

What Is Philosophy?

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It is often surprising to non-philosophers that philosophers should find it difficult to answer this question. Nonetheless, the very question “What is philosophy?” is *itself* a philosophical question! To help us gain an initial understanding of the philosophical enterprise I will quickly discuss three views of the nature of philosophy (two of which, I will argue, are deficient).

1. The “Wondering” Conception of Philosophy:

Philosophers as diverse as Plato, Aristotle, and Schopenhauer have contended that philosophy is, or begins with, a kind of wonder (or *refusal to take things for granted*)^[1] David Pears characterizes the relevant sort of wonder as follows:

...the question, why a particular species of animal exists, is answerable by zoology, but the question, why anything at all exists, cannot be answered by any science....the question whether a particular scientific argument is valid can be settled by reference to the accepted standards of...validity, but the question whether the standards themselves ought to be accepted cannot be settled in any such way.^[2]

According to Pears, “philosophy originates in the desire to transcend the world of human thought and experience, in order to find some *point of vantage from which it can be seen as a whole*.”^[3]

The “wondering” is sometimes called the attempt to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis*.^[4] It certainly captures *part* of what philosophizing is. But such wondering is, at best, only the *beginning* of the philosophic enterprise—if this was all there were to it, philosophizing would be a particular brand of *day-dreaming*. Indeed, if the “wondering conception” were the whole story, such wonders would seem pointless and disconnected with our lives, and complaints like that offered by David Stove (in the “Preface” to his book *The Plato Cult*) would be appropriate. Stove maintains that the “wonderings” of many philosophers are without purpose or meaning:

Parmenides [~500 B.C.E.] said nothing can move. Yet he traveled and knew he traveled around Greece and southern Italy, defending his opinion; he defended it, of course, by moving his tongue and lips.^[5]

Plato [~427--~347 B.C.E.] held that no particular thing can be *really* white, or round, or human...that only whiteness is really white....In another and better world, he said, such ‘universals’ exist on their own, unmixed with space, time, or each other....Yet Plato was a particular thing himself, of course, and was human too....^[6]

Philosopher’s theories, then, are often so exceedingly strange that we are obligated to postulate some non-rational cause, in order to explain the philosophers’ believing them.^[7]

Later in his book, Stove summarizes his criticism of the “wondering” characterization of philosophy by saying that “...philosophy typically begins in *pseudo-wonder*....”^[8] His complaint is that the wondering of **many (or most) philosophers seems idle**. That is, without a clear-cut goal (or end-in-view), it seems to be little more than day-dreaming.^[9] The “second” conception of philosophy, which I will now discuss, can help us see what is “missing” from the first one.

2. The “Enduring Questions” Conception of Philosophy:

To get at what the “wondering conception” leaves off, let me ask you this question:

Is the discipline of philosophy famous for answering its questions or resolving its wonderings?

While individual philosophers are, of course justly famous for their own particular “answers” to the questions which they address in any introductory course in philosophy students easily come to see the inadequacy of several famous “answers.” ^[10] Certainly, then, the answer to the above question has to be a resounding “No!” In many cases, the same questions are debated anew with each generation.

What, then, is it that makes this discipline famous (or infamous)? We could contend that *philosophy is famous for its questions*. This leads us to what I will call the “enduring questions” conception of philosophy. To understand it, we will need to distinguish two sorts of questions (or problems):

Removable questions are those that can be firmly and finally answered or resolved). Here I have in mind such questions as “What is the boiling point of water,” or “How can we vacuum-pack potato chips?”

Enduring questions, on the other hand, are questions that have not been, or perhaps can not be, firmly or finally resolved.

-According to this conception of philosophy, these questions arise for all of us (they arise for each individual, generation, society, or culture) because we are the sorts of creatures we are, and because of the nature of the world, or environment, which we inhabit. Examples of such questions include:[\[11\]](#)

--questions about our *relationship to others* (about our moral responsibility, political and social obligations, etc.);

--questions about “*nature*” (about the existence of a deity, the fundamental character of reality, the relationship of minds and bodies, the existence of a rationale for the world, etc.);

--questions about our *cognitive abilities* (about the consequences of human fallibility, the distinction between science and pseudo-science, the justification of our knowledge claims, etc.); and

--questions about *ourselves* (about the nature of personal identity, the meaning of our lives, etc.).

