

# What Makes Philosophers Tick?

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## 1. Perennial problems

Philosophy is driven by persistent problems: questions that, in one way or another, have preoccupied philosophers for more than two thousand years. If these characteristic problems could have been resolved in a more or less entirely satisfactory way, they would simply have lost their philosophical status. This has happened in the past: when it happens this usually signals the beginning of a new science.

Among these perennial problems are:

**Nonbeing:** The problem of how to characterize nonexistence.

**Skepticism:** The problem of how we can know anything.

**Moral Relativism:** The problem of how anything can be good or right, and how what is good and right can be distinguished from what is valued (by some group) or praised (by some group).

The second and third of these problems are natural enough and might occur to anyone, but the first may need some motivation.

Why, if your philosophical interest is *ontology*—the study of what there is—should you bother to think about nonexistence? Why not inventory the contents of the world by providing taxonomic information: first the most general categories of things, and then subheadings, going into as much detail as you like? The answer to “What is there?” is just “Anything that falls into one of the categories.” There is no need to add a separate account of nonexistence—of what there isn’t—because that’s what is left out. There are no unicorns because according to our inventory no animal is a unicorn. There are no numbers that are even and odd because no number can be both.

The difficulty with this is that we can think, and talk, about nonexistents. Although there are no unicorns, someone can easily believe, and say, that she saw one. And what she believes, and says, is different from what someone who thinks they saw a mermaid believes and says. But how can these beliefs be different if they aren’t about different things—aren’t about anything at all?

From this exercise we can see not only that it might be difficult for an ontologist to avoid having to giving an account of nonexistence, but that questions of ontology can connect to issues having to do with epistemology and semantics: with, for instance, believing and saying.

You might suspect that a solution to the semantic problem—a satisfactory account of how we can make sense of linguistic claims about nonexistents—would help with the epistemological problem, since saying something and believing something look very similar.

So this example helps us to understand why many philosophers, hoping for insights into large and characteristically philosophical problems, have become obsessed with questions about language. It also explains why philosophy of language often concentrates on questions that probably wouldn't occur to linguists, and why much of it is difficult to distinguish from philosophy in general.

## 2. Position proliferation

Philosophers use an adversarial method to develop and refine their ideas. They (1) make a proposal, then (2) consider how best to attack it, then (3) think about how to defend it against the attacks, and finally (4) use the results of this process to revise the original proposal. This process can, of course, be iterated. After enough of these iterations, a fairly simple point can become so elaborated and qualified that it is difficult to understand what it means, or why it could have occurred to anyone. This, of course, can make research papers in philosophy difficult to read; fortunately, the best philosophers are good at overcoming this difficulty in communicating ideas.

Often, philosophical claims are strategic, and will consist of many more or less connected subclaims. Such constellations of ideas are called *positions*. Philosophical positions evolve and are refined by an adversarial process. But with positions this process is usually social and involves groups of philosophers, and this can lead to a proliferation of similar positions, as different philosophers disagree about how best to respond to a counterclaim and the original position is refined in different ways. This process too can iterate.

Philosophers like to name positions, usually with words ending in '-ism'. In this course, we'll encounter—and need to understand—positions like *modal realism*, *contextualism*, and *moral relativism*.