

What is Philosophy Why Study It?

The term “philosophy” is a compound word of two words: *philos* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom), so “philosophy” literally means *love of wisdom*. To be a philosopher, then, is to love wisdom and philosophers are lovers of wisdom. But what does it mean to be a lover of wisdom?

Most thinkers would agree that wisdom is a quality of an individual who has good judgment, experience, and the capacity to teach other people how to live a good life.

It is not possible to tell exactly when humans started doing philosophy. But it is safe to say that they started from the moment they took the trouble to think about their existence in the world and the existence of the word.

Philosophy is the exciting examination of living questions like “How do I know what I should believe?”, “Is using animals for food moral?”, “Does God exist?”, “Which is the best form of government?”, “What does it mean to be a good person?”, and more. Thus, philosophy is the study of the most important questions of life. In a sense, all of us are philosophers when we think about existential problems. However, professional philosophers, typically university professors, are trained to think and write about philosophical questions.

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.)

Russell distinguished between science and philosophy. He 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 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 and taking measurements. We need to make observations and run experiments. We need to answer such questions empirically.

The questions of 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?”, cannot be solved by doing lab experiments. Philosophy, then, unlike science, considers questions that can’t be answered empirically. Thus the questions of philosophy must be answered by the use of careful logical reasoning and discussion. It’s useful to think about philosophical questions as falling into four main branches.

1. **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?”

2. **Metaphysics** addresses questions concerning the ultimate nature of reality, like “Does God exist?” and “Do we have free will?”

3. **Ethics** 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?”

4. **Aesthetics** is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions about artistic value and beauty, such as “Does a convincing forgery have the same artistic merit as the original?” or “Is beauty in the eyes of the beholder or some things are beautiful independently of what people think?”

5. **Logic** is the study of the principles of good and bad reasoning. Logic studies the elements of a good argument. Logic is concerned about the difference between inductive and deductive argumentation; also logic studies what makes an argument sound or unsound, valid or invalid, cogent or uncogent.

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.

Why study philosophy then?

Philosophy is Fun

Dealing with big questions, such as the possibility of knowledge, the existence of God, and the nature of morality, is interesting. No educated human being as far as I know ever contemplated such questions. Furthermore, you don't need to buy special equipment or tools to do philosophy. You can start where you are, and learn more as you go. You can do philosophy any time, alone or with others, in the bathroom or in an elevator. At your desk or while on vacation, for free! All you need is your mind. 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 to:

- 1) Develop your thinking skills
- 2) Develop your communication skills
- 3) Improve yourself
- 4) Improve your ability to get along with others

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, reality, aesthetics, and ethics. 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.

Philosophy is Unavoidable

Finally, philosophy is unavoidable. Whether you like it or not, philosophy cannot be rejected or ignored. Think about it. In order to reject philosophy, one would need to argue that anything worth knowing could be known empirically—through science or everyday observation. But this, itself, is a philosophical claim about knowledge and in order to establish it you need to do philosophy! Or if you say, for example, that you don't care about what others think and they should leave you alone, once again, you are making a moral judgment, and thus you're doing philosophy.

Can philosophy be ignored? Maybe. Some people are born and die without ever consciously entertaining a philosophical thought. But they don't really avoid philosophy; rather, they accept and adopt without thinking the prevalent philosophy, or worldview, of the surrounding society. (Think of Nazism, Racism, etc.) You can ignore philosophy only at the price of letting others lead you around by the nose.

Philosophy Of Religion

Philosophy of religion is the philosophical study of the meaning and nature of religion. In the first place, one question is how to define religion. The word religion derives from the Latin word *religare* or to bind or to put under an obligation. Philosophy of religion examines religious concepts, beliefs, terminology, arguments, and the practices of religious people. The range of people engaged in philosophy of religion is broad and diverse and includes Eastern and Western thinkers, religious believers and agnostics, skeptics, and atheists. Philosophy of religion draws on all areas of philosophy and of other fields, including history, sociology, psychology, and the natural sciences.

There are several themes that fall under the domain of philosophy of religion. The focus of this course will be religious language and belief, concepts of God, arguments for and against the existence of God, and problems of evil and suffering.

