What is Philosophy?
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Philosophy, like all other fields, is unique. But the uniqueness of philosophy seems more impressive. Whereas historians, physicists, etc., generally agree about what constitutes their proper field of study, philosophers do not. Some philosophers have even maintained that there is no proper field of study for philosophers.

This extreme position fortunately is not held by too many philosophers, but it illustrates perhaps the most distinctive feature of philosophy, namely that it leaves nothing unquestioned. This explains why philosophers do not accept any authority but their own reason. Philosophers have even questioned whether it is possible to question everything.

Indeed, this last question, whether some things are unquestionable, has proven to be of great value in philosophy. Philosophical questions of the sort that students like to consider such as "What really exists?" or "Can anything be known?" or "Are there any universal moral standards?," have themselves become the objects of study for philosophers. Centuries of unacceptable answers have led many present day philosophers to consider the possibility that something might be wrong with these questions.

When philosophers ask "What really exists?" it is not clear just what they want to know. Obviously they know that the piece of paper they are now reading really exists, so their question cannot be taken in a simple straightforward sense. But what sense should we give to this question? This is what many philosophers are now concerned with. What is the meaning of "exists" or "really exists" as it occurs in philosophical questions? This question forms a large part of what is commonly called "Metaphysics."

In a similar fashion, the question "Can anything be known?" as asked by a sane person, cannot be taken as implying genuine doubt about whether one knows that one is holding a piece of paper in one's hand. Thus many philosophers have become concerned with understanding the sense of "know" which leads people to question whether we can know anything. This concern is an essential part of what is commonly called "Theory of Knowledge" or "Epistemology." Questioning whether there are any universal moral standards is usually done by people who have no doubt that, except in very unusual circumstances, it is morally wrong to cheat. Thus, here too, philosophers have come to realize that a philosophical question cannot be taken in a simple straightforward fashion. Thus they have begun to investigate what is meant by "universal moral standard" and related phrases. This investigation is part of what is called "Ethical Theory" or "Moral Philosophy."

This concern with what is meant by the words and phrases that occur in traditional philosophical questions led some philosophers to investigate the meaning of these same words and phrases as they occur in ordinary or everyday language, for it seemed very likely that the meanings of the words as they occurred in philosophical questions must be related in an intimate way to the meaning of the same words as they occur in ordinary or everyday language. Some philosophers who investigated the ordinary use of words like "exist," "know" and "moral," concluded that many philosophical problems arose from a misunderstanding of their ordinary use. They came to believe that traditional philosophical questions were in large part due to a misunderstanding of words as they occurred in ordinary language. Philosophers who think that investigation of ordinary language is of some importance in understanding philosophical questions, are sometimes known as "ordinary language philosophers," sometimes as "linguistic philosophers," and sometimes as "analytic philosophers."

Thus ordinary language philosophers are not linguists, they are not interested in ordinary language for its own sake, but for the help that it gives in understanding philosophical questions. An understanding of this point makes it clear why philosophers are interested only in a very small number of words and phrases in ordinary language. They are interested only in those words and phrases that either occur in traditional philosophical questions or, more generally, those words the proper understanding of which they feel may help them to solve philosophical problems.

Some philosophical problems arise, not from misunderstanding ordinary everyday language, but from misunderstanding the language used by specialists in their studies. Philosophy of history deals with the philosophical problems that arise from what historians say. Philosophy of science, with its various subdivisions, e.g., philosophy of social science, philosophy of psychology, deals with the problems that arise from what scientists say. In keeping with the trend toward specialization there are now special courses devoted to the philosophical problems that arise in limited but important areas of life, such as religion, art, and medicine. In pursuing any of these more specialized areas, philosophers must, if they are to make any significant contribution to better understanding, have a good general grasp of the subject matter that they are philosophizing about. For example, a philosopher of science, who knows little science, is a poor philosopher of science.

I have been talking as if philosophical problems always arise from a misunderstanding of language, and this is most certainly not true. It is true that solving philosophical problems generally requires the proper understanding of the language we use, but this is also true of problems that arise in all fields, scientific or humanistic. Philosophical problems arise out of the attempt to arrive at a clear, coherent, and acceptable view of the world. Not all people are interested in arriving at such a world view, nor is there any straightforward practical reason for being interested in achieving such a view.

Unlike a scientific interest in the world, a philosophical interest never results in increased ability to change the world. Even scientists engaged in basic research often discover information that can be directly used in changing the world, though that is not their aim. Philosophers never uncover this kind of information, though philosophical investigation may give scientists a kind of understanding that enables them to make their discoveries. For example, Einstein's investigation of what was meant by saying that two events took place at the same time, provided him with understanding that was a necessary prerequisite to some of his more important scientific discoveries. Philosophers who are not also great scientists, rarely, if ever, have such direct impact on scientific discovery. Philosophers do sometimes aid in clearing up some of the confusion that keeps scientists from proceeding as fast as they should, but of course this applies primarily to philosophers of science.

