

I.3 Philosophical Method

PHIL101

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Goals, This Lesson

- To introduce the student to the primary two methodologies of philosophy, empiricism and rationalism;
- To introduce the student to the technique of conceptual analysis;
- To introduce the student to the concept of criticism.

In the first two lessons of this introductory section, we have introduced the two central goals of philosophy and presented the basic picture confronting the philosopher seeking these goals. We have seen that the goals are lofty: true understanding of all things and securing goodness in the world. And we have seen that the philosopher, like each of us, is confronted by two seemingly distinct realms, the conceptual and the sensory, in his or her quest for truth and goodness. In this lesson, we address the question of *how*, given the worlds of concept and sense, the philosopher is to proceed towards truth and goodness. For the moment, our focus will be on the philosopher's quest for truth; we will return more specifically to the second goal of philosophy in Section III of the course.

Empiricism and Rationalism

In the quest for truth, the philosopher encounters two worlds, the sensory world and the conceptual world. This suggests that we have two means to the truth, sensation and conceptual thought. Conceptual thought is also known as *reason* or *reasoning*, so we have two basic means to truth, sense and reason. These two avenues to truth have given rise to two basic methods of philosophy, empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism is the method in which we seek truth by means of sense experience. Rationalism is the method in which we seek truth by means of reason. As you may imagine, these methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive: the rationalist typically acknowledges the value of sense observation in the quest for philosophical truth; and the empiricist similarly acknowledges the role of reasoning in the quest for truth. There are, it is true, more extreme adherents to the one method who reject the significance of the other. On the whole, in any case, the distinction between the empiricist versus the rationalist method is a matter of emphasis – which of the two means seems prior or more important, in the quest for knowledge.

Empiricism: the primary source of human knowledge is sensation.

Rationalism: the primary source of human knowledge is reason.

The distinction between empiricism and rationalism is evident in our Basic Picture. We explore our world both by the investigation and manipulation of our concepts, and we also explore the world by attention to the information of our senses. Both realms are rich, complex regions, seemingly inexhaustible in the vistas they offer and the secrets they harbor. Think a little about the extent to which you learn by means of the exploration of ideas and by means of sensory

observation. We will encounter this basic distinction in approaches to learning throughout the course.

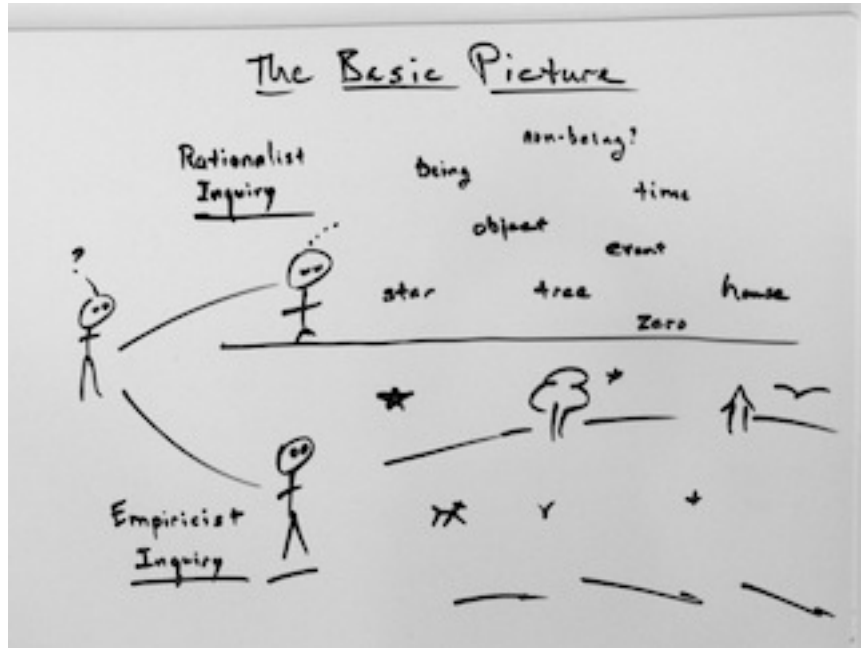


Figure 1

Note further, for now, the extent to which much of philosophical method pertains to the conceptual realm.¹ These particular methods include conceptual analysis, discussed below, and argumentation, which we discuss in the next section of the course.

