

## Chapter Five

### Be Your Own Guru: How to Develop Your Own Life Philosophy

Whether or not you have ever studied philosophy, you probably have some idea about what philosophy is. You've certainly heard people talk about their "philosophy of life," or heard them say "My philosophy is such and such." You are no doubt aware that philosophy is a liberal arts discipline and it has a long history, just as science does.

If you have studied philosophy before, you probably know that defining philosophy is itself a philosophical task. Here, I attempt to define philosophy and then provide some guidance in understanding what your philosophy of life is.

When people talk about philosophy, they sometimes talk about the entire field of philosophy. Other times, they may talk about specific branches of philosophy, such as philosophy of science or philosophy of math. Corresponding to these two ways of talking about philosophy are two ways to define 'philosophy'. One approach is to give a general definition of philosophy, and use this to define the branches of philosophy, such as philosophy of art. Another way is to define the branches of philosophy, where these take the form "philosophy of S." Here "S" is the name of some system of thought or field of study such as science, history, or mathematics. Then the definition of a "philosophy of S" can be used to give a more general definition of philosophy. This is the approach taken in this chapter.

#### A Philosophy of S

To understand what a "philosophy of S" is, it is helpful to look at the kinds of questions different "philosophies of S" answer. Suppose "S" is "science." Philosophy of science answers questions such as:

- What is a scientific theory?
- What types of scientific explanations are there?

- What are the differences between laws in physics and laws in psychology?

Philosophy of religion answers, or at least discusses, questions such as:

- Does God exist?
- How can we know that religious claims are true?

Philosophy of art examines among other issues the questions:

- What makes something beautiful?
- What are the criteria of beauty?

A philosophy of business might reflect the fundamental operating principles that someone uses in running their business. Examples include:

- The customer is always right.
- Pay vendors as you would like to be paid by them.

Moral philosophy examines the criteria for right and wrong and good and bad, and seeks to explain the underlying basis for moral judgments.

In these examples a philosophy seems to be an answer to questions about definition (concepts), or an answer to questions about some kind of **conceptual structure** created in the practice of a study. Examples of conceptual structures include theories, laws, explanations, and proofs. A philosophy of S can be appealed to in order to justify certain choices (“The customer is always right,”) or to explain the meaning of certain terms (“A scientific law is such and such.”)

There is no way to recognize statements that are part of a philosophical discussion apart from context. Any statement or sentence whatsoever could be used in a philosophical discussion. For example, someone might give "There is a fly on the wall" as an example of a statement about the external world (the world "outside" our minds) in a discussion about whether we can know anything for certain. And philosophical statements such as "God exists" or "Mind and brain are one and the same" can be used in non-philosophical contexts.

We should not look for any intrinsic property of statements, then, to distinguish philosophical from non-philosophical ones.

What distinguishes philosophical statements from others is the intent with which they are made, and their context of use. **Philosophical statements are often made in a context in which some justification is required for practices within a field of study, when that justification cannot be given by applying the tools of that study itself.** For example, the questions of what is a scientific law, or what types of scientific explanations or proofs there are, cannot be answered by the scientific method of hypothesis and proof. It is the very nature of the scientific proofs themselves that are in question. Likewise, the question "What makes something beautiful?" asked as a question about the nature of beauty, cannot be answered by creating more beautiful objects, as an artist does. This question is about what qualities something must have to be counted "beautiful," e.g., harmony, symmetry, etc. Someone who creates beautiful objects must already have some idea of what a beautiful object is.

Philosophical statements are often called "principles." The term 'principle' is derived from the Latin word principium, or "beginning," and from the word "princeps," meaning "taking the first part." Other than its association with beginnings, a principle looks a lot like a statement. For example, "Mind is distinct from body" is a principle that looks just like a statement. A principle, then, is a statement that is an assumption or is fundamental to a system of thought.

One way to understand what a philosophy of S is then is to say that it is a justifying principle of S. For example, the political philosophy of communism consists of a principle about how society should be structured. This view is that all goods including property should be held in common and distributed to all as needed. Likewise, the philosophy of capitalism consists of the principle that the distribution of goods in society including property should be determined by the free market, i.e., a market operated by private individuals or businesses and free from government control.

