

Philosophical Problems and Arguments:
An Introduction

James W. Cornman and Keith Lehrer

and Arguments:

An Introduction

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Preface

Joseph Conrad said that his aim in writing was “before all, to make you *see*.” Ours is, above all, to make you *think*. We want to make you think about the problems that philosophers have discussed. We also hope this introduction to philosophy will set you thinking about other problems. To achieve our aim, we have concentrated on five basic philosophical problems and tried to give a careful and thorough presentation and examination of the most plausible reasons for and against the solutions philosophers have proposed for these problems.

Each problem is discussed in a separate and virtually independent chapter. Each discussion, however, does rely on the material of the first chapter, where the nature of reasoning and argument is discussed and where certain basic philosophical terms are explained. Thus the first chapter is vital for a thorough grasp of the chapters that follow it, and it should be read before, or together with, them.

At the conclusion of each chapter we have presented a solution to the problem discussed. But because of the very nature of the problems, and because this is an introductory book, none of these solutions should be considered as final. They are, we claim, the most reasonable conclusions to reach on the basis of the material presented. But we have not, nor has anyone else, presented and examined all the material needed to solve these problems once and for all. To emphasize that you should think about these solutions rather than accept them, some of the exercises at the back of each chapter raise questions about points we have made. Others are designed to serve as review questions to test your grasp of the material. For those whose appetite is whetted for more reading on the various topics, we have provided an annotated bibliography after each chapter.

Committee efforts often produce compromise results. To avoid the

pitfalls of such results, each of us has assumed complete responsibility for three chapters, Mr. Lehrer for the first three and Mr. Cornman for the last three. You will see differences in style, but we hope that you can also find an important common feature—the attempt to evaluate the subject matter dispassionately, fairly, and carefully.

Although we have divided responsibility, we are not divided in our thanks to many people who have read, criticized, and contributed to this book. Two we must especially thank are Lewis W. Beck and John D. Moore, both of whom carefully read and helpfully criticized the entire book. Others whose help in various ways deserves mention are Jean Hopson, Loretta Kopelman, Joel Levinson, Natalie Tabet, and Peter van Inwagen.

J.W.C.
K.L.

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PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS AND ARGUMENTS:

An Introduction

Chapter 1

ONE WAY to understand a field of inquiry is to consider the questions and problems that are characteristic of it. This is a better way to approach the field of philosophy than trying to give a definition, because philosophers have generally disagreed among themselves concerning the nature of philosophy. A great diversity of subjects has been investigated by philosophers, and many of those subjects discussed by philosophers in the past are now more commonly studied by physicists, psychologists, and so forth. Thus, any general demarcation of philosophy is likely to be both controversial today and out of date tomorrow. Hence we shall only characterize philosophy by describing some typical philosophical problems, specifically the five philosophical problems to be discussed in this book. Because there are only five this characterization will have the merit of being succinct. Moreover, these problems have been the preoccupation of philosophers both past and present, so there should be little doubt that such matters are the proper concern of philosophy.

The first problem we will confront is the problem of knowledge and skepticism. Basically, we shall consider whether the claims to knowledge that most men commonly take for granted are really justified. For example, most men suppose that their senses provide a source of knowledge, that by looking, touching, and so forth they know of the existence of any number of familiar objects. But some philosophers have doubted that our senses can be the source of such information, and they have cogently defended the conclusion that we do not have knowledge of such matters. So the initial problem we shall face is that of investigating the merits of skepticism.

It is appropriate and useful to begin our study of philosophy by considering the problem of knowledge, because this subject is inter-

The Content and Methods of Philosophy

twined with all the others. We shall constantly be asking whether some belief is justified, no matter what issue we confront, and by considering the problem of knowledge and skepticism, we shall obtain a better understanding of how a belief may be justified or shown to be unjustified.

Secondly, we shall consider the problem of freedom and determinism. We ordinarily suppose that we do, at least now and then, act freely. This amounts to believing that we have genuine alternatives among which to choose and that whatever we actually choose to do, we could just as well have chosen and acted quite differently. However, we also suppose that there are causes for all that happens, including our own choices and actions. The difficulty is that this belief in universal causation appears quite inconsistent with the belief that we act freely, because the former belief has the consequence that all our actions are the inevitable results of causal processes. The problem is to determine whether we are justified in one rather than the other of these beliefs.

The third problem is closely connected to the second. It is the problem of the mental and physical. People differ from inanimate things in having thoughts, sensations and emotions, which are characteristic mental phenomena. It is reasonable to wonder in precisely what way these mental states are related to certain physical processes which occur within our bodies, for example, the neural processes that take place in the brain. Some maintain that there is some causal connection between our thoughts and what happens inside our heads. But philosophers have presented arguments to the contrary, and consequently, they have defended an alternative theory about the relation of the mental and the physical. For example, some philosophers have

held the thesis that thoughts simply *are* brain states, and therefore that the mental is identical with some aspect or part of the physical rather than being *causally* connected to it. The problem is to decide which of these conflicting theories is justified.

Next we shall discuss the problem of justifying belief in the existence of God. This problem requires little description. Most people, whether theists, atheists, or agnostics, must at some time wonder whether there is any way of rationally justifying belief in the existence of a supreme being. We shall study in detail the relevant arguments that have been offered by philosophers and theologians.

Finally, we shall turn to the field of ethics, and here we shall be concerned with the question of how a man can justify his ethical judgments concerning what is right and wrong. We shall attempt to find some moral rule or standard in terms of which we can reasonably judge the ethical merits of various courses of action. The search will proceed by a consideration of the arguments that have been offered both for and against various and conflicting ethical standards philosophers have proposed.

