[*Welcome to the first handout of your* ***Introduction to Philosophy*** *Mooc! This handout is designed to complement the video lecture by giving you a written summary of the key points covered in the videos. You can use it, or not, however you like! In my seminars at the University of Edinburgh I encourage my students to write their thoughts on the material we cover alongside the relevant parts of the handout. Or you might like to simply have it open alongside the videos as you watch them, or to read back over it after watching, to refresh the key points in your mind. However you choose to use it, we hope you enjoy this week's material, and the course!*]

1. What is Philosophy?

Thinking about this question is our mission for this week. I'm going to claim that philosophy is ***the activity of working out the right way of thinking about things***.

Before I start to explain what that means, note that my definition starts by saying that philosophy is an ***activity***. In fact, I think this is a more important point about philosophy than the rest of what I say this week.

- Because philosophy is an activity, **to understand what philosophy is, you need to get stuck in and do it**. You need to start thinking about philosophical problems, and the ways other thinkers have approached them. This is what we'll be doing on the rest of the course. So much of philosophy is learning specific tools and techniques to reason, argue, and express yourself.
- The best way to get a grasp of those tools and techniques, and to get a sense of the questions that interest philosophers, is to work your way through the rest of the course!

1.1 Philosophy and other subjects

So, I claim that philosophy is *the activity of working out the right way of thinking about things.*

However, *all* subjects, not just philosophy, try and think about things in the right way. This is true, but we can distinguish between ***thinking about things*** and ***working out the right way of thinking about things.*** In the second case, you step back from what you're doing, and ask questions about it – what it presupposes, and whether it's the right way to go about things.

- E.g. when doing **physics**, we investigate physical reality by constructing experiments, measuring, formulating theories.
- When doing **philosophy of physics** we might ask: 'What do we mean by "physical reality"?'; 'How do experimental results confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis?', or; 'What distinguishes a good scientific theory from a bad one?'

- When practicing **medicine** we try to heal or treat people according to our current best medical theories.
- When doing **philosophy of medicine**, we might step back and think about whether the concepts our best medical theories employ make sense, or what 'health' and 'sickness' really mean.

This shows us that the relationship between philosophy and other subjects can be blurry – we can be interested in the right way of thinking in lots of different domains; and we're often forced to do philosophy by the challenges or results that other subjects throw up for us.

2. Philosophy: Difficult, Important and Everywhere

2.1 Is Philosophy 'Fundamental'?

It is often claimed (often by philosophers!) that philosophy, or the questions it asks, are in some sense *fundamental.* What might this mean? Is it true?

- A sense in which it's *not* true: There are plenty of questions you can ask, and activities that you can pursue, perfectly legitimately without doing any philosophy.
- A sense in which it *is* true: No matter what sort of questions you're asking, or activities you're pursuing, *further philosophical questions can always arise.*
  - This is because philosophy involves stepping back and examining the presuppositions of what you're doing, or the questions you're asking. What are those presuppositions? Are they the right ones?
  - This is why philosophy, as a subject, is so broad – this 'stepping back' is something we can always do, whatever we're asking or thinking about.

2.2 Is Philosophy Important?

As with the claim that philosophy is *fundamental*, when trying to define philosophy it's often said that the subject, or the questions it asks, have some special *importance*. Is this true?

- Again, there's a sense in which it's clearly *not* – because (as I've suggested) philosophical questions can arise about *anything,* there will be many that are too trivial or boring to bother asking!
- But there are reasons for thinking philosophy, at its best, often *is* important:
  - Most philosophy (or at least, most worthwhile philosophy) aims at *thinking clearly about the things that matter most to us*.
  - Thinking philosophically (for example, stepping back and examining presuppositions) can help us to question or see past dogma or accepted wisdom that may not be the best thing for us to think or believe.

3. Philosophy: How to do it

To repeat, the best way to learn how to do philosophy is to work your way through this course, thinking about the problems and questions that it covers.

But even before doing this, you already have a good idea of how philosophy is done – because trying to think about things in the right way is something we do all the time.