How about a philosophy that contains more than one principle? A group of principles forms a set. Is the philosophy identical to the principle or to the view they express? For example, suppose we formulate the philosophy of materialism as:

1. Mind and brain are one and the same.
2. A brain is a purely physical object.
3. All explanations of mental activity can be reduced to statements about brain activity.

These three principles form a set expressing the view of materialism. Since there are three principles and only one philosophy, the most correct view is that the philosophy is identical to the view expressed by the set of principles.

The preceding discussion suggests the following definition of a philosophy of S:

**Definition 1. A philosophy of S is a view expressed by a set of justifying principles of S.**

While this definition points in the right direction, to understand it fully requires a better understanding of the relation between philosophy and "S," where "S" is some field of study such as science or art.

One way to understand the difference between science and philosophy is to think about the relation between science and its object of study. Scientists study our experience and the events that occur within our experience and try to formulate laws and explanations that explain and describe these events. Physicists study the rotation of the earth around the sun, the composition of matter, and the relation between matter and energy. But how do they know whether their definitions are consistent or whether their scientific methods are correct? How do they know whether their own assumptions are correct?

It is when scientists or artists have questions about the foundations of their discipline, or the boundaries of their study, or the correctness of their methods, that the need for philosophy arises. Psychologists agree that they study the mind, but what is the mind? How do we distinguish between chemistry and physics? Should sociological laws have the same form

as laws of nature? If physics studies matter, how is matter defined? All these questions involve questions about methods, boundaries, or definitions.

It is at this point that philosophy is needed to examine scientific methods, and the conceptual structures created by the sciences, including definitions. For example, philosophy of physics examines the definitions used in physics and states criteria for the existence of laws, theories, and explanations. Without a philosophy of physics, physics would be like a house with no foundation: built on an unstable structure and prone to be destroyed whenever any pressure is put on it. A philosophy of physics anchors the science of physics by helping provide correct definitions and by helping the entire structure of laws, theories, explanations, and definitions fit together as part of a single science.

One way to understand the relations between a field of study and its philosophy is by displaying these relations graphically. Figure 1 contains three levels, showing the structure of knowledge.

What is S? 'S' is the name for a field of study such as physics, chemistry, psychology, mathematics, logic, art, etc. If S is a science, S itself will consist of a set of fundamental principles which formulate assumptions, together with laws, theories, and definitions. Philosophy of science studies not just the fundamental assumptions of science but the entire conceptual structure of science: its laws, theories, definitions, explanations, and predictions.

What is 'E'? 'E' is the name for the aspect or element ('E' is for "element") of the world that is the subject of study for "S." For example, the subject of study of biology is living things, so the set of living things is the element of the world studied by biology. Physicists study the physical aspect of the world, while psychologists study minds. Sometimes the "E" element might a set of properties or aspects, rather than just a single one.

