Unlike other academic disciplines, philosophy is not defined by a specific content area. Biologists study living things, economists study economies, but philosophers systematically examine knowledge and the fundamental nature of the world. Philosophy is essentially a process for investigating certain types of questions.

**Philosophical Method:**

**Logic and Lady Gaga**

There are an endless number of extremely interesting and difficult philosophical questions, but how do philosophers go about trying to answer them? Here is what philosophers don't do: They don't give opinions, speculate, or just talk aimlessly. Instead, they employ logical analysis to evaluate the validity of the reasoning in an argument. Philosophers investigate questions by giving (or critiquing) arguments for particular answers, and logic allows us to evaluate the reasoning in those arguments precisely.

Logic is essentially rules for avoiding inconsistency in our beliefs. If someone believes something and also its negation (opposite), then that person is irrational. For example, only a crazy person would believe both that today is Tuesday and that today is not Tuesday at the same time. Logic keeps us from accidentally adopting such inconsistent beliefs.

Consider the claim that Lady Gaga is the best-dressed pop star. To be rational and follow the rules of logic, one who believes this also has to be committed to a plethora of other propositions. For instance, one would be committed to the proposition that it is not the case that all of the best-dressed pop stars have been men. Suppose I said that I think Lady Gaga is the best-dressed pop star, and also that all the best-dressed pop stars have been men. Using logic, you could demonstrate to me that my beliefs are inconsistent and compel me to give up one of those beliefs.

If I just shrug and say that I don't care, and that I'll continue to believe both of those propositions, then there's nothing more you can say to me. At that point, I am choosing to be irrational. Logic provides the most fundamental, basic, and indispensable ground rules for intellectual inquiry. Without it, there is nothing but unsubstantiated opinion.

**Arguments and Answers**

Logic is the tool for evaluating the reasoning in an argument, but what is an argument? An argument is a set of propositions, one of which (the conclusion) is said to be supported by the others (the premises). Philosophers employ arguments to support or refute a specific answer to a philosophical question. Logic determines whether the conclusion actually follows from the premises of the philosopher’s argument.

Where do the premises of philosophical arguments come from? A philosopher begins answering a question by considering what is known about the issue. For some questions, there may be a body of accepted knowledge for which any answer to the question must account. Consider a philosopher exploring questions about the nature of mind. Her pursuit of answers to these questions must be consistent with or explain in some way the currently accepted knowledge in neurophysiology, psychology,
etc., about the mind and mental processes. Alongside this knowledge, a philosopher generally has a set of intuitions, or deeply held instinctive beliefs, about how to answer the question. However, there are some questions that aren’t informed by an existing body of knowledge, such as whether a particular action is right or wrong. For such questions, intuitions are really the only place for a philosopher to begin.

So the philosophical method is just this: We start with a philosophical question about which we had at least some intuitions and maybe also some accepted knowledge (from science, for example). A philosopher uses that information to formulate a philosophical hypothesis and then uses logical analysis to support or discount the hypothesis.

Doing Philosophy

Suppose we’re trying to figure out what makes an action right or wrong. It seems plausible that an action can be regarded as morally right if it does the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Let’s test this starting point by finding a situation in which taking an action that does the greatest good for the greatest number of people doesn’t seem morally right. Suppose Bad Temper Bill is stuck in a horrible traffic jam on an overpass. A driver from another lane squeezes in front of Bill, despite Bill’s best efforts to prevent it. Bill jumps out of his car, rips the other driver out of the driver’s seat, and tosses him off the overpass. As it turns out, the guy Bill threw off the overpass was a terrorist who was just about to detonate a bomb that would have killed many innocent people. But the man was a complete stranger to Bill, who was simply acting in a fit of rage. Bill’s action did the greatest good for the greatest number of people, but given Bill’s motives, it seems ridiculous to claim that Bill’s actions were morally good.

We have arrived at a point where the proposition from which we began has created a contradiction. The initial proposition conflicts with our strong intuition in the Bill case. We now need to revise the initial proposition to make it consistent with that intuition. Once we’ve revised our proposition, we begin testing it again by analyzing what follows from it.

We contrived the Bill case as an intuition pump—a kind of scenario designed to elicit and refine intuitions on a question. Intuition pumps are to philosophers what experiments are to scientists. In fact, they are often referred to as thought experiments. They are powerful tools for philosophers because the intuitions that are elicited, along with the rules of logic, can be used to test philosophical claims.

As this example shows, while logical analysis is the primary tool in the philosopher’s toolbox, the philosophical method isn’t simply rote application of rules of logic. Rather, it’s a process of creating clever thought experiments, drawing fine distinctions, reflecting carefully, and developing the judgment to employ logical analysis effectively. It’s this process of thoughtful reflection at which Socrates excelled and through which contemporary philosophers continue to pursue their love of wisdom.

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