Conceptual Analysis

As the name suggests, conceptual analysis is the analysis of concepts. To analyze a thing is to break it apart so as to reveal its parts or components.² Concepts, as we saw in Lesson I.2, have an *intension* or meaning and typically what a concept intends is complex and itself made up of further concepts. That is to say, concepts have parts, which are usually themselves concepts. The analysis of concepts, then, is the process of revealing the concepts that are the parts of some given concept.

Previously, we saw the example of the concept of *horse*. A horse, I said, was a relatively large, four-legged mammal having hooves and lacking horns and known for its speed over land.³ The concept of *horse*, then, contains the concepts of being *four-legged*, being a *mammal*, *having hooves*, *lacking horns*, and being *known for its speed over land*. These concepts themselves also

¹ As for the empirical realm, consider the question of the meaning of our concepts. If the meaning of a concept is spelled out in terms of sensation, then we encounter a fundamental empiricist tenet: all that we know, conceptually, turns out to contain only information about the realm of the senses which information, of course, is gathered only by the senses.

² Our word 'analysis' derives from the ancient Greek word, *analuein*, itself composed of *ana* and *luein*, meaning "up" and "loosen", respectively. To analyze something, then, is to loosen it up so as to see its parts.

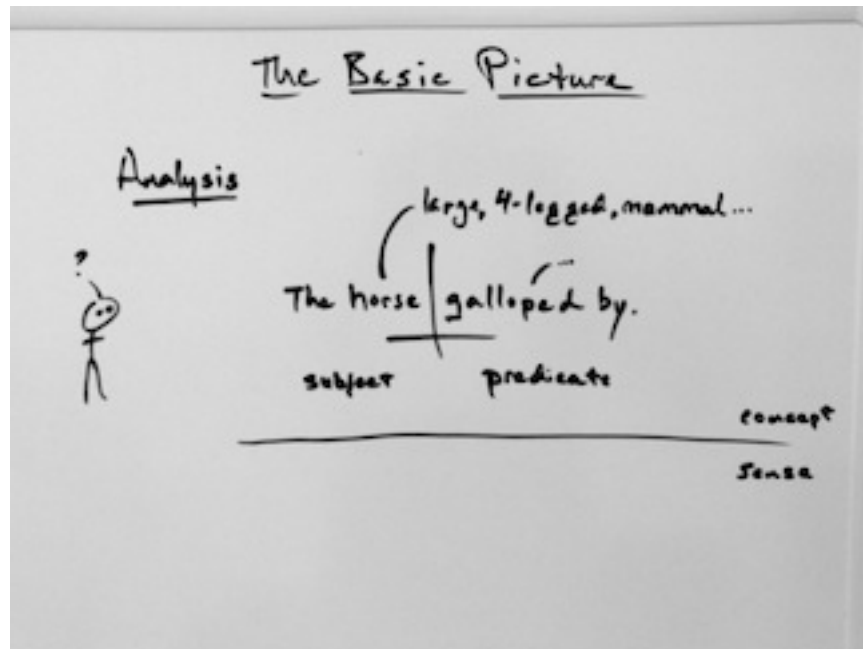
³ The exact content of a concept may not always be clear, and may differ from one person to another, depending on what the person understands the given concept to entail.

