to skepticism that truth is a worthy overarching goal—truth is the only real goal of philosophy. Instead, it reflects a realistic appreciation of the complexity of things, and of the historical and conceptual limitations on human knowledge.

Raising meaningful and illuminating questions is a central feature of philosophy’s method.<sup>1</sup> But there are different levels and types of questions that philosophers ask. Some are the “answer-resistant” kind. More than most other fields of study, philosophy is associated with these “deep issues” and so-called “big questions,” like, “What is the meaning of life?”; “What does it mean to exist?”; “What is justice?”; etc. Many philosophical writings, whether written by professionals who call themselves “philosophers” or by novelists, playwrights, or poets, are meant to help us think about such issues in ways that bring us closer to understanding their subtleties—not because we expect to finally answer them. But, philosophers also deal with questions that are not so big and intractable as the “answer-resistant” kind. Many work on particular, focused questions in the sciences, health care, the arts, sports, and other fields, helping to illuminate and clarify the main issues, principles, problems, and concepts that organize these fields. Ultimately, both types of philosophical questions are intended to give rise to a more subtle, precise, and interesting sense of what is going on in the area of human experience with which they are concerned.

Since the subject-matter of philosophy ranges across all human experience, the field is commonly divided into a number of branches. Although these branches can seem like self-contained areas of philosophical scrutiny, they all depend on one another and are intertwined in important ways. The four major branches of western philosophy are Metaphysics, Epistemology, Aesthetics, and Ethics. They are usually distinguished from one another according to what their questions mainly focus on: *Metaphysics* is the branch of philosophy that focuses mainly on questions about existence and being and the nature of things. *Epistemology* is the branch that focuses on questions about the nature and scope of knowledge. *Aesthetics* is concerned with the concept of beauty and the nature of art. *Ethics* (also called morality)

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<sup>1</sup> This sense of “philosophy” as an activity in pursuit of truth that involves constant questioning that I am describing here is different from the common use of the word as a synonym for “a particular doctrine or approach.” So, for example, when Miami Heat Coach Pat Riley talks about his “defensive basketball philosophy,” or when a management guru talks about her “management philosophy,” what they refer to is simply the particular views they hold on each subject. But neither one is necessarily thinking about their field of expertise in a “philosophical” way. To have a “philosophy of defensive basketball” or a “philosophy of business” is just to have some beliefs about how things should be done in those fields. One might hold such views in a rational, self-critical, “philosophical” way. But very often people hold on to a set of ideas they might call a “philosophy” in a decidedly irrational and unphilosophical way. If one holds a view dogmatically, one no longer cares to think about whether it might be untrue or incomplete. That is the essence of holding a view *unphilosophically*. The everyday sense of the word “philosophy” to refer to a set of doctrines or an approach to something is separate from the sense intended by philosophers.

most fundamentally deals with questions about the goodness of ends (or aims) and the rightness of our actions (means).

In each of these fields, through persistent questioning, philosophers are trying to illuminate and examine all the evidence that pertains to what it is they are asking about, so we can overcome entrenched assumptions and beliefs that might be unreasonable or wrong. Hence, the final thing to note about philosophical methods—they involve the use of reason and rationality. “Reason,” “reasoning,” “reasonableness,” “rationality,” and related terms are used in numerous ways and have shades of meaning in different contexts. But the meaning shared by all of them involves a very basic human activity. Essentially, reasoning is the activity of forming beliefs and assessing claims based on evidence. Holding beliefs rationally means having evidence for them and keeping that evidence open to scrutiny and criticism. By identifying the evidence for your beliefs, you make them available for reflection and criticism. A person is reasonable if he or she is willing to find out if their opinions stand up to such scrutiny. This involves allowing evidence to be assessed by others, and agreeing to accept the outcome of fair evaluation and assessment.

By contrast, opinions or beliefs that are held without concern for what the evidence indicates are called biased opinions. One is not biased just because one has an opinion, but because one’s opinion is irrationally maintained. A position is biased if it is held in such a manner so as to be impervious to reasonable evidence to the contrary. Bias can happen when a person insists that something is true in the face of evidence that would lead a reasonable person to question it. This is considered irrational because it shows that someone really doesn’t care what the evidence suggests.

