

1. Introduction

Martín Abreu Zavaleta

July 6, 2015

1 What is Philosophy?

Before addressing some philosophical questions, it may be natural to wonder what philosophy is. As with any other enterprise, it seems reasonable to want to know something about Philosophy before spending our time and resources in its pursuit. As it turns out, it is very difficult to tell what Philosophy is, but let's give it a try anyway.

One way in which we could define Philosophy is by its methods: if it turned out that there are certain methods that are only used when we do philosophy and which are all used in philosophy, then any discipline that used those methods would be a philosophical discipline. Yet it's not clear that there is a unique methodology that unifies Philosophy: some philosophers try to analyze our concepts as we use them; others make formal models of certain phenomena and explore their formal properties, hoping this will help them understand the phenomena they are interested in; other philosophers examine empirical evidence and try to offer some conceptual clarification in the places where scientists need it. As you may imagine, this is not an exhaustive list.

Should we expect one of these approaches to be the one true method of philosophy? If so, which one and why? What's so special about that method that makes it *more philosophical* than the others, or that makes the others less philosophical than that special one? What is it for one method to be more philosophical than the others in the first place?

Perhaps we should approach the matter in a different way. Maybe philosophy is defined not by its methods, but by its questions. Perhaps there is a special set of questions that are addressed by philosophy, and which only philosophy can address. Yet many interesting scientific questions have started as philosophical questions, and only thanks to certain advances (sometimes technological, sometimes philosophical!) have we been able to tackle them scientifically.¹ Moreover, many philosophers these days are helping answer questions that would otherwise seem to be in the domain of the sciences.² On a different side of the spectrum, philosophers are also concerned with questions about what we ought to do, how to live our lives, and so on, but not all philosophers concern themselves with these questions either. We've gotten into another blind alley.

Luckily, we don't need to know all the details of what philosophy is in order to start philosophizing—just like we don't need to know all the details about fishing in order to learn how to fish, or all the details about cooking in order to learn how to cook. What we do need are certain examples of good philosophy. Throughout the course we will examine many such examples from many acclaimed philosophers. The readings we will discuss have either been very influential or are paradigmatic of

¹For instance, the question what is life, or questions about the nature of motion.

²For instance, questions about the right interpretation of quantum mechanics in Physics.

what many of us these days consider interesting or good (sometimes only one of them, sometimes both) philosophical work.

Some of the questions we'll be examining have probably occurred to you before: how should we live our lives? What makes a person? What's in a mind? Other questions you probably hadn't considered before, but once you are presented with them it's easy to see how pressing they are.

By the end of the course, once you have familiarized yourself with some of its questions, you will be in a position to form a more sophisticated opinion about what Philosophy is. For now, we can learn an important lesson from our failed attempt to define it. The lesson is that *we don't always need to start with a definition of the subject matter of our enquiry*. Rather, we should expect that a good definition should be, if anything, the result of our research.

The first body of questions that we will examine in this course concern value and what constitutes a good life. As a warm up, let's consider some remarks by Robert Nozick on what we value and what constitutes a good life.

2 Nozick's experience machine

Nozick presents us with the following thought experiment:

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p. 42)

Nozick spends some time discussing the logistic complications of the machine, but let's suppose no such complications arise. Once you enter the machine, you only have desirable experiences, and all your desires for more experiences are satisfied.

From the inside, the experiences fed to your brain by the machine are indistinguishable from whatever you would experience if you were *really* doing the things that in the real world would produce your experiences. Someone in the machine wouldn't be able to tell that all her experiences are machine-made. After presenting the case, Nozick poses some interesting questions: should we plug into this machine for life? what else could matter to us besides how our lives feel from the inside?

Nozick thinks that the machine is a good thought experiment that can help us decide what matters to us. Because he thinks that very few of us would plug into the machine, he thinks that what matters to us must be something over and above our experiences, or how we live our lives from the inside. This is not the end of Nozick's point. To some extent, he also wants to offer some arguments in support of the view that the story about what matters to us doesn't end in our experiences.

For instance, we often care about doing something or other: saving the people you love from pain or death, securing resources for future generations, etc. Once you enter the experience machine, you could do none of those things. You could, of course, program the machine so that you have the experiences you would have had if you had in fact done those things, but you can't do the things themselves.

Nozick seems to have a strong case that we care about more than just our experiences. It is enough to notice that we care about the results of our actions, and the experience machine by itself

impedes us from performing any actions, or from our desires and thoughts having any result in the actual world. But that's not where his discussion ends.

We also care about who we are, and Nozick makes some interesting remarks on this matter. He claims that after some time of having entered the machine, there is no way a person is:

Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there's no way he is. Plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide.

Questions: Why does Nozick think this? Is he right?

In principle, we wouldn't seem to have much reason to believe him. Why would the mere fact that you are not interacting with the world make it so that there is no way a person in the machine is? After all, the people plugged into the machine would still have mental states (e.g. the experiences themselves), together with states very much like our ordinary beliefs and desires. So why is Nozick so adamant that plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide?

Perhaps this point is related to his third claim about what we care about. He claims that we care about being in contact with some deeper reality.³ Is this true? Imagine that we all live in a computer simulation so perfect that it's impossible to know from the inside that we live in a simulation. In fact, if all of a sudden someone took us out of the simulation and into the real world, we wouldn't be able to tell either.

Scenarios like this have been considered by many philosophers and artists. Thus, Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* considers the possibility that he is tricked by an evil demon, but really everything he has ever experienced is an illusion. The famous Spanish poet and writer Pedro Calderón de la Barca briefly considers the matter in the voice of Segismund, in the play *Life is a dream*.⁴ More recently, the Wachowski siblings consider the scenario in the movie *The Matrix*, and the philosopher Nick Bostrom has considered the thought that we are in fact living in a computer simulation.⁵

We won't settle the question whether we live in a simulation or how we could know either way. But it's important to ask whether it really matters to us not to live in a simulation. How bad would it be that none of us are not "in contact with any deeper reality", as Nozick would put it? Should we think that our lives are any less valuable for that reason, or would we think that being in contact with some deeper reality wasn't as important as we originally thought?

³**Question:** How could this support his previous claim about plugging into the machine being a kind of suicide?

⁴The king dreams he is a king,/ And in this delusive way/ Lives and rules with sovereign sway;/ All the cheers that round him ring,/ Born of air, on air take wing./ And in ashes (mournful fate!)/ Death dissolves his pride and state:/ Who would wish a crown to take,/ Seeing that he must awake/ In the dream beyond death's gate?/ ... / 'Tis a dream that I in sadness/ Here am bound, the scorn of fate:/ 'Twas a dream that once a state/ I enjoyed of light and gladness./ What is life? 'Tis but a madness./ What is life? A thing that seems,/ A mirage that falsely gleams./ Phantom joy, delusive rest,/ Since is life a dream at best./ And even dreams themselves are dreams. (Translation by Denis Florence MacCarthy in Calderon's Dramas, pp. 78-79. London: Henry S. King & Co., 1873)

⁵See his "Are you living in a simulation?"