The “enduring questions conception” of philosophy holds that philosophers are concerned with asking and answering such enduring questions. While this is partially the case, we must note that *theologians, novelists, and science fiction writers* (as well as many others) also raise and endeavor to answer such questions. Thus, it is not the questions themselves (nor the endeavoring to supply answers to them) which constitutes what is unique or special about the philosophic enterprise.

3. The “Dialectical” Conception of Philosophy:

In place of the “wondering” and “enduring questions” conceptions of philosophy, finally, I wish to offer what I will call the “dialectical conception.” Rather than concentrating on the *origins* or *objectives* of the philosophical enterprise (the wondering and answering), this conception draws our attention to the particular **methodology** which philosophers employ as they respond to the wonders, questions, and problems.[\[12\]](#)

Now it should be noted that for many individuals (at many times), *any sort of response* or answer to an enduring question will be satisfactory. After all if we have pressing questions, we often need to adopt some responsive stance [any stance] quickly. In the long run, however, the dialectical conception of philosophy emphasizes that we will be best served by (and we often desire) *critical or rational responses* to these questions. It is here that philosophy has a distinctive role to play:

according to the dialectical conception, philosophers seek *to develop, critically examine, and rationally defend* answers or responses to the sorts of questions (and wonders) noted above. In short, philosophy is here conceived of as a **critical enterprise**.

‘**Dialectic**’[\[13\]](#) (in the sense in which I am using it here [in the “Socratic” as opposed to the usage of Aquinas, Hegel, or Marx])[\[14\]](#) consists of rational argument—it is the enterprise *of meeting arguments with arguments*:

-dialectical advancement, development, and critical examination of our rational responses to the enduring questions helps to ensure that the responses which we offer are meaningful, that their implications are clear, that they fit together in a meaningful whole (a consistent world-view), that they are adequate, and that they are rationally justified.

-Toilet Paper Roll Example: (the “perennial question” as to which way it should roll off the roll, and the “rational”

response regarding “outward” and patterned paper). Of course, the problems or questions we will be concerned with are more “serious.”

--Imagine someone asks “what is the right way for toilet paper to roll off the holder—out from the wall or turning in toward the wall?” I respond “out, because that way the pattern can be seen.” An argument! Imagine the individual replies “but what if the toilet paper is not patterned?” My argument has met a counter-example, and if I am being “dialectical” (philosophical) I need to relinquish my thesis, respond successfully to the argument or modify my thesis. This quick example displays the core nature of the dialectical process.

A passage from James Rachels’ *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* summarizes this conception of philosophy nicely:

philosophy...is first and last an exercise in reason—the ideas that should come out on top are the ones that have the best reasons on their sides.[\[15\]](#)

4. Ending a Philosophical Dialectic:

A reasoned dialectic is completed when the participants rationally accept an argument, explanation, or problem-resolution. Here we can see a parallel between philosophic dialectic and science:

why do we feel that the sciences and medicine have progressed during the last two thousand years? Do we know the truth in science or medicine? Might our present answers be wrong?

-Do we have any idea what the endpoint would look like?

-How are our present theories better in science and medicine?

Avoiding past mistakes and resolving (better than they did) past problems.

Philosophers may claim the same success! Neither science nor philosophy arrives at an answer that is final but, rather, each finds an endpoint in *a critical and tentative rational agreement amongst the participants*.

