

Research Proposal

(sample)

GEN 410
(Erion)

(1) Author:

Jerry Erion

(2) Working title:

What We Are Doing in This Class: A Definition of Philosophy for Novice Undergraduates

(3) Introduction:

Those of us who teach introductory undergraduate courses in philosophy know the unique pleasures that come from instructing students who have never given serious consideration to philosophical questions before. But with these rewards come unique challenges as well. Chief among them is the unfortunate fact that most of our undergraduates show up for their first philosophy courses with rather foggy ideas about what philosophy is and what philosophers do. They know we have offices, but what in the world, they wonder, goes on in there?

Of course, our students know that we are not responsible for creating gallery exhibits of paintings or sculptures. They also know that we do not typically conduct poetry readings in coffee houses. They may even realize that we neither carry out experiments in laboratories nor collect empirical data from field studies. And very few of them are under the impression that we earn lots of money by designing bridges, buildings, computers, or other nifty gadgets.

Nonetheless, undergraduates will struggle when asked to give a positive account of the academic discipline of philosophy. Their lack of familiarity with our profession leaves them with unrealistic expectations for the introductory philosophy courses that they often take to fulfill their graduation requirements. When I suggest to my advisees that they consider adding philosophy to their schedules, for instance, their responses seem to indicate that they think of our courses as painfully boring surveys of trivial but unending disagreements understandable only to mountain top-dwelling, robe-wearing mystical geniuses with little to offer humanity besides grumpy criticisms and unsolvable riddles.

This impression is a bit off-target, but its very existence suggests that we could both correct the common stereotypes of philosophy and relieve groundless student anxieties about our courses by developing a useful, understandable, and accurate definition of philosophy that helps to introduce non-philosophers to the field. It is not uncommon for students to begin their required liberal arts and sciences courses wondering, sometimes out loud, "What are we doing in this class?"¹ They quickly come to understand what their introductory biology and history courses are all about (if they did not already grasp these things beforehand), but could easily complete an entire semester of philosophy without acquiring a clear awareness of our discipline's unique character.

To confront this problem in my introductory courses, I would like to develop a beginning-of-the-semester discussion aimed at producing a preliminary definition of philosophy. The objective will be to help students to understand philosophy and its important place in the overall structure of

¹ Donald Palmer cleverly uses this very question to entitle the first chapter of his 1996 introductory text; it also inspires the title of this proposal.

the academy by both providing information on the nature of philosophy and, simultaneously, engaging in a philosophical activity. In other words, we will define philosophy by both *articulating a description of it* and by *doing it*. To help me develop my lesson plan, I will review professional articles written for the teaching journals (including *Teaching Philosophy* and *Metaphilosophy*) and survey classic introductory texts. I will also search past issues of the on-line *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy* for relevant material. Having completed my research, I hope to have a definition of philosophy that professional philosophers will accept as accurate, and that new students will consider helpful.

(4) Research question(s):

What characteristics does philosophy *share with other academic disciplines*?
And what is it that makes philosophy *unique among the academic disciplines*?

What role does *argumentation* play in philosophy?
Is argumentation a *necessary* condition for philosophy?
What other conditions are necessary for philosophy?
Is there anything *unique* about philosophy's subject matter?

(5) Thesis:

Philosophy is the critical examination of fundamental ideas through logically rigorous analysis and argumentation; its goal is the discovery of truth about fundamental ideas.

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