## **2. Types of Reasoning and Styles of Philosophy**

It is important in thinking about what it means to be rational to recognize that there are different types of evidence appropriate to being reasonable depending on the type of issue we are looking at. One type of evidence is objective, having to do with empirical, quantifiable, and formal kinds of issues. Objective evidence is rational to look for when considering issues that do not depend on personal attitudes, feelings, points of view, perspectives, and interpretations, like the questions we normally think of as arising in the natural sciences and math. Mathematical equations work and planes fly for reasons that have nothing to do with anyone’s feelings or perspectives. Planes fly because of objective principles that hold for objects in space and time regardless of the perspectives, points of view, and feelings of the persons involved. It’s irrational to think about such things subjectively.

But, rationality isn’t always about being objective. This is because many of the most urgent and important issues people face in life simply cannot be decided or understood in a purely objective manner. Subjective evidence is the kind of evidence involved in being rational about issues that involve people’s perspectives, interpretations, feelings, and points-of-view. Such issues cannot be reduced to purely objective, formal, or quantifiable terms and decided once and for all. Some things are reasonable from

some perspectives but not others. If you have ever found yourself trying to explain to a friend why something that “makes sense” for him or her doesn’t also make sense for you, then you are familiar with this common situation.

The subjective type of evidence is also particularly important in trying to understand ethical and political issues, where the perspectives and points of view of persons and groups are usually central to the question. How a person or group understands and feels about the morality of some act or set of arrangements is important evidence to consider in making a reasonable determination about what the right thing to do might be. Economic arrangements that can reasonably seem to make good sense from the perspectives of some, can also and at the same time make no sense at all from the standpoint of others who are not or do not feel like they are sufficiently benefited by them.

Some things people have questions about are more objective and some are more subjective, and the types of evidence we can rely on to answer these different kinds of questions differ accordingly. Likewise, the aims and methods of different groups of philosophers reflect a range from the more scientific and objective to the more humanistic and subjective. Philosophers whose main interests are human subjectivity and the forms of writing and artistic production and performance that is known to the arts and humanities are usually referred to as “Continental” or “Humanistic Philosophers,” since this style of philosophy has been the most popular one in Europe during the last century. Those whose interests are more scientific and who have tended to deal with issues that arise in the sciences, mathematics, and logic are known as “Analytic Philosophers,” in recognition of the large role that linguistic and logical analysis have played in the style of philosophy most popular in the USA and England during most of the Twentieth Century. Although barriers between these two communities of philosophers have been breaking down in recent decades, it is still possible to find more-or-less distinct approaches and dialogues in the various areas and sub-fields of philosophy.

### **3. Argument: The Basic Unit of Philosophical Activity**

But whether they are more interested in scientific or humanistic subjects, all philosophers ultimately base their activity on the use of argument. The concept of an argument is closely connected to philosophy. The sense of argument we intend unless otherwise noted is captured in a simple definition that can be worded in different ways: An argument is an attempt to answer a specific question in a rational manner by appealing to evidence. Another way to say this is that an argument is an attempt to provide evidence in support of an answer to a specific question. Thus, an argument is not merely a statement or assertion, or a group of statements or assertions. It is not merely a report, description, or an uncontroversial explanation. And although the word “argument” is often associated with disagreement or dispute, that is not the main meaning intended in philosophy or critical reasoning. To illustrate this, if I offer you my argument for my position, I have presented the reasoning that I believe supports it. It could be that you agree completely with my reasoning and with my conclusion. In this case, each of us has an

argument and there is no dispute. Or, it could be that you agree with me completely about the conclusion, but have further evidence to support it that I am not aware of. This would mean we now have two arguments in support of the same conclusion about which we agree. But, in this case, we have two different arguments and still no dispute!

An argument is an intellectual process in which a claim or proposition is supported in response to some question on the basis of some evidence. Arguments are sets of premises supporting opinions. If you are a reasonable person, you are a person who tends to hold opinions and beliefs on the basis of evidence that is the best available. In other words, if you are a reasonable person you regard it as important to have some evidence for the beliefs you hold, at least on issues for which there is evidence available.

In everyday speech and most writing people aren't always so clear and direct about getting to their point as they could be. There are many reasons for this. Writers and speakers are often pursuing many kinds of aims simultaneously. They may want to convince us of something, but they may also seek to spur us to action or inspire us. They may also be trying to hide something from us, or to emphasize something in particular. Writers and speakers have many tools at their disposal, both logical and rhetorical, that they can use to make their cases. Logical tools are the ones that focus on getting the listener or reader to understand and grasp the position the author holds. Skill in using logical tools helps us get others to see what is true in a position, on the basis of evidence they already find plausible or true.

