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Overview of Philosophy

With four main branches of philosophy, it is important to first know what the etymological definition of the term is, as well as who originally devised it. Because each branch of philosophy serves a specific function, each entails its own list of indicative questions and topics. And although each branch has its own indications of something, there are many occurrences where the issues of one branch cross over into another. This is because despite the fact that the branches cover very different areas, we must remember that they still all reside under the same umbrella of philosophy, and are therefore unavoidably related to one another.

The etymological definition of the term philosophy first originated from the joining of two Greek terms “philia” and “sophia.” The word philia most commonly translates to a form of “brotherly or neighborly love,” while the word sophia means “wisdom.” When the two words are combined together they form the familiar English term “philosophy” which when translated means “the love of wisdom,” or more accurately, “the brotherly love of wisdom.” This definition makes the term a fitting one when describing philosophers, as they are lovers of wisdom and always seeking for it.

One of the early philosophers, Pythagoras, is the man who coined the term philosophy. He was the first to call himself a “philosopher” or “lover of wisdom,” but he is best known for his founding of the Pythagorean theorem (which bears his name). Pythagoras made many other influential contributions to philosophy and the religious teachings of his time, believing that everything was related to numbers and could therefore be predicted and measured in rhythmic patterns and cycles. He was asked to be a lawgiver of Italy, and through his teachings eventually brought peace to the entire peninsula.

Philosophy can be divided into four main branches, they are: epistemology (the study of knowledge), metaphysics (the study of reality), axiology (the study of value), and logic (the study of reason). Although each of these divisions encompass their own unique topics and purpose, they are all related cross over one another.

Epistemology, or the study of knowledge, investigates the distinction between justified beliefs and opinions. Because there is such a fine line between what can be called a belief and what can be classified as an opinion, there are many questions that arise. The most common of these questions are: 1) What is truth?, 2) What is knowledge?, and 3) Does knowledge exist?

For question number one, “What is truth?,” actually contains more specific questions within it, such as “Is truth universal?” and “How do we establish truth?” There are a couple different approaches to answering these questions. One way is to say that truth is something that is universally accepted. But this method seems to be based off beliefs and therefore a little on the irrational side. For example, just because the majority of a society thinks that the world is flat, it does not necessarily make the statement true. A second approach to defining truth is a method called the “correspondence theory,” which

states that a proposition is true if it accurately reflects reality. While this method seems to get us closer to defining truth compared to the universal theory, it still raises more questions such as, “What is accuracy?” and “What is reality?” Another possible resolution to defining truth is to say that there are many different types of truth, so no one definition could possibly cover all of them. But is this really a resolution? Or is it more just an agreement to disagree, leaving us no closer to a definition than when we started?

The second common question of epistemology, “What is knowledge,” seems to be a bit less complex to define; yet it still raises additional questions. Generally, knowledge is defined as facts, application, truth, and understanding. But what is truth? And when is something considered fact? Is there any way to fully understand knowledge without fully comprehending parts of its definition? Most people would say that there is not. You cannot fully know what something is without understanding its definition.

The third common question of epistemology, “Does knowledge exist?” tends to be the more circulatory of the common questions proposed. One view, the view of the skeptic, would say that no knowledge exists, period. They would claim that there is no way to know anything for certain, so therefore nothing exists, including knowledge. But this is a circular statement. For example, if you were to make a claim that “Knowledge does not exist,” you would in fact have to *know* that knowledge does not exist. And if you *know* that knowledge does not exist, you would be using *knowledge* to make your claim, and therefore prove its existence. If knowledge does not exist, you would not be able to make any claims about anything, ever- and this includes making the claim that it does not exist.

The second division of philosophy, Metaphysics, is the study of reality and has several questions that arise within it as well. The most common of these questions being: 1) What does it mean to be real/exist?, 2) Does reality exist?, and 3) Is there an independently existing objective reality?

Perhaps the most thorough answer to these questions is by using the Bubble Theory. The Bubble Theory suggests that there is an independently existing objective reality, by which everyone views through their own “bubble” or “lens.” This means that while reality exists and is objective, everyone’s perceptions of this reality are different and subjective. Since every bubble (person) has its own unique lens, and no two people can ever share the same bubble, it is impossible that everyone perceive reality exactly the same. The person in Bubble C can never really know exactly how Bubble D feels when he is sad.

