

Philosophy Café at The Letter Lounge

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What is philosophy? The nature of philosophical discussion

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Summary of key points

Point of issue: When we're involved in an argument/discussion, it's easy to respond to one person's claim by making a second claim that's not relevant. The task is to be aware of the point of issue and to keep the discussion focused on and relevant to that point. Without a careful focus on the point of issue, it's easy to talk past each other and/or talk about different things.

Understanding what philosophy is: Philosophy is the reasoning and questioning that sits underneath topics. As topics become well defined, they often move on to become disciplines in their own right (e.g., philosophy of mind formed into psychology).

Honesty and clarity as important concepts underpinning philosophical discussion: The purpose of philosophy is to uncover the truth, not to win an argument. Philosophy is not like debating. It's about engaging with an idea and coming up with the best way to understand it. The purpose of argument is to test out ideas. Philosophical argument should come from a thorough and empathetic understanding of the other's position. It's important to be able to describe the other position as plausibly and attractively as possible. The goal is to understand why they might think or believe something. Once you can describe their position with clarity, honesty and empathy, it's possible to identify areas of tension or concepts that might be problematic.

Philosophy crafts, tests and produces arguments: When you argue for a position, you have a duty to offer an explanation. The goal is to be rationally persuasive. Ask: What is your position? Why do you hold it?

Framing: How a problem is framed can influence whether it's solvable and/or understandable. This framing is the place or discipline from which the problem is understood – the boundaries that are put around it (for example, it's possible to frame drug-use issues as a legal issue or as a health issue – the frame will influence the way the topic is understood, discussed and addressed).

Deductive argument structure: From the premises (the things taken to be true) we can infer a conclusion. In deductive argument, the premises must lead to the conclusion. It's a matter of logic, forming a necessary truth.