THE BIG Questions

A Short Introduction to Philosophy

10th Edition

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For our nieces and nephews,

Jem, Jesi, Danyal, Rachel, and Carrie Solomon,
Caitlin Higgins, Jeffrey and Matthew Cook,
Allison, Rachel, Daniel, Brett, and Marcus Felten,
Kevin and Emily Daily

Contents

Preface

It was the fall of 1806, in the college town of Jena, in what we now call Germany. Most students and professors would have been getting ready for their classes, with mixed annoyance and anticipation. The professors would have been finishing up their summer research; the students would have been doing what students usually do at the end of the summer.

But this year school would not begin as usual.

Napoleon's troops were already approaching the city, and you could hear the cannon from the steps of the university library. French scouts were already in the town, walking around the university, stopping for a glass of wine in the student bars, and chatting casually with the local residents, many of whom were in sympathy with the new French ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

As the battle was about to begin, a young philosophy instructor named **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** was hastily finishing the book he was writing—a very difficult philosophy book with the forbidding title *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But "spirited" is what the book was, and it perfectly captured the tension, excitement, and anxiety of those perilous days. It was the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a new one. The book was a vision of consciousness caught in the midst of gigantic forces and looking for direction in a new and terrifyingly human world. It was an appeal for hope and thoughtful effort toward universal understanding and a belief in what was then innocently called the "perfectibility of humanity."

Transfer the situation to our own times—it was as if life in our society were about to change completely, with all our old habits and landmarks, our ideas about ourselves and the ways we live, replaced by something entirely new and largely unknown. We talk about "game changers" and "tipping points," but, in fact, most of what we consider drastic changes are mere shifts of emphasis, sometimes inconvenient advantages that accompany new and improved technologies and techniques. If so many of us can get so melodramatic about computers, smart phones, and the Internet, how would we react to a *real* change in our lives? Hegel and his students felt confident, even cheerful. Why? Because they had a *philosophy*. They had a vision of themselves and the future that allowed them to face the loss of their jobs, even the destruction of their society and the considerable chaos that would follow. Their ideas inspired them and made even the most threatening circumstances meaningful.

A class of our students who had been reading Hegel's philosophy were asked to characterize their own views of themselves and their times. The answers

were not inspiring. For many of them, the word *dull* seemed to summarize the world; others spoke of "crisis" and "despair." One said that life was "absurd" and another that it was "meaningless." When asked why, they answered that gasoline was expensive, that most of them weren't getting the job interviews they really wanted, and that television programs were bad. We agreed that these events were less than tragic, hardly "absurd," and didn't make life "meaningless." Everyone agreed that the specters of nuclear war and terrorism had put a damper on our optimism, but we also agreed that the likelihood of such catastrophes was debatable and that, in any case, we all had to live as best we could, even if under a shadow. But why, then, in these times of relative affluence and peace (compared to most of the world throughout most of history), were our answers so sour? What were we missing that Hegel and his students, confronting the most terrible battles ever known, seem to have had—something that made them so optimistic and fulfilled? Again, the answer is a philosophy.

Meet the Philosopher: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born in Stuttgart in 1770. While he was a college student, he was enthusiastic about the French Revolution (1789–1795) and an admirer of Napoleon. Hegel was teaching at the University of Jena in 1806 when Napoleon marched in and took over the town, ending the 800-year-old Holy Roman Empire and initiating widespread reforms throughout the German states. It was in this atmosphere of international war and liberal hopes that Hegel formulated his philosophy, which centered on the notion of Spirit, by which he meant the unity of the world through human consciousness. His method was **dialectic**—that is, he tried to demonstrate how contradictory views can be reconciled and shown to be, in fact, different aspects of one underlying phenomenon—ultimately, of Spirit. Hegel is still considered one of the great synthesizers of human knowledge and values; his **Encyclopedia** (first published in 1817) is a short synthesis of the whole of human life, including logic, science, and psychology as well as philosophy, art, religion, metaphysics, and ethics. He died in 1831.

Philosophy, religion, and science have always been closely related. The emphasis shifts, but the point of these endeavors is the same: the importance of ideas and understanding, of making sense out of our world and seeing our lives in some larger, even cosmic, perspective. *Ideas* define our place in the universe and our relations with other people; ideas determine what is important and what is not important, what is fair and what is not fair, what is worth believing and what is not worth believing. Ideas give life meaning. Our minds need ideas the way our bodies need food. We are starved for visions, hungry for understanding. We are caught up in the routines of life, distracted occasionally by those activities we call "recreation" and "entertainment." What we have lost is the joy of

thinking, the challenge of understanding, the inspirations as well as the consolations of philosophy.

