What is Philosophy?

Eastern & Western Perspectives

Revised, 8/30/08
Part I: The Structure of Philosophy

- Philosophy as the love of wisdom
- The basic questions and branches of philosophy
- The branches of the branches and the many philosophical questions that have been raised
The Greek word, *philosophia*, means

- the love *(philia)*
- of
- wisdom *(sophia)*

(So does Shankara)
The Sanskrit, Chinese, & Japanese equivalents of “philosophia” are:

- **Darshana** (Sanskrit), which means “vision” (more precisely, vision of ultimate reality)
- **Je Shwe** (Chinese, pronounced something like “juh shway”), which means “wise study”
- **Tetsugaku** (Japanese), which means “wise learning”
This course concentrates on Chinese & Indian philosophy.
(Japan has a less developed philosophical tradition, mostly borrowed from China or from the West.)
Philosophers (East & West) seek wisdom by trying to answer certain kinds of questions.
The three most basic philosophical questions are

- What’s what?
- What’s good?
- What do we know (or what’s true)?
The Branches of Philosophy

- **Metaphysics** - What’s what? – Reality

- **Axiology** - What’s good? – Value

- **Epistemology** - What do we know? - Knowledge (Or what’s true?) (& Truth)
What do those fancy words mean?

- **Metaphysics, *metaphusika* (Gr.)**
  - *meta* = above, beyond, after
  - *phusika* = the scientific study of the world (*phusis* = nature)

- **Axiology, *axiologia***
  - *axios, axion* = value
  - *logia* = the study, theory, or science of something

- **Epistemology, *epistemologia***
  - *episteme* = knowledge
  - *logia*
Some official (& brief) definitions:

- **Metaphysics** is the philosophical investigation of the nature of reality, being, or existence.
- **Axiology** is the philosophical investigation of the nature of value(s) & of the foundations of value judgments.
- **Epistemology** is the philosophical investigation of the nature of knowledge & truth & of the differences between knowledge & opinion & between truth & falsity.
The Branches of the Branches of Philosophy
Metaphysics
(Theory of Being)

- **Ontology** - being (*ontos*) in general
- **Philosophical Cosmology** - the cosmos
- **Philosophical Theology** - God & the gods (*Theos & theoi*)
- **Philosophical Anthropology** - human nature and human existence (*anthropos*)
Axiology
(Theory of Value)

- Aesthetics (philosophy of art)
- Ethics (moral philosophy)
- Social & Political Philosophy
Epistemology
(Theory of Knowledge)

Any branches of this branch?
(No)
So philosophy as an intellectual discipline has the following structure (or subject matter):

- **Metaphysics**
  - Ontology (being in general)
  - Philosophical Cosmology (the cosmos or universe)
  - Philosophical Theology (God & the gods)
  - Philosophical Anthropology (human nature & existence)

- **Axiology**
  - Aesthetics (art & aesthetic experience)
  - Ethics (morality)
  - Social & Political Philosophy (society & politics)

- **Epistemology**
Logic is also important in philosophy.

(We’ll get to it as we go along.)
In each of the branches (& sub-branches) of philosophy, numerous questions are raised.

In the following slides, various questions from the various branches of philosophy are listed. After each question, there are parenthetical indications as to whether the question has been raised in the Western philosophical tradition (“W”), or in Indian philosophy (“I”), or in Chinese philosophy (“C”).
In metaphysics, there are questions about being or reality in general, i.e., ontological questions.

- Why is there something rather than nothing? (W)
- Is it possible that, prior to now, there was absolutely nothing in existence? (W)
- What is ultimately (really) real (as opposed to what is only apparently real)? (W, I, C)
- Is reality fundamentally one or many? (W, I, C)
- What is the relationship between the One (TAO), the Two (Yin & Yang), & the Many (the plural world)? (C)
- Is there anything that does not change? (W, I, C)
- Is reality fundamentally material or spiritual? (W, I, C)
- Which is more basic, Being or Non-Being? (C)
Metaphysics also includes,

- **cosmological questions such as**
  - What is the nature of the cosmos? What is it made of? How is it structured? (W, I, C)
  - Did the cosmos come into being? If so, how? (W, I, C)
  - Will the cosmos cease to be in the future? (W)
  - Is there a reality above & beyond the cosmos (a “supernatural” reality), or is the cosmos (nature) “all there really is”? (W, I, C)
  - What are the philosophical implications of scientific answers to cosmological questions? (W)

