

REVISITING THE BASICS—PHILOSOPHY 1.0

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(Paper Presented to Philosophical Club of Cleveland, April 19, 2016)

This paper grew out of a series of forums, called “Searches” by the then ministers and members of the Church of Reason back in 1988. It was precipitated by me who, then, at the age of 46, had barely even read a book outside of those required in junior high, high school, and a year and a half of college, let alone knew the importance of understanding philosophy, even on a basic level. The underlying object of the exercise, conducted over a number of months, was to define philosophy and its components in eighth grade English.

As a quick aside, though I spent all those years just trying to “live life”, I must have actually realized the importance of reading, because by the time I read the first cloth book to my daughter in 1971 or 1972, I told her that books were her friends; that she could travel around the world in books and never leave the living room – But I digress.

The results of the exercise follow.

Philosophy

Philosophy is the study of the basic nature of all that exists—that is, whatever really is. Its purpose is to guide people in their search for happiness, happiness being a “successful state of life”¹. Philosophy seeks to answer the questions:

1. What is the essential nature of all that exists? [WHAT IS?]
2. How can people know the essential nature of all that exists, including their own nature as human beings and the nature of the universe? [HOW DO YOU KNOW?]
3. Why is it important to know the answers to these questions? [WHO CARES?]

¹ Ayn Rand in Galt’s Speech and For the New Intellectual.

Philosophy is generally divided into five fields or branches: (1) Metaphysics, (2) Epistemology, (3) Ethics, (4) Politics (though politics is sometimes classified and treated as a subset of ethics, and (5) Aesthetics.

Branch One: Metaphysics

Metaphysics is that branch of philosophy whose subject matter is everything that exists. It attempts to answer the question, What really is?

For instance, "Is there reincarnation?" is a metaphysical question, because either there is reincarnation or there isn't.

Metaphysics can deal with tangible "things" (animals, plants, buildings, etc.) or intangible "things" (ideas, dreams), both of such "things" being EXISTENTS. The existence of an idea or dream, for example, is a metaphysical fact, just as animals or buildings are. In other words, animals exist, buildings exist, ideas exist, dreams exist.

Ideas, dreams, and other intangible existents differ from tangible existents in three ways: (1) they cannot be perceived by the senses; (2) they have neither extension nor mass; and (3) they exist only in the minds of human beings.

All the physical sciences, such as chemistry, physics, meteorology, biology, zoology, geology, are included in metaphysics.

The study of metaphysics requires an epistemological basis, that is, for example, reason or faith. Therefore, epistemology must be studied first or along with metaphysics. More about that later.

BRANCH TWO: Epistemology

Epistemology is that branch of philosophy whose subject matter is the correct method of knowing what really is. It attempts to answer the question, How do you know what really is?

For example, “How do we know whether there is reincarnation or not?” is an epistemological question.

Various epistemological bases used to answer this and similar questions by vast numbers of people are faith (the most prevalent: “I believe”), revelation (“God talked to me” or “God tells us”), or feeling (“I feel it” or “I just know”). Others include thinking (“I just think so” or “I’ve thought it out”), instinct (“I sense it”), authority (“The Bible says so” or “According to Nobel Prize winning [somebody]”), voices (again, “God talked to me” or “I talked to God”), dreams (“I dreamed it”), astrology (“I read it in the stars” or “It was in the stars”), tea leaves/tarot cards (“It was in the leaves/cards”), experience (“I’ve been reincarnated” or “I know from personal experience”), the government (“According to the report of the Department of Natural Resources” or “According to Governor so and so”), drug induced (“Like wow man, I saw God”), magic (“Anything can happen”), spirits (“The devil made me do it”).

The polar opposite of those bases, and the basis used by Reasoners – this exercise was, of course, conducted by ministers and members of the Church of Reason – the way Reasoners validate what we think we know, is through reason and the evidence of our senses.

Before expounding upon what “reason” and “the evidence of our senses” means, in this context, I want to explain why epistemology, or “How do you know”, should be higher on the list of priorities than the metaphysical question of “What is the nature of existence?” Unless we have some grasp of the question of “How do you know”, we are not able to qualify any answer to any question as to the nature of existence.

Humans can choose many things but not all things. We can choose whether to wear a raincoat today, but we cannot choose whether it will rain. We choose the content

of our philosophy, but we cannot choose whether we will have a philosophy. Every person has some philosophy; whether or not it is recognized or acknowledged is beside the point. Every person has some philosophy and that is true regardless of whether he or she admits it, or for that matter, even knows it. Likewise, every person has some theory of knowledge – that is, some way of choosing what he or she thinks is right or wrong, correct or incorrect. Whether one has a valid or correct theory of knowledge is THE most important issue for each and every human being. Humans have no choice about the fact that in every moment of life, we are faced with a continuing stream of alternative courses of action, and we must choose among them. Those choices, more than anything else, determine the course of each individual's life. Good choices improve and enhance the quality of life; poor choices do just the opposite. Choices must be made upon the basis of one's theory of knowledge and thus that theory is THE most vital element in determining the quality of human existence.