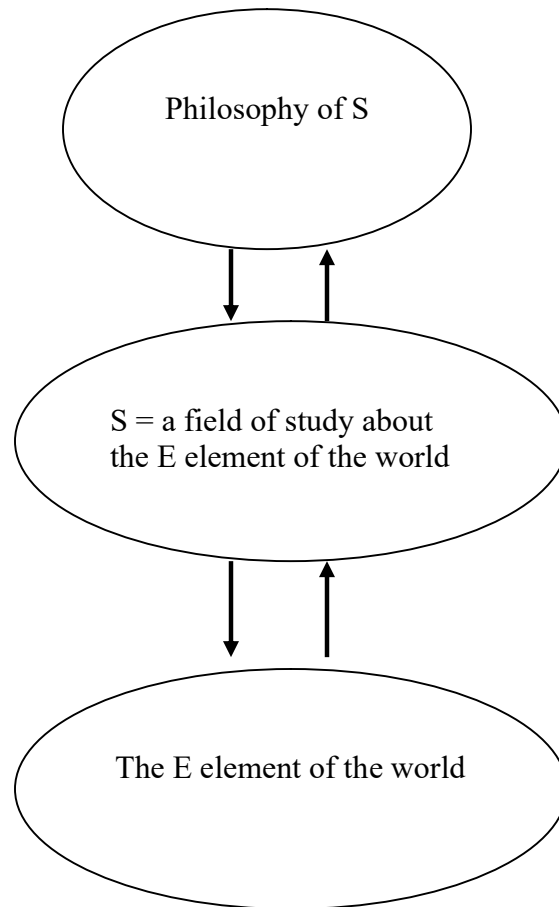


Figure 1-1. Three Levels Showing the Structure of Knowledge

What is important to understand in relation to this diagram is that a philosophy of S does not seek to explain and understand our experience of S directly (that's science, art, or some other second-level field of study), but rather seeks to explain and understand the conceptual structures created by the field of study (e.g., physics, psychology) that are used to explain and understand experience. Therefore, giving a definition of philosophy of S requires characterizing this second "field of study" level.

What fields of study appear at the second level? Sciences appear there, including psychology, history, chemistry, sociology, physics, neurology, biology, etc. But there are

other fields of study that are not sciences of which there might be a philosophy. Examples are art "in general," and particular arts such as music, painting, photography, dance, and fashion design. There are also crafts such as gardening, cooking, and knitting. There are other fields of study that may not fit clearly into any other category, such as religion, mathematics, and logic.

### **A definition of the second or "field of study" level**

Is it possible to find a general definition that applies to all these second level fields of study? Let us first consider science. The term 'science' is derived from the Latin term *sciencia* meaning "having knowledge". This derived from the Latin term *scire* meaning "to know." Think of a particular science such as biology. It does seem that the object of biology is to acquire knowledge about living organisms, while the object of psychology is to acquire knowledge about minds. In general, we might say that the object of science is to gain knowledge about the world. Each science selects some aspect or element of the world about which to gain knowledge.

What does scientific knowledge consist of? Scientific knowledge has a linguistic character: it is formulated in the statements of a language. These statements generally take the form of theories, laws, and definitions. Each science is based on one or more assumptions. Because these statements (assumptions, theories, laws, and definitions) are fundamental to the entire structure of a science, they are called "principles." The theories and laws provide knowledge by enabling us to explain, understand, describe, and predict those aspects or elements of the world that the science is concerned to provide knowledge about.

Another characteristic of a science is that it is organized in some way: it is not just a few isolated statements. Yet a science is not identical to the principles that formulate it since these principles can change without creating a new science. "The science of S" can be defined as follows:

**the science of S =df. a field of study whose purpose is to provide knowledge about the 'E' element of the world, i.e., to explain, understand, describe, and predict the 'E' element of the world.**

The reason for saying "E element" is that this phrase describes the aspect of the world the particular science is concerned with. For example, physics is concerned with knowledge about the physical world, while psychology is concerned with knowledge about minds. In some cases, the "E element" is not a single aspect, but a group of aspects or elements that together form the object of study of a particular science.

Consider now a subject of study that is not a science, such as art "in general," or a particular art such as music or painting. Is there a single purpose for art or for particular arts? One way to understand art is to say that it is a medium for expression and representation. Music provides a harmonic structure within which it is possible to express feelings and emotions musically, while a painting might represent a feeling or even a perception of an object, scene, or situation. Based on this general characterization of the purpose of art, arts differ according to the medium of expression or representation.

This suggests the following definition for "the art of S":

**the art of S =df. a field of study whose purpose is to make it possible to express or represent feelings, emotions, attitudes, and perceptions or to create them in others through the use of some "E" element of the world.**

The art of playing piano selects those elements of the world consisting of pianos as a medium of expression and representation, painting selects paint, photography selects cameras, etc. Some arts are not just subjects of study but are also practiced, but this practice occurs in conformity to the principles of the art (or at least it's intended to!).



Crafts such as cooking and knitting can be given a definition with a similar structure, though the purpose is different: each craft has a particular pragmatic purpose. For example, the purpose of cooking is preparing food to eat.

