

## INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

### 1. TWO VIEWS OF PHILOSOPHY

On one view, philosophy is the study of everything. Call this view the Systematic View of philosophy. The Systematic View of philosophy is best summed up by Wilfrid Sellars

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under “things in the broadest possible sense” I include such radically different items as not only “cabbages and kings,” but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death.

When pursuing the goal of making sense of everything that humans study and do certain problems with how we think of things come up. For example, physics rests on an understanding of the relation between objects and motion. Here is a natural principle governing motion

(Z) In order to travel from point  $A$  to point  $B$ , one must get to the halfway point between  $A$  and  $B$ ,  $C$ .

Principle (Z) appears to be true of motion. (Z) amounts to saying that in order to move between two points, one must move across the distance between them. While (Z) appears plausible, Zeno showed that according to (Z) motion is impossible. Pick any two points  $A$  and  $B$ . By (Z) in order to move from  $A$  to  $B$  you have to get to the half way point between them  $C$ . Now you must get to  $C$  from  $A$ . But in order to do that, by principle (Z), you have to get to the half way point between them  $D$ . Now you have to get from  $A$  to  $D$ . But principle (Z) will kick in again. This will happen over and over. Notice, though, there was

nothing special about points  $A$  and  $B$ , that we started with, so for *any* two points, it is impossible to move from one to the other. In other words, motion is impossible.

Zeno took this to show that motion was an illusion (even if it is a really persistent one). If he is right, then physics is the study of one big illusion. The alternative conclusion is that principle (Z) is false. But how could there be two points that you could travel between without crossing the midpoint between them. So either principle (Z) is false, or there is no such thing as motion. Neither option is particularly attractive. The Systematic View of philosophy attempts to reconcile this, it tries to make this problem with principle (Z) fit with our best scientific theory of the physical world.

There is an alternative to the Systematic View of philosophy. On the alternative view, the question of whether or not (Z) is true is pointless to ask. We see that motion happens, and we see that physics works just fine. According to this second view there is a problem with even asking whether or not principle (Z) is true. This view is best expressed by Ludwig Wittgenstein

What is your aim in philosophy? To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.

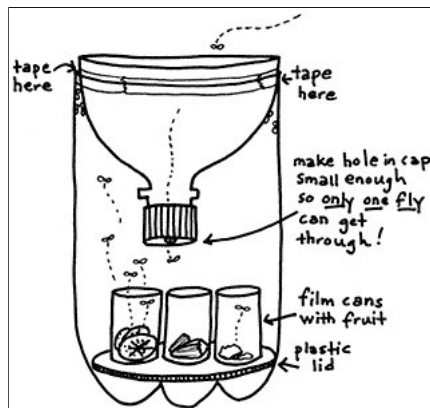


Image: Fly-Bottle

Call this the Therapeutic View of philosophy. According to Wittgenstein, philosophy is the result of not understanding that it makes no sense to even ask the question whether

or not there is such a thing as motion. Philosophers have confused themselves by even entertaining the question. They are like flies that have gotten themselves into a bottle and cannot find the way out. They keep buzzing around the same issue and keep running into problems and puzzles. On the Therapeutic View the point of philosophy is to dissolve this confusion.

On the Systematic View of philosophy the question of whether principle (Z) is true is an important question. Answering it would tell us something more about the way the world is and how the view of the world given to us by physics fits in. On the Therapeutic View the question is meaningless and so has nothing to add to our understanding of the world or ourselves. The challenge of the first view is to answer the question, the challenge of the second is to show that the question is meaningless. Answering the question has proved incredibly difficult. But showing that it is meaningless has also proved incredibly difficult. If it is an illusion that it is meaningful to ask whether (Z) is true, then it is a persistent illusion.

The Therapeutic View of philosophy presents a problem of its own: how can we tell which questions are meaningful and which are not. An obvious example of a meaningless question is “Does the Jabberwock sleep furiously?”. This question is meaningless because “Jabberwock” has not been defined. Another example of a meaningless question is “deities Olympus Greek reside The. upon?”. Though all the words in this question are defined, they are not put together in a way that is allowed in English. But what about questions that have all their terms defined and are put together in way allowed in English.

(T) “What happened before the first moment of time?”

All the words occurring in (T) are defined and they are put together in a way that is allowed in English. But there still appears to be something wrong with the question. The challenge for the Therapeutic View of philosophy is to give a *theory of meaning* by which we could decide whether or not (T) counts as meaningful.

