

1 WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

1.1 PHILOSOPHY AS OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONING

Reaching back to ancient Greece, a common ploy in addressing the question “What is philosophy?” is to provide a linguistic account, noting that the original Greek words *philos* and *sophia* combined can be understood as ‘love of Wisdom’. However, this ploy is evasive, because the moment that any two philosophers begin to expound on the relevant meanings of these two terms, they are likely as not to part ways.

A more recent ploy—notably pursued in the 20th century by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and (in a somewhat different form) by the pragmatist Richard Rorty (following Jacques Derrida)—is to give a deflationary account of philosophy. Wittgenstein’s idea was that philosophical problems are pseudo-problems that arise when we take language out of context. Imagine, for example, that one were to ask of a dancer “is that move a checkmate?”, as if the term ‘checkmate’ made sense out of the context of its use in chess. For Rorty, the idea was that philosophy is defined only by the fact that philosophical writing tends to concern itself with other philosophical writing:

All that ‘philosophy’ as a name for a sector of culture means is ‘talk of Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Russell . . . and that lot’. Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition. . . . (Rorty, R., 1979, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida”, *New Literary History* 10: 228-239.)

An irony of both of these deflationary accounts of philosophy is that the accounts themselves purport to do more than what they claim philosophy can do—they purport to make a case for a particular point of view. Indeed, as philosophers themselves recognize, both cases are themselves *philosophical*, and not in any deflationary sense.

The accounts thus spell their own demise.¹

There are many other characterizations of philosophy—as the ‘queen of the sciences’, as ‘asking the most fundamental questions’, and so on. Arguably, all such characterizations have their flaws. In any case, our aim is not to endorse any very specific account, but to notice an important aspect of philosophy that is highlighted by their very existence: Philosophy is critical to the core, to the point of being critical even of itself and its own foundations. By its being ‘critical’, we mean that philosophy permits one to question the accepted answer (even one’s own accepted answer) to *any* question, and in so doing, one does not (necessarily) depart from the bounds of philosophy. To put the point in a positive way: Philosophy is a form of open-ended questioning in which all questions are allowed.

1.2 THREE CLARIFICATIONS

While we do not offer this observation as an *account* of the nature of philosophy, we do see it as a deeply important aspect of the enterprise—‘define’ the enterprise as one will—and it guides us in our own vision. Before turning to that vision, there are three important points of clarification.

Comparison to Self-critique in other Disciplines. First, it is of course true that the practitioners of many disciplines take critique very seriously, and well they should.

Progress is often made by calling accepted or 'obvious' or 'convincing' answers into question. However, in other sorts of intellectual inquiry, typically there are *some* answers that must be taken for granted, lest the inquiry destroy itself. Physical sciences arguably rest on the notion that there is a physical world, and many if not all of those sciences rely, as well, on the notion that the physical world is law-like in some fashion. Much if not all of the discipline of history rests on the assumption the world did not come into being 10 seconds ago, that historical agents had beliefs and desires and acted accordingly, and so on.

Of course, it is certainly true that the practitioners of other intellectual disciplines may and sometimes do call into question the assumptions of their own discipline, but when they do so they are no longer practicing their discipline, but are either redefining it, or engaging in philosophical reflection on it (more likely, both). One of the most famous philosophers of the 20th century, Thomas Kuhn, made exactly this point with regard to physics:

It is, I think, particularly in periods of acknowledged crisis that scientists have turned to philosophical analysis as a device for unlocking the riddles of their field. Scientists have not generally needed or wanted to be philosophers. Indeed, normal science [*not* a term of derision for Kuhn!] usually holds creative philosophy at arm's length, and probably for good reason. (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962, p. 88)

In a similar vein, Kuhn later suggests that inquiry pushes outside of the boundaries of 'normal science' when it exhibits "the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals" (*ibid.*, p. 91).

Openness to Critique Versus Questioning Everything The second point of clarification is that while we view philosophy as always permitting a critical stance towards any particular position, we certainly do not claim that its practitioners are always critical of everything. Indeed, just as a physicist who questions the existence of the external world will not get very far doing physics, so too a philosopher who explicitly and simultaneously questions everything will make no philosophical progress. Exactly what gets questioned, and when, depends on one's philosophical project.