So, having said all that, this paper will not delve into the meaning of all of the opposites to reason and the evidence of our senses, at least in part because, the examples listed with them above, pretty clearly explain their simplistic – and I would add -- fallacious bases.

Reason, in the context of the Church of Reason exercise, as well as the Church of Reason epistemology, means the ability to recognize or identify and put together in a way that makes logical sense, or integrate, whatever we see, touch, hear, taste and smell. From that we form our concepts or ideas. This is the method by which we come to know, that is, by which we acquire what then becomes knowledge.

Examples of the process of forming concepts or ideas shows how Reason uses metaphysics and epistemology:

We begin with an awareness of something outside of ourselves. This is the beginning of metaphysics, or what really is, and is an implicit idea. We then must use epistemology, the method of validating what really is, to come up with an abstract idea or concept such as "existence exists".

For instance, if I show you a square and a rectangle, you can recognize them as belonging to the same class – four-sided figures. And if I show you a circle, you can recognize that as a different class entirely. Of course, together, these figures would also belong to the class "plane figures". In turn, these plane figures would be differentiated from the class known as solid figures such as cubes, cylinders and pyramids, but the plane figures and solid figures would together belong to the class "geometrical shapes".

We typically give each of our ideas or concepts a separate name. These names are called words, and each word stands for a separate idea or concept. With the exception of proper names, every word we use stands for, that is, is a concept of, a class of things or an action or a relationship: "Square" stands for a particular four-sided figure; "triangle" stands for a particular three-sided figure; "house" stands for a concept or idea of a free-standing dwelling; "marriage" is a word which stands for a particular relationship.

All mathematics, logic, and psychology are included in epistemology.

BRANCH THREE: Ethics

Ethics is that branch of philosophy whose subject matter is the behavior which is proper to man. Ethics addresses the question of what choices and actions are appropriate, or moral, to man when presented with a choice and why it is important to know the answer to these questions.

Whether one is committed to relying on his or her own mind or not is a moral issue; whether one determines to be self-supporting or not is a moral issue; whether lying, cheating, and stealing are proper or not is a moral issue; whether one can actually be proud of oneself rather than faking it is a moral issue; whether one is committed to reason or to faith is a moral issue, whether one acts in accord with his or her own consciously held beliefs or not is a moral issue, and whether one judges the guilt or innocence of others and acts accordingly is a moral issue.

BRANCH FOUR: Politics

Politics is that branch of philosophy whose subject matter is relationships among men and women in human society. It addresses the question of the nature and proper role of government, the nature of government being that it is the, albeit necessary, agency of coercion or the legal monopoly of force.

The proper method of financing government is a political question. Whether government should provide national defense and, if so, to what extent, is a political question. Whether the government should regulate and/or run highways, schools, hospitals, aid to dependent children, social security, welfare, disability compensation, police protection, or the courts – to name a few – are all political questions. For example, whether there should be gun control and to what extent, are political questions.

It should be noted that politics is sometimes classified and treated as a part, that is, a subset of ethics, because it deals with the conduct appropriate to people in regard to one another in an organized society. It may also be treated, as it is in this paper, as a separate branch of philosophy because it is a distinctly identifiable area and it plays a vitally important role in human affairs.

BRANCH FIVE: Aesthetics

Aesthetics is that branch of philosophy whose subject matter is the nature of the beautiful and with judgments concerning beauty. It attempts to answer the question as to what is beautiful, or not, based on metaphysical value judgments.

In nature, whether a brilliant sunrise, colorful sunset, or picturesque landscape is beautiful or not is an aesthetic question; or, conversely, whether a pile of houses, cars, trees, and rubble thrown together after a hurricane, tornado, or flood is beautiful or not, is also an aesthetic question.

In art, whether the recreation – in any artistic medium – of a blue-eyed, blond child dressed smartly in a freshly laundered and pressed dress, picking a perfectly shaped daisy in a sunlit field of flowers on a warm spring day is beautiful or not is an aesthetic question; or, conversely, whether the recreation – again in any artistic medium – of an otherwise Hollywood-type woman dressed in an exquisite evening gown which is tattered and dirty, who has pimples on her face and a cold sore on her lips, is beautiful or not, is also an aesthetic question.

So, what was the result of the exercise? Well, for me, it set the stage for all the philosophical thinking, philosophical studying, and even personal philosophizing that has followed for nearly thirty years now. The biggest take away that has remained with me ever since, and hence this little plaque that stands on my kitchen table – author unfortunately not remembered by me –

How Do We Know What we Know?

This is the problem that epistemology deals with—

And upon the solution of this problem every other aspect of philosophy must rest.

For until we know HOW we know, we cannot be certain of WHAT we know.

And if we cannot know anything with certainty, our capacity to reason, to choose, and to act is subverted at the root.