

HUM123 – Lecture 19

What Is Philosophy?

Philosophy, in its most general sense, is the critical and systematic investigation of fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. It is both a method of inquiry and a body of knowledge that challenges assumptions, seeks clarity, and aims for rational understanding of the world and our place in it.

The Sources of Philosophical Beliefs

Philosophical beliefs—our deeply held views about truth, knowledge, reality, and morality, are derived from multiple sources. These include:

1. **Perception** – Our direct sensory experience of the world around us.
2. **Inference** – Conclusions drawn based on evidence and reasoning.
3. **Intellect** – The capacity for rational thought, analysis, and problem-solving.
4. **Intuition** – Immediate understanding without the use of conscious reasoning.
5. **Authority** – Acceptance of claims based on credible or expert testimony.

These five sources form the foundation of our belief systems and influence how we understand both the physical world and abstract concepts.

Perception

Perception is the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses. It is our primary gateway to empirical knowledge. All human understanding of the physical world begins with perception, what we observe with our eyes, hear with our ears, and so forth. As such, it is a cornerstone of epistemology, the philosophical study of knowledge.

However, human perception is not infallible. It operates within certain normal limits, and what we perceive may be incomplete or even misleading. For example, objects like the sun, rain, or a cup of coffee are perceived through sight, touch, and sometimes smell, but our senses may not always capture the full reality of those objects. Nevertheless, perception remains the initial point of contact between the mind and the external world.

Intellect

The intellect is the mental capacity to analyze, interpret, and reason about information. While perception provides raw data from the external world, intellect processes that data into meaningful patterns and conclusions. It allows us to recognize truths, evaluate situations, and apply what we know in practical or theoretical contexts.

Intellect is what enables us to see a fire and understand its dangers, or to recognize that a “blue chair” and a “red chair” are both still chairs. It allows us to combine past knowledge with present situations to derive new insights or solve new problems. Philosophically, intellect is considered a higher-order cognitive function that contributes to the search for truth and understanding.

Inference

Inference is the logical process of forming conclusions based on evidence and premises. It underlies much of human reasoning, both in daily life and in formal disciplines such as logic and science. An inference connects statements in a meaningful way: from “All men are mortal” and “Socrates is a man,” we infer that “Socrates is mortal.”

Inference is essential for creating and evaluating arguments. In natural language, inference is often signaled by words like “therefore,” “so,” “since” “because” “it follows,” and “entails.” These terms help clarify that a statement is being drawn from earlier premises or observations.

Without inference, we would be unable to move beyond isolated facts to build coherent views of the world. In philosophy, the quality and validity of an inference are critical, faulty inferences lead to false beliefs and misunderstandings.

What Does “Rationally Defensible” Mean?

A belief or claim is said to be rationally defensible when it can withstand logical scrutiny and empirical investigation. There are two primary requirements for a claim to be rationally defensible:

1. It must not be self-contradictory; it must be logically consistent.
2. It must not be inconsistent with the facts of common experience or scientific knowledge.

This means that rational defensibility involves both internal logical coherence and external consistency with observed reality.

Examples of Rational and Irrational Claims

Let’s examine some illustrative examples:

- The statement that “today is both Monday and Wednesday” is self-contradictory and therefore logically impossible. It violates the principle of non-contradiction and cannot be rationally defended under any circumstances.
- The claim that “there is an elephant in your living room” is not self-contradictory, but under normal conditions, it is inconsistent with the facts of common experience. Unless there is actual evidence (such as seeing or touching the elephant), the claim remains not rationally defensible, but not logically impossible.

However, if there *were* an elephant in the living room, and you had direct perception of it (sight, touch, smell), then the claim would become rationally defensible in the strong sense—because it would be backed by verifiable evidence.

A Distinction Between Weak and Strong Rational Defensibility

Philosophy distinguishes between weak and strong rational defensibility:

- A claim is rationally defensible in the weak sense if it is:
 - Not self-contradictory
 - Not refuted by empirical evidence
 - But also, not positively supported by good reasons or data
- A claim is rationally defensible in the strong sense if it:
 - Meets all the criteria of the weak sense, and
 - It is positively supported by good reasoning or evidence
 - Can be considered certainly, probably, or more likely true than false

This distinction is crucial in evaluating philosophical and scientific claims. Strong rational defensibility supports firm belief, while weak rational defensibility merely prevents outright rejection.

Case Study: Elephant vs. Angel in the Living Room

These examples help illustrate the two types of rational defensibility:

- If we claim there is an elephant in your living room, we can test that claim directly. We can walk into the room and perceive the elephant using our senses. If we do see one, then the claim is strongly rationally defensible because it is empirically verified.
- On the other hand, if someone claims there is an angel in your living room, the situation is different. Angels are generally understood to be spiritual beings, imperceptible to the human senses. Even if we enter the room and see nothing, that does not disprove the claim—because it is already known that angels are not normally perceived.

Thus, the angel claim is:

- Not self-contradictory
- Not inconsistent with experience, since we don't expect to perceive angels anyway
- But also, not provable

So, it is rationally defensible in the weak sense, we cannot confirm it, but we cannot refute it either.

Summary: Rational Defensibility

A claim is rationally defensible in the weak sense when:

- It is not self-contradictory
- It is not disproven by common sense or scientific experience
- But it also lacks sufficient evidence or reasons to prove it true

Such claims cannot be logically or empirically refuted, but they also cannot be affirmed as true. They are possible but unsupported.

A claim is rationally defensible in the strong sense when:

- It is logically consistent
- It is empirically consistent
- And it is supported by strong reasons or evidence to be:
 - Certainly true (no doubt)
 - Probably true (very likely)
 - More likely true than false

These are the kinds of claims philosophy seeks to identify and defend, because they offer the most reliable basis for belief and knowledge.

What Makes a Belief or Proposition Rationally Indefensible?

A belief becomes rationally indefensible if it fails either the test of logical coherence or empirical consistency:

1. If a belief is self-contradictory, it is not only false but necessarily false, its truth is logically impossible. For example, the statement “I always lie” is self-defeating if true.
2. If a belief conflicts with the evidence of experience (whether from common sense or science), it is considered probably false. For example, the belief that “birds can read books” contradicts basic biological knowledge and lacks observational support.

Rational philosophy, therefore, discards such beliefs as untenable. These propositions either violate reason or conflict with reality, making them unreliable guides to truth.