(For more cosmological questions, see "Notes on the Nature of Philosophy")
Also in metaphysics, there are

- theological questions:
  - Does God exist? (W, I)
  - What is the nature of God? (W, I)
  - If God exists, how is it possible for pain, suffering, and disorder ("evil") to exist? (W, I)

- anthropological questions:
  - What are the basic characteristics of human nature? (W, I, C)
  - How are the human mind & the human body related to each other? (W)
  - Is there "freedom of the will"? (W, I, C)
  - Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What’s the point? (W, I, C)

However, see next slide on this category.
In Eastern philosophy, especially in Chinese philosophy,

- “theological” questions are often less focused specifically on “God” than the preceding slide suggests.

- The reality of “God” &/or the gods is not denied, but the emphasis is often placed on a Supreme Reality higher than the divine (the *TAO* in Confucianism & Taoism; the cosmic Buddha-nature & Nirvana in Buddhism; the Nirguna-Brahman in certain schools of Hindu thought).

- In this context, the questions would include: “Is there a Supreme Reality above the gods?” “What is its nature?” “How can we live in harmony with it?” “Can we achieve union with it?”
in Indian philosophy,

- there are questions that are both anthropological & theological.
  - Does the finite individual really exist?
  - What is the solution to the problem of suffering?
  - How can the Self be liberated from suffering?
  - What is the nature of the Self ($Atman$)?
  - What is the relationship between the Self & “God” ($Brahman$)?
  - What is the relationship between the body, the mind, the ego, & the Self?
In axiology, there are questions in

- the philosophy of art (aesthetics),
- moral philosophy (ethics), &
- social & political philosophy

For example,
there are questions about art:

- What is “art”? (W)
- Can we distinguish between (1) art & non-art, (2) authentic art & unauthentic art, (3) good & bad art, (4) fine & useful (applied) art? If so, how? If not, why not? (W)
- What are the standards of aesthetic judgment? (W)
- What is the purpose of art? (W)
- How does art “mean”? Does art “mean”? (W) (Not sure about C & I.)
there are questions about morality:

- General normative ethics
  - What are the basic standards of morality?
  - What are the differences between “right” & “wrong”?
  - What is the nature of moral virtue?

- Applied normative ethics
  - Is the death penalty morally justifiable?
  - Abortion?
  - Racial, gender, or age discrimination?
  - Recreational drug use?
  - The “war on drugs”?

(W, I, & C)

These are questions in normative ethics. What about non-normative ethics?
Ethics is a branch of axiology, & it has its own sub-branches:

- **Normative Ethics**
  - **General** - the attempt to define the basic principles, standards, & rules of morality
  - **Applied** - the application of moral principles, standards, & rules to specific moral problems

- **Non-Normative Ethics**
  - **Descriptive Ethics** - the scientific study of moral beliefs & practices (part of the social sciences)
  - **Metaethics** - critical thinking about normative ethics (e.g., “Is moral knowledge possible?”)
The 3rd branch of axiology is social & political philosophy:

- What are the origins, nature, & purposes of government (the state)?
- What are the proper relationships between the individual, society, & the state?
- What is the nature of justice? Liberty? Equality?
- What is the nature & purpose of law?
Questions in epistemology:

- What is the nature of knowledge?
- What are the sources of knowledge?
- What is the extent (scope & limits) of knowledge?
- What are the differences between knowledge & opinion?
- What is the nature of truth?
- What are the differences between truth & falsity?
- Can the truth be known at all?

(W & I -- not so much C)
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Theories of Truth
Theories of Truth
What makes a belief or proposition true (as opposed to false)?

- **Correspondence theory:** A belief or proposition is true when it corresponds to, agrees with, or describes reality (i.e., the "way things are," what is in fact the case), and it is false when it fails to correspond to, agree with, or describe reality. *(How we find out whether beliefs, propositions, and claims are in fact true or false, i.e., how we go about proving or disproving truth-claims, is a question we will need to discuss.)*

- **Coherence theory:** A belief or proposition is true when it agrees (coheres) with other true beliefs or propositions in a system of accepted beliefs and propositions.

