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NEW TO THIS EDITION

- **A new Chapter 3, "Truth and Knowledge,"** combines Chapters 3 and 4 from the previous edition
- **Seven new readings,** featuring work from Xinzhong Yao, Alvin Plantinga, Robert C. Solomon, Kaibara Ekken and Mary Evelyn Tucker, Boshan, and Simone de Beauvoir
- Throughout the text, **readings have been shortened wherever possible, and commentary has been expanded** to improve clarity and accessibility

Visit the text's online Ancillary Resource Center at www.oup.com/he/solomon-higgins-martin12e for a wealth of digital learning and teaching tools. Please see the preface for more information.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The late **Robert C. Solomon** was Quincy Lee Centennial Professor of Business and Philosophy and Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Introducing Philosophy

TWELFTH EDITION

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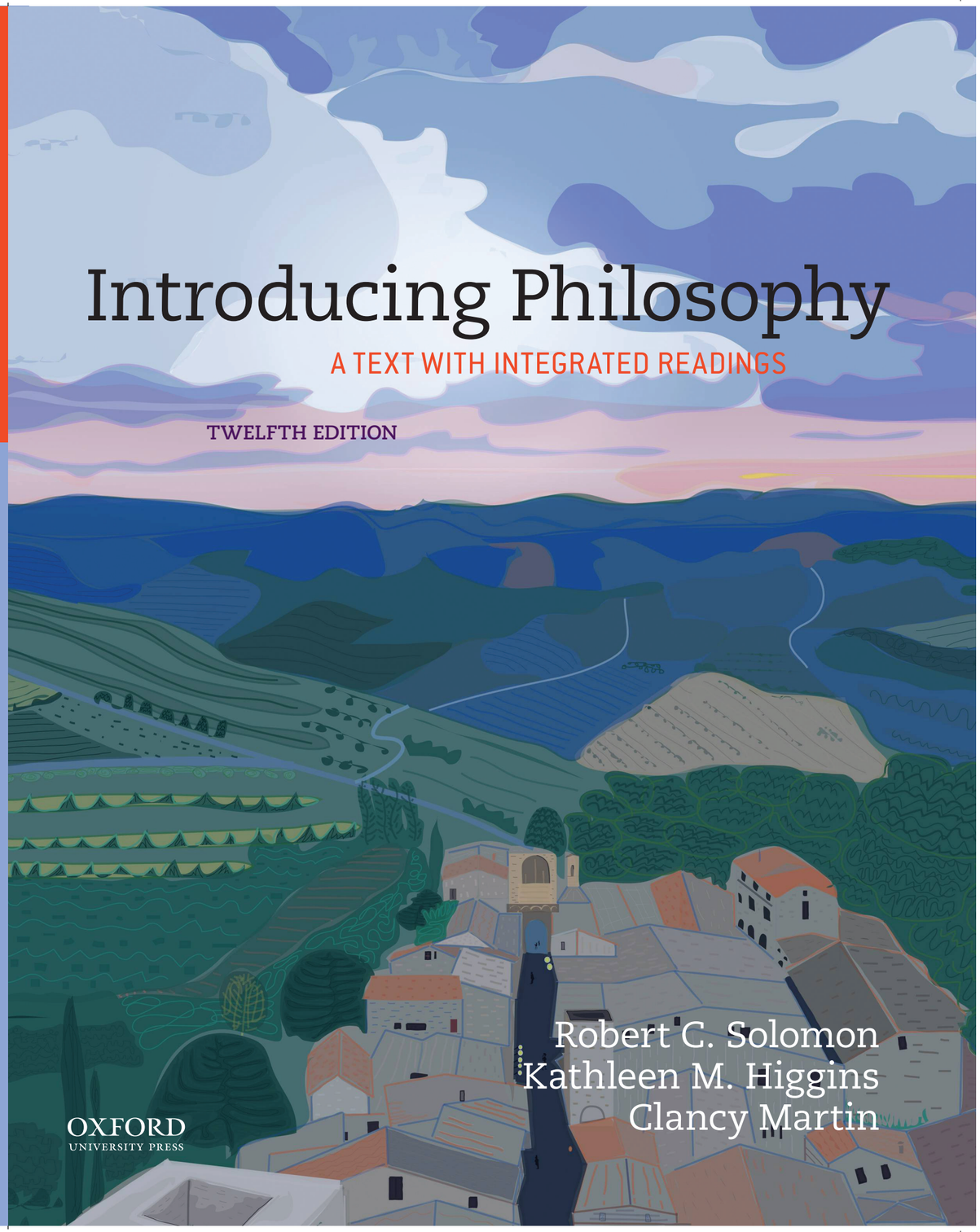
Introducing Philosophy

A TEXT WITH INTEGRATED READINGS

TWELFTH EDITION



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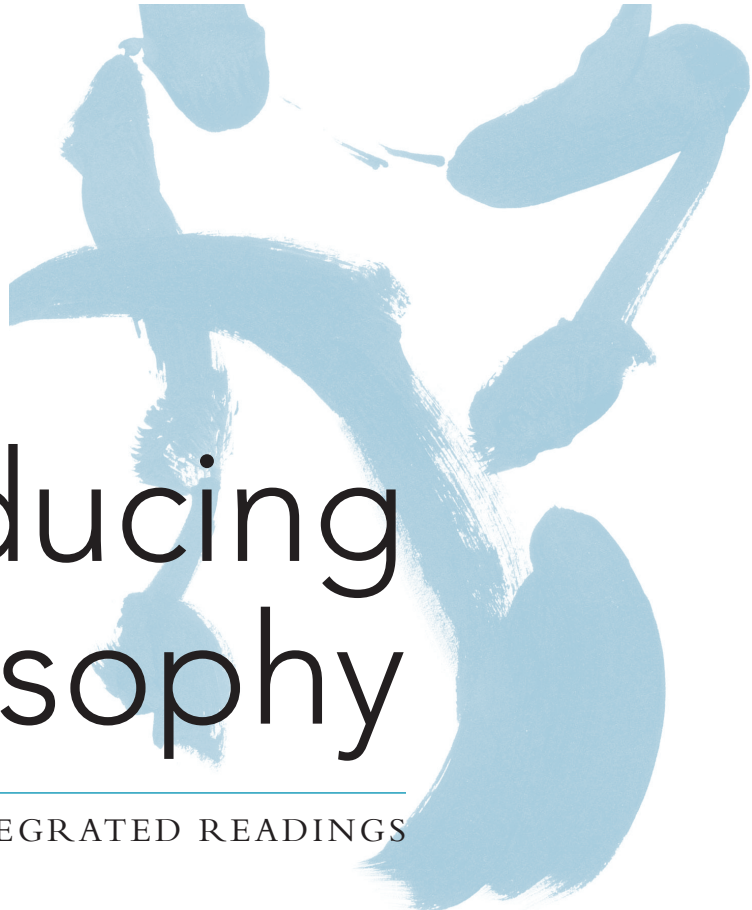

Introducing Philosophy

A TEXT WITH INTEGRATED READINGS

Twelfth Edition

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University of Texas at Austin

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University of Texas at Austin

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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For our parents
Vita P. Solomon (1916–2005) and Charles M. Solomon (1914–1986)
Kathryn A. Higgins (1925–2003) and Eugene A. Higgins (1923–2013)
Anna Victoria Moody and John William Martin (1941–1997)

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Preface

Introducing Philosophy: A Text with Integrated Readings, Twelfth Edition, is a thorough introduction to the core problems of philosophy. Organized topically, the chapters present alternative perspectives—including analytic, continental, feminist, and non-Western viewpoints—alongside the historical works of major philosophers. The text provides the course materials that allow instructors and students to focus on a variety of philosophical problems and perspectives. The goal is to present students with alternative views on philosophical issues and let them arrive at their own conclusions, which should be based on arguments in class and with classmates, as well as on the discussions in this book. The book presupposes no background in the subject and no special abilities. The purpose of philosophy is to encourage each person to think for himself or herself; no single source of arguments or information can take the place of personal dialogues and discussions. A textbook is ultimately a sourcebook—everything in it is to be taken as a cause for further argument, not as a final statement of results.

New to the Twelfth Edition

Many of the readings throughout the text have been shortened, including:

- Excerpts from the *Upanishads*, *Zend-Avesta*, The Fire Sermon, Plato's *Republic*, and *Meno* (Chapter 1)
- Discussion of the pre-Socratics (Chapter 1)
- Excerpts from Locke, Spinoza, and Russell (Chapter 3); Spelman (Chapter 4); Trimier, Mill, Frankfurt, Skinner, and Sartre (Chapter 6); and Held (Chapter 7).

Other changes include:

- Expanded commentary on many readings, including expanded commentary on Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley, Russell, Quine, Grosz, and Narajan (Chapter 3)
- Consolidation of Chapters 3 and 4 from the eleventh edition into Chapter 3, Truth and Knowledge

The following readings have been added to the new edition:

- Xinzhong Yao, "The Way of Confucianism" (Chapter 2)
- Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Chapter 2)
- Robert C. Solomon, *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life* (Chapter 2)

- Kaibara Ekken and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *The Philosophy of Qi: The Record of Great Doubts* (Chapter 2)
- Boshan, "Exhortations for Those Unable to Arouse Doubt" (Chapter 2)
- Simone de Beauvoir, from *The Second Sex* (Chapter 6)
- Robert C. Solomon, "The Emotions of Justice" (Chapter 8)

The following readings have been omitted from the new edition:

- Parmenides, Selections (Chapter 1)
- Heidegger, from *Being and Time* (Chapter 1)
- David Lewis, from *Counterfactuals* (Chapter 1)
- Victor A. Gunasekara, "The Buddhist Attitude to God" (Chapter 2)
- Plato, from *Republic* (Chapter 3)
- Plato, from *Theatetus* (Chapter 3)
- Charles Peirce, from "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (Chapter 4)
- Alfred Tarski, from "The Semantic Theory of Truth" (Chapter 3)
- Jean-Paul Sartre, from *Being and Nothingness* (Chapter 5)
- Genevieve Lloyd, from "The Man of Reason" (Chapter 5)
- Luce Irigaray, from *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Chapter 5)
- B. F. Skinner, from *Walden II* (Chapter 8)

