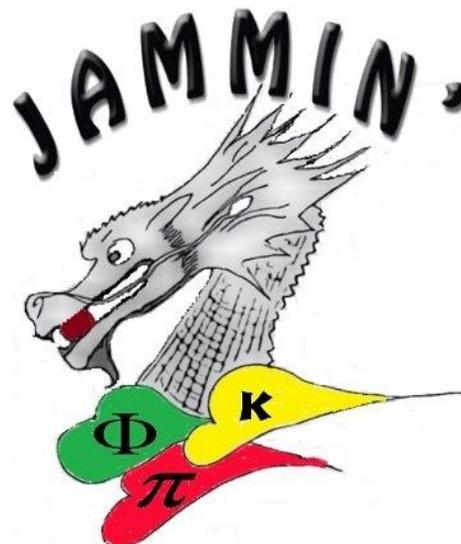


international society
for philosophers

wisdom
begins
in wonder

1.6) WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? • THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM •

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Philosophy is the exercise thinking through very human problems and analysing them and trying to solve them using logic and reason. Humans have invented all sorts of problems for themselves where other animals found none we have pondered – what is the world like and how should I act? Philosophy is this enterprise. When a chicken sees a worm it instinctively eats it, but a human asks questions: Does it have feelings? Does it have a soul? Does it survive after death? Should I eat it?

These problems have often been answered in a number of ways using religion, philosophy and sometimes science. However, it's not easy to clinically separate science, religion and philosophy as all three disciplines pursue answers using reason and evidence although the different approaches disagree as to what constitutes evidence. For example, religion will often include revelation, faith and sacredness as evidence whereas science and philosophy would not. Science on the other hand includes guesswork, simplicity and support of working models. Philosophy uses logic and reason to consider all possibilities. Below the differences to these three approaches are highlighted using the 'mind-body problem' as an example.

Take our friend the worm and the problem of does he have a soul. Different religions have different answers out of the box which they gained from revelation of some kind. Christians have assumed that only humans have souls and in addition animals are the property of humans so worms are fair game. Jains on the other hand would not harm a worm or any other living being as they believe they have a soul. We can see then that the answer to this question is literally a matter of life and death – for the worm and the billions that are kept in awful conditions and then slaughtered every year at the whim of humans. Philosophy also answers the questions of how we should act – eg, should we eat the worm – except in theory a philosopher will examine each argument on its merits, although I would argue that does not happen since in practice and a western philosopher, for example, will carry with her the cultural baggage of Christianity which will make her thinking biased towards a certain way of reasoning and acting.

Science on the other hand does not dictate whether or not we should eat the worm but rather through empirical methods it looks at how the central nervous system of the worm works, its nutritional value and so on. Scientists themselves might have views on the worms soul but that is out of the remit of science and their opinion is because the scientist has engaged in philosophy, theology or perhaps both.

The answer to the question of the mind-body has high stakes for not just worms but also religion and society. For example, if materialism is true and the mind is a product of the brain and one cannot survive death and all religions are false (with the possible exception of Buddhism). The stakes are equally high for theories of moral agency and responsibility since if materialism is true then your beliefs and desires could not explain what you do which would influence theories of crime and punishment and as passing judgement and punishing people is one of human beings political strategies and greatest pleasure this would be a great loss.

SCIENCE Vs PHILOSOPHY Vs THEOLOGY

For the majority of theologians the mind-body problem has been solved. In addition, most scientists agree that it has been solved but arrive at a different conclusion – they assert that materialism is true. Philosophers on the other hand analyse all the arguments and their logical conclusions.

The conclusion of the theologians comes from revelation whereas empirical methods drives science. The empirical evidence for materialism is that nearly any aspect of the mind -- temperament, memories, appetite, and so on -- can be disrupted by damage to specific areas of the brain and modern brain imaging techniques can even detect brain activity correlated with thought and that brain activity in the prefrontal and parietal cortex may precede conscious decision-making by as much as ten seconds before a decision is consciously made. However, as it is often pointed out just because the mind is affected by the brain, and its states are affected by the brain's functioning it doesn't follow that the world is composed only of material substance. In fact, all that follows is that there is a close connection between the mind and the brain in this life. As the philosopher Tom Morris put it:

“It is true that mental function seems to depend on the chemical state of the brain. But consider this analogy. If my car runs out of gas on the interstate, it will stop. So will I. But I am not the same thing as my car. I am not even made of the same stuff as my car. Yet I am affected by its various physical states, and by its proper functioning. When it

goes fast, I am going fast; when it sits in traffic, I sit in traffic. When it has a problem, I have a problem. Yet I am obviously a different entity from it.”

This argument that brain states prove materialism is therefore inconclusive. Furthermore, philosophers can use the favourite philosophical tool of scientists called Ockham’s razor and conclude that materialism is false since it is simpler to posit one substance rather than two as the materialists do. For example, in panpsychism there only exists one substance (mind) rather than two substances (matter with mind appearing as a mysterious emergent property) so it is a simpler and thus preferable theory.

It would then probably be argued by a materialist that materialism fits better into the current scientific world view, to which a philosopher would point out that even if that is a more coherent scientific model based on our correct understanding – which is debatable - it certainly does not follow that it is correct or that the current scientific model will not change in the future and evidence does not lead to theoretical truth - that is, despite scientific theories being empirically successful, being supported by evidence, and accepted by the scientific community that does not mean they are true. A good example of this are Newton’s Law’s of Motion (NLOM).

Newton's laws were verified by experiment and observation for over 200 years. Newton's laws of motion, together with his law of universal gravitation and the mathematical techniques of calculus, provided for the first time a unified quantitative explanation for a wide range of physical phenomena and up until 1905 there was no reason to think that the Newtonian theory was not completely true. And although not found in the Principia it was natural for scientists and philosophers to create a world view and in the late in the eighteenth century Laplace posited the “clockwork universe” model which was generally accepted. However, as everyone knows in 1905 Einstein showed that the “clockwork universe” model was incorrect and NLOM were at best an approximation which only apply under certain circumstances. In other words, although NLOM work, they are not true and despite it being confirmed for over 200 years and during that time being universally accepted by scientists as true. And it is worth stressing that Newton’s laws of Motion were wrong about very fundamental issues and give a completely wrong picture of the world around us. Newton’s theory asserted that space and time are absolute, that there is action at a distance, and that inertial mass is constant: all that and more is wrong with Newton's theory.

For this reason and others it is philosophically clear that even if most western scientists think the mind-body problem has been solved and materialism is true while theologians think that it is false it is easy to demonstrate, philosophically, that it has not been settled either way.

To conclude then, philosophy is a process. It is the process of studying the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. At its best it tests and probes the answers that others have arrived at via unquestioning methods with entrenched positions. At its worse it uses its methods to support the status-quo. Either way it is literally a matter of life and death.