Is it possible to create a general definition that applies to all these second-level fields of study? In each case a set of principles shares a common purpose. This purpose is defined according to some element "E," which selects out an aspect or element of the world, and differs according to the field of study.

Second-level fields of study can be defined as follows:

**field of study S =df. a set of statements and practices that share a common purpose that is defined by reference to the "E" element of the world.**

### **The fundamental assumptions of "second level" fields of study**

Every field of study is based on certain assumptions. The definition of "a field of study" requires making an assumption that there is an "E" element in the world. For example, physics rests on the assumption that the world has a physical aspect or element. One physics text begins:

The topic we consider in this book is Physical Science: the body of knowledge that concerns motion; gravitation; electricity; radiation; the structure of liquids, and gases; radioactivity; astronomy; geology; and cosmology. (Physics: An Introduction by Pollard and Huston, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 3)

Here the text attempts to define by enumeration those elements of the world studied by physics. Or, consider these fundamental principles of Euclidean geometry:

1. A straight line can be drawn from any point to any other point.
2. Any straight line can be extended continuously in a straight line.

3. Given any point and any distance, a circle can be drawn with that point as its center and that distance as its radius.

4. All right angles are equal to one another.

Here are some definitions that define some key terms used in these principles:

5. A point is that which has no part.

6. A line is breadthless length.

7. A straight line is a line that lies evenly with the points on itself.

8. A figure is that which is contained by any boundary or boundaries.

9. Parallel straight lines are straight lines which, being in the same plane and being produced indefinitely in both directions, do not meet one another in either direction. ([Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) entry under "Geometry"; [Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), New York: Macmillan Publishing Company and The Free Press, 1967.)

These nine statements, the fundamental principles together with the five definitions, constitute a partial formulation of the assumptions of Euclidean geometry. A complete formulation would include a complete set of definitions, and might include more fundamental principles.

Here are "the primary assumptions of accounting" according to a recent book:

1. Businesses are ongoing entities with unlimited life.

2. Although businesses have unlimited lifetimes, they require an "accounting" of their actions at least once a year.

3. Some of a business's accounts live forever and other parts "die" each time an accounting is made. That is, it will have "permanent" and "cyclical" accounts. (Simplified Accounting for Non-accountants. Hayes and Baker, New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1986, p. 209).

Some fundamental assumptions can be stated more simply. For example, here is the fundamental assumption of astrology:

The positions of the planets and stars affect human lives.

All these assumptions are fundamental principles upon which fields of study are based. But these principles cannot be verified by observation. They can only be justified by stepping outside the field of study and into philosophy.

### **Philosophical Views**

What distinguishes a philosophical view from other views, such as scientific views?

A philosophical view is distinguished from other views in several ways:

a) a philosophical view is used to define the conceptual structures or justify the assumptions used in a second-level field of study.

b) a philosophical view in many cases is a view about what ought to be the case as a general principle.

Whether a view is a philosophy does not depend on whether it actually does succeed in defining the conceptual structures or in justifying the assumptions of a field of study, but it

must at least be intended for this purpose. Using a), the phrase "a philosophy of S" can be defined as follows:

**a philosophy of S =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that can be used to define the conceptual structures or justify the assumptions of "S." Here "S" is a field of study that contains a set of statements and practices that share a common purpose that is defined by reference to an "E" element of the world.**

Here are some examples of philosophies. Consider the philosophy of empiricism, a view about knowledge. Simply stated, empiricism is the view that all our knowledge is derived from experience. Or, consider dualism as a philosophy of mind. Dualism is the view that mind and body are two separate things. As another example, consider capitalism as a philosophy of government. According to capitalism, government should be organized to allow private property, and free markets should determine the distribution of goods.

Philosophical views in many cases are about how principles should be justified, or about relations among conceptual structures such as definitions, explanations, and theories. Since philosophical views are expressed by statements of justification, they often are view about what ought to be the case as a general principle. For example, according to utilitarianism, a philosophy of ethics, we ought always to do what produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

While philosophical views are often simple to state, showing that they are true can be quite difficult and complex. This is true for several reasons. One is that many philosophical views are about fundamental concepts (e.g., truth, knowledge, beauty) that are used in many different subjects of study and in our common-sense beliefs. Another is that because they are both general in scope and fundamental to our system of thought considered as a whole, philosophical ideas have very wide implications. Hence, working out the implications of a philosophical view can be a complex task.