Key Features

- A second color to visually enhance the text and further engage students and instructors
- More than 230 images that illustrate key concepts and encapsulate famous philosophical figures
- More than 100 brief profiles of philosophers interspersed throughout the text
- Substantial readings from significant works in the history of philosophy, with helpful commentary from the authors
- Key terms bolded in the text and collected at the end of each chapter
- Marginal quotations from famous philosophers that keep the student engaged and focused
- Questions for further consideration at the end of every subsection and additional chapter review questions at the ends of chapters
- Bibliographies and Further Reading at the end of each chapter
- A Glossary of the most important and widely used philosophical terms at the end of the book

Ancillaries

The Instructor's Manual and a Companion Website for students and instructors (www.oup.com/he/solomon-higgins-martin12e) that accompany this text have been fully revised according to the new edition. The Instructor's Manual includes:

- Chapter Summaries and Goals
- Section Summaries
- A Test Bank that includes multiple-choice, essay, true/false, and fill-in-the-blank questions
- Lecture outlines
- Downloadable PowerPoint presentations

The Companion Website includes all the material from the Instructor's Manual, along with the following resources for students:

- Interactive flash cards with key terms and definitions
- Self-quizzes that give students the opportunity to test what they have learned
- Glossary

Acknowledgments

From Kathleen M. Higgins and Clancy Martin

For this edition, we want to thank especially our editor, Robert Miller, and his assistants, Anna Dean and Molly Zimetbaum. We also want to thank our production editor, William Murray, and the readers who advised us in the preparation of this edition: Mark Sadler at Northeast Lakeview College, Jeremy Byrd at Tarrant County College, Andrew Vassar at Northeastern State University, Paul Wilson at Texas State University, Daniel Bramer at Holy Family University, Ellen Stansell at Austin Community College, Marcos Arandia at North Lake College, Nancy Shaffer at California University of Pennsylvania, Kristofer Arca at Miami Dade College, Robert Allen Shotwell at Ivy Tech Community College–Terre Haute, and Nell Senter at Jackson State Community College. Also, a social thanks to Aaron Mascarenhas for his help with the twelfth edition.

From Robert C. Solomon

This book and its previous editions have been made possible through the encouragement and help of many people, most important of whom are the several thousand introductory students I have had the pleasure of meeting and teaching. For the ninth edition, I want to give special thanks to my friend and colleague Clancy Martin. For the original edition, I thank Susan Zaleski for her very special insights and criticism of the manuscript in its early stages. I also thank Robert Fogelin, John McDermott, Janet McCracken, Stephen Phillips, Paul Woodruff, Stephanie Lewis, Michael Tye, George Cronk, Roland D. Zimany, Terry Boswell, Lisa Erlich, David Blumenfeld, Harry O'Hara, Barbara Barratt, Billy Joe Lucas, Cheshire Calhoun, Peter Hutcheson, Richard Palmer, Norman Thomas, Greta Reed, Edward Johnson, Don Branson, Hoke Robinson, Meredith Michaels, Bruce Paternoster, Maxine Morphis, Bruce Ballard, Jeffery Coombs, Timothy Owen Davis, Conrad Gromada, Gregory Landini, Dan Bonevac, Kathleen Higgins, Kristy Bartlett, Marilyn Frye, Jonathan Westphal, David J. Paul, Edward Johnson, Fred Tabor, Brian Kutin, Karen Mottola, John Rowell, Christopher Melley, John Carvalho, Michael Clifford, Timothy Davis, Ronald Glass, Isabel Luengo, Thomas Ryckman, William Smith, and Clancy Martin. At Harcourt College Publishers, my editors—Bill Pullin, Bill McLane, and David Tatom—were helpful and encouraging for many years and through many editions. Finally, I would like once again to thank my first philosophy teachers—Robert Hanson, Doris Yokum, Elizabeth Flower, James Ross, and C. G. Hempel—who provided me with the models and the materials for an ideal introductory philosophy course—and the many students who still continue to make the teaching of philosophy one of the more satisfying professions in a not easily satisfying world.

For the Student: Doing Philosophy

Your attempt to develop your own thoughts—to "do" philosophy, as well as to read what others have done—is central to any study of philosophy. Philosophy, more than any other field, is not so much a subject as it is a way of thinking, one that can be appreciated fully only by joining in. While reading each section, therefore, do not hesitate to put down the book at any time and do your own thinking and writing. When reading about metaphysics, for example, think about how you would develop your own view of reality and how you would answer the questions raised by the first philosophers of ancient Greece or the Orient. When confronted by an argument, consider how you might argue for or against a given position. When facing an idea that seems foreign, try to put it in your own terms and understand the vision that lies behind it. And when facing a problem, always offer your own answer as well as the answers offered by earlier thinkers. In philosophy, unlike physics or biology, your own answer may be just as legitimate as those given by the philosophers of the past, and there may be equally interesting answers from different traditions. This is what makes philosophy so difficult to learn at first, but it is also what makes it so personally valuable and enjoyable.

Most of the sections and all of the chapters are followed immediately by questions for you to answer, either out loud with other students in class or in writing, perhaps by way of a class journal or as an addition to your class notes. Most of the questions are intended simply to encourage you to articulate the point of what you have just read, putting what you have just read in (more or less) your own words. All too often when we are reading new or difficult material, we just allow it to "pass through" on the way to the next reading. We all have had the experience of reading a long passage, even spending a considerable amount of time on it, and then afterward finding that we are unable to say anything about it. The aim of the questions, therefore, is to force you to say or write something. Some of the questions are thought-provoking, but most are aimed simply at providing immediate feedback for you. We ask, therefore, that you take the questions seriously and consider them an integral part of your reading assignment.

Writing Philosophy

With the foregoing ideas in mind, it should be obvious why talking about philosophy with friends and classmates, raising important questions and objections in class, and writing down ideas are so important. Articulation reinforces comprehension, and arguing against objections broadens understanding. Writing papers in philosophy is a particularly important part of any philosophy course, and there are certain general guidelines to keep in mind:

1. Begin your essay with a leading question. "Thinking about" some philosophical issue can be fun but too easily leads one to lose direction and purpose. For instance, thinking about "freedom" involves far too many different problems and perspectives. Asking such questions as "Is freedom of action compatible with scientific determinism?" or "Can there be freedom in a socialist state?" gives your thinking a specific orientation and way of proceeding.
2. Be clear about the difficulties you face in tackling the question. Are the terms of the question clear? It is not always necessary or possible to define terms at the start of your essay. Indeed, defining the key term may be the basic and most difficult conclusion you reach. Also, it is often a poor idea to depend on a dictionary (even a good one) for clarifying your question. Dictionaries are not written by philosophers and generally reflect popular usage—which may include just such philosophical misunderstandings as you are attempting to correct.

3. Clarify the position you are arguing. Do not force the reader (your instructor) to guess where you are going. When you are clear about the question you ask, it will help you clarify the answer you intend to give, and vice versa. In fact, you may well change your mind—about both the question and the answer—several times while you are writing; this is the real danger of attempting a one-draft-the-night-before approach to essay writing.
4. Argue your case. Demonstrate why you hold the position you do. The most frequent criticism of student papers is "This is your assertion: Where is the argument?" When an exam question asks you to discuss an idea or a quotation "critically," this does not mean that you must attack it or find fault with it but, rather, that you need to consider the merits and possible inadequacies, think about the reasons given, and give your own reasons for what you say.
5. Anticipate objections to your position and to your arguments and take the offensive against rival positions. If you do not know what your position is opposed to, it is doubtful that you are clear about what your own position is. If you cannot imagine how anyone could possibly disagree with you, you probably have not thought through your position carefully.
6. Do not be afraid to be yourself, to be humorous, charming, sincere, or personal. The most powerful philosophical writings, those that have endured for centuries, often reflect the author's deepest concerns and attitudes toward life. However, remember that no philosophical writing can be just humorous, charming, sincere, or personal. Make sure that everything you write—including a joke—is relevant to the topic at hand. What makes your writing philosophical is that it involves general concerns and careful arguments while attempting to prove an important point and answer one of the age-old questions.

History of Philosophy

Note: Over many centuries Western dates have traditionally been indicated in reference to the approximate year of the birth of Christ. "B.C." stands for "Before Christ," and "A.D." stands for the Latin "*Anno Domine*," meaning "in the year of the Lord." Increasingly, these abbreviations have been replaced with "B.C.E.," meaning "Before the Common Era" and "C.E.," the "Common Era." We have adopted the latter pair of abbreviations in this book.

3000 B.C.E.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2700 B.C.E.)

2000 B.C.E.

Abraham (ca. 1900)

1500 B.C.E.

Hindu Vedas (ca. 1500)

Moses (fl. 1220–1200)

Trojan War (1185 B.C.E.)

1000 B.C.E.

Chinese develop gunpowder (1000 B.C.E.)

Homer (9th–8th century)

First Olympic Games 776 B.C.E.

Rome is founded 753 B.C.E.

Pythagoras ca. 581–507 B.C.E.

Laozi 570–510 B.C.E.

Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) 566–486 B.C.E.

500 B.C.E.

Aesop's Fables ca. 550 B.C.E.

Confucius 551–479 B.C.E.

Heraclitus ca. 535–470 B.C.E.

Confucian *Analects* compiled ca. 475–221 B.C.E.

Socrates 469–399 B.C.E.

Parthenon is completed 433 B.C.E.

Plato 427–347 B.C.E.

400 B.C.E.

Job ca. 400 B.C.E.

Pentateuch established ca. 400 B.C.E.

Plato's *Symposium* ca. 385–380 B.C.E..

Aristotle 384–322 B.C.E.

Plato's *Republic* ca. 380 B.C.E.

Mencius 372–289 B.C.E.

Alexander the Great conquers Egypt 332 B.C.E.

300 B.C.E.

Julius Caesar assassinated 44 B.C.E.
Jesus Christ ca. 5 B.C.E..–30 C.E.

