

What is Philosophy?

the examined life



Jacques-Louis David "The Death of Socrates"

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What is philosophy?

"The unexamined life is not worth living."



Socrates
470-399 BCE

- One of the founders of Western philosophy, Socrates spent his life encouraging others to critically examine their fundamental values and assumptions.
- He was executed for "corrupting the youth."



Why did people find Socrates' questions so threatening that they killed an old man who would likely soon pass away anyway?

philo-sophia

The word "philosophy" comes from the Greek words for "love" (*philos*) and "wisdom" (*sophia*) and might be literally translated as "the love or pursuit of wisdom."

- Philosophy seeks understanding of the nature of reality and the significance of our lives by applying critical reasoning to our deepest and most general beliefs.
- It draws out basic assumptions, by asking questions with all of the wonder of a child.
- And it subjects them to careful analysis with all of the precision of a lawyer.



What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? Can one know things without being wise or the other way around?

philo-sophia



Science also seeks to understand reality, but it differs from philosophy in its method of evaluating its claims.

- If you are wrong in science your predictions fail, or you accidentally blow up the lab.
- If you are wrong in philosophy, your principles and most general beliefs conflict with each other and so your mind is at odds with itself.
- Failure to clarify one's life philosophically may seem unimportant, yet for Socrates not doing so is to lead an "unexamined life" and miss out on what is most valuable and unique about being human.

philo-sophia



Religion addresses the significance of our lives, but it differs from philosophy in how it proceeds.

- Religion emerges from the spontaneous ways we make meaning in our lives. It often embraces mythical and magical thinking, which place us at the center of life's drama.
- Philosophy seeks clarification and justification and asks how we might find meaning, even in a world where we are not at the center of things.
- Philosophy is fundamentally "humanistic" since it trusts our ability to figure things out, while religion often appeals to faith, emphasizing the limits of our ability to comprehend things.

Philosophical questions

"How should I live my life? In pursuit of power and money or in pursuit of wisdom?"



Socrates
470-399 BCE

- This is not a question about how we do in fact live but of how we *should* live.
- Such *normative* questions challenge us to give an account of ourselves, our values and our assumptions.
- Socrates' question is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called value theory or axiology.

Value theory questions about science

- Is it ever wrong to pursue knowledge and is it sometimes just best *not* to know?
- Is science value neutral, with moral questions only relevant to the application of scientific findings?
- Is scientific knowledge public or private, and who should profit from new discoveries?
- What role should scientific findings play in social policy?

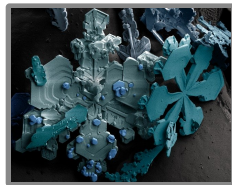
Philosophical questions

"What can I know with any degree of certainty, when my senses so often mislead me?"



René Descartes
1596-1650

- Descartes asked this question at the beginning of the Scientific Revolution when old "certainties" were revealed to be based on false assumptions.
- Answering it requires clarifying the nature and limitations of knowledge.
- This is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called epistemology or theory of knowledge.

More epistemological questions...

- How can we distinguish between appearances and reality?
- What counts as evidence, proof, or disproof and how does logical reasoning work?
- What is science and how do we distinguish it from pretenders to science?
- What is truth and is it singular or plural?

Philosophical questions

"Do we have free will or are we just cogs in a vast machine?"



Baron D'Holbach
1723-1789

- Philosophical questions are often much more general than questions we normally encounter.
- Science seeks answers to particular questions about the regularities in the world of our experience and shrinks away from such general questions as this.
- This is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called metaphysics or ontology which seeks an account of the basic nature of reality.

More metaphysical questions

- What sorts of things exist – only matter, or minds/souls/disembodied spirits as well?
- What is the relationship between minds and brains, and can we build an artificial brain that actually has a mind?
- How does order arise in the universe and what is the role of chance in the way things are?
- Are purposes built-in to things or imposed on them by us?

The philosopher's toolkit

Since philosophy asks us to examine all of our assumptions, there can be no fixed method for doing philosophy - historically speaking there have been many different approaches.

Over time, however, certain useful principles have been developed.

- Explicitly state our assumptions – this can be a challenge since they are assumptions after all.
- Draw out their logical implications – do these assumptions fit well with each other and do they clash with other ideas we have?
- Make lots of distinctions. (Philosophers have a bad reputation for "splitting hairs," but we think it is important to be precise in our use of language.)

Find out more

Socrates on self-confidence and questioning others about their values. A great video outlining the motivation for doing philosophy in the first place.

What is Philosophy?: The Crash Course is a series of short, entertaining and informative videos produced by the Green brothers John and Hank. Here Hank Green gives his take on what philosophy is.

How to Argue: the second video in the Crash Course Philosophy series outlines the basics of philosophical reasoning and argumentation.



Rembrandt "Anatomy Lesson"

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