Philosophy is simply *thinking hard* about life, about what we have learned, about our place in the world. Philosophy is, literally, the *love of wisdom*. It is the search for the larger picture, and this involves the demand for *knowledge*—the kind of knowledge that allows us to understand our lives and the world around us. It is, accordingly, the insistence on the importance of *values*, a refusal to get totally caught up in the details of life and simply go along with the crowd. Philosophy and wisdom define our place in the universe and give our lives meaning.

When undergraduates ask questions about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe, it is philosophy that ought to answer the questions. But thousands of students, not trained in hard thinking but starved for ideas and understanding, will retreat to the easier alternatives—pop philosophies of self-help, exotic religious practices, extremist politics. If the hard thinking of philosophy does not address the big questions, then perhaps these alternatives will. The difference between philosophy and the popular alternatives is ultimately one of quality—the quality of ideas, the thoroughness of understanding. Because we all live by our ideas anyway, the choice becomes not whether to do philosophy or not do philosophy, but whether to accept cheap and unchallenging substitutes or to try the real thing. The aim of this book is to give you an introduction—to the real thing.

The Subject of Philosophy

Philosophy is sometimes treated as an extremely esoteric, abstract, and specialized subject that has little to do with any other subjects of study—or with the rest of our lives. This is simply untrue. Philosophy is nothing less than the attempt to understand who we are and what we think of ourselves. And that is just what the great philosophers of history, whom we study in philosophy courses, were doing: trying to understand themselves, their times, and their place in the world. They did this so brilliantly, in fact, that their attempts remain models for us. They help us formulate our own ideas and develop our own ways of clarifying what we believe.

In this book, we have tried to introduce at least briefly many of the great philosophers throughout history. (Brief biographies are included in the chapters.) But philosophy is not primarily the study of *other* people's ideas. Philosophy is first of all the attempt to state clearly, and as convincingly and interestingly as possible, *your own* views. That is *doing* philosophy, not just reading about how someone else has done it.

This book is an attempt to help you do just that—to *do* philosophy, to state what you believe, using the great philosophers and the great ideas of the past as inspiration, as a guide to ways of putting together your own views, and to provoke the present alternatives that you may not have thought of on your own. The aim

of the book—and at least one aim of the course you are taking—is to force you to think through your ideas, connect them, confront alternative views, and understand what you prefer and why you prefer it. Some students inevitably think that once they are speaking abstractly, it doesn't matter what they say. So they talk utter nonsense, they express ideas they have never thought about, or they recite mere words—for example, the popular word *value*—without having any sense of what they as individuals believe to be true. A very bright student one year claimed that he did not exist. (He received a grade anyway.) Some students even feel that it doesn't matter if they contradict themselves—after all, "It's only ideas." But if we see the world through ideas, if they determine how we feel about ourselves and live our lives, then our ideas make all the difference. So it is urgent—as well as intellectually necessary—that you ask, at every turn, "Do I really believe that?" and, "Is that compatible with other things I believe?" Good philosophy, and *great* philosophy, depend on the seriousness and rigor with which such questions are asked. The aim of this book to help you ask them, to help you build for yourself a philosophical presentation of your own view of the world.

The task of summarizing your views about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe in a single course may sound overwhelming. But no matter how crude your first efforts, this kind of integrative critical thinking—putting it all together—is essential to what you will be doing all through your life: trying to keep your priorities straight, to know who you are, and to be sure of what you believe. The purpose of this course, which may be your first introduction to philosophy, is to get you started. Once you begin to think about the *big questions*, you may well find, as many students and almost all professional philosophers have found, that it is one of the most rewarding and most accessible activities you will ever learn—you can do it almost anywhere, at any time, with anyone, and even alone. And if it seems difficult to begin (as it always does), that is because you are not used to thinking as a philosopher, because our ideas are inevitably more complex than we originally think they are, and because, once you begin thinking, there is no end to the number of things there are to think about. So consider this as a first attempt, an exploratory essay, a first difficult effort to express yourself and your positions—not just your views on this issue or that one, but your entire view of the world. Engaging in the activity of *doing* philosophy, even if it is only for the first time, is what makes philosophy so exciting and challenging.

The first chapter of the book consists of a set of preliminary questions to get you to state your opinions on some of the issues that make up virtually every philosophical viewpoint. Some of the questions you will find amusing; some of them are deadly serious. But between the two, the outlines of what you believe and don't believe should begin to become clear. Each succeeding chapter also begins with a set of preliminary questions. And again the point is to encourage you to reflect on and state your views on these subjects before we begin to develop the views that philosophers have argued. Each chapter includes a discussion of various alternative viewpoints, with brief passages from some of the great philosophers. Special terms, which probably are new to you but have become established in philosophy, are introduced as they are needed, as a way of helping you make distinctions and clarify your positions more precisely than

our ordinary language allows. (A glossary containing most of these terms—which are boldface in the text—appears at the back of the book.) Each chapter ends with a set of concluding questions that will help you locate your own views among the alternatives of traditional philosophy. There is a bibliography at the end of each chapter containing suggestions for further reading; you can explore those topics that interest or challenge you, because no textbook can substitute for original works.

