

What is Philosophy?

Originally translated from the Greek as 'love of wisdom' (philos = love; sofia = wisdom), philosophy is better characterised today as the study of thought or, as the contemporary philosopher A.C. Grayling puts it: "thinking about thinking." In this way, philosophy encourages us to strive for logical rigour and clarity in relation to both the arguments of others and one's own thoughts; it is, as such, work on oneself as much as anything else. Philosophy is a unique discipline in that it has no subject matter of its own.

Recently however, public figures such as Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins have suggested that philosophy is a redundant discipline with nothing further to offer. In making such claims however, they are actually invoking the very discipline whose redundancy they announce.

Questions concerning the value of science are, fundamentally, philosophical questions not scientific ones, but because they are such common currency in everyday conversation, the fact that they are philosophical, as opposed to scientific, tends to get forgotten. Similarly, judgements about legal processes are based on philosophical positions and presuppositions, even if those philosophical foundations remain (as they frequently do) unspecified. In this course there is only time to deal with the most prominent themes but there are many fascinating branches of philosophy such as philosophy of history and philosophy of literature.

Each of these branches examines the different ways of thinking that characterise these various disciplines.