What happens if other participants join in or if new considerations arise later? The dialectic is again taken up! This is why philosophical arguments are often characterized as “**perennial**”—they arise anew for each age as each group of individuals carries on the dialectic and assesses the answers of its ancestors. To many this suggests that philosophers will never solve any of the problems (or answer any of the questions), and this leads them to think that the contrast between philosophy and science is not at all favorable to philosophy. After all, the scientists are able to reach broad intersubjective consensus as to whether or not a scientific question is answered or a scientific problem is resolved. In his “Thomas Kuhn, Rocks and the Laws of Physics,” Richard Rorty offers a discussion which may help mitigate such a critique:

the trouble is that intersubjective agreement about who has succeeded and who has failed is easy to get if you lay down criteria of success in advance [and, he suggests, this is what scientists are able to do]. If all you want is fast relief, your choice of analgesic is clear (though the winning drug may have unfortunate belated side effects). If you know that all you want out of science is accurate prediction, you have a fast way to decide between competing theories (though this criterion by itself would, at one time, have led you to favor Ptolemaic over Copernican astronomy). If you know that all you want is rigorous demonstration, you can check out mathematicians’ proofs of theorems and award the prize to the one who has proved the most (although the award will then always go to a hack, whose theorems are of no interest). But intersubjective agreement is harder to get when the criteria of success begin to proliferate, and even harder when those criteria themselves are up for grabs [as they are, he suggests, in philosophy].[\[16\]](#)

5. How to Read Philosophy:

I believe that a “successful” reading of any philosophical text will comprise the asking and answering of the following four questions:

1. “What is being argued here?”
2. “What are the stages of the argument?”
3. “Were good reasons presented for the thesis?”
4. “Why is it being argued?”

It is not as easy as it might seem to ask, and answer, these questions! But if you are to understand what a philosopher says, you must know what is being argued, what steps there are to the argument, why it is being argued, and whether or not the arguments are adequate.

6. Regarding The “Interpretations” Presented in this Course:

It is necessary to note that in this course I will be presenting you with *interpretation* of the thought of several philosophers. The introductions and interpretations I will provide are meant to be just that however. I am also asking *you* to read the thinkers themselves, and I want you to form your *own* considered views about their theories. My interpretations and introductions are intended as aids to this latter process. Here the remarks of another philosopher, Richard McKeon, are appropriate. McKeon makes this statement in his “Preface” to his edition of *The Basic Works of Aristotle*:

...some aid is needed, however, and therefore a method of reading Aristotle’s works is suggested in the *Introduction* by a brief statement of the interrelations and continuity of his doctrines. The reader is advised to treat this interpretation skeptically until and unless he can find it confirmed in his own reading of the text, for it is useful only as a device by which to permit Aristotle to speak for himself. The achievement of Aristotle can be discovered only by reading and rereading his works, and the appreciation of that achievement depends quite as much on the deepened sense of value and the precision of criteria which he inculcates as on the materials he treats.[\[17\]](#)

McKeon and I want you to develop your own appreciation and interpretation of the thinkers we are exposing you to, and our remarks are meant to facilitate that rather than to be taken as some privileged set of observations and interpretations.

7. Philosophy vs. Rhetoric—The Goals of Philosophizing:

While the philosophical enterprise revolves around argumentation, philosophical argumentation must be distinguished from rhetorical argumentation. Wikipedia says:

rhetoric is the art of persuasion, which along with grammar and logic (or dialectic ...), is one of the three ancient arts of discourse. Rhetoric aims to study the capacities of writers or speakers needed to inform, persuade, or motivate particular audiences in specific situations. Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of *persuasion*” and since mastery of the art was necessary for victory in a case at law; or for passage of proposals in the assembly; or for fame as a speaker in civic ceremonies; he calls it “a combination of the science of logic and of the ethical branch of politics.” Rhetoric typically provides heuristics for understanding, discovering, and developing arguments for particular situations, such as Aristotle's three persuasive audience appeals: logos, pathos, and ethos. The five canons of rhetoric or phases of developing a persuasive speech were first codified in classical Rome: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. From Ancient Greece to the late 19th century, rhetoric played a central role in Western education in training orators, lawyers, counselors, historians, statesmen, and poets.[\[18\]](#)

The phrase I used above, “meeting arguments with arguments,” may be misunderstood (and the characterization of philosophy which I have just offered may be misconstrued) if we think of arguments simply as *disagreements* amongst individuals, as simply purposed toward *persuasion*, or as *stylized debates* where individuals seek primarily to “score points” against one another. Aristotle cites (above) winning in court, passing legislation, and seeking fame as a speaker, but rhetoricians can also simply enjoy spirited competition with friends, or may seek to “win a judged contest.” Generally rhetoricians seek to inform, persuade, or entertain an audience.

