Chapter 1

Philosophy and its methods

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

This chapter is designed to encourage the correct attitude to philosophical discussion. It begins by pointing out that philosophy is a practice that requires engagement and reflection. It is not simply a list of points to be learned. The chapter briefly discusses the major divisions of the subject – logic, metaphysics and epistemology (theory of knowledge), with some discussion of what we mean by knowledge and when we can claim to have it. It gives guidance on good practice in taking notes in philosophy and theology. Finally, it provides suggestions about the skills required in essay writing.

2 Philosophy is a conversation

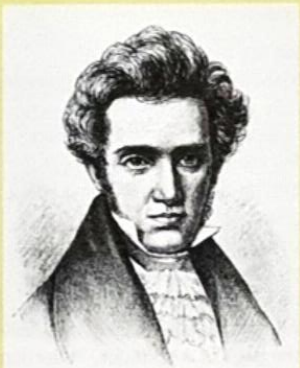
'Why did you think that?'
'Is that really a good enough reason?'
'Why did I do that?'
'How did you reach that conclusion?'
'Why on earth do things like that happen?'

We have all heard ourselves and others use sentences like these. We ask questions, both of ourselves and others, and we think about and probe the answers we give. If someone gives a silly reason for an action, we tend to ask more questions and try to probe more deeply.

Key term

Philosophy The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline.

Key quote



The thing is to understand myself. To see what God really wishes me to do: the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.

Søren Kierkegaard 1813–55

When we do this, we are conversing – but we are also being philosophers. We are looking for understanding. To understand and to be aware of the questions we ought to ask, and not to be afraid to ask them, is the beginning of wisdom. The word **philosophy** means *'love of wisdom'*. In philosophy, we question and think about the answers, then perhaps look for clarification, explanation and justification, just as we do when we are talking to people, so we understand more clearly. Living philosophers talk to each other, and discuss among themselves what other philosophers (including the dead ones) might have meant when they gave their opinions.

Philosophy, including ethics, is not a subject to be learned, but an activity. This is true also in how philosophy relates to theology.

That sounds odd, but understanding this is what makes the difference between doing well in the subject and merely knowing enough to pass an examination. Being good at philosophy is not a question of how much you know, because anyone can, with enough hard work, learn facts. If all you did in the next year or so was learn facts about philosophy, you would have learned the basics to begin philosophy, but no more.

This need not seem so strange. If all you had ever done in mathematics was to learn the meaning of basic arithmetical signs, and learned by heart dozens of different formulas, would you be good at mathematics? Knowing about mathematics is not the same as being a good mathematician. A good mathematician actively uses mathematics, working through problems, using specific knowledge of formulas to work out the solution to problems. This is why the study of mathematics goes beyond mechanical or rote learning. You have to practise it as a set of skills, and in the practice you discover its deeper meanings.

Philosophy is like that. It is quite different from learning something such as the names of the bones in the foot or the periodic table; though good biologists and chemists do more than simply learn these basic facts. They also think through the implications of what has been learned – the meaning of these facts – for understanding the skeleton or chemical structure.

Philosophy, then, requires *engagement*. You should not approach it as you would approach learning a set of notes or a teacher's PowerPoint presentation. Instead, it requires you to think about the issues, reaching your own conclusions – with sound reasoning for the conclusions you reach.

Philosophy discusses big issues. In Ancient Greece, much philosophy, especially as practised by the great philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle or Pythagoras, was, at its heart, a considered conversation. Perhaps the conservation took place in the market place or, often, during and after a friendly meal.

When a philosopher develops a theory or a new argument, he or she is not saying to the world:

'Learn this!'

Rather, the philosopher asks a question:

'What do you think of this?'

The right response is not to say that you have learned it, but to respond with a considered opinion. You should point out strong or weak points in the argument offered, judging its effectiveness. Sometimes two or three competing arguments are offered, and the philosopher is asking

for a reasoned judgement about which of these arguments might most effectively answer the problem they are designed to solve.

If this sounds challenging, there is some practical advice later in this chapter on how to think in the way required. For the moment, it is important to reflect on, and discuss, what you study. Examination questions and essays call on you to reach judgements, not simply to write down what you have learned. It is too late to work out what you think of theories if you have never discussed them or reached a judgement about them before you go into the examination room. Discussion and reflection are habits to be worked on during the study. The same skills apply more broadly in life. In philosophy we need to bear in mind Socrates' idea that:

'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

To live most fully means thinking about the meaning of our experiences, such as our adventures or friendships. Effective philosophising is just an extension of the same activity. By reflecting we discover ways of thinking and being that we had not considered before, and we learn new possibilities. One of the most exciting moments in philosophy is when you can say, 'I never thought of that!' In time you can think about how you have grown since meeting the idea.

