

COLLEGE GUILD
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PHILOSOPHY

Unit 3 of 6

Other Things Philosophers Like to Think About

From the ancient Greeks to today's "heady" thinkers, philosophy covers a multitude of topics. Yes, there's always someone thinking about and attempting to explain the ideas that have shaped our world views. Here are three things to explore...

PART 1 – UTILITARIANISM

Within the branch of ethics is the theory of moral reasoning called Utilitarianism. It holds that the morally right course of action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest benefit over any harm for everyone affected. Here, morality is determined by its usefulness. The phrase "the greatest good for the greatest number" comes from Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832). Another utilitarian was John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873). A modern term for utilitarianism is "situation ethics".

Here's an example by philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson (born 1929): *A brilliant transplant surgeon has five patients, each in need of a different organ, each of whom will die without that organ. Unfortunately, there are no organs available to perform any of these five transplant operations. A healthy young traveler, just passing through the city the doctor works in, comes in for a routine checkup. In the course of doing the checkup, the doctor discovers that his organs are compatible with all five of his dying patients. Suppose further that if the young man were to disappear, no one would suspect the doctor.*

1. If you were this brilliant transplant surgeon, what would you do and why?

2. Write a paragraph on a specific example in American history you can think of in which the "greatest good for the greatest number" was utilized.

In the questions of ethics, we generally ask: "How should I live?" or "What ought I to do?" But in utilitarianism, the question is asked: "What effect will my doing this act in this situation have on the general balance of good over evil?" Thus, morality must depend on balancing the beneficial and the harmful consequences of our conduct.

3. What problems, if any, do you see with this theory of utilitarianism?

One major challenge of utilitarianism is how we go about assigning a value (worth or importance) to the benefits and harms resulting from our actions and comparing them with the benefits and harms that might result from other actions.

4. Does the principle of utilitarianism take into account considerations of criminal justice? Explain.

One challenge of utilitarianism is that it leads to an "ends justify the means" mentality, when truly the end does not justify the means. If that was the case, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust because the end was to purify the human race.

5. Do you think the principle of utilitarianism protects the rights of minorities? Why or why not?

In the end, one might say that while utilitarianism has its merits, it is never an easy way to make a decision, particularly on a large scale. In an era that some have characterized as "the age of self-interest", utilitarianism is a powerful reminder that morality calls us to look beyond the self to the good of all.

PART 2 - PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Philosophy of education draws from all three branches of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. It addresses methods of teaching (pedagogy) as well as education policy and courses of study (curriculum). Some questions asked are: “What makes up a child’s upbringing and education?”, “What are the values and norms revealed through educational practices?”, and “What are the limits of education?”

Philosophy of education is not easily defined because of the multitude of ways of understanding education combined with the many approaches of philosophy. We will look at several theories of learning through philosophical history. But first...

6. Explain what going to school was like for you as a child or teenager.
7. Tell your story about an educational experience where you thrived academically and/or personally.
8. Tell your story about an education experience that was not so pleasant.
9. Who was your favorite teacher and why was he/she special to you?

Some theories of learning...

Plato (424 BCE – 347 BCE): Plato advocated removing children from their mothers’ care and raising them as wards of the state. Education included learning facts, skills, physical disciplines, and music and art. A child’s education would be directed toward specific aspects of society and designed to train and blend gentle and strong qualities in the individual to create a harmonious person. Both boys and girls would receive the same kind of education.

John Locke (1632 – 1704): Locke believed that the mind is a *tabula rasa* or “blank sheet” until experience in the form of sensation and reflection provide the basic materials — simple ideas — out of which most of our more complex knowledge is constructed. He argued that the “association of ideas” that one makes when young is more important than those made later in life because they determine who one becomes as a person. Locke’s philosophy also developed into the later discipline of psychology.

John Dewey (1859 – 1952): Dewey believed that education was important in order for society to continue on. He was against authoritarian, strict teaching which was concerned with delivering knowledge and not enough with understanding students’ actual experiences. He believed that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and that all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning.

Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952): Montessori felt children should be given freedom in an environment prepared with materials designed for their self-directed learning activity. Teachers observe children to bring about, sustain, and support their true, natural way of being. Montessori schools are still in existence today and are popular. Classrooms are mixed in age, students choose learning activities within a preset range of options, and they are given uninterrupted blocks of work time.