Just as one must understand the rhetorician's goal if one is to understand their activity, the *end-in-view* of a philosophical dialectic must be understood if we are to understand the philosophical argument. Unfortunately, as you might expect, philosophers disagree as to the end-in-view of the philosophical enterprise. Here are four of the many differing goals of philosophizing which have been advanced by various philosophers over the centuries from Plato's time to today.

(a) **Rational Understanding and Truth:** many traditional philosophers contend that philosophy seeks *rational understanding* (that is, "truth supported by reason"). They claim that we can attain this sort of understanding only if we develop a coherent system of critically-considered theories (or responses). Such a coherent system of critically held theories is often called a "*world-view*"—these philosophers don't claim that philosophers seek to master the many particular truths which are true of the world (the number of grains of sand on the beach, the age of the highest mountain, the exact amount of one's check-book balance), instead a coherent set of extremely general truths are sought. Here rational understanding is not sought because it facilitates some other goal, instead it is seen as intrinsically valuable (or the search for it is conceived of as an intrinsically valuable activity).^[19] In a similar vein, Robert Nozick contends that philosophy should be directed toward providing *explanations*: "many philosophical problems are ones of understanding how something is or can be possible. How is it possible for us to have free will, supposing that all actions are causally determined?"^[20]

(b) **The Happiness of the Rational Life:** some philosophers contend that human beings can not be *happy* (or lead the *good life*) unless we develop critically-considered rational responses to the wonders and enduring questions noted above (or a critically considered overall world-view). Here it is happiness which is claimed to be intrinsically valuable, and philosophy is conceived of as a necessary means toward its attainment. While criticism is, of course, emphasized here, it is valued for what it can get us (happiness or the good life). Often this view is raised not by talking about criticism but, rather, by talking about the "intellectual virtues"—it is claimed that the "life of reason" is the only truly fulfilling life for human beings.

(c) **Rational Understanding and Worship:** still other philosophers contend that the end-in-view of philosophy is the understanding (and proper worship) of a deity. These philosophers contend that the appropriate end for man is philosophical understanding of a deity (that such rational understanding is our primary purpose, obligation, and the only appropriate form of worship for a rational creature).

(d) **The Empowerment of Individuals via Reason:** finally, for my introductory purpose here, some philosophers contend that the goal of philosophizing is the empowerment of individuals via the liberation of their thought, culture, and lives from the prejudice and provincialism which culture, upbringing, and convention instill in us all. For example, Martha Nussbaum maintains that the "...pursuit of logical validity, intellectual coherence, and truth delivers *freedom from the tyranny of custom and convention, creating a community of beings who can take charge of their own life story and their own thought.*"^[21] Nussbaum cites Epicurus who says that:

empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul."^[22]

As noted above, the rhetoricians had their students study logic and argumentation to help them become more facile in arguing for (or against) whatever these students happened to want to argue for (or against). The critical orientation that the dialectical conception of philosophy champions is, similarly, "plastic" in that it allows for a variety of ends which one might pursue with this methodology. Of course there are many other goals pursued by those pursuing the philosophical enterprise.

The dialectical methodology is uncompromising, however, in its adherence to the **ideal of rationality**—it is to be used to offer others (and to help oneself find) rationally-persuasive responses to enduring problems or questions.^[23] Where the dialectical methodology in philosophy is pursued without keeping the enduring questions in sight, it is perverted from one of its primary controlling factors. Similarly, when philosophy focuses on the questions while losing sight of the dialectical arguments, it is perverted from the other of its primary controlling influences. In his *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, Hilary Putnam says that:

philosophy which is all argument feeds no real hunger; while philosophy which is all vision feeds a real hunger, but it feeds it Pabulum.[\[24\]](#)

In [a fuller version of this page](#) I have one further section "Concluding Thoughts on Distinguishing and Characterizing Philosophy" which discusses John Dewey's conception of philosophy (which emphasizes the activity of criticism of values) and also offers an initial critique of the presumption that there is a single "essence" which could adequately capture the nature of philosophizing.

