

Philosophy of Technology MIDSEM Assignment

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Philosophy and Religion

Definitions

Let's look at definitions of Religion and Philosophy from Wikipedia, which are promisingly elaborate and comprehensible.

Religion

There is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion. It may be defined as a cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, which relate humanity to the supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual. Different religions may or may not contain various elements ranging from the divine, sacred things, faith, a supernatural being or supernatural beings or “some ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life”. Religious practices may include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration (of deities), sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trances, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, public service, or other aspects of human culture. Religions have sacred histories and narratives, which may be preserved in sacred scriptures, and symbols and holy places, that aim mostly to give a meaning to life. Religions may contain symbolic stories, which are sometimes said by followers to be true, that have the side purpose of explaining the origin of life, the Universe, and other things. Traditionally, faith, in addition to reason, has been considered a source of religious beliefs.

(“Religion - Wikipedia”)

Philosophy

Philosophy (from Greek φιλοσοφία, Philosophia, literally “love of wisdom”) is the study of general and fundamental problems concerning matters such as existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. . . . Philosophical methods include questioning, critical discussion, rational argument, and systematic presentation. Classic philosophical questions include: Is it possible to know anything and to prove it? What is most real? Philosophers also pose more practical and concrete questions such as: Is there a best way to live? Is it better to be just or unjust (if one can get away with it)? Do humans have free will?

(“Philosophy - Wikipedia”)

So, the definitions are indeed very elaborate and tend to be all-encompassing. Though there is no scholarly consensus about what these two terms mean, we will go with the broad general view that we all sort of primarily agree with. We can (more or less) characterize the contrast between philosophy and religion in the following way: philosophy is based on reason, evidence, and experience for its truths; religion depends on faith, authority, grace and the revelation of truth.

Concrete differences between Philosophy and Religion

Epistemological Differences

As two approaches to gain knowledge about and to explain our reality, philosophy and religion are broadly different in the following ways

- **Subjects**

Religion talks about why the reality is, why we are and what we ought to do. Religion often assumes the existence of an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent being (**essence** in Hegelian terms) and asserts that meaning of the human life (**appearance**) shines forth from the will of that being. Religion gives the human society a set of dogmas in the form of rituals/ customs about how to best lead a meaningful life, and often these dogmas are unquestionable.

Philosophy talks about much more broad topics and does not assume any given knowledge to be true. It generally encompasses of the disciplines like metaphysics (study of first principles and ontology), epistemology (study of the nature and scope knowledge), ethics (the study of values in human behavior or the study of moral problems), aesthetics (the study of value in the arts or the inquiry into feelings, judgments, or standards of beauty).

- **Toolset**

Religions are in general concocted stories about our reality and a set of guidelines to live a meaningful life. Religion thrives on collective belief of such stories and the interpersonal reality it thus creates. Religion relies highly on faith and obedience towards such *fiction* and promises that meaning to the human life arises from those set of dogmas only.

Philosophy, on the other hand, does not assume anything to *given* and questions everything. As Steven Pinker recently wrote in his book **Enlightenment Now**, Reason is non-negotiable in philosophy. Philosophy often borrows from and contributes to other branches of human endeavors and try to thrive with the most minimal set of axioms possible. Philosophy, at least in the modern times, highly relies on rationality, critical thinking, and scientific methods. ([Pinker](#))

Differences from a Historical point of view

- Over the past couple of millennia, Philosophy has raised some of the most profound and most important questions in human history. Philosophy has been an ever on-going and ever on-growing discipline. Most dogmatic organized religion, on the other hand, has been stagnant with the same old issues and hasn't contributed to the whole of human knowledge.
- Philosophy, as the mother of all disciplines, has offered entire systems of thinking and propagated human knowledge in unimaginable ways. For example, what we call contemporary science, started as the study of natural philosophy only.
- Religions apart from uniting people and providing temporary meaning to life has contributed severely negatively in the history by initiating war, xenophobia, mass hysteria and thus regimenting the development of reason, progress, science, and humanism.
- Philosophy has been empirically and pragmatically useful in the past several centuries as it tried to answer moral questions and gave frameworks for reasoning about what to value and why value that. For example, Humanism is the critical philosophical development that, we can argue, contributed significantly to the making of the contemporary world.

Broadening the Definitions

*The following section is highly influenced by Part II of Yuval Noah Harari's book **Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow**.* ([Harari](#)) Let's look at philosophy and religion from a different and broader perspective. In here, we introduce **science**, and consider philosophy and religion in relation to it.

It turns out, any religious story, from the historical reality, can be summarised as

1. Ethical judgments, such as 'human life is spiritual'.
2. Factual statements, such as 'human life begins at the moment of conception'.
3. A juxtaposition of the ethical judgments with the factual statements, resulting in practical guidelines such as 'you should never allow abortion, even a single day after conception'.

