

# **A Plain English Guide to Philosophical Jargon**

*For the lay reader who is unfamiliar with the jargon, and for academics, wannabe academics, and anyone who wants to talk to regular people about philosophy*

*Edited from the original based on feedback – this is v. 6*

## **A priori**

Known before any experience — something that's true by definition or logic alone, not from observation.

## **Access consciousness**

Information that's available to your brain for reasoning and behavior, as opposed to information you're actually experiencing. Your brain "accesses" a lot without you noticing it.

## **Apatheism**

Not caring whether god exists. Not "I don't know" — just "doesn't matter to me either way."

## **Axiom**

A starting assumption you don't derive from anything else — you just accept it and build from there. Every ethical system has at least one. "Suffering is bad" is an axiom. You can't prove it; you either accept it or you don't. Most ethical disagreements, if you trace them back far enough, are disagreements about axioms rather than conclusions.

## **The binding problem**

Your brain processes color, shape, sound, and movement separately — so how do they get unified into one seamless experience? Nobody has a good answer.

## **Compatibilism**

Free will and determinism can both be true at the same time, if you define free will as acting according to your own desires without external coercion. It's essentially a redefinition of free will.

## **De facto**

"In practice" or "for all practical purposes." A de facto atheist is someone who lives as if there's no god, whatever label they use.

## **Determinism**

Every event, including every thought and decision, is the inevitable result of prior causes. If you rewind the universe and ran it again, everything would happen exactly the same way.

## **Divine command theory**

The position that morality is whatever God commands. Something is right because God says so, not the other way around. Gives morality a clear enforcer, but makes it entirely dependent on the existence and will of that enforcer.

### **Dualism**

The idea that mind and body are two fundamentally different things. Most philosophers try to avoid it because it raises the question of how they interact.

### **Eliminativism**

Some concepts we use — like "belief," "desire," or even "consciousness" — don't actually refer to anything real and should be dropped. A position held by a small number of philosophers; most find it a useful provocation even if they reject it.

### **Emergence / emergent property**

Something that arises from simpler parts but wasn't obviously there in those parts. Wetness emerges from water molecules, none of which is wet. Critics note this often just restates the mystery rather than explaining it.

### **Epiphenomenon**

A side effect that doesn't actually cause anything. If consciousness is an epiphenomenon, it's just along for the ride while your brain does the real work.

### **Epistemic / Epistemology**

A term encompassing multiple questions about knowledge: how we come to know things, whether we can know them at all, and how certain we can be. "That's an epistemic claim" means the claim is about one of those questions (the grounds for knowledge) rather than about what's actually true. "We can't know if god exists" is an epistemic claim. "God doesn't exist" is a truth claim.

### **Epistemic diffidence**

A term applied to others to suggest they are "too timid to take a stance."

### **Epistemic humility**

An admission of ignorance, as in, "I offer my opinion with epistemic humility."

### **The explanatory gap**

The distance between describing brain activity in physical terms and explaining why that activity produces any experience at all. Closely related to the hard problem.

### **Flourishing**

Living well in a full sense — not just pleasure or the absence of pain, but something closer to a life going well overall. Aristotle's term; picked up by Sam Harris and others as the thing ethics should be trying to maximize. Sounds obvious until you try to define it precisely. (From the Greek eudaimonia.)

### **Functionalism**

What matters for consciousness is what a system does, not what it's made of. If something processes information the right way, it's conscious — whether it's neurons or silicon. Underlies most arguments for AI consciousness.

### **Global Workspace Theory**

Consciousness is what happens when information gets "broadcast" widely across the brain, making it available to multiple systems at once. More of an engineering model than a philosophical one.

### **The hard problem (of consciousness)**

How does brain activity produce any inner experience at all? Why isn't it all just processing with nobody home?

### **Higher-order theory**

You're conscious of something when you have a thought about that thought — awareness of awareness. Some call it a second-order mental state.

### **Homeostasis**

A system maintaining stable internal conditions despite external changes. Used in biology but shows up in consciousness discussions as a marker of what makes living systems different from inert ones.

### **Idealism**

The view that reality is fundamentally mental or experiential rather than physical. Matter exists, but only as something that appears within experience, not as the bedrock.

### **Illusionism (about consciousness)**

The feeling that there's something it's like to be you is itself a trick the brain plays. There's no deep mystery — the apparent mystery is the illusion. Critics say this just relocates the problem.

### **Instrumental ought**

An ought derived from a desired outcome. "If you want X, you ought to do Y." No deeper moral claim is being made — it's purely practical. "If you want to lose weight, you ought to eat less" is an instrumental ought. Compare with transcendent ought.

### **Integrated Information Theory (IIT)**

Consciousness corresponds to how much information a system integrates across its parts. More integration, more consciousness. Critics point out it's hard to test and produces counterintuitive results.

### **Intentionality**

The property of mental states being "about" something. Your thought is about the coffee. The coffee isn't about anything. This "aboutness" is considered one of the defining features of mind.

### **Introspection**

Looking inward at your own mental states. Philosophers and psychologists note that your reports about what you're thinking or feeling may not accurately reflect what's actually happening in your brain.