- **Pragmatic theory:** A belief or proposition is true when it works out in practice, i.e., "when acting upon it yields satisfactory practical results." William James held that this approach will lead in the long run to "a stable body of scientific propositions that have been shown in experience to be successful principles for human action."
Part II: The Process of Philosophical Thinking

- The dialectic of construction and criticism in the process of philosophical thinking: constructive philosophy & critical philosophy
- The nature of rational defensibility (and of rational indefensibility)
In addition to being a discipline with a structure & subject matter,

philosophy is also a process or activity, a way of trying to “figure things out.”
As a process or activity, philosophy is a two-sided way of thinking about reality, value, & knowledge.
The Two Types (or Sides) of Philosophical Thinking

- **Constructive Philosophy**
  - the construction of *rationally defensible answers* to philosophical questions concerning the nature of reality, the nature of value, & the nature of knowledge
  - answering questions

- **Critical Philosophy**
  - the *analysis, clarification, & evaluation* of answers that are given to philosophical questions concerning the nature of reality, the nature of value, & the nature of knowledge
  - questioning answers
The overall process of philosophical thinking proceeds in something like the following way:

- Someone raises a philosophical question.
- Someone (the questioner or someone else) constructs an answer to the question, trying to back the answer up with good reasons so as to make it as *rationally defensible* as possible (constructive philosophy).
- Someone (the constructor or someone else) analyzes, clarifies, & evaluates the answer & judges the degree to which the answer is satisfactory (critical philosophy).
if the answer is less than completely satisfactory (& it usually is),

the constructor of the answer will have to reconstruct it or construct a new one,

and then the critic will analyze, clarify, & evaluate the reconstructed or new answer & judge the degree to which it is a satisfactory response to the original philosophical question . . . (and so on) . . .
Ideally (and theoretically),

- this back-and-forth ("dialectical") process of construction-criticism-reconstruction-criticism-reconstruction goes on until a fully satisfactory answer to the original question is developed.

- It is, of course, possible that that ideal goal will never be reached.
- However, true philosophers never give up their pursuit of the wisdom that they love.
Another point about constructive philosophy:

- Traditionally, the aim of constructive philosophy was quite ambitious. It was to construct a comprehensive, coherent, & intellectually (& perhaps emotionally) satisfying world-view or philosophical system in which everything “falls into place,” has meaning, & makes sense.

- However, in modern times, many (but not all) constructive philosophers have tended to be more modest in their aims, attempting to answer only a few of the major philosophical questions without attempting the construction of a world-view or philosophical system.

(This is more true of Western than of Eastern philosophy.)
What, then, is philosophy?

Philosophy, on the *constructive* side, is the attempt to formulate *rationally defensible* answers to certain fundamental questions concerning the nature of reality, the nature of value, & the nature of knowledge and truth;

& on the *critical* side, it is the analysis, clarification, & evaluation of answers given to basic metaphysical, axiological, & epistemological questions in an effort to determine just how *rationally defensible* such answers are.
What does “rationally defensible” mean?

What makes a claim *rationally defensible*?
To be rationally defensible, at minimum,

- a claim must not be inconsistent with itself (i.e., self-contradictory), and

- it must not be inconsistent with the facts or evidence of common sense or scientific experience.
the claim that today is both Monday & Friday

- cannot be true
- because it is self-contradictory (i.e., it is inconsistent with itself),
- and it is therefore NOT rationally defensible.
the claim that there is an elephant in your living room,

- although it is not inconsistent with itself (i.e., it is not self-contradictory),
- *is* inconsistent with the facts of experience,
- i.e., *as a matter of fact*, there is no elephant in your living room (is there?).
- So this claim is also NOT rationally defensible.

Of course, if there *were* an elephant in your living room, then this claim . . . .
would be rationally defensible, wouldn’t it?

- It is not a self-contradictory claim.
- If there were an elephant in your living room, then it would not be inconsistent with the facts of experience to say that there is.
- Indeed, the facts of experience (seeing, touching, etc.) would actually prove that the claim is true.

This leads to....
a distinction between

- claims that are rationally defensible *in the weak sense*, i.e., in the sense that they are neither self-contradictory nor negated by the facts of experience and thus cannot be refuted;

- claims that are rationally defensible *in the strong sense*, i.e., in the sense that they are positively supported by or even proved true on the basis of good reasons.
If someone were to claim that there is an elephant in your living room, we could prove or disprove the claim by going into your living room, looking around, and, on the basis of our perceptions, discovering whether there is an elephant there or not.

And the result of our investigation -- i.e., our answer to the question as to whether or not there is an elephant in your living room -- would itself be rationally defensible in the strong sense because our answer would be proved on the basis of perception.
the claim is that there is an **ANGEL** in your living room?