Today, philosophy of religion is one of the most vibrant areas of philosophy. Philosophers publish books and articles in philosophy of religion. There are various meetings at the American Philosophical Association and of the Royal Society of Philosophy. There are societies dedicated to the field such as the Society for Philosophy of Religion (USA) and the British Society for Philosophy of Religion and the field is supported by multiple centers such as the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, the Rutgers Center for Philosophy of Religion, the Centre for the Philosophy of Religion at Glasgow University. Oxford University Press published in 2009 *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion* in five volumes involving over 100 contributors, and the *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion* in five volumes, with over 350 contributors from around the world. Why so much interest? Consider at least two reasons.

First: The religious nature of the world population. Most people in the world are either part of a religion or influenced by religion. So, religion is a subject that affects actual people. Therefore, we must take religion seriously, whether we are or are not believers. Philosophy of religion helps us understand and evaluate different religious traditions and their alternatives.

Second: Both religious and philosophical thinking raise many of the same fascinating questions about the nature of reality, the limits of reason, the meaning of life,

the nature of morality, and so on. Some people argue that philosophy and religion are inseparable.

Natural Theology, Evidentialism, Reformed Epistemology, and Volitional Epistemology

Natural theology is the attempt to establish religious truths and prove the existence of God by rational argument and without reliance upon revelations. We will study and evaluate some of the most popular arguments for God.

Evidentialism is the view that for a person to be justified in some belief, that person must have some awareness of the evidence for the belief. On this view, the belief in question must not be undermined (or defeated) by other, evident beliefs held by the person.

Evidentialism has been challenged on many grounds. Some argue that we have too many evident beliefs to know which one is true. Instead of evidentialism, some philosophers speak of reliabilism, according to which a person may be justified in a belief so long as the belief is produced by a reliable means, whether the person is aware of evidence that justifies the belief.

Two movements in philosophy of religion develop positions that are not in line with the traditional evidential tradition: **reformed epistemology** and **volitional epistemology**.

Reformed epistemology is “Reformed” insofar as it draws on the Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) who claimed that persons are created with a sense of God (*sensus divinitatis*). While this sense of God may not be apparent, it can reliably prompt you to believe in God and support a religious life.

Volitional epistemology: If the God of Christianity exists, this God would not be evident to inquirers who are just curious about whether God exists. The God of Christianity would only become evident in a process that would involve the moral and spiritual transformation of persons. By willfully subjecting oneself to the commanding love of God, a person may come to serve as evidence of the truths of faith.

Religious Language and Belief

Logical Positivism

The practice of philosophy emphasizes precision of terms and clarity of concepts and ideas. Religious language is often vague, imprecise, mysterious. In the twentieth century, this linguistic imprecision was challenged by some philosophers known as logical positivists. These philosophers used the principle of verifiability to reject as meaningless non-empirical claims.

All statements have two elements, a subject, and a predicate. For example, consider this statement: “All bachelors are an unmarried man.” The term “bachelors” is the subject, and the term “unmarried men” is the predicate. Note that the predicate is the definition of the subject because the definition of the word “bachelor” is a man who is not married. Also, note that the statement is true. Even if you don’t know what the terms mean, you can find out that the statement is true by looking up the meaning of the terms in a dictionary—bachelor equals unmarried man. In other words, what makes the statement “All bachelors are unmarried men” true is the meaning of the terms. Put

another way, this statement is true by definition. Statements that are true by definition are known as analytic.

Consider another type of statement: “All bachelors are elegant.” Note that the term “elegant” is not the definition of the term “bachelors.” How do we know whether the statement is true? The only way is to verify it by observing whether all bachelors are elegant. If all of them are elegant, then the statement is proven to be true.

Now religious people make all kinds of religious statements such as “Vishnu is the preserver and protector of the universe” or “Jesus is the only way to heaven”. Are such statements true? One would think that the answer is either yes or no. But logical positivists thought that the answer is that such statements are neither true nor false. Why? Because a statement is true or false if and only if it can be verified. As we have seen, I can verify the truth of “All bachelors are unmarried men” by analyzing the meanings of the terms. And I can verify the truth of “All bachelors are elegant” by looking at bachelors (if I find even one who is not elegant, then the statement is false). However, how am I supposed to know whether religious statements are true? The question is whether religious statements are either analytic or synthetic.

