What is Philosophy?

I love philosophy! It’s an activity that anyone can enjoy, without special tools or training (although, of course, tools and training can help us to do philosophy better and to get more out of it). It’s the exciting examination of living questions like "How do I know what I should believe?", "Does God exist?", and "What does it mean to be a good person?" And, most of all, it’s the process of exploring our own beliefs, playing with them a little, and modifying them if we want to.

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), one of the most important philosophers of the 20th Century, wrote that philosophy "is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason..." (Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, p. xiii.)

I like this understanding of philosophy, because it effectively illuminates philosophy’s subject matter and methodology. Let’s take a look at both.

The Subject Matter of Philosophy

As we’ve seen, Russell wrote that philosophy "is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason..."

In giving this account, Russell distinguished between science and philosophy, a distinction that I think is all to the good, even though my thoughts about the nature of the difference between science and philosophy are not quite the same as Russell’s.

In particular, Russell implies that scientific questions differ from philosophical questions because we have definite answers to scientific questions but we don’t have definite answers to philosophical ones. I prefer to leave that issue open; after all, we can legitimately wonder whether science can give us definite answers, or, for that matter, whether philosophy can’t. Rather, I think that philosophical questions differ from scientific ones in virtue of the way in which we try to go about answering them.
Specifically, science addresses questions that can be answered only by appealing to experience. That's why laboratory work is so important in the sciences. Many questions, like "What is the speed of sound?", can be answered only by looking, listening, and taking measurements. We need to make observations and run experiments. We need to answer such questions empirically.

The questions of interest to philosophy, on the other hand, are quite different. Such questions, like "Does God exist?", and "Does science give us the best picture of the world?", seem to resist empirical solution. If these questions have answers at all, the answers can't be discovered by working in the lab. Philosophy, then, unlike science, considers questions that can't be answered empirically. We may, if we wish, call these questions “philosophical questions" and we can call answers to philosophical questions “philosophical claims.”

Sometimes it's useful to think about philosophical questions and claims as falling into three main groups that comprise the major subdisciplines of philosophy.

- Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that considers questions related to knowledge, questions like "What, if anything, can we know for certain?" and "What makes some beliefs better than others?"

- Metaphysics addresses questions concerning the ultimate nature of reality, like "Does God exist?" and “Do we have free will?"

- Value Theory is the branch of philosophy that addresses questions about our value judgments, like “Are moral judgments objectively true or false, or are they only a matter of opinion?” and "Does a convincing forgery have the same artistic merit as the original?"

We'll be taking a look at each of these subdisciplines as we explore philosophy.

Stop and Think:

Do you think it’s important to consider questions of the sort that philosophy asks? Why or why not?

Someone probably disagrees with you. What reasons might such a person give for the contrary position? How would you respond?

The Method of Philosophy

If philosophy concerns itself with questions that can’t be answered empirically, how does it approach, or try to go about answering, these questions?

Russell states that philosophy "appeals to human reason," and I agree. Philosophy would have you formulate your beliefs about knowledge, reality, ethics, or anything else,
by thinking rationally instead of blindly adopting the beliefs of those around you. Virtually everyone who is trained in philosophy has some background in logic or critical thinking.

Not all philosophers value logic equally, of course. (Since philosophers call everything into question, they hardly ever agree about anything.) Enthusiasm for logic characterizes analytic philosophy, but is not uniformly shared by philosophers working in the Continental tradition. I, however, am an analytic philosopher by training and inclination, and so I will say that philosophy is the activity of considering questions that can't be answered empirically and addressing them by thinking rationally.

This is an admittedly biased perspective on the subject, but it’s not uncommon and it will serve as a framework for our philosophical explorations. As a definition of philosophy, it has at least three important things going for it. It stresses that philosophy is an activity — something we do, not something we watch being done and not a body of knowledge to be assimilated. It points us to the sorts of questions that philosophy considers, enabling us to recognize a philosophical question when we see it. And it notes the way in which (at least one major school of) philosophy goes about answering these philosophical questions.

Stop and Think:

Thinking rationally is one way to address questions that can't be answered empirically. In what other ways can these questions be addressed?

Is one of these ways usually best? Why or why not?

Why do Philosophy?

Although I think that philosophy is and should be enjoyable and absorbing most of the time, I recognize that it can be emotionally draining and mentally taxing to rigorously tackle the sort of issues that philosophy considers. No matter what your preconceptions are, philosophy will question them. And philosophy will ask you to think about things in a clearer and more careful way than is normally required of you. Philosophy, in short, can be challenging in every sense of the world. Why, then, should you bother with it?

