

Styles of Reason

Rational thought may rest on a few basic principles, concepts and rules, but serious philosophical thinking then needs a strategy. Should the focus be on narrow and specific views, or on broad generalisations and overviews? Should philosophy be a solitary or a group activity, and should it be pursued aggressively, or gently and co-operatively? Should it focus on objective truths, or on what people actually believe? Should it attend to facts in the world, or to abstractions and idealisations? Should it aim for conclusive results, or just aim to be persuasive? Does it try to make progress towards a possible conclusion, or is the value in the activity itself?

It is sometimes said that the key skill in philosophy is to ask the right question, and that the initial response should then be to ask what a good answer to it would look like. If the answer is likely to be non-existent, or excessively obscure or vague, then the question is not worth pursuing. Only with a good question in place can an enquiry begin. There then seem to be three options: wade in, prepare tools for the job, or examine the presuppositions. To 'wade in' is to start examining some domain of reality at the level appropriate for the question, try to ascertain what is true or false in this domain, and try to locate what makes those ideas true or false. Success in that should identify the essence of the problem, and we can ask for no more than that.

Preparing the tools would involve thinking about a strategy for this particular occasion. Some questions seem to need imaginative speculation, and others need precise logic or factual evidence. We may conclude that we need 'examples', or 'proofs', or a 'big coherent picture', or just the 'authority' of someone else who understands it. The style you adopt will, of course, depend on the tradition of philosophy within which you have chosen to operate (or where your culture has placed you). Typically, the analytic style is to break a problem down, seeking definitions, foundations and logical structure. In modern versions this leads to a quest for the 'logical form' of questions and theories, which may even be expressed in a purely logical language, in the quest for rigour. The usual continental approach is to seek suitable concepts, or even create new ones, which can be used for an illuminating description.

Seeking the presuppositions of a question or problem has been common to all approaches to philosophy, right from the start. Some presuppositions are very obvious, and have to be questioned (such as 'why are you so evil?'), but some are subtle, and they may be part of the language used in the question, or be very general assumptions of a whole culture. An obvious problem is that if you delve too deeply into presuppositions you will never get back to the question. A compromise seems called for. To overlook important presupposition can be disastrous in philosophy, because they might lead to hideous unexpected implications. When philosophy is a dialogue it seems best if the participants agree the main presuppositions; the lone philosopher should spell out the main presuppositions, so that they can be revisited if it all goes wrong later on. A further question is which presuppositions to choose, if there is a choice. We can either start from what most people 'normally' think, and see whether that view is coherent or illuminating, or we can start from some bold proposal, and put it through critical tests to see whether it is plausible. An interesting approach to presuppositions is the 'transcendental argument', which starts from an accepted theory, and then reasons backwards to reveal the hidden presuppositions that must exist to support it.

Once an enquiry is underway, a key feature of philosophical style is the way in which examples are used. One indicator of ability in philosophy is a talent for creating good examples, which precisely illuminate a problem or a principle. The history of the subject is full of famous examples which are repeatedly discussed, such as the identity of a ship which changes its planks, or what causes one billiard ball to move another, or whether you could 'see' a mind if you toured a very large brain. Some examples are so rich that they are still discussed after the original point is forgotten. If examples can support theories, this gives rise to 'counterexamples' to attack them, and this construction of problem cases is also a widely used strategy. Sometimes these expand into 'thought experiments', and the key issue then is how we should treat highly imaginative experiments if we think they are unrealistic. Does the fact that I can imagine my mind leaving my body prove that it is possible? Realistic counterexamples can be devastating in argument, but unrealistic ones may be less persuasive. A minority view is that high-level philosophy should avoid examples, because it is too restrictive of generalised discussion, but the obscurity that results usually drives philosophers back to examples, because that is what ties philosophical theory to the real world.

Drastic scepticism about the basic human ability to know anything was always a hallmark of philosophy, but scepticism also developed into a method of enquiry. If you want to study the mind, might the mind not exist? In politics, why bother with a state at all? In morality, what if there are no values? Even if a modern philosophical study does not start from such questions, philosophers must always be ready for such a drastic challenge. The most basic questions in philosophy are 'who cares?', 'why bother?' and 'so what?'. Good philosophical theories need answers to those questions.

Philosophy can either be a solo effort or teamwork, and that affects the style of thinking. The lone philosopher can employ introspection, and rely on strong private intuitions. They can even ignore what other philosophers have written, and remorselessly pursue a private train of thought. We find more recent philosophers employing 'methodological solipsism', where the thinker imagines that only they exist, and tries to draw the desired implications from that narrow base. The obvious danger for the lone philosopher is obscurity, but it might be worth the risk if a sustained and highly focused picture of things can be developed.

Ancient philosophy was widely approached through teamwork, since they relied more on discussion and less on writing than the moderns. They quickly spotted that the competitive approach to argument (*eristic*) did not produce good results, since its main objective was to reduce your opponent to a gibbering wreck. The method of identifying someone's sincere beliefs and then interrogating them (*elenchus*) was more promising, but you could also play 'devil's advocate' to explore other views. Their ideal was co-operative dialogue that worked towards the truth (*dialectic*). The hallmark of a talented dialectician was a love of being proved wrong, which should be a lesson for us all.