

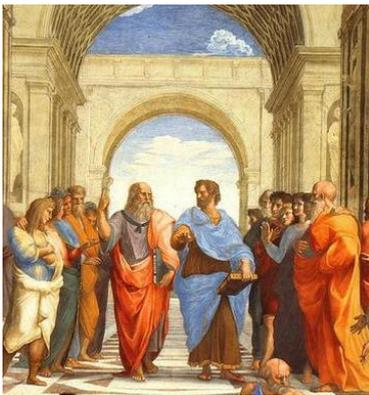
# Introduction: *What Is Philosophy?*

---

## What is Philosophy?

It is frequently thought (quite naturally) that every discipline needs to have a subject matter of its own to be authentic – mathematics, for instance, deals with numbers; history, with what has happened and how we view it; geography with social studies and physical features of the earth and so on. Science has a broad subject matter that is generally specified by its various sub-categories (physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, geology etc.) and, until the modern age, philosophy was, at least in part, concerned with all the natural sciences. The philosopher was, for instance, part astronomer and mathematician, as well as someone who thought about moral questions.

The broad interests of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) and the early-modern French philosopher René Descartes (1596 – 1650) exemplify this claim. Aristotle’s scholastic diversity was particularly remarkable. He made ground –breaking discoveries in science, logic, ethics, politics, biology and zoology. One of Aristotle’s most important contributions to philosophy was the study and development of deductive inference in the form of the syllogism. A syllogism is a form of deductive argument where the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises. – For example:



Plato & Aristotle  
(Raphael’s School of Athens)

**Premise 1:** Socrates is a man.  
**Premise 2:** All men are mortal.  
**Therefore** (it necessarily follows that)  
**Conclusion:** Socrates is mortal.



René Descartes

Similarly, René Descartes – who you will become very familiar with – was a fine mathematician, physicist and cosmologist. He was also well known for his work on geometry, optics and meteorology (the study of the weather). The cultural climate in which Descartes worked however, was not always conducive to the kinds of results he achieved. In 1633 the so-called “father of modern science” Galileo Galilei was ordered to stand trial on suspicion of heresy because he claimed (following Copernicus) that the Earth moved around the Sun as opposed to the long held Catholic belief that the Earth was at the centre of the universe. When Descartes heard of this, he withdrew some of his work from publication fearing similar consequences.

Descartes is now best remembered for his *Meditations on First Philosophy* which you will be studying in some detail. In it, Descartes attempts to understand the conditions that are required for the possibility of knowledge i.e., how we can be certain that we know something and distinguish it from what we merely believe. Accordingly, in the past, the philosopher was someone who studied all of these (and more) disciplines; these days, such disciplines have been categorised much more rigorously and it has been said by some – most notably, Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins – that philosophy is now redundant with nothing to offer and, as such, should be abandoned.

Part of the problem for contemporary philosophy and philosophers is that the discipline does not possess a subject matter of its own and, consequently, cannot be categorised in the same way as other disciplines. Many of our endeavours, it could be argued, are pursued in a quest for greater understanding and better judgement (or wisdom) and philosophy, because it does not lay claim to any particular branch of knowledge and – as such – does not yield definite results, is sometimes thought of as “a bit of a cop out”. How can it be as rigorous or as useful as other disciplines if it does not yield tangible results like they do? Another problem that philosophy encounters in some quarters is that of image. Those apt to pass judgement on philosophy without having bothered to find out what it is, often think philosophers are old white-bearded cranks sitting around mulling over the meaning of life or trying to answer questions such as, “if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it still make a sound?” There is little truth in this, although it is (dubiously) alleged that the philosopher Bishop Berkeley originally posed the question about the falling tree!

The meaning of life claim is an interesting one however. There is an enormous difference between wistfully pondering the meaning of life (something that philosophers do not do) and considering the meaning that a life can have, or the dimensions of life that are meaningful – such as the arts, poetry, morality, war, justice and so on (something which philosophers are constantly doing). These are complex aspects of our lives; they play particular roles in defining the concepts that we use to assess and deepen our understanding of ourselves and others. Frequently, disagreements and opinions are invoked as ammunition for or against other disagreements and opinions; sometimes they are dressed up to look like evidence, when really they are not. This is what the philosopher concentrates on; he or she examines and analyses complex thoughts and arguments, looks at the ways we live with ourselves and others (including animals) and, through such examinations, considers how we apply concepts in relation to such things. Philosophers also examine the methods of science and attempt to understand what it is (and means) to relate rightly or wrongly to beliefs - whether, for instance, a true belief has been arrived at through brainwashing, or reasoned critical thought and testing. They look at what it means to wrong someone, where our sense of right and wrong comes from and so on. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Thus, when public figures such as Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins suggest that philosophy is a redundant discipline with nothing further to offer, they are actually invoking the very discipline whose redundancy they announce. Questions concerning the value of science are, at their core, philosophical questions not scientific ones but, because they are such common currency in everyday conversation, the fact that they are philosophical as opposed to scientific tends to get forgotten. Correspondingly, judgements about legal processes are based on philosophical positions even if those philosophical foundations remain (as the frequently do) unspecified.