Philosophy is Fun

When asked about the value of philosophy, my first thought is always about how much fun it can be. Grappling with big questions, like the possibility of knowledge, the existence of God, and the nature of morality, is exhilarating. (Of course, it might not be exhilarating if you're worried about a grade, but nothing is exhilarating if you're worried about a grade.) Furthermore, you don't need to know a lot to do philosophy. You can start where you are, and learn more as you go. And you can do philosophy any time, alone or with others, at your desk or while brushing your teeth, for free! All of this makes philosophy one of best forms of entertainment around!
Philosophy is Good for You

And not only is philosophy fun – it’s good for you! You can expect a course in philosophy to:

1) develop your thinking skills by
   a) helping you to think both concretely and abstractly,
   b) deepening your ability to contemplate complex ideas and trains of thought,
   c) enabling you to feel more comfortable with uncertainty,
   d) making it easier for you to analyze and evaluate arguments advanced by others, and
   e) improving your ability to support your own positions by formulating arguments in their defense

2) develop your communication skills by
   a) sharpening your ability to read difficult material,
   b) sharpening your ability to follow difficult material when it’s expressed orally, and
   c) honing your ability to express complex ideas and trains of thought, both orally and in writing

3) improve your to get along with yourself by
   a) helping you to better understand your beliefs,
   b) helping you to evaluate your beliefs, and
   c) helping you to modify your beliefs, if you choose

4) improve your ability to get along with others by
   a) exposing you to new perspectives, and
   b) strengthening your ability to understand and respect points of view that differ from your own.

Best of all, philosophy can do this all at once, and very efficiently! It’s the intellectual equivalent of cross-training.

Stop and Think:

Which of the expected outcomes of studying philosophy are most interesting and important to you? Do you want to improve your communication skills by developing your ability to read difficult material, for instance? Do you want to improve your ability to get along with others by developing your ability to understand points of view that differ from your own?

Write down the three things that you’d most like to get out of studying philosophy. Keep this list handy and plan to refer to it every couple of weeks to ensure that you’re getting what you want to get from your study of philosophy.
Philosophy builds Worldviews

Philosophy is important for another reason, too. Your general perspective on things, your worldview, is a function of what you think about knowledge (epistemology), reality (metaphysics), and ethics (value theory). As we’ve seen, these are all philosophical topics, so your worldview is essentially a philosophical construction that affects what you think, what you feel, and what you do. Just consider the difference between people who believe that human nature is naturally good, people who believe that human nature is naturally bad, and people who don't believe in human nature at all. These beliefs make a difference to your own life, to the lives of those around you, and to society as a whole, so by helping you to better understand, evaluate, and (if you want) change your worldview, philosophy can affect the world in important ways.

Stop and Think:

What basic epistemological assumptions do you carry about? (For example, do you think that we can know things about the world or not? If so, what are some of the best ways to get this knowledge? If not, what implications does our lack of knowledge have?)

What basic metaphysical assumptions do you carry about? (For example, do you think that the reality is physical through and through, or do you think that there are nonphysical things too, like God or souls? Do you think that people have free will?)

What basic assumptions about ethics do you carry about? (For example, do you think that certain things are objectively good or bad, from a moral point of view, or do you think that it’s all a matter of subjective opinion? If you think that it’s all a matter of opinion, who’s opinion counts the most, the individual's opinion or the opinion of the larger culture? If you think that certain things are objectively good or bad, what makes them good or bad? What accounts for the moral value of an action, if not our opinion about it?)

Philosophy is Unavoidable

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I would maintain that philosophy is fundamentally unavoidable because it can neither be rejected nor effectively ignored.

Think about it. In order to reject philosophy, one would need to argue that anything worth knowing can be known empirically - through science or everyday observation. But this, itself, is a philosophical claim about knowledge and in order to establish it one needs to do philosophy!

So can philosophy be ignored? Perhaps in a way. Some people go from cradle to grave without ever consciously entertaining a philosophical thought. Often they unthinkingly adopt the prevalent philosophy, or worldview, of the surrounding society, absorbing their culture’s beliefs about the relative merits of science and religion, the best form of
government, the nature of gender roles, and so on. And they live their lives accordingly. They act on these philosophical assumptions, but more than that, these philosophical assumptions *act on them*. In virtue of never considering philosophical issues, these people are never in the position to examine, reject, or consciously choose the philosophical assumptions that shape their lives. They can ignore philosophy *only* at the price of letting it lead them around by the nose.

Stop and Think:

Philosophy is always challenging people to defend their beliefs. It will ask you, for instance, why you do or don’t believe in God. Sometimes people say that it isn’t important for people to defend their beliefs because everyone has a right to his or her own opinion. Do you agree that everyone has a right to his or her own opinion? Why or why not?