A theory of meaning will not only show which questions are meaningful, it may also provide answers or ways to answer those questions that are meaningful. It is for this reason that offering a theory of meaning is the central goal of philosophy. A theory of meaning makes clear which questions are worth asking and which are not. If it can be shown that a question is meaningless, then there is no point in worrying whether or not it has an answer.

Wittgenstein thought that once we had the correct theory of meaning, it would turn out that all the questions that are normally considered philosophical are meaningless. This includes the question about whether principle (Z) is true and question (T). Even if Wittgenstein was right, then there is still work for the Systematic View of philosophy to do. The theory of meaning will make all of our thought and language plain. It will show how to give an answer to meaningful questions, and how the answer is related to everything else. The theory of meaning provides a foundation for completing the goal of the Systematic View of philosophy.

Once it is shown that the meaning of the word “before” means something to the effect of “happened at an earlier moment”, and “first moment” means “earliest moment” then (T) can be rewritten as

(T') “What happened at an earlier moment than the earliest moment?”

And once the meaning of “earlier” and “earliest” are made clear, the question can be explained away or rejected. There is no moment earlier than the earliest one, and this is a matter of how we use the words “earlier” and “earliest”. The confusing question has been reduced to something that can easily be given treatment.

Perhaps a similar phenomenon happens for principle (Z) when the theory of meaning clears up the the meaning of the words “motion”, “between”, and “point”. On the other hand, the theory of meaning may make clear that Zeno’s argument is substantial and

does not arise because of a confusion of language. If that's the case, then some serious philosophical work needs to be done. Our thought about motion is, in that case, confused.

## 2. THE SUBJECT MATTER OF PHILOSOPHY

Once the theory of meaning has been settled the philosophical questions are those that are not settled by any other subject like physics, mathematics, biology.

- (1) Metaphysical
- (2) Epistemological
- (3) Ethical
- (4) Logical

Roughly these are questions about what the world is like independently of humans, questions about the nature of knowledge and how we come to know things, questions about what the world ought to be like, and issues in the theory of meaning. Logic settles which questions make sense to ask. Metaphysics answers questions about the way the world is. Ethics answers questions about the way the world should be. Epistemology explains how answers to metaphysical questions are possible.

**2.1. Metaphysics.** Metaphysics is the study of what the world really is like regardless of human or any knowledge of it. Metaphysicists try to answer questions like 'Are there colors independent of things perceiving them?', 'Is there a God?', 'Are human minds physical?', 'Do we have free will?', or 'Is principle (Z) true?'

A metaphysical problem concerns the Ship of Theseus. Suppose that Theseus had a wooden ship that he had repaired at each port that he went to. At each stop, one plank was removed, and replaced with a sturdier metal one. At the end of ten years, Theseus's ship is completely metal, there are no wooden planks left. Ariadne had followed him from port to port, and as the pieces of the ship were taken off she collected them. At the end of the ten years Ariadne had all the wooden pieces of the ship and had put them back

together as they were when the ship first set sail. The puzzle here is to figure out who has the ship of Theseus. Is it Ariadne, Theseus, both, or neither? No option on that list is satisfying. A good metaphysics will give an answer to this question, or show which answer is forced on us by our best theory.

**2.2. Epistemology.** Epistemology is the study of knowledge. The main epistemological questions are ‘How do you know what you know?’, or ‘What is the relationship between knowers and truth?’. The usual answer to this question is ‘I saw it’. For instance, the way to know that the title of this paper is ‘Introduction to Philosophy’ is to look to the top of the page, or the beginning of the paper. But some things cannot be known through observation. No one observes that 37 is a prime number, no one can see numbers. Mathematical knowledge requires a different explanation than other sorts of knowledge.

Moral facts also cannot be observed. Consider this example. Five people are trapped on a train track, and the train is approaching. Fred can stop this by pulling the lever to switch the track but if he does so, one person, Alex, on the other track will be killed. Fred hates Alex.