The point, rather, is that we can all recognize *as philosophical* a project that questions our own assumptions, even our assumptions about the specific nature or methodology of philosophy. A historian of philosophy might need to accept that various historical figures (Plato, Kant, Fichte, whomever) existed at more or less the times standardly thought, that those figures wrote the texts that we attribute to them, that they did so with some intended meaning, in response to their beliefs about certain philosophical issues, and so on. Another philosopher might wish to entertain the idea that the entire world, together with our (wildly mistaken) memories of it, came into existence a few moments ago. Yet another philosopher might wish to call into question whether *anybody* has intentions, or beliefs. And so on. (These claims *have* been questioned by philosophers.) The point is not that our hypothetical historian of philosophy must also take such a critical stance towards history and towards the reality of intentions and beliefs, but that

he or she *can acknowledge* that those *other* philosophers are *also* doing philosophy, that their critical stance is philosophical in nature.

The same sort of 'philosophical tolerance' holds in the other direction. By acknowledging a particular critical stance as 'permissible within philosophy', the philosopher does not thereby *give up* the 'philosophical right' to adopt this or that position. The historian of philosophy is not 'anti-philosophical' for assuming that historical figures had beliefs and intentions. The philosopher of biology is not 'anti-philosophical' for basing arguments on the scientific theory of evolution. And so on.

In all cases—cases of raising questions, and cases of standing firm on answers to some questions for the purpose of asking *other* questions—the philosopher is true to this key feature of philosophy: that no question is out of bounds. We are united in the acknowledgment that this sort of tolerance is critical for the success of philosophy.

A Richer, Positive, Account of Philosophy. The third point of clarification is that 'adopting a critical stance', or 'recognizing that all questions are fair', or something of that sort, is not—or at least not necessarily—*all* that there is to philosophy.² For one thing, the very fact that philosophy is always *open* to the philosophical legitimacy of asking another question, and in particular of questioning assumptions, leads philosophers to take a particular *positive* approach to inquiry that is in many ways distinctively and recognizably philosophical.

Hence, for example, to some measure, philosophers worry explicitly about the assumptions that they make, the internal and joint consistency of those assumptions, and the coherence of those assumptions (and anything that follows from them) with other claims that they accept. Moreover, philosophers have developed methods that are directed to the uncovering of such assumptions and sensitive to the inherent difficulty of coming to *any* conclusions in an environment where, potentially, at least, *anything* is up for grabs.³

Inevitably, these philosophical methods have all, at some time or other, come under heavy criticism, itself philosophical. Nonetheless, there is a recognizable, if controversial, 'toolbox' of philosophical methods, including patterns of argument, patterns of deliberation, and patterns of reflection. A common recognition of this toolbox—even if one considers some of the 'tools' to be broken!—is a positive hallmark of the discipline of philosophy.

In addition to having a positive methodology, there are types of question that have been considered characteristically philosophical. Naturally, as in any discipline, the characteristic questions of philosophy have evolved. Indeed, while, on the one hand, 'all questions are fair game' in philosophy, on the other hand, many questions that were once considered philosophical in the sense of being reasonably pursued by philosophical methods (some ancient Greek philosophers, to take one straightforward example, speculated about the physical nature of the heavenly bodies) have later been found to be better addressed by other methods. Academics are most likely familiar with this shift as result of the scientific revolution, but a similar shifts happened both before

and after, for example in the late 19th century when the emerging discipline of psychology subsumed some traditionally philosophical questions.⁴

Exactly which questions are legitimately open to philosophical scrutiny is itself a disputed question in philosophy, and we make no attempt to address it here. (Indeed, it is likely that we would not agree among ourselves about the answer to *that* question, and for reasons that we explain below, we find this situation to be professionally desirable.) On the other hand, there is not much dispute that many of these questions, whatever they are, fit into a relatively small number of categories. This list is not exhaustive and does not reflect anything but the manner in which, traditionally, philosophers have 'carved up' their discipline:

- [epistemology: questions regarding the nature of knowledge
- [logic: questions regarding the nature of reasoning and formal representations of it
- [metaphysics: questions regarding the most basic features of reality, such as time, events, personal identity, causation
- [ethics: questions regarding the best way to live (personally and politically)
- [aesthetics: questions regarding the nature of beauty and art
- [history of philosophy: questions regarding specific historical approaches to philosophical questions

In addition, many philosophers study specific branches of inquiry, inquiring about their specific natures, resulting in a number of sub-disciplines, such as: philosophy of science, philosophy of history, philosophy of religion, philosophy of law, philosophy of medicine, philosophy of language, and many more.

To sum up: philosophy as we see it is in principle open to all questions, meaning both that all assumptions may be called into question, and that all assumptions may be adopted for the purpose of examining their consequences.⁵ Moreover, philosophy has developed methods to address questions in a manner that makes both the questioning of assumptions and the investigating of their consequences intellectually respectable. Finally, specific philosophical questions themselves have evolved throughout history, but generally have fallen into recognizable and stable categories.

2 THE VALUE OF PHILOSOPHY

We spent some time exploring the issue of what characterizes philosophy so that we could better articulate the value of philosophy in a convincing way. Doing so is critical in this context, because it is *that* value that we pursue for ourselves, and *that* value that we seek to bring to our students and fellow faculty at the university, as well as our professional community and the wider public. We identify five specific, and related, ways in which philosophy can be valuable (with no pretense that the list is exhaustive).

Philosophy is intrinsically valuable. First, and at least for our own purposes foremost, we take philosophical investigation to be intrinsically valuable, in the same manner that any worthwhile intellectual inquiry is intrinsically valuable: it satisfies a basic human

thirst for the pursuit of inquiry. The 20th century philosopher Bertrand Russell famously puts the point thus:

If all . . . were well off, if poverty and disease had been reduced to their lowest possible point, there would still remain much to be done to produce a valuable society; and even in the existing world the goods of the mind are at least as important as the goods of the body. (1912, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Williams and Norgate, London, ch. 15)

Philosophy shares this value with other branches of intellectual inquiry, which we take to be paradigmatically represented by the academic disciplines within the College.

Philosophy provides good training. Many of the benefits of studying philosophy are immediate, and show themselves in measurable ways. For example, philosophy majors do extremely well in postgraduate tests such as the LSAT and GRE, and even the

GMAT;⁶ moreover, they also do quite well on the job market after College, especially in the long-run,⁷ their degree having prepared them well for a variety of careers (and shifting amongst them).

Philosophy can assist other disciplines. Philosophy can provide conceptual clarification or even new creative resources, to other disciplines. After arguing for the intrinsic value of philosophy, Russell goes on to claim that “It is exclusively among the goods of the mind that the value of philosophy is to be found” (ibid.) but here, as the quotation from Kuhn above makes clear, Russell is mistaken. Precisely because philosophy is ‘willing to try anything’, it can be (and has been) of service to other disciplines, especially in times of disciplinary crisis.

Moreover, in some cases, aid comes not only in the rare dramatic revolutions of a discipline in the face of crisis, but also in the quotidian problems faced by the practitioners of the discipline. Some bioethicists and medical ethicists, for example, frequently play an advisory role to those in the medical profession; some philosophers of science work closely with scientists; increasingly, we find epistemologists and philosophers of language working with psychologists and linguists, and so on.

Philosophy can alert us to unexamined presuppositions. Third, because philosophers are willing to question anything, they can play a crucial role in awakening us from our ‘dogmatic slumber’ (as the philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote in praise of David Hume). The point is *not* (as some popularized philosophy would have it) that by confronting us with questions that we hadn’t asked or arguments that we hadn’t considered, philosophers will disabuse us of our beliefs. Revision of beliefs *could* be the result of philosophical questioning, but just as easily the result could be a better grasp of and firmer conviction in those beliefs. The chemist who is faced with the claim that chemistry is nothing more than ‘complicated physics’ might come away with a better understanding of the nature of science and the reasons for believing that chemistry is *not* just ‘physics with approximations’. The omnivore who is faced with the claim that animals deserve moral consideration might come away with a better understanding of the grounds for moral consideration and the distinction between humans and animals. The rabbi who is faced with the claim that rampant evil disproves the existence of an omnipotent divine being might come away with a better understanding of the causes and nature of evil.

