

# About Philosophy

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## What is Philosophy?

There is no single definition that seems to completely capture the meaning of Philosophy. The word tends to be used in many different ways. When we talk of studying philosophy as a discipline, we are referring to the process of reflecting critically on some of the most basic human beliefs and concepts. Philosophy is sometimes referred to as 'thinking about thinking.' While there are many areas of life that we might be thinking about when we 'do philosophy,' the three main distinctions that are made are: *Metaphysics* or theory of existence, *Epistemology* or theory of knowledge and *Ethics* or theory of human conduct.



## Philosophies of Life

'Philosophies of life' are drawn from people's experiences, often emotionally based and not always backed by rational argument. They are personal and do not have to be defended (although they could be brought under philosophical scrutiny if someone wished to do so).

## Academic Philosophy

The discipline of 'Academic Philosophy' is based on rational, defended arguments. When 'doing philosophy' we may study a person's philosophy-of-life, but our task would be to critically examine it to see if it can be rationally defended. We would not just make assertions, but would test them with argument and counter-argument. We would need to produce good reasons for our claims. Philosophy often begins in *inquiry*.

## Philosophical Inquiry and Empirical Inquiry

Ordinary inquiry is about things to which we can, in principle, find answers. 'Where is the bus-stop?' 'Who is the Prime-Minister?' 'What did I have for dinner tonight?' 'What is the sum of 54 and 63?' We resort to experience for the answer. Philosophical questions are much more difficult to answer. We either cannot answer them, or there are several possibilities, none of which can be proven. Often people disagree about the answers.

## Philosophy and Science

Science makes discoveries by using telescopes, microscopes and other forms of technology. Scientific theories can be tested by experience. Facts about life are deduced from other facts. But what about the question of why there is any life *at all*? Or something rather than nothing? Science cannot get outside of its 'bag of facts' to explain that. This is where Philosophy comes in.

## Philosophical Questions

*Philosophical questions* are not answerable within other disciplines, such as science, history, or mathematics. They are questions about meaning and concepts, often called *open questions*. They invariably lead to other questions and exploration. Some open philosophical questions are about *content*, about what something 'is.'



Other kinds of philosophical questions are about *method* and concern the way that we investigate and reason. These are sometimes referred to as *Socratic Questions*. To clarify: questions of *content* refer the *nature and substance* of the thing being questioned, and questions of *method* refer to the *practice of questioning* itself. To find out more about Philosophy, why not put your name down for one of our courses? You will have so much fun!

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