

1000-Word PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY

1000wordphilosophy.com/2020/10/10/philosophy/

Philosophy

Author: Thomas Metcalf

Category: [Metaphilosophy](#)

Word count: 1000

If you've ever wondered whether God exists, whether life has purpose, whether beauty is in the eye of the beholder, what makes actions right or wrong, or whether a law is fair or just, then you've thought about philosophy. And these are just a few philosophical topics.

But what is philosophy? The question is itself a philosophical question. This essay surveys some answers.

1. Defining Philosophy

The most general definition of philosophy is that it is the pursuit of wisdom, truth, and knowledge.^[1] Indeed, the word itself means 'love of wisdom' in Greek.

Whenever people think about deep, fundamental questions concerning the nature of the universe and ourselves, the limits of human knowledge, their values and the meaning of life, they are thinking about philosophy. Philosophical thinking is found in all parts of the world, present, and past.^[2]

In the academic world, philosophy distinguishes a certain area of study from all other areas, such as the sciences and other humanities. Philosophers typically consider questions that are, in some sense, broader and/or more fundamental than other inquirers' questions:^[3] e.g. physicists ask *what caused* some event; philosophers ask whether causation even *exists*; historians study figures who fought for justice; philosophers ask what justice *is* or whether their causes were in fact just; economists study the allocation of capital; philosophers debate the ethical merits of *capitalism*.

When a topic becomes amenable to rigorous, empirical study, it tends to be "outsourced" to its own field, and not described in the present day as

"philosophy" anymore: e.g., the natural sciences were once called "natural philosophy," but we don't now just *think* about whether matter is composed of atoms or infinitely divisible: we use scientific experiments.^[4] And most of the different doctoral degrees are called "Doctor of Philosophy" even when they're in sociology or chemistry.

Philosophical questions can't be straightforwardly investigated through purely empirical means:^[5] e.g. try to imagine a lab experiment testing whether societies should privilege equality over freedom—not whether people *believe* we should, but whether we *actually should*. What does moral importance look like in a microscope?

The main method of academic philosophy is to construct and evaluate *arguments* (i.e. reasons intended to justify some conclusion). Such conclusions might be that some theory is true or false or might be about the correct *analysis* or *definition* of some concept. These arguments generally have at least some conceptual, intellectual, or *a priori*, i.e., non-empirical, content. And philosophers often incorporate relevant scientific knowledge as premises in arguments.^[6]

2. Branches of Philosophy

Philosophy deals with fundamental questions. But which questions, specifically, is philosophy about? Here's a standard categorization:^[7]

Logic: Logicians study good and bad arguments and reasoning, and they study formal, symbolic languages intended to express propositions, sentences, or arguments.^[8]

Metaphysics: Metaphysicians study what sorts of entities exist, what the world and its constituents are made of, and how objects or events might cause or explain each other.^[9]

Epistemology: Epistemologists study knowledge, evidence, and justified belief. An epistemologist might study whether we can trust our senses and whether science is trustworthy.^[10]

Values: In value theory, philosophers study morality, politics, and art, among other topics. For example: What makes wrong actions wrong? How do we identify good people and good lives? What makes a society just or unjust?^[11]

There are many sub-branches within these fields. Many other fields—the sciences, art, literature, and religion—have a "philosophy of" attached to them:

e.g. philosophers of science might help interpret quantum mechanics; philosophers of religion often consider arguments about the existence of God.^[12]

There are also unique and important philosophical discussions about certain populations or communities, such as feminist philosophy and Africana philosophy.^[13] People from all cultures contribute to philosophy, more than are typically discussed in Western philosophy courses.^[14] Western academic philosophy has often neglected voices from non-Western cultures, and women's voices.^[15]

Philosophers sometimes import tools, knowledge, and language from other fields, such as using the formal tools of statistics in epistemology and the insights from special relativity in the philosophy of time.^[16] When your project is understanding all of existence^[17] in the broadest and most fundamental way, you need all the help you can get.

3. The Point(s) of Philosophy

Academic philosophy doesn't present a body of consensus knowledge the way chemistry and physics do.^[18] Do philosophical questions have correct answers? Does philosophical progress exist? Does philosophy get closer to the truth over time?^[19] These are all matters of philosophical debate.^[20] And philosophical debates are rarely resolved with certainty.

So what's the point? Here are some answers:^[21]

- To discover truth, wherever and whatever it is.^[22]
- To learn how to better live our lives.^[23]
- To understand our own views, including their strengths and weaknesses.
- To examine our own lives and be more conscious of our choices and their implications.
- To learn how to better think and reason. Recall: The main method of philosophy is to present and examine arguments.^[24]

And arguably, all of us are already naturally interested in at least some philosophical questions. Many people find that philosophy is a lot of fun. And it's difficult to dispute that it is very important to find the answers to philosophical questions, if the answers exist. It's important to know, for instance, that slavery is wrong and whether scientific consensus is generally trustworthy. So as long as it's

at least *possible* to find the answers to these questions, we should try.