Of course, in any case, the result could be the opposite as well. The point is that changing beliefs is not necessarily the point. There is value to posing 'awkward philosophical questions' and pondering them carefully, even if one does not alter one's original stance as a result. Arguably the founder of Western philosophy, Socrates is famous for teaching that the unexamined life is not worth living. He probably overstated his point, but a milder version applies to belief: examining one's beliefs can make them stronger. Philosophy can play an important role in strengthening (as well as revising) our beliefs, especially the beliefs that are typically taken for granted in other contexts.

Philosophy provides resources for addressing the 'Big Questions'. And what are those beliefs that philosophy may strengthen or revise? Sometimes they are rather specialized and not, perhaps, directly related to human goods ("chemistry is not reducible to physics"). Sometimes, however, they concern what people often call "the big questions", questions the answer to which seem to have widespread if not universal implications for how we live or think about ourselves and others ("there is no God", "pleasure is the only good", "persons are compositions of bodies and souls", "there is a world outside of my experiences"). With respect to these beliefs and the questions associated with them, Philosophy provides three important resources: (1) permission to (and an opportunity to) ask them; (2) established methodologies for addressing them in a rigorous way; and (3) a historical record of excellent, thoughtful, reflection on them.

All three of these resources are important, especially the latter two. In particular, while there are limited other opportunities to ask the 'big questions', philosophy provides a disciplinary and historical context in which to ask and address them *well*, with intellectual rigor and the advantage of centuries of collective experience.

A final observation: In doing so, we learn many of the same lessons that are learned from the careful pursuit of any inquiry—the value of splitting big, difficult, problems into smaller, more manageable problems, the value of testing beliefs against the objections of others, the value of intellectual patience and honesty, and so on. Moreover, while the prospects for widely agreed answers to these 'big questions' are dim, philosophy may help (and has helped) individuals come to their own understandings, ones that are specific and robust enough to have important—and, one hopes, positive—influence on how we live our lives. Moreover, by forcing us to grapple with the sometimes radically different points of view held by others both now and historically, philosophy has the potential to empower us to interact with others in a spirit of tolerance and to understand them in a spirit of charity.

3 PRINCIPLES FOR PURSUING THE BENEFITS OF PHILOSOPHY

In this section, we mention five general principles that we take to be important in the pursuit of the specific benefits of philosophy that we discussed in the previous section. None of these principles is unique to philosophy and philosophical inquiry, but each of them is quite important for the pursuit of philosophical values, and emerges naturally and forcefully from those values, as we briefly expounded them. The general principles play an important role in motivating and informing the more specific strategic goals that we discuss later (§3).

The importance of history. Philosophy has a rich history of careful reflection on questions typical of the discipline. Inasmuch as understanding both history and careful

reflection are themselves intrinsically valuable, the sub-discipline of 'history of philosophy' takes on its own sort of value. Moreover, history of philosophy also plays a special role within the discipline itself even for those who are not themselves historians of philosophy. The recognition and valuing of the history of philosophy as a resource also for other areas of philosophy is certainly not universal in our discipline, but it is an important feature of how we pursue philosophical inquiry, collectively, at the University of South Carolina.

One reason is that while philosophy has developed new methodological tools over the centuries, and the discipline has learned to avoid certain kinds of mistake, the nature of philosophical inquiry is such that proposed answers will nearly always be contentious. The views held by historical figures are only rarely simply dismissible as uncontroversially wrong. The result is that by limiting oneself to contemporary authors, one limits oneself to the approaches and answers that are currently in fashion, and they constitute a small percentage of the approaches and answers that survive whatever agreed philosophical tests we can throw at them. By ignoring history, we miss opportunities.

