
PRELIMINARIES

Fred Feldman, A Cartesian
Introduction to Philosophy, pp 1-13.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy is one of the strangest of academic disciplines. It differs from most other disciplines in several interesting respects. I want to begin by pointing out three interesting respects in which I think philosophy is strange.

Suppose you are browsing in a bookstore, and you see a book entitled *Modern European History*. Even before you open that book, you will have a pretty good idea of what's to be found inside. You will know that the book contains accounts of some of the more important political, military, social, and intellectual developments that took place in Europe during the past few hundred years or so. Of course, you may not know exactly how these events are described, and you may know almost nothing of the events themselves. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which it is correct to say that you know what the book is about, even before you read it.

A similar thing would happen if you were to pick up a book entitled *Elements of Nursing* or *Fundamentals of Wildlife Management*. While you would probably be ignorant of the details (and perhaps that's why you need to read the book) you would have a fairly accurate conception of the subject matter of the book. You would know that the book about nursing would contain accounts of the main jobs that nurses have to perform, and it would contain descriptions of the equipment and procedures with which nurses must be familiar. A similar point holds in the case of the book about wildlife management. Even before you open the book, you know that it contains accounts of the problems faced by a wildlife manager, and it probably also contains descriptions of various successful and unsuccessful methods for dealing with those problems. Perhaps it would be fair to put the point in this way: with most academic disciplines, even though beginners may be ignorant of the

answers to the questions in those disciplines, at least they know what the main questions are.

In this respect, philosophy is not like these other disciplines. Quite frequently, people who have not studied philosophy in any formal way find that they simply have no conception of philosophy at all. Even intelligent and reasonably well-educated people may simply "draw a blank" when they are asked about the nature of philosophy. My own personal experience bears this out. Often at a social gathering, a stranger will ask me what I do. I say that I teach philosophy. The stranger will then mumble something about how interesting that must be, and will say that he had once intended to take a course in that. Then, after a few moments of awkward silence, he will wander off looking for a fresh drink. I'm convinced that this sort of reaction is to be explained (at least in some cases) by the fact that my answer has meant just about nothing to the stranger. He doesn't want to admit his ignorance, but he doesn't know what to say next.

So the first respect in which philosophy is odd has to do with the extent to which outsiders understand what it's about. People who have not studied philosophy often have no clear conception of the subject matter of philosophy. Most other disciplines are not like this. Outsiders generally have a fairly good idea of the subject matters of those disciplines.

A second interesting fact about philosophy has to do with the extent to which the field has been misconceived by outsiders. Some people think it has something to do with "taking things philosophically." They think that philosophers are people who have learned to accept the bumps and bruises of life with a calm, resigned, fatalistic attitude. The study of philosophy, as they conceive of it, should have a straightforward payoff. The more we know about it, the greater will be our capacity to deal with misfortune.

It must be admitted that there is some historical basis for this misconception. Quite a few ancient philosophers apparently claimed that the study of philosophy would be beneficial in this way. Furthermore, there are certain Oriental schools of thought that clearly do advocate fatalism and calm resignation, and some of these are called "philosophies." However, the modern Western academic discipline of philosophy does not answer to this conception. Very little of what goes on in the classroom, and just about none of what goes on in professional journals and books, is directed toward the end of making us more "philosophical," in this sense.

Sometimes, when a person is asked to explain his philosophy, he will respond by stating some grand, general principles that have guided him in his career. For example, a professional football coach might say that his philosophy is this: "Winning isn't just the main thing. Winning is the only thing." Another coach might say that he has a different philosophy: "It isn't whether you win or lose. It's how you play the game."

No matter what activity or occupation we choose, we can find someone who will expound a philosophy of that activity. I have heard fishermen debating various philosophies of fishing; and I have heard gardeners debating various philosophies of gardening. If you watch certain television shows, you will have the opportunity of hearing motion picture directors and other show business celebrities discussing

their philosophies, too. You might even say that a maxim such as "There's no substitute for cubic inches" is the philosophy that for many years guided certain American automobile manufacturers.

