HUM123 – Lecture 20: What is Philosophy? (Part 2)

The Sources of Philosophical Beliefs

Philosophy is deeply concerned with the origin and justification of our beliefs. Philosophical beliefs, those concerning reality, truth, knowledge, values, and meaning, are typically grounded in five main sources:

1. **Perception (sense-perception)** – our experience of the world through our senses (seeing, hearing, touching, etc.).
2. **Inference** – reasoning from premises to conclusions; logical deduction or generalization.
3. **Intellect** – the mind's ability to process information and discover truth through rational analysis.
4. **Intuition** – immediate knowledge or insight without reasoning.
5. **Authority** – accepting knowledge from reliable or traditional sources such as religious texts or historical records.

These sources are not exclusive to philosophy; they influence all kinds of human thought—but philosophers critically examine them to understand the nature and limits of knowledge.

What Makes a Belief or Proposition Rationally Indefensible?

Philosophy values clarity and coherence. For a belief to be considered rationally defensible, it must meet certain logical and empirical standards. A belief becomes rationally indefensible if it fails in either of the following ways:

- **Self-contradiction**: A belief that contradicts itself is logically impossible. For example, if someone claims, "All truths are false," the statement defeats itself. Such a belief is necessarily false and cannot be defended on logical grounds.
- **Inconsistency with experience**: A belief that contradicts established facts, whether from common sense or science, is probably false. For example, the claim that "the sun orbits the Earth" contradicts astronomical knowledge and is not rationally defensible.

Therefore, philosophical rigor demands that beliefs be both logically consistent and empirically compatible with our experience of the world.

Rationalism vs. Empiricism: The Epistemological Divide

Historically, philosophers have disagreed over the source of genuine knowledge. Rationalists argue that reason alone can provide certain knowledge. They emphasize logic and intellectual deduction, aiming for conclusions that are indubitable. However, critics of rationalism note that while it may provide logical certainty, it often lacks practical relevance or real-world application.

Empiricists, by contrast, insist that all knowledge must originate in experience. They value sensory data and emphasize observation and experimentation. This view provides practical content but admits that certainty is elusive, experience is limited, and conclusions drawn from it are provisional.

Both traditions offer important insights but also face limitations. Philosophers like Kant attempted to resolve these tensions in innovative ways.

Kant's Contribution: A New Framing of the Problem

Immanuel Kant revolutionized epistemology by reframing the central question. Instead of asking how our concepts can conform to the world, Kant asked how the world becomes intelligible to us through our concepts. In his major work, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), Kant argued that the mind actively structures experience. We do not passively receive information; rather, our mental framework shapes how we perceive and understand objects.

This approach recognizes the interplay of reason and experience, showing that knowledge arises when the rational structure of the mind interacts with sensory input. In other words, the conditions of knowledge are determined not just by the world, but also by how the human mind processes it.

Inference and the Limits of Perception

While many claims can be confirmed or denied through direct perception, there are some that rely on inference, conclusions drawn from limited evidence. For example, consider the earlier philosophical example: *Is there an elephant in your living room?* This claim can be tested by looking into the room. If there is no elephant, the claim is false.

But not all claims are so easily verified. For instance, if someone observes that every crow they have ever seen is black, they might infer that "all crows are black." This is an inductive inference—a general rule based on limited observation.

However, even if someone has seen hundreds or thousands of black crows, the claim cannot be verified through perception alone. No one can see all the crows. So, the question becomes: *Is it reasonable to infer a universal rule from repeated individual experiences?* This is a central question in the philosophy of science and logic.

The Problem of Other Minds

A deeper metaphysical issue in philosophy is "the problem of other minds." How do we know that other people have minds like our own? We cannot perceive the minds of others directly. However, we see their bodies, hear their voices, and observe their behavior, smiles, expressions of pain, emotional responses.

Based on these perceptions, we infer that others also have minds, thoughts, and feelings, even though we do not directly access them. This inference seems reasonable, but it is not directly provable. It raises important questions: *Is this belief rationally defensible? How strong is the inference?* Philosophy encourages us to question even the assumptions we rarely consider.

Perception and Inference in Philosophy

Philosophical claims are typically established or at least explored using:

1. **Perception**: Direct sensory observation
2. **Inference**: Logical deduction or generalization

Most philosophical thinking starts with perception but relies more heavily on logical inference. As we delve deeper into philosophical texts, we may encounter arguments that draw almost entirely on reasoning, with little or no reliance on sensory experience.

Philosophy, then, is a discipline of critical reasoning, where inferences must be examined for their logical validity and strength, and not just their emotional appeal or intuitive plausibility.

Intuition and Authority as Additional Sources

Besides perception and inference, other methods of philosophical thinking include:

Intuition

Intuition is the immediate, non-inferential knowledge or awareness of something. It is often described as a "gut feeling" or "hunch." Unlike inference, which requires logical steps from premises to conclusion, intuition skips the process and delivers a judgment directly. For example, we might intuitively feel that stealing is wrong without analyzing ethical theories.

Philosophers distinguish between two types of intuition:

- **Sensory (sensible) intuition**, which is akin to perception (e.g., seeing a table and recognizing it exists).
- **Intellectual (intelligible) intuition**, which allows us to grasp abstract truths such as:
    - Every effect must have a cause.
    - A proposition is either true or false (law of the excluded middle).
    - A whole is greater than its parts.
    - A perfect being cannot have imperfections.

Some philosophers also claim intuitive knowledge of God, Being, Self, and moral truths.

Though powerful, intuition is controversial in philosophy and science because it can be subjective, unverifiable, and prone to error.

Appeal to Traditional Authorities

In many philosophical traditions, especially Eastern philosophies, authoritative testimony plays a significant role in knowledge formation. Sacred texts such as the Qur'an, Bible, Vedas, and Chinese Classics are often viewed as legitimate sources of philosophical and moral knowledge.

Even in secular contexts, much of what we "know" is based on authoritative records. For instance:

- How do we know there was an American Civil War?
- How do we know what's happening in Iraq or Afghanistan today?

We rely not on personal perception or inference, but on the testimony of historians, journalists, and other experts. This kind of knowledge though indirect is widespread and vital. Philosophically, it

raises questions about how we determine the credibility of such testimony and the limits of secondhand knowledge.

What, Then, Is Philosophy?

Philosophy can be described in two main dimensions:

1. **Constructive Philosophy** – This is the active development of theories about reality, value, and knowledge. It uses perception, inference, intuition, and authoritative testimony to propose answers to big questions.
2. **Critical Philosophy** – This involves the critical evaluation of claims, theories, and beliefs. It asks: *Is the belief logically consistent? Is it supported by evidence? Can it be refuted?*

In both forms, philosophy strives for rational defensibility, that is, beliefs should be justified either strongly (with good reasons and evidence) or at least weak (by not being self-contradictory or disproven).