There are practical advantages to this type of engagement, and not simply getting better examination results. There are things in philosophy, as in mathematics, that need to be learned. The process of learning is much easier when you have discussed and argued about something than it is when trying to learn cold facts off the page of a textbook. Reflection and discussion engage the whole mind, not just the memory, though memory is stimulated by them.

Of course, there are things which you must learn. It would be absurd to attempt to learn mathematics without mastering the language of mathematics. You have to learn the meaning of arithmetical symbols, of multiplication, division, square roots and all the rest. Without a grasp of that mathematical grammar, the activity is impossible, though the grammar is best learned in practice, using the symbols and concepts by working through problems.

The same is true in philosophy. There are tools of the trade, which need to be understood through use.

This chapter is designed to show you some basic tools and give a little idea of their use in practice. As you work through the chapters of this book, you will learn to use these terms, and you will become more familiar with their correct use.

Key quote

Faced with the complexity of today's world, philosophical reflection is above all a call to humility ... The greater the difficulties encountered the greater the need for philosophy to make sense of questions.

Irina Bokova: Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of World Philosophy Day, 15 November 2012

3 Naming the parts – essential vocabulary for philosophical thinking

Key term

Logic Branch of philosophy concerned with the structure of ideas and arguments.

(a) Four branches of philosophy

Philosophy of religion needs several disciplines – **logic**, **epistemology** (theory of knowledge), and **metaphysics**. **Ethics** is also important. Religion makes claims about the good life and religious systems are usually, perhaps always, ethical systems. They encourage us to live in particular ways, both individually and in relation to others. In one sense, ethics can be seen as one of the original tasks of philosophy. Greek philosophers continually asked, 'What is the Good Life for Man?' For the moment, we will postpone discussion of ethics until the next part of the book, when we look at ethical theory in more detail.

There are other branches of philosophy. A philosophical discipline can accompany anything that can be the subject of reflection and questioning. As philosophers, we learn through continual questioning of our beliefs and practices. As long as that is the case, there will be philosophy.

Key terms

Epistemology Also known as theory of knowledge. This asks about what we can claim to know. What we truly know is not always the same as what we believe.

Metaphysics Branch of philosophy which asks what it is for something to be, to exist.

Ethics Branch of philosophy concerned with moral questions, not simply what we should do but also such things as the meaning and justification of goodness.

Validity This refers to an argument which is soundly constructed, so that if the premises were true, the conclusion would also be true. An argument might be valid but not true.

Key person

Aristotle (384–322BC): A Macedonian, son of the court physician. He studied at the Academy for 20 years, but disagreed with Plato's theory of the Forms, taking a much more empirical approach to his studies. He created his own school, the *Lyceum*.

Key terms

Syllogism Basic structure of an argument as set out by Aristotle, containing at least one major premise and one minor premise.

Major premise In a syllogism, a sentence which is all or nothing, with no exceptions.

Minor premise In a syllogism, a sentence containing an individual piece of information.

(b) Logic

Logic is about the structure of arguments. Its primary concern is not whether a particular argument is *true*, but rather whether it is *structured to yield true conclusions*. It searches for the **validity** of arguments. An argument is valid if it is in a form that, if the information underlying the argument were true, then the conclusion would also be true.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, all logic was based on the principles which Aristotle had set out in his logical works. These were known collectively as the *Organon*, comprising six books – *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*.

(c) The syllogism

Aristotle's logic is also called 'syllogistic logic', because the **syllogism** is the most basic logical form within the system.

A syllogism has a minimum of three elements: a **major premise**, a **minor premise** and a conclusion.

The most famous example of a syllogism is:

All men are mortal. (major premise)
Socrates is a man. (minor premise)
Therefore: Socrates is mortal. (conclusion)

The first line is a *major premise* because it is an 'all' sentence. The argument would fail if, instead of 'all' we wrote 'a few', 'some' or even 'most'. Socrates might then be one of those men who are not mortal. It could, of course, be 'none' rather than 'all', as long as the term permits no exception. It must include everything of the type because any exception would disprove the rule. The major premise always acts as a universal rule. Just remember that it must always be a case of 'all or nothing'.

The *minor premise* is an individual piece of information. In this case, it is about one particular man, Socrates. Notice that it is the *structure* of the argument that makes the conclusion true. The form of the argument is:

All p are q.
r is p.
Therefore r is q.