If academic philosophy had something to do with this sort of "philosophy of _____" then it would be hard to see how there could be any such academic field as philosophy. What would philosophers do? Surely it would be absurd to suppose that the academic philosopher would be an expert in all fields of human activity. In any case, it doesn't matter. Academic philosophy, as it is currently practiced, has virtually nothing to do with the philosophy of gardening or the philosophy of fishing. If you want to discover some grand general principles that can guide your investment policy, or your selection of roommates, philosophy is not the place to look.

So the second odd thing about philosophy is this: quite frequently, when an outsider does have a conception of philosophy, it turns out that his conception is very seriously distorted. People who have not studied philosophy in any rigorous way, but who have merely drifted into some notion of what it is about, quite often have drifted into a mistaken notion. I think that the extent to which this happens in the case of philosophy is greater than the extent to which it happens in other academic disciplines.

The third odd thing about philosophy has to do with the fact that philosophy is "reflective." By this, I mean to indicate that one of the things that philosophers think about is the question, "what is philosophy?" The question about the nature of philosophy is itself a question in philosophy. Quite a few major figures in philosophy gained their professional fame by defending views about what philosophy is or how it ought to be pursued. Some, in fact, gained their greatest fame (or notoriety) by claiming either that philosophy is dead or that it never existed in the first place. Such debates are said to be in "metaphilosophy," which is generally considered to be the philosophical study of philosophy.

Of course, historians have reflected on the nature of history, and mathematicians have reflected on the nature of mathematics. For every academic discipline, we can raise the question concerning its nature and proper practice. However, when we raise these questions, we leave the sphere of the discipline in question. The question, "what is history?" is not a question in history—it is a question in the philosophy of history. Similarly, the question, "what is the nature of law?" is not a question in law—it is a question in the philosophy of law. So I am not saying that there is no question about the nature of any other discipline. I'm saying that, for each other discipline, the question about its nature is not a question in it. It is a question in the philosophy of that discipline. When a historian begins to reflect on the nature of his field of study, he leaves history proper, and enters "metahistory," and begins to tackle philosophical questions.

So, in my view, there are at least three interesting respects in which philosophy differs from most other academic disciplines. First, so many outsiders have no conception of philosophy. Second, so many outsiders have distorted conceptions of philosophy. Finally, philosophy is reflective. The question about the nature of philosophy is itself a question in philosophy.

SOME CONCEPTIONS OF PHILOSOPHY

The question about the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question. Furthermore, it is a disputed question. Different philosophers answer the question in different ways. Let's consider some of the most popular answers.

Philosophy as the Love of Wisdom

Some philosophers adopt what I call the "Etymological Approach." They note that the word "philosophy" is derived from two Greek words, "philos" and "sophia," which are generally translated as "lover" and "wisdom." Thus, it is frequently said that philosophy is the love of wisdom, and a philosopher is a person who loves wisdom. This conception of philosophy is apparently presupposed by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (ca. 428 B.C. – 347 B.C.). In Books V and VI of his Republic, Plato discusses the view that philosophers ought to be kings, and he characterizes the true philosopher as a person who loves wisdom.

I suspect that there may have been a time in the distant past when something like this suggestion was true. Perhaps in ancient Greece everyone who loved wisdom was entitled to the Greek equivalent of the name "philosopher," and there may even have been a time when everyone who was properly called a philosopher did in fact love wisdom. But whether or not the etymological approach was true at some time in the past, it is surely not true now. Nowadays, there are millions of people who love wisdom, but who are not philosophers. For example, consider any biblical scholar who pursues his or her research with genuine devotion. Such a person apparently loves wisdom, but for all that he or she is still not a philosopher. For that matter, consider a mathematician or physicist or any other academic who pursues his or her research with the relevant sort of love. In spite of their love of wisdom, these people are properly housed in the department of mathematics or the department of physics. They are not misplaced philosophers.

It might be suggested that I have misunderstood the proposal. It's not that philosophy is supposed to be the love of wisdom. Rather, the idea is that philosophy is the love of wisdom for *its* own sake, and philosophers are people who love wisdom for its own sake. Perhaps academics in other fields pursue wisdom only because it will help them achieve better results in mathematics, physics, history, and the rest. Only philosophers, it might be said, pursue wisdom for its own sake. Philosophers want to be wise, but not because they think wisdom will make them richer or more powerful. They seek wisdom because they think wisdom is good in itself.