3.1 Should I go to the cinema tonight?

Suppose you're trying to decide whether to go to the cinema tonight. Your decision process will involve:

- ***Looking around for evidence***, either that you should or shouldn't
  - What's on? Have you seen it before? Do you have enough money?
- ***Thinking about what that evidence gives you reason to do*** (or ***to think*** about the question of whether you should go to the cinema)

    - Perhaps you *have* seen that film before – but it was so great that you'd like to see it again; Perhaps you *do* have enough money – but you should really be saving up for something else
- ***Coming to a conclusion about what to do, or to think, on the basis of that evidence***
    - E.g. 'All things considered, I really shouldn't go to the cinema tonight'

Suppose that, in deciding whether or not to go to the cinema tonight, I reason like this:

1. **They have good hot dogs at the cinema**
2. **I like hot dogs**
3. **Therefore I should go to the cinema**

In doing so, I've given a very simple ***argument*** for the ***conclusion*** that I should go to the cinema.

Looking at this, we can see that an argument, in philosophy, is just ***a sequence of evidence and reasoning designed to support a particular conclusion.***

This argument has 2 ***premises*** (labeled '1' and '2', above), as well as its conclusion (labeled '3').

A very important part of doing philosophy is thinking about whether or not particular arguments do a good job of establishing their conclusions. How might we question the above argument?

One way is to question whether the truth of the conclusion follows from the truth of its premises. That is, if the premises are true, does the conclusion **have** to be true? If it does, then we say that the argument is ***valid***.

- In the case of the argument above, it looks like there are lots of cases where the premises could be true, but the conclusion might not be true. The argument is ***invalid.***

Another way is to question the truth of the premises.

- In the above case, this would involve finding out about the hot dogs at the cinema, and whether or not I really like hot dogs.

When an argument is valid with true premises, we say that it is ***sound.***
So an argument can fail to be sound by having one or more false premises, or by being invalid.

3.2 Do we have free will?

Let's think about a slightly more difficult, and perhaps more interesting, argument to assess.
It seems to all of us that we have a lot of freedom as to what we choose to do, or not do. But there are arguments that try to call this into question:

1. **The way the world was in the past controls exactly how it is in the present, and how it will be in the future**
2. **We're part of the world, just like everything else.**
3. **We can't control how things were in the past, or the way the past controls the present and future**
4. **Therefore, we don't control anything that happens in the world, including all the things that we think, say and do.**

It's a lot more difficult to work out whether this argument is a good or a bad one than it was for our first argument – but we assess it in just the same ways:

- Are the premises (1-3) true?

    - E.g. does the past really fix the present and the future? Are we really parts of the world just like everything else?
- Does the truth of the premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion (i.e. is the argument **valid**)?
    - E.g. does 'control' mean the same thing in '1' as it does in '4'? If not, then perhaps what '1' tells us about control doesn't lead to the conclusion in '4'.

It's not part of our task this week to think through the ways of responding to this argument in detail (though you might like to share your ideas about this on the discussion forums).
But note that each of the ways of responding I (very quickly) suggested above has some work attached to it – each of the ways of responding to the argument need explained and defended in much more detail. This sort of work is what we do when we do philosophy.
In trying to come to think about some topic in the right way, we attempt to get the clearest possible understanding of the evidence in favour of our thinking as we do, and the way it supports the conclusions about the topic we arrive at.

3.3 It's not all argument

Though trying to construct and assess arguments in favour of some view or conclusion is a crucial part of philosophy, there is more to the subject than this. Here is a quote (from the philosopher Hilary Putnam) that I think expresses this well:

> "Philosophy needs vision *and* argument [...] there is something disappointing about a philosophical work that contains arguments, however good, which are not inspired by some genuine vision, and something disappointing about a philosophical work that contains a vision, however inspiring, which is unsupported by arguments [...]
>
> Speculation about how things hang together requires [...] the ability to draw out conceptual distinctions and connections, and the ability to argue [...] But speculative views, however interesting or well supported by arguments or insightful, are not all we need. We also need what [the philosopher Myles] Burnyeat called 'vision' – and I take that to mean vision as to how to live our lives, and how to order our societies."

One lesson here is that we should bear in mind the 'big picture' when putting forward or criticizing philosophical arguments

- Sometimes this might involve stepping back and thinking about why a topic is an interesting or useful one to be considering in the first place
- Sometimes this might involve thinking about the *vision* that might have inspired an argument that we're criticizing or evaluating – can thinking about that vision help us to understand an argument better, or perhaps do a better job of expressing what the argument is getting at?