For the Instructor

This tenth edition is flexible for teaching a variety of individually structured courses in introductory philosophy at both the college and advanced high school levels. I have summarized the general layout of each chapter toward the beginning (usually within the first few paragraphs or at the end of the first section). Boxed features provide supporting material to complement what is discussed in the body of the text. The boxes in this edition fall primarily into three categories: biography, concept, and quotation boxes. Biography boxes are indicated by the heading "*Meet the Philosopher*" (or, occasionally, "*Meet the Thinker*"), and they provide a glimpse into the lives of many of the philosophers covered in the main text. "*From the Source*" boxes offer a wide variety of quotations and brief excerpts from key philosophical writings, as well as relevant popular sources. "*Master the Concepts*" boxes draw attention to important terms and point out important conceptual distinctions. Occasionally, I include "*Apply the Concept*" boxes, which encourage to student to link particular philosophical concepts with phenomena they encounter in everyday life. Key words are indicated by bold typeface, and they are defined in the glossary. In this edition, I have also provided a list of key words used at the end of each chapter for the convenience of students and instructors. I have also made the sources of quotations more evident by providing a section of endnotes (under the heading "Works Cited") at the end of each chapter, followed by other suggested readings.

This edition is also supplemented by an expanded range of options through MindTap, a personalized program of digital products and services that provides interactive engagement for students and offers a range of choices in content, platforms, devices, and learning tools.

In this edition I have rearranged Chapters 10 and 11, reasoning that the Western emphasis of the chapter entitled "Beauty" should be grouped with the other chapters on Western philosophy and appear before the chapter on non-Western philosophy. I have considerably revised and reorganized the chapter on ethics in this edition, expanding the discussion of basic moral theories and elaborating more on how they can be applied to situations in everyday life. I have also included consideration of some topics that were not or were barely discussed in the previous edition: liberation theology (Chapter 3), intellectual virtues (Chapter 8), practical syllogisms (Chapter 8), metaethics (Chapter 8), good will (Chapter 8), and the mean (Chapter 8).

The discussion in each chapter is more or less self-contained, and the chapters can be used in just about any order. Some instructors prefer to start with the "God" chapter, others with the more epistemological chapters: "The Search for Truth," "Self," and "Freedom." The opening chapters, with their broad collection of both playful and serious philosophical questions and varied discussions of the "Meaning of Life," may be helpful in loosening up and relaxing nervous first-time students of philosophy and getting them to talk in a more free-wheeling way than they do if they are immediately confronted with the great thinkers or the most intractable problems of philosophy. So, too, the opening questions can help get students to think about the issues on their own before diving into the text. To motivate students to write and think about philosophical questions, to get them used to *interacting* with the text and arguments, we would encourage students to write their own responses and comments directly in the margins of book. The closing questions of each chapter might also serve as potential exam questions or questions to prompt classroom discussion.

Kathleen M.Higgins

Acknowledgments

I thank all those readers, both students and colleagues, who responded kindly and critically to my earlier text, *Introducing Philosophy* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich . . . [subsequently Oxford University Press]). The present text is a fresh attempt to reach an audience not as well addressed by that book, and I am indebted to all who pointed out the need for the new book and helped me develop and refine it.

I especially thank all those people who taught me the joys and skills of philosophy, and how to teach it. First of all, there is my father, Charles M. Solomon, who always encouraged me. There is Robert Hanson, who first thrilled me with Parmenides and Heraclitus at Cheltenham High School, and Doris Yocum, who taught my first philosophy course. I learned so much about teaching philosophy from Elizabeth Flower, James Ross, Peter Hempel, and Frithjof Bergmann, and I continue to learn from great colleagues like Bob Kane, Stephen Phillips, and Paul Woodruff. I also thank Donette Moss, the late Winkie Conlon, and Shirley Hull for their much-needed care and attention. Thanks to Jon Solomon for his advice on exotic matters in the book. Thanks, too, to Stephen Waters, Mark Gilbertson, Victor Guarino, Michael Thomas, Thomas E. Moody, Stanley M. Browne, Ronald Duska, Albert B. Randall, Emrys Westacott, Gary Prince, Janet McCracken, Timothy Davis, Charlie Huenemann, George Matejka, Christopher Trogan, Butian Zhang, Mathias Bildhauer, Clancy Martin, Karen Mottola, Cleavis Headley, Dave Hilditch, George Matejka, and Erin Frank. Thanks also to David Tatom, Bill McLane, Steve Wainwright, and Worth Hawes.