THE METHODS OF PHILOSOPHY

Before discussing the problems just outlined, it is essential to consider the methods and techniques of philosophy. Sometimes philosophy is said to be a dialectical discipline. This means that philosophy proceeds through a process of arguments and counterarguments. Of course, all disciplines depend on argument to some extent, but in philosophy logical reasoning plays an especially prominent role. The explanation for this is that philosophy strives to answer such basic and fundamental questions that it is difficult to find any specific empirical facts to resolve the issues. When two people disagree about some philosophical matter, the only avenue of progress open to them is to consider and evaluate the arguments and objections on both sides. Therefore, philosophical inquiry must be critical and logical if any gain is to result. To facilitate such inquiry, we must learn to ask critical questions about the arguments we encounter, and to examine the answers with logical acumen. These are questions of logic and semantics. We shall present a brief introduction to logic and semantics in order to approach the challenging problems of philosophy with

those logical skills that are the requisite of intelligent and rigorous inquiry.

LOGIC

The field whose subject matter is *argument* is known as logic, or formal logic. The first question to answer in this field is: What is an argument? For our purposes, an argument is a group of statements in which one, the conclusion, is claimed to follow from the others. For example, consider the following argument: Everything is caused and, that being so, no one acts freely. This argument, the merits of which we shall consider in a later chapter, might be stated more formally as follows:

1. If everything is caused, then no one acts freely.
 2. Everything is caused.
- Therefore*
3. No one acts freely.

The word 'Therefore' above statement (3), indicates that what falls beneath it is the conclusion that is claimed to follow from the statements above. Statements (1) and (2) are the reasons given for concluding (3), and such statements are called premises. Thus, every argument consists of a conclusion and one or more premises from which the conclusion is claimed to follow.

SOUNDNESS AND VALIDITY

There are, in general, two kinds of arguments, inductive and deductive. We shall consider inductive arguments subsequently, but first let us concentrate on deductive arguments, an example of which was just presented. A deductive argument is said to be *sound* when the premises of the argument are true and the argument is valid. Saying that an argument is valid is equivalent to saying that it is logically impossible that the premises of the argument are true and the conclusion false. A less precise but intuitively clear way of putting this is to say that in a valid argument *if* the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true. By this definition it is easy to see that the preceding argument is valid, and, if the premises are true, then it must be sound as well. For *if* the premises

1. If everything is caused, then no one acts freely.

and

2. Everything is caused.

are both true, then it must also be true that

3. No one acts freely.

As a simple matter of logic it is impossible that premises (1) and (2) should both be true and conclusion (3) be false. It is important to notice that the fact that this argument is valid does not prove the conclusion is true. Validity is a hypothetical or conditional characteristic; it assures us that the conclusion of the argument is true *if* the premises are.

The argument may also be said to be valid in virtue of its *form*. We can represent the form of the preceding argument by the following schema:

If P , then Q
 P
 Therefore
 Q

The argument form is called *Modus ponens*. Every argument of this form is valid, and thus we may say that the argument form itself is valid. Consider the following argument:

If God is dead, then everything is permitted.
 God is dead.
 Therefore
 Everything is permitted.

This argument, like the preceding one, is valid because it has the form of *Modus ponens*. We can obtain these arguments from *Modus ponens* by substituting the appropriate English sentences for the letters P and Q in the argument form. If we substitute the sentence 'God is dead' for the letter P and the sentence 'Everything is permitted' for the letter Q in the argument form, we will obtain the valid argument just cited. Whenever an argument form is valid, then we obtain a valid argument if we substitute in this way.

The following are other valid argument forms:

*Modus tollens*If P , then Q Not Q *Therefore*Not P *Hypothetical Syllogism*If P , then Q If Q , then R *Therefore*If P , then R *Dilemma*Either P or Q Not P *Therefore* Q *Contraposition*If P , then Q *Therefore*If not Q , then not P

This list of argument forms is not complete or definitive. However, by considering various arguments of these forms one may obtain an intuitive idea of what a valid argument is like. Many arguments can be shown to be valid by making the proper substitutions in the argument forms listed above. In some cases we will have to appeal to more than one argument form to show that an argument is valid. For example, consider the following argument:

If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.

If murder is not permitted, then not everything is permitted.

Murder is not permitted.

Therefore

It is not the case that God does not exist.

To show that this argument is valid, first notice that from

If murder is not permitted, then not everything is permitted.

and

Murder is not permitted.

we may conclude by *Modus ponens* that

Not everything is permitted.

We may now take this statement, which is a conclusion of this foregoing argument, and use it as a premise in another argument. From the premise

If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.

and the new premise

Not everything is permitted.

we may conclude by *Modus tollens* that

It is not the case that God does not exist.

This shows that from the original premises we could validly deduce the conclusion of that argument by appealing to the argument forms previously listed. A lesson to be learned from the argument just considered is that anything validly deduced from a set of premises, such as the statement

Not everything is permitted.

may be added to the original premises for the purpose of making further deductions.

EXERCISES

All of the following arguments can be shown to be valid by appealing to the argument forms previously listed. Decide what argument form each of the following arguments has.

1. If the brain is needed for thought, then thought always occurs in the head.

If thought always occurs in the head, then no spirit without a body ever thinks.

Therefore

If the brain is needed for thought, then no spirit without a body ever thinks.

2. If reasons are the causes of actions, then all rational actions are caused.

Therefore

If not all rational actions are caused, then it is not the case that reasons are the causes of actions.

3. Either wars are avoided or the innocent suffer.

Wars are not avoided.

Therefore

The innocent suffer.

4. If all men could be mistaken in what they believe, then all men lack knowledge.

All men could be mistaken in what they believe.

Therefore

All men lack knowledge.