Regardless of whether or not you agree that everyone has a right to his or her own opinion, can people successfully “opt out” of philosophy by claiming that they do?

Study Tips

Hopefully, you now have a pretty good idea of what philosophy is and you see why it’s worth studying. However, this is all probably very new ground for you still. You may never have had a philosophy class before and you might wonder how you should go about learning it. So let’s take a look at a few study tips before we go any further.

It’s difficult to give study tips that are both useful and informative because most of the best study tips are things that you probably know already. They fall in the category of Generally Good Advice that’s applicable to pretty much every class. Specifically:

1) Go to class *every day*, unless you’re prevented from doing so by illness or emergency.
   - If your professor is boring or your classmates annoying, mentally thank them. They’re giving you the chance to practice showing up and acting interested, and I think that 90% of success in life consists of showing up and acting interested. Seriously.

2) If you can’t come to class every day, contact a classmate to find out what you missed.
   - Toward this end, it’s a good idea to get to know a couple of people in class, if you don’t know some people in class already. Many professors get loads of email, and many of us don’t like to get messages from students asking us what they missed when they weren’t there. It’s not that we don’t want to help. We do. It’s just that we can’t really summarize our classes for everyone who couldn’t make it. So, if at all possible *always* try to get that information from another student first and if you do need to contact your professor explain that your classmate was unable to fill you in on what you missed.
And, while I’m giving general cautionary advice, if you need to check with your professor after missing a class, please don’t say, “Do you do anything?” “Did I miss anything?” or “Did I miss anything important?” These three questions jointly comprise a common pet peeve among professors, who try to do something important in class every day. Instead, ask, “What did I miss?”

3) Do the assignments before coming to class.
   Even if you don’t completely understand the readings, if you read them before coming to class you’ll get more out of the class discussion.

4) Review your notes or the slides after class.
   This will reinforce what was said and done in class, enhancing your comprehension.

5) If you don’t understand something, say so.
   Raise your hand in class if possible because that will allow your instructor to clarify something that’s probably confusing a lot of other people too. If you don’t feel comfortable raising your hand in class, check with a classmate after class or contact your professor. I said earlier that many professors don’t like to be asked to summarize material that a student missed. Almost all professors, however, will be more than happy to help you if you’re confused. So you should feel absolutely free to chat with your professors after class, to email your professors, or stop by their offices during office hours if you want something clarified or explained.

6) Start studying for the exams as early as possible.
   It’s usually better to study for half an hour every day for ten days than to cram for five hours right before the test.

Philosophy, however, is in some respects different than other courses, so there is some Advice for Studying Philosophy in particular. Namely:

1) Understand, Teach, and Understand by Teaching
   Philosophy isn’t about memorizing things; it’s about understanding them. The best way to understand anything is to teach it to someone else - preferably someone who isn’t in class and who hasn’t taken the class before because then you’ll really need to explain things. If you have a friend who’s willing to act as your student this semester, that’s great! If none of your current friends are interested in talking philosophy with you, then trot out that imaginary friend you had in Kindergarten. I’m serious. Explaining something to anyone, even if that person is invisible, will help you to understand it better. I’ve given lots of classes to imaginary students. (By the way, this “teach and learn” approach is a good one to take toward any course that requires higher-level conceptual thought – that asks you to understand rather than memorize.)
2) Understand the question being asked.
   As we’ve seen, philosophy is the activity of addressing questions that can’t be answered empirically. Sometimes the philosophical conversation can get confusing. By always remembering the question that’s under consideration you can keep you from getting lost. And the best way to fully grasp this question is by explaining it to someone who doesn’t already know it.

3) Understand how each position is an answer to that question.
   Just as remembering the question being asked can help you stay on track, understanding how different philosophical positions are answers to that question can help you to fit everything together. And again, the best way to do this is to explain these positions to someone who doesn’t already know them.

4) Understand the reasons, or arguments, given in support of each position.
   Just as philosophy is the activity of answering questions that can’t be resolved empirically, it’s also the process of giving reasons in support of these answers. Understanding the arguments that support positions is, in philosophy, at least as important as understanding the positions themselves. Once more, to understand these arguments, try to explain them to someone who knows less about the subject than you do.

5) Understand the objections to each position.
   Because very little is settled in philosophy, it’s often important to understand the objections that are leveled against positions, in addition to understanding the arguments that are advanced in support of those positions. And yet again, the best way to understand these objections is to explain them to someone else.

We’ve now seen what philosophy is, why we should do it, and how we can go about studying it. We’re ready to start doing philosophy in earnest.