

What is Philosophy?

One of the best ways to get a sense of all that the field of philosophy encompasses is to focus on examples of particular philosophical questions. Like many fields, philosophy is often organized into subfields; below are examples of questions associated with key subfields.

Ethics

- What is happiness? What's involved in leading a fulfilling, flourishing human life?
- What is the meaning of life?
- What is it to be a virtuous person? How can people develop virtues and avoid developing vices?
- What, if any, duties and obligations do we have?
- What, if any, rights do humans have? What, if any, rights do non-human animals have?
- Are there objective ethical principles, ethical principles that apply to human beings generally? If so, what are they?
- In what does human nature consist? What do all humans have in common?
- What (if anything) justifies going to war?
- Why do innocent people suffer? Are there steps people can take to dramatically reduce the extent and intensity of their suffering?
- What duties and obligations do humans have in connection with the natural world? What obligations do we have to future generations?

Theory of Knowledge (Epistemology)

- What is it to *know* something? What distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief?
- What sorts of things can we know?
- Can a person know something without being able to give an argument for it?
- What is *perceptual* knowledge; what do we know on the basis of sense perception?
- Is there *a priori* knowledge, i.e. knowledge that does not rest on experience?
- What is *wisdom*; what is it to be a truly wise person? How is wisdom related to ethics?
- What sorts of intellectual virtues can people develop? How can we develop intellectual virtues and avoid intellectual vices?
- What *can't* we know? Where do the limits of our knowledge lie?

Metaphysics

- Why does the universe exist at all? Why is there something rather than nothing? Where did everything come from?
- What are the most basic categories into which things fall (categories that are not themselves subcategories of more comprehensive categories)?
- What is the nature of causality? What is it for something (an event, say) to cause something else to occur?
- What is the nature of time? What is the nature of space? How are space, time, and causality related?
- Does anything exist that's not a physical object or substance? If so, what?
- Are there universals, i.e., properties that particular objects exemplify or instantiate?
- What kind of entity is a human being? Are we physical organisms? Are we immaterial minds? Are we some kind of hybrid?

- Do human beings have free will? If so, to what extent, and under what circumstances, may they act freely?

Logic

- What are the basic principles of human inference; what are the most basic laws that allow us to infer a particular claim from a given set of premises? How these laws related to one another?
- How can we tell whether or not an argument is valid?
- How should we represent our chains of reasoning so as to bring out their logical structures?
- What does it mean to say that an argument has a certain *logical form*?
- In what ways are our powers of reasoning limited?
- How is logic related to mathematics?

Philosophy of Mind

- How are our bodies related to our minds? Is a human mind identical a particular brain? Is the mind something immaterial? (If so, how can something immaterial causally interact with something physical, such as a brain or body?)
- What is consciousness; what is it to be a conscious being and to have conscious experiences?
- *Why* do conscious beings exist? For instance, why aren't we simply automatons that have no conscious experiences? Where does consciousness come from?
- How are mental properties (such as the property of feeling warmth or believing that philosophy is fun) related to physical properties (such as the property of having a certain mass or charge)?
- What is a *mental representation*? What sort of relationship does a mental representation bear to what is being represented?

Philosophy of Language

- In what ways is language related to the world?
- What is the nature of *linguistic meaning*; what is it for a word or sentence to have a *meaning*? Are meanings concrete objects, thoughts, or things of another sort?
- What is the relationship between knowing the meaning of an expression and being able to use it?
- How is language related to thought? How is language related to experience?
- How is language related to logic?
- Are there certain structural properties that all (or most) languages share? What criteria would a set of phenomena have to satisfy in order to count as a language?

Philosophy of Science

- In what ways are scientific claims different from other sorts of claims?
- In what ways do scientific methods of investigation differ from other ways of learning about the world?
- What sort of thing is a law of nature?
- How much can science tell us about the world? For instance, how much can science tell us about things that cannot be directly observed? What are the limitations of scientific investigation?
- What is the nature of scientific explanation; what is it to *explain* some physical phenomenon or regularity?
- What kinds of biases affect scientific investigation and how can we seek to minimize irrational bias?

- Should all of the sciences look to physics as the paradigm science and aim to be as much like physics as possible?

Political Philosophy

- What is the nature of *justice*? (What is it for a society to be just? What is it for an action (or set of actions) to be just? What is it for a person to exercise justice?)
- Are there basic principles that would have to be in place within a particular society in order for that society to count as a *just* society?
- What are the alternative ways in which societies can be structured? Assuming that some structures are better than others, what would make one possible structure better than another?
- Is there one form of government that is best for humanity generally? If so, what is it? If not, are some forms of government better than others? What makes a particular form of government good for people?
- Under what circumstances is it morally obligatory (or at least morally permissible) for one country to intervene in conflicts that take place outside its borders? For instance, does genocide call for intervention? What about human rights violations that are less severe?

Philosophy of Religion

- Does anything divine or supernatural exist? If so, what are the key characteristics of the divine?
- What happens when we die? Is there life after death? What should we make of the idea that there's a heaven? What should we make of the idea that there's a hell? Are people reincarnated?
- Is there one true religion, or a religion that gets closest to the truth? If so, how would a person know if he or she were a member of the one true religion?
- Would an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God permit the kinds of suffering and evil that we witness in the world?
- What is the nature of religious experience? What can religious experience reveal about the nature of reality?
- Should humans try to cultivate some kind of spiritual life? Why or why not?
- When humans act wrongly, are their mistakes entirely due to ignorance, or are they flawed in some deep way (say, through original sin, or something along these lines)?
- Under what circumstances do religion and science come into conflict?

Aesthetics

- What is art? What makes works of art different from other types of phenomena?
- Why do humans seek artistic experiences?
- What sorts of insights can works of art convey?
- Are there insights that we can gain from works of art that we cannot gain in any other way?
- How do works of art affect our beliefs about the world? Can art help us address philosophical questions?