1 B.C.E.

St. Paul ca. 10–65
St. Augustine 354–430
St. Augustine's *Confessions* 397–398

C.E. 500

Muhammad ca. 570–632

1000 *Beowulf* ca. 1000
St. Anselm ca. 1033–1109
Al-Ghazali 1058–1111
The first crusade captures Jerusalem 1099

1100

Oxford University founded 1149

1200

The Magna Carta is signed 1215
St. Thomas Aquinas 1225–1274
Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* 1265–1274
Marco Polo returns from China 1275
Farsighted eyeglasses are invented 1285

1300 Gunpowder used for the first time in Europe 1300
Dante's *Divine Comedy* 1310
The Bubonic Plague 1348–1375
Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* 1386

1400

First documented black slaves arrive in Europe 1441
Christian Constantinople falls to the Muslims 1453
Johannes Gutenberg invents the printing press 1455
Columbus and Spanish exploration and colonization of the Americas and Caribbean 1492–1520

1500 Northern European Renaissance begins 1500
High Renaissance in Italy 1500–1530
Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* 1513
Copernican Revolution 1514
Martin Luther's 95 Theses 1517
Protestant Reformation 1517–1541
830,000 killed in massive earthquake in China 1556
Thomas Hobbes 1588–1679
René Descartes 1596–1650

1600

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 1601
Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quixote* 1605
King James Bible 1611
Thirty Years War 1618–1648
Pilgrims arrive at Plymouth 1620
Blaise Pascal 1623–1662
Benedictus de Spinoza 1632–1677

John Locke 1632–1704
Descartes's *Discourse on Method* 1637
Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1641
Isaac Newton 1642–1727
Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz 1646–1716

1650

Hobbes's *Leviathan* 1651
John Milton's *Paradise Lost* 1667
Pascal's *Pensées* 1670
Spinoza's *Ethics* 1677
Bishop George Berkeley 1685–1753
Newton's *Principles of Mathematics* 1687
Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 1690

1700

Berkeley's *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* 1710
David Hume 1711–1776
Jean–Jacques Rousseau 1712–1778
Leibniz's *The Monadology* 1714
Immanuel Kant 1724–1804
Agricultural revolution in Western Europe 1730–1850
Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* 1732
Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1739
Jeremy Bentham 1748–1832
Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* 1748
Voltaire's *Candide* 1759
Rousseau's *Emile* 1762
Rousseau's *The Social Contract* 1762
Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding* 1765
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel 1770–1831
Boston Tea Party 1773
The American colonies declare independence 1776
Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* 1776
Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* 1781
Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* 1783
Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* 1788
Arthur Schopenhauer 1788–1860
French Revolution begins 1789
Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* 1792
Reign of Terror in France 1793
Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* 1797

1800

Napoleon crowned emperor of France 1804
John Stuart Mill 1806–1873
Harriet Taylor 1807–1858
Hegel's *Phemonenology of Spirit* 1807
Charles Darwin 1809–1882
Søren Kierkegaard 1813–1855
The Battle at Waterloo 1815

Frederick Douglass 1817–1895
Henry David Thoreau 1817–1862
Karl Marx 1818–1883
Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* 1818
Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* 1818
Fyodor Dostoyevsky 1821–1881
England outlaws slavery 1833
Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" 1836
William James 1842–1910
Friedrich Nietzsche 1844–1900
The Potato Famine 1845–1848
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *The Communist Manifesto* 1848

1850

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* 1851
Thoreau's *Walden* 1854
Sigmund Freud 1856–1939
Edmund Husserl 1859–1938
John Dewey 1859–1952
Darwin's *Origin of Species* 1859
Mill's *Utilitarianism* 1863
Emancipation Proclamation 1863
Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 1865
Telegraph cable connects the United States and Europe 1866
Mahatma Gandhi 1868–1948
Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* 1868
Bertrand Russell 1872–1970
Global economic depression 1873–1877
Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* 1875
Albert Einstein 1879–1955
Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* 1880
Karl Jaspers 1883–1969
Ludwig Wittgenstein 1889–1951
Martin Heidegger 1889–1976

1900

Gilbert Ryle 1900–1976
Keiji Nishitani 1900–1990
W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks* 1903
John Wisdom 1904–1993
Jean-Paul Sartre 1905–1980
Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* 1906
Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1908–1961
Simone de Beauvoir 1908–1986
NAACP established 1909

1910

Nationalist Revolution in China 1911
Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* 1912
Titanic sinks 1912
Albert Camus 1913–1960

World War I 1914–1918
Russian Revolution 1917
Influenza epidemic kills 20 million people 1918

1920

John Rawls 1921–2002
James Joyce's *Ulysses* 1922
John Scopes indicted for teaching evolution 1925
Malcolm X 1925–1965
Kafka's *The Trial* 1925
Michel Foucault 1926–1984
Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* 1927
U.S. stock market crash 1929
William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* 1929
Worldwide economic depression 1929–1939
Martin Luther King Jr. 1929–1968

1930

Rise of Nazism in Germany 1930
Jacques Derrida 1930–2004
Richard Rorty 1931–2007
Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 1937
John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* 1939
World War II 1939–1945

1940

The Japanese attack Pearl Harbor 1941
David Lewis 1941-2001
Merleau–Ponty's *The Structure of Behavior* 1942
Camus's *The Stranger* 1942
The Shoah (Holocaust) 1942–1945
Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* 1943
Formation of the United Nations 1945
George Orwell's *Animal Farm* 1945
The atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima 1945
India gains independence from Britain; Pakistan is created 1947
Israel is created 1948
Marshall Plan 1948
Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* 1949
de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* 1949
Communist victory in China, ascension of Mao Tse-tung 1949

1950

J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* 1951
Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* 1952
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* 1952
Brown v. Board of Education 1954
The Vietnam War 1955–1975

1960

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* 1960
Cuban Missile Crisis 1962
Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* 1963
John Fitzgerald Kennedy is assassinated 1963
The Civil Rights Act is passed in the United States 1964

Cultural Revolution in China 1965–1973
Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* 1967
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated 1968
Woodstock Music Festival 1969

1970

Rawls's *Theory of Justice* 1971
Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* 1974
Lebanese Civil War 1975
Ronald Dworkin's *Taking Rights Seriously* 1977
Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* 1979
Thomas Nagel's *Mortal Questions* 1979

1980

Rise of Ronald Reagan and conservatism in the United States 1980
Jacques Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* 1982
Apple's Macintosh computers are released 1984
Glasnost (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) policies in Soviet Union 1985
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* 1987
Berlin Wall falls 1989

1990

Internet introduced to the general public 1990
Soviet Union dissolved 1991
Hilary Putnam's *Renewing Philosophy* 1992
First democratic elections in South Africa 1994
Charles Taylor's *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* 1994
Genocide in Rwanda 1995

2000

September 11, 2001
Iraq War begins 2003
Barack Obama becomes president of the United States 2009

Introducing Philosophy

Introduction

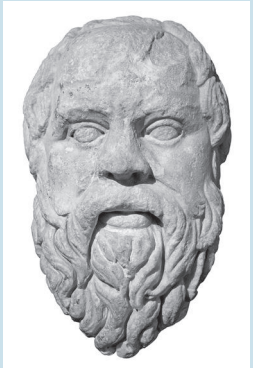
The unexamined life is not worth living.

SOCRATES

A. Socrates

He was not the first philosopher, but he was, and is still, the ideal of philosophers. Once assured by the oracle at Delphi that he was the wisest man in Athens, **Socrates** (470–399 B.C.E.) borrowed his view of life from the inscription at Delphi, "Know Thyself." Mixing humility with arrogance, he boasted that his superiority lay in his awareness of his own ignorance, and he spent the rest of his life making fools of the self-proclaimed "wise men" of Athens.

In the opinion of Socrates and other critics of the time, the government of Athens was corrupt and notoriously bumbling, in marked contrast to the "Golden Age" of Pericles a few years before. Philosophical arguments had become all cleverness and demagoguery, rhetorical tricks to win arguments and legal cases; political ambition replaced justice and the search for the good life. Socrates believed that the people of Athens held their principles glibly, like banners we would see today at a football game, but rarely lived up to them and even more rarely examined them. Against this, he developed a technique of asking seemingly innocent questions, trapping his audience in their own confusions and hypocrisies, exploding the pretensions of his times. And against their easy certainties, he taught that "the unexamined life is not worth living." He referred to himself as a "gadfly" (an obnoxious insect with a painful bite), keeping his fellow citizens from ever becoming as smug and self- righteous as they would like to have been. Accordingly, he made many enemies and was satirized by Aristophanes in his play *The Clouds*.



A traditional image of Socrates (© *Shutterstock.com/Kamira*)

Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.)

An Athenian philosopher with a gift for rhetoric and debating, who had a notoriously poor marriage, several children, and lived in poverty most of his life. Socrates was fascinated by human nature, morality, and politics. He became famous debating with the many "sophists" who wandered about giving practical training in argument and persuasion (the ancient equivalent of law school). Socrates found their general skepticism intolerable and urged a return to the absolute ideals of wisdom, virtue, justice, and the good life. In his not always tactful search for truth, however, Socrates made many enemies, who eventually had him condemned to death, an unjust verdict that he accepted with dignity.

FROM *The Clouds*
BY Aristophanes[1]

STUDENT OF SOCRATES: Socrates asked Chaerephon how many of its own feet a flea could jump—one had bitten Chaerephon's brow and then jumped to Socrates' head.

STREPSIADES: And how did he measure the jump?

STUDENT: Most ingeniously. He melted wax, caught the flea, dipped its feet, and the hardened wax made Persian slippers. Unfastening these, he found their size.

STREPSIADES: Royal Zeus! What an acute intellect!

STUDENT: But yesterday a high thought was lost through a lizard.

STREPSIADES: How so? Tell me.

STUDENT: As he gaped up at the moon, investigating her paths and turnings, from off the roof a lizard befouled him.

In the play, Aristophanes made Socrates and his students look utterly ridiculous, and the Athenian public enjoyed Aristophanes' sarcasm as a mild form of vengeance for Socrates' constant criticisms. Aristophanes' "clouds" refer to that confusion which we mean when we talk of someone "having his head in the clouds." Aristophanes probably expressed the general public opinion when he described Socrates as "shiftless" and merely a master at verbal trickery.

Socrates' students, however, virtually worshiped him. They described him as "the bravest, most wise, and most upright man of our times" and perceived him as a martyr for the truth in a corrupted society. The price of his criticism was not merely the satire of the playwrights. Because he had been such a continual nuisance, the government arranged to have Socrates brought to trial for "corrupting the youth of Athens" and "not believing in the gods of the city." And for these trumped-up "crimes," Socrates was condemned to death. But at his trial, he once again became a gadfly to those who condemned him.

