

Session Title

What are Philosophical Questions?

Session Description

It is the goal of any philosophy course to develop students' ability to *think like philosophers*. The first step in being able to *think* like a philosopher is being able to *react* like a philosopher and that typically involves *asking the questions* a philosopher would ask. The difficulty we have in teaching students how to philosophize may be rooted in the fact that students don't know how to respond philosophically to what they read. If we can teach them how to do ask the questions philosophers would ask, perhaps we can then teach the further stages of philosophical thinking.

This material that forms the subject of this session grows out of my attempts to teach students how to ask philosophical questions. I plan to do three things in this session: (a) Discuss with the people attending the session just what are the distinguishing marks of philosophical questions, (b) Exhibit some data collected during a number of my classes which shows what sort of questions students think count as "philosophical" questions, and (c) discuss strategies for helping students to recognize, appreciate, and figure out how to go about answering, philosophical questions. Let me say a little bit more about each of these pieces of the session.

I think we all have a sense of what a philosophical question is, even if there is not a bright line between philosophical questions and those which don't count as philosophical, and even if we don't have a rigorous definition of them. It may be a "family resemblance" notion, but I think there is deep pedagogical value in trying to identify some distinguishing characteristics of such questions, and plan to enlist the session attendees in working collectively to do just that. The rise of experimental philosophy puts pressure on the notion of what counts as a philosophical question, inasmuch as one way of characterizing such questions holds that a question which can be answered

empirically is, *ipso facto*, not philosophical,¹ and I'm hoping that some of the attendees who have experience with experimental philosophy will have interesting contributions to make to this part of the session. I also plan to share with the attendees a rubric I have drafted to assess the extent to which a question is a philosophical one. I would value very much their feedback on that rubric.

For a couple of years, I have collected students views of what philosophical questions are. On the first day of class, and then again on the last day of class, I ask the students to pose some questions on a particular topic. I further ask them to label some of those questions as “philosophical”. I thus have a set of data which allows me to compare their view of philosophical questions before the course has begun, and then again at the completion of the course. In the second part of the session I plan to share this data with the attendees, both to show them common points of student confusion (students frequently confuse psychological questions with philosophical questions, for example), and evidence of student improvement.

The third part of the session will be discussion based. Among the questions that I would like to pose to the attendees are these: What strategies do they employ for helping students to understand the nature of philosophical questions? Do they think that focusing on philosophical questions is a valuable way to explain the nature of philosophy to students? Are there ways to move from an exploration of the nature of philosophical questions to an examination of the methods philosophers deploy to *answer* those questions?

References

Chin, C., Brown, D.E., & Bruce, B.C. (2002). Student-generated questions: a meaningful aspect of learning in science. *International Journal of Science Education*, 24, 521-549.

¹ So, for instance, consider this from John Hospers: “Everyone seems to agree on one thing, that if a question can be answered *empirically*, by the use of the senses, by seeing, hearing, touching, or the other senses, or setting up experiments, it is not a philosophical question.” *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), p. 4.

Graesser, A.C., & Person, N.K. (1994). Question asking during tutoring. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31, 104-137.

Graesser, A.C., Person, N. K., & Huber, J. D. (1992). Mechanisms that generate questions. In T.E. Lauer, E. Peacock, & A.C. Graeser (Eds.), *Questions and information systems* (pp 167-187). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Marbach-Ad, G., & Sokolove, P.G. (2000a). Can undergraduate biology students learn to ask higher level questions? *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 37, 854-870.

Marbach-Ad, G., & Sokolove, P.G. (2000b). Good science begins with good questions. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 30, 192-195.

Middendorf, J., & Pace, D. (2004). Decoding the disciplines: a model for helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 98, 1-12.

Handouts

Handouts include (a) an example of the pre- and post-course question asking assignment (b) the draft of the rubric for assessing the extent to which a question is a philosophical one, and (c) some summary of the data about the extent to which students improve in their abilities to ask philosophical questions.

Equipment

A data projector/computer for a PowerPoint and a chalkboard/whiteboard would be all that I need.