We can see that any argument of this form will give us a true conclusion if both premises are true.

Think about a different argument:

All Celts have fifteen fingers.
Brian Boru was a Celt.
Therefore Brian Boru had fifteen fingers.

definition of 'thinking' in the way that having three sides is essential to the definition of a triangle. Mathematics can be seen as *a priori*, because all mathematical calculations are variations on the basic tautological truth that $x = x$. That is, the result of all sums, such as $453 + 247 = 700$, is simply a variation of $x = x$.

Some philosophers, such as St Anselm and Descartes, have attempted to prove the existence of God *a priori*. We will see their theories in Chapter 6.

For a profile of Descartes, see Chapter 4.

Philosophers point out two things about tautologies:

1 They tell us nothing about the world. For example, 'A mermaid is half-woman, half-fish' is true, because that is what we mean by the word 'mermaid'. But the only way we can know whether mermaids exist is through sense experience. Tautologies are definitions about the meaning of words.
2 Their truth is certain because we make the rules we are using. That is why mathematics is certain. Mathematicians have made the rules by which $2 + 2 = 4$ is true. If someone showed us a triangle and said 'this is round', we would say 'that's not true'. Without circularity, we would not allow the word 'round' to be used.

(ii) A posteriori

This refers to those things where our knowledge depends on sense experience. Knowledge of this kind is called **empirical knowledge**, from the Greek term *empeiria*, which means 'experience'.

Key term

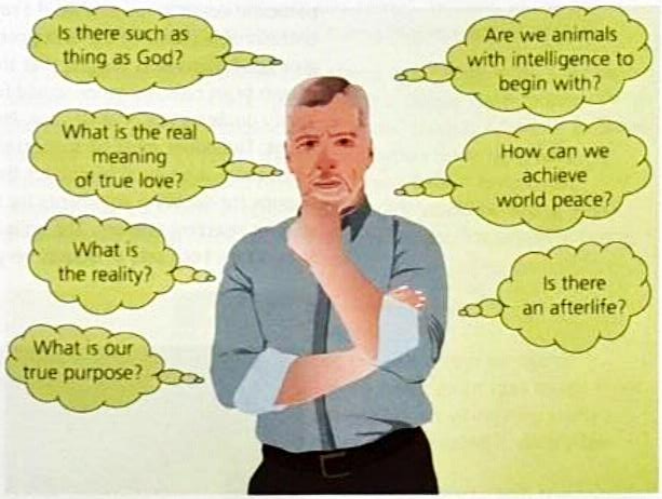
Empirical knowledge Alternative description of *a posteriori* knowledge.

In a descriptive sentence which is not a tautology, some things can be known to be true by using our senses in some other way. Knowing the meaning of the words in 'my cat is playing with a mouse' or 'there are mermaids in the Waters of Leith' is not enough to tell us whether these things are true. Someone would need to look to confirm that it is so. And even if these sentences were true today, we would have to look again tomorrow to see whether they were still true.

Any sense experience has limitations. We can only ever perceive the world with the senses we have. We can never get outside ourselves to check whether our perceptions are accurate. If we look at photographs or see films to check what is out there, we still see those things with our own eyes. We can never certainly know that the world is indeed as it seems to be to us. We can only know that this is how it appears to us.

To think about this a little more, consider the sentence, 'That chair is green.' How do I know whether the chair has any kind of existence beyond my imagination, that outside what-is-me lies this other, not-me object, the chair? I see it as green. All I truly know is that I describe it as green. I may hear you also describing the chair as green. The most I could know is that you use the term 'green' to describe the chair. I do not know what green looks like to you. I cannot get inside your mind to share your understanding of what green feels or looks like, any more than I can know what something tastes like to you. Philosophers call this privacy of experience the 'problem of other minds'.

4 Sense experience and its problems



If knowledge of the outside world depends on our observations, then how do we make sense of the information? How do we take our random observations and make general rules of how things work in the universe? Only through making theories of this kind can we have science.

For a profiles of David Hume and Bertrand Russell, see Chapter 5.

Many philosophers, including David Hume and Bertrand Russell, argue that most of our science – apart from mathematics, which is deductive – is based on making general conclusions from many observations. So, for example, we notice apparently endless instances of the Sun rising every morning, and draw the general conclusion: 'The Sun rises every morning.' This becomes a principle of geography and astronomy. But, of course, the conclusion is at best only probable. There could still be the exception, when the Sun does not rise, because it has burned out. This kind of reasoning, called *inductive*, can only give us probabilities at best.