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have their content – further concepts elaborating their meaning (intension). *Mammal*, for instance, is the concept of a warm-blooded animal whose young are nursed on milk (typically). as you can see, the interrelation of concepts is highly complex. Part of the business of philosophy, as it is in other knowledge-seeking disciplines, is the search for the most basic of concepts, those that are common to many others and that have themselves few or no component concepts. And whether there exist such concepts is, as you might expect, itself a philosophical issue.⁴

In addition to concepts considered as single expressions, we generally experience concepts as the components of some determinate *thought*. A determinate thought is complete in a way that a concept by itself is not. For example, the concept of *horse*, by itself, is only a partial thought, a component of a thought. By contrast, the sentence, *The great horse galloped by* expresses a complete thought. The distinction drawn here is that between the parts or components of thought, and a complete thought itself or what we otherwise call a *statement*. Concepts by themselves give us the components of thought; combined in certain ways, we get fully-formed thoughts or statements.⁵

Just as concepts themselves can be analyzed for their content, statements, also can be so analyzed. The primary components of a statement are its *subject* and its *predicate*. The subject of a statement is whatever thing the statement is about; the predicate of a statement is whatever we are saying about that thing, the subject of the statement. In the sentence, *The great horse galloped by*, the subject – what we are talking about – is *the great horse* and the predicate – what we are saying about that subject – is *galloped by*.



⁴ One such concept might be the concept of *time*. Another, perhaps, that of *space*. Another: *cause*. Another: *quantity*. How many basic concepts might there be? Aristotle thought that there were ten; Kant counted 12.

⁵ Knock-Knock jokes are based in part on the distinction between single concepts and complete thoughts. *Cantaloupe*, by itself, isn't a complete thought or statement. *Can't elope tonight, my father's got the car* does express a complete thought. (Knock-Knock jokes also trade on homophones – words or word-phrases that sound alike but express different concepts.)

Figure 2

Conceptual analysis, then, includes the processes both of analyzing individual concepts for their content parts and analyzing complete statements for their component parts. Both processes are fundamental to the philosophical method. As you can see from our Basic Picture, a whole world of concepts exists before us, and it is primarily by analysis that we penetrate and explore this world.

The philosopher examines the world, in part, by means of the analysis of concepts, both by themselves and as located in complete statements. Given the relationship between the conceptual world and the world of sense, you can now see roughly how conceptual analysis extends our inquisitive reach into the sensory world. For concepts, generally, refer to objects encountered in the sensory realm. *Horses* are objects that we encounter in sense. Their size and shape – being *relatively large* and having *four hooved legs* – are qualities that are revealed to us in sense: certain sensations satisfy those concepts. Thus, given the close relationship between conceptual thought and sensory worlds, we examine the contents of our sensory world even as we analyze the contents of our concepts.

