

How to 'philosophise'?

Question everything and assume nothing!

Task 1: Philosophical Questions

A key skill in Philosophy is having the ability to think. When answering these questions, please give yourself plenty of time to think and answer them as best as you can. Before you start your own thinking, you can ask friends and family what they think the answers are to these questions but bear in mind as with nearly all philosophical questions, there is no correct answer

Question 1: To what extent do you shape your own destiny, and how much is down to fate?

Question 2: Can we experience happiness without knowing what sadness is?

Question 3: Who defines what is good and what is evil?

TASK 2: Key Terms

Philosophy is centred in the analysis and constructions of arguments. Arguments are the process of reasoning from premises to a conclusion. This process can be described in many different ways. We are now going to look at a few key words to help us understand of this works.

Watch these videos and explain the terms in the boxes below. If you have any trouble accessing these links they can also be found at www.stmartinspre.webs.com

<https://youtu.be/94YV6Lu009k>

<https://youtu.be/iRcNQkWNWNk?t=111>

A priori	
A posteriori	
Inductive	
Deductive	

Task 3: Philosophical Text Analysis

Read the following article. Highlight the key ideas and annotate where necessary. Complete the questions at the end.

Write down five things that you might think that you know - any five at all.

Here's my list:

- I know that Washington is the capital of the USA.
- I know that $2+3=5$
- I know that fairies have got wings.
- I know that I am writing this article.
- I know that daisies are white and yellow.

Now look at them and ask yourself "How do I know them?" Some of them, you will know because you have experienced them. For example, I know that daisies are white and yellow, because I have seen them outside on the grass. Some things you will know because you have been told about them or have read about them in books. I have never been to Washington, but I have been told about it by someone who has. I know that fairies have got wings, because I have seen pictures in books. I know I am writing this article, because I can see the words on the screen in front of me. I know all these things, because I have had certain experiences. I have seen things and heard them and touched them and tasted them and smelled them.

But how do I know that $2+3=5$. Well, some people might argue, it is because you have experienced two things and three things, making five things. This is possible, but I know all sorts of sums which I have not experienced in my life for real. How can I know them? Some people argue that I know that $2+3=5$ because I have reasoned it out myself.

Here, we can see two quite different kinds of knowledge: knowledge which comes from experience and knowledge which comes from reasoning.

There has been a long debate in Philosophy about how we acquire our knowledge. Some philosophers argue that all our knowledge comes from experience. Without experiences, we know nothing at all. When we are born, we are like 'blank slates' and our experiences provide the 'writing' on the slates. These philosophers are known as Empiricists.

Do you think that, when a baby is born, it is like a 'blank slate' (something without any knowledge)? Is there any way in which you could find out?

Other philosophers disagree. They argue that there is some knowledge which does not come from experience. There are some things which we can know, without needing to have experiences. We know by reasoning or thinking alone. These philosophers are known as Rationalists. Rationalists argue that there are certain ideas which we are born with. These are known as innate ideas. We do not need experience to acquire these innate ideas.

Whether you are a rationalist or an empiricist will determine the kinds of arguments which you use to prove the existence of God.

What starting point would (a) an Empiricist and (b) a Rationalist use in any argument for the existence of God?

An Empiricist has to start with what is experienced, so any proof of the existence of God needs to start with experiences. Some people claim that you can experience God directly, through a Religious Experience. This might be an empiricist argument for the existence of God. Other people claim that you can experience design (as design may have a purpose or regularity) in the world and this might be the starting point for an empiricist argument for the existence of God.

These two suggestions raise interesting questions for Empiricists and for empirical arguments in general.

The first argument, that we can experience God, leads us to the very general question, which empiricists answer in very different ways: "If all knowledge comes from experience, what exactly do we experience?"

Some people say "Well, we experience objects, as they really are?" So, what I experience are tables and chairs and flowers and trees.

The difficulty with this claim is that we rarely do experience objects as we think they really are. Many of our claims about what we experience are not at all about what we actually do experience.

Look at the table in front of you - what are you experiencing?

Most people would claim that they are experiencing a hard, rectangular object, of a certain colour. But what are you really experiencing? Look again - exactly what are you experiencing? Your experience is not of something which is rectangular in shape (unless you are hovering directly above it). Your experience is actually of something that is changing shape, as you move. Your experience is not of something which has a certain colour. Look again - the colours change as you move. If the sun is shining, certain parts of the table are white and shining; other parts are dark. The table is all sorts of colours.

