

# Introduction to Philosophy

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## 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.
  - 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?).

### **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.
  - Metaphysics and Epistemology.
  - Ethics.
- Each class will cover reading from a classic text in the history of Western philosophy.
- Emphasis will be on influential philosophical theories and the basic arguments given to support them.