

A first approach to philosophy

Liceo "G.B.Quadri" 8th April 2008

Gesamtschule - Niederzier

Paolo Vidali

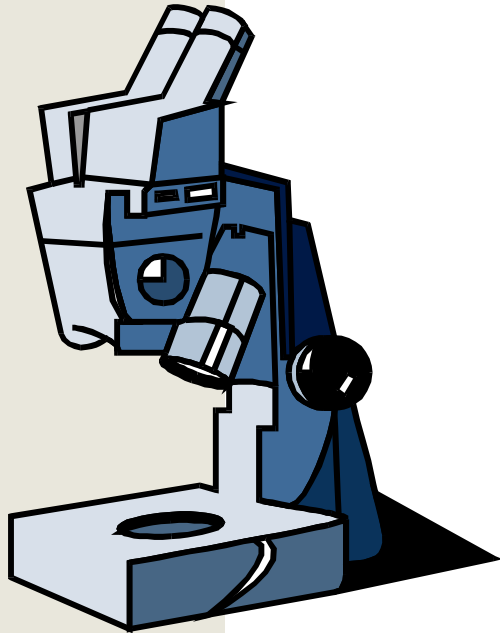


An approach to philosophy

Summary

- The meaning of philosophy: history, etymology, problems
- When is a question a philosophical question?
- An example of philosophical investigation
- How philosophy works: argumentative reasoning between what's true and what's false
- Conclusion

1. What's a discipline?



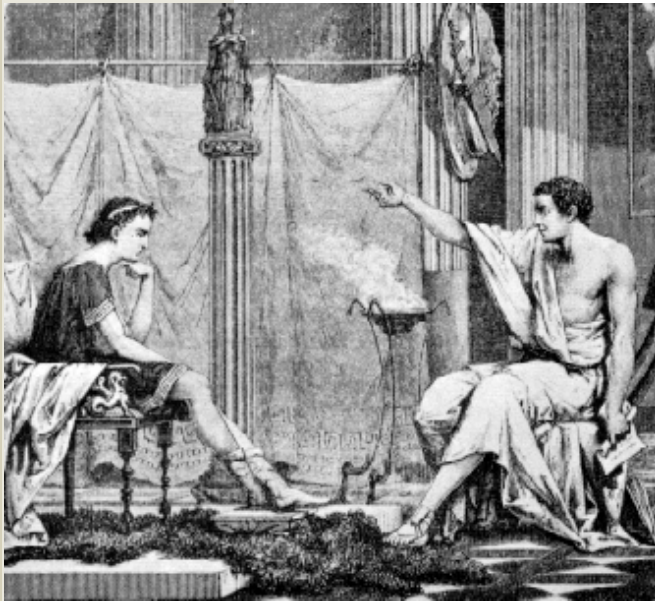
- ✚ Every discipline is defined by an object and a method
- ✚ Mathematics studies numbers and uses the demonstrative method.
- ✚ Physics studies matter, energy and the laws of nature.
- ✚ Chemistry studies molecular bonds. Biology studies living beings.

The method of sciences



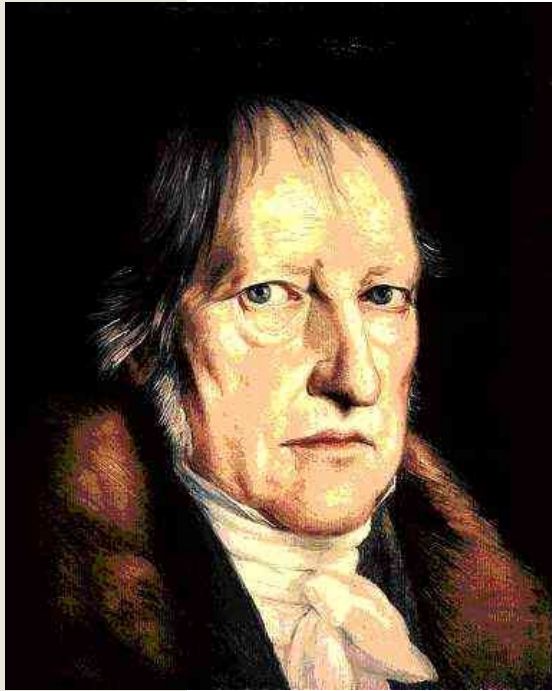
- ✚ Every natural science uses mathematical language and experimental methods, based on observation, hypotheses, induction...
- ✚ Human sciences also point to an object (the past for history, the mind for psychology, human behaviour for sociology ...) and use a scientific method.