Following from this point, we recognize that studying the history of philosophy is instrumentally valuable to contemporary philosophy simply because it offers new ideas, to augment the relatively poor stock that is currently in vogue. Furthermore, historians of philosophy share with philosophers at large the goals of examining assumptions, understanding conceptual connections, and ultimately discovering the truth, so history for philosophy is not *merely* instrumentally valuable to philosophy, but is itself a form of philosophy.

The importance of plurality. As we have mentioned, a plurality of ideas and a plurality of methodological approaches to assessing those ideas is generally a virtue in philosophy, in large part because the nature of the questions being asked does not lend itself to the production of *single*, universally agreed, answers, or even a single, agreed, method for addressing the questions. In the face of a lack of widely endorsed answers and methods, it makes sense to be mindful of the plurality of answers and methods across the discipline.

A department *could*, and some *do*, choose to pursue a single sort of answer, or to follow a narrowly circumscribed approach to addressing philosophical questions. As for us, we can be more effective in both our teaching and research missions by fostering an environment in which a variety of questions, answers, principles, and methods are in play amongst the faculty and encouraged amongst the students. Our position is that plurality of this sort can be informative to ourselves as practitioners of philosophy and puts us in a better position to deal with the very wide variety of students that one encounters at a large state institution.

The importance of interaction. It is almost a corollary of the valuing of plurality that we also value intellectual interaction, amongst ourselves, between faculty and students, and between faculty (both individually and collectively) and the greater community, both philosophical and general. (The existence of a colleague down the hall who takes a different perspective to mine on philosophical matters is of no value if I never find it out, or never explore those differences.)

It is important to remember, as well, that the benefits of interaction are realized not only when we interact with those with whom we disagree, but also—albeit often in different ways—when we explore philosophical issues with those with whom we share substantial philosophical agreements.

In either case, ‘exploration’ can take many forms, and we make no presumption about the best forms. It can occur merely as a result of attending a colleague’s talk, or visiting a class, or even just hearing others’ questions during a departmental colloquium. It can occur in more intense but perhaps less frequent moments when we collaborate in the organization of visiting speakers, or a local workshop or conference. It can occur in reading groups and informal meetings at the coffee shop. It can occur in interdisciplinary colloquia and workshops. The point is that we seek to foster an environment where all of these types of opportunities for interaction, and more, are easy to create and are valued.

We also take very seriously the value of interaction with the wider philosophical community, as well as communities outside of philosophy. After all, while we have a decent number of faculty and students—certainly enough to provide many opportunities for interaction—local resources will never match those of the larger community. There can be many occasions for such interactions, the most obvious being professional meetings and colloquia, but we also have in mind participation in activities such as professional working groups, off-site fellowships and sabbaticals, panel review committees, and public service.

The importance of time. While there are examples of philosophical work that comes in smaller ‘chunks’ that can be conceived, developed, and polished in relatively short order, most philosophical work is not of that sort. Papers in philosophy tend to be quite dense, and the best work frequently engages with and is informed by a wide variety of sources (for reasons that we have already outlined). Moreover, the ‘shelf life’ of a good philosophy paper can be quite long—philosophers often cite work from decades, sometimes centuries, ago—which puts pressure on authors of new work to engage with an extensive literature and to make sure that the new work has a high degree of polish.

The point is not—of course!—that philosophers ‘work harder’ than other academics, but that their hard work is often manifested in a smaller number of dense articles. The 3000-word paper is a rarity in most sub-disciplines in philosophy. Much more common are longer articles, and books. It is important for us as a department to acknowledge this fact and create an environment in which faculty can feel comfortable taking the time they need to produce good work, while also, always, insisting on disciplinary standards for both the volume and the quality of the work that is produced.

The importance of teaching. From its earliest days, philosophy was closely associated with teaching. Socrates, whom we know as a ‘philosopher’, was considered a *teacher* in his own day. Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and indeed all of the major philosophers in the ancient world, were famous for leading ‘schools’, which would have been, quite literally, a place where others come to learn.

