PHILOSOPHY

A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION

PHILOSOPHY – A DEFINITION

1

- The obvious question here is this:
    - What *exactly* is philosophy?
- Philosophy is notoriously difficult to define. There have been a number of attempts to formulate a relevant definition. One of the better known attempts is that by G.E. Moore: philosophy is the topic of discussion in the books written by people such as Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas and Hume.
- Evidently, this is not of much help to the newcomer. Another attempt has it that if one is to understand what philosophy is, then one needs to actually *do* philosophy. That is to say, one needs to actively come to grips with some of the classical problems of philosophy. One such problem could be the puzzle of 'free will *vs* determinism': Are we really free to make choices in our lives, or is it rather the case that all our actions are predetermined?
- The above is also a (somewhat) flawed answer to our initial question. What we are after is a general definition of philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY – A DEFINITION

- I believe that the best (working) definition of philosophy is the following: philosophy is a kind of activity whereby the practitioner uses arguments to resolve a number of very specific problems which are of concern to human beings as such.

- Specialists/Scientists in other fields, e.g., psychologists and sociologists, use arguments all the time. The philosopher, however, employs arguments in order to deal with/resolve a number of issues which are specific to philosophy.

- Some of these issues are the following: Can we prove God's Existence [*Natural Theology*]? Do we have free will [*Metaphysics*]? What is (political) freedom [*Social & Political Philosophy*]? What is art [*Aesthetics*]? Can the methods used by the scientists yield reliable conclusions [*Philosophy of Science*]? Do human beings have an immaterial soul in addition to their material body [*Philosophy of Mind*]?

PHILOSOPHY – A DEFINITION

- In more detail, the definition proposed here is the following:
  - Philosophy is some kind of activity which is characterized by: (1) the use of arguments, and (2) the thorough analysis of concepts.
  - More specifically, a philosopher is somebody who uses the tools mentioned above, arguments and conceptual analysis, in order to resolve certain problems.
  - What differentiates the philosopher from other thinkers/scientists is the fact that he/she utilizes these tools in order to resolve a set of very specific problems. The problems the philosopher deals with are considered to be *exclusively* philosophical. No other discipline deals with these problems (as such).

PHILOSOPHY – THE BASIC ISSUES

1

- Many people simply assume the existence of (the Christian) God. The question/issue that arises here, however, is this: "Can we really prove God's existence?". If the answer to this question is negative, then what are the consequences for man/man's life?

- Is there (some kind of) life after death? If not, then how does this affect our lives?

- Do we have free will, or is it the case that everything in the universe is (pre)determined? These are some of the issues in the field of philosophy known as "*Natural Theology*".

- We often state positions like the following: "John's action ***X*** is immoral/moral". What exactly do we mean when we make statements/judgments like the above? Do we simply express our (strictly) personal views on matter ***X***? This is one of the most important questions in the field of philosophy known as "*Ethics*"/"Moral Philosophy".

PHILOSOPHY – THE BASIC ISSUES

2

- Does a government/a state have the right to correct the inequalities that (may) exist within a society, e.g., concerning the distribution of money/property?

- What exactly is "political freedom"? Do citizens/people really have political freedom, even in the most liberal of states? These are some of the issues in the field of "*Social and Political Philosophy*".

- We all agree that we have a material body that is composed of flesh, blood and bones. At the very same time, however, we believe that every human being has a mind/soul. What *exactly* is the nature of the human mind/soul? Is it something material, i.e., something which occupies space and time? Or, is it something purely immaterial, i.e., something which occupies no space (and time), and thus has no causal powers? This is the most important question in the "*Philosophy of Mind*".

- Is it true that our sensory organs may provide us with reliable information concerning what we call "the external world" ? This is one of the many questions examined by philosophers who specialize in "*Epistemology*". [What about the following question: "What exactly is knowledge?".]

PHILOSOPHY – THE BASIC ISSUES

- What exactly is a scientific proof? Can we really trust the methods employed by modern science? These are two of the questions in the field known as "*Philosophy of Science*".

- As has already been noted, these are just some of the many issues the philosopher deals with.

