

Phil. 1000

Notes #1: Course Requirements, What Is Philosophy?

To discuss today:

This course: requirements, subject, guidelines

Philosophy: what it is

An example of philosophy: The Ship of Theseus

The value of philosophy & this course

I. About this Class

Review syllabus. Some highlights:

- Who should take this class?
 - Class will contain:
 - Lots of arguments
 - Theoretical, philosophical questions (see below)
 - Controversial ideas.
 - Will not contain:
 - Directly practical knowledge
- Course requirements. Quizzes, exams.
- Miscellaneous guidelines:
 - Come on time.
 - Come to office hours.
 - Participate.
- What should you do now?
 - Get course readings. <<http://libraries.colorado.edu/search/p?SEARCH=huemer>>
 - Read the syllabus.
 - Read the Clifford and Feynman readings. (Then the Rand selection.)

II. What Is Philosophy?

A. The Subject Matter of Philosophy

- Philosophy studies some general, fundamental questions, about the nature of the world and our place in it.
- Three main branches:
 1. Metaphysics - studies what sorts of things in general exist, and what sort of world this is. (Examples: existence of God, free will vs. determinism, distinction between body and soul, and the Ship of Theseus question)
 2. Epistemology - Studies the nature of knowledge - what is it and how do we know what we know?
 3. Ethics - studies evaluative questions - what is good/bad, what should one do in general, etc.
- Some smaller branches of philosophy:
 4. Political philosophy - studies the source of political authority, the best overall structure for society and/or the state, and related questions. (Can be seen as a branch of ethics.)
 5. Aesthetics - studies the nature of art, beauty, and related questions. (More generally: the nature of aesthetic qualities.)

6. Logic - studies reasoning, esp. the principles of correct reasoning. Closely related to, but not the same as, epistemology.

B. The Methods of Philosophy

Philosophy in the Western tradition mainly relies on logical arguments & common experience.

III. Benefits of Studying Philosophy

A. The importance of philosophical questions

A metaphor: The story of the astronaut (from Ayn Rand). Three questions:

1. Where am I?
2. How do I find out?
3. What should I do?

B. Thinking skills

- Philosophy teaches us to think more clearly, to avoid common confusions.
- Philosophy teaches us to reason more cogently, to avoid common fallacies.
- Philosophy makes us aware of the fundamental questions.

C. Philosophical Attitude

The Cardinal Rule of philosophy: Truth comes first.

When doing philosophy, we are trying to identify what is true. That comes before personalities, feelings, and desires. The following rules are all consequences of this.

Four rules of philosophical comportment:

1. Philosophers question:

- Question the claims of others.
- Question your own beliefs.
- This does not mean refusing to accept anything as true!

2. Philosophy is impersonal:

- The philosopher does not choose beliefs based on his personality or feelings.
- The philosopher does not take intellectual criticism personally. Challenges are to be welcomed.
- The philosopher does not accept or reject philosophical claims based on who says them.
- The philosopher does not go along with ideas because of personal or social consequences of criticizing them.

3. Philosophers are reasonable:

- The philosopher has reasons for his beliefs.
- The philosopher asks for the reasons for others' beliefs.
- The philosopher is moved by good reasons presented to him.

4. Philosophers are open-minded and critical:

- Our ideas and arguments are open to criticism. The philosopher looks for objections to his beliefs.
- The ideas and arguments of others are also open to criticism.

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Notes #2: The Ethic of Rationality

Two problems of irrationality to discuss today:

1. Forming beliefs for no reason.
2. Failure to consider objections/counter-evidence.

I. Evidentialism (Clifford)

This is the view that it is morally wrong to hold unjustified beliefs.

- Justified belief: a belief that it is rational to hold; a belief that is (very) likely to be true, given your evidence.