How could we prove or disprove that claim?

If we all (& by “we,” I mean the members of this class) went into your living room & saw an angel sitting on your couch (& if we all agreed that what we were seeing actually was an angel), then I suppose we could say that this claim is rationally defensible *in the strong sense* (at least to our own satisfaction although others we told about this might think that we had all been subject to a mass hallucination).

However, what is more likely to happen
when we look around your living room is that we will **NOT** see any angels because angels (which are spiritual rather than material beings) are ordinarily invisible (& imperceptible in general).

Will that prove that there are no angels in your living room?

No, it won’t. Since angels are ordinarily imperceptible, our failure to perceive any in your living room does not prove that there are none there.
It seems that the claim that there is an angel in your living room is neither provable nor disprovable; and since the claim is neither self-contradictory nor inconsistent with the facts of experience, it is rationally defensible, *only in the weak sense* that it cannot be refuted on the basis of either logic or factual evidence.

To be rationally defensible *in the strong sense*, the claim would have to be positively supported or even proved true on the basis of good reasons.

*Remember, the fact that we do not perceive the angel does not show that the claim here is inconsistent with the facts of experience because it *is* a fact of experience that angels are rarely [if ever] perceived.*)
At this point, we must be careful not to claim too much.

- To say that a claim is rationally defensible does not necessarily mean that it is true or has been proved true.
- A claim that is rationally defensible *in the strong sense* is one that has good reasons supporting it.
- The support may be so strong as to remove all doubt (and thus prove with certainty) that the claim is true.
- However, the reasons supporting the claim may only remove all *reasonable* doubt (not *all* doubt) from our minds; or they may be just strong enough to make it *more likely than not* that the claim is true (because it is supported by a “preponderance of the evidence”).
A claim that is rationally defensible *in the weak sense*

- is merely one that has not been refuted because it is neither inconsistent with itself nor with the facts of experience.
- Thus, it *might* be true.
- However, there is no positive or convincing reason to believe that it *is* true (e.g., is there any reason whatsoever to believe that there are, say, exactly three ghosts in your living room?).
- Thus, the claim might also be false.

(Just because it has not been *proved* false does not allow us to say that it is true.)
Let’s pause to summarize our discussion of rational defensibility . . . .
A claim is rationally defensible *in the weak sense* when

- there is no good reason to believe that it is true, but when also
- it cannot be proved false because it is neither self-contradictory
- nor inconsistent with the evidence of (common sense or scientific) experience.

And...
A claim is rationally defensible *in the strong sense* when

- it is neither inconsistent with itself
- nor with the evidence of (common sense or scientific) experience
- **AND** when there is good reason to believe that the claim is (1) *certainly true* (no doubt), or (2) *probably true* (no reasonable doubt), or at least (3) *more likely to be true than false* (because there is a preponderance of evidence supporting it).
What makes a belief or proposition rationally indefensible?

- A belief or proposition that is inconsistent with itself (self-contradictory) is rationally indefensible. Any belief or proposition that is self-contradictory is not only false but necessarily so. Its truth is logically impossible.

- A belief or proposition that is inconsistent with the evidence of (common sense or scientific) experience is rationally indefensible. Any such belief or proposition is at least probably false.

- Are there other ways in which a belief or proposition can be rationally indefensible? I don't know. Can you think of any?
Part III: The Sources of Philosophical Beliefs

- Perception (i.e., sense-perception)
- Inference
- Intuition
- Authority ("authoritative testimony")
Earlier, when we were considering the claim that there is an elephant in your living room,

- we appealed to sense perception in order to test the rational defensibility of that claim.
- However, many claims (philosophical or otherwise) can be neither established nor refuted through perception because

- they are *inferential* in nature.
- For example, I can (& do) perceive crows, & every crow I have ever seen has been black.
- From this perceptual experience, I infer that . . . .
all crows are black.

Now, even though this claim is based on perceptual experience, it cannot be evaluated through direct perception because no one can have a perception of ALL crows.
IS IT REASONABLE

- to infer that *ALL* crows are black
- on the basis of our perceptions of *SOME* crows?
- I have observed hundreds or even thousands of crows, haven’t you?
- They’ve all been black.
- So my “reason” tells me that *ALL* crows are black even though I have observed only *SOME* crows.

Is this or is this not a reasonable inference? That is the question. What’s the answer?
Here’s a more philosophical example. It pertains to a metaphysical issue known as “the problem of other minds.”

