

A discussion on the nature and direction of philosophy, religion and ethics and its relationship within the wider range of humanities.

The subjects of philosophy, religion and ethics have been core elements in the world of humanities, since arguably, the beginning time. The areas involve critical thinking, being ruminative and unafraid to ask about the conundrums and enigmas of human existence and beyond. They are insightful topics, that without, we couldn't explore existence, morality, or the divine. If critical thinkers hadn't put forth their ideas into these conversations, we might not have felt compelled to study them more intensely, or formed the distinct subjects that make up the humanities today. It is assuredly philosophy that encourages thinking and discovery of humanity and the world around us, which this essay will explore further.

Philosophy offers so many intricate realms, such as existentialism and metaphysics, which if we didn't study, questions about freedom and reality would never have answers. Whilst no answer can be definitive, without them all the other areas of the humanities; history, archaeology, anthropology etc, would cease to exist. Philosophy began when we decided we should ask the hard-hitting, open-ended questions; what is the meaning of our existence? What is right and wrong? What makes something true or false? What is real and what isn't? This is the beginning of the humanities. If we didn't care to ask about our existence, our morals, facts and phenomena, we wouldn't care to study archaeology: to discover artefacts of our ancestors. We wouldn't care to study anthropology: to observe culture and heritage. We care about the past and understanding human behaviour, because we are philosophers at our core. Religion, similarly, seeks mysteries and a comprehension of the human condition. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism... they all believe in the divine, transcendence and providence. They are an available explanation for the workings of the world, and the part we play in it as human beings. Even the earliest Sumerian, Ancient Egyptian and Indus Valley civilisations worshipped deities. They believed in creation and that humanity is important and intelligent. This proves the innate quest for answers we possess as humans; a quest to find God, a quest that is a blueprint in our DNA, a quest to find a being who created a world that is so rich in beauty and ambiguity, that we have the privilege of delving into, exploring and learning about across the study of the humanities. This leads me into ethics. Ethics is our first and earliest enactment of evaluation. As children, we can feel strongly about what is right and wrong. As we get older, we seek more deeply, to know unequivocally, what is virtuous? How should we conduct decision-making? Fortunately for us, ethics is a branch of investigation that provides numerous options for how we should behave. Ethics has given us deontology, consequentialism, relativism and virtue, a surplus of theories that guide humanity and can act as our compass.

For me, it is evident that my discipline has shaped moral and cultural frameworks, propelled literature, revealed historical changes, influenced art and aesthetic values and more. In shaping moral frameworks, the Enlightenment philosophy is the most obvious example.¹ John Locke was a leader of this philosophical thought and movement, publishing *'Two Treatises of Government'* where he refuted privileged beings and indirectly condemned classism. He formed

¹ Rogers, G. (2019). *John Locke - Two Treatises of Government*. In: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Locke/Two-Treatises-of-Government>. (Accessed 20/10/25).

the basis for human rights, a birth-right to life, liberty and property. This catapulted events such as the American and French Revolution and helped humanity to reach the point where we instated fair and just legislation, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and Bill of Rights. This is just one example of philosophy laying the groundwork for the human rights we possess today, and how it has kickstarted all the events that we study in history to this day. Additionally, the domain of literature is saturated with philosophy. Authors such as Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Sartre and Camus have given some of the weightiest exposition to literature.² In specific, Camus' *'The Stranger'* explores themes of existentialism; the tension human beings experience in an absurd world, when trying to discover their meaning and freedom. He confronts the social pressure we face, consequences and constructs. This touches, only at surface level, on how much input philosophy has had on all the areas that constitute the humanities.

Philosophy can be amalgamated with many other areas within the humanities. For example, archaeology uncovers material remains, excavates historical sites, and provides artefacts that carry meaning and find answers from our past. However, philosophy fuels the desire to do this. Philosophy and all its questions are why we feel compelled to unearth these parts of our ancestry. Archaeology unveils details of our past, but it is philosophy which provides the conceptual framework, clarifying and visualising what it is we wish to find and define. The realm within philosophy of epistemology, pinpoints what it means to know the past. It doesn't prescribe how to, or involve the physical digging up of tangible items, but it identifies why we want to know these things, and what it means to discover the past.³ Conceivably, ethics has instructed archaeologists on how they do their work, making sure to carefully deal with the climate and preservation of information, considering a moral responsibility to respect communities they enter and avoiding pervading properties that aren't theirs.⁴ Field archaeologist, Margaret A. Smith, wrote that archaeology was limited as it is inevitably comprised of "an element of conjecture which cannot be tested". She was influenced by philosophical themes of empiricism, meaning that her archaeological work was fuelled by an original interest in philosophy, proving that this is what advised her on how archaeology should be done. Guided by philosophy, she believed that archaeologists must be epistemically responsible and pursue goals that have been given their description first in philosophical terms.