This modification makes the proposal even less plausible. For, in the first place, surely it is possible for there to be philosophers who do not **love** wisdom for its own sake. Maybe they are just in it for the money. This wouldn't make their work any less philosophical, and it wouldn't make them any less philosophers. In the second place, we must recognize that plenty of nonphilosophers do love wisdom for its own sake. A mathematician might love mathematical wisdom just for itself and not for any ulterior purpose. The same holds true of a physicist, a historian, and even for the baseball fan who is proud of knowing the lifetime **batting** average of every player

in the National League since 1900. Such people **may just** love to have the knowledge they have, even though it is not particularly useful. So that can't be the mark of the philosopher.

Perhaps someone will say that what's distinctive about philosophers is not just that they love wisdom — plenty of others can make the same claim. What's special in the case of the philosopher is something about the sort of wisdom that he or she loves. This is a deeper and more general sort of wisdom. We can call it "philosophical wisdom." No matter how much some mathematician loves mathematical wisdom, that won't make the mathematician into a philosopher. To be a philosopher, on this proposal, one must love *philosophical* wisdom.

The emptiness of this version of the etymological approach should be clear. We get no insight at all into the nature of philosophy if we are merely told that philosophy is the love of philosophical wisdom. In order to give this suggestion some point, we would have to add some clear account of the nature of "philosophical wisdom." Perhaps it will be said that philosophical wisdom is the sort of wisdom sought in philosophy. Now, however, the proposal is clearly circular. That is, in our effort to explain what philosophy is, we make use of the concept of "philosophical wisdom." Then, when we try to explain this otherwise unexplained term, we make use of the concept of philosophy. But this is the very concept we want to understand! Explanations such as this one, which make essential use of the concept they purport to explain, are said to be circular. It's hard to see how any such explanation could be enlightening.

Philosophy as the Queen of the Sciences

According to another conception, philosophy should be viewed as "Queen of the Sciences." In order to understand this proposal, we must first consider some ideas about the various sciences. We might suppose that for each science, there is a certain body of empirical data concerning particular concrete facts (e.g., the gas in this closed container was heated, and its pressure went up). In addition to this factual data, there are various generalizations (e.g., whenever any gas in any closed container is heated, its pressure goes up). Once we reach a certain level of abstraction, the generalizations may be considered scientific laws. By appeal to them, we can explain and predict the data to be found at the lower level within the science.

Furthermore, for each science, there are certain fundamental concepts. These concepts are used by the scientists within the field, but are not subjected to scrutiny within that field. For example, a biologist might make use of the concepts of *oxygen*, *water*, and *heat* quite frequently, but biologists are not especially interested in studying these concepts. Chemists and physicists (perhaps not much interested in biology) are better qualified to investigate such concepts.

If each scientist works exclusively within his or her own domain, it may turn out that the highest-level generalizations of one science do not mesh very well with those of other sciences. Furthermore, it may turn out that the fundamental concepts employed by the biologist will be found to conflict with those of the chemist. But if the biologist sticks to biology, and chemist sticks to chemistry, such "interscientific

discontinuities" may never be discovered. In order to ensure that this doesn't happen, someone has to master the concepts and generalizations of all the main sciences, and determine whether or not there are conflicts. If such conflicts are discovered, this person has to suggest adjustments that will remove them.

There is a tradition according to which this job is the central job of the philosopher. The maxim here is that philosophy is the queen of the sciences. In a remarkable passage, Henry Sidgwick forcibly expressed this position. He said that the primary job of the philosopher is:

to coordinate the most important general notions and fundamental principles of the various sciences.'

It's easy to understand how a philosophical novice could be pretty frightened if he thought that he was about to embark upon a study of the queen of the sciences. I suspect that there are very few people in the world today who would be able to pursue such a subject. Surely, the typical college student is not quite ready to take it on. Nowadays, the various sciences are so complex and technical that one must study for years before achieving a satisfactory understanding of the fundamental principles of any one of them. Obviously, it would take a lifetime to prepare oneself to coordinate them all.