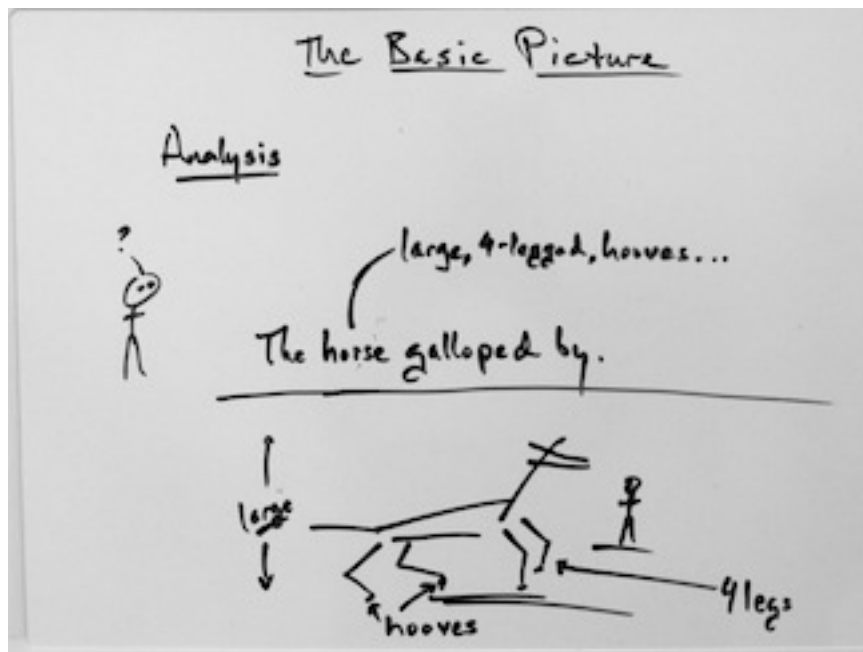


Figure 3

This brings us back to the empiricist-rationalist distinction mentioned above. Conceptual analysis is primarily a rationalist method. It is a means of acquiring information relying primarily on reason, on the rational process of concept analysis. Nevertheless, conceptual analysis is a part of the empiricist approach to truth. The content of our concepts, revealed in analysis, can guide us in our investigations of the world of sense.

Criticism

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I have mentioned a couple of times that everything in philosophy is controversial, including this very statement. This is an important and challenging feature of philosophy, one that gets to the very heart of the discipline and its methodology. The problem originates in what we might call the *fact/evidence disparity*.⁶ We will consider this idea in greater detail when we reach Descartes's views on method. For the moment, note that the *fact* of a thing is not the same thing as one's *evidence* for that fact. It is one thing for LeBron James to weigh 270 pounds; one's evidence for this fact might be the content of a web-page or, more directly, the read-out on a scale. But, as we know, web-pages and read-outs are not always reliable guides to the facts and at bottom this is because they are not the same one thing.

This point is significant for the philosopher because as one who seeks truth, the philosopher must always consider whether the *evidence* that s/he has is sufficient to give us knowledge of the *facts*. We have seen that we live in a world of thought and sense. The fact/evidence disparity entails that our access to the *truth*, whatever exactly it is, will always be *indirect*: we must judge from certain evidence, in the form of thought or sense, whether one or another fact obtains.

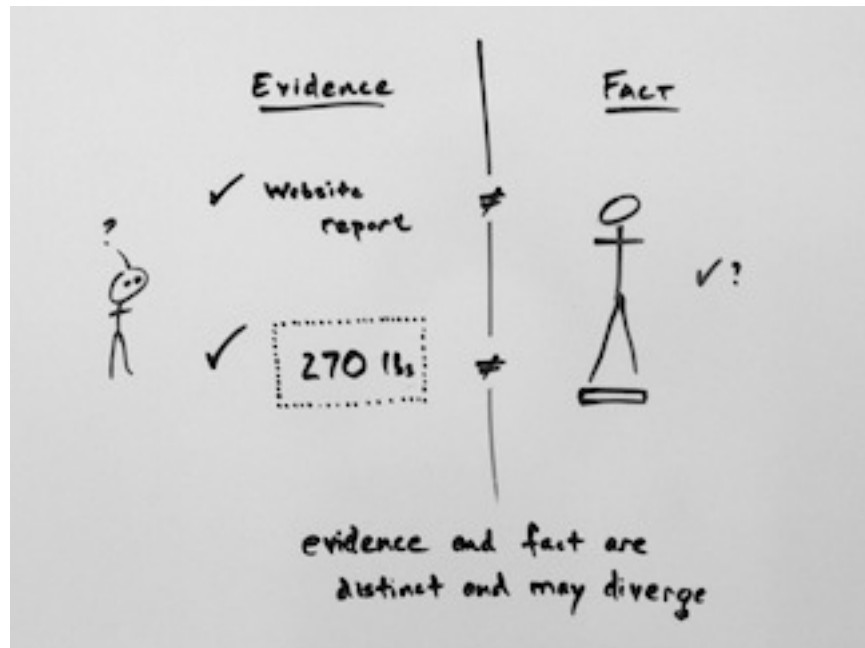


Figure 4

The fact/evidence disparity suggests that our claims about the world – our claims about what is in fact true, about what are the true facts – that these claims will always be subject to challenge. We are forever in the position of having to judge whether our evidence of a supposed fact is sufficient for our knowing the fact to be true. At the same time, the philosopher insists on knowledge of the truth as the philosopher's highest goal. It is for this reason that every claim in philosophy is controversial. For every fact that the philosopher may wish to uphold, the philosopher is limited to showing us evidence for that fact. But since the fact of the matter is not the same one thing as

⁶ The word 'disparity' comes from the Latin *paritas* meaning "parity" or "equality", which itself derives from the ancient Greek, *para* meaning "beside" or "alongside". The Latin prefix, 'dis' here means "not", so that a disparity is a case of inequality – two things being fundamentally different from each other.

