

What is Philosophy?

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Ethics kept out

Before proceeding to deal with Indian philosophical systems and schools, I must explain what I mean by *Philosophy*. Among the meanings of this word enlisted in the dictionary is 'investigation of the nature of being' to which I wish to limit the word in my exposition of the subject. Traditionally, the word is employed so as to include ethics in its ambit. I am going to keep ethics out; for, in my view, ethics cannot be accommodated under the same roof as metaphysics which, again, is defined as 'science of being'. I owe you an explanation why I keep ethics out when I talk of philosophy.

Fundamental difference between metaphysics and ethics

Metaphysics as science of being is concerned with *what is* or *is not*, as against ethics which is concerned with *what should* or *should not be*. The basis for the first is the universal means of knowledge such as perception and inference that do not change with cultural traditions. The basis for the second is the composite human will which shapes the mind of a society and sets in a tradition which may differ substantially from that of another society. The *Ten Commandments* acceptable to Christianity may not be so to a man belonging to another creed or no creed. This does not happen in the case of conclusions based on perception or inference. What is a tree for a Christian cannot be an elephant for a non-Christian. It is the element of will in ethics, absent in metaphysics, that makes a world of difference between the two. It is this fundamental difference which demands the addition of a third category of cognition, viz. the *willed cognition*, besides the traditional ones, *right* and *wrong*. Once recognised, this category can bring under a single roof all that is known as culture and bring clarity and precision to the theory of epistemology.

Physics and metaphysics

This would make it clear that metaphysics, like physics, is a way of thinking supported by evidence which leaves no scope for human will. This character of philosophy is found conceived and expressed in categorical terms in as old a text as the Katha Upanishads which describes the Ultimate Reality as a concept beyond do-s and don't-s. The difference between physics and metaphysics, thus, lies not so much in their approach or methodology as in their targets. Physics searches into the outer world, the object; metaphysics, the inner world, the subject. If, then, we designate physics as the science of matter, one can designate metaphysics as the science of the spirit.

Existence of the soul

This raises the question whether there is anything called spirit or soul or self apart from the mind. Psychology accepts mind but does not go into the problem of the soul. This should not mean that it denies the existence of the soul. Every branch of knowledge has to work within the limits of its target and tools; it neither accepts nor denies what lies beyond these self-imposed limits. We have to turn to metaphysics to find out the evidence why we have to accept the existence of the soul apart from the complex of the body, the organs and the mind. This problem has engaged the minds of Upanishadic thinkers who argue that the soul as the viewer of this complex has to be identified as a separate entity, for no object can view itself. An attempt was also made to analyse the states of consciousness – waking, dream and deep sleep – to determine the nature of the soul, besides its existence. Apart from these basic facts, Patanjali as well as Vyaasa, the commentator of the Yoga-sutra-s, adduce further evidence to prove the existence of the soul. This was necessary as there were schools, the materialists and the Buddhists, who denied the existence of the soul for different reasons and at different levels.

Fourfold approach

In philosophy, therefore, we are concerned with the soul, its real nature, the cause of its suffering and the means of liberation from it. This search has been compared by the two authors mentioned above to the fourfold approach of the medical science to its subject: disease, its diagnosis, freedom from disease and its means. Indian philosophy views this-worldly life of the soul as suffering, mistaken identity of the soul as its cause, freedom from this identity as liberation, and awareness of the real nature of the soul as the means to liberation. Philosophy is thus a system of restoration of the soul to its natural health in a comprehensive sense.

The scheme of presentation of a school

All serious thought comprises two aspects: the evidence and the conclusions. The first aspect concerns the attitude of the school towards the means of knowledge; the second concerns the conclusions drawn from the accepted means. Conclusions differ because the attitude of the school towards the means of knowledge differs. Every school has, therefore, to clarify its stand regarding the means of knowledge and the order of their priority in case of mutual conflict among them. Perception and inference, being universal, are on the whole accepted by all schools, but are subordinated to scriptures when in conflict with them by those who advocate the latter as an authority in matters beyond the ambit of the universal means. In Indian tradition, Vedas are treated as the ultimate authority in such matters by the orthodox schools. This recognition of the Vedas is at times only formal and nominal, and intended for practical purposes,

viz. to avoid confrontation with the established beliefs. We have, therefore, to evaluate theories of schools as rational or otherwise not on the basis of what they profess but by an examination of their contents. Besides perception, inference and scriptures, there are other means of knowledge accepted by some schools in varying degrees, but they can be ignored as they do not play any significant role in philosophical matters.

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