- And, as was also noted earlier on, the philosopher's task is to answer these purely philosophical questions/puzzles by utilizing two basic tools:

  - Arguments For instance, philosophers use arguments in order to determine whether or not God exists. To give one more example, philosophers also use arguments in order to determine whether the human mind may be identified with the human brain.
  - Conceptual analysis For instance, philosophers use the tool of conceptual analysis in order to determine the content of the concept "moral error". Putatively, if we do manage to offer an adequate analysis of this concept, then we may also answer questions like the following: "Is voluntary euthanasia morally right or wrong?".

SUMMARY

- As we have seen, philosophy is a kind of activity.
- The practitioner, the philosopher, has two main tools: (a) arguments and (b) conceptual analysis.
- The philosopher uses arguments and conceptual analysis in order to resolve a number of problems/puzzles which fall under his expertise.
- We have seen some of the problems/issues that concern the philosopher.

PHILOSOPHY AND LOGIC

- To better understand what philosophy is we need to examine, even briefly, what an argument is.
- The study of arguments, as such, is the task of the discipline of *Logic*. In this brief introduction to philosophy we can only take a very quick look at some of the most basic issues in the field of logic.
- We can't get into a detailed study of (informal) logic in this course. This is not necessary anyway.
- We only need to consider the following questions: (a) "What exactly is an argument?", and (b) "How do we evaluate an argument?".
- In the next few slides we will provide quick answers to the questions posed above.

PHILOSOPHY & LOGIC

2

- The first question: “What is an argument?”.
- Definition: An argument is a set of sentences in which some of them, *the premises*, provide support for another sentence, *the conclusion*.
- Let us see some examples of arguments – the following are not philosophical arguments.

PHILOSOPHY & LOGIC

- Example # 1:
  - All primates are mammals.
  - Chimps are primates.
  - Therefore, all chimps are mammals.

- Example # 2:
  - Every meteorite scientists examined (so far) contained gold.
  - Therefore, the next meteorite to be examined will also contain gold.

PHILOSOPHY & LOGIC

- The next thing one ought to note here is that there two (basic) kinds of arguments: (a) *Deductive Arguments* and (b) *Inductive Arguments*.

- A deductive argument is an argument in which the premises are claimed to support the conclusion in such a way that if they are assumed true, it is impossible for the conclusion to be false.

- An inductive argument is an argument in which the premises are claimed to support the conclusion in such a way that if they are assumed true, then based on that assumption it is only probable that the conclusion is true.

- Consider now the arguments we have just seen (slide # 11). Can you determine what kind(s) of arguments we have there?

ON HOW TO EVALUATE ARGUMENTS

1

- A deductive argument should be *valid*, and ideally *sound*. On the other hand, an inductive argument should be *strong*, and ideally *cogent*.

- A *valid deductive argument* is an argument such that if the premises are assumed to be true, (*then in fact*) it is impossible for the conclusion to be false. And an *invalid deductive argument* is an argument such that if the premises are assumed to be true, it is possible for the conclusion to be false.

- Let us see some relevant examples:

  - All wines are beverages; Ginger ale is a beverage; Therefore, ginger ale is a wine (I).
  - All wines are beverages; Chardonay is a wine; Therefore, chardonay is a beverage (V).
  - All wines are whiskeys; Chardonay is a whiskey; Therefore, chardonay is a wine (I).
  - All wines are soft drinks; Ginger ale is a wine; Therefore, ginger ale is a soft drink (V).
  - All pigs can fly; George is a pig; Therefore, George can fly (V).

ON HOW TO EVALUATE ARGUMENTS

2

- Now, what exactly is a valid and sound deductive argument? It is a deductive argument that is valid and has true premises.

- Invalid arguments are bad arguments. In such arguments the premises fail to provide any support for the conclusion.

- Valid arguments are good in the sense that: ***if*** the premises are assumed to be true, ***then*** it is impossible for the conclusion to be false. This is a pretty useful assessment tool in those cases where we don't have any/sufficient knowledge of the content of an argument.