Take the first statement, “Vishnu is the preserver and protector of the universe”. The predicate term “preserver and protector of the universe” is not the definition of the subject “Vishnu.” If anything, the predicate says what Vishnu does, not what Vishnu is. So, the truth of the statement cannot be determined based on definition. Can it be determined based on observation? Not really. What is there to be observed? Where can it be observed Vishnu while preserving and protecting the universe? Consequently, the truth of the statement cannot be verified by observation, either. Therefore, according to logical positivism, such statements as the statements of religion are neither true, nor false. So, what are they? They are nonsensical.

By the late twentieth century, many philosophers started questioning the validity of logical positivism. Think about it, are the statements of logical positivism analytic or synthetic? How can we verify their truth? This, and other factors, caused logical positivism to wane.

Religious Diversity

Not all religions can be right. Consider some examples: for Buddhists there is no creator God, whereas Muslims affirm that the universe was created by the one true God, Allah; for Advaita Vedanta Hindus, the concept of Ultimate Reality is pantheistic monism in which only Brahman exists, whereas Christians affirm theistic dualism in which God exists as distinct from human beings and the other created entities; for Muslims and Christians, salvation is the ultimate goal whereby human beings are united with God forever in the afterlife, while the Buddhists’ ultimate goal is nirvana—an extinguishing of the individual self and complete extinction of all suffering. How is one to respond to this diversity of fundamental beliefs?

Religious Pluralism

One response to religious diversity is to deny or minimize the doctrinal conflicts and to maintain that doctrine itself is not as important for religion as religious experience and that the great religious traditions are equally authentic responses to Ultimate Reality. This is one form of religious pluralism. Its most ardent defender has been John Hick.

Hick argues that a person's experiences, religious and non-religious, depend on the frameworks and concepts through which one's mind structures and comprehends them. While some people experience and comprehend Ultimate Reality in personal, theistic categories (as Allah or Yahweh), others do so in impersonal, pantheistic ways (as Brahman, for example). Yet others experience and comprehend Ultimate Reality as non-personal and non-pantheistic (as Nirvana or the Tao). We do not know which view is ultimately correct because Ultimate Reality is far beyond human conceptions since we do not have a "God's eye" perspective from which to make such an assessment.

One common illustration of the pluralist position of experiencing God is the Hindu parable of the blind men and the elephant. God is like an elephant surrounded by several blind men. One man felt the elephant's tail and believed it to be a rope. Another felt his trunk and believed it to be a snake. Another felt his leg and believed it to be a tree. Yet another felt his side and believed it to be a wall. Each of them experiences the same elephant but in very different ways from the others. In our experiences and understandings of Ultimate Reality, we are very much like the blind men, argue such religious pluralists, for our beliefs and viewpoints are constricted by our enculturated concepts.

One objection to pluralism is that it leads to a dilemma. On the one hand, if we do not have concepts that are in fact referring to Ultimate Reality as it is in itself, then we fall into religious skepticism. On the other hand, if we do have concepts that describe actual properties of Ultimate Reality, then we are not blind after all, and therefore we could, theoretically at least, be in a position to make evaluations about different claims that are made about Ultimate Reality from the various religious traditions.

Another version of religious pluralism is that each of the different major religious traditions reflects some aspect of the Ultimate Reality. Ultimate Reality manifests different aspects of itself in the different religions given their own unique conceptual schemes and practices.

One challenge to this form of pluralism is that, since each of the religions is capturing only an aspect of the Ultimate Reality, it seems that one would obtain a better understanding of its essence by creating a new syncretistic religion in order to glean a more comprehensive understanding of Ultimate Reality.

Religious Exclusivism

The central tenets of one religion are true and claims incompatible with those tenets are false. Salvation is found exclusively in one religion. For example, for a Muslim exclusivist, Allah is the one true God who literally spoke to the prophet Muhammad in space and time. Since that is true, then the Advaita Vedanta claim that Brahman (God) is without attributes must be false, for these two understandings of Ultimate Reality contradict one another.