This association between philosophy and teaching is no accident—there is nothing like explaining a philosophical answer to a ‘big question’ to those who have not been exposed to (one is tempted to say, ‘jaded by’) professional philosophy for forcing

oneself to become very clear about how the proposed answer goes. Moreover, students always have opinions about these questions. One does not expect to enter a classroom to discuss arguments for the existence of God, or the moral permissibility of the death penalty, or the nature of racism, or doubts about the existence of an external world, to encounter disinterest and lack of any prior opinion or commitment on the part of students. Bringing the standard philosophical literature into contact with these pre-philosophical views is instructive and helpful both to the student and to the teacher, i.e., to the enterprise of philosophy itself.

Moreover, while it would be easy to 'argue circles around' inexperienced students on philosophical matters, or to pull the wool over their eyes with fancy philosophical jargon, to do so is to miss a crucial opportunity both to be maximally intellectually honest with oneself (and therefore with the students) and to understand how the philosophical views that one is teaching can accommodate, or not, the antecedent views of people, which, while certainly not always correct, are rarely *utterly* wrong. In this sense, too, teaching philosophy is partly constitutive of *doing* philosophy. They are not independent activities.

Notes

1 Wittgenstein's and Rorty's accounts do each contain a grain of truth. Sometimes what appears to be a philosophical problem *is* a pseudo-problem brought on by overly ambitious use of language; and much if not all of philosophy *is* tied in some way—sometimes explicitly, sometimes in other ways—to the ideas of and the questions raised by previous philosophers.

2 Graham Priest *does* seem to think that 'being critical of potentially anything' is all that there is to philosophy. (Priest, G., 2006, "What Is Philosophy?", *Philosophy* 81:189–207) Perhaps, however, at least *something* more positive can be said. Priest does acknowledge the impetus to do so but tries to subsume those positive things under the umbrella of critique, his observation being that critique of a position is more convincing when accompanied by a viable alternative. This observation is true but perhaps not sufficient to ground the importance or role of 'constructive' philosophical activity.

3 Two examples, just to illustrate the point, are 'conceptual analysis' and 'reflective equilibrium'. The former consists in 'breaking down' a concept into its 'component' concepts, based largely, or solely, on one's understanding of the original concept, and largely for the purpose of comparison with other concepts. The latter is achieved by a deliberative process in which members of a set of potentially conflicting beliefs are progressively revised until the resulting set of beliefs is thought to be consistent, or coherent.

4 Neither of these examples is meant to suggest that there are not important philosophical questions remaining about the nature of matter or the nature of the human psyche, as well as philosophical principles that might guide or underwrite physical or psychological investigation of them, but there is little or no controversy that *some* questions in those areas that had previously been addressed by philosophical methods are now more reliably addressed by other methods.

5 Of course, one might find that not all assumptions are *interesting* to question, or to adopt, just as one finds in other disciplines. Some mathematical theorems are uninteresting even to mathematicians. Some historical projects are uninteresting even to historians.

6 GRE: Between 2011 and 2014, philosophy majors averaged the top score among all majors in verbal reasoning and in analytical writing, and the top score amongst humanities majors, and very strong overall, in quantitative reasoning (https://www.ets.org/s/gre/pdf/gre_guide_table4.pdf). LSAT: Philosophy majors consistently score at or near the top on the LSAT, as well as in rates of acceptance and matriculation to law school. (See, e.g., [http://lsac.org/docs/default-source/data-\(lsac-resources\)-docs/2014-15_applicants-major.pdf](http://lsac.org/docs/default-source/data-(lsac-resources)-docs/2014-15_applicants-major.pdf).) GMAT: Philosophy majors consistently score near the top; for example from 2008-2012 philosophy majors averaged the 5th highest score, higher than any of the business-related majors (<http://www.f1gmat.com/mean-gmat-score-undergraduate-degree#>).

7 In one study, philosophy majors ranked near the top of the pay scale at mid-career, alongside engineers, mathematicians, and physicists (http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-Degrees_that_Pay_you_Back-sort.html).