...and philosophy?



- ⊕ What about philosophy?
- ⊕ What's its object?
- ⊕ What's its method?
- ⊕ What are its distinctive aims?

Definition of philosophy?



Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831)

- ✚ Every philosopher reconstructs philosophical method and definition in order to construct his/her own.
- ✚ Definitions of philosophy are characteristically bones of contention among philosophers.
- ✚ Why is it so difficult to define what philosophy is?

Etymology of the term



Philosophia is a Greek word composed of two parts:

philo

sophia

φιλο

σοφια

the love of

wisdom

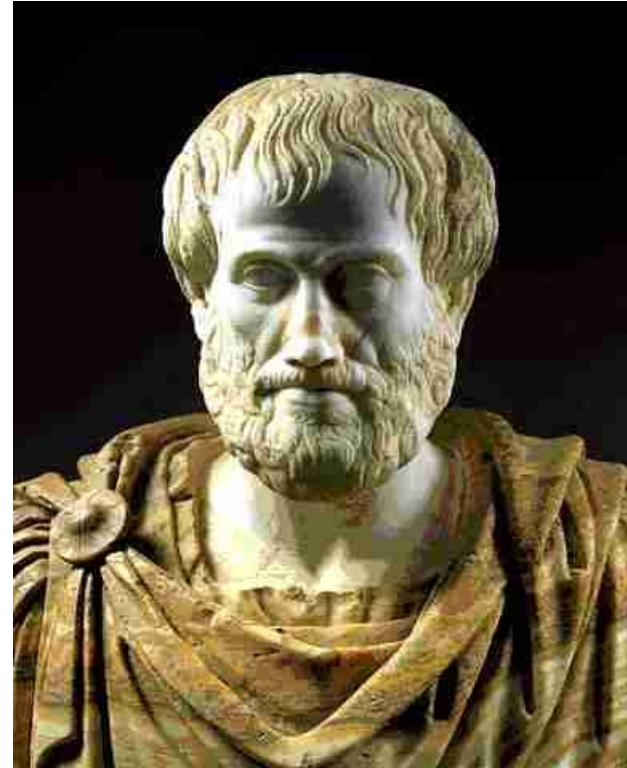
First use of “philosophy”

- ✦ The first use of "*philosophia*" is ascribed to **Pythagoras** (around 570-580 BC).
- ✦ When asked "What is philosophy?" by a ruler, Pythagoras gave the following answer:

✦ *Life is like a gathering at the Olympic games, to which, having set forth from different lives and backgrounds, people flock for three motives. To compete for the glory of the crown, to buy and sell or as spectators. So in life, some enter the services of fame and others of money, but the best choice is that of the few who spend their time in the contemplation of nature, and as lovers of wisdom: **philosophers**.*

Philosophy comes from wondering

- ✚ Aristotle, maybe the most important philosopher of ancient age, wrote that philosophy **comes from wondering**, from being **astonished at the obvious**.



Aristotle (384-322 BC)

Philosophy comes from wondering



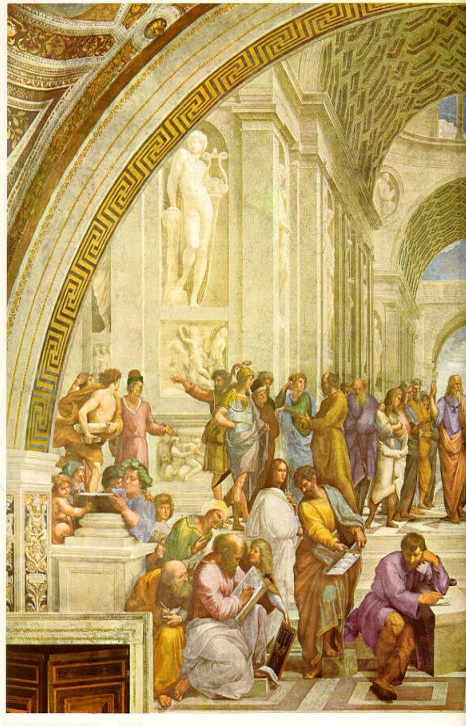
✚ *That philosophy is not a science of production is clear even from the history of the earliest philosophers. For it is owing to their wonder that men begin to philosophize; they originally wondered at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 2, 982b)*