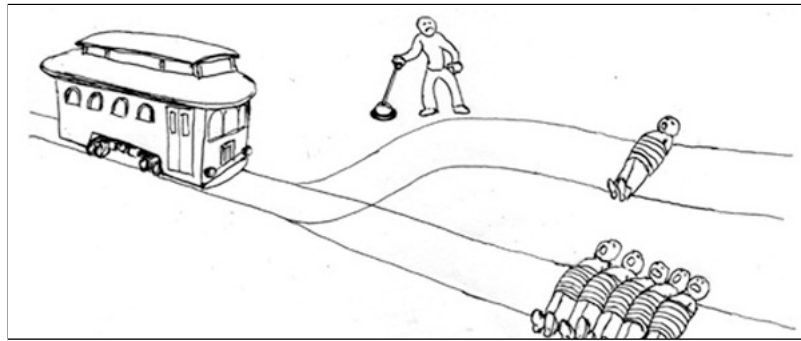


Image: The Train Problem

Now there are two situations that seem to have a moral difference, but no *observable* difference. In the first situation suppose Fred pulls the lever because he hates Alex and is happy to see him die. In the second situation Fred pulls the lever because he has to save five people from dying. In the first case, it seems like Fred is doing something wrong and

in the second it seems like Fred is doing something right. But there is nothing one could *observe* about the situation that is different. In both cases Fred pulls the lever, Alex dies, and the five are saved. So if this example is right, we know moral facts independently of our observations as well.

There are other epistemological puzzles. This one is from Plato's *Meno*: Let someone begin searching for some truth. They do not know the truth yet, that explains why they are searching. But since they do not know the truth, how will they recognize when they have found it. They would have to know it in order to recognize it. On the other hand, if they already know it, then there is no use in searching for it.

This is called the Paradox of Inquiry or *Meno's Paradox*. The problem is that if someone is going on a search for what they do not know they will not recognize it if they find it. If they do know, then there is no point in searching. Socrates used this as an argument that all knowing is actually remembering.

**2.3. Ethics.** Strictly speaking ethics is the study of what the world ought to be like. That is, the study of how things should be regardless of how they in fact are. Some standard questions in ethics are 'How ought a person to behave?', 'What makes a person's life go best?', 'What is the right thing to do?', 'How ought we to govern ourselves?'. The term "ethics" is often associated with seminars that focus on legal as opposed to moral issues. This unfortunate use of the term has little to do with what people ought to do or what is the best way for a person live.

There do not appear to be any easy answers to the questions listed above. This is regrettable because often times decisions have a time component, and can mean the difference between life and death. This is particularly salient in contemporary debates concerning issues of euthanasia, capital punishment, and whether or not it is just to use mercenaries in war.

As mentioned above, there is no way to simply observe how the world ought to be. Because philosophy focuses on precise arguments it is ideal for handling these difficult questions.

The above questions are usually thought of as questions in *applied* ethics. A broader use of the term 'Ethics' includes in it the study of metaphysical questions that are particularly salient to ethical issues. For instance, one may question whether ethical facts depend on the culture you find yourself in. A *moral relativist* may claim that in some cultures it is permissible for people to consume their dead, while in others it is impermissible. According to them, what is right or wrong depends only on the culture one is in. One might even wonder whether or not there are any ethical facts at all. These are usually called issues in *metaethics*.

Other topics that fall under metaethics include *responsibility* and *motivation*. Various metaphysical theories, and theories of natural laws suggest that all human action is out of human control, and subject only to the forces of nature. If this is the case, there is a question of whether or not humans can ever be responsible for their actions. Other topics concern what can actually motivate a human being to act. Some theories, called *egoist* hold that the only thing that can motivate a human to act is concern for their *own* happiness.

**2.4. Logic.** Logic is the study of correct inference. What makes an inference a good one depends on the meaning of the words involved. So logic is directly related to the theory of meaning. According to some philosophers to give a theory of good inference is just to give a theory of meaning. The core notion of a meaning theory according to such philosophers is inference.

The study of logic was popular among Greek philosophers, and later among medieval philosophers. In the early modern period little attention was given to issues in logic. It was not until the work of Gottlob Frege, a German mathematician that logic was re-elevated



to a central concern in philosophy. The twentieth century saw giant advancements in logic not only in philosophy, but also in mathematics, linguistics, and computer science.

There are various logical problems. One of the most famous is the Liar paradox. Consider the following sentence

(L)                                      (L) is false.

The paradox arises from asking whether or not (L) is true or false. If (L) is true, then what it says must be the case. But what (L) says is that (L) is false. So it is false. If, on the other hand, (L) is false, then what it says *is* the case (it says that (L) is false). But then (L) is true. There is no way to decide whether or not (L) is true or false.