

# Philosophy as the Self-Defining Discipline

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## Abstract

This paper defends a simple and surprisingly adequate definition of philosophy: as suggested by the “know thyself” imperative, philosophy *is* the “self-defining” discipline. The task of philosophizing is therefore best described as the task of self-defining. In responding to various objections, I defend four senses in which this definition holds. First, when other academic disciplines seek to define the nature of their discipline, they are generally recognized as exploring the philosophy *of* their discipline; only for philosophy is such an inquiry self-referential, remaining fully within the discipline itself. Second, while some genuinely philosophical topics do not explicitly involve self-defining, philosophy as a *way of life* always has self-examination at its core. Third, even though psychology may have largely usurped philosophy’s classical role as the guardian of self-knowledge, the goal of helping persons to refine their own self-understanding is still crucial for philosophers today. Finally, in a deep but paradoxical sense, genuine philosophy is self-authenticating. While Socrates’ maxim, “the unexamined life is not worth living” should not be taken too literally, it does correctly convey the fact that only an *authentic life* is really worth living.

The theme of this World Congress, “Philosophy as Inquiry and Way of Life”, calls for an answer to the questions: What *kind* of inquiry? *Which* way of life? The breadth of the 75 more specific section themes might lead one to despair at the prospects of ever identifying a comprehensive philosophical answer to such broad questions. For the task of defining philosophy has proved notoriously difficult from the early days of the ancient Greeks, Thales and other pre-Socratics, to our modern and post-modern choices between the likes of Wittgenstein or Derrida. Indeed, when comparing different philosophers’ notions of what philosophy *is*, a paraphrase of Heraclitus’ well-known maxim seems apt: *the only constant, uniting all philosophers, is that each philosopher disagrees with the definition of philosophy proposed by all others!* Is there any genuinely universalizable definition of philosophy? Or is there any essentially philosophical activity that sets the *philosophical* Way of Life apart from the ways of life promoted by all other academic (or *human*) disciplines?

A good guide for answering these formative questions is Socrates’ use of the famous imperative, “know thyself”—often taken as a principle urging individual self-understanding. I would not deny that on one level this imperative does carry such a meaning. What is often ignored is that self-knowledge—or, more precisely, the task of *self-defining*—is the essential philosophical activity. Self-defining is what makes philosophy *philosophy*. Unlike any other discipline, philosophizing is the activity, *A*, of asking “*What is A?*” This is why many philosophy courses and textbooks begin (and/or *end*) with the question “*What is philosophy?*”

An obvious objection to this claim is that many (if not most) other academic disciplines *also* begin with an act of self-defining, setting out the essential features of the subject-matter under consideration. An Introduction to History lecture, for example, is likely to begin by asking “*What is history?*” Likewise, Introduction to Art may ask “*What is art?*” Even courses in mathematical sciences such as Geometry typically begin with attempts at self-definition. Surely this common feature of so many academic disciplines cannot be used to *distinguish* philosophy from all others, can it?

This objection fails to consider that, when answering the basic questions, “*What is history?*” or “*What is art?*”, historians or artists are not actually *doing* history or art; rather, they are doing *philosophy of* history or *philosophy of* art. Math teachers who begin geometry courses by comparing and contrasting competing theories of what geometry *is* are doing *philosophy of geometry*, not geometry as such. The same is true for *any* academic subject—or at least, any that can be said to have a “*philosophy of*” attached

thereto. Only one discipline includes the question “What is this discipline *about?*” as a question *within* the proper domain of the discipline itself; that discipline is *philosophy*. This simple but often neglected fact is the key to developing a universally-applicable definition of philosophy.

“Philosophy is the task of self-definition” means, first and foremost, that philosophy is the task of defining *philosophy*. But as we have seen, this definition of philosophy quickly branches out to include all areas of what I call *applied* philosophy; for the philosophy of any given discipline is that discipline’s attempt to engage in (philosophical) self-definition; the same goes for numerous other intellectual or human pursuits. Philosophy of religion is philosophy because it is religion’s attempt at self-definition. Philosophy of science is likewise the science-inspired task of defining science *philosophically*. Of course, this does not mean that all philosophers engaging in these disciplines must be religious believers or scientists. Far from it! What it does mean is that all religious believers or scientists who attempt to define their own discipline are, *ipso facto*, straying into the philosopher’s domain.

Another objection is that philosophy is concerned with many topics other than its own self-definition, so even if self-definition is a *sufficient* condition for being philosophical, it is not a *necessary* condition. That is, even if all self-definition is philosophical, this does not imply that all philosophy involves self-definition. Strictly speaking, this is probably true. However, when philosophy is viewed as a way of life, the objection fades into insignificance. For viewing philosophy as the task of defining philosophy sheds new light on the meaning of Socrates’ oft-quoted maxim: “the unexamined life is not worth living”. Taken at face value, serious doubts could be raised as to the validity of this claim. Are the lives of mentally-disabled persons, whose rational capacities do not allow for the luxury of self-examination but who struggle to overcome obstacles greater than any Socrates himself had to face, *not worth living*? Perhaps even more significantly, are the lives of humble religious believers, who devote their entire lives to helping drug addicts overcome their addictions or to providing shelter for the homeless, *not worth living*, if such persons never stop to question the nature and validity of their simple faith? A serious, objective examination of Socrates’ claim would reveal that *it is simply not true*—at least, in any literal sense. Human history shows many examples of apparently unexamined lives that were *well worth living*.