I do not think that it is correct to think of the modern academic discipline of philosophy as the queen of the sciences. The majority of currently practicing philosophers probably would not be able to undertake the sort of project Sidgwick described. At any rate, very few of them try. Furthermore, I think it is important to recognize that there are plenty of interesting problems that clearly do belong to philosophy, but which don't seem to fit very neatly into the framework of the queen of the sciences. For example, there are questions in ethics, aesthetics, and philosophical theology. It is hard to see why we need to solve these problems if our main goal is to **"coordinate the most important general notions and fundamental principles of the various sciences."**

Of course, there is such a thing as the philosophy of science, and some of the work done there seems to fit the description Sidgwick gave. So I'm not claiming that philosophers never do this sort of thing. Rather, my point is that it is wrong to *identify* philosophy in this way. Philosophy may include this coordination problem, but it contains a lot of other, seemingly unrelated problems, too.

Philosophy as a Method

Some philosophers have maintained that if you study philosophy, you will "learn how to **think**." **They** have suggested that a really good philosopher is one who has a whole bunch of important intellectual skills. The philosopher is good at spotting fallacious arguments, drawing subtle distinctions, and discovering previously unnoticed cases that refute seemingly plausible hypotheses. If you submit yourself to the philosopher's course of training, you too will end up with these wonderful

talents. Then, if you're smart, you will go into law or medicine or science, and make use of the abilities developed in your philosophy course.

Although I doubt that he would endorse this conception of philosophy, the author of a recent textbook summed up this conception of philosophy in a marvelous way:

Philosophy, that is, is a *method*. It is *learning how* to ask and re-ask questions until meaningful answers begin to appear. It is *learning how* to relate materials. It is *learning where* to go for the most dependable, up-to-date information that might shed light on some problem. It is *learning how* to double check fact-claims in order to verify or falsify them. It is *learning how* to reject fallacious fact-claims — to reject them no matter how prestigious the authority who holds them or how deeply one would personally like to believe them.²

This much I think is true: really good philosophers generally are able to spot fallacious arguments, draw subtle distinctions, and ask probing questions. Quite a few of them are also able to use the card catalogue in the library, and they usually can resist the conclusion of a weak argument, even if the person presenting the argument is very famous. So I think that good philosophers have at least some of the talents mentioned above in the passage from Professor Christian.

However, I do not think that we should conclude that "philosophy is a method." For, in the first place, the method described here is common to every form of serious intellectual activity. If you study to become a lawyer, you will surely have to learn to spot bad arguments, and to draw subtle distinctions. Furthermore, you will need to develop the ability to check your fact claims. The same can be said of the detective, the medical diagnostician, and the research chemist. They all have to reason carefully, avoid fallacious arguments, and make nice distinctions. Without these skills, a person is not fit for any sort of sustained, rigorous thought. So we mustn't think that philosophers have somehow cornered the market in clear thinking.

Furthermore, this conception of philosophy leaves out far too much. It suggests that there is no special subject matter for philosophy. It's as if philosophers had a nifty method for answering questions, but were utterly lacking in questions to which to apply the method. To apply the method, you would have to look into some other field of inquiry. Anyone who has studied philosophy for a while knows that this is wrong. There are plenty of philosophical questions. In addition to its method (which it largely shares with other intellectual disciplines) philosophy does have certain traditional subject matters.

Philosophy as Analysis

Some critics of recent British and American philosophy seem to think that philosophers spend all their time analyzing concepts. Some of these critics seem to think that philosophers have more important jobs to do, and so they also think that it's a

²James L. Christian. *Philosophy: an introduction to the art of wondering*, New York, 1977: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, p. xvii.

pity that so much time is wasted in conceptual analysis. Others apparently believe that if one is going to be a philosopher, then one must analyze concepts—since philosophy just *is* conceptual analysis. A person who takes this view may conclude that it's a pity that so much time is wasted in philosophy.

