**Lecture Five: Philosophy and Ethics**

1. **Philosophy**

Philosophy is a subject within the humanities. Etymologically, it refers to the "love of wisdom". It is the study of fundamental questions about existence, knowledge or moral behaviour.

For example, 'What is the meaning of life?', 'What is knowledge and how do we get it?', 'By what rules should we lead our lives?'

Philosophers analyse these issues using a critical point of view rather than experiments. In other words, their analysis follows generally a systematic approach and relies on reasoned arguments.

* 1. **Branches of Philosophy**

The study of the very basis of reality and existence is a branch of philosophy called ***metaphysics****.* Metaphysics goes beyond what we can know just from physical evidence. For example, metaphysics asks whether there is a god or whether there are other dimensions of space or time beyond those we currently know of.

The study of knowledge itself is called ***epistemology***. It asks questions about knowledge, what it is, how we gain it and whether we can truly know what we think we know.

There is also a branch of philosophy that asks questions about our actions. For example, what the right way to behave is or how we should treat other people, animals or the environment. This is called ***ethics.*** We use ethics in our daily life, often without realising it. For example, we might reject a plastic bag from a shop because we believe plastic bags are bad for the environment. Or, we might not eat meat because we believe it is wrong to kill animals. In making these types of decisions we are thinking about what we believe is right or wrong, and why. We are making decisions about ethics.

In this lecture, we are going to shed light mainly on epistemology and ethics.

* + 1. **Epistemology**

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, how we gain it and how we know the things that we know. It considers whether we can know things to really be true or only believe them to be true. It also considers whether knowledge is something that we are born with or something that we learn through experience.

In Classical Greece, the philosopher Plato (428–347 BCE) described a story told by another philosopher called Socrates (470–399 BCE). He asked us to imagine prisoners that have always been chained up in a cave, facing the wall. There is a fire blazing behind them. People pass in front of the fire carrying models of things (see illustration below).

All the prisoners can see of reality are the shadows cast on the wall. One day, a prisoner escapes and leaves the cave. Outside, at first he is blinded by the light and colours. He slowly starts to see the things in reality that he had only seen as shadows before. He returns to the cave to tell the others about the real things he has seen outside. However, the other prisoners do not believe him and think he has gone mad. This allegory demonstrates the difference between what we believe we know through our senses, and what might actually be real.

**Rationalism**

René Descartes lived around 400 years ago. He asked, 'What can we truly be certain of?' He imagined a situation where all of our physical sensations, thoughts and memories could have been put into our minds by an 'evil genius'. Everything around us, and our experiences of them, might not be real. The evil genius is probably not true; however, this is an example of a 'thought experiment'.

Although Descartes doubted everything, the one thing that he could not doubt was that he doubted, and that, therefore, he existed. That led to him to the statement: 'I doubt, therefore I think, and therefore I am.' Like Plato, Descartes was a rationalist. Rationalists believe that knowledge is gained through thinking and reasoning rather than through our senses. For example, we know that adding two apples and two more apples equals four apples. Rationalists say that we do not actually need to see or hold any apples to know this is always true. Rationalists also believe that people are born with some pre-existing (innate) knowledge. **Empiricism**

About 300 years ago, the philosopher John Locke stated that it was not possible to know reality just through thinking and reasoning, as Plato or Descartes had claimed. He also argued that people are born without any pre-existing knowledge. To gain knowledge, Locke believed that people have to physically observe and experience things around them through their own senses. This belief – that we are born without knowledge and gain it through sense-based experience – is called empiricism. What is important about these ideas about knowledge is that they encourage us to think critically and question our understanding of the world around us. It is through this questioning that new knowledge, ideas, inventions and social change can happen.

**Practice**

**Exercise 1:** Answer the questions.

1. Which branch of philosophy studies how we gain knowledge?

2. Which branch of philosophy considers the question of whether we have a soul?

3. What are we doing when we think about the right way to treat other people?

4. Match questions a-c (below) to the three branches of philosophy.

a. Is it ever acceptable to tell a lie?

b. How can we be sure that we really know something?

c. Is there a part of us that lives on after we die?

**Exercise 2.** Read the thoughts in the left column. Decide which statement in the right column would be made by a rationalist thinker and which by an empiricist thinker. 2. Explain why you matched the statements to rationalism or empiricism

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| a. 'Where is my brother? He was here only a minute ago…' | i. 'I won't know where he is until I see him again.' ii. 'I know he must still be here.' |
| b. 'What will happen if I put my hand in the fire?' | i. 'It will probably hurt. Fires are very hot.' ii. 'I don't know. I will try it. Owwwww!' |
| c. 'I should know how to ride a bicycle but I have never ridden one.' | i. 'If I think about it how to do it for a very long time, I will be able to ride. I probably know how to do it anyway.' ii. 'I will get on this bicycle and see what happens…' |
| d. 'One plus one always equals two.' | i. 'No. I need to do the equation and check the result each time to know that it is true.' ii. 'Yes. If I know what is "one", and what is "plus", then I know that this is always true.' |

**Exercise 3.**

1. Read the following ideas, statements and actions and decide whether they relate to rationalism, empiricism or both, and why. Put them in the table.

a. The idea that children learn by observing their parents.

b. I only believe what I can see, hear or feel.

c. Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave'.

d. The belief that you are born with a little knowledge but learn most things through experience.

e. Using 'thought experiments' and then testing them with physical evidence.

f. Only believing evidence that includes facts and figures.

g. The idea that people are born without any knowledge and gain it through experience.

h. Descartes' statement that, 'I doubt, therefore I think, and therefore I am.'

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| Relates to Rationalism | Relates to Empiricism | Relates to Both |
|  | 1. Because empiricism uses senses to gain knowledge. This is what children do when they observe. |  |

**Exercise 4.**

1. Do you believe that: a) people are born with knowledge already in their minds or; b) they are born with no ideas and they get knowledge through experiences in their lives? Why?
2. Since language is one type of knowledge that humans acquire, Do you believe that: a) people are born with knowledge of language already in their minds or; b) they are born with nothing and they acquire language through imitating care takers? Why?

**Reference**

Jagger, S. & Simpson, M. (n.d.).Social Science and the Humanities : An introductory course for Myanmar learners.