We can get a better understanding of philosophy by considering what sorts of things other than scientific issues humans might inquire into. Philosophical issues are as diverse and far ranging as those we find in the sciences, but a great many of them fall into one of three big topic areas, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

Metaphysics

Metaphysical issues are concerned with the nature of reality. Traditional metaphysical issues include the existence of God and the nature of human free will (assuming we have any). Here are a few metaphysical questions of interest to contemporary philosophers: What is a thing? How are space and time related? Does the past exist? How about the future? How many dimensions does the world have? Are there any entities beyond physical objects (like numbers, properties, and relations)? If so, how are they related to physical objects? Historically, many philosophers have proposed and defended specific metaphysical positions, often as part of systematic and comprehensive metaphysical views. But attempts to establish systematic metaphysical world views have been notoriously unsuccessful. Since the 19th century many philosophers and scientists have been understandably suspicious of metaphysics, and it has frequently been dismissed as a waste of time, or worse, as meaningless. But in just the past few decades metaphysics has returned to vitality. As difficult as they are to resolve, metaphysical issues are also difficult to ignore for long. Contemporary analytic metaphysics is typically taken to have more modest aims than definitively settling on the final and complete truth about the underlying nature of reality. A better way to understand metaphysics as it is currently practiced is as aiming at better understanding how various claims about the reality logically hang together or conflict. Metaphysicians analyze metaphysical puzzles and problems with the goal of better understanding how things could or could not be. Metaphysicians are in the business of exploring the realm of possibility and necessity. They are explorers of logical space.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and justified belief. What is knowledge? Can we have any knowledge at all? Can we have knowledge about the laws of nature, the laws or morality, or the existence of other minds? The view that we can't have knowledge is called skepticism. An extreme form of skepticism denies that we can have any knowledge whatsoever. But we might grant that we can have knowledge about some things and remain skeptics concerning other issues. Many people, for instance, are not skeptics about scientific knowledge, but are skeptics when it comes to knowledge of morality. Later in this course we will entertain some skeptical worries about science and we will consider whether ethics is really in a more precarious position. Some critical attention reveals that scientific knowledge and moral knowledge face many of the same skeptical challenges and share some similar resources in addressing those challenges. Many of the popular reasons for being more skeptical about morality than science turn on philosophical confusions we will address and attempt to clear up. Even if we lack absolute and certain knowledge of many things, our

beliefs about those things might yet be more or less reasonable or more or less likely to be true given the limited evidence we have. Epistemology is also concerned with what it is for a belief to be rationally justified. Even if we can't have certain knowledge of anything (or much), questions about what we ought to believe remain relevant.

Ethics

While epistemology is concerned with what we ought to believe and how we ought to reason, Ethics is concerned with what we ought to do, how we ought to live, and how we ought to organize our communities. Sadly, it comes as a surprise to many new philosophy students that you can reason about such things. Religiously inspired views about morality often take right and wrong to be simply a matter of what is commanded by a divine being. Moral Relativism, perhaps the most popular opinion among people who have rejected faith, simply substitutes the commands of society for the commands of God. Commands are simply to be obeyed, they are not to be inquired into, assessed for reasonableness, or tested against the evidence. Thinking of morality in terms of whose commands are authoritative leaves no room for rational inquiry into how we ought to live, how we ought to treat others, or how we ought to structure our communities. Philosophy, on the other hand, takes seriously the possibility of rational inquiry into these matters. If philosophy has not succeeded in coming up with absolutely certain and definitive answer in ethics, this is in part because philosophers take the answers to moral questions to be things we need to discover, not simply matters of somebody's say so. The long and difficult history of science should give us some humble recognition of how difficult and frustrating careful inquiry and investigation can be. So we don't know for certain what the laws of morality are. We also don't have a unified field theory in physics. Why expect morality to be any easier? So we might think of metaphysics as concerned with "What is it?" questions, epistemology as concerned with "How do we know?" questions, and ethics as concerned with "What should we do about it?" questions. Many interesting lines of inquiry cut across these three kinds of questions. The philosophy of science, for instance, is concerned with metaphysical issues about what science is, but also with epistemological questions about how we can know scientific truths. The philosophy of love is similarly concerned with metaphysical questions about what love is. But it also concerned with questions about the value of love that are more ethical in character. Assorted tangled vines of inquiry branch off from the three major trunks of philosophy, intermingle between them, and ultimately with scientific issues as well. The notion that some branches of human inquiry can proceed entirely independent of others ultimately becomes difficult to sustain. The scientist who neglects philosophy runs the same risk of ignorance as the philosopher who neglects science.