The question is, are there minds other than my own?
My answer to this question is “yes,” & I construct it on the basis of both perception & inference.

I cannot perceive the minds of other persons, but I can see their bodies, and I can hear their voices.

Other people *speak* as though they have minds, they make *facial expressions* which suggest to me that they have minds, & their “body language” in general leads me to believe that they have minds as I do.
... I *infer*

- the existence of minds other than my own,
- namely,
- the minds of other people.

- This is my solution to
- "the problem of other minds."

Now, this answer must be subjected to philosophical criticism. Is the inference I have made a reasonable one? Is it rationally defensible? What do you say?
So, philosophical claims

- can be established or criticized on the basis of perception (i.e., sense perception), or
- on the basis of a process of logical inference.

Much philosophical thinking begins with perception; but reasoning out the logical implications of what is perceived probably plays a larger role in philosophy than does perception itself. As we proceed through the course, we may even find some philosophers reasoning in ways that owe very little or nothing to perceptual experience.

We’ll discuss logic a lot more later on.
In addition to perception & inference,

- **some** Western philosophers & **and** **many** Eastern philosophers recognize at least **two additional means** by which philosophical claims can be established or criticized, namely,
  - **intuition**
  - &
  - **appeal to traditional authorities** (e.g., the Bible, the **Vedas**, the Chinese classics, etc.).
INTUITION is the immediate, direct apprehension, understanding, or knowing of something without the use of discursive reasoning.

(Discursive reasoning is the process of inference, i.e., the process of going from premises to a conclusion in a series of logical steps.)
Actually, *perception* is a form of intuition.

- Some philosophers distinguish between *sensible (or sensory) intuition* (perception) & *intelligible intuition*.
- Through *intelligible intuition* (intellectual perception), we can know certain things in the realm of *ideas* (not perceivable objects) directly & non-inferentially, e.g., that every effect must have a cause; that a proposition “A” is either true or false; that a finite whole is larger than any one of its own parts; that a perfect being cannot have any defects; etc.

(Some also claim that we have intuitional knowledge of Being, of God, of the Self, of moral truth, etc.)
Appeal to Traditional Authorities

In Indian and Chinese philosophy, another source of belief is authoritative testimony, especially as embodied in classic and/or sacred texts. Maybe we should add that to sense-perception, inference, and intuition. How, for example, do we know (if we do know) that there was a great civil war in America in the mid-19th century? None of us was there to witness it. We do not know about it through pure intuition. Nor does our knowledge of the Civil War seem to be a product of logical reasoning. We know about it mainly through the (written) work of historians, who have used the remnants of the past (documents and artifacts of various sorts) to construct accounts of “what happened then.” Even now, how do we know what is going on in Iraq or in Afganistan? It is through the (written, radio, and TV) reports of journalists and social scientists, isn't it? Not through our own perceptions, inferences, or intuitions. It seems that much of what we know (or at least believe) arises from that kind of “authoritative testimony.”
What, then, is philosophy?

- It is an attempt to figure out, on the basis of perceptual (and perhaps intuitional) experience, logical reasoning, and “authoritative testimony” – & in a “rationally defensible” way – the nature of reality, value, & knowledge. (That’s “constructive philosophy.”)

- It is also the criticism of all such attempts. (That’s “critical philosophy.”)
Some (other) contrasts between Eastern & Western philosophy:

- **Eastern Philosophy**
  - Close relationship between philosophy & religion
  - Strong emphasis on “spirit”
  - Employs perception, reasoning, intuition, & traditional authority in its pursuit of philosophical “vision”
  - Recognition of many perspectives on truth

- **Western Philosophy**
  - Critical distance between philosophy & religion
  - Less strong emphasis on “spirit”
  - Emphasis on reason, experience, & “scientific” methods of thinking (critical of appeals to intuition & traditional authority)
  - Seeks **THE** perspective on truth (less so in recent times)

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<td>- i.e., focused on gaining release from suffering (“salvation” philosophies)</td>
<td>- i.e., focused on understanding the nature of reality, value, &amp; knowledge</td>
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<td>Unsystematic, rambling,</td>
<td>Systematic, precise, analytic, logically organized, logically extended (non-aphoristic), &amp; less repetitious style of thinking</td>
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<td>disorganized, aphoristic, &amp; repetitious style of thinking &amp; writing (suspicion of human ability to grasp “The Truth”)</td>
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That’s all for now