Filo...sophia

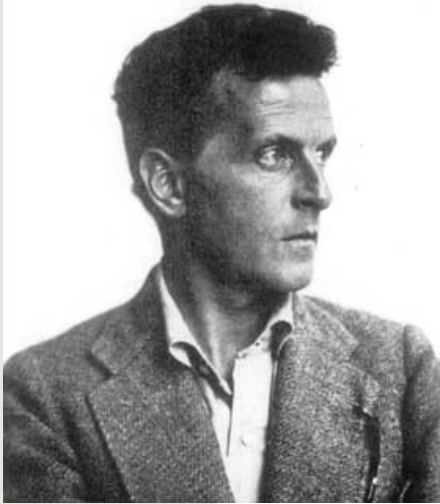
- ✚ *"A man who is puzzled and wonders considers himself ignorant".*
- ✚ This statement helps us understand an important peculiarity about philosophy: **a philosopher never thinks he/she holds the truth**. He/She wonders about everything: the obvious, the normal, the ordinary and, therefore also, the invisible.
- ✚ Nevertheless, this investigation does not imply that one attains truth, but that it is only **the path towards truth**.

Philosophy and science



- ✚ The history of philosophy, in our civilisation, is the same as the history of science.
- ✚ Philosophy starts as a process of investigation, because it asks some very important questions.
- ✚ Science represents the historical development of those questions.
- ✚ All sciences come from philosophy, but philosophy is very different from other sciences. Why?

Philosophy and science



Ludwig Wittgenstein
(1889-1951)

✚ *We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are no questions left then, and this itself is the answer.*

L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*
6.52

....summary

- ✚ So we have achieved four results:
 - philosophy has its origin in man's sense of wonder, often about what's obvious;
 - philosophy is not science, or truth, but only a path to truth
 - in this process philosophy is the first step of science, which continues the path, building our knowledge
 - However the question of philosophy still remains open.
- ✚ Why? What's a philosophical question?

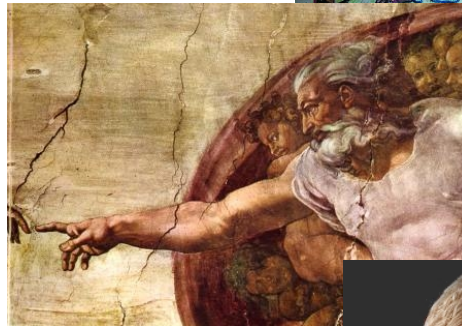
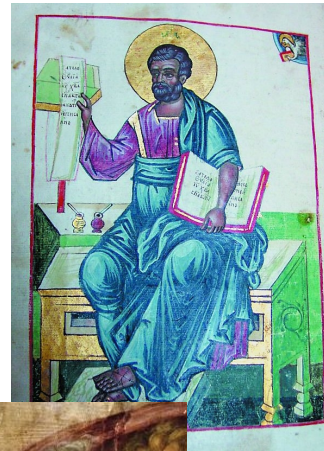


2. The questions of philosophy

- ❖ How was the world generated?
- ❖ Is there any meaning behind what happens?
- ❖ Is there life after death?
- ❖ How ought we to live?
- ❖ We cannot find out whether God exists or any God exists or whether there is life after death by looking it up in an encyclopaedia .
- ❖ Sciences are still silent about these questions because it's not their job to answer them.

Philosophy like religion, art, literature?

- Someone might say that religion, art or literature ask the same general questions.
- What's man?
- What's beauty and what's its importance?
- What's the meaning of life?



- What's the difference between philosophy and literature or religion?



Philosophy uses only reason

- ❖ The difference is easy to say but difficult to explain.
- ❖ **Philosophy answers only using reason and rationality.** It doesn't use faith, or persuasion, or aesthetic allure
- ❖ The philosophical answer is reached only by using reason.
- ❖ Critical analysis, argumentation, reasoning, observation...these are the only tools of a philosopher.
- ❖ Nothing else.

A helpful quotation...



“The most important interest of philosophy is to debate and to understand some absolutely common ideas, which we use every day without thinking. A historian asks what it happened in the past, but a philosopher asks, “what’s time?” A mathematician can study relations between numbers, but a philosopher asks, “what’s a number?” A physician investigates atoms and gravity, but a philosopher asks how we can know that there is something outside our minds. A linguist can study how children learn a language, but a philosopher asks “What’s meaning?”.”

T. Nagel, *What Does It All Mean? A very short introduction to philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1987



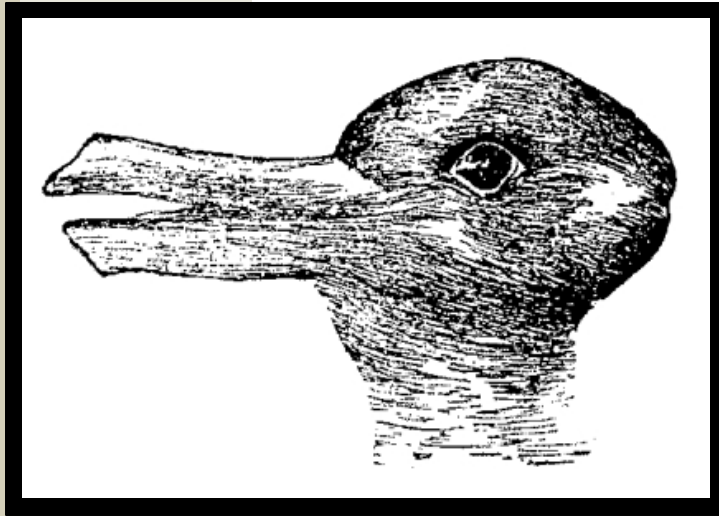
....summary

- Philosophy is interested in general questions, looking for answers by using only reason.
- Typical philosophical questions are fundamental questions, which go to the heart of the problem, searching for something that nobody asks, because it's the premise of the question (time, number, meaning, language...)
- The most important aim of philosophy is to ask the right questions, sometimes destroying old ways of thinking.
- In any case, in philosophy asking the right question is worth more than finding an answer. It's the job of science to find good answers. It's philosophy's job to ask well posed questions.

2.1 An example of question: What's reality?

- ✚ We agree that what we know about reality comes from **experience**. Therefore we think that all the knowledge of the world derives from what the senses tell us.
- ✚ We can say (according to Aristotle, Locke, Hume, Russell ...) "**There is nothing in the mind except what was first in the senses**".
- ✚ We do have one certainty. It's obvious that everything we know comes first from experience. But it's possible to ask a question (a typical philosophical question):
 - ✚ **What happens when the senses are in contradiction?**
 - ✚ Let's imagine a stick immersed in water.
 - ✚ Sight shows the stick as entirely whole . The touch of my hands reveals it as broken.
 - ✚ Which sense is right? Sight or touch ? How can we decide what is in front of us?

A strange picture



- ❖ What exactly is this? A rabbit or a duck?
- ❖ The experimental data are the same, but the perception of reality is very different. Why?
- ❖ A possible answer is that the mind (or the brain, if you prefer) takes part in the perception of reality.

"There is nothing in the mind except what was first in the senses" we said.
Now we have to say:

"There is something in the mind that decides what do we get from the senses "



2.2. Second example of question: what comes from outside myself and what comes from inside?

- ❖ What we know about reality comes in part from something different from the senses.
- ❖ What is it? The mind? The soul? The spirit? In different times philosophers have reached different answers, but the problem still remains open: how to decide what comes from experience and what comes from the mind?

Descartes and the evil demon



René Descartes
(1596-1650)

- ✚ René Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy, invented a method of systematic doubt. He decided that he would believe nothing he didn't see clearly and distinctly. **Whatever he could bring himself to doubt, he would doubt, until he saw reasons for not doubting it.**
- ✚ He imagined an evil demon, presenting unreal things to his senses in a perpetual phantasmagoria; it might be very improbable that such a demon existed, but it was still possible, and therefore doubting about things perceived by the senses was possible.



2.3. Third question: is it possible that an external system produces what I think is coming from outside?



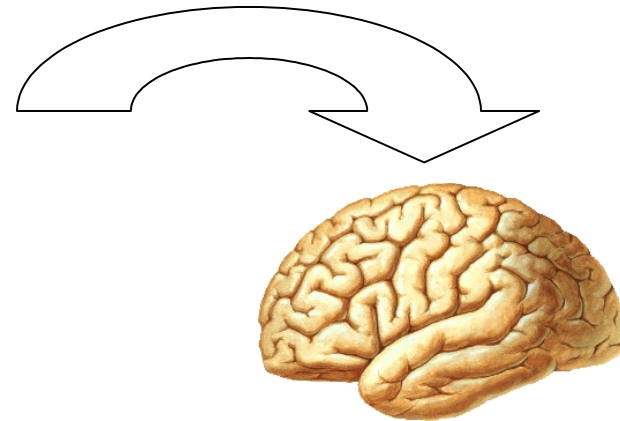
All of us can find in this philosophical story the matrix of the "Matrix": a world established by a supercomputer that produces a real world in the mind of people.

Is it possible that an external system (the supreme architect in the "Matrix" or Descartes' evil demon), operating on my mind, **produces what I think is reality?**

- ✚ It's only a strange philosophical dream: our lives are very different from this philosophical hypothesis.
- ✚ Are we sure?

The "removal theorem"

the neurological stimulation
equivalent to a chair



We see a chair without a chair,
without an eye and without a nerve.
It's Matrix, it's Descartes' demon, it is a brain in a vat.



Philosophical analysis

- ❖ The "removal theorem" shows that we are not sure about the origin of what we call reality. Even the answer about inside or outside proves to be incorrect.
- ❖ This is **a typical result of philosophical analysis**: to go back to the question and **to expose the problem in another light**.
- ❖ Let's go back to our first question: What's reality? Is reality something which comes from outside, from experience? Or is reality something totally internal? If reality is a mix of inside and outside, how is it possible to distinguish among different sources?
- ❖ Is there a significant difference between experience and intellectual process? What if the question were wrong?



Philosophical questions

- ⊕ First question: **what's reality?**
- ⊕ Second question: **what comes from outside myself and what comes from inside?**
- ⊕ Third question: **is it possible that an external system produces what I think reality is?**
- ⊕ Fourth question: **Is there a difference between experience and intellectual process? What if the question were wrong?**



Philosophical analysis

- ❖ Well, our example is over. We have moved away from a naïve idea of the world, where things are simply exhibited in front of our eyes.
- ❖ Now we suspect that it is possible to be wrong: our reality criterion has evolved: we have come to the conclusion that what is simple can be complex.
- ❖ We are looking for a more complex truth. We don't have the truth: we have only a path to the truth.
- ❖ **That's philosophy.**
- ❖ Philosophy tries to understand the world's limits.
- ❖ This seems quite absurd; but whoever wishes to become a philosopher must learn not to be frightened by absurdities.



- ✚ Everyday we see on TV images of the world. Are they showing a chair without a real chair being there? Are they showing a reality where things are substituted by images that look like reality?



3. The method of philosophy

- ❖ Philosophy is an attempt to study the principles of life.
- ❖ It tries to understand **some limits of the world from within these limits.**
- ❖ It studies reason, language, meaning, time, space, reality, good and evil, beauty ... But we are living in the language, in reason, in the space, in the meaningful world.
- ❖ It's necessary to have a particular method to study something which is insurmountable, something which can't be an object like a chair or a triangle.
- ❖ **Philosophy provides the framework through which can understand the world.**
- ❖ It provides the premises from which we can discover truth, and use our reason to support our life. Every man has an understanding of the world. Every man must have a philosophy then, even if it is never made explicit.



