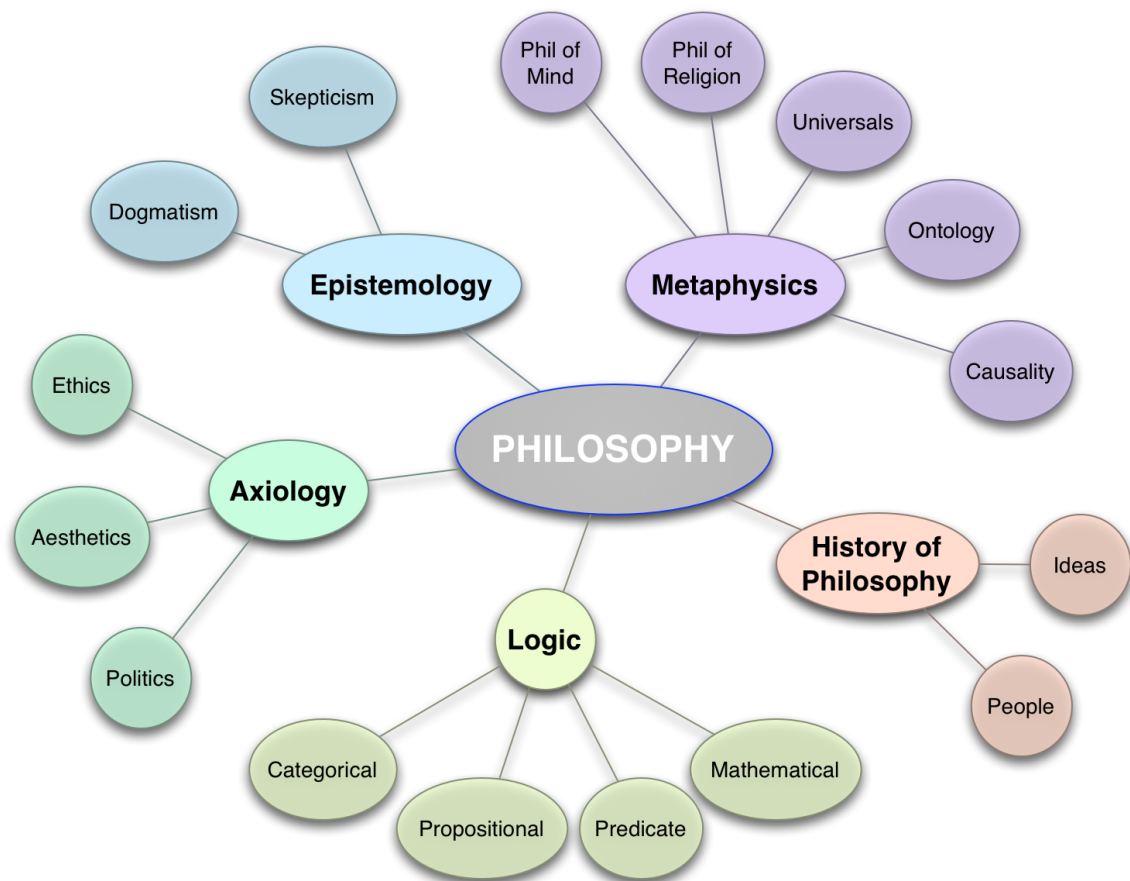


# PHILOSOPHY 101

## INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN PHILOSOPHY



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## What is Philosophy?

In the past, I've asked students what they thought Philosophy was, and often received interesting answers.

### "Philosophy is . . ."

- "a bunch of crap that people do when they want to make money but don't want to work."
- "Trying to answer questions through observation and thought. Philosophy could be a formula to life, or an informed way of life."
- "Different peoples views on life, death, and the after-life."
- "Wanting to know more than the obvious; clarifying (using reason and logic) answers to questions-arguing."
- "How a person thinks."
- "Sitting around, smoking cigarettes, and getting into deep discussions about life's little quirks."
- "The rational inquiry into the nature of the universe, both physical and metaphysical."
- "In-depth reasoning about literary works (analyzing)."
- "The search for truth through the contemplation to reach a higher sense of self or self-actualization."

Each of these definitions is interesting in its own way, and to some degree capture *some* of what Philosophy is about, or at least what people **THINK** it's about. What we can glean from these definitions is that Philosophy is a kind of *conversation* about important questions, much of which is focused on human existence. But more specifically, we can divide Philosophy into major groups of questions that we can call the "sub-disciplines" of Philosophy.

### The Major Subdisciplines of Philosophy:

**Epistemology** - the *philosophical* study of *knowledge*:

What is knowledge?  
 Can we have knowledge?  
 How do we get knowledge?

**Metaphysics** - the *philosophical* study of *reality*:

**Ontology** - What kinds of things actually *exist*?

**Philosophy of Mind** - What is the nature of *consciousness*

**Philosophy of Religion** – What is the nature of God?

**Axiology** - the *philosophical* study of *value*:

**Ethics** - the *philosophical* study of *morality*:

What makes an action Right or Wrong?

Is morality relative?

What do the words 'right' and 'wrong' actually mean?