What then is the point of Socrates’ maxim? Why do so many Introduction to Philosophy courses cite it as a crucial component? Perhaps “live an *examined* life!” is

actually a *political* statement, intended to *persuade* people to philosophize. The truth behind the statement is that the unexamined life is not *philosophical*, so philosophers who would like to see more people becoming philosophical can coerce people to do so by telling them that if they do not, their lives are *worthless*. But what about poets who write poetry for the sheer pleasure of it, without ever stopping to consider how their poetry sheds new light on their own personhood? Or the scientist who dispassionately devotes a lifetime of research and experimentation to search (unsuccessfully) for a cure for cancer, never bothering to reflect on why such research ought to be done in the first place? Philosophers cannot rightfully claim that such people are living *meaningless* lives; at most, we can argue that their lives would be *more* meaningful, if they would learn to view their work in the self-defining context of philosophy.

To explain what this might mean, I shall consider examples from poetry. Some poets claim that all poetry is about the task of writing poetry. This claim initially intrigued me because, if true, it would give poetry the same self-reflective character I am claiming as the essential defining feature of philosophy. But after reading a considerable amount of poetry, I believe it is far from being true. Rather, good poets—perhaps even all of the *best* poets—write *some* poems about the task of writing poetry. But writing about what poetry is does not express the essence of what it means to be a poet. Rather, when a poet writes a poem of this nature, *he or she is performing an essentially philosophical task*. For example, many famous and indisputably great poems, such as most of Shakespeare’s sonnets, are clearly not *about* what it means to be a poet. They are about love. Compare any such love poem to the following lines from the poem, “Striker”, by Richard Mapplebeckpalmer (1973), written after he drew a blank when his beloved asked him to write poem for her:

As Moses struck the rock and called for water  
so my pen strikes this slow and vacant paper

to plough the virgin field with furrows of the Word  
until this page is ditched and dyked with lines  
like canals urged repetitiously into the dry sand:

a thirsty grid to underline this arid land  
and frame the space wherein I step my rain dance  
under the unpropitious canopy of a dry sky.

This poem clearly *is* about poetry; it is also strikingly self-defining. Yet this feature is precisely what makes it such an interesting study in the *philosophy* of poetry.

Philosophy is self-defining in at least two other important senses. First, philosophy is self-defining in the important sense that it assists us in defining or “refining” our own self-understanding. Psychology (in many, but not all, of its classical manifestations) attempts to graft this aspect of philosophy’s self-defining nature onto various empirical approaches to studying selfhood. Yet not all psychology is self-defining. A discussion of the question, “What is psychology?”, held on the first day of an Introduction to Psychology course, would probably not itself illustrate any specifically *psychological* method. Rather, it would be inherently philosophical.

Lastly, philosophy is self-defining in the rather strange and paradoxical sense that it *defines itself*. By this I mean that each philosopher has his or her own unique way of practicing philosophy and, although certain general principles of good philosophizing ought to be followed in order to obtain the best results, the individual’s philosophical method is to a large extent *self-authenticating*. By this, I do not mean that “anything goes” in philosophy; quite to the contrary, the point is that *nothing* passes muster in philosophy if it conflicts with *one’s own* sense of propriety.

Not everyone is destined to become a philosopher; nevertheless, virtually every human being *does* act philosophically, at least occasionally. Nearly all human beings, from the simplest mentally challenged person to the most complex religious fanatics, *do* engage in self-examination to some degree. With this in mind, perhaps Socrates was on the right track after all, when he gave so much weight, in determining the value of a person’s life, to the role played by a specific kind of “self-defining”—the kind that requires careful examination of one’s own presuppositions, of the rational grounding of one’s beliefs, and of the extent to which others in one’s community are likely to be convinced by our reasons. For, in a way quite distinct from any other academic discipline (with the possible exception of religion) or human activity (with the possible exception of love), practicing philosophy, insofar as it is conceived as the *self-defining* discipline, makes a person more authentically human.

A human being can live a long and fulfilled life without ever reading or writing a line of poetry, or without ever engaging in any historical research, or without ever doing rigorous scientific experiments on the chemical, biological, or physical make-up of anything; such a life would not necessarily lack *anything* essentially human, simply

because it ignored one or another of these disciplines. But a person who totally ignores the inner call to self-examination (like an academic discipline that ignores the need to examine how it defines itself) *will* be missing something essential, something that has the potential to *maximize* a person's worth. Such a life may be worth living (and such a discipline may be worth practicing) for *other* reasons; but it will not be able to fulfill its *ultimate* worth without engaging in the self-defining discipline called *philosophy*.