Philosophical reasoning

- ❖ Reasoning implies a connected series of statements, some of which (**premises**) are intended to provide support or evidence of the truth of another statement (**conclusion**).
- ❖ We know the proceeding of a special kind of reasoning: **demonstration**.
- ❖ It consists in deriving a **necessary** and true conclusion from true premises.
- ❖ We accept some principles as true and some logical operations as valid: using principles and rules we can draw a necessary conclusion.

An example of demonstration

All men are mortal
John is a man

premises

then

deductive inference

John is mortal

conclusion

We use this kind of reasoning when studying mathematics or logic. But it isn't the reasoning of philosophy. Philosophy doesn't use demonstrative reasoning.

An example of argumentation

*All rich men are happy
John is rich*

premises

then

argumentative inference

John is happy

conclusion

Are the premises true? Is it true that every rich person is happy? What's the meaning of rich? Is a person who has one million Euro rich? Is a person who has one million minus 1000 Euro still considered rich? And minus 2000?

It's very difficult to decide when somebody is or isn't rich.

Is happiness easier to define maybe?



Philosophy and argumentative reasoning

- ✦ Philosophy uses argumentative reason.
- ✦ *Argumentation* is the process of reasoning when premises provide reasons supporting the **probable truth of the conclusion**. Both premises and argumentative inferences are thought of as probable, and **to be called into question**.
- ✦ What's evident is undebatable: we don't argue about what's true. We argue about debatable questions. A large part of our statements is neither true nor false. It's simply questionable.
- ✦ "All men are good"; "All men are bad". These kinds of propositions should be debated: their value depends on context, interlocutor and knowledge.



Philosophy provides the analysis of principles

- ❖ Here we find the field of philosophical discussion.
- ❖ We know that philosophy studies principles, general concepts, general propositions about life and world. Its method is argumentative reasoning, not deductive reasoning, for a very simple reason.
- ❖ **It's impossible to demonstrate when principles are the real object of discussion.** The demonstration needs some true principles from where to deduce.
- ❖ Philosophy provides the **rational analysis of these principles.**
- ❖ Philosophy, after all, is a rational strategy to test the validity of our general statements.

Conclusion

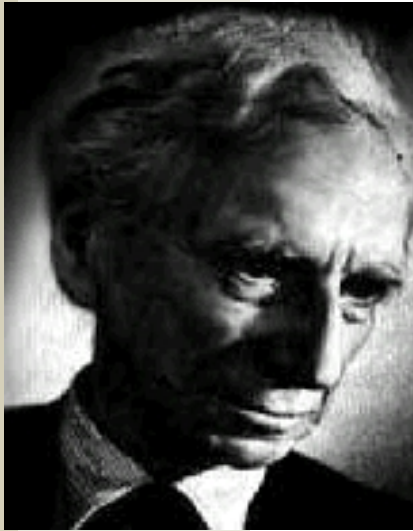
- ❖ We started from a question: **why is philosophy so hard to define?**
- ❖ Now we have a possible answer: **because philosophy is the best way to define**, to test our principles, to have a starting point to form our opinion.
- ❖ Philosophy, using only argumentative reasoning, **looks for truth**, from where to start, from where to have knowledge and science.
- ❖ What's number? what's matter? what's right? From these questions mathematics, physics, law start. But **the principles of these disciplines are still being discussed by philosophers**, because times, cultures and different situations need to test and to change these principles.



Conclusion

- ✚ Therefore, the job of philosophy is fundamental: **we need to test our general beliefs, in order to accept or refuse them.**
- ✚ Therefore a philosopher is a **person who doubts**, is a strong critic of everything we believe, of every general assumption that we accept, maybe without thinking.
- ✚ We say that philosophy comes from being astonished at the obvious.
- ✚ Therefore, even if many philosophical investigations are now scientific investigations, **after 2500 years we still use our reasoning to look for truth**, to look for wisdom, to look for principles of science, in order to change them or consolidate them.

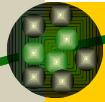
Why study philosophy?



Bertrand Russell
(1872-1970)

✚ *Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves. Philosophy is to be studied because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against knowledge.*

B. Russell, *Problems of philosophy*, XV



A first approach to philosophy ok

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