Science can deal with the factual statements and give us objective answers about its truth value. Not to say that science already has responses to all the accounts, but it can, in theory,

and has been remarkably successful at it. But, it can not talk about any ethical statements. No rule of physics or biology or whatever science can tell us that it is wrong to murder or rape a human being.

(Note: some philosophers, most notably, contemporary neuroscientist Sam Harris believe we can use science to answer moral questions. That discussion is beyond the scope of this answer.)

Science has over and over proven incorrectness of factual statements of religion with theories such as heliocentrism and evolution. The rigidity of religion didn't let it adapt to the contemporary worldview, and thus most religions became incompatible with the current world. Philosophy, on the other hand, came to rescue that issue and, in general, with a minimal set of assumptions, gave directions for minimizing human suffering and maximizing human flourishing.

Case Study - Humanism

We conclude our answer with a brief overview of how the philosophy of humanism gave meaning to the human life and made human flourishing possible to the unimaginable extent possible, compared to any previously organized religion, which also tried to provide meaning for the human life.

From our previous discussions, we can summarize that:

Religion: Knowledge = Scriptures x Logic
Science: Knowledge = Empirical Data x Mathematics

Now, the development of the ideals of **Enlightenment** and **Modernity** gave birth to the philosophy of **Humanism**, which provides a new equation:

Humanism: Knowledge = Experience x Sensitivity

Humanism is a stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism and empiricism) over the acceptance of dogma or superstition.

Where religion sources meaning of human life from the concept of an almighty God, philosophy of Humanism uses critical thinking, reason, and science to give humans the authority to choose the meaning of their life.

As an example, let's look at how different applications of humanism has improved the human condition and made human flourishing possible.

- **Humanist Politics** tells us that the voter knows the best and has authority to exercise her individuality, and doesn't have to follow the order of a monarch or religious leader.
- **Humanist Economics** tells us the market knows the best, not what a couple of leaders of a state thinks is best.

- **Humanist Aesthetics** tells us beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. Not what a religious scripture says is beautiful, what you think is beautiful is beautiful.
- **Humanist Ethics** says if it feels good and doesn't harm anyone, do it. For example, heteronormativity is the one true path in almost all the religions of the world, while humanist philosophy has made same-sex marriages legal and acceptable in several countries already.

Rationalism vs. Empiricism

Introduction

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy related to the nature and scope of knowledge. It explores how knowledge can be acquired and consider its limits and validity. Rationalism and empiricism are different epistemological schools of thinking. Among other things, they differ significantly in the source of concepts and ideas. Rationalists, including *Descartes*, *Spinoza*, and *Leibniz*, contend that reason is a purely deductive process for achieving honest truths about reality. In contrast, empiricists, including *Locke*, *Berkeley*, and *Hume*, argue that knowledge derives from the role of experience and sensory data in formulating ideas. The question of what is the ideal foundation for knowledge is still debatable to this day.

The critical issues of epistemology are as follows.

- What is the nature of propositional knowledge, namely, that a particular proposition on the world is correct?
- How can we acquire knowledge?
- What are the limits of our knowledge?

Rationalism and Empiricism differ in their approaches to the answer(s) to the second question.

Empiricists have always claimed that sensory experience is the ultimate point of departure for all our knowledge. The senses, they argue, give us all our raw data about the world, and without this raw material, there would be no knowledge. Perception begins a process, and all our beliefs arise from this process. In its purest form, empiricism holds that sensory experience alone gives birth to all our beliefs and knowledge.

Rationalists have asserted that the ultimate starting point of all knowledge is not the senses but the reason. They maintain that without previous categories and principles furnished by reason, we could n't organize and explain our sense experience in any way. We would be confronted with one great kaleidoscopic whirlwind of sensation, undifferentiated, meaning nothing. Rationalism in its purest form goes so far as to consider that all our rational beliefs, and the totality of animal knowledge, consist of first principles and inborn concepts (concepts that we have just been born) which are created and accredited by reason, with anything logically deductible from these first principles.

(Scheibe; Meyers)

Main Distinctions

Innate Ideas

One of the most important differences between rationalism and empiricism is the idea of innate knowledge; that is, the knowledge that is already possessed by us when we are born.

Descartes believes in the notion of inborn knowledge and proves it in his philosophy by affirming that there are specific ideas, for example, the idea of God, that we carry that are neither adventitious nor devised. Adventitious ideas refer to ideas arising from the experience of the senses, and devised ideas are ideas that we invent ourselves. Therefore, they must be inborn ideas. Both Locke and Hume decline this idea of innate knowledge by asserting that when we are born, we are born as **tabula rasa** - blank slate, and that any notion that we will ever come to possess will be the product of sensation or reflection; sensation being any stimulation by the senses from experience, and reflecting being the actual process of the mind thinking, judging, and understanding.

