1. What Philosophy Is

What is philosophy?

Many answers have been offered in reply to this question and most are angling at something similar. My favorite answer is that philosophy is all of rational inquiry except for science. Perhaps you think science exhausts inquiry. About a hundred years ago, many philosophers, especially the Logical Positivists, thought there was nothing we could intelligibly inquire into except for scientific matters. But this view is probably not right. What branch of science addresses the question of whether or not science covers all of rational inquiry? If the question strikes you as puzzling, this might be because you already recognize that whether or not science can answer every question is not itself a scientific issue. Questions about the limits of human inquiry and knowledge are philosophical questions.

We can get a better understanding of philosophy by considering what sorts of things other than scientific issues humans might inquire into. Philosophical issues are as diverse and far ranging as those we find in the sciences, but a great many of them fall into one of three big topic areas, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

Metaphysics

Metaphysical issues are concerned with the nature of reality. Traditional metaphysical issues include the existence of God and the nature of human free will (assuming we have any). Here are a few metaphysical questions of interest to contemporary philosophers: What is a thing? How are space and time related? Does the past exist? How about the future? How many dimensions does the world have? Are there any entities beyond physical objects (like numbers, properties, and relations)? If so, how are they related to physical objects? Historically, many philosophers have proposed and defended specific metaphysical positions, often as part of systematic and comprehensive metaphysical views. But attempts to establish systematic metaphysical world views have been notoriously unsuccessful.

Since the 19th century many philosophers and scientists have been understandably suspicious of metaphysics, and it has frequently been dismissed as a waste of time, or worse, as meaningless. But in just the past few decades metaphysics has returned to vitality. As difficult as they are to resolve, metaphysical issues are also difficult to ignore for long. Contemporary analytic metaphysics is typically taken to have more modest aims than definitively settling on the final and complete truth about the underlying nature of reality. A better way to understand metaphysics as it is currently practiced is as aiming at better understanding how various claims about the reality logically hang together or conflict. Metaphysicians analyze metaphysical

puzzles and problems with the goal of better understanding how things could or could not be. Metaphysicians are in the business of exploring the realm of possibility and necessity. They are explorers of logical space.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and justified belief. What is knowledge? Can we have any knowledge at all? Can we have knowledge about the laws of nature, the laws or morality, or the existence of other minds? The view that we can't have knowledge is called skepticism. An extreme form of skepticism denies that we can have any knowledge whatsoever. But we might grant that we can have knowledge about some things and remain skeptics concerning other issues. Many people, for instance, are not skeptics about scientific knowledge, but are skeptics when it comes to knowledge of morality. Later in this course we will entertain some skeptical worries about science and we will consider whether ethics is really in a more precarious position. Some critical attention reveals that scientific knowledge and moral knowledge face many of the same skeptical challenges and share some similar resources in addressing those challenges. Many of the popular reasons for being more skeptical about morality than science turn on philosophical confusions we will address and attempt to clear up.

Even if we lack absolute and certain knowledge of many things, our beliefs about those things might yet be more or less reasonable or more or less likely to be true given the limited evidence we have. Epistemology is also concerned with what it is for a belief to be rationally justified. Even if we can't have certain knowledge of anything (or much), questions about what we ought to believe remain relevant.

Ethics

While epistemology is concerned with what we ought to believe and how we ought to reason, Ethics is concerned with what we ought to do, how we ought to live, and how we ought to organize our communities. Sadly, it comes as a surprise to many new philosophy students that you can reason about such things. Religiously inspired views about morality often take right and wrong to be simply a matter of what is commanded by a divine being. Moral Relativism, perhaps the most popular opinion among people who have rejected faith, simply substitutes the commands of society for the commands of God. Commands are simply to be obeyed, they are not to be inquired into, assessed for reasonableness, or tested against the evidence. Thinking of morality in terms of whose commands are authoritative leaves no room for rational inquiry into how we ought to live, how we ought to treat others, or how we ought to structure our communities. Philosophy, on the other hand, takes seriously the possibility of rational inquiry into these matters. If philosophy has not succeeded in coming up with absolutely certain and definitive answer in ethics, this is in part because philosophers take the answers to moral

questions to be things we need to discover, not simply matters of somebody's say so. The long and difficult history of science should give us some humble recognition of how difficult and frustrating careful inquiry and investigation can be. So we don't know for certain what the laws of morality are. We also don't have a unified field theory in physics. Why expect morality to be any easier?

So we might think of metaphysics as concerned with "What is it?" questions, epistemology as concerned with "How do we know?" questions, and ethics as concerned with "What should we do about it?" questions. Many interesting lines of inquiry cut across these three kinds of questions. The philosophy of science, for instance, is concerned with metaphysical issues about what science is, but also with epistemological questions about how we can know scientific truths. The philosophy of love is similarly concerned with metaphysical questions about what love is. But it also concerned with questions about the value of love that are more ethical in character.

Assorted tangled vines of inquiry branch off from the three major trunks of philosophy, intermingle between them, and ultimately with scientific issues as well. The notion that some branches of human inquiry can proceed entirely independent of others ultimately becomes difficult to sustain. The scientist who neglects philosophy runs the same risk of ignorance as the philosopher who neglects science.

What is the value of philosophy?