History of philosophy

The Presocratics

In the Iliad and the Odyssey, the early Ionian epic poet Homer offers a view of the world as under the influence of the Olympian gods. The Olympian gods were much like humans, capricious and willful. In the Homeric view of the world, human qualities are projected onto the world via human-like gods. Here explanation of the natural world is modeled on explanation of human behavior. This marks the world view of the epic poets as pre-philosophical and prescientific. However, even in the early epic poems we find a moral outlook that is key to the scientific and philosophical frame of mind. In Homer and in later Greek tragedy, we find stories of the grief that human hubris brings upon us. The repeated warnings against human pride and arrogance make a virtue out of humility. Intellectual humility involves recognizing the fallibility of human thought, in particular one's own. The willingness to submit one's own opinions to rational scrutiny is essential to moving beyond the realm of myth and into the realm of philosophy and science. Intellectual humility makes it possible to see the world and one's place in it as a matter for discovery rather than a matter of self-assertion.

The Melisians

The beginning of philosophy in ancient Greece is often given as 585 B.C., the year that the Milesian philosopher Thales predicted a solar eclipse. Thales brings a new naturalistic approach to explaining the world. That is, his proposed explanations for natural phenomenon are given in terms of more fundamental natural phenomenon, not in supernatural terms. The step away from supernatural myth and towards understanding the natural world on its own terms is a major development. Thales is interested in the fundamental nature of the world and arrives at the view that the basic substance of the world is water. His reason for thinking that water is fundamental is that of the four recognized elements - earth, air, fire and water - only water can take the form of a solid, liquid, or a gas. According to Thales, earth is really water that is even more concentrated than ice and fire is really water that is more rarified than steam. While his view sounds absurd to us, the significance of his contribution is not the specific answer he gives to the question of the ultimate nature of the world, but how he proposes to answer this question. Thales takes an important step away from projecting ourselves onto the world through myth and superstition and towards explanations that invite further investigation of the world as it is independent of human will

Pythagoras (fl. 525-500 B.C.) traveled in Egypt where he learned astronomy and

geometry. His thought represents a peculiar amalgam of hardnosed mathematical thinking and creative but rather kooky superstition. Pythagoras holds that all things consist of numbers. He saw mathematics as a purifier of the soul. Thinking about numbers takes one's attention off of particular things and elevates the mind to the realm of the eternal. Scientific thinking, on this view, is not so far from meditation. Pythagoras is responsible for the Pythagorean Theorem which tells us that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the remaining sides. He also discerned how points in space can define shapes, magnitudes, and forms:

1 point defines location

2 points define a line

3 points define a plane

4 points define solid

3 dimensional objects

Pythagoras introduces the concept of form.

The earlier Milesians only addressed the nature of matter, the stuff of the universe. A full account of the nature of the world must also address the various forms that underlying stuff takes. Form implies limits. For Pythagoras, this is understandable in numerical terms. Number represents the application of limit (form) to the unlimited (matter). The notion of form takes on greater sophistication and importance in the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Pythagoras led a cult that held some rather peculiar religious beliefs. The more popular beliefs in the Homeric gods are not concerned with salvation or spiritual purification. There was the Dionysian religion, which sought spiritual purification and immortality through drunken carnal feasts and orgies. Pythagorean religious belief also aims at purification and immortality, but without the intoxication and sex. Pythagoras founded a religious society based on the following precepts: that at its deepest level, reality is mathematical in nature• that philosophy can be used for spiritual purification• that the soul can rise to union with the divine• that certain symbols have a mystical significance• that all brothers of the order should observe strict loyalty and secrecy• Members of the inner circle were strict communist vegetarians. They were also not allowed to eat beans. Pythagoras might have done well in Ballard. The last of the Milesians we will discuss is Heraclitus. Heraclitus (544-484 B.C.) was born in Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor. He is best known for his doctrine of eternal flux according to which everything undergoes perpetual change. "One can never step in the same river twice." The underlying substance of the world is fire or heat according to Heraclitus. This is the leaststable of the elements and explains the transitoriness of all things. Everything is a kindling or extinguishing of fire. While everything is in a continual state of flux, this change is not without order. Heraclitus saw Logos or rational order as essential to the world. Changes are injustices, which by natural necessity are redressed in further changes. Heraclitus held ethical views worth

