

Major Areas of Issues and Problems for Debate
in Contemporary Philosophy

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Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, believed that reason was the supreme authority. He humbly admitted that he didn't know very much, but he did believe that he could use reason, based on logical propositions, to try to attempt understanding. Over the years, many issues have been discussed, but since there are no formal proofs for philosophical problems like there are with mathematical problems (Nagel 4), many issues of older eras are still debatable issues today. Authors John R. Burr and Milton Goldinger have come up with six major areas of issues and problems with philosophical study.

The first of the six major issues is that of freedom and determinism. Determinism is a theory that there is universal causation and complete predictability of human events. Human actions are predictable if we can just be aware of and understand the underlying causes. Opposed to the theory of determinism are the supporters of libertarianism who believe that humans exert free will, and if every action and event were predetermined, then no one should be responsible for their own actions.

The concept of hard determinism is consistent with libertarianism in that moral responsibility is compatible with universal causation. But the hard determinists believe that if we are predetermined, then we should not worry about the future. Robert Blatchford, a proponent of this view, believed that all human actions are governed by heredity and environment. Soft determinists, on the other hand, believe that people can be morally responsible even though their behavior is predetermined, and that we do exert free will when we do something by choice rather than by compulsion.

The second of the six major issues of philosophical inquiry is that of God and religion.

As western civilization progressed from a religious view of the world to a more scientific view of the world, religious beliefs began to be held to the scrutiny of scientific principles. But religious leaders don't think that only one world view, that of either religion or of science, has to be chosen, especially since each realm of experience deals with different issues. Science helps us understand the physical laws of the universe. Religion helps us with matters beyond what can be tested scientifically, including the meaning of life, and the existence of God.

The philosopher uses reason through thought to comprehend the issues of religion. But some religious arguments are unsound, and these are usually one of two types (Burr and Goldinger 105). The *argument from agreement* type of unsound argument tries to express that God exists because so many people worldwide agree that God exists. The obvious problem with this view is that the masses are not always right. As an example, the masses used to believe that the sun revolved around the earth until Galileo proved otherwise.

The second type of unsound argument of religious inquiry is the *argument from Scripture* which uses writings from old texts (e.g., Old Testament, Torah) as a foundation for which to base belief. The main problem with this type of argument is that there is no way to prove or disprove many of the assertions in the old texts.

Some other types of arguments for the existence of God are plausible, including *argument from design*, which maintains that this universe of ours is so amazingly complex that there *must* be intelligent design involved. Richard Dawkins offered the view that intelligent design does not need to be included in an explanation for the complexity of the universe (Burr and Goldinger 105). His belief was that there are scientific principles which can explain everything we observe and that natural selection can explain how life evolved so complexly.

In contrast to Dawkin's belief, Richard Swinburne suggests that it is *due* to the

complexity of the universe that God is needed to explain it all. Kai Nielsen takes a different stance when he believes that people's focus on a God and an afterlife reduces their focus on trying to live a good life in this world. Some other philosophers ask how there can be a God who would allow so much misery in the world. Still others counter this by maintaining that people must use free will to create realities independent of the influence of God.

Leo Tolstoy understood that belief in God has more life sustaining value than no belief. Tolstoy, once plagued by depression and despair, had renewed interest in life after returning to a belief in God. Regardless of differing views of God, the belief in God falls back on faith, and faith is belief unsupported by evidence. And thus the arguments pitting science against religion continue unresolved.

A third major area of philosophical debate is that of morality and society. The main issue here is in dealing with right and wrong from the broad perspective of a society. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that explores these issues, and one main problem is in trying to determine if there is a basis for determining right and wrong. The difficulty in justifying morality is because there are so many different human motives (Nagel 75). Some believe that morality is relative to a society in terms of time and place, and this belief forms the basis of relativism. There are two main types of relativism, sociological and ethical. Sociological relativists believe that different societies and cultures often have different ultimate principles, which are those principles that are used as a basis for defending all other moral judgments and principles.

Ethical relativism is the view that there are different but equally valid ultimate principles. If relativists are correct in believing that decisions of societies are relative to the time and place, then it values the argument that we shouldn't criticize people of a different belief system. Ethical absolutists have the opposing belief which is that there is only one ultimate principle. It has been

argued that ethical absolutism is superior to ethical relativism because the consequences of the latter are often dire, a poignant example being the belief system that led to the Holocaust.

Philosophers have presented several different theories concerning the best possible ultimate principle. Three of the most prominent views are egoism, utilitarianism, and formalism. Egoism maintains that the only proper standard of conduct is based on self interest. This is a sound argument when it is considered that self preservation is a strong instinct. The problem with this view is in the disharmony created when one's interests clash with the interests of another.

Utilitarians believe that the right acts are those that produce the greatest happiness and the greatest benefit for everyone concerned. A cautionary question that would be asked of a utilitarian is whether or not crimes (e.g., murder) would be allowed if they produced favorable results for the masses.

Formalism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of actions is not determined by the consequences produced by the actions. Right acts should be done because doing so is right in and of itself. The Golden Rule is a formalist view in that it values proper behavior regardless of final outcomes.

A fourth major area of philosophical debate is over state and society. The main issue here is that any legitimate and respected government should base its authoritative power on moral authority. And moral authority, with sound propositions, is a subject of debate in political philosophy. A politician in a democratic political system encourages the mass public to adhere to democratic principles, but often does so with rhetoric and on an emotional level. A political philosopher, in contrast, looks at the matter a little deeper in helping to articulate what democratic principles actually are, and attempts to do so without emotion or bias. So, politicians are more interested in ideas and actions that support their respective causes. Political

philosophers, in contrast, are interested in using reason and logic to understand the various issues and concepts of interest in a political world.

If a democracy is the best form of government, then political philosophers want to understand why it is so, and they also want to understand all implications of adopting such a system. Not all believe that a democratic system is best. Alexis de Tocqueville thought that the seeds of tyranny were implanted in the concept of democracy (Barr and Goldinger 272). He believed that unlimited power, through majority rule, has the potential to become tyrannical. Other political systems might have worthy benefits, but they also have problems of their own. Ayn Rand was opposed to Socialism and Communism because they were antithetical to the power and freedom of the individual.

Some political issues continue to be unresolved over time. Freedom of speech is an example. New twists to the understanding of free speech continue to surface. Current political issues in hot debate include property rights, same-gender civil unions, and illegal immigration. There are two (or more) sides to each of these issues, and the debates will go on for the foreseeable future.

The fifth major category of philosophical issues is that of mind and body. We obviously possess physical bodies, but what is the mind? Is it different from the brain? If we have minds that are nonphysical, then that would seem to be a case for intelligence outside of the body, which supports the case for a higher intelligence. The mind-body problem is therefore an issue for philosophers who argue for or against a separate mind.

Materialism is the view of reality that holds that there is only material in existence, and it is all built from extremely small subatomic particles. Materialists believe that we can think because of a highly developed brain and nervous system, and they believe that there is nothing

after we die.

Dualism is the belief that we are both a physical and nonphysical organism (Nagel 30). Interactionism is the most popular form of dualism, and holds that the mind and body affect each other. But debate continues since there is no provable explanation as to how mind and body causally affect each other.

The other form of dualism is epiphenomenalism, and it holds that mental events don't cause physical events. The problem with this belief is that there is no sound argument to show how thoughts inevitably lead to actions.

As computers become more advanced, it is conceivable that one could be developed to not only perform countless trillions of calculations per second, but that could also be programmed to exhibit emotions. A philosophical question related to this possibility is whether or not computers would then be equivalent to humans in terms of intelligence. Perhaps not, since computers respond to symbols (i.e., the syntax) as they are programmed to do so, whereas humans respond to the meanings (i.e., semantics) behind symbols. It is debatable whether or not computers will ever be able to comprehend meaning.

The sixth and final major category of philosophical issues is that of knowledge and science. Most people value knowledge as if it were a tool that would help them to accomplish something (e.g., acquiring wealth), or experience something (e.g., being entertained). Philosophers, in contrast, value knowledge above all else, and the branch of philosophy that deals with the study and investigation of knowledge is called epistemology. They study issues such as whether or not knowledge must be acquired by sensory input, and there are different sides of this singular issue. Rationalists believe that reason alone is a source of knowledge and does not require experience from the five physical senses. Empiricists, on the other hand, believe

that all knowledge comes from sense experience. Philosophical skepticism is the questioning of the very possibility of knowing anything, and skeptics argue that there seems to be a gap between evidence and knowing.

Science has value far beyond solving problems. It has not only transformed our physical world, it is pivotal as a cultural phenomenon. Strong scientific principles have advanced knowledge in countless ways. Science is built on the sound principles of the scientific method, and where philosophy is concerned, experts want to know how we can know things. For a proposition to be valid, it must not be self-contradictory. Thus, a round triangle is self-contradictory and is therefore invalid. But while a pink elephant is not known to exist, it is not self-contradictory and therefore possible. Science therefore deals with what is possible. But by using sound principles and logical propositions, we can test the uncertain areas between provable science and unproven pseudoscience.

Language is also an issue in understanding and knowing. The very fact that we can say the words *round triangle* proves that words can be mixed together to form both logical and illogical impossibilities. We can't always know that we know something, especially if there are no proven systems for the development of criterion. Propositions can be either true or false, but arguments persist about what criterion to use to make the distinction. Also, the experience of stimulus may not be the same from person to person (Nagel 21), so it must be determined how to account for the observable differences.

Part of what makes philosophy a discipline in its own right is that it contends with issues that seem irresolvable. If an issue could be proven, then it would be pure science. Burr and Goldinger have presented six major areas of philosophical discussion. Some of the issues are old, some are new, but the arguments and discussions pertaining to them are likely to continue for

many years to come.

Works Cited

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