### **Is-ought distinction**

No set of facts about the world can by itself tell you what you should do. You can describe reality in exhaustive detail and still not derive a single obligation from it without first smuggling in a value. "People suffer" is a fact. "We should reduce suffering" is a value claim. The gap between them doesn't close on its own. Also called Hume's guillotine.

### **Latent (in the model)**

Already baked in, just not visible yet. In AI discussions, it means the behavior was always possible given the training — it just hadn't come out yet.

### **Metaethics**

The study of what ethical claims actually are, rather than which ones are true. Not "should we reduce suffering?" but "what does 'should' even mean, and can it be true or false?" One level up from ethics itself.

### **Metaphysical**

Relating to things outside the physical world — or more honestly, relating to things we can't test or measure.

### **Moral naturalism / moral realist naturalism**

The view that moral facts are real and objective, not just opinions, and that they're grounded in natural facts about the world rather than divine command or abstract principles. "Torturing small mammals is wrong" would be as objectively true as any scientific fact.

### **Moral realism**

The view that moral facts exist independently of what anyone thinks or feels about them. Similar to moral naturalism, but broader — a moral realist doesn't have to ground morality in natural facts specifically. You can be a moral realist without being a naturalist.

### **Naked should**

A claim about what ought to be done with no stated criteria for evaluating it. "How should we live?" is a naked should — it sounds like a question but can't be answered until you specify what you're optimizing for. Most ethical debates are arguments about naked shoulds without anyone noticing.

### **Nonduality**

The claim, common in certain meditation and spiritual traditions, that the apparent separation between self and world is an illusion. A term that resists precise definition and means different things in different traditions.

### **Normative / normatively**

Relating to what ought to be, or what counts as better or worse for a system. A budget is normative — it defines what spending ought to be, not just what it is.

### **Noumena**

Kant's term for reality as it actually is, behind what we can perceive or experience. The idea is that we only ever have access to appearances, never to the thing itself.

### **Ontology / ontological**

The study of what exists, or what kinds of things are real. "What's the ontology here?" means "what are we actually saying exists?" An ontological claim is a claim about what exists or what's real, whether it's accurate or not (i.e. Politicians serve the public).

### **Orthogonal**

Two things operating independently, where one has no bearing on the other. Chickens eaten per year and population per year are not orthogonal — knowing one tells you something about the other. Chickens eaten per year and the number of left-handed violinists are orthogonal — knowing one tells you nothing about the other.

### **Panpsychism**

Consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality, present in some form even in simple matter. Not the same as saying rocks think — more like saying experience goes all the way down. A minority view among philosophers but one that has gained more attention recently.

### **Parsimonious**

The simplest explanation. "The parsimonious assumption" means "the least complicated way to look at it."

### **Phenomenal consciousness**

The fact that experience feels like something. As opposed to just processing information. "Phenomenal" here means nothing fancy — just that there's an inner experience happening.

### **Phenomenology / phenomenological**

The study of experience from the inside — what things are like as they appear to you, rather than what they are objectively.

### **Philosophical zombie**

An imaginary being identical to a human in every physical way but with no inner experience. Used as a thought experiment to argue that consciousness isn't just physics.

### **Physicalism / materialism**

Everything that exists is physical. There's no soul, no ghost in the machine — mind is what the brain does. Most scientists hold this view implicitly.

### **Positive truth claim**

Saying outright that something is true. As opposed to just saying you don't believe it.

## **Qualia**

The raw feel of experience — what it's actually like to taste coffee or see the color red, as opposed to just describing the chemistry of it.

## **Reductionism**

Explaining something by breaking it down into its parts. "Consciousness is just neurons firing" is a reductionist claim. Not necessarily wrong, but it tends to skip over the question of how and why the firing produces experience.

## **The self as narrative**

The "self" isn't a thing — it's a story constructed by the brain after the fact. There's no fixed "you" underneath it. Similar to someone utterly convinced they're Jesus Christ and feeling no less "themselves" for it.

## **Solipsism**

The view that only your own mind can be known to exist. Everything else — other people, the external world — might be a projection. Nobody actually believes this, but it comes up as an extreme counterexample in consciousness debates.

## **Subjectivity / subjective experience**

The fact that experience happens from a point of view — yours. When philosophers say consciousness is "irreducibly subjective," they mean you can't describe to others what you feel like inside.

## **Substrate**

The physical material something runs on. "Substrate independence" means a process could in principle run on different materials — neurons, silicon, whatever — and still be the same process.

## **Transcendent ought**

The claim that something is simply right or wrong, full stop, with no reference to consequences or desires. "It's just the right thing to do" invokes a transcendent ought. For atheists, the term is largely empty — without a divine enforcer, there's nothing for it to anchor to. Compare with instrumental ought.

## **Ultimate reality**

Whatever is fundamentally true about existence, beneath all appearances. Often invoked when someone is gesturing at something beyond what science can currently measure.

## **Unfalsifiable**

There's no test that could prove it wrong. Often used correctly, but sometimes deployed just to sound technical.