Argument for this:

1. It is wrong to hold an unjustified belief which causes harm to others.
 - The shipowner in the 1st example is morally blameworthy.
 - Best explanation of this: he is blameworthy for his unjustified belief. (Discuss alternatives.)
2. If so, it is also wrong when the belief does not but could have caused harm.
 - Wrongness must depend on what was true at the time of the action.
 - Related point: moral blame cannot depend on whether the agent got lucky.
3. All unjustified beliefs carry a risk of harm to others.
 - Everyone (not just public figures) influences the beliefs and actions of others. (Examples)
 - [Beliefs interact in unpredictable ways. (My point)]
 - Unjustified beliefs weaken our powers of reasoning, develop bad habits.
 - Your irrationality causes other people to be dishonest with you.
4. Therefore, it is always wrong to have unjustified beliefs.
 - “To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” (101)

Why people are often irrational:

- We feel happier when we think we know things.
- But this is no justification for adopting unjustified beliefs.
- Exercise: think about what unjustified beliefs you or others around you have.

Objection:

What if we are irrational only about certain things with little practical consequences?

Problem:

- The irrational person is in a poor position to identify these issues.
- Beliefs have many connections with other beliefs, some unanticipated.

II. Rationality & the Scientific Ethic (Feynman)

- Feynman distinguishes two things:
 - a) Not being dishonest: This is merely not lying.
 - b) “Scientific integrity, which is another level” (341): This requires giving all relevant information that you know.

- Scientist should state all the facts that might cast doubt on their theory / experimental results.
 - “For example, if you’re doing an experiment, you should report everything that you think might make it invalid—not only what you think is right about it: other causes that could possibly explain your results; and things you thought of that you’ve eliminated by some other experiment, and how they worked ... Details that could throw doubt on your interpretation must be given, if you know them. You must do the best you can—if you know anything at all wrong, or possibly wrong—to explain it.”
- This applies to non-scientists too (my points):
 - Confirmation Bias: This is a common psychological phenomenon. People are biased towards confirmatory evidence. E.g., when considering a theory,
 - ☞ They look for positive instances, not counter-examples.
 - ☞ They think about arguments for, but not objections.
 - ☞ They remember evidence supporting their beliefs more than evidence against their beliefs.
 - Psychology experiments support this.
 - ☞ Capital punishment experiment
 - ☞ The introversion/extraversion experiment
- The scientific ethic is often disregarded in politics.
 - “On the one hand, as scientists we are ethically bound to the scientific method, in effect promising to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but—which means that we must include all the doubts, the caveats, the ifs, ands, and buts. On the other hand, we are not just scientists but human beings as well. And like most people we’d like to see the world a better place, which in this context translates into our working to reduce the risk of potentially disastrous climatic change. To do that we need to get some broadbased support, to capture the public’s imagination. That, of course, entails getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we might have. This ‘double ethical bind’ we frequently find ourselves in cannot be solved by any formula. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest. I hope that means being both.”
 - Stephen Schneider, Prof. of Environmental Biology & Global Change, Stanford University (Discover, Oct. 1989, pp. 45-48)

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Notes #3: Political Irrationality

To Discuss today:

Theories to explain political disagreement.

Why people are irrational.

How to avoid irrationality.

I. The problem of political disagreement

- Features of political disagreements:
 - widespread
 - strong
 - persistent
- Harms:
 - Waste of resources
 - Bad policies
 - Conflict, violence
- Theories of political disagreements:
 - a. Miscalculation + inherent difficulty of issues
 - b. Ignorance, we haven't collected enough information to resolve issues
 - c. People disagree because of divergent values
 - d. Irrationality

II. Ignorance & miscalculation theories do not explain:

- Persistence of political disagreements.
- Strength of political beliefs.
- Clustering of logically unrelated beliefs.
- Correlations of political beliefs with race, sex, personality traits, etc.

III. Divergent values theory does not explain:

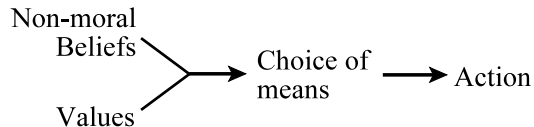
- Why people disagree about values in the first place.
- Clustering of logically unrelated beliefs.
- Factual disputes in politics. Examples:

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Disputes:</u>
Gun Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Do guns cause crime?▪ Are they effective means of self-defense?▪ Is there a risk of developing a tyrannical government?▪ Does private gun ownership reduce this risk?
Capital Punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Does capital punishment deter crime?▪ How often are innocent people executed?

- Capitalism vs. Socialism
 - What determines prices in a market economy?
 - What are the effects of socialism?
 - Where do capitalists get their money?

IV. Rational ignorance & rational irrationality

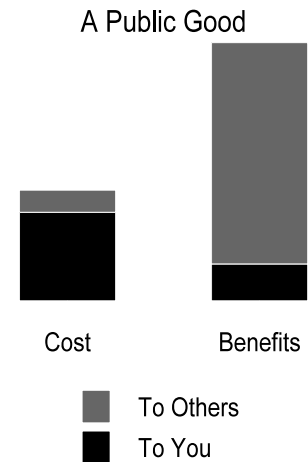
- Two kinds of “rationality”:
 - Instrumental rationality: consists in choosing the correct means for pursuing your existing goals, whatever they are. The explanation of action:



- Epistemic rationality: consists in using correct (logical) reasoning, basing beliefs on evidence, avoiding fallacies, not contradicting oneself, and so on.

- The Theory of Rational Ignorance:

- It is rational to remain ignorant when costs of collecting information exceed expected benefits.
- Example: information about political candidates & issues. Political information is a public good: a good for which the producer bears most of the cost, while others receive most of the benefits.
- People in fact choose to remain ignorant in these cases.



- ☞ 60% think foreign aid is one of the 2 largest items in the federal budget. In fact, it is <1% of the budget.¹
- ☞ “During the 1992 presidential campaign 89 percent of the public knew that Vice President Quayle was feuding with the television character Murphy Brown, but only 19 percent could characterize Bill Clinton’s record on the environment... 86 percent of the public knew that the Bushes’ dog was named Millie, yet only 15 percent knew that both presidential candidates supported the death penalty. Judge Wapner (host of the television series ‘People’s Court’) was identified by more people than were Chief Justices Burger or Rehnquist.”²

- The Theory of Rational Irrationality:

- Assumes:
 - a. People have non-epistemic belief preferences: prefer to believe certain things, for reasons independent of the truth or epistemic rationality of those beliefs.
 - b. People have some control over what they believe.

¹ <www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/BFW/finding1.html>. Respondents were asked to pick the two largest items from the following list: foreign aid, defense, Social Security, food stamps, and Medicare. On average, foreign aid was estimated as 23% of the budget.

² Delli Carpini & Keeter, What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters, 101.

- c. People are generally instrumentally rational.
- Therefore:
 - ☞ People choose to adopt epistemically irrational beliefs, when the “costs” of being rational are greater than the expected benefits.
 - ☞ This includes most political beliefs.

V. Sources of belief preferences

- People are biased by self-interest + interests of the group they prefer to identify with
- People adopt beliefs to accord with the self-image they want to project
- Political beliefs can serve as tools of social bonding.
- People are biased towards other beliefs that cohere with their existing beliefs.

VI. Mechanisms of belief fixation

- a. Biased weighting of evidence: we attribute slightly more weight to each piece of evidence that supports our belief, and slightly less weight to each piece of evidence that undermines our belief, than it merits.
- b. Selective attention and energy: we spend more time/energy thinking about arguments supporting or beliefs than arguments criticizing them. But we spend more time looking for flaws in arguments opposing our beliefs than in arguments supporting them. This leads to:
 - ☞ Prospects for attaining the truth, with different intellectual traits:

	<u>Intelligence</u>	<u>Bias</u>	
1.	+	-	(best)
2.	-	-	
3.	-	+	
4.	+	+	(worst)

- c. Selection of evidence sources: we get political information from sources we already know we agree with.
 - ☞ Contrast this with scientific approach.
- d. We base beliefs on subjective, speculative, and anecdotal claims. These are more subject to bias.

VII. What should we do?

- Avoid using mechanisms in (VI).
- Collect information from variety of sources.
- Look for flaws in your own arguments.
- Be aware of cases where we are likely to be biased.
 - Moral-political issues
 - Emotional issues
 - Clustering of logically independent beliefs
 - Factual beliefs that occur prior to gathering evidence / are unaffected by evidence
- Remember:
 - Irrationality is not fully conscious.
 - Don't assume you are immune.
 - Conscious efforts may reduce it.

- Regard others' political claims with skepticism.
- Identify what sort of evidence is required to scientifically resolve a factual question, or test a factual claim. Ask whether one has such evidence.