Also, there are strong correlations between studying philosophy and high achievement in other academic areas, such as GRE scores and professional-school admission.^[25]

4. Conclusion

We've contrasted philosophy with other fields. We've looked at the branches of philosophy. And we've looked at the purposes or benefits of philosophy. But what *is* philosophy, really? Given everything we've said so far, we can provide at least a partial definition of 'philosophy' as follows:

A largely (but not exclusively) non-empirical inquiry that attempts to identify and answer fundamental questions about the world, including about what's valuable and disvaluable.

Is this a good definition? That's a philosophical question too.

Acknowledgments

This entry has benefited enormously from the comments and suggestions of Shane Gronholz, Chelsea Haramia, Dan Lowe, and Nathan Nobis.

Notes

[1] Berkeley 2003 [1710]: 5; Blackburn 1999: 1.

[2] Some of the oldest formal philosophy writing we have is attributed to a group of ancient Greek philosophers called the 'Pre-Socratics,' because they wrote before Socrates and Plato did (cf. Curd 2019). The earliest Upanishads may go back even further (Olivelle 1998: 4 ff.).

[3] This is similar to Encyclopaedia Britannica's (n.d.) definition: "the rational, abstract, and methodical consideration of reality as a whole or of fundamental dimensions of human existence and experience."

[4] See e.g. Berryman 2020 on ancient atomism.

[5] Metcalf 2018.

[6] Most philosophers believe that the sciences provide knowledge relevant to traditional philosophical issues. That is, most philosophers endorse the meta-philosophy of 'naturalism,' according to which philosophy should be informed by the natural sciences. The usual justification for naturalism is based on the track-record of the natural sciences, including their tending toward consensus. See Bourget and Chalmers 2014: 476; Metcalf 2018;

and Papineau 2019. For examples of the relevance of science to traditional philosophical issues, see Ingram and Tallent (2019: § 8); Wilce 2019; and Knobe and Nichols 2019. In these examples, special relativity may be relevant to philosophy of time; quantum mechanics may be relevant to philosophy of logic; and social science may be relevant to ethics.

[7] This is a version of common anthologies' categorizations. See e.g. Blackburn 1999: vii and Rosen et al. 2015.

[8] Logicians can also study logics about obligation (McNamara 2019), about necessity and possibility (Garson 2019), and whether useful logics can contain sentences that are both true and false simultaneously (Priest et al. 2019).

[9] Van Inwagen and Sullivan 2019.

[10] Steup 2019; Metcalf 2020.

[11] Value theorists also study specific topics, such as our obligations to animals (Gruen 2019) and whether governments can be legitimate (Peter 2019). See also Haramia 2018 (the entry on applied ethics in *1000-Word Philosophy*) for an overview of applied ethics.

[12] Indeed, one area where people see many connections is with religion. So what's the difference between philosophy and religion? This is not an easy question to answer, but most religious practice proceeds from a shared starting-point consensus body of putative knowledge, and these beliefs are almost all about God or gods, the afterlife, and how to live a pious life. In contrast, in philosophy, everything is constantly open to question, and the topics are much broader than gods and the afterlife.

[13] See e.g. McAfee 2019 and Outlaw 2019.

[14] Van Norden 2017.

[15] See e.g. Van Norden (op. cit.) and Buxton and Whiting 2020.

[16] Indeed, one popular metaphilosophical view is methodological naturalism about philosophy, according to which philosophy should use the methods of the natural sciences. Some naturalists go so far as to say that traditional philosophical methods should be replaced by scientific methods. See Metcalf 2018 and Papineau 2019 for more discussion. As for tools and knowledge from other fields, statistical and probabilistic analysis is common in many areas of philosophy (see, e.g., Weisberg 2019) and special relativity may tell us something important about the philosophy of time (Ingram and Tallant 2019).

[17] And maybe even the objects that don't exist; see Reicher 2019.

[18] Bourget and Chalmers 2014. Arguably, there is consensus about many philosophical questions, but we don't consider those questions in academic philosophy, at least not anymore. For example, almost everyone knows that slavery is wrong and that women should be allowed to vote if anyone is. See also Gutting 2009 for a general survey of some apparent philosophical discoveries.

[19] Cf. Chalmers 2015.

[20] See, e.g., Miller 2019.

[21] See Bierce 2008; de Montaigne 1987: 204; Russell 2010: 20 for some other statements about the nature or purpose of philosophy.

[22] Bierce 2008.

[23] De Montaigne 1987: 204.

[24] See e.g. Groarke 2019.

