

In defense of philosophy

Jacob Williams * <https://brokensandals.net/2023/in-defense-of-philosophy> * 2023-07-20

Here's how I personally think of the field of "philosophy":

The study of questions for which there is no consensus about how to determine the answers.¹

The literal definition is "love of wisdom", but that's pretentious and uninformative. Economists, psychologists, and others are seeking wisdom through their research too. Wikipedia's definition is better: "the systematized study of general and fundamental questions"². But that could describe much of math and physics as well, and those fields are much better at providing reliable answers. The only time it makes sense to approach a question using the methods of philosophy instead of the methods of some other field is when no other field's methods are applicable—or there's widespread disagreement about which methods are applicable. For example, consider the issue of abortion. If we want to know how many people *think* abortion is wrong, we can use empirical methods to get an estimate. But how do we figure out whether abortion is *actually* wrong? That's far more contentious; informed and thoughtful people hold widely diverging views about what would even count as evidence one way or the other. Philosophy is basically the dumping ground for that sort of question.

This makes philosophy feel like a waste of time to a lot of people. Practical-minded folks want to settle issues using facts, not just exchange opinions. Unfortunately, some of these slippery philosophical questions are unavoidable. For example:

- What makes an action right or wrong?
- How should we deal with uncertainty and conflicting evidence?

¹I was influenced by Van Inwagen's introduction to his *Metaphysics* textbook: "In metaphysics there is no information, and there are no established facts to be learned....besides information and facts about what certain people think, or once thought, concerning various metaphysical questions." All of philosophy is like that, he says, and "most people who have thought about the matter would take this to be one of the defining characteristics of philosophy. If some branch of philosophy...began...to yield real information, it would cease to be regarded as a branch of philosophy and would come to be regarded as one of the sciences."

²"systematized" might be a little generous.

- Under what circumstances is a person no longer responsible for their actions?
- What makes life worth living? When is life *not* worth living?

We all have implicit or explicit beliefs on such issues, and those beliefs affect how we vote, how we judge people and treat people, how we handle crises, etc. They make a big difference. Even though there's no hope of reaching consensus on them in the foreseeable future, subjecting them to rational scrutiny can still be very productive. Understanding the strongest objections to our own views³ often drives us toward more nuanced and more internally consistent views, and forces us to confront implications of our views that we wouldn't have recognized otherwise.

Perhaps more importantly, it discourages overconfidence. There's a natural human tendency to believe that our own views are so clearly and obviously correct that anyone who disagrees must be stupid or evil (or both). I grew up around religious conservatives who often thought liberals were utterly unreasonable and blatantly wicked. Now I spend more time around secular liberals and leftists, who often think the exact same thing about conservatives. It *feels* the same on both sides of the divide⁴: we always feel confident that we're the "good guys"⁵. So this feeling is not trustworthy. We should remember that it's compatible with three different possibilities:

1. We're right.
2. We're deluded, and *we're* the evil ones.
3. The issue has complexities that we're overlooking, and people earnestly seeking the truth can still have trouble figuring it out.

When we forget the latter two possibilities, we're prone to behaving rashly. We push away loved ones because we can't tolerate their opinions, or can't respect anyone who holds those opinions. We mock and denigrate our opponents because we think they're so reprehensible that their feelings don't matter. We use social pressure, laws, or military violence to suppress dissent, because we're confident that we're creating a better world, and that the dissenters deserve whatever suffering this suppression causes them.

³The strongest objections are usually not the pithiest ones; you won't find them in memes or tweets or short soundbites. They take more digging to find, and more patience to genuinely understand.

⁴I've also written about this in my review of *The Status Game*.

⁵People on either side often assert that the people on the other side are being disingenuous—that they know, deep down, that they're being selfish or irrational. From my own experience, I'm convinced that these accusations are simply not true. People usually really believe the stuff they say they believe, however insane or inconsistent it may be.

But when we're conscious of how easily we can get things wrong, we're likely to behave more cautiously. I personally find that the more I learn, the more aware I become of how much I don't know, and of how much hidden complexity tends to lie beneath the surface of seemingly-simple issues⁶. Learning about philosophy helps with that process. Philosophers have extensively documented how every proposed answer to many of humanity's most basic questions about reality, morality, and knowledge have major weaknesses when scrutinized closely. This is valuable information: it warns us against arrogance.

Admittedly, I also just think philosophy is a lot of fun :)

⁶Not all issues. There are certainly some debates that would never have been debates at all if not for prejudice, motivated reasoning, or misinformation from one side. But even when I remain convinced that an issue really is that simple, knowing that I've been on the wrong side of simple issues before reminds me to have empathy for the people who are on the wrong side now. We're all vulnerable to being ensnared in destructive ideologies without realizing it.