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the evidence, it remains possible that the evidence and the fact *diverge* – i.e., that the evidence doesn't necessarily entail that the fact obtains.

And because the philosopher insists on knowledge of the truth, and not simply a “good guess”, the method of philosophers has become what is called a *critical* method.⁷ The critical method entails that no claim may be advanced as known without support; that claims advanced without support must be identified as such – i.e., as suppositions or premises; and that any claim whatever may be challenged, which amounts to a call for the evidence supporting the claim along with an evaluation of that evidence. To be a philosopher is to accept the critical method as implicit in one's philosophical activity. It is to remain open to the possibility of error at every point of inquiry. It is to accept the challenges of others as important to one's own process of inquiry. The philosophical endeavor is thus a communal effort. We rely on the gaze and criticism of others to ensure the integrity of our work as a whole. The basic philosophical question, How do I know? is thus fundamental to the philosophical method. It makes the task of the philosopher most arduous, even as it preserves and ensures the value of that work.

A result of philosophy's critical method is a mistrust of appearances. We cannot be simply assume that an apparent reality is, in fact, reality itself. And because philosophers often then step beyond appearances in their pursuit of truth, some of their theories as to the true nature of things sound strange to the uninitiated. I conclude this lesson with a list of some of the claims that philosophers have advanced as a result of their critical examination of the world around us.

A sampler of metaphysical theories (What is it?):

- Thales: the world (i.e., every thing that exists) is made of water.
- Anaximander: the world is made of some indefinite stuff which, when in motion, becomes definite.
- Anaximenes: the world is made of air.
- Heraclitus: everything is in constant change.
- Parmenides: there is only one object and it never changes.
- Zeno (student of Parmenides): motion is impossible.
- Democritus: there are two kinds of thing, the empty and the full.
- Plato: material objects are the imperfect, decaying, unknowable copies of the ultimately real things (the Forms), which are themselves immaterial and perfect.
- Aristotle: to exist is to be enformed matter.
- Augustine: only God is fully real; other things are only partly real.
- Descartes: there are three kinds of thing: the infinite (God), finite thinking things (souls), and finite material things (bodies).
- Hobbes: only material objects are real.
- Leibniz: only thinking things are real; they don't have contact with each other, but perceive the world consistently in “pre-established harmony”.
- Spinoza; there are infinitely many different kinds of thing, though we are aware of only two (mind and body); these infinite “attributes” are all the different aspects of the same one thing, namely God.
- Berkeley: all things besides God exist as thoughts of God.
- Hume: we don't know that anything exists, but we are in the habit of thinking so.
- Kant: when we try to think of what exists, we only think of how we think of what exists.
- Hegel: the world is a giant, incomplete, self-aware thought that evolves by trying (not) to contradict itself.

⁷ Another meaning of the word ‘critical’ is of course the negative attitude that one might take to another in which one finds fault with the other. This meaning of the term is of course related to our technical

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- Schopenhauer: *willing* is the only real phenomenon.
- Nietzsche: living things are a special form of dead things.
- W.V. Quine: sets and physical particles are real.
- David K. Lewis: every possible combination of things is a thing.

Ask Yourself:

To complete this lesson, you should think about and “process” what you have read. Ask yourself the following questions, and review the reading until you are able to answer them readily. Bear in mind that some questions pertain to information stated explicitly, above, while others may require some thought, on your part.

1. What are empiricism and rationalism and what is the difference between them?
2. What does it mean to analyze a concept?
3. What is the difference between a concept and a complete thought?
4. What is the critical method?