

What is Philosophy?

Illustrate your answer using the example of the mind-body problem.

It seems a good idea to begin by looking at the entry for philosophy from the Concise OED, which says that philosophy is;

the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline. A particular system of philosophical thought. The study of the theoretical basis of a particular branch of knowledge or experience.

This is good as far as it goes, but needs amplification. Philosophy should make a disinterested enquiry in whatever direction the arguments take us, using scepticism and reason as a tool of investigation. Philosophers often will engage with others interested in these questions. Eg; religion has, and will continue to be interested in many of the same areas as philosophy. For example, the questions as to the existence, or not, of God and whether or not man has an immortal soul are typical of such interests. The relationship with theology has often been productive, but full of conflict. As Donne said

“and new Philosophy calls all in doubt, the element of fire is quite put out; the Sun is lost, and the earth, and no mans wit can well direct him where to look for it.”

Scientists and philosophers also share some interests. For example, matters such as whether scientific determinism affects man, or whether he has free will, are typical of this overlap of jurisdictions. Historically, relations between science and philosophy have often been as fruitful and problematic as those between religion and philosophy. For example, consider this controversial remark by Hawking;

“...what is the nature of reality? Where did all this come from? Did the universe need a creator? ... Traditionally, these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.”

If philosophers take their role seriously then it is not surprising that they make enemies. The continuing question as to whether the human mind has a separate existence from body is an excellent example where philosophers and scientists may conflict.

Because of this mutual interest in many areas, philosophers have been interested in how such specialists such as scientists and theologians operate, and thus analyse of their methodology. As a result, philosophies of science and theology are often studied at university level.

Philosophers often begin their analyses by stating questions thought to be of great importance. What are things made of? Does God exist? What should I do to be just and/or moral? Do I have a mind, or am I just body? These are just examples. Sometimes the questions might come from other interested parties. The question is followed wherever the argument takes it, nothing is taken for granted, and nothing discarded or accepted until an acceptable proof or justification emerges.

Philosophers will often use the same methods as scientists if it is possible to do so, which means formulating hypotheses, testing them using experimental data and accepting or

rejecting the hypotheses on the basis of these tests. Often, philosophers will turn to the methods of mathematicians, which means subjecting propositions to such techniques as reduction ad absurdum, or the test of contradiction. Or, they may resort to techniques used in geometry, where a set of axiomatic statements is used as the basis for further deductions. Argument by induction is often used, although is regarded suspiciously, eg: I believe that X should be destroyed so I think everyone else must believe it too”.

Philosophers often use methods of their own, not derived from other methods of enquiry. Dialectic has been used for centuries, and was a favoured method of the ancients. Combined with a deliberate use of scepticism and reason, the dialectic presented a powerful method of analysis.

Typically, where it was not possible to use experimentation (and even where scientific method was possible), philosophers have used thought experiments (gedankenexperiment for German philosophers and scientists). A thought experiment consists of creating a possible scenario and following the implications which result. For example, the Ship of Theseus leads to very useful lines of enquiry concerning the nature of identity. Lest it be believed that the thought experiment is confined solely to philosophers, it should be noticed that scientists have made good use of it. Because of the vividness of his experiment, Schroedinger was bombarded with hate mail for years because of his famous cat! In investigating matters relating to problems of body and mind, philosophers have used thought experiments involving zombies and out-of-body experiences.

So far, I have suggested that philosophers will enquire into the nature of things, using reason and scepticism and go wherever the argument leads. In doing so, they will often encounter others (we have mentioned religion and science, but they are only two) who are equally concerned with these matters. The “body-soul” problem is an interesting example of a problem of interest to philosophers (and others), and a study of the main points of its evolution will shed light on what philosophy is about, and how it works.

The mind-body problem firstly proceeds with an exploration as to whether it is valid, or useful, in the first place to make a distinction between mind (soul) and body. Next, if it seems that such a distinction can be made, there will be an exploration into what sorts of things belong to the sphere of mind, and what to the body. It would also be necessary to explore how mind and body interact.

The stakes involved in all past and present arguments in the mind body problem could not be greater, for if we find that there is no mind, soul or spirit, then the position becomes one where body (matter) is the only substance. This would surely be a position which a scientist, anxious to establish the primacy of causal relationships would assume to be the case. On the other hand, if mind (soul or spirit) were a separate thing from body – perhaps even the dominant part - then this would be a situation which a theologian would approve of.

Before the 16th century the soul was all important; there was no question as to its position. However, with the emergence of new science around this period, and the drive to find law-like relations governing the universe, philosophers and others were troubled by the relations between soul and body. Cartesian dualism could be seen as an attempt to define a clear area where scientific enquiry might carry on, and not fall foul of religion. It was also an attempt to separate reason from emotion, and show that the former was superior, just as soul is superior

to body for many theologians.

Once started, the problems arising from the mind-body concern have never ceased to trouble thinkers, and philosophers have been active in trying to state what these problems are, how they might affect the way scientists and others work, and how they might be resolved.

Problems such as whether there was any real dualism at all were explored. Why cannot there be just one substance from which both mind and body are formed? If mind and body are different, then what are they made from? Can they exist separately? If they are different, then other problems arise. For example, it would be necessary to shed light on how they interacted together.

As the Newtonian scientific revolution proceeded, with causal determinism at its centre, philosophers looked at new problems for the mind body problem. Natural laws seemed to be relegating the sphere of the mind to a minor role – or even no role at all.

Thomas Huxley's restatement of epiphenomenalism was meant as much to satisfy those who thought that the mind existed and was separate from body, as it was to convince scientists that, if anything as inconvenient as a mind did exist, it was causally inert.

Philosophers recognised that further developments in the neuro sciences meant that more questions were raised concerning even the very existence of mind itself. Could not every mind event be correlated with an equivalent brain event? Many philosophers opted for a monistic account of the body-soul problem with a reductive form of physicalism. Such an approach would certainly square well with scientific developments.

However, other philosophers still continued to argue that mind functions could not be completely reduced to neurological functions. Even many scientists were convinced of the non-reductibility of mind

"... the downward causal control influence of higher emergent (mental) over lower (neural) entities, and the fact that the mental and neural events are different kinds of phenomena regulated by different kinds of laws and forces, argues for a new mentalism" (Sperry).

There has even been a revival of interest in dualism, due in some respects to the influence of David Chalmers book "The Conscious Mind; in Search of a Fundamental Theory." This shows that although the mind-body debate has ebbed between dualism and monism, and has evaluated different answers to how mind and body functions relate, it has never disappeared.

I hope the above short discussion of the body-mind problem has shed some light on how philosophers work. They ask the questions, and then, without limitation see where the arguments lead, noting carefully where the arguments interact with other concerns, church, state, science etc. The philosopher can acknowledge and explore the interests of these other disciplines, but should not become enslaved by them. Sometimes along the way other questions arise, which will also need investigation, and, if necessary, conflicting positions are discussed. Sometimes views are reconciled, and sometimes, views are discarded. Philosophers must also ask whether it is even necessary to raise particular questions in the first place. Does the positing of a mind-body problem tell us anything useful at all?

Souls, Minds, Bodies & Planets Mary Midgley. Philosophy Now Sep/Oct 2011

David Chalmers "The Conscious Mind; in Search of a Fundamental Theory." 1996