

Phil 2, January 18, 2011

What is philosophy?

- Difficult to give a full definition.
- Instead a list of a few distinguishing features:
 1. Clarifying the most basic and important *concepts* with which we understand ourselves and the world.
 - Examples: “cause,” “number,” “time,” “probability,” “truth,” “reason,” “beauty,” “possibility,” “knowledge,” “good,” and “person.”
 2. *Justifying* our most basic and important beliefs and actions.
 - Examples: Are we justified in believing that there is an external world, a world of persisting physical objects, beyond our own minds? If someone doesn’t care about morality, is he justified? Should he care about morality?
 - Not the same as *describing*, *predicting*, or *explaining* beliefs and actions.
 3. Understanding, and possibly resolving, *paradoxes*. A paradox is a pair of claims that, on the one hand, seem plausible, but that, on the other hand, seem to contradict one another.
 - Example: When you do something, this is because certain neurons fired in your brain. The firing of these neurons is a physical event, which must have some earlier physical cause. And this cause must in turn have some still earlier physical cause. And so on. So whenever you act, your action is the effect of physical causes over which, ultimately, you have no control. But how can we be responsible for our actions, if whatever we do is ultimately the cause of physical events over which we have no control?
 - Example: We know things not only about our own minds, but also about the world around us. However, all of that knowledge results from our perceptual experiences. If we were in the Matrix, we might have the same perceptual experiences, but not know anything about the world around us. How can we know that we are not in the Matrix? And if we can’t know this, then how can we know anything about the world around us?

How can we try to answer philosophical questions?

- Not likely that many philosophical questions can be settled *empirically*: by observation or experiment. Not like the natural or social sciences.

- Not likely that many philosophical questions can be settled by stipulative *definition* and logical *proof*. Not like pure mathematics.

Some complaints that people sometimes have when they first encounter philosophy:

1. “If philosophical questions can’t be settled by experiment and observation, or by definition and proof, then anything goes! Any opinion is as good as any other!”

- We can give arguments for answers to philosophical questions. (*You will* give some, if you stick with this class.)
- We start with premises that seem plausible and are widely accepted (often called “intuitions”). Then we try to argue for conclusions that are less certain or more controversial.

2. “Philosophical questions aren’t real questions! They’re just nonsense, or games with words!”

- *This* itself was a philosophical position, which was largely abandoned.
- One can *ignore* philosophical questions, but it is difficult to *dismiss* them.

3. “What good does philosophy do? ”

- What makes philosophical knowledge and understanding valuable is not that it can be *used to produce something else*.
- If philosophy is valuable, it is because the kind of knowledge and understanding that it brings is *worthwhile in itself*.
- It answers to a natural curiosity and sense of embarrassment.
- *Studying* philosophy *can* have good effects. One learns how to think and write clearly, and to see the big picture behind the details. These abilities are useful for other things.

4. “Philosophers have been asking the same questions for millennia, and they haven’t found have answers that everyone will accept. So why continue to ask them?”

- If our aim is understanding for its own sake, then finding answers that everyone will accept need not be the most important thing.
- Instead, understanding the philosophical problem, where it comes from, why different answers seem compelling.
- Socrates’ claim that his greater wisdom consisted in his awareness of his ignorance.