**Political Theory** - the *philosophical* study of *justice*

**Aesthetics** - the *philosophical* study of *beauty*:

Philosophy of Literature -

Philosophy of Art -

Philosophy of Music -

**Logic** - the *philosophical* study of *reason* and *arguments*

What is an argument?

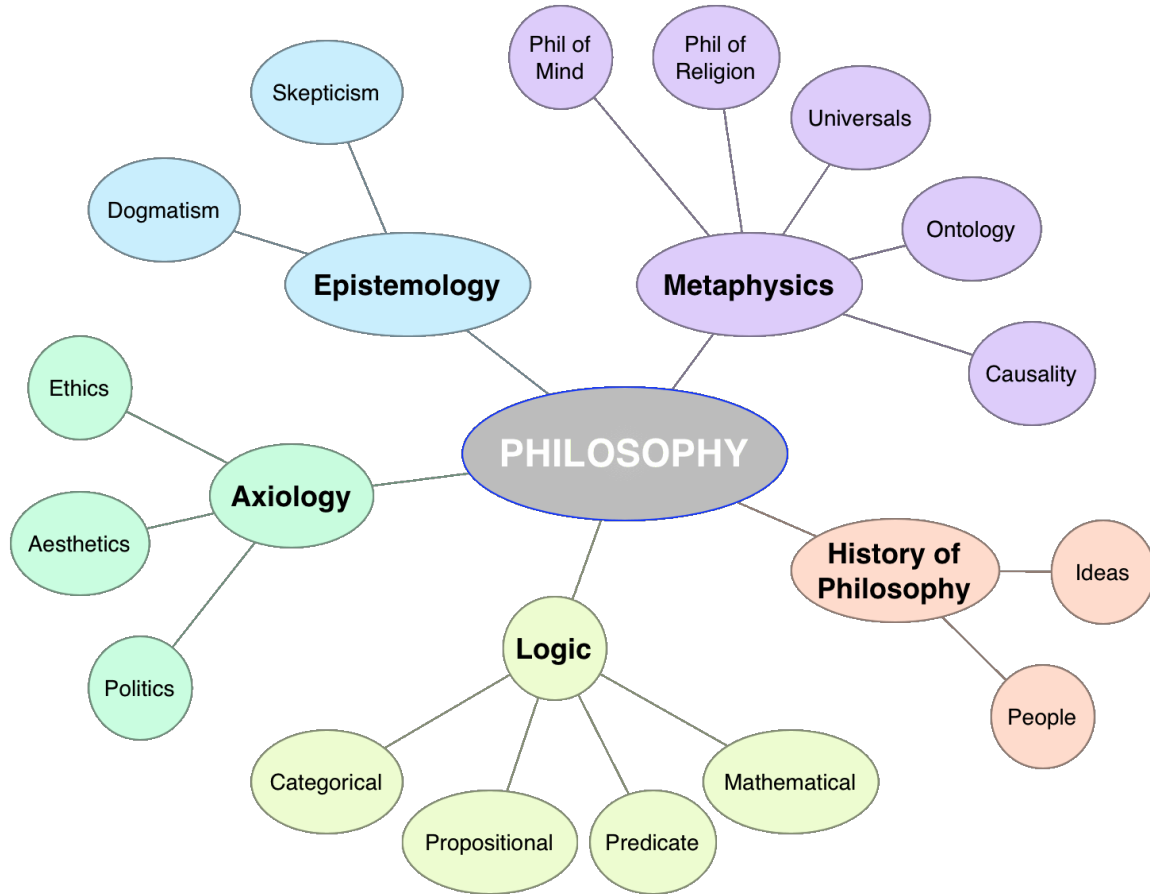
What makes an argument work?

What makes an argument fail?

**History of Philosophy** – the *philosophical* examination of the development of *ideas*

People – what did philosophers of the past think about and why?

Ideas – how do ideas arise over time and influence the development of new ideas in the future?



These are the main *topics* or *problems* in Philosophy. Thinking about it in this way helps us understand why it is an academic discipline (i.e., an area of concentration in higher education). In the academic world, the word ‘philosophy’ is very much like the word ‘science’: it covers a wide variety of distinct, but related topics. But, as you can see, the field of Philosophy is more broad than Science because it has *more* primary subdisciplines (Science only has three: Physics, Chemistry, and Biology).

Unlike other academic disciplines, Philosophy also has a profoundly personal dimension. Many, if not most, people will—at some point in their life—struggle with philosophical questions. “Why am I here?” “Why do bad things happen?” “Is there consciousness beyond the death of the body?” “How do I know when I can trust my senses or the testimony of other people?” “Are the choices I make really free, and will they have an impact on my future?” And, of course, there’s the old classic from “The Breakfast Club,” “who am I?” Being aware of these questions, struggling with possible answers, considering how others have tried to answer them makes up the personal dimension of Philosophy.

In the readings that follow, and over the course of this semester, we will explore some of these questions both in their historical and contemporary contexts. The material we will be reading and discussing in class is aimed to help introduce you to, and guide you through this very cursory introduction to Philosophy as an academic discipline and way of life.

In the following unit we are going to confine ourselves to one simple question: ***What is Philosophy?*** We are going to examine that question from a number of perspectives including, where the word itself came from, when Philosophy (as we think of it) started and why, and how three different paradigmatic philosophers can help us to better understand what it is all about.