Similarly, someone who believes that “philosophy is all a matter of opinion” is taking a philosophical position that needs justification but they, like Hawking and Dawkins, are undermined by their own claim: if philosophy is all a matter of opinion then, presumably, it is a matter of opinion whether it is all a matter of opinion (as opposed to anything more substantial) – thus, the strength of such a claim is fatally undermined by its own position.

Fundamentally, philosophy is simultaneously similar to, yet also radically different from science. It is similar to science insofar as its enterprise is to further human understanding, but it is fundamentally different from science in the way that it seeks to do so. Understanding achieved through science rests on the construction of theories, testable hypotheses, prediction and explanation. Philosophy, by contrast, seeks to attain understanding through conceptual clarification in relation to the construction of arguments and the kinds of thinking behind them; in other words, it strives to clarify what makes sense, the conditions under which such sense is possible, and what that sense is able to reveal. One cannot, for example, create a hypothesis that something makes sense; in order to create a hypothesis – for the concept of a hypothesis to even be coherent – sense needs to be there already.

One can practise philosophy in relation to all aspects of life (philosophy of art, philosophy of literature, philosophy of science, philosophy of information, philosophy of music and so on) and one can practise it well (if one has a sound grasp of logic and the form of thought under consideration) or badly (if one does not); that, in itself, is something for philosophical scrutiny.

### **Why Study Philosophy?**

Studying philosophy develops one's ability to ask searching questions, analyse and evaluate one's own arguments together with the arguments of others and present them in a clear logical form. Throughout the A-level course, you will be directly acquainted with much of the primary literature associated with each of the areas studied, and encouraged to question assumptions and arguments at every turn – both in verbal and written form. Lively debate is encouraged throughout, and formal essay skills will be developed.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology is the study of the theory of knowledge. What is knowledge? What counts as knowledge? How is it that we know anything at all? What methods of justification do we have for our various knowledge claims? What is the difference between knowledge, true belief and certainty? Can science tell us what knowledge is, or does it presuppose the possibility of knowledge before embarking on investigations? In this unit you will explore some of the methods used to answer these questions. You will examine the idea that we might have innate knowledge, together with the conflicting thought that all knowledge comes from experience. If the latter is true then one needs to answer the question: how does experience teach you what to learn from it? Are our perceptions always reliable? Can we always tell if they are not? What implications might this have? What are concepts? Are concepts real? If we understand the world through concepts and they are not real, how can we be said to have knowledge of the world at all?

### **Philosophy of Religion**

Philosophy of Religion is neither a species of religious studies nor religious philosophy. Rather, it is philosophy about religion which means that it tries to understand the kinds of thinking that underpin peoples' religious convictions and clarify the nature of religion in general. Like other areas of philosophy, you will approach it dispassionately whether or not you have personal religious convictions. How might we determine whether or not God exists? What is the role of faith in religious conviction? Can one rationalise religious belief? How might one reconcile religious belief with the presence of evil in the world? What kinds of relationship does religious belief have with evolutionary theory? How might organised religion play a role in the survival of the human race? If faith is a central aspect of religious belief, is there any merit in even trying to formulate rational arguments for the existence or non-existence of God?

### **Ethics**

Are there moral truths, or is our ethical thought made up entirely of opinions? Can reason shed light on what our moral duties are or should we restrict ourselves to trying to make the majority happy whilst minimising pain? Are there circumstances in which it is right to kill an innocent human being? Are we morally obliged to torture? How do we judge the moral weight of problems in medical ethics such as those connected with abortion and euthanasia?

Moral philosophy explores the different forms of thought and argument that give rise to these questions by examining their foundations. It attempts to understand the nature of our moral judgements by examining what kinds of foundational beliefs are internal to different moral positions.

## **Philosophy of Mind**

It is the task of philosophy of mind to examine different theories of mind and how they relate to (and have been influenced by) developments in modern neuroscience.

Is the mind identical to the brain? If so, can mind and brain be characterised as separate entities? If not, how might we understand the nature of mind? Does research in neuroscience assume a kind of brain/body dualism? Are psychological states, such as pain, reducible to brain states or merely behaviour (or, perhaps, neither)? Does the mind stand in relation to the brain as software stands in relation to the hardware of a computer? Can computers think? In this unit, you will become familiar with various theories of mind that attempt to address these questions, together with learning how to evaluate them critically philosophically and in relation to progress in modern neuroscience.