

What is Philosophy?

The Basics (Definitions & Divisions)

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Philosophy as a Discipline, Philosophy as an Activity

- Aetius (Greek doxographer, 1st cent. CE):
 - “The Stoics said that wisdom is knowledge of the divine and the human, and that philosophy is the practice (*askēsis*) of expertise (*technē*) in what is suitable. Virtue (a.k.a., excellence) singly and its highest is what is suitable, and virtues at their most generic are tripartite: physical, ethical, and logical.
 - “For this reason, philosophy too has three parts: physics, ethics, and logic. Physics is practiced whenever we investigate the cosmos and the contents of the cosmos; ethics is our engagement with human life; and logic is our engagement with discourse (*logos*), which they also call dialectic.”
- “Event-makers” as the elements of any activity or discipline:

Agent
Patient (domain, subject-matter)
Instrument (method)
+ <u>Beneficiary (purpose, “that for the sake of which”)</u>
= Event/Activity (discipline)

- Questions for our investigation:
 - What has traditionally been included within philosophy?
 - What definition(s) make these things a unified discipline or activity?

Parts, Divisions, & Scope

- Logic, physics, and ethics. (*Stoics, and Hellenistic philosophers in general.*)
- Theoretical and practical. (*Platonic philosophers; a parallel division in India.*)
- Instruments of knowledge, and objects of knowledge. (*Main parts of any darśana in India.*)
- Philosophy has the widest domain, including:
 - All of human life and experience.
 - The entire cosmos.
 - All the other arts and sciences—including their subject-matter, methods, and goals.
- Philosophy has the most general (or, most universal) goal/purpose:
 - Truth.
 - Goodness. (*We always need to ask: “Whose good?”*)
 - Freedom?

Definitions from the Alexandrian Platonists

- Our sources: Elias and David, students of Olympiodorus (late 6th cent. CE).
- Based on the subject-matter:
 1. Philosophy is knowledge of real things *qua* real things.
 2. Philosophy is knowledge of divine and human things.
- Based on the goal:
 3. Philosophy is a preparation for death.
 4. Philosophy is becoming like God, insofar as possible for man.
(*equivalently: Philosophy is becoming like the Gods, insofar as possible for human beings.*)
- Based on superiority:
 5. Philosophy is the craft of crafts (or, the art of arts) and the science of sciences.
(*Both 'craft' and 'art' attempt to translate technē, which was 'expertise' in Aetius' quote.*)
 - Philosophy is the greatest kind of music.
- Based on etymology:
 6. Philosophy is the love (*philia*) of wisdom (*sophia*).
 - Lloyd Gerson: Wisdom is “life-enhancing understanding of the cosmos.”

Some Additional Approaches

- Philosophy is a way of life.
 - Practice, training, etc.: *askēsis* (in Aetius' quote).
- Philosophy is the working out of a conceptual scheme.
- Philosophy is a cosmogonic act.
 - Cosmogony: bringing to birth a cosmos (literally, an ordered whole).
 - Philosophy brings a conceptual scheme (further, more fully) into being.
- Self-examination, and proper self-knowledge, are the foundation of philosophy.



Some Divisions of Philosophy

Alexandrian Platonists		Stoics, Hellenistic	India	Modern
[Logic is considered to be a <u>tool</u> of philosophy, rather than a <u>part</u> of philosophy.]		Logic	Study of Instruments of Knowledge (<i>Pramāṇavāda</i>)	Epistemology
Theoretical Philosophy Goal: Truth.	1) Physics/Natural Science: <i>studies completely material beings.</i> 2) Mathematics: <i>studies beings that are material in one way, but immaterial in another.</i> 3) Theology: <i>studies completely immaterial beings.</i>	Physics: 1) The cosmos. 2) The elements. 3) Their causes.	Study of Objects of Knowledge (<i>Prameyavāda</i>)	Logic
				Philosophy of Mind
				Metaphysics (≈ Stoics' #3?)
Practical Philosophy Goal: The Good.	Divisions by subject matter (Aristotle): 1) Ethics 2) Economics 3) Politics	Divisions by activity (Platonists): 1) Legislation 2) Jurisdiction	Ethics	[With certain limited exceptions, these "applied" domains tend to be given to different thinkers—not the people doing the above two items.]
				Ethics
				Political Philosophy
				Aesthetics

“Physics” translates the Greek term “*to phusikon*,” which comes from the word *phusis* (or *physis*), meaning “nature.”

Notes

The **definitions of philosophy** given by the Alexandrian Platonists are not original to them. Elias and David both point this out, and indicate the sources from which each definition originates:

- Definitions 1, 2, and 6 all come from Pythagoras.
- Definitions 3 and 4, as well as the unnumbered “extra” definition, are from Plato:
 - “Preparation for death” is the subject of Plato’s *Phaedo* (stated explicitly at 64a).
 - “Becoming like God insofar as possible for man” comes from Plato’s *Theaetetus* (176a).
 - The “extra” definition, “the greatest kind of music” also appears in Plato’s *Phaedo* (61a).
- Definition 5 is from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Book I, chapter 2 (982a).

The foundational role of **knowing oneself**, as the first and most crucial step in pursuing philosophy, is addressed directly and movingly in Plato’s *Alcibiades*. So it’s no accident that this is the first Platonic dialogue that students in Alexandria would study!

The opening quotation from Aetius is from Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 26A, modified. For the Stoics’ relative ranking/ordering of the different parts of philosophy, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* VII.39–41 (quoted in Long & Sedley, 26B).

Lloyd Gerson’s definition of wisdom is from his book *From Plato to Platonism* (p. 20), which is a highly technical work, not really intended for beginners.

Readings & Resources

One of the best ways to get a sense of what philosophy is all about is simply to start *doing* it: engaging with specific philosophical ideas, arguments, and ways of living. It’s at that point that we move from simply being doxographers, to actually being philosophers. We’ll be offering some suggestions for how to approach some of those specific ideas, arguments, and ways of living in the next three workshops in this series, and in nearly all of the workshops, walks, classes, and other events we organize at Merlin. That said, some resources for today’s themes include:

For beginning the study of philosophy, and especially the question of “knowing oneself”:

- The trilogy of Platonic dialogues, which were the beginning of the traditional curriculum: *Alcibiades*, *Gorgias*, and *Phaedo*, in that order. There are many different translations available.

For the Alexandrian Platonists, Elias and David, whose work we discussed in the workshop:

- *Elias and David: Introductions to Philosophy, with Olympiodorus: Introduction to Logic*. Translated by Sebastian Gertz. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

For the Stoic divisions of philosophy:

- Seneca, *Letter 89*. In *Seneca: Letters on Ethics*. Translated by Margaret Graves and A.A. Long. University of Chicago Press, 2015. (Or see the second volume of [this much older translation](#), now available in the public domain.)

Another way in to really understanding how the Stoics’ three-part division of philosophy unfolded in the Hellenistic period, is through Books II and III of the great skeptical treatise:

- Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Scepticism*. Translated by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Sextus uses the division of philosophy into logic, physics, and ethics as the structure of Books II and III, and compiles a wide range of arguments from various philosophical schools, which provide a good sense of what was going on within each of these domains.

For the Pythagoreans, and Pythagorean philosophy as a way of life:

- *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*. Compiled and translated by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie. Edited and introduced by David Fideler. Phanes Press, 1987.

Karl Potter makes his case for “freedom” (rather than truth or goodness) as the overarching goal of philosophy in India, in his book:

- Karl H. Potter. *Presuppositions of India’s Philosophies*. Prentice Hall, 1963. [variously reprinted]