

Introduction to Philosophy

“As soon as Sophie had closed the gate behind her she opened the envelope. It contained only a slip of paper no bigger than envelope. It read: *Who are you?* Nothing else, only the three words, written by hand, and followed by a large question mark.”ⁱ

When most people think about philosophy they imagine academic elites speaking in overly complicated gibberish that has no relation to their lives. Unfortunately, this misconception does have a basis. Modern philosophy has moved away from its origins to become an intellectual pursuit for the sole purpose of speculation with no relation to everyday life. When anything in this life perpetuates for its own sake, removed from any purpose beyond itself it loses any meaning besides self-gratification. Philosophy, however, does not begin inside the ivory tower of academia.

Whether you realize it, you ask the first foundational question of philosophical inquiry when you ask: Who am I? All philosophy begins with this three-word question. This absurdly simple and direct question implies so much more. What defines you? Are you a product of your environment or is there something inherent within you that dictates your personality? Do your actions and decisions matter or does some unseen force control life? Do you have a purpose? Does your life have meaning? What gives life meaning? From where did life come? How do you know that anyone else experiences life in the same way as you? How do you know anything? Can you trust your sensory experiences? Does anything exist beyond what you can process through your senses? Every one of these questions watersheds from that three-word query.

Living in this world, you become desensitized to the questions ignited by the wonder of life. As you accept the world around you, you stop questioning. Think of a three year old. This is an age that many adults find frustrating, because the most

common question from a three year old is “why? “. Many adults have become comfortable with the world around them and have no wish to question, but the constant wonder of a young child reminds them that this world is uncomfortable and questions still exist. The job of the philosopher and the purpose of philosophy is to ask those uncomfortable questions.

As it has already been stated, philosophy should not ask questions for the sake of asking questions. There must exist a purpose, a reason why you ask these questions.

What is the most important thing in life? If we ask someone living on the edge of starvation, the answer is food. ... But when these basic needs have been satisfied – will there still be something that everybody needs? ... [Philosophers] believe that man cannot live by bread alone. Of course everyone needs food. And everyone needs love and care. But there is something else – apart from that – which everyone needs, and that is to figure out who we are and why we are here.ⁱⁱ

Formal Western philosophy began in ancient Greece. The name “philosophy” comes from the Greek “philos” and “sophia,” which means “lover of wisdom.” Philosophy’s original purpose was concerned with the dirty and messy details of life. Socrates even claimed that the unexamined life is a life not worth living. So, he asked questions in order to discover the answer to one question focused on everyday experience: What is the good life? Just as the initial question of identity posed proved complex in its simplicity, so does this question. To answer this you must answer several other questions: What determines good and bad? How do you know the good from the bad? How ought you live? These questions reflect the three basic branches of philosophy: the study of being, the study of knowing, and the study of how to act.

The first branch of formal philosophy concerns existence, being. This branch is called ontology, which is a part of metaphysics. Metaphysics, simply put, examines what cannot be verified by your senses, such as justice, love, or God. It studies what exists beyond the physical and the material. Previously, metaphysics was the first branch of philosophy, but with the increasing influence of empiricism

metaphysics became a dirty word in philosophy. Empiricists claim that knowledge only comes from experience and observation. So ontology has taken the place of metaphysics as the broader category of study.

To elaborate, ontology “studies the makeup, function, and organization of reality in general.”ⁱⁱⁱ When ontology refers to the makeup of reality, it is not referring to the physical makeup, but the metaphysical. One of the strongest ontological statements in the Judeo-Christian scriptures is when Moses asks God whom he should tell them sent him. “God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’”^{iv} Naturally, ontology is concerned with the idea of an ultimate existence or God. For example, medieval philosophers, such as Anselm of Canterbury and St. Thomas Aquinas, proposed ontological proof for the existence of God. Man is not perfect, however, man can conceive of perfection. For man to be capable to conceive of perfection, perfection must exist objectively. God, therefore, must exist. It is also within ontology that questions concerning whether the universe merely consists of the material world we can see and touch or whether the universe has a spiritual side beyond the observable are examined.

The Great Conversation of philosophical inquiry, that every philosopher takes part in, occurs when individuals attempt to answer these questions and engage the answers left by philosophers before them. By understanding how philosophers before you have answered these questions, you can better understand the questions and how to discern truth from error. To give you a clearer picture of ontology, consider some philosopher’s views on being. Plato believed that being was “[p]erfect, unchanging, ideal forms [that] lend order and understanding to physical reality.”^v Aristotle posited that “[e]ach identifiable thing has an essence that supplies it with a purpose culminating in the prime mover.”^{vi} Medieval scholastic philosopher, Thomas Aquinas claimed that “[r]eality was created by God according to his plan (confirmed by the ‘ontological proof’).”^{vii} Portuguese-Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza believed that “[r]eality is all one substance, including God and nature; everything that exists is part of this one substance, which is capable of thought (vitalism).”^{viii} Father of rationalism, Renee Descartes said that “[p]hysical

reality works according to mechanical principles. In addition, there is a spiritual reality, including God and the mind, that can think (dualism)."^{ix} The questions of ontology are crucial to understand and answer within a biblical worldview, because they concern the very nature and existence of God and His creation.