What's meant by "conceptual analysis"? Perhaps I can explain it by showing how it figures in a certain theory about concept development.

There is an old and rather plausible view according to which each person's mind starts off perfectly empty—a blank slate. Then, as individuals begin to have sensory experiences, they begin to have concepts. If they see a round, yellow, bumpy lemon, they will come to have the concepts of roundness, yellowness, and bumpiness. The same holds true for all the other simple concepts. The only way such concepts can get into the mind in the first place is by sensory experience.

Obviously, it would be wrong to suppose that *all* concepts come in by way of the senses, since some concepts do not correspond to anything we can sense. For example, consider the concept of an angel, or the concept of a frictionless bearing. No one has ever seen such things, and so the first person to entertain these concepts must have gotten them in some non-sensory way.

We can postulate the existence of some relatively small number of mental operations that can be performed on concepts. For example, consider conjunction. This is the operation of "putting together" two concepts. So, suppose you have the concept of yellowness (which you got by seeing a lemon) and you have the concept of a cube (which you got by seeing a pair of dice). Now you can conjoin these concepts so as to create the compound concept of a yellow cube—even if you have never seen or heard about a yellow cube.

Other mental operations might include abstraction, negation, conditionalization, etc. For present purposes the details are not important. Now we can state an interesting thesis about human concept development: if a person comes to have a certain concept, then either (a) he got it directly by sensory experience, or (b) he got it as a result of operations performed on other concepts he already had. This view is the empiricist thesis concerning concept development.

If you accept the empiricist thesis, then you are faced with the task of showing, in particular cases, how certain complex concepts could have been constructed out of concepts gained through sensory experience. This can be an extremely challenging project. In many instances, it is very hard to see how a certain concept could have been derived from sense experience at all. The concepts of *cause* and *effect*, of *good* and *evil*, and of *necessity* and *possibility*, for example, are exceedingly difficult to explain in the prescribed way.

Many empiricist philosophers have taken up this challenge, and have tried to show how the problematic concepts might have been constructed. Traditionally, the way in which this is done is by formulating definitions of the words that express the concepts in question. So, for example, if you wanted to analyze the concept of *cause*, you would try to present a satisfactory definition of the word "cause." Your definition might look something like this:

D1 *x* causes *y* = df. *x* is an event, and *y* is an event, *x* occurs before *y* occurs.

If the definition is a good one, then the expression on the right-hand side of the “=df.” sign expresses the same concept as does the expression on the left. Furthermore, every word that occurs on the right-hand side must be legitimate. It must express either a sensory concept, or a compound concept whose construction has already been explained, or one of the specified mental operations. If these conditions can be satisfied, then the definition shows how the concept of *cause* might have been constructed. (Obviously, D1 is not a very plausible proposal. I use it here merely to illustrate the form of an analytical definition.)

It is clear, then, that an empiricist philosopher might have reason to spend some time in conceptual analysis. However, it is unlikely that such a philosopher would pursue such analyses for their own sake. Rather, he or she would attempt to construct the analyses in order to show how the more fundamental empiricist thesis might be true. Analysis, in this case, would just be one of many philosophical projects.

There are other purposes for which a philosopher might want to produce an analysis. For example, he or she might want to draw an important distinction. Perhaps the best way to do this would require definitions of the terms to be distinguished. In all such cases, however, analysis is not the ultimate goal. There is always some further philosophical purpose. The analytical definition is produced, not for its own sake, but because the philosopher thinks it will be useful. Thus, it cannot be correct to say that philosophy just is conceptual analysis.

I do not know of anyone who seriously thinks that the central task of philosophy is analysis. Of course, there might be a few philosophers, unknown to me, who do maintain this view. Be that as it may, I do not maintain it, and this book is not written on the assumption that it is true. I think philosophers have other and more interesting challenges to face.

