

Investigator:

PHILOSOPHER



Introducing philosophy



Philosophers are well known for asking questions. Philosophers of religion ask whether God exists. Philosophers of science ask whether scientific theories are true. Moral philosophers, or ethicists, ask questions about what makes something right and something else wrong, and how to live a good life.

One thing that almost all philosophers do is work on questions that are hard to answer because people do not really know how to answer them. For example, it is hard to study the question 'Does God exist?' because if there is a God, then that God would not be the sort of thing that we can see, touch, or do experiments on. If we can't see, touch or do experiments on something, how can we find out about it? The same is true of questions about right and wrong. Although we feel that some actions are right, and some are wrong, how do we know whether our feelings are correct?

The questions that philosophers ask are very important, so even though we do not have easy answers to them, philosophers think that they should still be studied. For example, when we ask whether actions are right or wrong, our answers really matter. Someone might be put into prison for doing something wrong, and this would completely change their life, so it is important that we really know that they did something wrong.

There are many differences in how philosophers answer the questions they set themselves. Some philosophers see themselves as scientists who use careful thinking to weave together what the sciences tell us. Others see themselves as artists or poets who are trying to make sense of the very complicated world around us. Another understanding of philosophy is that it focuses on language, and the words that we use. If we are very clear about the words that we use, then the difficult questions should become easier to answer.

As a result, there are many different answers to philosophical questions. Philosophers enjoy debating with each other about which of the answers is the best. They also study the history of philosophy, and try to improve on other people's conclusions.

It's great to ask lots of questions about life, the world, and what people think, believe and do. We can explore the same topic by asking different kinds of questions. You can also use different methods for answering these questions too. This affects the kind of answer you get – which affects what knowledge is produced.

This series introduces you to some investigators who look at things from their specialist discipline.

In the left hand column, our resident philosopher, Dr Jane Gatley, introduces the discipline of philosophy.

**Dr Jane Gatley
outlines some key
features
of philosophy:**

What do you investigate?

Philosophers investigate everything! We study beauty and art (aesthetics). We explore how to live a good life (ethics). We think about what knowledge is and how we can know (epistemology). We examine abstract ideas like time, space, objects and properties (metaphysics). We think about how to reason correctly (logic), what it means to have a mind, what science is and how it works, and about the meanings of words and language. Political philosophy studies political systems and asks questions about things like rights, justice and duties; and philosophy of religion asks questions about God(s), religious experiences and institutions.

What kinds of questions do you ask?

Any question that does not have a simple answer. Philosophers are not very interested in questions with clear answers, such as how many types of wild birds there are in the UK: that can be answered by bird specialists counting birds. Philosophers ask questions that even a specialist would have difficulty answering, such as why there is something rather than nothing, or whether protecting birds' environments is more or less important than protecting people from poverty.

How do you find out the answers?

If you watched a philosopher for a week, you might see them do several things. First, they would probably spend a lot of time reading what other people have written. Since people have been doing philosophy for a long time, they might even read what Ancient Greeks such as Plato and Aristotle wrote. Philosophers also discuss ideas with other philosophers, or even with their friends. Sometimes having a conversation about a difficult question makes it clearer to see the sorts of answers that might work. A philosopher would also spend a lot of time writing. Writing is important because it makes ideas clearer, and it allows other philosophers to read answers and respond to them. Philosophy progresses when people listen to, respond to, and build on each other's ideas.

What tools do you use?

Just thinking carefully about something is not enough. Philosophers use many tools to help them to reach answers to difficult questions. One set of tools come from logic, which sets up rules for how to think well and create good arguments.

Another tool that philosophers use is dialogue. This involves talking about a difficult philosophical question. One person will propose an answer, then a second person will come up with a problem that

they see arising, perhaps giving an example to show that the first person's answer does not work. Then the first person will reply with a new idea. This process is sometimes called a Socratic dialogue, after the philosopher Socrates who used to challenge ordinary people's ideas as he walked around ancient Athens.

What evidence do you look for?

Philosophers draw on all sorts of evidence to come up with their ideas. They are often very interested in examples, so they might read the news for examples that relate to the arguments they are trying to make. The real sign of a good philosophical theory is that no one can think of any problems with it. This is quite rare. It is more common for a philosophical view to be rejected because it has a big problem with it that cannot be solved.

What are the basic methods you use?

Logical thought, careful observation, discussion and dialogue, turning to the history of philosophy and ideas from the past, coming up with philosophical questions, learning from other disciplines, and many more.

What assumptions do you need to look out for?

There are lots of ways of thinking that are problematic, and should be looked out for. These are called logical fallacies. For example, it is a logical fallacy to say someone's argument is bad just because you consider the person who made the argument is bad. Generally, philosophers will happily challenge all assumptions. You might try to tell a philosopher that murder is wrong, but the philosopher might ask you *why* murder is wrong. They would be challenging your assumptions about murder. The philosopher probably agrees that murder is wrong, but what they want is good reasons without assumptions.

How do you evaluate your methods and conclusions?

Philosophers present arguments. Some of the ways of evaluating philosophical arguments are: examining whether they are **logical, coherent, significant** (rather than trivial), can **explain the world around us**, and are **clear**.

Can you apply your answers to everyone?

As you might expect, philosophers disagree about this. It is a philosophical question in its own right. Despite this, most philosophers are trying to be right, and trying to convince other people that they are right. So, most of the time, most philosophers will think that their answers should be accepted by everyone.