

Philosophical Analysis as a Way of Life

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial, we will pull together some of the essential threads of this course, which have been taught to us by some of the greatest thinkers in history:

- The value of the pursuit of truth, especially in answering the big questions: "What is the nature of reality?" "What can we know?" "What is right?"
- The use of truth to develop a worldview, and then acting according to belief

This tutorial examines the relationship of philosophy to the way in which we live our lives, in three parts:

1. [The Pursuit of Truth](#)
2. [Philosophical Worldviews](#)
3. [Acting According to Belief](#)

1. The Pursuit of Truth

Recall that philosophy involves pursuit of the truth. The implicit assumption is that truth has value, that it is worth knowing. While the immediate reaction may be to say, "of course truth has value," this is a superficial response.

Philosophers maintain that it is *always* better to know. But is this what we believe? Do you want to know whether your spouse of ten years cheated on you once, several years ago? Perhaps all that knowing this truth can do is cause harm. Consider Socrates' requirement that we examine *all* of our beliefs. How eager are you to discover that you are wrong? If you believe that a right to own guns reduces crime and/or makes you safer, how willing are you to perform the objective research necessary to determine whether your beliefs are correct? Are you willing to try your best to prove yourself wrong?

The requirement to value truth is also a requirement to reject bias. If *all* of our beliefs are subject to scrutiny, then no belief is sacred. Consider the advantage in this requirement. There are two possibilities: your strong belief will be proven correct, or incorrect.

If your belief is found to be incorrect, you may be upset for a time, but ultimately, it is better to know that you were wrong. For example, you will no longer foolishly defend a falsehood in conversations with others. Your

improved knowledge of the world will enable you to better navigate it. You will be less biased, and more understanding.

If, however, your belief turns out to be correct, it is no longer only your opinion, but genuine knowledge. You not only know *that* it is true, but you also know *why* it is true. This enables you to defend it properly and enriches your life as a result of your close examination of the belief. Meeting the Socratic challenge is a win-win.

Note the role of logic, reason, and reasoning in the search for truth. They are the tools and methods of philosophy. Reason discovers truth, and resists bias and emotion.

2. Philosophical Worldviews

One of the unique aspects of the pursuit of philosophy is that we are its subject *and* object. As subjects, we are the ones doing the thinking. With respect to the really big questions, however, we are usually among the objects studied as well. For example, in pursuing ethics, we determine how *a person* ought to act. That also entails how *we* ought to act. If, while investigating the metaphysics of free will, we conclude that free will is an illusion and the will is determined, our conclusion includes each of *our* wills. If we determine that there are no supernatural entities, then we have also confirmed that our deaths will be the end of our existence.

By practicing philosophy—by trying to figure out what is true about the world—we place ourselves in the world, as part of the system rather than outside of it. Why is this an advantage? In addition to the benefits of pursuing truth listed above, it forces us to be consistent.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** If I determine that it is morally wrong to text and drive, my determination includes me. People believe that it is unsafe to text and drive, and studies show that it causes more accidents (and fatalities) than drunk driving. Most people know this. However, many of the same people often think, “it is unsafe for *others* to text and drive. I, however, do it carefully, so I’ll do it now.” Do you know who else has reasoned that way? *Everyone who has ever caused an accident by texting and driving.* No one thinks, “I may get myself or someone else killed, but I really need to type LOL now, instead of ten minutes from now.” Philosophy places you inside this system, rather than on the outside looking in. In so doing, it reveals inconsistent thinking. You cannot be an exception to the rule.

3. Acting According to Belief

This leads us to the last major thread of philosophical thinking: acting according to belief. As the life of Socrates illustrates, the philosopher can’t just talk the talk but must walk the walk as well.

Philosophy entails the pursuit of truth, including truth in ethics. Therefore, philosophers hold beliefs about what is true with respect to right and wrong, and regarding how one should act. Remember that philosophers do not just have opinions on these matters. Their opinions have been dissected and analyzed. If they still hold a belief following that process, they not only believe it but *know* it. They hold it with a higher degree of certainty than that with which an unexamined belief is held. If you are relatively certain that something is the right thing to do,

you are less likely to act on it than if you are very certain that it is the right thing to do. This is especially true when the action (i.e., the thing to be done) is demanding.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Imagine a dangerous situation, such as one that involves an active shooter. Being somewhat sure that an action that puts you in danger is the right thing to do is unlikely to make you act. But knowing for certain what is right to do in a situation is more likely to cause you to take action.

Knowing what is right, rather than merely believing what is right, leads to acting according to belief. By thinking things through carefully, one will be more aware of times when one acts in ways that are inconsistent with beliefs. For example, most of us believe that we have a moral obligation to the next generation. However, we often don't act accordingly.



THINK ABOUT IT

Do you believe that we have a moral obligation to our children? If you do, do you act in accordance with that belief? As an exercise in critical thinking, think of five ways in which you do not act according to this belief.



HINT

Consider these questions while thinking of ways in which you do NOT act according to the belief that we have a moral obligation to our children: Do you recycle? Even when you are on vacation? Do you take public transportation when it is available? Do you drive a fuel-efficient vehicle? Do you avoid pressing the "wheelchair-accessible" button to open the door when you don't need it? Do you write to your congresspersons, encouraging them to support future-friendly policies? Do you watch sports that involve the use of huge amounts of gasoline?

Most of us hold beliefs, but because we have not examined those beliefs beyond a superficial level, we don't act according to them. However, not every philosopher is Socrates. No one is perfectly rational, or perfectly objective, and no one acts in perfect accordance with his or her beliefs. Philosophy enables us to maximize rationality, minimize bias, and increase consistency of thought and action.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, we discussed **The Pursuit of Truth, Philosophical Worldviews, and Acting According to Belief**. The pursuit of philosophy is not only an academic discipline. It should also make us better people. Pursuing truth and using reason to examine our beliefs are activities that have value, as do developing a worldview and acting according to belief. All of these skills are honed and leveraged when philosophy is properly pursued.

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