Here are some more definitions of philosophies of different subjects of study:

a philosophy of science =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that can be used to define the conceptual structures or justify the assumptions of a field of study that consists of a set of statements and practices whose common purpose is defined by reference to the scientific element of the world.

a philosophy of psychology =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that can be used to define the conceptual structures or justify the assumptions of a field of study whose purpose is to provide knowledge about the mental aspect of the world i.e., to explain, understand, describe, and predict the mental aspect or element of the world (minds).

a philosophy of art =df. a view expressed by a set of principles can be used to define the conceptual structures or justify a set of assumptions of a field of study whose purpose is to make it possible to express or represent feelings, emotions, attitudes, and perceptions or to create them in others.

a philosophy of music =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that can be used to define the conceptual structures or justify a field of study whose purpose is to make it possible to express or represent feelings, emotions, attitudes, and perceptions or to create them in others through the use of the musical aspect of the world (music).

### **What is S?**

In many cases, "S" is the name of a particular science or art, such as psychology, history, or painting. In other cases, 'S' is not the name of a particular science or art, but instead denotes a general category which contains a number of sciences or arts. "Science" and "art" are examples. The task of these philosophies is to examine the correctness of the principles of all the sciences and the conceptual structures they contain. Philosophy of science "in general" also examines the individual philosophies of particular sciences such as the philosophy of behaviorism and attempts to formulate criteria for the existence of theories,

laws, and explanations. Philosophy of science "in general" exists at the third level in the three-tiered graphic. The second or "theory" level can be expanded to allow for different sciences.

We could draw a large circle around all circles representing sciences at the second level to represent all the sciences. Likewise, we could draw a large circle around all the philosophies of individual sciences to represent philosophy of science.

In some cases, the 'S' is not a science or art but a general category of experience such as truth, knowledge, or existence. Do the above definitions work to define a philosophy of S in those cases?

When "S" refers not to a field of study but to a concept such as truth or knowledge, task of philosophy is also to formulate a consistent set of principles in terms of which our beliefs about these concepts can be defined and justified. Though we may not have a science of truth or knowledge, we do have a second level set of common-sense beliefs about truth and knowledge. Hence terms such as 'truth' and 'knowledge' pick out some aspects or elements "E" of the world (truth and knowledge are both aspects of the world). Our philosophy of truth or philosophy of knowledge examines the principles and conceptual structures (including definitions of and statements about knowledge or truth) contained in our common-sense beliefs and seeks to define and justify them. This is precisely Descartes' enterprise in the Meditations.

### **A more intuitive definition**

Consider the definition of "philosophy of S" again:

**a philosophy of S =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that can be used to define the conceptual structures or justify the assumptions of "S." Here "S" is a field of study that consists of a set of statements and practices that share a common purpose that is defined by reference to an "E" element of the world.**

This definition includes the definition of "S." Let's simply replace this part of the definition with "S" to give a more intuitive definition:

**a philosophy of S =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that is intended to be used to define the conceptual structures and justify the assumptions of S.**

This serves as a definition for the philosophy of a particular science. Philosophy of science "in general" can be defined as follows:

**philosophy of science =df. a view that is intended to be used to define the conceptual structures and justify the assumptions of science.**

**philosophy of art =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that is intended to be used to define the conceptual structures and justify the assumptions of art.**

### **What is philosophy?**

Is it possible to give a definition of philosophy that is not tied to a particular philosophy of S? The definitions already given identify **philosophy of S** with a view expressed by a set of principles that is intended to define the conceptual structures and justify the assumptions of some subject of study or concept.

