What is Philosophy?

• One of the most commonly asked questions about philosophy is “what is it?”

• There are several ways to answer the question.
  – Thematic: Philosophy treats certain subject-matters.
  – Methodological: Philosophy uses certain methods.
  – Descriptive: Philosophy is what people do in their capacity as “philosophers.”

• “Philosophers” have treated many subject-matters using many methods.

• There is much disagreement among “philosophers” about whether specific subject-matters and methods are “legitimate.”

The Subjects of Philosophy

• Among the areas generally recognized as subjects of philosophical investigation are the following:
  – Metaphysics: the general nature of reality.
  – Epistemology: the nature of knowledge.
  – Ethics: the values of human action.
  – Aesthetics: the nature of art or beauty.
  – Logic: the correct forms of inference and “logical truths.”
  – Philosophy of x (x = science, mind, language, etc.)
  – History of philosophy.
The Methods of Philosophy

- Among the activities widely used by philosophers are these (with an example following each):
  - Analyzing language or concepts (what does ‘good’ mean? what is goodness?).
  - Giving an account of mental activity (how do we reason?).
  - Theorizing about what is beyond experience (does God exist?).
  - Theorizing at a high level of generality (what is a thing?).
  - Posing and trying to solve puzzles (is it wrong to kill in order to save a life?).
  - Defending claims about how philosophy should be done (historically? ahistorically?).

Philosophical Theories

- Although a number of methods have been employed by philosophers, there a common framework for most philosophizing.
  - Philosophy is pursued through the use of language, both oral and written.
  - The primary unit of language for philosophers is the declarative sentence.
  - Using declarative sentences, philosophers express philosophical theses.
    - The universe has a beginning in time.
    - There is a world external to my own mind.
    - It is wrong to harm others.
  - A set of inter-related philosophical theses is a philosophical theory.

Defending Philosophical Theses

- Philosophical theses are advanced by philosophers in books, papers, blogs, oral discussions, etc.
- In general, philosophers attempt to provide support for their theses.
- Support is intended to produce agreement concerning the truth of the thesis.
- The most common way of providing support is by producing an argument in defense of the thesis.
• Alternatively, a philosopher may advance a thesis as needing no support from an argument because it is.
  – Self-evident,
  – Common-sensical,
  – Intuitive.

**Arguments**

• An argument consists of a set of sentences designated as its premises and a single sentence designated as its conclusion.

• Here is an example of an argument.
  1. The breaking up of ice caps is an event taking place in time.
  2. Every event taking place in time has a cause.
  3. Therefore, the breaking up of the polar ice caps has a cause.

• The first premise is empirically verifiable on the basis of scientific measurement.

• But the second premise is a philosophical thesis that requires some kind of philosophical defense.

**Evaluating Arguments**

• We may evaluate arguments in one of two ways.
  – Materially, with respect to whether the premises are true.
  – Formally, with respect to whether the premises really support the conclusion.

• Logic evaluates the formal aspect of arguments.

• Premises may formally support conclusions to a greater or lesser extent.
  – An argument is *deductively valid* when it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.
  – Deductively invalid arguments, such as those used in science, may provide very strong support.

• Similarly, the premises themselves may be impossible to deny, impossible to accept, or have any degree of plausibility in between.
Empirical Premises and Theses

- Empirical premises and theses concern features of experience.
- The first premise in the argument above, that the ice caps are melting, is such a premise.
- Empirical premises and theses may be defended by appeal to such evidence as:
  - Personal experience,
  - Testimony of others,
  - Authority of experts,
  - Other kinds of empirical evidence.

Non-Philosophical Defenses

- In general, philosophy demands that what is used to defend theses should be in some way reasonable.
- Some non-philosophical ways of supporting premises are by appealing to:
  - Faith,
  - Inspiration,
  - Strong conviction.
- Such appeals can be characterized as being dogmatic.

Defeating Premises and Theses

- General premises and theses, of the kind found in philosophical arguments, can be attacked in a specific way.
- One may produce a counter-example, which is a case which is held to be true but which conflicts with the general statement.
- Consider the following:
  - Every case of true belief is a case of knowledge.
- As Plato pointed out in his dialogue Theaetetus, one can have a true belief that is not knowledge.
  - A jury might be convinced of the true guilt of a defendant, on the basis of hearsay evidence, by a persuasive lawyer.
- Much of the activity of philosophers consists in advancing counter-examples to general philosophical theses and then trying to provide improved general theses that are not subject to counter-example.
**Skepticism**

- Philosophical skeptics hold that philosophical theses cannot be reasonably defended.
- Some hold that because of their great generality, philosophical theses cannot be defended by appeal to experience.
- They go on to question whether there can be any other reasonable basis for defending the theses.
- Other skeptics emphasize the prevalence of disagreement over the truth of philosophical theses and claim that no argument is capable of settling such disagreement.

**The History of Western Philosophy**

- The history of western philosophy can be broken down roughly into several phases.
  - Hellenic (6th-4th cent. BC)
  - Hellenistic (3rd cent. BC to 2nd cent. AD)
  - Medieval (5th-15th cent. AD)
  - Renaissance (16th cent. AD)
  - Modern (17th-19th cent. AD)
  - Contemporary (20th-21st cent. AD)
    * Analytic
    * Continental
- Philosophers in each period differed in their methods, but the split between analytic and continental philosophy seems more profound.

**Some Superstars of Philosophy**

- The following are generally acknowledged to be among the greatest Western philosophers:
  - Plato (4th cent. BC)
  - Aristotle (4th cent. BC)
  - René Descartes (17th cent. AD)
  - David Hume (18th cent. AD)
  - Immanuel Kant (18th cent. AD)
Plan for the Course

- The course will be organized around the historical development of two broad subjects.
  - Ethics.
  - Metaphysics and Epistemology.
- Classes will cover readings from classic texts in the history of Western philosophy.
- Emphasis will be on influential philosophical theories and the basic arguments given to support them.