Other approaches to answering these questions of metaphysics are the views of the Nihilist and the Sophist. A Nihilist would argue that it is equally possible for a world exists with nothing in it, just as it is possible that there is a world composed of finitely many things. The Nihilist would therefore reject the Bubble Theory on the grounds that there is no underlying objective reality that exists, because nothing exists at all. A Sophist approach to the Bubble theory would be that reality is not underlying and objective, but rather it is there because our brains projected it there, and therefore is subjective depending on whose “bubble” you are viewing reality from. Basically, reality is not always there for us to observe it or not, but it is only there because we are observing it to be there.

The third division of philosophy, Axiology, is the study of values and it too encompasses many questions. The most common of these questions are: 1) What does

value mean?, 2) Does value exist?, and 3) Is there such a thing as objective, independently existing values?

The term “value” entails a few different meanings, such as the worth of something, the importance of something, and the goodness of something. But this brings us to our second question of “Does value exist?” For if value does exist, is it possible for something to have worth and importance but not have any goodness associated with it? Or likewise, is it possible for something to have goodness values associated with it and not have any worth or importance? While a person may believe with absolute certainty that his or her car is worth something, he or she may also believe that there is no “goodness” associated with it. And yet another person may believe that his or her car is a “good” car, but that it does not have any worth or importance to it. This leads us to our third common question of axiology that asks, “Is there such a thing as objective, independently existing values?” For example, is it possible to have an item that is intrinsically good? Meaning, it is good for its own sake, and not because anybody believes it to be good? Or do things in our world only have value that we place on it, making it subjective since that value would vary depending on who was making the judgment?

With so many variables to consider concerning axiology, in order to explore the meaning of value completely, as well as answer any questions about its existence, would require a thorough exploration of the philosophy of love, law, religion, and ethics, the social and political philosophy of things, as well as the beauty and art of things.

The fourth and final division of philosophy is logic, or the study of reasoning. The most common questions concerning logic are: 1) What is reasoning?, 2) What are the components of reasoning?, and 3) Is it good or bad to be rational?

The definition of reasoning is best described as a mental process, or a problem solving method. The components of reasoning are premises, inferences, and conclusions. Premises are defined as evidence, purported knowledge, and data information used to support a conclusion. Inferences are the logical relationships of support between the premises and conclusion. And conclusions, therefore, are the answers, solutions, thesis and theories directly supported by the premises.

Since the definition of being rational means to be “in accordance with reason or logic,” the question of whether it is good or bad to be rational would depend on whether or not one agrees with the 3 components of reasoning- premises, inferences, and conclusions. If one did agree that the components of reasoning were in accordance with reason and logic, it would likely be found that they believe being rational to be a “good” thing. On the contrary, if one did not believe that the components of reasoning were in accordance with reason and logic, it would likely be found that they find being rational to be a “bad” thing.

With the four divisions of philosophy clearly covering very specific areas, it is also very apparent to see how these topics cross over into one another’s categories. For example, the issue of truth came up when discussing metaphysics, and the issue of reality came up when discussing epistemology. These facts are undeniable. There is however, a question as to what order these divisions relate to each other. For example, what came first, epistemology or metaphysics? Would someone first need knowledge in order to perceive reality, or would reality need to exist first in order to be perceived? I personally am in accordance with the ancient philosophical approach that Metaphysics is necessary

for Epistemology, and then Logic and Axiology follow after that. The modern philosophical approach would be to assume that epistemology existed first, then metaphysics, however I don't personally agree that one can have knowledge of things that do not exist.

With philosophical thought originating with metaphysics, it sets the foundation for the possibility of epistemology. Without reality, one doesn't know anything, because in order to know something, something would have to exist. So once reality exists, only then can knowledge be used to study and make judgments about it.

Furthermore, once metaphysics and epistemology are present, I believe we then have the prerequisites to be logical. Because logic is reasoning conducted based on the principles of proof and inference, we would need knowledge to make such assessments and a reality to exist in order to be the assessed. To attempt to be logical without the existence of knowledge, for example, is a contradictory statement since the mere definition of logic requires one to use reasoning skills – skills only found in the epistemological division of philosophy.

Lastly, I believe that the final division of philosophy, axiology, is entirely dependent on the existence of the previous three divisions. Axiology, or the study of values, requires reasoning skills to determine which values are superior to another. In order to reason, one needs to have knowledge, and in order to be knowledgeable, a reality must exist in order for something to be known. If any of these division were to be placed in any other order, I would find them to be inconsistent and therefore not worthy of any serious consideration.

While I believe that the order of the four divisions of philosophy is very important, I find it equally significant to understand what each division represents. It is necessary to acknowledge all of the indicative questions that arise in each division, in hopes of one day answering each of them completely and eventually understanding what the real truth of the world is.