

## What Is Philosophy? A Personal View

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There is no way to define Philosophy in a simple, short formula. In part, that is because Philosophy is three things at once:

It is a subject of study, alongside other subjects such as History or Physics or Linguistics.

It is an activity or practice, like swimming or hunting.

It is an aspect of human personality.

Take the second thing first: that Philosophy is an activity or practice. The reason why I call it an activity as well as a subject is that subjects are organized masses of information about things. By learning that information, one learns about those things. Philosophy does not just tell us about things. It is also something that one can learn how to do. Philosophy is, in one sense, comparable to such activities as hunting or swimming. Learning it involves the development of certain abilities. In particular, abilities for good reasoning, good judgement, analysis of claims and arguments, careful interpretation and criticism or defence of what you yourself or others say or do. For the most part, these abilities are developed by observation and imitation of people who are highly practised at doing such things. You learn to swim by copying the movements of those who can swim. Similarly, you learn to do Philosophy by taking part in Philosophical conversations, research and writing and listening to people who already have some Philosophical skills,

especially the skills of good reasoning. I'll come back to the topic of good reasoning and its importance in Philosophy in one of the paragraphs that follow this one.

Next, consider what I said was the third sense of what Philosophy is: an aspect of human personality. In suggesting that it has this meaning, I'm indicating what we mean when we say of a person that he or she has a philosophy. When we describe a person in this way, we don't necessarily mean that the person knows things about the academic subject of Philosophy. And we don't necessarily mean that the person has developed abilities for doing Philosophy either. We mean that such people have a philosophy of their own.

Here's why I think that this distinction is important. Probably, most people have a philosophy, even though they may know nothing about Philosophy as an academic subject; even though they may seldom or never engage in Philosophical discussions or express themselves philosophically. They may not even realize that they have a philosophy or be able to explain what their philosophy is. Having said that, how can I claim that nearly everybody has a philosophy?

Whoever you are, some things matter to you more than other things do. One indication of this fact is that there are some things that you do, not because you have to do them, but because you want to do them. There are other things that you do even though you neither have to do them nor want to do them. You do these things just because you think you should do them. You not only do, and believe you ought to do, those things, you also refrain from doing certain other things just because you believe you ought not to do them. Also, you apply some of those beliefs to other people. You criticize them for doing things you believe they ought not to have done. You also have certain tastes and preferences. You like and admire certain kinds of things and you praise them or

express your liking for them and approval of them. Some other things regard as offensive or disgusting. Some things strike you as beautiful, appropriate, clever or interesting. You praise them for those reasons.

Here's why I think that these attitudes, viewpoints and character traits are important for explaining what Philosophy is. Caring about certain things, recognizing obligations, having tastes and preferences, criticizing or praising certain things, are signs of values people have. Having a set of values is an aspect of your personality; of who you are. Having values is closely connected with having a philosophy. Just about everybody not only has values and shows them, they would also be willing to defend some of their values as worthy of some respect. Or, we are sometimes willing to defend or criticize some of the values that we or other people have and act upon. Also, most people are, at least sometimes, willing to explain why they think that something should or should not be done; why something does or does not deserve respect or admiration.

Insofar as you praise, criticize, defend or explain values, you examining them and you are thinking about them. Insofar as you examine or think about values, you have a philosophy.

So, if your values are an aspect of who you are, so is your philosophy. You have one, even if you never realized that you have one. Of course, I'm not saying that everybody has the same philosophy. Just the opposite. Your philosophy is one of the main things that makes you the unique person you are. But people's philosophies are not only as different as the people themselves, they are different according to the degree to which a person has developed and worked out their thinking about their values. Some people have developed the kinds of reasons they use to support, defend, explain or criticize values to a greater extent than have others. People whose main interest in life is in the development and criticism of philosophies are professional philosophers. One of the main parts of studying Philosophy as an academic subject consists of studying, analyzing, criticising or defending, discussing,

thinking and writing about the ideas of professional philosophers. What these ideas are or were is the purely informational part of Philosophy as an academic subject.

As I've just explained things, practically everybody is at least an amateur philosopher, even without this sort of study. Practically everybody tries at least sometimes to make sense of life and of their and other people's values. Studying the works of professional philosophers is an excellent way of learning how to do Philosophy. Even in the context of studying Philosophy as an academic subject, one gains philosophical skills and abilities. Once this begins to happen, one is no longer a "mere amateur". A disposition to think philosophically makes a concrete difference to how one lives and to the sort of person one is.

I've made it seem as if Philosophy is only about values and, in a way, I think that's correct. or at least not far from correct. It all depends on the sorts of things that can be counted as values. Everybody would count things like Freedom, Beauty, Justice or Health as values. We often criticize people for not having enough respect for such values. Sometimes we criticize people for focusing too much on values like Power or Wealth. But there are other things that are classifiable as values and our everyday practices of praising or criticizing things also reveals what these other values are. Think about the following kinds of cases.