Though philosophy is categorized into three main branches, as seen by the ontological proof of God's existence, these categories can overlap. The ontological proof for God's existence claimed that because humans have an understanding of perfection, perfection must exist. This moves the discussion into the realm of knowing. The study of knowing in formal philosophy is called epistemology. Looking at the ontological proof for God's existence, you see implied that to know something it must have real existence otherwise the concept cannot be known within the human mind. This is an epistemological claim. Epistemology asks: How do we know what we know?

Again going to the Great Conversation, you see several different answers to the question of knowledge. Rationalism, as proposed by Descartes, begins with the certainty of a person's self-awareness of his own existence, as stated in Descartes famous statement, "Cogito ergo sum," which means, "I think therefore I am." From this starting point of "because I question my own existence, I know I exist," Rationalism finds sensory experience suspect as a reliable source of knowledge. Rationalism claims that humans can find knowledge and truth without experience, but with reason alone. Knowledge is reason.

The exact opposite position of Empiricism, however, as held by Francis Bacon, claimed that you could not trust knowledge until it has been tested through experience. For the Empiricist, outside of experience there is no knowledge or certainty. This position is suspicious of anything that cannot be seen, touched, or measured in some quantifiable way. Knowledge is experience.

Moving to the German Romantic philosopher, Immanuel Kant, you begin to see how epistemology moves further away from the real world. Kant proposed Idealism as the answer to epistemological questions. Idealism claims that

knowledge is completely dependent on how your own mind processes the information that you receive empirically through your senses. With Idealism, no two people necessarily process the same empirical data the same way. Idealism introduces the concept of subjectivity to epistemology. Suddenly, knowledge is different for every person. Knowledge is the rational understanding of experience.

Moving forward again to Karl Marx, he claimed that, “social relationships influence the way people think, ‘knowledge’ is limited and structured by the way we see to our material needs. Marx called this structured knowledge ideology.”^x An ideology is “a system of beliefs or ideas that reinforce the values of a particular class or group of people.”^{xi} For Marx, knowledge is a construct of your environment. Knowledge is ideology. These four views of epistemology dominate the way people think about knowledge today. Understanding how you know something with certainty is vital within the biblical worldview. How you answer the questions of epistemology determines whether you believe if truth can ever be known or not.

The third, and final, branch of philosophy concerns your actions. This is ethics or axiology. Whereas ontology and epistemology, asks questions about how things are (empirical questions), ethics asks about how things ought to be (normative questions). Ethics wants to know what is right and wrong in actions. Within ethics there exist two major divisions: deontology and teleology.

Deontological ethics when evaluating a situation (making value judgments is also part of ethics) asks: What are the rights of the individuals involved or affected by this decision or action? The most important consideration of deontology is protecting the rights of the individuals in all situations. Teleological ethics when evaluating a situation asks: What are the consequences of this decision or action? The most important consideration of teleology is obtaining a good result for the majority of people involved.

Looking at an example will show the two very different results that occur with these two ethical approaches. Imagine a bomb shelter with only enough oxygen for six people for ten days that contains seven people for ten days.

Teleological ethics tells you that one person has to be removed from the shelter for the good of the remaining six. The concern for the teleologist is the result, the best result for the most people. The question that is raised by this ethical system is how do you decide who goes? Who is less important than anyone else in that shelter? Who deserves to survive? Deontological ethics tells you instead that no one is removed. No one person's rights can be violated for the sake of the group. Other options to extend the oxygen supply can be explored or if one person makes the decision to sacrifice himself for the survival of the remaining six that is his choice. But it is the choice of that individual, not something decided and demanded by the group. One person's life is not any more valuable than another's according to deontology.

Remember as you begin a formal study of philosophy that these questions, while simple lead to some complex answers, but that these questions touch the very foundations of who you are.

The philosophers' search for the truth resembles a detective story. Some think Andersen was the murderer, others think it was Nielsen or Jensen. The police are sometimes able to solve the real crime. But it is equally possible that they never get to the bottom of it, although there is a solution somewhere. So even if it is difficult to answer a question, there may be one – and only one – right answer. Either there is a kind of existence after death – or there is not.^{xii}

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ⁱ Jostein Gaarder, Sophie's World (New York, Berkley Books, 1994) 2.

ⁱⁱ Gaarder 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jay Stevenson, The Complete Idiot's Guide to Philosophy (New York, Penguin Group, 2005) 11.

^{iv} Holy Bible, English Standard Version (New York, Crossway, 2001) Exodus 3:14.

^v Stevenson 14.

^{vi} Stevenson 14.

^{vii} Stevenson 14.

^{viii} Stevenson 14.

^{ix} Stevenson 14.

^x Stevenson 26.

^{xi} Stevenson 26.

^{xii} Gaarder 13.