The purpose of philosophy as a whole is to create and demonstrate the truth of particular philosophies. A philosophy is a view expressed by a set of justifying and defining principles. Before completing the definition, it is important to add two more components:

1. Consistency. Since philosophy aims at truth, consistency will be written into the definition. If two statements are inconsistent, they cannot both be true. The type of consistency that philosophers are concerned with is logical consistency.
2. Experience. What is the role of experience in philosophy? Experience comes in in the following way. Experience is the starting point for philosophy. The world is divided up

according to various "E" elements (e.g., the physical or biological element), based on similarities in our experience. For example, physical things have certain properties in common (they appear solid, resist touch, stick around when we're not there, etc.). It is these common elements of experience that serve as the basis for categorizing the world into types of elements.

Adding consistency and experience, the above definitions can be generalized as follows:

**philosophy is an activity whose purpose is to create and demonstrate the truth of views expressed by consistent sets of principles that can be used to define the conceptual structures and justify the assumptions of the fields of study used to acquire knowledge of our experience.**

A more intuitive and concise way of expressing this idea is as follows:

**Philosophy is the attempt to impose a consistent set of views on our experience.**

### **Fields of philosophy**

Here are examples of fields or branches of philosophy:

philosophy of math, philosophy of science, philosophy of logic, philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology, philosophy of art, philosophy of business, philosophy of morality (ethics), philosophy of the social sciences, philosophy of truth, philosophy of language, philosophy of psychology, philosophy of life, philosophy of values (value theory), philosophy of computers, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, philosophy of history, philosophy of law, epistemology (theory of knowledge), metaphysics (philosophy of being and existence)

### **Philosophy of Life**

How does this definition of philosophy apply to the idea of philosophy of life? Plugging in the word 'life' to the definition of philosophy gives the following result:



**a philosophy of life =df. a view expressed by a set of principles that can be used to define the conceptual structures or justify the assumptions of "life". Here "life" is a field of study that consists of a set of statements and practices that share a common purpose that is defined by reference to an "E" element of the world.**

The above definition perhaps raises more questions than it answers. For example, what is the "E" element for philosophy of life. And since when is "life" a field of study?

In understanding the idea of philosophy of life, it is important to distinguish between "philosophy of life in general," or "philosophy of all life," and a philosophy of life that a person has about their own particular life. If we think of philosophy of life as an all-encompassing view about life, then the "E" element is organic structure. If it is a philosophy of human life, the "E" element is living human beings.

The phrase "philosophy of life" as applied to someone's philosophy of life does not fit the model for the definition of "philosophy of S" very well because, in most cases, "S" refers to a science or organized field of study. Unlike 'physics' and 'geometry,' the term 'life' does not refer to an organized field of study. Instead, it refers to the totality of experiences that someone has.

Despite the fact that the phrase "philosophy of life" does not behave quite like the other "philosophy of S" phrases, there still is some insight to be gained about a philosophy of life from this definition. The definition of "philosophy of S" identifies three levels as shown in Figure 1-2.

5-18

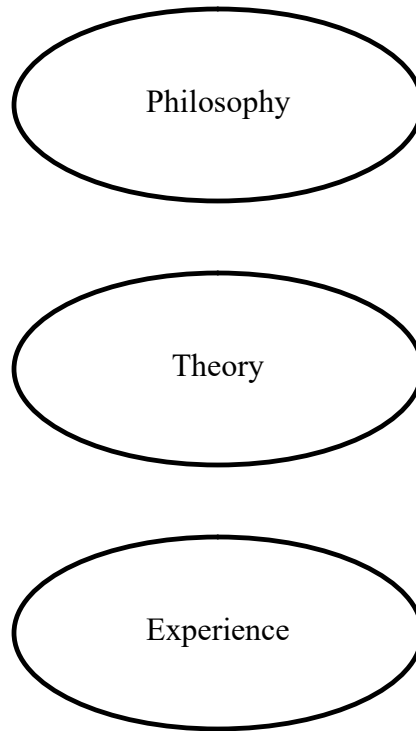
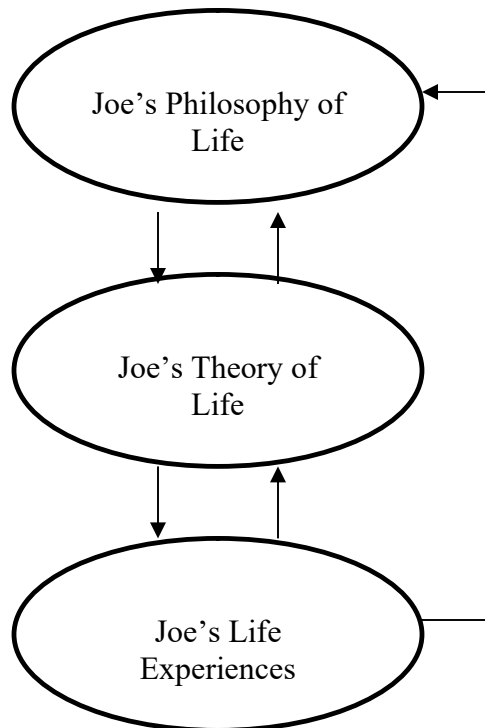