We criticize people for being naive or gullible in their beliefs, assumptions or ideas. Sometimes we criticize a person for being prejudiced, biased or narrow-minded. Sometimes we criticize a person's thinking as careless, sloppy or incomplete. This sort of criticism is like criticizing someone for being boring, offensive or lazy, except in the latter cases what we are criticizing is their actions. In the former cases, what we are criticizing is the quality of their thinking. Sometimes, other

people may question or challenge our judgement. When this happens, we often want to show them that we are not prejudiced; that we are really being impartial; that we have not made a naive judgement; that we have made the judgement carefully and fairly. We want to show these things about our judgement even on those occasions when we really are being prejudiced, unfair or careless. Very often, we don't realize that our judgement is imperfect, even though it is. Even then, we want to be regarded as someone who has good judgment. What these everyday kinds of criticism and response show is that Truth is one of the things that are important to us.. It, too, is a value. Like Beauty and Justice, some people care more about it than do others. But Truth is a special value because no one can be indifferent all the time about what is or is not true. Possibly, someone could be utterly indifferent to values like Beauty or Justice throughout their whole lives. I doubt that anyone could take such an attitude constantly toward Truth. Finding out what's true and what's not true is one of the main ways we try to make sense of our lives. It is also one of the main ways we try to stay alive. When we criticize other people's judgement, or reasoning, we are, in effect, accusing them of not caring as much as they should about Truth. We are also implying that we do care appropriately about Truth. Finding out what's true and what's not true is part of acquiring knowledge. We care about and respect it even if we never think consciously about what it is. Does Philosophy tell us what to think it is? Does learning Philosophy consist of learning certain facts?

It would be a mistake to think that the point of studying Philosophy is to acquire knowledge of some domain of facts just as the point of studying other academic subjects like History or Physics is to become acquainted with and think clearly about certain collections of facts. No doubt, there are "facts of History" and "facts of Physics". Historians and Physicists may sometimes argue among themselves about what some of the facts are, but they have no doubt that the facts are there, whether they ever succeed in identifying them or not. By contrast, it is very controversial whether there are any "facts of Philosophy". It would also be a mistake to suppose that studying Philosophy means that you are searching for

some body of doctrine, perhaps some specific ideology or creed like Socialist Theory or Hinduism, and that you want to adopt it as your own, to carefully absorb its basic tenets, codes and principles and to then defend all of that as the Truth while criticizing and rejecting rival ideologies or creeds as simply not true. There are, of course, many Philosophers who have constructed such ideologies or creeds and they have defended them as superior to all others. There is nothing illegitimate about a philosophers' constructing an ideology or creed and then trying to convince others that it is correct. And there is much to be learned by studying their ideas. But, it is quite possible to be a philosopher without making any commitment to any ideology or creed. Studying Philosophy and learning to do Philosophy do not require, or even necessarily promote, the adoption of some ideology or creed. Quite the opposite. The point of studying Philosophy is to acquire a set of attitudes and abilities which liberate one from captivity, either to one's own biases and prejudices or to the world views of various ideologies or creeds.

Human beings are susceptible to being controlled and manipulated by many things. To the extent that we do not become conscious of these potential traps, examine them carefully, critically and fairly and then make our own decisions about what to believe and do, we are not free agents. We are controlled by the ideas of others. To the extent that one learns the skills of analyzing ideas and arguments, identifying ambiguity and vagueness, of observing the quality of reasoning that others use to persuade us to believe and act as they would have us do, to learn the skill of forming one's own opinions so that they are as clear and as logically grounded as we can make them, we are learning to be intellectually free agents. That is the real goal of studying Philosophy. No prize is more valuable. No course of study is of greater practical value. to be wealthy, strong, beautiful powerful or famous are all worthless if one's thoughts, attitudes and actions are controlled by someone else's ideas. There is all the difference in the world between having ideas imposed on you, so that you accept them uncritically versus freely accepting

them as rationally warranted according to your own careful examination and judgement. It is something like the difference between being held prisoner by someone and inviting that person into your house as a respected guest.

Though many people live in "free" and "democratic" societies, it is not clear that a majority of them understand the urgency of the need for citizens to have more than just access to information they need to participate in the process of government. What is also essential is the intellectual skills and abilities for making sense of complex information, for spotting deceptive uses of information, for identifying and analyzing arguments, for detecting contradictions, for demanding good explanations and assessing the quality of the reasoning that others, especially politicians and the news media, use. There is a constant danger in free, democratic societies of being manipulated and controlled by others' statements, arguments, explanations, appeals to emotion and prejudice. There will always be anti-democratic factions who will take advantage of free press and free speech to use any sort of rhetorical devices necessary to persuade citizens to either accept existing policies or to reject them and elect those who would put different policies into effect. Unless citizens are intellectually equipped with skills of the sort promoted by the study of Philosophy to participate in fair, free and full discussions of issues that are vital to their interests, access to information will be of little value. If most citizens of democratic societies are so poorly equipped for this purpose that they become confused, frustrated, disgusted and cynical and then stop trying to participate in reasonable debates, give up on the whole idea of a democratic society, then democracy will eventually die. Only strongly motivated political minorities will participate in the process of government. And the most strongly motivated political minorities are always the most radical.

That is how democracies die. One of the first things that anti-democratic societies do after seizing power is to silence intellectually free, rational thinkers who demand good reasons for policies, laws and ideologically

based assertions. People with independent minds, especially if they are professional philosophers, are anathema to anti-democratic governments and they are typically sent to labor camps or prisons or are executed when anti-democratic leaders take power. Such governments allow only "philosophers" who teach only officially approved ideology. Even when anti-democratic governments are in positions to control all access to information, re-write history books to suit their objectives and totally restructure the contents of education, they fear and despise those with the courage and skill to challenge their logic.