FROM *Apology*
BY Plato[2]

He assesses the penalty at death. So be it. What counterassessment should I propose to you, gentlemen of the jury? Clearly it should be a penalty I deserve, and what do I deserve to suffer or to pay because I have deliberately not led a quiet life but have neglected what occupies most people: wealth, household affairs, the position of general or public orator or the other offices, the political clubs and factions that exist in the city? I thought myself too honest to survive if I occupied myself with those things. I did not follow that path that would have made me of no use either to you or to myself, but I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by persuading him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible, not

[1] Excerpt from *The Clouds*, in *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes*, ed. Moses Hadas. Copyright © 1962 by Bantam Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

[2] Plato, *The Apology*, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 2nd ed., trans. G. M. A. Grube. Copyright © 1975 by Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself, and to care for other things in the same way. What do I deserve for being such a man? Some good, gentlemen of the jury, if I must truly make an assessment according to my deserts, and something suitable.

Socrates here suggests that the state should give him a pension, rather than a punishment, for being a public benefactor and urging his students to be virtuous.

It is for the sake of a short time, gentlemen of the jury, that you will acquire the reputation and the guilt, in the eyes of those who want to denigrate the city, of having killed Socrates, a wise man, for they will say that I am wise even if I am not. If you had waited but a little while, this would have happened of its own accord. You see my age, that I am already advanced in years and close to death. I am saying this not to all of you but to those who condemned me to death, and to these same jurors I say: Perhaps you think that I was convicted for lack of such words as might have convinced you, if I thought I should say or do all I could to avoid my sentence. Far from it. I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness and the willingness to say to you what you would most gladly have heard from me, lamentations and tears and my saying and doing many things that I say are unworthy of me but that you are accustomed to hear from others. I did not think then that the danger I ran should make me do anything mean, nor do I now regret the nature of my defense. I would much rather die after this kind of defense than live after making the other kind. Neither I nor any other man should, on trial or in war, contrive to avoid death at any cost. Indeed it is often obvious in battle that one could escape death by throwing away one's weapons and by turning to supplicate one's pursuers, and there are many ways to avoid death in every kind of danger if one will venture to do or say anything to avoid it. It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen of the jury, it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death. Slow and elderly as I am, I have been caught by the slower pursuer, whereas my accusers, being clever and sharp, have been caught by the quicker, wickedness. I leave you now, condemned to death by you, but they are condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice. So I maintain my assessment, and they maintain theirs. This perhaps had to happen, and I think it is as it should be.

Now I want to prophesy to those who convicted me, for I am at the point when men prophesy most, when they are about to die. I say gentlemen, to those who voted to kill me, that vengeance will come upon you immediately after my death, a vengeance much harder to bear than that which you took in killing me. You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible. With this prophecy to you who convicted me, I part from you.

"It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen of the jury, it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death."

—PLATO'S SOCRATES

In prison, he was given the opportunity to escape. He refused it. He had always taught that "the really important thing is not to live, but to live well." And to "live well" meant, along

with the more enjoyable things in life, to live according to your principles. When his friend Crito tried to persuade him otherwise, Socrates countered his pleas and arguments with powerful arguments of his own. Look carefully at the structure of these arguments and judge for yourself their soundness.

FROM *Crito*
BY Plato[3]

SOCRATES: My good Crito, why should we care so much for what the majority think? The most reasonable people, to whom one should pay more attention, will believe that things were done as they were done.

CRITO: You see, Socrates, that one must also pay attention to the opinion of the majority. Your present situation makes clear that the majority can inflict not the least but pretty well the greatest evils if one is slandered among them.

SOCRATES: Would that the majority could inflict the greatest evils, for they would then be capable of the greatest good, and that would be fine, but now they cannot do either. They cannot make a man either wise or foolish, but they inflict things haphazardly.

CRITO: That may be so. But tell me this, Socrates, are you anticipating that I and your other friends would have trouble with the informers if you escape from here, as having stolen you away, and that we should be compelled to lose all our property or pay heavy fines and suffer other punishment besides? If you have any such fear, forget it. We would be justified in running this risk to save you, and worse, if necessary. Do follow my advice, and do not act differently.

SOCRATES: I do have these things in mind, Crito, and also many others.

CRITO: Have no such fear. It is not much money that some people require to save you and get you out of here. . . .

Besides, Socrates, I do not think that what you are doing is right, to give up your life when you can save it, and to hasten your fate as your enemies would hasten it, and indeed have hastened it in their wish to destroy you.

. . .

SOCRATES: My dear Crito, your eagerness is worth much if it should have some right aim; if not, then the greater your keenness the more difficult it is to deal with. We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens only to the argument that on reflection seems best to me. I cannot, now that this fate has come upon me, discard the arguments I used; they seem to me much the same. I value and respect the same principles as before, and if we have no better arguments to bring up at this moment, be sure that I shall not agree with you, not even if the power of the majority were to frighten us with more bogeys, as if we were children, with threats of incarcerations and executions and confiscation of property. How should we examine this matter more reasonably? Would it be by taking up first your argument about the opinions of men, whether it is sound in every case that one should pay attention to some opinions, but not to others? Or was that well-spoken before the necessity to die came upon me, but now it is clear that this was said in vain for the sake of argument, that

[3] Plato, *The Crito*, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 2nd ed., trans. G. M. A. Grube. Copyright © 1975 by Hackett Publishing Company. Reprinted with permission.

it was in truth play and nonsense? I am eager to examine together with you, Crito, whether this argument will appear in any way different to me in my present circumstances, or whether it remains the same, whether we are to abandon it or believe it. It was said on every occasion that one should greatly value some opinions, but not others. Does that seem to you a sound statement? . . . Examine the following statement in turn as to whether it stays the same or not, that the most important thing is not life, but the good life.

CRITO: It stays the same.

SOCRATES: And that the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same; does that still hold, or not?

CRITO: It does hold.

SOCRATES: As we have agreed so far, we must examine next whether it is right for me to try to get out of here when the Athenians have not acquitted me. If it is seen to be right, we will try to do so; if it is not, we will abandon the idea. As for those questions you raise about money, reputation, the upbringing of children, Crito, those considerations in truth belong to those people who easily put men to death and would bring them to life again if they could, without thinking; I mean the majority of men. For us, however, since our argument leads to this, the only valid consideration, as we were saying just now, is whether we should be acting rightly in giving money and gratitude to those who will lead me out of here, and ourselves helping with the escape, or whether in truth we shall do wrong in doing all this. If it appears that we shall be acting unjustly, then we have no need at all to take into account whether we shall have to die, if we stay here and keep quiet, or suffer in another way, rather than do wrong.

CRITO: I think you put that beautifully, Socrates, but see what we should do.

SOCRATES: Let us examine the question together, my dear friend, and if you can make any objection while I am speaking, make it and I will listen to you, but if you have no objection to make, my dear Crito, then stop now from saying the same thing so often, that I must leave here against the will of the Athenians. I think it important to persuade you before I act, and not to act against your wishes. . . .

SOCRATES: Then . . . I ask you: when one has come to an agreement that is just with someone, should one fulfill it or cheat on it?

CRITO: One should fulfill it.

SOCRATES: See what follows from this: If we leave here without the city's permission, are we injuring people whom we should least injure? And are we sticking to a just agreement, or not?

The name "Plato" literally means "broad shoulders." *(© Shutterstock.com/ pseudolongino)*

Plato (427–347 B.C.E.)

Plato was born into a family of wealth and political power. But in Athens, he fell under the influence of Socrates and turned his talents to philosophy. He conceived of a "philosopher-king," the ideal wise ruler, who certainly did not exist in Athens. He was disillusioned by Socrates' execution and devoted his life to continuing Socrates' work. Plato set up the Academy for this purpose and spent the rest of his life teaching there. He first wrote down his reminiscences of Socrates' life and death, and, using the dialogue form with Socrates as his mouthpiece, he extended Socrates' thought into entirely new areas, notably, metaphysics and the theory of knowledge. Plato incorporated theories of morality into his metaphysics and politics, particularly in *Republic*. Like all Greeks, he saw ethics as part of politics and the good life for the individual in terms of the strength and harmony of the society. In *Republic*, accordingly, Socrates argues against the various views of selfishness and hedonism that would interfere with such a conception. Virtue, he argues, is the harmony of the individual soul as well as the harmony of the individual within the society. It is still difficult to know, since we have nothing from Socrates himself, how much is original Plato and how much is transcribed Socrates.

"Not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens only to the argument that on reflection seems best to me."

—PLATO'S SOCRATES

CRITO: I cannot answer your question, Socrates, I do not know.

SOCRATES: Look at it this way. If, as we were planning to run away from here, or whatever one should call it, the laws and the state came and confronted us and asked: "Tell me, Socrates, what are you intending to do? Do you not by this action you are attempting intend to destroy us, the laws, and indeed the whole city, as far as you are concerned? Or do you think it possible for a city not to be destroyed if the verdicts of its courts have no force but are nullified and set at naught by private individuals?" What shall we answer to this and other such arguments? For many things could be said, especially by an orator on behalf of this law we are destroying, which orders that the judgments of the courts shall be carried out. Shall we say in answer, "The city wronged me, and its decision was not right." Shall we say that, or what?

CRITO: Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, that is our answer.

SOCRATES: Then what if the laws said, "Was that the agreement between us, Socrates, or was it to respect the judgments that the city came to?" And if we wondered at their words, they would perhaps add: "Socrates, do not wonder at what we say but answer, since you are accustomed to proceed by question and answer. Come now, what accusation do you bring against us and the city, that you should try to destroy us? Did we not, first, bring you to birth, and was it not through us that your father married your mother and begat you? Tell us, do you find anything to criticize in those of us who are concerned with marriage?" And I would say that I do not criticize them. "Or in those of us concerned with the nurture of babies and the education that you too received? Were those assigned to that subject not right to instruct your father to educate you in the arts and in physical culture?" And I would say that they were right. "Very well," they would continue, "and after you were born and nurtured and educated, could you, in the first place, deny that you are our offspring and servant, both you and your forefathers? If that is so, do you think that we are on an equal footing as regards the right, and that whatever we do to you it is right for you to do to us? You were not on an equal footing with your father as regards the right, nor with your master if you had one, so as to retaliate for anything they did to you, to revile them if they reviled you, to beat them if they beat you, and so with many other things. Do you think you have this right to retaliation against your country and its laws? That if we undertake to destroy you and think it right to do so, you can undertake to destroy us, as far as you can, in return? And will you say that you are right to do so, you who truly care for virtue? Is your wisdom such as not to realize that your country is to be honoured more than your mother, your father, and all your ancestors, that it is more to be revered and more sacred, and that it counts for more among the gods and sensible men, that you must worship it, yield to it and placate its anger more than your father's? You must either persuade it or obey its orders, and endure in silence whatever it instructs you to endure, whether blows or bonds, and if it leads you into war to be wounded or killed, you must obey. To do so is right, and one must not give way or retreat or leave one's post, but both in war and in courts and everywhere else, one must obey the commands of one's city and country, or persuade it as to the nature of justice. It is impious to bring violence to bear against your mother or father, it is much more so to use it against your country." What shall we say in reply, Crito, that the laws speak the truth, or not?