But induction involves the logical problem of induction. The problem is easy to understand. The only proof that events give us probable general conclusions is that we have experienced them enough times to notice a pattern in them. It is this pattern that leads us to probable general conclusions. The only evidence for induction is induction itself.

(a) Philosophical doubt

A posteriori judgements can never be wholly certain. It is unavoidable that they are uncertain, but this need not be a reason for total scepticism or sleepless nights. After all, many things in life are uncertain. We do not withhold friendship because we cannot prove that our best friend will never betray us, and there is no reason to despair of all our knowledge because we are aware of its limitations.

There is an important difference between genuine philosophical doubt and other types of doubt. A good test about doubt is to ask whether a particular doubt is reasonable. If I say a table cannot think, it would be unreasonable doubt to try to suggest tables could think, unless you could give good reasons to suggest that they might. Given that tables have no known brain cells, someone would have to make a remarkable case to justify doubting my original view. Philosophical doubt is always reasoned doubt. The doubt must be supported. We ought not to entertain a doubt when there is no good reason for that doubt. There are good philosophical reasons for doubting arguments for the existence of God – as there are also for rejecting atheism. The philosopher, regardless of personal belief, should take both sets of doubts very seriously.

Key quote

Take the risk of thinking for yourself, much more happiness, truth, beauty, and wisdom will come to you that way.

Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011)

(b) Knowledge and belief

When can we claim that we *know* something and not simply that we *believe* it?

Philosophers generally agree that four criteria must be satisfied in order to claim knowledge:

1 What we believe to be true must in fact be true. I can hardly be said to *know* that Snaefell is the world's highest mountain when it is not.
2 We must believe that what we believe to be true is really true. If someone said: 'I think Paris is the capital of France, but I'm really not sure', we would not say he had knowledge. He has a belief which happens to be true.
3 We must have sufficiently good reasons – not inadequate ones such as, 'it's in the newspaper' or 'my dad says ...'. This is called justification of our beliefs. There is great debate about what counts as sufficient justification. Some say that all attempts at justification ultimately fail.
4 Our belief must not rest on any false information. I could not be said to truly know who the king was who conquered England in 1066 if I believed that every conqueror was named 'William'. In this case I happen to be right, but I believe it for a reason which is mistaken.

It is important to remember these claims about knowledge. On religious matters, as well as on others, such as politics, people claim to *know* things that really they do not. People claim to 'know' there is a God, or to 'know' there is no God, or to 'know' that nationalisation is the right policy for industry. There may be good reasons for those beliefs, and people certainly may be sincere in holding them, but it would be wrong to say they have knowledge. After all, they may be sincere, but sincerely wrong.

5 Metaphysics

The name 'metaphysics' has an odd history.

After Aristotle died, his pupils edited the notes from his course lectures. They had just finished editing the notes about how things move and change, which they sensibly called *The Physics* when they started on a course for which they had no name, so they called it simply *The Metaphysics*, which meant 'beyond the physics'.

Metaphysics is sometimes understood to deal simply with transcendent matters. That is, it deals with things beyond our normal experience. In ordinary language, when people describe something as 'metaphysical', they refer to something beyond our experience. But it is a mistake to think of the philosophical activity on metaphysics in this way.

The central metaphysical question is: What exists? So, asking whether material objects, such as chairs or cats or guinea pigs, exist is as much a metaphysical question as asking whether God exists or souls exist.

Traditionally, metaphysical theories are divided into two kinds:

1 **Cosmological** – this approach refers to theories of the whole of being. They can be found in the work of Plato. He gave a metaphysical account of the entirety of the universe in relation to the Forms (see next chapter). They can also be found in Hegel, in relation to consciousness and the Absolute (covered in Year 2).
2 **Ontological** – these are theories of whether things of a particular kind exist. They do not attempt to make a grand theory of everything. Ontological approaches are piecemeal. So, for example, to ask whether souls exist is an ontological question. It does not ask what other kinds of things might also exist.

6 Study advice – making notes

The art of note-taking is essential to effective study. Remember that your ability in the subject is not determined by the number or length of notes you take, but by how effective they are as a guide to learning. Some students try to write everything the teacher says, but without truly listening, as if they were merely taking dictation, leaving themselves with a mass of notes which – as the examination approaches – they fear they will never be able to learn. You do not wish to finish the course with a daunting pile of notes any more than you should think you have *learned* something just because you have written it all down in class. If you are just writing in class, it becomes mechanical, passive not active.