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Distinguishing Between the Conceptual Versus the Empirical

Philosophical questions tend to be conceptual in nature. This means that they cannot be answered simply by giving facts or information. A concept is the object of a thought, not something that is present to the senses.

The word “empirical” means “gained through experience.” Scientific experiments and observation give rise to empirical data. Scientific theories that organize the data are conceptual. Historical records or results of sociological or psychological surveys are empirical. Making sense of those records or results requires the use of concepts.

Concepts are not mysterious, and although they are “abstract,” we use them all the time to organize our thinking. We literally could not think or communicate without concepts. Some common examples of concepts are “justice,” “beauty,” and “truth,” but also “seven,” “blue,” or “big.”

Empirical questions can be answered by giving facts or information. Examples of empirical questions are: “What is the chemical composition of water?” or: “When did the French Revolution happen?” or: “Which educational system results in the highest literacy rate?”

When we ask a philosophical conceptual question, we are usually inquiring into the nature of something, or asking a question about how something is the way it is. Ancient philosophers such as Plato asked conceptual questions such as “What is justice?” as the basis of philosophy. The statements, “That action is wrong,” or, “Knowledge is justified true belief,” are conceptual claims.

In papers, you will often be asked to consider concepts, to analyze and unpack the way in which philosophers use them, and perhaps to compare them across texts. For example, you might be asked, “Do animals have rights?” This question asks you to consider what a right is, and whether it is the sort of thing an animal ought to or even could have. It does not ask whether or not there are laws on the books that actually give these rights. It also does not ask for your opinion on this question, but for a reasoned position that draws on philosophical concepts and texts for support.