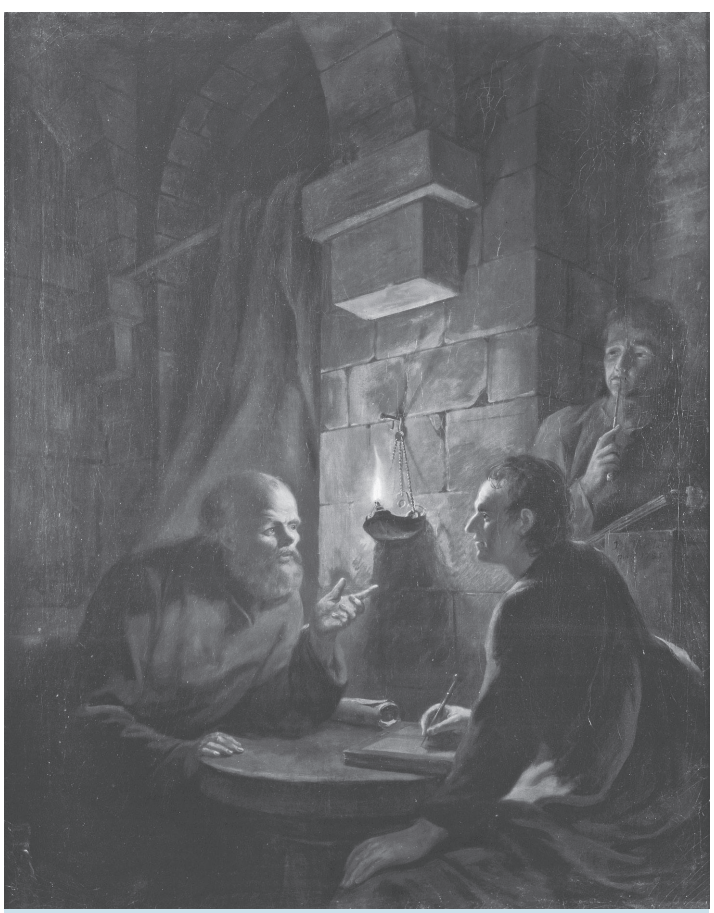
CRITO: I think they do.

SOCRATES: "Reflect now, Socrates," the laws might say, "that if what we say is true, you are not treating us rightly by planning to do what you are planning. . . . "So decisively did you choose us and agree to be a citizen under us. Also, you have had children in this city, thus showing that it was congenial to you. Then at your trial you could have assessed your penalty at exile if you wished, and you are now attempting to do against the city's wishes what you could then have done with her consent. Then you prided yourself that you did not resent death, but you chose, as you said, death in preference to exile. Now, however, those words do not make you ashamed, and you pay no heed to us, the laws, as you plan to destroy us, and you act like the meanest type of slave by trying to run away, contrary to your undertakings and your agreement to live as a citizen under us. First then, answer us on this very point, whether we speak the truth when we say that you agreed, not only in words but by your deeds, to live in accordance with us." What are we to say to that, Crito? Must we not agree?

CRITO: We must, Socrates.

SOCRATES: "Surely," they might say, "you are breaking the undertakings and agreements that you made with us without compulsion or deceit, and under no pressure of time for deliberation. You have had seventy years during which you could have gone away if you did not like us, and if you thought our agreements unjust. You did not choose to go to Sparta or to Crete, which you are always saying are well governed, nor to any other city, Greek or foreign. You have been away from Athens less than the lame or the blind or other handicapped people. It is clear that the city has been outstandingly more congenial to you than to other Athenians, and so have we, the laws, for what city can please if its laws do not? Will you then not now stick to our agreements? You will, Socrates, if we can persuade you, and not make yourself a laughingstock by leaving the city."

"Be persuaded by us who have brought you up, Socrates. Do not value either your children or your life or anything else more than goodness, in order that you may have all this as your defense before rulers there. If you do this deed, you will not think it better or more just or more pious, nor will any one of your friends, nor will it be better for you when you arrive yonder. As it is, you depart, if you depart, after being wronged not by us, the laws, but by men; but if you depart after shamefully returning wrong for wrong and injury for injury, after breaking your agreement and contract with us, after injuring those you should injure least—yourself,



Socrates in Prison (1785) by Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder
(bpk, Berlin/Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel/Lutz Braun/Art Resource, NY)

your friends, your country and us—we shall be angry with you while you are still alive, and our brothers, the laws of the underworld, will not receive [you] kindly, knowing that you tried to destroy us as far as you could. Do not let Crito persuade you, rather than we, to do what he says."

. . .

CRITO: I have nothing to say, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Let it be then, Crito, and let us act in this way, since this is the way the god is leading us.

- By choosing to go on living in the city, Socrates has agreed with Athens to obey its laws. Therefore, even if he is wrongly condemned by the same laws, he has the duty to stay and accept his punishment. Do you agree that he has made such a tacit agreement? Do you agree that he has the duty to stay and accept punishment even if he was wrongly condemned? Have you entered into such an agreement with your community? Your country? What would you do if you were Socrates?

Socrates believed that the good of his "soul" was far more important than the transient pleasures of life. Accordingly, he preferred to die for his ideas than live as a hypocrite. An idea worth living for may be an idea worth dying for as well.

FROM *Phaedo*
BY Plato[4]

And while he was saying this, he was holding the cup, and then drained it calmly and easily. Most of us had been able to hold back our tears reasonably well up till then, but when we saw him drinking it and after he drank it, we could hold them back no longer; my own tears came in floods against my will. So I covered my face. I was weeping for myself—not for him, but for my misfortune in being deprived of such a comrade. Even before me, Crito was unable to restrain his tears and got up. Apollodorus had not ceased from weeping before, and at this moment his noisy tears and anger made everybody present break down, except Socrates, "What is this," he said, "you strange fellows. It is mainly for this reason that I sent the women away, to avoid such unseemliness, for I am told one should die in good omened silence. So keep quiet and control yourselves. . . ."

Such was the end of our comrade, Echecrates, a man who, we would say, was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright.

Is there anything that you believe so passionately that you would die for? Is there anything that you believe so passionately that it really makes your life worth living? For most people,

[4] Plato, *The Phaedo*, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 2nd ed., trans. G. M. A. Grube. Copyright © 1975 by Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

The Death of Socrates (1787) by Jacques Louis David *(Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY)*

now as always, life is rather a matter of "getting by." One of the more popular phrases of self-praise these days is "I'm a survivor." But, ironically, a person who is not willing to die for anything (e.g., his or her own freedom) is thereby more vulnerable to threats and corruption. To be willing to die—as Socrates was—is to have a considerable advantage over someone for whom "life is everything."

If you look closely at your life, not only at your proclaimed ideals and principles but also your desires and ambitions, do the facts of your life add up to its best intentions? Or are you, too, just drifting with the times, dissatisfied with ultimately meaningless jobs and mindless joyless entertainments, concerned with the price of tuition and some recent stupidity of your government, the petty competitions of school and society, the hassles of chores and assignments, car troubles and occasional social embarrassments, interrupted only by all too rare and too quickly passing pleasures and distractions? What we learn from Socrates is how to rise above all of this. It's not that we should give up worldly pleasures—good food and fun, sex, sports and entertainment—and put our heads in the "clouds"; but we should see them in perspective and examine for ourselves that jungle of confused reactions and conditioned responses that we have unthinkingly inherited from our parents and borrowed from our peers. The point is not to give up what we have learned or to turn against our culture. Rather, the lesson to be learned from Socrates is that thinking about our lives and clarifying our ideals can turn them from a dreary series of tasks and distractions into a self-conscious adventure, one even worth dying for and certainly worth living for. It is a special kind of abstract thinking, rising above petty concerns and transforming our existence into a bold experiment in living. This special kind of thinking is called philosophy.

Another fascinating aspect of Socrates' approach to philosophy was his unquenchable thirst for knowledge. For Socrates, the willingness to passionately question what we know—to doubt—was as important as knowledge itself.

"We shall rightly call a philosopher the man who is easily willing to learn every kind of knowledge."

—PLATO'S SOCRATES

FROM *Republic*
BY Plato[5]

SOCRATES: Do you agree, or not, that when we say that a man has a passion for something, we shall say that he desires that whole kind of thing, not just one part of it and not the other?

GLAUCON: Yes, the whole of it.

SOCRATES: The lover of wisdom, we shall say, has a passion for wisdom, not for this kind of wisdom and not that, but for every kind of wisdom?

GLAUCON: True.

SOCRATES: As for one who is choosy about what he learns, especially if he is young and cannot yet give a reasoned account of what is useful and what is not, we shall not call him a lover of learning or a philosopher, just as we shall not say that a man who is difficult about his food is hungry or has an appetite for food. We shall not call him a lover of food but a bad feeder.

GLAUCON: And we should be right.

SOCRATES: But we shall rightly call a philosopher the man who is easily willing to learn every kind of knowledge, gladly turns to learning things, and is unsatiable in this respect. Is that not so?