4. Is There a 'Right Way' of Thinking About Things?

I've tried to define philosophy as the activity of working out the right way of thinking about things. And we've just seen that constructing and assessing arguments is an important part of this activity. But **is there** a right way of thinking about things? And if there is, **how do we know that we can get at the right way just by thinking?**

These are really important questions for philosophy. I bring them up not because I think I can answer them (I certainly can't!), but because they emphasize something I already mentioned about philosophical questions – they can arise anywhere, *even in response to the definition of philosophy I've been trying to give*. One motivation for asking these questions might be the thought that there is something suspicious about the notion of a 'right way of thinking' that I've used in my definition – so perhaps my definition *isn't the right way of thinking about philosophy*.

Instead of trying to answer these important questions, I want to finish by quickly considering what two great past philosophers have said about them.

4.1 Hume on the 'right way' of thinking

The great Edinburgh-based philosopher David Hume would have agreed with the skeptical spirit of the above questions – he was pessimistic about the notion of a 'right way' of thinking about things, and even more pessimistic about the idea that such a 'right way' could be something our minds could grasp.

As a good ***empiricist*** philosopher, Hume thought that it was crucial that philosophy stay true to our sensory experience of the world. However, he argued that our experience tells us much less about the world than we usually think. For example:

- ***Causation:*** We never really observe one thing causing another to happen. We might see one billiard ball roll into another, and then see the second billiard ball roll off. But all we really observe are the billiard balls at various times and places.
    - Our experience of one ball **causing** the other to roll off is something extra, over and above the times and places we see the billiard balls occupying.
    - So, for Hume, causation isn't something we observe in the world. It's **something extra** that **our minds add** to the events we observe.
- ***Ourselves:*** We never really observe *ourselves* – we might observe various thoughts, feelings, impressions as they pass through 'our' mind, but we never observe the **single subject** that is supposed to unify, or to have, all these.
    - So, for Hume, the idea of a persisting **self,** over and above the various thoughts and feelings that pass through 'our' minds is **something extra** that **our minds add** to what we really observe.

Do these habits of our minds – to experience the world as if it contained causally connected events; to experience ourselves as more than bundles of impressions and feelings – corresponded to the way things **really are** in the world? In other words, are they the **right ways** of thinking about causation and ourselves?

Hume thought that we couldn't know the answer to these questions – all we can know is that these are the habits our minds **do** have, not whether those habits are the **right** or the **wrong** ones.

This led Hume to the gloomy conclusion that:

> 'The observation of human blindness and weakness is the result of all philosophy, and meets us at every turn, in spite of our endeavours to elude or avoid it.'

4.2 Kant on the 'right way' of thinking

The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant said that these ideas of Hume's awoke him from his dogmatic slumbers. Previously Kant had *assumed* that philosophical thinking could put us in touch with the world, but he now realized he had to *prove* this.

Kant's views are very complicated – but, in a nutshell, he tried to show that the possibility of a world that *didn't* conform to the rules and patterns that our mind imposes on experience was **nonsensical.**

Hume was **right** to point out that philosophical reflection uncovers ways that we **can't avoid** thinking about and experiencing the world – as stretching through space, as unfolding over time, as containing causally connected events.

But he was **wrong** to suggest that these might just be facts about us – arbitrary habits of our minds. Kant tried to show that they were **also** facts about **what it is for a world to be there to think about in the first place**.
If we try to think about a world that *doesn't* conform to the above ways of thinking, we find we can't do it. Perhaps we think we can imagine the bare possibility that the world doesn't conform to these ways of thinking (even if we can't imagine exactly how that would go). But we can understand Kant as suggesting that, if we can do that, we're no longer thinking about **some way *our* world might be.**

Put even more briefly, Kant tried to show that the rules that govern our thought are the same as rules that govern the world, and that we can know this *just by thinking about it*.

So, for Kant, there **is** a right way of thinking about things, and we can arrive at it by the clear and careful use of reason.

4.3 Philosophy and history

We've barely scratched the surface of the complex and interesting ideas of Hume and (particularly) Kant above – but these quick sketches show us that one of the exciting and challenging aspects of philosophy is the way it can bring us into dialogue with great thinkers of the past as we try to clarify our own ideas.

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[*Don't forget to check out the* ***additional resources*** *for more on this week's ideas – and discuss what you found interesting, puzzling, wrong or crazy in the discussion forums!*]