**Philosophical Method Day 1: What is Philosophy?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Content:**  Am I Your Teacher? (20 minutes)  What Is Philosophy? (30 minutes) | **Method:**  1. Class discussion  2. Lecture |

***Instructor’s Introduction***: The first day of the course is devoted to introducing the students to the subject of philosophy and the nature of philosophical inquiry. In doing so, the lesson provide a preview of both the kinds of questions that will be explored in the course and the method that will be employed in exploring those questions.

# *Goals and Key Concepts*

1. 1. To have students understand that philosophy is not just a subject matter, but a method of inquiry.
2. To get the students excited about some of the philosophical questions that they will have the opportunity to explore.
3. Key concepts: **argument, ontology, epistemology, axiology.**

**1. Am I Your Teacher?**

Begin the first class by writing “I am the teacher of this class” at the bottom of the board with a line drawn above it. Ask the students to show by raising hands how many of them think this statement is true. Presumably, all of them will. Ask them why they think this. As they give reasons, write the reasons on the board above the line. Once there are a large number of reasons on the board, ask the students what everything written on the board is called. Hopefully they’ll recognize it as an argument. Explain the following about arguments:

* Arguments are the way we think and reason—when we’re reasoning something out, what we’re really doing is forming a series of arguments in our heads
* Though “argument” can also mean a dispute in common use, that’s not the sense in which we mean it here
* Arguments consist of a conclusion and some premises
* The conclusion is what the argument is meant to support as being true; it’s the claim being made
* The premises provide support for the conclusion
* There can be any number of premises, from 0 to an infinite number (but having more premises doesn’t necessarily mean there’s more support for the conclusion!)
* The premises and conclusion are propositional statements, that is, they are sentences which express facts (propositions) about the world which may be true or false
* Not all sentences are propositional statements—for example, there are questions, imperatives, etc., which don’t really go into arguments

Ask the students why you had them do this as the first exercise in a philosophy class.

**2. What Is Philosophy?**

Before we answer that question, let’s begin by stepping back and looking at the word “philosophy.” Ask the students if they know where the word comes from.

The word “philosophy” derives from Greek meaning “love of wisdom.” It is an apt description. Philosophers relentlessly pursue answers to the most fundamental questions. But what are these questions and how do philosophers go about pursuing the answers?

Unlike other academic disciplines, philosophy is not defined by a specific content area. Biologists study living things, economists study economies, but philosophers systematically study knowledge and the fundamental nature of the world. Philosophy is essentially a ***process*** for exploring certain kinds of questions. In fact, philosophers talk about ***doing*** philosophy, not about ***knowing*** philosophy.

But what is doing philosophy? Here is what doing philosophy is not: Philosophers don’t give opinions, speculate, or talk aimlessly. Instead, the philosophical method is using logical analysis to evaluate the reasoning in arguments about philosophical questions. Philosophers investigate questions by giving (or critiquing) arguments for particular answers, and logic allows us to evaluate the reasoning in those arguments precisely.

Return now to the “I am the teacher of this class” argument. The reason we began with this exercise is because making arguments is what doing philosophy is all about. Philosophers make arguments about philosophical claims. But how are these arguments evaluated? The answer is logic.

Logic is a primary tool of the philosopher, and much of this module is aimed at teaching students how to use this tool. Logic allows philosophers to determine what is entailed by a particular claim, and therefore to decide whether or not they can accept those claims entailed by the original. At its core, logic is essentially rules for avoiding inconsistency in our beliefs. If someone believes something and also its negation (opposite), then that person is irrational. For example, only a crazy person would believe that today is Tuesday and that today is not Tuesday at the same time. Logic keeps us from unknowingly adopting such inconsistent beliefs. This will become clearer as we learn more about logic in this module, but for now consider the following example:

Consider the claim that Lady Gaga is the best-dressed pop star. To be rational and follow the rules of logic, one who believes this also has to be committed to a plethora of other propositions. For instance, one would be committed to the proposition that it is not the case that all of the best-dressed pop stars have been men. Suppose I said that I think Lady Gaga is the best-dressed pop star, and also that all of the best dressed pop stars have been men. Using logic, you could demonstrate to me that my beliefs are inconsistent and compel me to give up one of those beliefs. If I just shrug and say I don’t care, there’s nothing more you can say to me. At that point, I am choosing to be irrational. Logic provides the most fundamental and indispensible ground rules for intellectual inquiry.

We’ve talked so far about the philosophical method. We haven’t yet, however, said much at all about the kinds of questions philosophers explore. It is hard to define exactly what constitutes a philosophical question, but roughly, philosophical questions are about the fundamental nature of the world and our knowledge of the world. There are three broad areas into which one can divide philosophical questions: ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

**Ontology**, also known as metaphysics, is the study of what there really is in the world. What kinds of things exist? How are they related to one another? One of the ontological questions that the course will explore in depth is the question of the nature of the mind—is the mind simply the brain or is there something that exists over and above our physical bodies?

**Epistemology** is a second area of philosophical inquiry. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justified belief. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge? Can we know anything at all? When can a belief be said to be justified? Are there objective criteria for justifying beliefs? If so, what are they? There will be a dedicated module on epistemology later in the course, although epistemological questions will come up throughout.

**Axiology**, sometimes called value theory, is the study of value judgments. For practical purposes, we can divide axiology into two main kinds of values studied by philosophers: ethical values and aesthetic values. The former includes: What makes an action right or wrong? Is morality subjective? The latter: How do we define beauty? Are there objective criteria? What makes something a work of art? Is a can of Campbell’s soup art in as much as Warhol’s paintings of the can are?

You may have realized by now that philosophical questions understood in this way arise in almost every discipline. What counts as evidence for a scientific hypothesis? Is providing its citizens with health care a government’s responsibility? For this reason, there can be (and is) a “philosophy of” almost anything. Philosophy of science explores nature of scientific explanation. Political philosophy examines the nature of government and its proper function.

**Assignment**

This assignment is in preparation for the next day’s activity entitled *What’s Your Reason?* A complete description of the activity is given in the next day’s lesson plan. The activity was borrowed from resources provided by the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children.

Hand out four note cards (or note-card sized pieces of paper) to each student. Ask them to write down, on each of the four cards, one claim they believe in, for a total of four. One of these should be a value (normative) claim and one of them should be a negative claim. For the value claim, they should write down something they believe people ought or ought not do. The negative claim should be something of the form “It is not the case that…” The reason to include a negative claim is merely to reinforce for the notion that we also have reasons for believing the things we take to not be the case.

On the side opposite the claim, students should write three reasons they have for believing the claims. They are allowed to appeal to whatever outside sources of information they want to in providing their reasons.