For some philosophers, even being indirectly practical, is not really important. For what the philosopher seeks is not knowledge, that is, not the kind of knowledge that can be put to practical use, but understanding. That is, the philosopher seeks to understand the world, or at least some part of it. It is only the truly great philosophers who have sought to present a complete world view. These men, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, John Stuart Mill, and Nietzsche (not a list that all philosophers would agree with) tried to include everything within their systems. They sought not only to provide a way of understanding the nature of the world and how we could come to know this, but also to show what people's role in this world was and how they could best play it. They sought to provide a framework in which everything that happened made sense, or could be understood, one in which people would have some general guide by which to order their actions.
None of these systems are now accepted in their entirety, but this does not mean that present day philosophers think that there is nothing to learn from the great philosophers. On the contrary, one of the best ways to get into the study of philosophy is to study its history, for it is only by examining the attempts of the great philosophers of the past that one can even begin to get an idea of how difficult it

is to arrive at a clear, coherent, and acceptable view of the world. Most attempts by students, or even by professional philosophers, to work out such a view are far below these past efforts. But we must study the great works of the past not only to learn from them but also to avoid their mistakes. Especially in philosophy, it seems to be true that those who do not know the past are condemned to repeat it. For most of the problems that the present day philosopher confronts do not differ from the problems that confronted the very first philosopher.

Though some thought may be possible without language, philosophical thought is not. Philosophy is essentially linguistic, consisting as it does in the attempt to provide a clear, coherent, and acceptable view of the world. If one is to be clear and coherent, it is essential that one take care to say what one wants to say precisely. And if one does not really understand the use of the language, it is unlikely that one will be able to do this. With considerable oversimplification, and some dangerously misleading statements, I should like to present one example of the kind of confusion that can arise from lack of proper understanding of an important, though ordinary, word.

It is very easy to come to think that "I believe" and "I know" simply express different degrees of confidence in what follows them. Thus, we might think that people with a great deal of self-confidence might say that they knew, while those with somewhat less confidence, might say only that they believed. From this one might come to think that believing and knowing, i.e., those states of mind referred to by "believe" and "know," differ from each other only in degree. If one thinks this, then the following problem seems to present itself. We often believe things that are not true, thus it seems that it must be possible that we can know things that are not true. This seems to follow from the fact that both knowing and believing are states of mind. But one cannot know something that is not true. So we have a problem. How is one to solve this problem? One "solution" is to conclude that we cannot really know anything. This conclusion seems to follow from the two premises (1) "We can only know what is in fact true" and (2) "The fact that a person is in a certain state of mind, viz. knowing, can never guarantee that anything is in fact true."

However, as we pointed out in the beginning of this paper, the view that we can never know anything seems unacceptable. Thus some philosophers have denied one or the other of the two premises. Generally they have denied the second one, for it seems undeniable that we can only know what is in fact true. So philosophers have sometimes held that knowing is a very special state of mind, so special that when people are in it, it guarantees that what they "know" is true. How any state of mind could have this characteristic is so hard to understand, that the skeptical view has been accepted as the lesser of two evils. But when confronted with this kind of dilemma, the proper philosophical response is to examine the premises more carefully. Doing this we come upon the true cause of our dilemma, the view that knowing is a state of mind, a view that was accepted without even an argument. In the seemingly innocent phrase "believing and knowing, i.e., those states of mind referred to by 'believe' and 'know'," we committed ourselves to an important view without even realizing it. Very often in philosophy as well as in non-philosophical discussions, the crucial step is taken with no argument, but simply by means of such phrases as "or in other words," "to put it another way," "or what is the same thing." This procedure which I call "the fallacy of assumed equivalence" is one of the most commonly committed fallacies, and in the discussion we are concerned with, results in our acceptance of the view that knowing is a state of mind without having been given any argument for it at all.

But knowing is not a state of mind, i.e., the word "know" does not refer to a state of mind. The above sentence would be another example of the fallacy of assumed equivalence if I did not provide an argument for it. Unfortunately the complete argument takes much more time and space that I can give it here, so I can only give the barest outline of it. Normally whenever we say "X is a kind of ship" or "X is white," we can also say "The word 'X' refers to a kind of ship" or "The word 'X' refers to

something white." When we are not talking about physical objects, the view that X is a certain kind of thing arises from the view that the word "X" is used to refer to that kind of thing. This is why words are so important in philosophy. It is the view that "know" is used to refer to a state or activity of mind that gives rise to the view that knowing is a state of mind.

But "know" is not used to refer to a state of mind, in fact, it is not used to refer at all. Rather we use the word "know" in a very different kind of way. It is true that we only use it when we are very certain about something, but the word "know" demands more than this; we must have good evidence for what we say. In this way the use of "know" differs in an important way from the use of "believe." This can be seen from the fact that we ask "Why do you believe?" but "How do you know?" We are justified in saying "I know" when we have evidence of a kind that almost invariably has the result that what we say we know is true. To say "I know" is in a sense, to claim that one has extremely reliable evidence that something is true. And, of course, we do often have such extremely reliable evidence, and so we are often justified in saying that we know.

This brief discussion of "know," which is a grossly simplified summary of parts of what two of the leading twentieth century philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin, have written on the subject, contains several misleading statements, as well as some outright mistakes. For example, it is extremely misleading to regard believing as a state of mind, and it is simply false that "I know" is correctly said only when one has evidence, at least in an ordinary sense of "evidence." But the discussion of "know" does give some indication of what a large number of present day philosophers are doing, and it also shows how difficult it is to do it. There is some question about whether it is even worth doing. For some it is not. But for some the desire to understand things for oneself is a very important desire.

Philosophy, in which people are required to work out for themselves a clear, coherent and acceptable view of the world, is for these people not just desirable but essential. John Stuart Mill said, "Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." But it would have been fairer to say, "If one is Socrates, one cannot help but be dissatisfied."