B. What Is Philosophy?

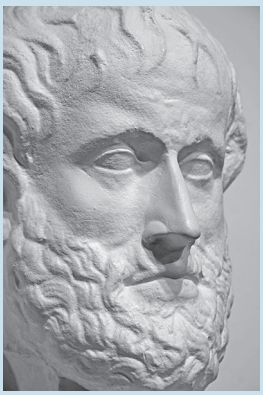
Philosophy is not like any other academic subject; rather, it is a critical approach to all subjects, the comprehensive vision within which all other subjects are contained. Philosophy is a style of life, a life of ideas or the life of **reason**, which a person like Socrates lives all of the time, yet which many of us live only a few hours a week. It is thinking, about everything and anything. But mainly, it is living thoughtfully. **Aristotle**, the student of **Plato**, who was the student of Socrates, called this "contemplative" or philosophical life the ideal life for humankind. He did not mean, however, that one should sit and think all of the time without doing anything. Aristotle, like the other Greek philosophers, was not one to abstain from pleasure or from political and social involvement for the sake of isolated thinking. Philosophy is not, as is commonly believed, putting our heads in the clouds, out of touch with everyday reality. Quite to the contrary, philosophy takes our heads out of the clouds, enlarging our view of ourselves and our knowledge of the world, allowing us to break out of prejudices and harmful habits that we have held since we were too young or too naive to know better. To say that philosophy is "critical" is not to say that it is negative or nihilistic; it is only to say that it is *reflective*. It looks at and thinks about ideas carefully, instead of unthinkingly accepting them.

Philosophy puts our lives and our beliefs in perspective by enabling us to see afresh the ways in which we view the world, to see what we assume, what we **infer**, and what we know for certain. It also allows us to appreciate *other* views of the world. It encourages us to see the consequences of our views and sometimes their hopeless inconsistencies. It allows us to see the justification (or lack of it) for our most treasured beliefs and to separate what we will continue to believe with confidence from what we should consider doubtful or reject. It allows us the option of considering alternatives. Philosophy gives us the intellectual strength to defend what we do and what we believe to others and to ourselves. It forces us to be clear

[5] Plato, *The Republic*, Bk. V, trans. G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1974.

about the limits as well as the warrants for our acts and beliefs. Consequently, it gives us the intellectual strength to understand, tolerate, and even sympathize with or adopt views very different from our own.

Philosophy is first and foremost a discipline that teaches us how to articulate, hold, and defend beliefs that, perhaps, we have always held, but without having spelled them out and argued for them. For example, suppose you have been brought up in a deeply religious home; you have been taught respect for God and church, but you have never had to learn to justify or argue for your beliefs. You know that, although there are people who would disagree with you, your belief is a righteous and necessary one, but you have never had to explain this to anyone, nor have you tried to explain it to yourself. But now you enter college and immediately you are confronted by fellow students, some of whom you consider close friends and admire in many ways, who are openly skeptical about religion. Others accept very different doctrines and beliefs, and vociferously defend these. Your first reactions may be almost physical; you feel weak, flushed, and anxious. You refuse to listen, and if you respond at all, it is with a tinge of hysteria. You may get into fights as well as arguments. You feel as if some foundation of your life, one of its main supports, is slipping away. But slowly you gain some confidence; you begin to listen. You give yourself enough distance so that you will consider arguments about religion in just the same way you would consider arguments about some scientific or political dispute. You ask yourself *why* your friends don't believe what you believe. Are their arguments persuasive, their **reasons** *good* reasons? You begin asking yourself how you came to believe in your religion in the first place and you may well come up with the answer (many first-year students do) that you were "conditioned" by your parents and by society in general. Consequently you may, perhaps for a time, perhaps for a lifetime, question or reject the ideas you had once "naturally" accepted. Or you may reaffirm your faith with new commitment, determined that, whatever the source, your beliefs are right or, at least, right for you. But after further consideration and argument, perhaps with some new religious experience, you come to see both sides of the arguments. For the first time, you can weigh their merits and demerits against each other without defensively holding onto one and attacking the other. You may remain a believer; you may become an atheist or an agnostic (a person who admits not knowing whether there is a God or not). Some people convert to another faith. Or you can adopt a position in which you give all religions (and nonreligion) equal weight, continuing to believe but not insisting that one belief is the only correct one or that a person is necessarily superior for holding it. Whatever you decide, your position will no longer be naive and unthinking. You know the arguments, both for and against. You know how to defend yourself. And, most importantly, you have confidence that your position is secure,



Aristotle is sometimes referred to as "The Philosopher."
(© Shutterstock.com/Dhoxax)

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.)

One of the greatest Western philosophers, Aristotle was born in northern Greece (Stagira). His father was the physician to Philip, king of Macedonia, and he himself was to become the tutor to Philip's son, Alexander the Great. For eighteen years, Aristotle was a student in Plato's Academy in Athens, where he learned and challenged Plato's views. After Plato's death, he turned to the study of biology, and many of his theories dominated Western science until the Renaissance. Aristotle was with Alexander until 335 B.C.E., when he returned to Athens to set up his own school, the Lyceum. After Alexander's death, the anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens forced Aristotle to flee (commenting that the Athenians would not sin twice against philosophy). In addition to his biological studies, Aristotle virtually created the sciences of logic and linguistics; developed extravagant theories in physics and astronomy; and made significant contributions to metaphysics, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. His *Metaphysics* is still a basic text on the subject, and his *Nicomachean Ethics* codified ancient Greek morality. This latter work stresses individual virtue and excellence for a small elite of Greek citizens. The best life of all, according to Aristotle, is the life of contemplation, that is, the life of a philosopher, for it is the most self-contained and the "closest to the gods." But such contemplation must go together with the pleasures of life, honor, wealth, and virtuous action.

> "Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation but above all because through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good."
>
> ***Bertrand Russell, from* The Problems of Philosophy**

that you have considered its objections, and that you have mastered its strengths. So it is with all philosophical problems and positions. Philosophy does not pull us away from our lives; it clarifies them. It secures them on intellectual ground in place of the fragile supports provided by inherited prejudices, fragments of parental advice, and mindless slogans borrowed from television commercials.

"Philosophy" sounds like a new and mysterious discipline, unlike anything you have ever encountered. But the basic ideas of philosophy are familiar to all of us, even if we have not yet formally confronted the problems. In this sense, we are all philosophers already. Watch yourself in a crisis, or listen to yourself in an argument with a friend. Notice how quickly abstract concepts like "freedom," "mankind," "self-identity," "natural," "relative," "reality," "illusion," and "truth" enter our thoughts and our conversations. Notice how certain basic philosophical principles—whether conservative or radical, pragmatic or idealistic, confident or skeptical, pedestrian or heroic—enter into our arguments and our thinking as well as our actions. We all have some opinions about God, about morality and its principles, about the nature of man and the nature of the universe. But because we haven't questioned them, they are merely the **assumptions** of our thinking. We believe many things without having thought about them, merely assuming them, sometimes without evidence or good reasons. What the study of philosophy does for us is to make our ideas explicit, to give us the means to defend our **presuppositions**, and to make alternative suppositions available to us as well. Where once we merely assumed a point of view, passively and for lack of alternatives, we now can argue for it with confidence knowing that our acceptance is active and critical, systematic rather than merely a collection of borrowed beliefs (who knows from where). To be **critical** means to examine carefully and cautiously, being willing, necessary, to change one's own beliefs. It does not need to be nasty or destructive. There is "constructive criticism" as well. And to "argue" does not mean to "have a fight"; an **argument** is nothing less than an attempt to justify our beliefs, to back them up with good reasons.

So what is philosophy? Literally, from the Greek (*philein, sophia*), it is "the love of wisdom."[6] It is an attitude of critical and systematic thoughtfulness rather than a particular subject matter. This makes matters very difficult for the beginner, who would like a definition of philosophy of the same kind received when he or she began biology, as "the study of living organisms." But the nature of philosophy is itself among the most bitter disputes in philosophy. Many philosophers say that it is a science, in fact, the "queen of the sciences," the womb in which physics, chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, biology, and psychology began their development before being born into their own distinguished worlds and separate university departments. Historically, this is certainly true. (Thus, in almost any scientific field, the highest degree is "doctor of philosophy" ["Ph.D."].) Insofar as one says that philosophy is the road to reality and that the goal of philosophy is truth, that would seem to make it the ultimate science as well.

But it has also been argued, as far back as Socrates, that the main business of philosophy is a matter of definitions—finding clear meanings for such important ideas as truth, justice, wisdom, knowledge, and happiness. Accordingly, many philosophers have taken advantage of the increasingly sophisticated tools of logic and linguistics in their attempts to find such

[6] The word "philosophy" was invented by Pythagoras. When he was asked if he was already a wise man, he answered, "No, I am not wise, but I am a *lover* of wisdom."

definitions. Other philosophers, however, would insist that philosophy is rather closer to morality and religion, its purpose being to give meaning to our lives and lead us down "the right path" to "the good life." Still others insist that philosophy is an art, the art of criticism and argumentation as well as the art of conceptual **system** building or, perhaps, the art of creating comprehensive and edifying visions, dazzling metaphors, new ways of thinking. So considered, philosophy may be akin to storytelling or mythology. Some philosophers place strong emphasis on **proof** and argument; others place their trust in intuition and insight. Some philosophers reduce all philosophizing to the study of experience, other philosophers take it as a matter of principle not to trust experience. Also, some philosophers insist on being practical—in fact, insist that there are no other considerations but practicality—and then there are others who insist on the purity of the life of ideas, divorced from any practical considerations. But philosophy cannot, without distortion, be reduced to any one of these preferences. All enter into that constantly redefined critical and creative life of ideas that Socrates was willing to die for. In fact, Socrates himself insisted that it is the seeking of wisdom that is the essence of philosophy and that anyone who is sure that he or she has wisdom already is undoubtedly wrong. In *Apology*, for example, he makes this famous disclaimer:

FROM *Apology*
BY Plato[7]

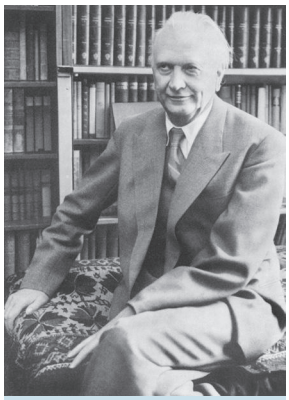
> The effect of these investigations of mine, gentlemen, has been to arouse against me a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a particularly bitter and persistent kind, which has resulted in various malicious suggestions, including the description of me as a professor of wisdom. This is due to the fact that whenever I succeed in disproving another person's claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself. But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this: that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us "The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless."
>
> That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger; and when I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not. This occupation has kept me too busy to do much either in politics or in my own affairs; in fact, my service to God has reduced me to extreme poverty.

In the West (that is, Europe, North America, and those parts of the world most influenced by them), Socrates remains a pivotal figure. But philosophy did not begin in Greece. It is a three-thousand-year-old conversation, or, rather, many conversations, that began in many different places, all around the globe.