[25] Daily Nous n.d. However, we do not yet know what proportion of this is a 'selection effect'—people who are *already* smart major in philosophy—and how much of this is a 'treatment effect,' i.e., majoring in philosophy actually *makes* you smarter.

References

Berkeley, George. 2003 [1710]. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. Mineola, NY: Dover Philosophical Classics.

Berryman, Sylvia. 2019. "Ancient Atomism." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/atomism-ancient/>

Bierce, Ambrose. 2008. "The Devil's Dictionary." In Project Gutenberg (ed.), Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/972/972-h/972-h.htm>

Blackburn, Simon. 1999. *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy*. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bourget, David and David J. Chalmers. 2014. "What Do Philosophers Believe?" *Philosophical Studies* 170(3): 465-500.

Buxton, Rebecca and Lisa Whiting. 2020. *The Philosopher Queens: The Lives and Legacies of*

Philosophy's Unsung Women. London, UK: Unbound Publishers.

Chalmers, David J. 2015. "Why Isn't There More Progress in Philosophy?" *Philosophy* 90(1): 3-31.

Curd, Patricia. 2019. "Presocratic Philosophy." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/presocratics/>

Daily Nous. n.d. "Value of Philosophy." <http://dailynous.com/value-of-philosophy/>

De Montaigne, Michel. 1987. *Complete Essays*. Tr. M. A. Screech. London, UK: Penguin Books.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. N.d. "Philosophy." In The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Online Edition. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy>

Garson, James. 2019. "Modal Logic." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/logic-modal/>

Groarke, Leo. 2019. "Informal Logic." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/logic-informal/>

Gruen, Lori. 2019. "The Moral Status of Animals." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/moral-animal/>

Gutting, Gary. 2009. *What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Haramia, Chelsea. 2018. "Applied Ethics." In Nathan Nobis et al. (eds.), *1000-Word Philosophy*. <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2018/02/13/applied-ethics/>

Ingram, David and Jonathan Tallant. 2019. "Presentism." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/presentism/>

Knobe, Joshua and Shaun Nichols. 2019. "Experimental Philosophy." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The*

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/experimental-philosophy/>

Markosian, Ned. 2019. "Time." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/time/>

McAfee, Noëlle. 2019. "Feminist Philosophy." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/feminist-philosophy/>

McNamara, Paul. 2019. "Deontic Logic." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/logic-deontic/>

Metcalf, Thomas. 2018. "Philosophy and Its Contrast with Science." In Nathan Nobis et al. (eds.), *1000-Word Philosophy*. <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2018/02/13/philosophy-and-its-contrast-with-science/>

Metcalf, Thomas. 2020. "Epistemology, or Theory of Knowledge." In Nathan Nobis et al. (eds.), *1000-Word Philosophy*. <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2020/08/24/epistemology-or-theory-of-knowledge/>

Miller, Alexander. 2019. "Realism." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/realism/>

Olivelle, Patrick (tr. and ed.). 1998. *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation*. New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Outlaw, Lucius T. Jr. 2019. "Africana Philosophy." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/africana/>

Papineau, David. 2019. "Naturalism." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/naturalism/>

Peter, Fabienne. 2019. "Political Legitimacy." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019

Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/legitimacy/>

Priest, Graham et al. 2019. "Paraconsistent Logic." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/logic-paraconsistent/>

Reicher, Maria. 2019. "Nonexistent Objects." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/nonexistent-objects/>

Rosen, Gideon et al. 2015. *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, Second Edition. New York, NY and London, UK: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.

Russell, Bertrand. 2010. *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Oxford, UK: Routledge Classics.

Sartwell, Crispin. 2019. "Beauty." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/beauty/>

Steup, Matthias. 2019. "Epistemology." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/epistemology/>

Van Inwagen, Peter and Meghan Sullivan. 2019. "Metaphysics." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/metaphysics/>

Van Norden, Bryan W. 2017. *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Weisberg, Jonathan. 2019. "Formal Epistemology." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/formal-epistemology/>

Wilce, Alexander. 2019. "Quantum Logic and Probability Theory." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2019 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/qt-quantlog/>

Related Essays

[Applied Ethics](#) by Chelsea Haramia

[Epistemology, or Theory of Knowledge](#) by Thomas Metcalf.

[Philosophy and its Contrast with Science](#) by Thomas Metcalf.

[All Essays at 1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology](#)

About the Author

Tom is an assistant professor at Spring Hill College in Mobile, AL. He received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Colorado, Boulder. He specializes in ethics, metaethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of religion. Tom has two cats whose names are Hesperus and Phosphorus.

<http://shc.academia.edu/ThomasMetcalf>

Follow 1000-Word Philosophy on Facebook, Twitter and subscribe to receive email notifications of new essays at 1000WordPhilosophy.com