Religion and Science

The relationship between religion and science is the subject of continued debate among thinkers in general, and in philosophy of religion in particular. The debate is over whether and to what extent religion and science are compatible. First, one question is whether religious beliefs pose obstacles to scientific inquiry. Second, atheists generally

argue that science is replacing God in the sense that, one day, humans will no longer need religions because science will have answered all the important questions, from existence to the meaning of life to the nature of consciousness, etc. Conversely, most theists argue that science will never and can never replace God; moreover, as science evolves, it makes God's existence more and more evident.

What is science, and what is religion?

In order to understand the relationship between science and religion, we must know what science and religion are. Consider that “science” and “religion” are terms that were coined recently, with meanings that vary across times and cultures. Before the nineteenth century, the term “religion” was not common. In the Middle Ages, the term *religio* meant binding in the sense of piety or worship. The term “religion” obtained its current meaning by the late 1800s. Also consider that there are traditions considered religions that do not have a godhead, for example, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, and others. So, what exactly is religion?

But don't think that science fares any better. The term “science” as it is currently used also became common only in the nineteenth century. Before the nineteenth century, what we call “science” was referred to as “natural philosophy” or “experimental philosophy”. William Whewell (1834) standardized the term “scientist” to refer to people who do things different from what philosophers do. Ironically, the job of defining science was given to philosophers. For instance, Karl Popper (1959) claimed that scientific hypotheses are in principle falsifiable.

The principle of falsifiability: The idea is that science moves forward by “conjectures and refutations” and not, as others in the past suggested, through “inductive generalizations”, that is generalizations based on a sample. Popper thought that a theory cannot be proven true but only false. In other words, a theory becomes scientific by specifying the conditions under which it may be proven false or incorrect. For example, the theory of evolution states that all living organism you see today have evolved over millions of years from common ancestors. If one were to find an organism that could not have evolved over time, that organism would falsify the theory. However, in order to test a theory, you need to make a lot of auxiliary hypotheses or rely on instruments to make measurements; but those instruments, in their turn, rely on other theories. Think for example about Newton's second law of motion, which says that $F = ma$, that the total force on a physical object is equal to the product of its mass and its acceleration. How do you falsify that? Indeed, when a prediction derived from a theory, they take to be well-established fails, scientists don't just throw away the theory and start looking for a replacement. Instead, they generally assume that one of the background assumptions necessary to derive the prediction, which are often left implicit, was false and try to figure out which one it was.

One way to distinguish between science and religion is the claim that science concerns the natural world, whereas religion concerns both the natural and the supernatural. Scientific explanations do not appeal to supernatural entities such as gods or angels, or to non-natural forces (like miracles). For example, neuroscientists typically explain our thoughts in terms of brain states, not by reference to an immaterial soul or spirit.

Many philosophers also propose that science is an enterprise guided by naturalism. Naturalists make a distinction between **methodological naturalism (MN)**, **philosophical naturalism (PN)**. MN is a principle that limits scientific inquiry to natural entities and laws, and PN is a metaphysical principle that rejects the supernatural.

Here is an argument against naturalism. If naturalism entails that all our thoughts are the effect of a physical cause, then we have no reason for assuming that they are true. If naturalism were true, there would be no way of knowing it (or anything else), except by a fluke. The statement “I have reason to believe naturalism is valid” is inconsistent in the same manner as “I never tell the truth.” If my mental processes are determined by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true

Another argument is the evolutionary argument against naturalism developed by Alvin Plantinga. The probability that evolution has produced humans with reliable true beliefs, is low or inscrutable, unless their evolution was guided, for example, by God. Naturalism and evolution are consistent, right? Wrong! Combined, they defeat the belief that our cognitive faculties are reliable. Evolution and natural selection select organisms due to adaptive behaviors, but not necessarily due to true beliefs. So, if the story of natural selection is true, then some or many of our beliefs are false and that our reasoning processes may not point to truths but are merely evolutionarily advantageous.