

# The Philosophical Approach to Inquiry

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will begin with a reminder of the nature of philosophy, then move on to a four-step account of philosophical inquiry. Our discussion will break down like this:

## 1. Review of Philosophy

To begin with, recall that philosophy is the pursuit of truth. This means philosophy is not just the collection of information. Rather, it places the highest importance on how we go about discovering whether or not something is true.

Here are some of the ways philosophy typically attempts to secure truth:

1. Using reasoning and logical arguments
2. Maintaining consistency between our actions and beliefs
3. Consistently applying our standards of judgment or evaluation
4. Guarding against the biasing influence of our passions

It is not just the way of pursuing truth that distinguishes philosophy. It is also the type of truths it pursues that makes it different from other disciplines (such as science). Philosophy helps us understand things that we cannot know just by looking at the physical world.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You are reading or listening to this tutorial. A scientist could explain the way your body (e.g. your eyes, ears, etc.) enables you to do this. But philosophy will approach this in a different way: it will ask “what are your reasons for doing this?”. In other words, it will ask for the ideals or goals that motivate your actions (e.g. self-improvement, pursuit of knowledge, etc.).

Thinking about the reasons we have for doing things, and questioning whether or not we think they are good reasons, requires us to go beyond mere observation and instead use arguments and critical thinking.



### BIG IDEA

As you can see, this supports our definition of philosophy as the pursuit of truths that cannot be determined wholly empirically.

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## 2. Specifying a Philosophical Question

In order to arrive at your own considered view about a philosophical issue, you first need to think about the topic under consideration and specify the precise question or problem you want to address.



This provides the focus you need to pursue a productive philosophical inquiry.

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### 3. Identifying and Evaluating Philosophical Positions

Now you can investigate what other people have already said about it. It is helpful to list many philosophers' positions on this question before you decide which ones to tackle (see the examples in the illustration below).

## STEP 2: IDENTIFY POSITIONS ON THE QUESTION



You should then think critically about what has been said by others, weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of their position. Consider the example given in the illustration below.

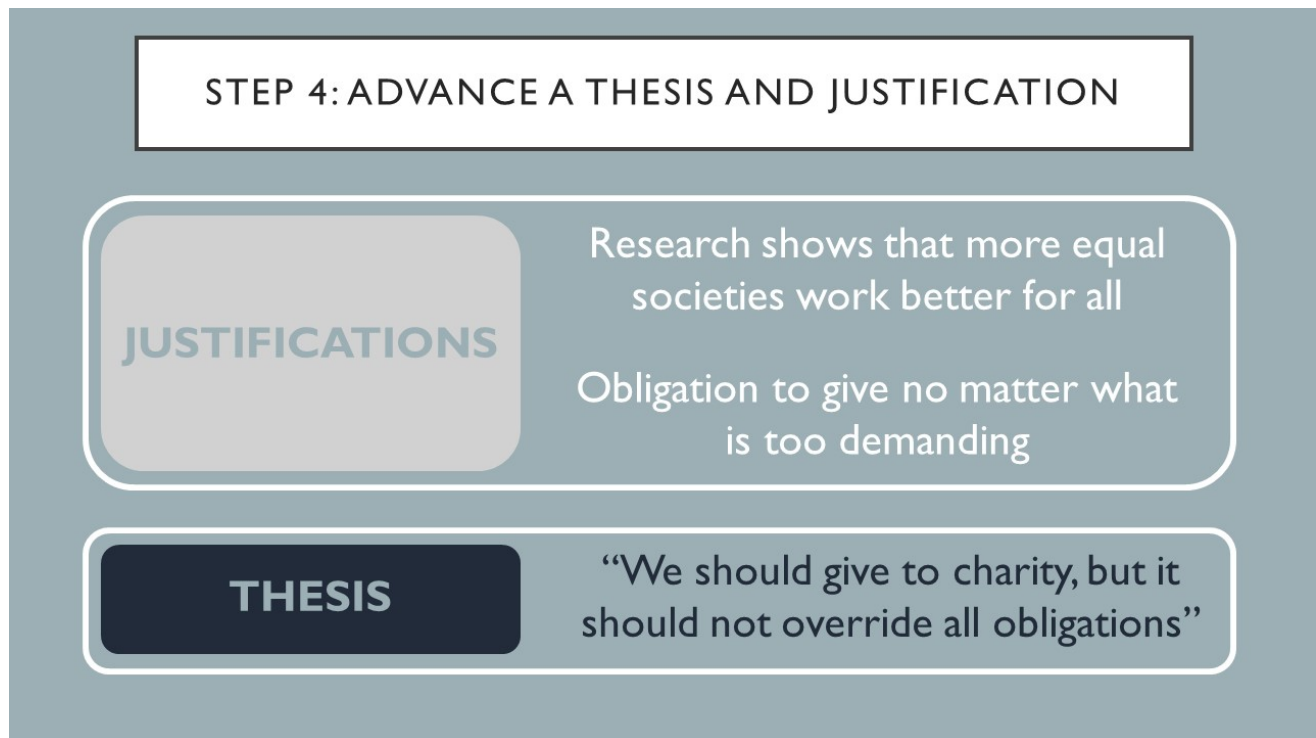
## STEP 3: EVALUATE POSITIONS



The type of support you give for or against a position can be of different kinds. For instance, it may be that you cite research that shows charity often fails to help because of inefficient systems. Perhaps you found some convincing arguments by various philosophers that state: if you are able, you should help others. And maybe you think the reason why we should give to charity is because you find it intuitively plausible to think that you would want to be helped if you needed it.

## 4. Advancing a Thesis

Finally, you need to take a position on the issue and give justifications for why this is the correct position to take. In other words, you should advance a thesis with some supporting arguments or evidence.



Notice that the first and second justification pull in slightly different directions. The first seems to be a straightforward endorsement of charity, while the second seems to place doubts on it.

But what is doubted is only the belief that charity is the most important or binding moral commitment we have. The worry with this belief is that, if charity comes above all other obligations, then it might take over our lives (e.g. we would not be able to buy a home because there are those that need food first).

Therefore, you can hold that we ought to give to charity, but add that this is not an obligation above all others. In this way you would have firmly established a thesis whilst taking varying ideas into account.

## SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of philosophy**, considering some of the core characteristics of philosophical inquiry. Then we looked at how we go about **specifying a philosophical question** in order to provide focus for a philosophical inquiry.

We saw what is involved in **identifying and evaluating philosophical positions**, including weighing reasons for and against a position. Finally, we saw how we use justifications (e.g. arguments or evidence) when **advancing a thesis**.