Furthermore, the intellectual traditions in philosophy can be seen as the influence of anthropology, a subject that studies human behaviour, culture and society. Without epistemology, anthropologists would not have a clear framework of knowledge and its nature, limiting their ability to define anything about humans. Without initial philosophical inquiry into

² Saadanm, H. Ridha, A. (2023). *Existentialism and Absurdity in Albert Camus's 'The Stranger', Psychological Study. American Research Journal of Humanities & Social Science (ARJHSS)*. Available at: <https://www.arjhss.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/B651218.pdf>. (Accessed 20/10/25)

³ Scarre, C. Scarre, G. (2006). *The ethics of archaeology: philosophical perspectives on archaeological practice*. Cambridge University. Press. Available at: <https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/1133873/the-ethics-of-archaeology-philosophical-perspectives-on-archaeological-practice>. (Accessed 23/10/25)

⁴ Wylie, A. (1998). *Philosophy of Archaeology; Philosophy in Archaeology*. Philosophy of Science, Anthropology and Sociology. Available at: <https://www.ugr.es/~zink/arqueo/PhilOfArcheologyWylie.pdf>. (Accessed 23/10/25)

the nature of culture and identity, anthropology would potentially not exist.⁵ An earlier example of this would be Hume's input on cultural relativity in the 1700s, where he contends that every culture can be different but not all right, some cultures must be wrong about their beliefs and social norms, and these differences or moral disagreements form from artificial moral sentiments. This philosophy could resonate with an anthropologist and prescribe them on how to work when studying culture. In the 20th century more philosophical insight on the matter was presented, with philosophers such as J.L Mackie and Harman,⁶ believing that moral principles can differentiate amongst separate societies and that this doesn't prove any culture to be wrong. Instead, nothing is objective, or universally true, allowing human culture to be studied from all angles. It appears indisputable that without the philosophical inquiry of relativism, anthropologists may not have had the basis for their studies, and to be their own branch within the humanities. It is philosophy and areas such as relativism which fuels the most common thoughts and questions of an anthropologist; beliefs and practices and how they shape human behaviours, traditions and the concept of rituals and languages being passed down to generations, economic, familial and political structures around the world and how they influence different societies etc. Yet these are all matters already debated within philosophy for centuries; Nietzsche analysed religion and rituals and what they caused in human behaviour, J.G Herder examined language as a vessel for the spirit of people, crucial in forming identity, and Marx investigated capitalist economic structures and its effect on society, taking shape in class divisions and exploitation. This illustrates that the area of anthropology stems from the original scrutiny and exploration of philosophers.

In conclusion, the nature of philosophy, religion and ethics is to explore fundamental questions to our human existence and experience. This alludes to its nature within the entirety of the humanities, being core and central to all other niche aspects of studying humans. Being critical and reflective in nature, philosophy moulds the humanities by forming the intellectual, ethical and cultural frameworks that the other disciplines are based upon. It underlies all existing forms of exploring human existence, as it started the conversations and made the initial inquiries into why humans exist, how they should behave, how we view reality, how we approach freedom and more. Regarding its direction in the future, we should ensure philosophy, religion and ethics continue an overlapping discourse, as the world becomes more diverse, encounters new ethical dilemmas such as artificial intelligence, and experiences global horrors such as the wars in Ukraine-Russia and Palestine-Israel. It is certain, that with all the humanities subjects that exist, philosophical understanding, religious freedom and compassion, as well as ethical standards, are the ones we should keep pushing into the future, to navigate changing times with wisdom and solidarity. The discipline of philosophy will continue to direct us and guide the humanities, as it will ask of us to revisit old queries and ensure we utilise our gift of critical thinking to apply new answers in new times, creating a more empathetic and collaborative world.

⁵ Bohlin, H. (2013). *Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue'*. Philosophy, Volume 88, Issue 4. Pages 593–606. Cambridge University. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/philosophy/article/abs/universal-moral-standards-and-the-problem-of-cultural-relativism-in-humes-a-dialogue/4497B4B537B925A126386B6C4D623E15>. (Accessed 25/10/25).

⁶ Baghranian, M. Adam, C.J. (2025). *Relativism*. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/>. (Accessed 25/10/25).

Bibliography:

Baghrmian, M. Adam, C.J. (2025). *Relativism*. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/>. (Accessed 25/10/25).

Bohlin, H. (2013). *Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue'*. *Philosophy*, Volume 88, Issue 4. Pages 593–606. Cambridge University. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/philosophy/article/abs/universal-moral-standards-and-the-problem-of-cultural-relativism-in-humes-a-dialogue/4497B4B537B925A126386B6C4D623E15>. (Accessed 25/10/25).

Rogers, G. (2019). *John Locke - Two Treatises of Government*. In: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Locke/Two-Treatises-of-Government>. (Accessed 20/10/25).

Saadnm, H. Ridha, A. (2023). *Existentialism and Absurdity in Albert Camus's 'The Stranger', Psychological Study*. *American Research Journal of Humanities & Social Science (ARJHSS)*. Available at: <https://www.arjhss.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/B651218.pdf>. (Accessed 20/10/25).

Scarre, C. Scarre, G. (2006). *The ethics of archaeology: philosophical perspectives on archaeological practice*. Cambridge University. Press. Available at: <https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/1133873/the-ethics-of-archaeology-philosophical-perspectives-on-archaeological-practice>. (Accessed 23/10/25).

Wylie, A. (1998). *Philosophy of Archaeology; Philosophy in Archaeology*. *Philosophy of Science, Anthropology and Sociology*. Available at: <https://www.ugr.es/~zink/arqueo/PhilOfArcheologyWylie.pdf>. (Accessed 23/10/25).