The oldest philosophical texts we know are from South Asia, in what is now India, dating from more than a thousand years before Socrates—three thousand years ago. A remarkable series of texts, the Vedas, became a source for many of the great religions of the world, beginning with what came to be called Hinduism (which for many centuries referred only to a very loose collection of local religious beliefs and practices) and then providing the

[7] Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1954.

philosophical foundations for Buddhism. Before Socrates, too, in China, a modest teacher called Kong Fuzi ("Confucius") started a very different philosophical tradition, in parallel with another Chinese philosophy called Daoism (sometimes spelled "Taoism"). And in the Middle East, of course, there was a great deal of philosophical activity, in ancient Persia as well as in the religious cauldron of Jerusalem. Moreover, there had been philosophers in Greece for several centuries by the time Socrates came on the scene, so that the world was already steeped in philosophy. The twentieth-century philosopher Karl Jaspers describes the dawning of philosophy as "The Axial Period," and says that it was the turning point of civilization.



Karl Jaspers was a great psychiatrist, philosopher, and existentialist theologian of the twentieth century. *(© Bettmann/Corbis)*

FROM "The Axial Period" BY Karl Jaspers[8]

It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C.E., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C.E. It is there that we meet with the most deep-cut dividing line in history. Humanity, as we know it today, came into being. For short we may style this whole range of early philosophical developments the "Axial Period."

The most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period. Confucius and Laozi were living in China, all the directions of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mozi, Zhuangzi, Liezi, and a host of others; India produced the Upanishads and Buddha, and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to skepticism, materialism, sophism, and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught the challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah, to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer, of the philosophers—Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Plato—of the tragedians, of Thucydides, and of Archimedes. Everything that is merely intimated by these names developed during these few centuries almost simultaneously in China, India, and the Occident without the thinkers of any one of these societies knowing of the thinkers in the others.

What is new about this age, in each of these worlds, is that humanity becomes aware of Being as a whole, of the nature of being human and the limitations that come with it. Face to face with the terrible nature of the world and their own impotence, people start to ask radical questions and to strive for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing their limits, they set themselves the highest goals. And they come to experience both the depth of self-hood and the clarity of transcendence.

- Why might it be a good thing to have one's head in "the clouds"?
- Why does Socrates think it is more difficult to avoid wickedness than death? Why does he think that one shouldn't avoid death at any cost?
- How does Socrates respond to Crito's attempt to persuade him to escape? What are his reasons and arguments for staying in jail? What would you do?
- What makes a reason a good reason?
- Is philosophy more like an art or a science?
- Which requires explanation: the fact that some things (like your body) change or the fact that some things seem eternal (like 2 + 2 = 4)?

[8] From Karl Jaspers, *Basic Philosophical Writings—Selections*, edited, translated, and with introductions by Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1986, pp. 382–387.

Although this book is grounded in the Western tradition since Socrates, it is important to keep in mind the traditions from Asia as well. It would be utterly foolish to try to summarize the differences between "East and West," as too many commentators have tried to do, especially since the Western tradition is thought to include both the reason-oriented legacy of the Greeks and the faith-oriented religions of the Hebrews and Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, the diversity of ideas in Asia is colossal, between the "all is One" philosophy of the ancient Vedas to the world-and-self-as-illusion philosophy of Buddhism and the alignment of the Chinese to the ***Dao*** ("the Way," the flow of reality). But it might be worth making a few rather simplified comments about similarities and differences. The first concerns the remarkable affinities between the philosophies that arose in Greece and the Middle East and the ancient Vedic philosophies, particularly in their mutual fascination with unified explanation. (Think of the "unity of science," evident even in the earliest Greek philosophies, and monotheism, which pretty much defined the three great "Western" religions.)

Second, there is a dramatic contrast between the Greek notion of *logos* ("reason" or "word"), suggesting "logic" and eternal truth (it also serves a central function in Christianity, as in "in the beginning was the *logos*"), and the Chinese conception of the *Dao*, which is more oriented toward change, movement, and process. Closely related to this is the Western affection for polarities and oppositions (good vs. evil, reality vs. appearance, the sacred vs. the secular) and the Chinese insistence on *yin/yang*, the interrelatedness of such seeming opposites. Of equal importance, Western thought over the past two thousand years has been largely defined by its attempts to come to grips with the idea of the One God. (Atheists, too, are caught up in the arguments concerning God's nature and existence.) Much of Eastern thought, by contrast, has no such concern, or it is a very different kind of concern, although the notion of spirituality plays a central role in many Asian religions.

Still, while admitting that these very general characterizations brush over a wealth of interesting differences, it is worth insisting that the inclusion of Asian and other voices in the text that follows should not be treated as exotic spice added to the substance of (Western) philosophy, nor should it be thought of as mere echoes of Western ideas. Rather, it is an attempt to open windows to a number of very different perspectives, which sometimes contrast with and sometimes unexpectedly support each other. Philosophy has many faces and voices, and as one learns to appreciate the profundity of philosophical inquiries, it is necessary to appreciate its diversity as well.

With diversity in mind, we can bring this section to a close with a very different description of philosophy from the ancient Chinese Daoist philosopher Laozi in the texts of the *Dao De Jing*.[9]

FROM ***Dao De Jing***
BY **Laozi**[10]

14
Look for it, and it can't be seen.
Listen for it, and it can't be heard.
Grasp for it, and it can't be caught.
These three cannot be further described,
so we treat them as The One.

[9] The philosopher and his text are sometimes referred to in the classic Wade-Giles transliteration as Lao-Tzu and the *Tao Te Ching*, as they are in the translation we draw from here. The modern pinyin style is now much preferred, however, and we use it throughout this edition to refer to all Chinese names.
[10] From Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. J. H. McDonald, 1996 (for the public domain).

Laozi is supposed to have delivered the *Dao De Jing* to an official and then ridden into the mountains, riding an ox. *(© iStockphoto.com/HultonArchive)*

Laozi

Laozi likely flourished in the fourth century B.C.E., and is generally believed to be the author of the *Dao De Jing*, the founding and most important text for all Taoist thought. "Laozi" is an honorific title, which can be roughly translated as "the Old Master" or "the Old Child." Laozi and Confucius are said to have met in the Imperial Library of the Zhou Dynasty court. The older Laozi likely had a great influence on the younger Confucius' thought. Laozi believed in Dao or "the Way," the flowing reality that encompasses everything, with which we should try to attune our lives. Following the Dao means adopting the principle of *wu-wei*, or action through inaction. To follow the Dao is to be like a river: it is not that one does not move or engage in action, but that the action is a kind of effortlessness; it does not involve striving. The *Dao De Jing* covers many of the traditional areas of philosophy, but the text is more poetic than many philosophical texts, and it is difficult to read straightforwardly. It is often viewed as falling within the mystical tradition of philosophical writing.

Its highest is not bright.
Its depths are not dark.
Unending, unnameable, it returns to
nothingness.
Formless forms, and imageless images,
subtle, beyond all understanding.

Approach it and you will not see a beginning;
follow it and there will be no end.
When we grasp the Tao of the ancient ones,
we can use it to direct our life today.
To know the ancient origin of Tao: this is
the beginning of wisdom.

17
The best leaders are those the people hardly
know exist.
The next best is a leader who is loved and
praised.
Next comes the one who is feared.
The worst one is the leader that is despised.
If you don't trust the people,
they will become untrustworthy.

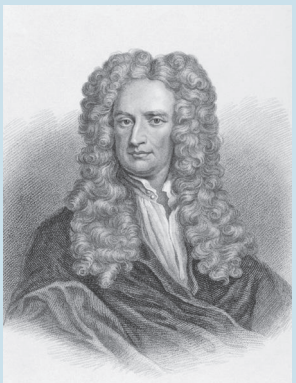
The best leaders value their words, and use them sparingly.
When she has accomplished her task,
the people say, "Amazing:
we did it, all by ourselves!"

C. A Modern Approach to Philosophy

The orientation to philosophy in this book is, inevitably, essentially a modern Western approach in which criticism plays a predominant role. Historically, modern European philosophy has its origins in the rise of science and technology. (As you will see, philosophy and science both emerged in ancient Greece and Asia Minor and, about the same time, in South and East Asia.) We should understand science, however, not just as a particular discipline or subject matter, but rather as a state of mind, a way of looking at the world. In the European tradition, this means that the world is understandable and every event in the world is explainable. It sees the universe as *rational*, operating according to universal laws. And it sees the human mind as rational, too—in the sense that it can grasp and formulate these laws for itself. European philosophy and science also put enormous emphasis on the mind of the individual and the ability of human beings to learn the truth about reality.

Although science is essentially a team effort, requiring the labor and thinking of thousands of men and women, the great breakthroughs in science have often been the insights of one man or woman alone. The most famous modern example of this individual genius is the British philosopher-scientist **Isaac Newton**. In the eyes of his contemporaries and

followers, he single-mindedly mastered the laws of the universe, while sitting (so the story goes) under an apple tree. The ideal of modern Western philosophy is, in a phrase, *thinking for yourself*. That is, philosophy is thinking for yourself about basic questions—about life, knowledge, religion, and what to do with yourself. It is *using* the rationality built into your brain to comprehend the rationality (or lack of it) in the world around you. In some cultures, however, the emphasis lies on the group or community, and thinking for yourself is not as important as maintaining group harmony and cohesiveness. In India and China, for example, enlightenment rather than scientific knowledge has traditionally been the main goal of philosophy. It is important to keep this difference in mind.



A nineteenth-century engraving of Isaac Newton *(© iStockphoto.com/GeorgiosArt)*

Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

One of the most formidable intellectual figures in history. Newton was an innovator in multiple areas. His contributions include the theory of universal gravitation and the basic laws of classical mechanics, the theory of calculus (independently developed by Gottfried Leibniz), and the reflective telescope. Newton also wrote extensively on religious topics. He found the intricate organization of nature to be evidence of a divine Creator who had organized the world according to principles that human reason could apprehend.