SOME MAIN FIELDS OF PHILOSOPHY

So far, then, I have described a variety of misconceptions of philosophy, but I have not yet said what philosophy is. Perhaps I can make the topic a bit clearer by saying something about the main fields **into** which philosophy is traditionally divided.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is sometimes said to be the philosophical study of the “ultimate nature of reality.” Although the words are surely sufficiently high-sounding, I suspect that they may carry very little meaning.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), was an enormously productive writer. His works (and works subsequently attributed to him) cover a wide range of topics, including many that would now be considered strictly scientific, rather than philosophical. According to a traditional story, several hundred years after Aristotle’s death, an editor called Andronicus of Rhodes attempted to organize his writings into a coherent collection. He found a number of essays that didn’t fit very well anywhere else, so he put them together, and filed them right after

Aristotle's book on physics. Since the new book was filed after the physics book, it came to be known as Aristotle's *Metaphysics*—"meta" meaning "after," and "physics" meaning "Physics." As a result of this historical accident, the modern field of metaphysics now consists largely of discussions of the topics that were treated by Aristotle in the essays included in that ancient book.

Some of the main questions in metaphysics, then, are these. What are the main sorts of things that exist in the world? Of these things, which are fundamental, and which are somehow constructed out of the others? What is the difference between a substance and its attributes? What is the nature of time and space? What are necessity and possibility? What is causation? What is truth? Unless you have already studied some metaphysics, I suspect that this explanation may be a bit too vague to be useful. If so, I encourage you to be patient. It will eventually become clearer.

Epistemology

Epistemology (or "Theory of Knowledge") is the philosophical study of knowledge. Since ancient times, it has been thought that a person knows something only if (a) he or she believes that thing; (b) it is true; and (c) he or she is justified in holding this belief—perhaps because he or she has adequate evidence in favor of it. In light of this, epistemology also includes the philosophical study of belief, truth, and justification. Furthermore, since so much of our knowledge seems to depend upon sensory experience, epistemology also includes the philosophical study of sense perception.

There is an interesting question about the scope of human knowledge. How much can we know? Are there any areas concerning which people cannot have any knowledge? Those who think that our knowledge is seriously limited in some way (the "skeptics") may try to prove that it is impossible to know certain things that most of us would normally assume can be known. A total skeptic would go so far as to say that it is impossible to know anything. The investigation of all such claims falls into the field of epistemology.

Ethics

Ethics is the philosophical study of such value concepts as right and wrong, and good and *evil*. Broadly conceived, ethics also includes reflection on such questions as these: What is the nature of "the good life"? What are the virtues and vices? What, if any, are the fundamental human rights? Do animals have rights? What is the connection between law and morality?

Two areas of philosophical inquiry that are closely allied with ethics are social and political philosophy and aesthetics. The former deals with a variety of questions concerning the nature and justification of the state. If you are wondering how social organization might have arisen, and when and why the needs of the society should take precedence over the rights of the individual, then you are raising questions normally studied in social and political philosophy. One of the fundamental questions here is the question how the state ought to be organized. Aesthetics is the **philosophical**

study of art. It includes inquiry into the nature of beauty and ugliness, just as ethics includes inquiry into the nature of right and wrong. Furthermore, aesthetics involves inquiry into the nature of the work of art itself. The question "what makes something a work of art?" is a question in aesthetics.

Some philosophers believe that their conclusions in ethics and the allied fields should be put into practice. So, for example, if a philosopher has come to the conclusion that the death penalty is always morally wrong, he or she might actively seek to bring about the repeal of the laws that permit capital punishment.

Logic

We can say that an argument is a series of sentences, the last of which (the conclusion) is supposed to follow from the others (the premises). In some cases, the conclusion really does follow. Any such argument is said to be *valid*.³

Logic is the study of the formal features of premises and conclusions in virtue of which certain arguments are valid, and others are invalid. Traditionally, it was assumed that every valid argument could be reformulated as some sort of syllogism. So, for example, consider this argument: "Socrates must be mortal. After all, he is only a man." In order to show why this is valid, we can recast it as a syllogism:

- 1 All men are mortal.
- 2 Socrates is a man.
- 3 Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Having done this, we can see that the argument must be valid, since it exemplifies one of the valid forms. That form is:

- 1 All A's are B's.
- 2 x is an A.
- 3 Therefore, x is a B.