However, in this aspect, Locke and Hume differ a little. Locke claims what has just been said; that ideas come from sensation or reflection. Hume opposes this by telling that ideas come from impressions or experiences. In retrospect, Locke's notion of sensation is fundamentally the same as Hume's notion of impression, except that Hume asserts that the impression of something comes from an object and that impressions are separated from experience. Locke bridges the gap between sensation and experience, which is not the case with Hume. Empiricism denies the presence of essential knowledge, by showing that ideas are born purely from sensation, reflection, impressions, or experience. However, Locke's explanation of the falsity of the idea of innate knowledge is clearer in his discussion than that of Hume, because he is able to show the relationship between sensation and reflection, which Hume fails to understand. do with his impressions. experiences.

(“Rationalism vs. Empiricism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)”)

Essence of Objects

Another distinction between these two philosophies is the belief in an essence behind objects. The idea of an essence or a form of all objects was believed in every theory of Plato until Descartes. Empiricism was the first philosophy that challenged this belief. Empiricism holds that all essence is extracted from experience. Hume, being the radical empiricist he is, rejects the essence and forms of things. Locke also denies the existence of species and forms, but of a smaller size than Hume. Instead, empiricism uses beam theory. What this theory asserts is that an object is a bundle of physical characteristics, devoid of any essence or form. This is really where the strict empiricist nature of Hume really reveals itself. One of the conclusions he reaches is that science and all things related to science can be refuted.

Intuition/ Deduction Thesis

The Intuition/ Deduction thesis claims that we can know certain propositions by intuition and even more by deduction. Many empiricists(e.g., Hume) have been wanting to accept the thesis as long as it is limited to propositions solely on the relations between our concepts. We can, they agree, know intuitively that our concept of God includes our concept of omniscience. Just by analyzing the concepts, we can intellectually grasp that one consists of the other. The debate between rationalists and empiricists converges when the former

affirm, and the latter argument, the Intuition/ Deduction thesis about proposals containing substantial information about the outside world.

Innate Knowledge Thesis

The thesis of Innate Knowledge joins the thesis of Intuition/ Deduction in affirming that we have a priori knowledge, but it does not offer intuition and deduction as the cause of that knowledge. Our prior knowledge must be part of our rational nature. Experience can trigger our awareness of this knowledge, but it does not provide it. The knowledge is already there.

Innate Concept Thesis

According to Innate Concept's thesis, some of our concepts have not been learned from experience. Rather, They are part of our rational composition, and experience triggers merely a process by which we consciously grasp them. The major concern that motivates the rationalist should now be familiar: the content of specific concepts seems to exceed anything we could have learned from experience. An example of this thought is discussed by Descartes in the Meditations. Although he sometimes seems committed to the idea that all our ideas are inborn, he classifies our ideas as weeds, devised by us, and inborn. Adventitious ideas, like the sensation of heat, are acquired directly by sensory experience. Ideas devised by us, such as our idea of a hippogriff, are created by us from other ideas we possess. Inborn ideas, such as our ideas of God, extended matter, substance and ideal triangle, are positioned in our minds by God at creation.

(“Rationalism vs. Empiricism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)”)

Erasing the Boundaries from a Cognitive Science Point of View

In the genetic model, the environment is paradoxically very important. The information contained in genes can only be expressed in body structures if they are in an appropriate and complex environment - so that 99% of the information on the construction of an organism can be considered as situated in the background and only 1% in the genes themselves (the proportion is not strictly quantifiable). The environment acts as a trigger for the selective transcription of genes, which in turn affects the urgent environment. As the information in the gene is expressed in response to the structure of the situation, and the environment reacts in turn to the action of genes, the organism slowly begins to materialize. It is as if the material itself contained most of the information for life; he just needs a little extra clue.

For cognitive development, this means that genetic and environmental information simultaneously contributes to the development of cognitive structures. Some of the environmental information that stimulates certain genes can come from the senses; for example, cats can not recognize vertical lines if they are not detected before a certain age, and children who have not learned a language before the age of ten no longer retain the ability to acquire one.

More complex scenarios with intermediate control structures are also possible, as an alternative to a continuous role for genes. The rationalist argument is consistent with the genetic model in that both claim that cognition depends on fabrications that do not arise from experience. But the genetic model has historicized rationalism, playing the role of empiricism by subverting its claims to transcendental universals. Thus, the distinction between empiricism and rationalism has become mostly insignificant, as two aspects of the same coin that have melted into a sphere.

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