NOTES: to return from note to the text for the note, click on the note number!

[\[1\]](#) Cf., Plato, *Theaetetus* 155 d, trans. F.M. Cornford, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1961); and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book I: Chapter 2; 982, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

[\[2\]](#) David Pears, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), p. 13.

[\[3\]](#) *Ibid.*, emphasis added to citation.

[\[4\]](#) That is, "under the aspect of eternity", or "in its essential or universal form or nature," or "from the outside."

[\[5\]](#) David Stove, *The Plato Cult* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. ix.

[\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

[\[7\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. x.

[\[8\]](#) David Stove, "'I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee:' Epistemology and the Ishmael Effect," in his *The Plato Cult, op. cit.*, pp. 61-82, p. 69. Emphasis added to passage.

[\[9\]](#) Where one substitutes 'explanations' for 'wonders' it may seem that the appearance of day-dreaming can be avoided. We need to remember that explanations must also be in service of some end however. Individuals may offer explanations to escape blame, to clarify causal connections, to cover-up actions, to elaborate what they take to be the truth, etc. Unless a standard of explanation is offered, little more "progress" toward what an adequate conception of philosophy is will be made here—magic, religion, statistics, and chance are all appealed to by various individuals as "explanations" for certain phenomena.

[\[10\]](#) Thus introductory students learn the deficiencies of Plato's conception of the state, Anselm's ontological argument, Descartes' dualistic conception of the self, and Kant's moral theory.

[\[11\]](#) This sample "division" of the questions is not meant to be exhaustive, nor does it perfectly parallel the "standard" division of the philosophic terrain into ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, etc.

[\[12\]](#) Of course, as the ensuing will show, the origins and objectives may not be ignored by this conception.

[\[13\]](#) Philosophers use single quotes to surround a word when they are *mentioning* it rather than *using* it. For example in the sentence "'Long' is a short word," the word 'long' is *mentioned* (discussed) while the word 'short' is *used*!

[\[14\]](#) Aquinas' method was called "dialectical" because it proceeded by first asking a specific question; second his opponents' objections to his thesis (in regard to the question) were stated; third he stated his own position (beginning with "On the contrary...", or "I answer..."); and finally, he replied to the objections which were raised. Hegel's method consisted of the statement of a thesis, then of an anti-thesis, and then a "synthesis" was developed. Marx's "dialectic" defies simple characterization, but was central to his "historical" and developmental conception.

[\[15\]](#) James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1986), p. vi.

[16] Richard Rorty, "Thomas Kuhn, Rocks and the Laws of Physics" [1997], in *his Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 175-189, p. 180. The essay originally appeared in *Common Knowledge* v. 6 (1997).

[17] Richard McKeon, "Preface," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, *op. cit.*, pp. vii-x, p. ix.

[18] "Rhetoric," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 25, 2020. The citations from Aristotle are from his *Rhetoric*, Book I, Chapter 2, Section 1359.

[19] An intrinsically valuable goal, or activity, is one that is pursued for its own sake. Such values are contrasted with *extrinsic* values—here the goal or activity is valued for what it will allow one to achieve. Health, for example, might be intrinsically valuable (good-in-itself), while wealth is usually conceived of as extrinsically valuable (good-for-what-it-can-get-us).

[20] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1981), p. 4. Emphasis added to passage.

[21] Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1994), p. 5. Emphasis added to the passage.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[23] Of course, two of the ends-in-view may require a qualification of this statement. The skeptical conception of philosophy which sees philosophical criticism aiming at the suspension of belief, and the religious conception which sees it as ending up in worship both constitute "compromised" commitments to the ideal of rationality. But this is a complex story that requires extended argument.

[24] Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 23.

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I greatly appreciate comments and corrections--typos and infelicities are all too common and the curse of "auto-correct" plagues me!