This sort of syllogistic logic has now given way to much more powerful forms of symbolic logic. These new systems of logic are apparently able to explain the validity of arguments whose forms are not adequately represented in any syllogism.

Philosophical Anthropology

Philosophical anthropology (or "philosophy of persons") is the philosophical study of persons. I **think** that philosophical anthropology should be viewed as a special branch of metaphysics, but it is sufficiently rich and interesting in its own right so as to be generally treated as a separate field.

The fundamental question here is: "What is the nature of a person?" When we raise this question, we are not looking for an answer to the psychological question about human nature. Rather, we are inquiring into the metaphysics of people. Are

³For further discussion of arguments and validity, see below, Chapter 2, under "Soundness and Validity."

people just complex and interesting physical objects? Or are they also endowed with a nonphysical component — a mind? If so, what is the connection between the mind and rest of the person?

Philosophical Theology

This too is really just a special branch of metaphysics. In this case, however, it is the philosophical study of the nature and existence of God.

If you set out to do philosophical theology, one of your first projects must be to establish the existence of God — for if there is no God, what would there be for you to investigate? Thus, those who do philosophical theology spend a remarkable amount of time attempting to formulate and evaluate various arguments for and against the existence of God. They also inquire into the nature of God. They raise such questions as these. "What are the main features that God is supposed to have?" "Does God exist in time and space?" "Is it possible for human beings to have knowledge of God?"

Philosophy of...

I suggested above that if you raise a sufficiently abstract question about history, you will enter the realm of the philosophy of history. This would be the philosophical study of history. There are many other "philosophies of": philosophy of education, philosophy of law, philosophy of language, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of sport, just to mention a few.

Some purists would catalogue each of these under one of the more traditional headings, rather than listing them as if they were on a par with metaphysics and epistemology. Indeed, some purists would undoubtedly dismiss some of these philosophies of, claiming that they are not genuine areas of philosophy at all. However, there are philosophy courses in all of these areas, and books and journals and societies, and it seems to me that they should be counted as fields of philosophy. Purists are free to ignore them, if they like.

History of Philosophy

One final field should be mentioned. That is the History of Philosophy.

Philosophy has a long and honorable history, going back at least to the Golden Age of Greece. Some of the most brilliant and influential thinkers of the last two thousand years have been philosophers. Surely any list of great thinkers would have to include such philosophers as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, J. S. Mill, Dewey, Russell, G. E. Moore, and Wittgenstein. Their writings have provided enlightenment (and puzzlement) to generations of readers. When a philosopher studies the work of some illustrious predecessor, attempting to elucidate its meaning, and to evaluate its significance, he or she is engaged in the history of philosophy.

Some work that has been done in the history of philosophy looks very much like straightforward metaphysics, or epistemology. The modern writer may pay only the

slightest attention to the actual words of the philosopher whose work he or she is interpreting, simply seeking to capture the spirit of the thought of the historical figure. Other work in this area looks more like "intellectual history," rather than philosophy. Here, the modern writer may be primarily interested in discovering the historical facts concerning some philosophical work, rather than in reformulating it or evaluating it. He or she may seek to determine the precise date at which some doctrine was first formulated, or the intellectual influences that operated on some important figure. So long as the intent of the modern writer is clear to all parties concerned, I can see no reason to say that either of these extremes is preferable to the other, or to something between them.

A Minor Problem

I suspect that some readers may feel that they have been shortchanged here. I have attempted to explain what philosophy is by describing some of its main fields. Yet, in many cases, I have described the field by saying that it is the philosophical study of something-or-other. For example, I said that epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge, that ethics is the philosophical study of morality, and that philosophical anthropology is the philosophical study of persons. Surely, there is something circular about my explanation!

I must acknowledge that my explanation is somewhat empty. A person who does not know what philosophy is probably doesn't know what a philosophical study is, either. If you are such a person, I must encourage you to be patient. If you stay with me for a while, you will eventually come to have a somewhat better understanding of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical theology, and philosophical anthropology. It will take some time and effort, but, at the end, you will be closer to knowing what each of these fields of philosophy is, and so you will be closer to knowing what philosophy itself is.