Paulo Friere (1921 – 1997): A Brazilian, Friere was committed to the cause of educating the impoverished people of his country. He believed that learning was reciprocal (concerning two or more individuals) between teacher and students, where the teacher learned from the students as well as teaching them. Emphasis is on student-teacher dialogue.

10. Make a chart. Choose three of these educational philosophers and write what you think is a positive trait and a negative trait of their theory.

11. What do you think is the best way to educate a child from birth through age 18? (In other words, this is your personal philosophy of education.)

PART 3 – AESTHETICS

Aesthetics (pronounced “es-THET-ics”) is a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste, along with the creation and appreciation of beauty. Philosophical scholars in the field define aesthetics as “critical reflection on art, culture, and nature”. It comes from the Greek meaning “perceptible by the senses”. For our purposes, we will use the term “philosophy of art.”

12. Name as many categories of art as you can (example: paintings, music...other?).

13. List the categories of art that you love or gravitate toward. Which of these do you like to do or are you skilled in?

"Art for art's sake" is an English translation of a French slogan from the early 1800's, "l'art pour l'art", and it expresses a philosophy that "true" art is divorced from any function. Such work is sometimes described as “complete in itself”, i.e. there is no need for a reason for that art to be created.

14. How would you personally interpret the phrase “Art for art’s sake”?

The ancient Greeks revered beauty, particularly in the human physical form showing musculature, poise, beauty, and anatomically correct proportions. Art in the Middle East focused on calligraphy (visual art of writing) and architecture. Drama and literature focusing on the spiritual was the favored artistic expression of India. In ancient China, music and poetry were the favored forms of art. Western art of the Middle Ages (400 CE to 1500 CE) favored religious expression with objects made from rare and valuable materials. Historically, art has had a specific purpose within the culture.

The modern period of Western art – the late 1600s to early 1900s – emphasized beauty as the key component of art. Beyond the mid-1900s this concept was challenged; this is known as post-modern aesthetics. Reality itself as one perceives it is aesthetic.

For example, the contemporary artist Andy Warhol’s (1928-1987) famous Brillo Boxes are nearly indistinguishable from actual Brillo boxes at the time.



It would be a mistake to praise Warhol for the design of his boxes (which were designed by another person as shipping boxes), yet the conceptual move of exhibiting these boxes as art in a museum together with other kinds of paintings is Warhol's. How are we to judge Warhol's concept? His execution of the concept in the medium (the Brillo Boxes)? The

curator’s insight in letting Warhol display the boxes? The overall result? Our experience or interpretation of the result?

15. Imagine you and a friend are having a “culture” day. First you go to your local museum. There are contemporary paintings you love but your friend hates. Then you listen to a concert that has classical music which makes you squirm but your friend glories in. Down the street, however are some local musicians playing Chicago blues. Now that’s music! At the end of the day, you wander into a bookstore where a poet is reading some of her poems. One especially touching poem gives your arms goose bumps while your buddy is sticking her finger down her throat and rolling her eyes. Why do you differ in opinion and in your tastes of paintings, music, and poetry? What do you think contributes to your differences?

16. What should we look for when we judge art?

17. What criteria do you use when you’re judging art (in any of its forms)?

18. What do you think is the value (importance) of art?

Who knew that Marilyn Monroe was a philosopher? She said: “I think that when an artist – forgive me, but I do think I’m becoming an artist, even though some people will laugh; that’s why I apologize – when an artist tries to be true, you sometimes feel you are on the verge of some kind of craziness. But it isn’t really craziness. You’re just trying to get the truest part of yourself out, and it’s very hard, you know. There are times when you think, ‘All I have to be is true’. But sometimes, it doesn’t come so easily.”

19. For your final question, refer back to Question 13. Show us the stuff you’ve got. If you’re a visual artist, draw or paint a sketch. If you’re a writer or a poet, show us a sample of your work. If you’re a musician...well, unfortunately we can’t hear you sing or play a musical instrument, but describe for us the feeling you get when you do sing or play; what do you like to sing or play? Or if you do anything else you think of as an artistic endeavor, we’d like to hear you describe it! This is your Brag Time! We honor your creative gift.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes