

Introduction to Philosophy



Prof. Steven Levine – Introduction to Philosophy – Lecture 1

What is Philosophy?

The term 'philosophy' comes from the Greek: *Philos* (love) + *Sophia* (wisdom).

But what is wisdom? Two different answers:

- To be wise is to *know how to live*. A person is wise when they know what's important, when they have good judgment, are equitable, have insight into how things work, keep things in perspective, etc.
- To be wise is to have systematic insight into the most basic principles and laws which govern reality in all of its forms.

Two Overall Views of Philosophy

Philosophy as a Way of Life

Philosophy is a reflective practice which helps us live the proper way. It is a component of one's life-path.

Example: Buddhism is primarily a spiritual path to overcome suffering, but this path involves philosophy: one must *understand* that desire cannot be fulfilled, that reality is in some sense illusory, etc. to properly take the path to enlightenment.

Philosophy as Science

Philosophy is *science*: It tries to arrive at an objective, systematic, and unified body of knowledge about the world.

It aims at getting *disinterested* knowledge of the way things are.

Much of Western philosophy, and especially Modern philosophy, is understood in this way.

What Philosophy Isn't

Religion

Like religion philosophy asks questions about the most fundamental things: God, free-will, morality, time, eternity, etc.

But it does not answer these questions by taking recourse to tradition or to revealed texts. Rather, it looks to *human reason*.

Empirical Science

Philosophy aims at getting knowledge (and being science), but it does not gain knowledge primarily by observing the empirical world or through experiment.

Rather, philosophy is reflective, theoretical, and rational, usually proceeding through *argument* and *reason-giving*.

The Object of Philosophy

The special sciences, for example, physics, biology, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, history, literary studies, are each concerned with understanding a *specific domain of objects*: physical things, living things, society, the economy, politics, etc.

Philosophy, in contrast, *has no domain of objects that is its own*.

So what is it concerned with?

- 1) The *most general concepts* of things that are used in everyday life and in the sciences.
- 2) How the concepts of everyday life and the special sciences *hang together*.

General Concepts

Philosophy is concerned with examining concepts and questions that because of their generality do not belong to any one science. Think of the concepts of cause or time. These concepts do not belong to any one science. The concept of cause and time are used by physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, political science, history, literary studies, as well as in everyday life.

When an inquirer in any of these fields, or in everyday life, stops *using* the concept of cause or time, and starts *reflecting on what causation or time is in itself*, they have started to ask *philosophical questions* about these concepts.

Reflection

We *reflect* on our concepts rather than simply *use* them when they no longer 'work', when we no longer clearly understand them.

- Ask yourself about the meaning of time or justice? You use these terms understandingly all the time, yet when asked to define them, its very hard.
- This shows that in some sense *we don't really understand what we are saying*, we don't really understand the concepts that we are using.
- Philosophy is a process by which we come to try to understand clearly what we mean by what we say, and in so doing come to understand how things are.

How Things Hang Together

Wilfrid Sellars, a 20th century philosopher, once said:
“The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”

This explanation of how things hang together must be:

- 1) General
- 2) Systematic
- 3) Justified and Grounded

This is what makes a philosophical account of something *rational*.

Different Periods of Western Philosophy

There are three major periods of Western philosophy:

1) Ancient philosophy (Greek and Roman Philosophy) 600 BC – 450 AD

2) Medieval Philosophy (Christian, Jewish and Islamic Philosophy) 500 AD – 1500 AD

3) Modern Philosophy (Philosophy in light of the scientific revolution) 1500 AD – The present

Some Major Philosophers

Ancient/Medieval

Thales

Socrates b. 470 B.C.

Plato b. 428 B. C.

Aristotle b. 384 B. C.

Plotinus

Cicero

Augustine b. 354 A.D.

St. Thomas b. 1225 A.D.

Maimonides

Averroes

Duns Scotus

William of Occam

Modern

Descartes b. 1596

Hobbes

Locke

Spinoza

Hume

Kant b.1724

Hegel

Marx

Nietzsche

James

20th Century

Frege

Russell

Husserl

Heidegger

Sartre

Merleau-Ponty

Wittgenstein

Foucault

Derrida

Habermas

Kripke

Main Areas of Philosophy

Concerned with **Truth** (*with what is the case*):

- Metaphysics
- Epistemology (Theory of knowledge)
- Logic
- Philosophy of Mind

Concerned with **Goodness or Rightness** (*with how one ought to live as an individual and as a member of a community*):

- Ethics
- Political philosophy

Concerned with **Beauty**:

- Aesthetics