noting as well. The good life involves understanding and accepting the necessity of strife and change. The Sophists Most of early Greek philosophy prior to the Sophists was concerned with the natural world. The desire to explain an underlying reality required natural philosophers to speculate beyond what is observable and they lacked any developed critical method for adjudicating between rival theories of substance change or being. In this situation, it is easy to see how many might grow impatient with natural philosophy and adopt the skeptical view that reason simply cannot reveal truths beyond our immediate experience. But reason might still have practical value in that it allows the skilled arguer to advance his interests. The Sophists were the first professional educators. For a fee, they taught students how to argue for the practical purpose of persuading others and winning their way. While they were well acquainted with and taught the theories of philosophers, they were less concerned with inquiry and discovery than with persuasion. Pythagoras and Heraclitus had offered some views on religion and the good life. Social and moral issues come to occupy the center of attention for the Sophists. Their tendency towards skepticism about the capacity of reason to reveal truth and their cosmopolitan circumstances, which exposed them to a broad range of social customs and codes, lead the Sophists to take a relativist stance on ethical matters. The Sophist's lack of interest in knowing the truth for its own sake and their entrepreneurial interest in teaching argument for the sake of best serving their client's interests leads Plato to derisively label the Sophists as "shopkeepers with spiritual wares." One of the better known Sophists, Protagoras (481-411 B.C.), authored several books including, Truth, or the Rejection (the rejection of science and philosophy), which begins with his bestknown quote, "man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are, of those that are not that they are not." Knowledge, for Protagoras is reducible to perception. Since different individuals perceive the same things in different ways, knowledge is relative to the knower. This is a classic expression of epistemic relativism. Accordingly, Protagoras rejects any objectively knowable morality and takes ethics and law to be conventional inventions of civilizations, binding only within societies and holding only relative to societies.

Socrates

Socrates is widely regarded as the founder of philosophy and rational inquiry. He was born around 470 B.C., and tried and executed in 399 B.C.. Socrates was the first of the three major Greek philosophers; the others being Socrates' student Plato and Plato's student Aristotle.

Socrates did not write anything himself. We know of his views primarily through Plato's dialogues where Socrates is the primary character. Socrates is also known through plays of Aristophanes and the historical writings of Xenophon. In many of Plato's dialogues it is difficult to determine when Socrates' views are being represented and when the character of Socrates is used as a mouthpiece for Plato's views. Socrates was well known in Athens. He was eccentric, poor, ugly, brave, stoic, and temperate. He was a distinguished veteran who fought bravely on Athens' behalf and was apparently

indifferent to the discomforts of war. Socrates claimed to hear a divine inner voice he called his daimon and he was prone to go into catatonic states of concentration. The conflicting views of the Ionian and Eleatic philosophers of nature encouraged skepticism about our ability to obtain knowledge through rational inquiry. Among the Sophists, this skepticism is manifested in epistemic and Moral Relativism. Epistemic relativism is the view that there is no objective standard for evaluating the truth or likely truth of our beliefs. Rather, epistemic standards of reasoning are relative to one's point of view and interests. Roughly, this is the view that what is true for me might not be true for you (when we are not just talking about ourselves). Epistemic relativism marks no distinction between knowledge, belief, or opinion on the one hand, and truth and reality on the other. To take a rather silly example, if I think it's Tuesday, then that's what's true for me; and if you think it's Thursday, then that's what is true for you. In cases like this, epistemic relativism seems quite absurd, yet many of us have grown comfortable with the notion that, say, beliefs about the moral acceptability of capital punishment might be true for some people and not for others. Moral Relativism is the parallel doctrine about moral standards. The moral relativist takes there to be no objective grounds for judging some ethical opinions to be correct and others not. Rather, ethical judgments can only be made relative to one or another system of moral beliefs and no system can be evaluated as objectively better than another. Since earlier attempts at rational inquiry had produced conflicting results, the Sophists held that no opinion could be said to constitute knowledge. According to the Sophists, rather than providing grounds for thinking some beliefs are true and others false, rational argument can only be fruitfully employed as rhetoric, the art of persuasion. For the epistemic relativist, the value of reason lies not in revealing the truth, but in advancing one's interests. The epistemic and Moral Relativism of the Sophist has become popular again in recent years and has an academic following in much "postmodern" writing. Socrates was not an epistemic or moral relativist. He pursued rational inquiry as a means of discovering the truth about ethical matters. But he did not advance any ethical doctrines or lay claim to any knowledge about ethical matters. Instead, his criticism of the Sophists and his contribution to philosophy and science came in the form of his method of inquiry

As the Socratic Method is portrayed in Plato's Socratic dialogues, interlocutor proposes a definition or analysis of some important concept, Socrates raises an objection or offers counter examples, then the interlocutor reformulates his position to handle the objection. Socrates raises a more refined objection. Further reformulations are offered, and so forth. Socrates uses the dialectic to discredit others' claims to knowledge. While revealing the ignorance of his interlocutors, Socrates also shows how to make progress towards more adequate understanding. A good example of the Socratic Method at work can be found in one of Plato's early Socratic dialogues, Euthyphro. Here is a link: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1642. Here is Euthyphro as an audiobook: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/19840. In Plato's dialogues we often find Socrates asking about the nature of something and then critically examine proposed answers, finding assorted illuminating objections that often suggest next steps. In this dialogue, Socrates and Euthyphro are discussing the nature of piety or holiness. Socrates and

