PHIL 2003H: Honors Introduction to Philosophy
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Handout: What is Philosophy?

- ‘Philosophy’ is difficult to define or characterize, even for a philosopher. There are many different types of philosophers, and their characterizations of the philosophical enterprise will vary accordingly. The style of philosophy currently most prominent in philosophy departments in the English-speaking world is called analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophers endorse a philosophical methodology that we will follow.

**Philosophical Method:** Philosophy is concerned with the i) reflective, ii) pursuit of truth (in an objective sense) and understanding, iii) through reasoned argument, and/or iv) careful analysis.

- Reflection is the critical examination of one’s own position in the world and mental states. This is a type of self-consciousness.
- The respect for truth and understanding that is characteristic of many philosophers is well-represented in the writings by Clifford and by Plato’s depiction of Socrates.
- Arguments should offer premises or reasons in support of some conclusion. These premises should adequately support the conclusion, and the premises should also be true. The paradigm of a good argument is a deductively sound argument. Logic is the philosophical discipline concerned with the study of formal arguments.
- This “careful analysis” includes conceptual analysis (see the next handout), or, more generally, the careful scrutiny of fundamental concepts such as virtue, knowledge, existence, etc.

- Of course, enterprises besides philosophy can employ the Philosophical Method. For example, historians or scientists might vigorously pursue the truth in their fields, utilizing good arguments and careful analysis toward this end. Philosophy must then be something more or other than just using the Philosophical Method. Philosophers use this method within some domain. But what is the philosopher’s domain?

This is not an easy question to answer. The traditional disciplines of philosophy will provide us with some insight, but they might strike you as a
hodge-podge collection. Still, you should know these traditional philosophical disciplines:

**Metaphysics**: The branch of philosophy which studies the universe, its inhabitants, the structure of these inhabitants and their relations to one another, and even existence itself, all at the broadest level of abstraction. Many metaphysical questions are supposed to be beyond the scope of science (empirical enquiry), but nevertheless be relevant to foundational scientific issues.

**Epistemology**: The branch of philosophy which studies the nature and limits of human knowledge.

**Ethics**: The branch of philosophy which studies the nature of ethical judgments, as well as the principles (if such there be) that determine what conduct is ethically prohibited, permitted, obligatory, supererogatory, etc.

**Logic**: The branch of philosophy that studies arguments in a formalized manner.

**Philosophy of X** (e.g., Science, Mind, Art, Religion, etc.): The application of the Philosophical Method to issues that are foundational to X.

There are many other disciplines within philosophy, but this list is a good starter. The University of Arkansas, for example, offers classes dedicated exclusively to each of the above disciplines.