In much of the Western tradition, the central demand of modern philosophy is *the autonomy of the individual person*. This means that each of us must be credited with the ability to ascertain what is true and what is right, through our own thinking and experience, without just depending upon outside authority: parents, teachers, popes, kings, or a majority of peers. This does not mean that you should not listen to or, where appropriate, obey other people. Nor does it mean that whatever you think is true or right, even "for you." What it means is that whether you believe in God or not, for example, must be decided by you, by appeal to your own reason and arguments that you can formulate and examine by yourself. Whether you accept a scientific theory, a doctor's diagnosis, a television network's version of the news, or the legitimacy of a new law are also matters to be decided by you on the basis of evidence, your evaluation of the testimony or authority of others, principles that you can accept, and arguments that you acknowledge as valid. Nevertheless, all of this—the evidence, your evaluation, testimony, and principles—must be subject to examination by other people and other standards than just your own. The truth is not whatever you believe, but how you come to understand and justify the truth is nevertheless your responsibility. This stress on individual **autonomy** stands at the very foundation of contemporary Western thought. We might say that it is our most basic assumption. (Accordingly, we shall have to examine it as well; but the obvious place to begin is to assume that we are—each of us—capable of carrying out the **reflection** and criticism that philosophy demands of us.)

Historically, the position of individual autonomy can be found most famously in Socrates, who went against the popular opinions of his day and, consequently, sacrificed his life for the principles he believed to be right. It also appears in many medieval philosophers, some of whom also faced grave danger in their partial rejection or questioning of the authority of the Church. It can also be found in those philosophers who, like the **Buddha**, struck out from established society to find a new way. The stress on individual autonomy comes to dominate Western thinking in that intellectually brilliant period of history called the **Enlightenment** (sometimes called "the Age of Reason"), which began in the late seventeenth century and continued until the French Revolution (1789). It spread through different countries with varying speed and intensity, but ultimately it influenced the thinking of all of Europe, from England and France to Spain and Russia, and it became the ideology of young America,

which used Enlightenment doctrines in the formulation of a "Declaration of Independence," a war for its own autonomy, and a new government established on Enlightenment principles. Those principles, whatever the variations from one country or party to another, were the autonomy of the individual and each person's right to choose and to speak his[11] own religious, political, moral, and philosophical beliefs, to "pursue happiness" in his own way, and to lead the life that he, as a reasonable person, sees as right.

If these principles have often been abused, creating confusion and sometimes anarchy and encouraging ruthlessness in politics and strife in a mixed society, they are principles that can be challenged only with great difficulty and a sense of imminent danger. Once the individual's right or ability to decide such matters for himself or herself is denied, who shall decide? Society no longer agrees on any single unambiguous set of instructions from the Scriptures. Those in power are no longer trusted. We are rightfully suspicious of those who attack the individual because it is not clear what else they have in mind. Whatever the abuses, and whatever political, social, or economic systems might be required to support them, philosophical autonomy is the starting point. Even in the most authority-minded societies, autonomy and the ability to think beyond prescribed limits remain essential.

The metaphor of enlightenment is common to many cultures. The comparison of clear thinking with illumination is to be found in ancient, Christian, and Eastern thought as well as in modern philosophy and comic-book symbolism (e.g., the cartoon light bulb over a character's head). The seventeenth-century French philosopher **René Descartes** (1596–1650) was one of the founders of the Enlightenment, and he was particularly fond of the "illumination" metaphor. He is generally recognized as the father of modern philosophy. Like Socrates two thousand years before him, Descartes believed that each person was capable of ascertaining what beliefs were true and what actions were right. But whereas Socrates searched for the truth through dialogue and discussion, Descartes searched in the solitude of his own thinking. With considerable risk to his own safety, he challenged the authority of the French government and the Catholic Church. He insisted that he would accept as true only those ideas that were demonstrably true to him. Against what he considered were obscure teachings of the Church and often opaque commands of his government, Descartes insisted upon "clear and distinct ideas" and arguments based upon "the light of reason." The modern philosophy of individual autonomy began with Descartes. As a matter of fact, his results were quite conservative. He retained many basic medieval teachings: he continued to believe in God and the Church, and he made it his first "moral maxim" to "obey the laws and customs of my country." His challenge to authority was his

René Descartes (1596–1650)

The French philosopher who is usually considered the father of modern philosophy. Descartes was raised in the French aristocracy and educated at the excellent Jesuit College of La Flèche. He became skilled in the classics, law, and medicine; however, he decided that they fell far short of proper knowledge, so he turned to modern science and mathematics. His first book, which he prudently did not publish, was a defense of Copernicus. Descartes discovered, while still a young man, the connections between algebra and geometry (developing the field we now call "analytic geometry"), and he used this discovery as a model for the rest of his career. Basing the principles of philosophy and theology on a similar mathematical basis, he was able to develop a method in philosophy that could be carried through according to individual reason and no longer depended upon an appeal to authorities whose insights and methods were questionable. In *Discourse on Method* (1637), he set out these basic principles, which he had already used in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (not published until 1641), to reexamine the foundations of philosophy. Descartes sought a basic premise from which, as in a geometric proof, he could deduce all the principles that could be known with certainty.

[11] Not, at that point in history, hers as well. The concept of a woman's autonomy is a late nineteenth-century idea that has only recently become accepted.

method, which signified one of the greatest revolutions in Western thought. From Descartes on, the ultimate authority was to be found in man's own thinking and experience, nowhere else.

None of this is meant to deny authority as such, nor is it to deny the "objectivity" of truth. Appeals are still made to authority, but authorities are never to be taken as absolutes. For example, none of us would particularly like to go out and establish on our own the figures of the 2020 census of the U.S. population. But it is up to the individual whether or not to accept the official "authoritative" figures, to question, if necessary, the integrity or motivation of the authorities, and to appeal, if necessary, to alternative sources of information. Nevertheless, the true figures do exist, whether we or anyone else ever discovers them. Intellectual autonomy and integrity do not demand that we give up the search for truth but rather that we should be continually critical—of both ourselves and others—in the pursuit of it.

For anyone beginning to study philosophy today, Descartes is a pivotal figure. His method is both easy to follow and very much in accord with our own independent temperaments. Descartes proceeded by means of logical arguments, giving his readers a long monologue of presentations and proofs of his philosophical doubts and beliefs. Like Socrates before him, Descartes used his philosophy to cut through the clouds of prejudice and unreliable opinions. He was concerned with their truth, no matter how many people already believed them—or, how few. Descartes's arguments were his tools for finding this truth and distinguishing it from falsehood and mere opinion.

Philosophy has always been concerned with truth and humankind's knowledge of reality. Not coincidentally, Descartes's new philosophy developed in the age of Galileo and the rise of modern science. In ancient Greece, the origins of philosophy and the birth of Greek science were one and the same. The truth, however, is not always what most people believe at any given time. (Most people once believed that the earth was flat and stationary, for example.) But, at the same time that they simply refuse to accept "common sense," philosophers try not to say things that common sense finds absurd. For example, a philosopher who in a public speech really denied that anyone existed besides himself would clearly be ridiculous. So would the philosopher who argued that he knew that nobody ever knows anything. Nevertheless, philosophers often take such claims very seriously, if only to refute them and show us *why* they are absurd.

Accordingly, two of the most important challenges in the philosopher's search for truth are (1) skepticism and (2) paradox. In **skepticism**, the philosopher finds himself or herself unable to justify what every sane person knows to be the case—for example, that we are not merely dreaming all of the time. Skepticism is the view that we cannot have knowledge of at least some kinds of claims. In Eastern as well as Western philosophy, skepticism has provided a valuable probe for our everyday presumptions of knowledge, and skepticism sometimes becomes a philosophy in its own right. In a **paradox**, an absurd conclusion seems to result from perfectly acceptable ways of thinking. For example, there is the familiar paradox of Epimenides the Cretan, who claimed that "all Cretans are liars." (That sounds reasonable enough.) But if what he said was true, shouldn't we take him to be lying and thus to be saying something that is false? What Epimenides said is a version of what is called the liar's paradox, the paradox that a sentence that claims to be a lie is true only if it is false at the same time. But how can the same statement be both true and false? That is a paradox, and whenever a philosophical argument ends in paradox we can be fairly confident that something has gone wrong. Again, in both East and West, philosophers have always been intrigued by paradoxes and have often been prompted by them to strike out in bold new directions in search of a resolution.

This detail from *Dreaming of Immortality in a Thatched Cottage* by Tang Yin (1470–1524) reflects the Daoist ideal of free and easy mental wandering. *(© Art Archive, The/Art Archive, The/SuperStock)*

Skepticism begins with **doubt**. The philosopher considers the possibility that something that everyone believes is possibly mistaken. Some doubt is a healthy sign of intellectual autonomy, but excessive doubting is no longer healthy. Skepticism has its obvious dangers: if you doubt whether you are ever awake or not, you might well do things that wouldn't have serious consequences in a dream but would be fatal in real life (e.g., jumping out of a plane without a parachute). Philosophers who have doubts about the most ordinary and seemingly unquestionable beliefs are called *skeptics*. For example, there was the Chinese philosopher who, when he once dreamed that he was a butterfly, started wondering whether he really were a butterfly—dreaming that he was a philosopher. But however challenging skeptics may be as philosophers, in practice maintaining such skepticism is impossible. Accordingly, one of the main drives in philosophy has been to refute the skeptic and return philosophy to common sense (to prove, e.g., that we are *not* dreaming all of the time). Opposed to skepticism is an ancient philosophical ideal, the ideal of **certainty**, the ability to prove beyond a doubt that what we believe is true. Socrates and Descartes, in their very different ways, tried to provide precisely this certainty for the most important beliefs, and thus refute the skeptics of their own times.

In Western philosophy, the precision of mathematics has long served as an ideal of knowledge. For Descartes, certainty is the **criterion**, that is, the test according to which beliefs are to be evaluated. But do we ever find such certainty? It seems that we do, Descartes suggested, in mathematics. Who can doubt that two plus two equals four or that the interior angles of a triangle total 180 degrees? Using mathematics as his model, Descartes (and many generations of philosophers following him) attempted to apply a similar method in philosophy. First, he had to find, as in Euclidean geometry, a small set of "**first principles**" or **axioms** that were obvious or **self-evident**. They had to be assumed without proof or be so fundamental that they seemed not to allow any proof. These would serve as premises or starting points for the *arguments* that would take a person from the self-evident axioms to other principles that might not be self-evident at all. But if these other principles could be deduced from others that were already certain, like the theorems of geometry, then they would share the certainty of the ones from which they had been derived.