Euthyphro never conclusively discover what piety is, but they learn much about how various attempts to define piety fail. The dialogue works the same if we substitute moral goodness for piety. Understood in this way, Euthyphro provides a classic argument against Divine Command Theory, a view about the nature of morality that says that what is right is right simply because it is commanded by God. Socrates would not have us believe our questions have no correct answers. He is genuinely seeking the truth of the matter. But he would impress on us that inquiry is hard and that untested claims to knowledge amount to little more than vanity. Even though Euthyphro and Socrates don't achieve full knowledge of the nature of piety, their understanding is advanced through testing the answers that Euthyphro suggests. We come to see why piety can't be understood just by identifying examples of it. While examples of pious acts fail to give us a general understanding of piety, the fact that we can identify examples of what is pious suggests that we have some grasp of the notion even in the absence of a clear understanding of it. After a few failed attempts to define piety, Euthyphro suggests that what is pious is what is loved by the gods (all of them, the Greeks recognized quite a few). Many religious believers continue to hold some version of Divine Command Theory. In his response to Euthyphro, Socrates points us towards a rather devastating critique of this view and any view that grounds morality in authority. Socrates asks whether what is pious is pious because the gods love it or whether the gods love what is pious because it is pious. Let's suppose that the gods agree in loving just what is pious. The question remains whether their loving the pious explains its piety or whether some things being pious explains why the gods love them. Once this question of what is supposed to explain what is made clear, Euthyphro agrees with Socrates that the gods love what is pious because it is pious. The problem with the alternative view, that what is pious is pious because it is loved by the gods, is that this view makes piety wholly arbitrary. Anything could be pious if piety is just a matter of being loved by the gods. If the gods love puppy torture, then this would be pious. Hopefully this seems absurd. Neither Socrates nor Euthyphro is willing to accept thatwhat is pious is completely arbitrary. At this point, Socrates points out to Euthyphro that since an act's being pious is what explains why the gods love it, he has failed to give an account of what piety is. The explanation can't run in both directions. In taking piety to explain being loved by the gods, we are left lacking an explanation of what piety itself is. Euthyphro gives up shortly after this failed attempt and walks off in a huff. If we substitute talk of God making things right or wrong by way of commanding them for talk of the gods loving what is pious in this exchange of ideas, we can readily see that Divine Command Theory has the rather unsavory result that torturing innocent puppies would be right if God commanded it. We will return to this problem when we take up ethical theory later in the course. While we don't reach the end of inquiry into piety (or goodness) in Euthyphro, we do make discernible progress in coming to see why a few faulty accounts must be set aside. Socrates does not refute the skeptic or the relativist Sophist by claiming to discover the truth about anything. What he does instead is show us how to engage in rational inquiry and show us how we can make progress by taking the possibility of rational inquiry seriously. Apology This dialogue by Plato is a

dramatization of Socrates' defense at his trial for corrupting the youth among other things. Socrates tells the story of his friend Chaerophon who visits the Oracle of Delphi and asks if anyone in Athens is wiser than Socrates. The Oracle answered that no one is wiser than Socrates. Socrates is astounded by this and makes it his mission in life to test and understand the Oracle's pronouncement. He seeks out people who have a reputation for wisdom in various regards and tests their claims to knowledge through questioning. He discovers a good deal of vain ignorance and false claims to knowledge, but no one with genuine wisdom. Ultimately, Socrates concludes that he is wisest, but not because he possesses special knowledge not had by others. Rather, he finds that he is wisest because he recognizes his own lack of knowledge while others think they know, but do not. Of course people generally, and alleged experts especially, are quite happy to think that what they believe is right. We tend to be content with our opinions and we rather like it when others affirm this contentment by agreeing with us, deferring to our claims to know or at least by "respecting our opinion" (whatever that is supposed to mean). We are vain about our opinions even to the point of self identifying with them (I'm the guy who is right about this or that). Not claiming to know, Socrates demonstrates some intellectual humility in allowing that his opinions might be wrong and being willing to subject them to examination. But in critically examining various opinions, including those of the supposed experts, he pierces the vanity of many of Athens' prestigious citizens. Engaging in rational inquiry is dangerous business, and Socrates is eventually brought up on charges of corrupting the youth who liked to follow him around and listen to him reveal people's claims to knowledge as false pride. The Apology documents Socrates' defense of his of behavior and the Athenian assembly's decision to sentence him to death