Rhetorical tools are also important in making a case, but rhetoric is mainly focused on how language and imagery that appeal to our desires and emotions can be used alongside one's strictly logical case. And rhetorical tools can also be used in ways that are contrary to logic. Thus, rhetoric is commonly associated with the intention to *persuade* rather than the intention to provide a *convincing* logical argument. Although the words are commonly used as if they were synonymous, from a logical standpoint, it is helpful to carefully distinguish effective persuasion from convincing argument. While logic and rhetoric can blend into one another in some contexts, philosophers and logicians focus on the more directly logical part of the wide spectrum of forms of argumentation, which is aimed at *convincing*, not merely *persuading* the listener.

In this sense, an argument has four main elements:

**1. Conclusion** - An argument offers a claim or proposition, with evidence to support it, in answer to a question. This claim or proposition is the author's point and it is known as the conclusion, because it is thought to follow logically from the evidence the arguer is using. The conclusion of an argument is the speaker or writer's answer to an issue or question.

**2. Premises** - The premises are the evidence or support presented and implied by the arguer intended to establish the truth of the conclusion. Often, premises are called "reasons." Test results, statistical data, observations of past experience or history, and eye-witness and expert testimony are commonly offered forms of support for the claims arguers wish to establish.

**3. Question** - The question is the particular open or controversial issue that occasions an argument. It is the specific matter which the arguer is responding to and trying to resolve by offering a conclusion backed by premises. An argument is offered as an attempt to answer a question as convincingly and conclusively as possible.

**4. Assumptions** - An assumption is a belief which may be stated or implied in an argument, which the arguer regards as true, but for which he or she has provided no evidence. Premises that are presented in an argument without evidence to support them are assumptions. More interesting are the hidden assumptions that are not stated by the arguer. Some of these, although hidden, are beliefs the arguer must hold in order for their argument to make any sense at all. These *foundational assumptions* can be thought of as the argument's basic, essential, underlying belief structure. Arguments always have some foundational assumptions which are necessary to support their entire structure. If these foundational assumptions are weak or false, any argument built upon them will be compromised.

Finally, an argument also has a kind of "glue" that holds it together in a logically coherent way. This is the structuring principle of the argument, known as its *inference*. Actually, the inference is something the argument makes your mind do! It is the mental action you make when you recognize that a conclusion follows from some specific premises. The inference is the movement of the mind by which it is compelled to see that a conclusion is implied by some premises. For example, look at the two premises marked (1) and (2) below. What would you infer if you heard someone make these two claims? What follows from them?

(1) All sea-going creatures with fins are fish. (2) Whales are sea-going creatures with fins.

When you read these two propositions, something spontaneously clicks in your head! From these two premises you automatically draw the conclusion that, "Hmmm, if these claims are true, then it follows that, (3), whales must be fish." This movement is what is meant by the term "inference," and getting you to make it is what the argument's author intends to accomplish. These premises imply that "whales are fish," and when you grasp that this follows from these premises, you are inferring what the arguer implies.

Now, you are no doubt also observing that this particular argument is false! Whales are not fish, they are mammals! So, an argument does not have to be good in order for it to be an argument! This argument, in fact, is an example of a valid deductive argument, since, if its premises were true it would necessarily follow that, "whales are fish." Even though this conclusion is false, in other words, it is implied by these premises, as your mind correctly infers. But we happen to know that one of the premises is actually not true. Hence, although there is a valid formal inference here, this is an unsound argument.

This odd paradox is one of many that the study of logic allows us to recognize concerning the complexities of reasoning and argumentation. One of the most important distinctions in logic is that

between deductive and inductive types. Deductive logic deals with formal inferences like the one in the fishy argument above. In a deductive argument, if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true. Inductive logic, by contrast, is concerned with inferences that are based on experiential evidence and generalization. They do not follow formal patterns of reasoning, and their conclusions are at their very best only more-or-less probable. Inductive logic pertains to a great deal of the reasoning involved in the sciences and in everyday experience.

For our purposes, and as we read our philosophical writings and have our conversations about them in this class, learn to direct your attention to the question of what the writer or speaker's argument is, before thinking about whether you agree or disagree with their conclusion. It is one thing to note that you believe a particular conclusion to be false. It is much more interesting and productive in the pursuit of truth to be able to show *why* the evidence offered for it doesn't support it.