- Let us see what we mean by this. Consider the following argument:
  - If a substance is a noble gas, then it is inert.
  - Argon is a noble gas.
  - Therefore, argon is inert.

ON HOW TO EVALUATE ARGUMENTS

3

- I don't know the precise content of the concepts referred to by the following terms: "argon", "noble gas", "inert". Nevertheless, I can confidently declare that the last argument is good, insofar as it is valid. That is to say, if its premises are assumed to be true, then it is impossible for its conclusion to be false.

- The best deductive arguments are those which are both valid and sound. Consider, for instance, the following example:
  - All men are mortal.
  - John is a man.
  - Therefore, John is mortal.

- It is time now to turn our attention to inductive arguments.

ON HOW TO EVALUATE ARGUMENTS

4

- A *strong inductive argument* is an (inductive) argument such that if the premises are assumed to be true, then (*in fact*) it is (only) probable that the conclusion is true. On the other hand, *a weak inductive argument* is an (inductive) argument such that if the premises are assumed to be true, then based on that assumption it is not probable that the conclusion is true.

- Let us consider some relevant examples:

  - All previous American presidents were men; Therefore, (probably) the next American president will be a man (S).
  - A few American presidents were Federalists; Therefore, (probably) the next American president will be a man (W).

ON HOW TO EVALUATE ARGUMENTS

- Weak inductive arguments are bad arguments. They don't provide support for their conclusions.
- Strong inductive arguments are good arguments in the sense that: if their premises are assumed to be true, then it is probable that their conclusions are also true.
- Again, this is a pretty useful assessment tool when we are asked to evaluate inductive arguments which refer to issues and concepts we are unfamiliar with.
- Consider the following example:
  - Neon has unstable isotopes; Argon is similar in many ways to neon; Therefore, it probably follows that argon has unstable isotopes too.

ON HOW TO EVALUATE ARGUMENTS

- We may not know anything about the content of the argument, i.e., isotopes, argon, etc. However, we can still declare that this is a good argument in the sense that: if its premises are assumed to be true, then it is probable that its conclusion is also true.

- The best inductive arguments are those that are *cogent*. An inductive argument is cogent provided it is strong and it also has true premises. [In any other case an inductive argument is said to be *uncogent*.]

- Here is an example of a cogent (inductive) argument:
  - The sun has been rising every day for the last ….. years.
  - Therefore, it is probably true that the sun will rise tomorrow.

SUMMARY – AND SOME ADVICE

1

- You should be able to explain what an argument is.

- Very important: You should be able to distinguish deductive arguments from inductive arguments. This is quite important for a number of reasons. Let us mention just one of them. Often politicians present inductive arguments for a certain position, and then they conclude that they have proven the truth of this position "beyond any doubt".

- In your efforts to evaluate arguments, you should remember two things:
  - The easiest way to go about evaluating a valid deductive argument is this: consider whether one (or more) of its premises is false. If one (or more) of the premises is false, then the argument is not good/not convincing/not sound.
  - The easiest way to go about evaluating an inductive argument is this: consider whether one (or more) of the premises is false; alternatively, consider whether the premises support the conclusion with a low degree of probability. In either of these cases, you may declare the argument to be a bad one.

SUMMARY – AND SOME ADVICE

2

- Two examples that may help you see how you may criticize (valid) deductive and inductive arguments:
  - Example # 1: All pigs can fly; George is a pig; Therefore, George can fly.
  - The problem here lies with the first premise; it is patently false. Therefore, the argument, though valid deductive, it is not convincing/not sound.
  - Example # 2: 30% of the mechanics in Nicosia are Armenians; John is a mechanic who lives and works in Nicosia; Therefore, it is probable that John is Armenian.
  - The above argument is certainly inductive. However, the premises of the argument do not support the conclusion with a high degree of probability. Therefore, this argument is not sufficiently convincing.
- There is a whole lot more we could say about arguments and logic in general. However, this is all we have the time for in this course. If you do have the time for further reading, see (e.g.) Hurley, P. (latest edition). *A Concise Introduction to Logic*. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company – see esp. chs 1-3.