Philosophy is a branch of human inquiry and as such it aims at knowledge and understanding. We might expect that the value of philosophy lies in the value of the ends that it seeks, the knowledge and understanding it reveals. But philosophy is rather notorious for failing to establish definitive knowledge on the matters it investigates. I'm not so sure this reputation is well deserved. We do learn much from doing philosophy. Philosophy often clearly reveals why some initially attractive answers to big philosophical questions are deeply problematic, for instance. But granted, philosophy often frustrates our craving for straightforward convictions. In our first reading, Bertrand Russell argues that there is great value in doing philosophy precisely because it frustrates our desire for quick easy answers. In denying us easy answers to big questions and undermining complacent convictions, philosophy liberates us from narrow minded conventional thinking and opens our minds to new possibilities. Philosophy often provides an antidote to prejudice not by settling big questions, but by revealing just how hard it is to settle those questions. It can lead us to question our comfortably complacent conventional opinions.

The Value of Philosophy

Reading: Our first Reading is Chapter 15 of Bertrand Russell's *Problems of Philosophy,* "The Value of Philosophy." The whole book can be found here:

http://www.ditext.com/russell/russell.html. (Follow one of these links and do the reading before continuing with discussion of it below)

We humans are very prone to suffer from a psychological predicament we might call "the security blanket paradox." We know the world is full of hazards, and like passengers after a shipwreck, we tend to latch on to something for a sense of safety. We might cling to a possession, another person, our cherished beliefs, or any combination of these. The American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce speaks of doubt and uncertainty as uncomfortable anxiety-producing states. This would help explain why we tend to cling, even desperately, to beliefs we find comforting. This clinging strategy, however, leads us into a predicament that becomes clear once we notice that having a security blanket just gives us one more thing to worry about. In addition to worrying about our own safety, we now are anxious about our security blanket getting lost or damaged. The asset becomes a liability. The clinging strategy for dealing with uncertainty and fear becomes counterproductive.

While not calling it by this name, Russell describes the intellectual consequences of the security blanket paradox vividly:

> The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his deliberate reason. . . The life of the instinctive man is shut up within the circle of his private interests. . . In such a life there is something feverish and confined, in comparison with which the philosophic life is calm and free. The private world of instinctive interests is a small one, set in the midst of a great and powerful world which must, sooner or later, lay our private world in ruins.

The primary value of philosophy according to Russell is that it loosens the grip of uncritically held opinion and opens the mind to a liberating range of new possibilities to explore.

> The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. . . Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never traveled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.

Here we are faced with a stark choice between the feeling of safety we might derive from clinging to opinions we are accustomed to and the liberation that comes with loosening our grip on these in order to explore new ideas. The paradox of the security blanket should make it clear

what choice we should consider rational. Russell, of course, compellingly affirms choosing the liberty of free and open inquiry.

Must we remain forever uncertain about philosophical matters? Russell does hold that some philosophical questions appear to be unanswerable (at least by us). But he doesn't say this about every philosophical issue. In fact, he gives credit to philosophical successes for the birth of various branches of the sciences. Many of the philosophical questions we care most deeply about, however - like whether our lives are significant, whether there is objective value that transcends our subjective interests - sometimes seem to be unsolvable and so remain perennial philosophical concerns. But we shouldn't be too certain about this either. Russell is hardly the final authority on what in philosophy is or isn't resolvable. Keep in mind that Russell was writing 100 years ago and a lot has happened in philosophy in the mean time (not in small part thanks to Russell's own definitive contributions). Problems that looked unsolvable to the best experts a hundred years ago often look quite solvable by current experts. The sciences are no different in this regard. The structure of DNA would not have been considered knowable fairly recently. That there was such a structure to discover could not even have been conceivable prior to Mendel and Darwin (and here we are only talking 150 years ago).

Further, it is often possible to make real progress in understanding issues even when they can't be definitively settled. We can often rule out many potential answers to philosophical questions even when we can't narrow things down to a single correct answer. And we can learn a great deal about the implications of and challenges for the possible answers that remain.

Even where philosophy can't settle an issue, it's not quite correct to conclude that there is no right answer. When we can't settle an issue this usually just tells us something about our own limitations. There may still be a specific right answer; we just can't tell conclusively what it is. It's easy to appreciate this point with a non-philosophical issue. Perhaps we can't know whether or not there is intelligent life on other planets. But surely there is or there isn't intelligent life on other planets. Similarly, we may never establish that humans do or don't have free will, but it still seems that there must be some fact of the matter. It would be intellectually arrogant of us to think that a question has no right answer just because we aren't able to figure out what that answer is.

Review and Discussion Questions

The first quiz covers this chapter and Bertrand Russell's essay "The Value of Philosophy." You will find a link to the quiz in the course module for this chapter. Watch the course calendar for when to take the quiz. The following questions will help you prepare. Feel free to take these questions up on the discussion board.

On this lecture note:

- Why should we doubt that science covers all of human inquiry?

- What are some metaphysical issues? Some epistemological and ethical issues?
- What problem does the view that morality is simply a matter of the say-so of some authority lead to?

On Russell's "The Value of Philosophy":

- What is the aim of philosophy according to Russell?
- How is philosophy connected to the sciences?
- What value is there in the uncertainty that philosophical inquiry often produces?

On the commentary on Russell:

- Explain the "security blanket" paradox.
- How can understanding of issues be advanced even when definitive knowledge can't be had?
- What's the difference between saying we can't know the answer to some question and saying that there is no truth of the matter?

Finally, consider some of the definitions of philosophy offered by philosophers on the page linked at the opening of the lecture. A number of these would make for good discussion. Here's the link again: http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/04/09/what-is-philosophy/