Figure 1-2. The Three Levels Identified by “Philosophy of S”

Figure 1-3. The Three Levels of Philosophy of Life



If we take the three levels of “Philosophy of S” and apply them to a particular person, then the three levels look like they do in Figure 1-3.

What is “Joe’s Theory of Life?” Surely most people don’t have an organized “theory of life” that they apply to their life. Yet most do people have such a theory, whether they are aware of it or now. This theory of life is the set of rules and principles they use to make decisions, and to understand their experiences. Even though these rules and principles are usually not consciously organized into a set, they still exist as vehicles for decision making and understanding.

What are these second-level rules and principles? Suppose Joe consistently goes to work on time. If asked why, he might say “I consider it my duty to be at work on time.” Suppose he also plays squash twice a week, and periodically takes walks after dinner. When asked to explain this, Joe might say “I am trying to keep in shape, and I also enjoy squash. Playing squash allows me to do both of these at once.” Looking more closely at Joe’s life, we find that he helps his wife with the cooking, and also does his share of other domestic chores. Here a justifying principle might be “I feel obligated to do my share of the household tasks.” When questioned further, he might say “I believe that spouses should share domestic duties in a roughly equal way.” These are the types of rules and principles that exist at the second or “theory of life” level.

The philosophy of life that someone has is made of the principles that are used to justify the second-level rules and principles. A philosophy of life is usually articulated even less often than the second-level rules and principles. It sometimes comes into play when there is a conflict in the second-order principles, or when people find their decision-making rules and principles challenged. Examples of principles that could be part of a philosophy of life include:

- Pursue pleasure when there is no reason not to.
- The meaning of life is self-expression.

- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- In any given situation, take multiple points of view to enhance understanding and increase knowledge.
- Seek out experiences of beauty whenever this is possible.
- Pursue your own interests in every situation regardless of the consequences for other people.

Obviously, not all philosophies are equally “good” or “bad.” If someone seems like a selfish or self-centered person, they probably are operating on a selfish or self-centered philosophy of life. People who are more “giving” or who go out of their way to help other people are most likely operating on a philosophy of life that emphasizes taking other people’s interests into account. Even though it is sometimes difficult to prove that one philosophy is better than another, people have to decide what sort of person they want to be. On the other hand, a person’s philosophy can be modified by experience. This is the reason for the long arrow in the preceding figure that extends from the Experience level to the Philosophy of Life level.

### **Discovering Your Own Philosophy of Life**

To discover the philosophy that your life is based on, ask yourself a series of “Why” questions similar to the ones asked in the above paragraphs. Try to understand the rules and principles you use in making your decisions. Then try to find more general principles that can be used to justify these decision-making rules and principles. You may need to go through a series of “Why” questions before you get to a principle that is general enough to be part of a philosophy of life. You will learn something important about yourself, and you may also find that you want to make some changes in your philosophy of life. But even if you decide you are perfectly happy with your philosophy of life as it is, you will find this a very worthwhile exercise.

### **Mental exercise**

1. Can you think of some other examples of philosophies?
2. Could there be other fields of philosophy that no one has thought of yet?

3. What is your philosophy of life?

