

Lecture 1.2 – General Areas or Divisions of Philosophy

Now that you have an understanding of the **origin/etymology** of the word “philosophy,” there is **another way** of gaining more understanding of “what philosophy is,” and that is by considering the **kinds of questions** that philosophers ask when they are philosophizing. Through the kinds of questions that philosophers ask, we can also become familiar with the general areas or divisions of philosophy.

There are **4 general areas or divisions of philosophy**:

1. **Metaphysics** – in this area of philosophy, the primary question that the philosopher is asking is: **What is reality?** This question can be asked in different ways. For example, we can ask: is this world the really real world? Or is there a world far more real than this world we are familiar with? Or is this table (or any object around us) a real table? What makes a table (or any object around us) really a table? Is it a table because of its shape? Is it a table because of its color? Or what is it that makes us truly human? Are we human because of our body? Is there something else other than our body that makes us human? Is that the mind/soul? What is the mind/soul? If so, how is the mind related to the body? What happens to the mind/soul when we die? Does it survive death? Or is there God? Does God really exist? If so, why is there evil in this world? ---- All these questions are different ways of asking the question about **what reality is**. However way a philosopher answers such questions will show the **metaphysical view** or the **theory of reality** of a philosopher.
2. **Epistemology** – the word “**epistemology**” comes from 2 Greek words: **episteme** (which means **knowledge**) and **logos** (which means **the study or science of**), so putting these 2 words together we have **epistemology** (or **the study of knowledge**). In this area of philosophy, the philosopher is concerned with asking: **What is knowledge?** This question can be asked in different ways. For example, we can ask: **Is knowledge attainable?** Or **can we know?** What are the sources of knowledge? Depending on how such question is answered will determine the **epistemological view** of a philosopher. For example, if a philosopher says that we cannot have knowledge or that knowledge is not attainable, then in terms of the epistemological view of that philosopher, he/she is considered to be a **sceptic**. There are philosophers who claim (**contrary** to the claim of the **sceptic**) that knowledge is attainable or that we can have knowledge. For the philosophers who claim that we can have knowledge, the next question to ask is: **what then can we know?** Depending on how this question is answered, a philosopher can be considered to be an **empiricist** or **rationalist**.

For the **empiricist**, we can have knowledge but it is limited only to sense experience. Anything therefore that we cannot sense or anything beyond sense experience is

unknowable. All our ideas are acquired. Our mind is like a tabula rasa (blank tablet/slate), that is, at birth our mind is empty, so all the ideas that we now have in our mind are acquired as a result of sense experience. Thus, we do not have innate ideas.

For the **rationalist**, we can have knowledge (**like the empiricist**), but (unlike the empiricist) we have the capacity to know things/truths that are independent of sense experience. Our mind/reason is not like a tabula rasa. Instead, we have innate ideas, ideas that are already in the mind which did not come from sense experience.

Thus, a philosopher can be a **sceptic** or an **empiricist** or a **rationalist** in his/her **theory of knowledge**.

NOTE: For the most part, in philosophy, MIND (which is a faculty of the soul) and BRAIN (which is an organ of the body) are NOT THE SAME.

NOTE: Our course (Phil 101) is focused only on the **ETHICAL** area of philosophy. So, for all the philosophers we will be discussing in this course, we will focus only on the ethical aspect of their philosophy, although in most cases, we need to know something about their claims concerning reality and knowledge to make sense of their ethical claims

3. **Axiology** – the word “axiology” comes from the combination of 2 words: **axios** (which means **values**) and **logos** (which means, as one of its meanings, **study or science of**). Putting these 2 words together, **axiology** is **the study of values**. In this area of philosophy, the philosopher is concerned with questions about values. By values here, we refer to **moral/ethical** values, **social/political** values, and **artistic/aesthetical** values.

The area of axiology that is concerned with **the study of moral/ethical values** is called **Ethics** or **Moral Philosophy**. In this area of philosophy, the philosopher is concerned with asking: what is it that makes an act moral (or justifiable or good or right)? What makes an act immoral (or unjustifiable or bad or wrong)? What is the good life? What makes a person good or bad?

The area of axiology that is concerned with **the study of social/political values** is called **political** (from the Greek word **polis** which means **city-state**) or **philosophy of state**. In this area of philosophy the concern is with what makes a state a good (just) state. What is the best form of government? Are there universal human rights? Is civil disobedience ever right?

The area of axiology that is concerned with **the study of artistic/aesthetic values** is called **aesthetics or philosophy of art**. In this area of philosophy the concern is with what makes something beautiful? Is beauty something that is in the object itself, or is beauty something in the eyes of the beholder? What makes a work of art beautiful?

4. **Logic** – the word “logic” comes from the Greek word **logos** (which has several layers of meaning). In this case, **logos** means **thought**. So logic is concerned with the act of thinking that is called **reasoning**. The product of the act of reasoning is **argument**. Thus, in logic the philosopher is asking: what makes an argument valid or invalid; sound or unsound; weak or strong; cogent or uncogent?