

WHAT DO YOU MEAN PHILOSOPHY???

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Sometime, at your leisure—if you want to know what philosophy is—go into a large bookstore and browse. Check a variety of books in psychology, anthropology, physics, chemistry, archeology, astronomy, and other nonfiction fields. Look at the last chapter in each book. In a surprising number of cases, you will find that the author has chosen to round out his work with a final summation of what the book is all about. That is, having written a whole book on a specialized subject in which he is probably an authority, he finds that he also has ideas about the larger meaning of the facts that he has written about. The final chapter *may* be called “Conclusions,” “Epilogue,” “Postscript,” “My Personal View,” “Implications,” “Comments,” “Speculations,” or (as in one case) “So What?” But in every instance, the author is trying to elucidate the larger implications of his subject matter and to clarify how he thinks it relates to other fields or to life. He has an urge to tell us the meaning of all his facts taken together. He wants to share with us the philosophic implications of what he has written.

When he does this, the author has moved beyond the role of a field specialist. He is a philosopher.

2. This is a textbook in synoptic* philosophy. It is an invitation to ponder, in the largest possible perspective, the weightier, more stubborn problems of human existence. It is an invitation to think—to wonder, to question, to speculate, to reason, even to fantasize—in the eternal search for wisdom. In a word, synoptic philosophy is an attempt to weave interconnecting lines of illumination between all the disparate realms of human thought in the hope that, like a thousand dawns, new insights will burst through.

By its very nature, philosophy is a do-it-yourself enterprise. There is a common misunderstanding that philosophy—like chemistry or history—has a content to offer, a content which a teacher is to teach and a student is to learn. This is not the case. There are no facts, no theories, certainly no final truths which go by the name of “philosophy” and which one is supposed to accept and believe. Rather, philosophy is a skill—more akin to mathematics and music; it is something that one *learns to do*.

Philosophy, that is, is a *method*. It is *learning how* to ask and re-ask questions until meaningful answers begin to appear. It is *learning how* to relate materials. It is *learning where* to go for the most dependable, up-to-date information that might shed light on some problem. It is *learning how* to double check fact-claims in order to verify or falsify them. It is *learning how* to reject fallacious fact-claims—to reject them no matter how prestigious the authority who holds them or how deeply one would personally like to believe them.

3. The student should be aware that philosophy has never been just one kind of activity with a single approach to a single task. Rather, there have been many kinds of philosophy: the quiet philosophy of the sage who sees much but speaks little because language cannot hold life; the articulate, noisy dialectics of Socrates; the calm, logical apologetics of Aquinas; the mystical philosophy of Plotinus and Chuang-tzu; the mathematical philosophy of Russell and Wittgenstein.

Each school of philosophy has concentrated upon some aspect of man’s knowledge. Logical/analytical philosophy has worked long and hard on the confusion which vitiates so much of our thinking and communicating. Pragmatism has concentrated on finding solutions to problems of man’s social existence. Existential philosophy has been concerned with making life meaningful to each, unique individual. Activist schools argue that philosophers spend too much time trying to make sense of the world and too little time trying to change it. Several schools of philosophy, Eastern and Western, challenge the individual to turn away from an alienating society and to seek harmony with Nature or Ultimate Reality.

Each kind of philosophy has made an immense contribution to its area of concern. Each was doubtless a part of the *Zeitgeist*—"the spirit of the age"—which gave it birth and to which it spoke.

The present unhappy condition of human knowledge calls for the application of a synoptic methodology. We now possess vast accumulations of specialized knowledge in countless fields, but these fields remain isolated from one another. Yet it is increasingly clear that many of our urgent problems can be understood only when the specialized information from a variety of these separate fields is integrated and "seen together"—synoptically. It is only then that we can develop realistic solutions to these complex problems.

4. It is often said that philosophers engage in two basic tasks: "taking apart"—*analyzing* ideas to discover if we truly know what we think we know (and we don't) -- and "putting together"—*synthesizing* all our knowledge to find if we can attain a larger and better view of life (we can).

But in practice philosophers do a lot more than this. They talk a lot. They carry on dialogues with anyone who comes within range. And they argue a great deal. Not the usual kinds of argument in which egos fight to win, but philosophical arguments in which they attempt to clarify the reasoning that lies behind their statements; and no one cares about winning since, in philosophical arguments, everyone wins.

They also ask one another for definitions to be sure they're thinking clearly; and they push one another to pursue the implications of their ideas and statements. They prod themselves and others to examine the basic assumptions upon which their beliefs and arguments rest.

Philosophers are persistent explorers in the nooks and crannies of human knowledge which are commonly overlooked or deliberately ignored. It is an exciting but restless adventure of the mind.

5. Philosophers, however, do not engage in this critical task just to make nuisances of themselves. Indeed, the central aim of philosophers has always been . . . to construct a picture of the whole

of reality, in which every element of man's knowledge and every aspect of man's experience will find its proper place.

Philosophy, in short, is man's quest for the unity of knowledge: it consists in a perpetual struggle to create the concepts in which the universe can be conceived as a universe and not a multiverse. The history of philosophy is attempt is made to grasp this total unity. . It cannot be denied that this attempt stands without rival as the most audacious enterprise in which the mind of man has ever engaged. Just reflect for a moment: Here is man, surrounded by the vastness of a universe in which he is only a tiny and perhaps insignificant pan—and he wants to *understand* it.

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A Concise Introduction to Philosophy

(1967. Random House, Inc., p. 18ff)

6. In one respect, philosophic material can be deceptive. Since it deals with life by examining the sort of questions we ask every day, some of the subject matter will have an easy, familiar ring.

The fact is that synoptic philosophy must be as diligently studied as any other subject, not to remember data, but to set the mind in motion toward developing larger concepts, connecting ideas, and seeing through and beyond mere words and facts.

In a sense, intellectual growth *happens to us*; it is not really something that we do. But it happens to us only when our minds are given a chance to operate on their terms. They take their own time to process information and to begin developing a web of interconnecting lines of illumination among their materials. This undertaking is partly conscious, of course; but largely it is an unconscious process. This is why much philosophic insight just happens, as though the light moves from the depths upward and not from the rational conscious downward.

Only disciplined study with an open mind will produce philosophic awareness. Insight and consciousness still come only with relentless labor. In this age of instant everything, there is still no instant wisdom, unfortunately.

7. No two of us possess precisely the same information, or see things from the same viewpoint, or share the same values. Therefore, each of us must do synoptic philosophy in his own unique and personal way. A student entering upon the activity of philosophizing may need to be on guard against developing a world-view which resembles, a bit too closely, the prepackaged philosophy of life belonging to someone else or to some institution. Most of us are philosophically lazy, and it is easy to appropriate another's thoughts and rationalize our theft. The British logician Wittgenstein warned us that "a thought which is not independent is a thought only half understood." Similarly, a philosophy of life that is not the authentic product of one's own experience is a philosophy only half understood.

Nor will any of us succeed in developing a finished philosophy; for as one changes with life, so does one's thinking. A philosophy *of life* must change *with life*. Doing philosophy is an endless activity. For this reason, this textbook is merely an example of synoptic philosophy. This is the way I have had to do it because of *my* perspectives, *my* interests, *my* areas of knowledge, *my* personal concerns, and *my* limitations. But *your* world-view will be different because it will be *yours*, and *yours alone*.

This is why my attempt to do synoptic philosophy is, at most, a guideline showing how it might be done; at least, the expression of a hope that, someday, in your own way, you will resolve the contradictions of your own existence—both of knowing and of being—and proceed to see life in a larger, more fulfilling way.

*synoptic: seeing the whole together; taking a comprehensive view