

Introduction to Western Philosophy

Course notes by Richard Baron

Notes for the first session

This document is available at www.rbphilosophy.com/coursenotes

Philia + sophia: love of wisdom

Wisdom about what?

What style of wisdom - like science, like art or the meaning of life?

Philosophy has style(s)

Western, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, African, Latin American, Polynesian

Historical phases in Western philosophy: ancient, medieval, modern

Anglo-American and Continental philosophy

Some philosophical questions

Logic

What counts as good reasoning?

What fallacies should we look out for?

Metaphysics

What things exist? (ontology) – elephants, the concept of an elephant, the force of gravity, the number 7?

Could there have been a first moment in time?

Philosophy of mind

Is the mind the same thing as the brain?

Could robots be conscious?

Epistemology (theory of knowledge)

What is knowledge?
Can we know anything?

Philosophy of science

How does good scientific reasoning work?
Are scientific theories true, or are they just useful?

Ethics

Are there any absolute moral rules?
Should we just aim to make people happy?

Political philosophy

What makes governments legitimate?
Is democracy a good idea?

Aesthetics

What is beauty?
How does art convey messages to us?

Philosophy of religion

Does God exist?
If God does exist, why is there evil in the world?

T'ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it

Philosophy covers topics that are also covered by sciences, the arts and religions.

In many disciplines, we want a better match between the world and our view of it. If the world and our view match perfectly, we might say we have found the truth.

In western academic philosophy, we are more willing than in other disciplines to challenge our fundamental assumptions. We can:

- re-define our concepts;
- challenge our methods of reasoning;
- try out different ways of looking at the world as a whole.

We also seek the most general answers. "What is knowledge?" asks for a definition that will cover as many types of knowledge as possible, and exclude anything which does not strike us as really being knowledge.

Other styles of philosophy have comparable characteristics. Finding ultimate wisdom may mean:

- stepping outside all of your usual concepts;
- challenging your most basic assumptions;
- grasping the most general principles of the universe.

Why do philosophy?

Truth, understanding and the right attitude to life look like good things to have. We can learn a lot from the sciences and the arts, but if we do not challenge our concepts, our reasoning and our way of looking at the world, we might mislead ourselves. We might also miss out on some big unifying principles.

If you think about how to live, you have a better chance of living well. (But don't spend all your time thinking about living!)

The arts and sciences are richer and more exciting when we think about them philosophically. What ideas are being conveyed in your favourite novel, and do you agree with them? If human beings were routinely cloned, what would that do to our sense of our identity?

Philosophy can help us to answer political and social questions. Should we go to war to overthrow dictators? What limits should there be on free speech? How should we resolve ethical dilemmas in the practice of medicine?

How to do philosophy

Discussion

Testing your ideas in debate is great. Always take the opportunity.

- Don't be afraid of radical ideas – your own or other people's.
- Don't worry if your ideas do not survive other people's objections.
- Try to argue for and against the ideas rather than the people.
- Try to use reason and evidence, rather than rhetorical gimmicks.

You can find links to the websites of several philosophical societies in London at www.rbphilos.com.

Reading

There are plenty of introductory texts. Browse in a bookshop or library to find one that suits you.

As soon as you can, get stuck into the great philosophers. These people are very old and very famous, but they are also very approachable. You really can read their texts and argue with them. Some are easier to read than others. Browse in a bookshop or library to see who you get on with, but Plato, Descartes and Hume are worth a look.

You can find articles on most philosophers and philosophical topics on the Internet, but don't believe everything you read (philosophers never do anyway). Sites to try include:

<http://www.philosophyprofessor.com>

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/> (This site has substantial scholarly articles)

Writing

Writing is a great way to force yourself to make your thoughts precise. Pick any philosophical question you like, and try to answer it in writing. Then look at your answer, criticise and improve it. If you can get someone else to review your answer, so much the better.

A few megastars of western philosophy

Ancient Greeks

Socrates (469 – 399 BC)
Plato (427 – 347 BC)
Aristotle (384 – 322 BC)

Medieval philosophers

Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430)
Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274)

Continental rationalists

René Descartes (1596 – 1650)
Baruch/Benedict de Spinoza (1632 – 1677)
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646 – 1716)

British empiricists

John Locke (1632 – 1704)
George Berkeley (1685 – 1753)
David Hume (1711 – 1776)

Great Germans

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831)
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900)

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries

Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970)
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951)
Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976)
Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980)
Willard van Orman Quine (1908 – 2000)
A J Ayer (1910 – 1989)
Donald Davidson (1917 – 2003)
Elizabeth Anscombe (1919 – 2001)
John Rawls (1921 – 2002)
Bernard Williams (1929 – 2003)
Martha Nussbaum (1947 –)

Example of a philosophical argument

Glaucon sees justice as a social contract (Plato, Republic 358e)

They say that to do injustice is, by nature, good; to suffer injustice, evil; but that the evil is greater than the good. So when men have both done and suffered injustice and have had experience of both, and they realise that they cannot do injustice without also suffering it, they think that they had better agree among themselves to have neither. Hence laws and agreements arise. What the law says people must do is what they call lawful and just. This they affirm to be the origin and nature of justice. It is a compromise between the best of all, which is to do injustice and not be punished, and the worst of all, which is to suffer injustice without the power of retaliation. Justice, being at a middle point between the two, is tolerated not as a good, but as the lesser evil. It is honoured because men cannot do injustice. For no man who is worthy to be called a man would ever submit to such an agreement if he were able to resist. He would be mad if he did. Such is the received account, Socrates, of the nature and origin of justice.