Such arguments have led certain Empiricist philosophers to put forward a theory - Sense Data Theory. This theory points out that we do not experience objects themselves, but their qualities. In the case of the table, I do not experience the table itself, but the qualities of the table. These qualities are experienced as my Perceptions, or Sense Data. So, instead of saying "I am experiencing a table" if we are good empiricists, we should say "I am understanding

that I experience brownness and hardness and so on.” If I want to talk about a physical object table, I have to make an inference from my sense data. I have to say “I am experiencing brownness, hardness etc, therefore, I am experiencing a table.” I must remember, however, that I am not experiencing the table itself, but only its qualities. Anything I want to say about the table is an inference - I am making a claim which goes beyond the evidence I have.

Now watch your favourite film or TV programme-one that makes you laugh or cry and absorb yourself with what’s going on in the film or programme.

Whatever you have watched should have shown you that there can be occasions when my sense data can seriously mislead me. It can seem to me that I am having certain experiences, when, in fact, I am not. All that is happening is that I am experiencing certain sense data and inferring, on the basis of that sense data, that I am having experiences. For example, I can feel sadness when someone dies in the film or laugh out loud at a funny joke that comes up in the dialogue between characters but these things are not actually happening to me, they only exist on the screen. So, on Empiricist grounds, we cannot make claims about reality on the basis of our experiences, as easily as we first thought.

Now, let’s look at the Argument from Religious Experience. Someone might claim, on the basis of an experience, that they have empirical reasons for believing that there is a God.

The first problem with this is that God does not obviously have the kind of qualities which an empiricist is used to experiencing. God is not a thing, or a person, in the usual sense of the word. He does not have a shape, or a size, or a colour or a texture! When someone claims to have experienced God, they are claiming an experience of qualities (or sense data) which are radically different from those in other experiences.

There might be a strong temptation to argue that one option when I am having a religious experience is “I am having a hallucination,” especially given that religious experiences tend not to be public, or repeatable. To justify the inference “I am experiencing God,” that inference must be the most likely of all possible inferences.

So, as an empiricist, I can construct arguments for the existence of God, but those arguments are not conclusive. That is the downside for a religious empiricist. The upside is that, as an empiricist, I can construct arguments for the existence of an external world, but those arguments are not conclusive either. That is the upside for a religious empiricist.

Turning to Rationalism, if you want a rationalist argument for the existence of God, you need an argument which you can do entirely without needing to appeal to experience. You need an argument which you can do with your eyes shut and your fingers in your ears!

The most famous rationalist argument for the existence of God is the Ontological Argument. In essence, the Ontological Argument goes:

Premise 1: God is a perfect being.

Premise 2: A perfect being is:

omnipotent

omniscient

omnipresent

morally perfect

Premise 3: A perfect being is also existent (because if it didn’t exist, it wouldn’t be perfect).

Conclusion: Therefore God exists.

The reason why the Ontological Argument is a rationalist argument is because - allegedly - you can prove the existence of God just by thinking about the definition of ‘God’ without having to look to the outside world.

There are all sorts of problems with the Ontological Argument. The issue that I would like you to consider now is:

The Ontological Argument is rationalist, because, once you know what the definition of 'God' is, you know that God must exist, because 'exists' is in His definition.

And here is the big problem with the Ontological Argument. Many people say that all the Ontological Argument is doing is playing with words. If you define God as a perfect being and you say that perfection includes existence, they argue, of course God exists. You have defined him as existing but you haven't actually proved it fully.

And so here is your problem. As a Rationalist, how do you get beyond your mind? How do you move from what you can think about to what exists, out there, independent of your thoughts? How do you reason to the existence of something outside your mind?

This should sound familiar. The Rationalist is now in a rather similar position to the empiricist. Both want arguments for the existence of God. Both can construct arguments, but neither of them seems able, without problems, to move beyond themselves, to make claims about what is the case "out there." The empiricist is stuck with her experiences; the rationalist with her chain of reasoning. Although Rationalism and Empiricism are diametrically opposed philosophical positions, they do seem to end up, in this particular case, with a very similar problem.

Questions

1. Explain what the following are:

A) Knowledge that comes from experience

B) Knowledge that comes from reasoning

2. Briefly explain the difference between rationalism and empiricism

3. Which do you think is a more convincing argument for the existence of God? An empiricist argument (e.g. religious experience) or a rationalist argument (e.g. ontological argument)? Why?

Extension

This task is optional. Attached is a PDF version of a book called 'Sophie's World' by Jostein Gaarder. It is a novel about the history of philosophy. You may wish to read this. If you want to just dip in and read parts, I recommend:

- The letter to Sophie page 14-16
- The Mythological World Picture page 23-28
- Natural Philosophers page 31-34
- Socrates page 61-66
- Aquinas page 165-171