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Kathleen M. Higgins

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Robert C. Solomon (1942–2007) was internationally renowned as a teacher and lecturer in philosophy. He was Quincy Lee Centennial Professor and Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and over the course of his career taught at numerous institutions, including Princeton University, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Auckland, and the University of California, in addition to the University of Texas. He authored over forty books, including *Introducing Philosophy; A Short History of Philosophy* (with Kathleen M. Higgins); *The Passions; In the Spirit of Hegel; About Love; Above the Bottom Line* (4th ed., with Clancy Martin); *Ethics and Excellence; The Joy of Philosophy;* and *True to Our Feelings;* he was also coeditor of *Twenty Questions* (5th ed., with Lee Bowie and Meredith Michaels) and *Since Socrates* (with Clancy Martin).

Kathleen M. Higgins is professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin. She received her Ph.D. from Yale University and has taught at the University of Auckland and the University of California, Riverside in addition to the University of Texas. She is author of several books, including *Nietzsche's "Zarathustra"; The Music of Our Lives; What Nietzsche Really Said* (with Robert C. Solomon); *Comic Relief; A Short History of Philosophy* (with Robert C. Solomon); *A Passion for Wisdom* (with Robert C. Solomon); and *The Music Between Us: Is Music the Universal Language?* She has edited or coedited numerous books, including *Aesthetics in Perspective* and *Thirteen Questions in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (2nd ed., with Lee Bowie and Meredith Michaels).

Introduction

Doing Philosophy

Raphael Sanzio, *The School of Athens*, fresco, detail 1509–1511.
Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Rome.
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The unexamined life is not worth living.
—Socrates, fifth century BCE

Know thyself!
—Oracle at Delphi (Socrates motto)

Philosophy concerns our beliefs and attitudes about ourselves and the world. Doing philosophy, therefore, begins with the activity of stating, as clearly and as convincingly as possible, what we believe and what we believe in. This does not mean, however, that announcing one's allegiance to some grand-sounding ideas or, perhaps, some impressive word or "ism" is all that there is to philosophy. Philosophy is the development or revision of these ideas, the attempt to work them out with all their implications and complications. It is the attempt to see their connections and compare them with other people's views—including the classic statements of the great philosophers of the past. It is the effort to appreciate the differences between one's own views and others' views, to be able to argue with someone who disagrees, and to resolve the difficulties that others may throw in your path. One of our students once suggested that she found it easy to list her main ideas on a single sheet of paper; what she found difficult was showing how they related to one another and how she might defend them against someone who disagreed with her. In effect, what she was saying was something like this: she would really enjoy playing quarterback with the football team, as long as she didn't have to cooperate with the other players—and then only until the other team came onto the field. But playing football is cooperating with your team and running against the team that is out to stop you; philosophy is the attempt to coordinate a number of different ideas into a coherent viewpoint and defending what you believe against those who are out to **refute** you. Indeed, a belief that can't be tied in with a great many other beliefs and that can't withstand criticism may not be worth believing at all.

MEET THE PHILOSOPHER: Socrates (469 or 470–399 BCE)

Socrates was one of the greatest philosophers of all times, though he never recorded his philosophy in writing. (All that we know of him comes down to us from his student Plato and other philosophers.) Socrates was born in approximately 469 or 470 BCE and lived his whole long life in Athens. He had a spectacular gift for rhetoric and debating. He had a much-gossiped-about marriage, had several children, and lived in poverty most of his life. He based his philosophy on the need to "know yourself" and on living the "examined life," even though the height of wisdom, according to Socrates, was to know how thoroughly ignorant we are. Much of his work was dedicated to defining and living the ideals of wisdom, justice, and the good life. In 399 BCE he was placed on trial by the Athenians for "corrupting

the youth" with his ideas. He was condemned to death, refused all opportunities to escape or have his sentence repealed, and accepted the cruel and unfair verdict with complete dignity and several brilliant speeches, dying as well as living for the ideas he defended.

Beyond Buzzwords

To defend your ideas is quite different from insisting, no matter how self-righteously, on your commitment to a mere word. To say that you believe in freedom, for instance, may make you feel proud and righteous, but this has nothing to do with philosophy or, for that matter, with freedom, unless you are willing to spell out exactly what it is you stand for, what it is that you believe, and why this *freedom,* as you call it, is so desirable. But most students, as well as many professional philosophers, get caught up in such attractive, admirable words, which we can call "buzzwords." These sound as if they refer to something quite specific and concrete (like the word *dog*), but in fact they are among the most difficult words to understand, and they provide us with the hardest problems in philosophy. *Freedom* sounds as if it means breaking out of prison or being able to speak one's mind against a bad government policy; but when we try to say what it is that ties these two examples together, and many more besides, it soon becomes clear that we don't know exactly what we're talking about. Indeed, virtually everyone believes in freedom, but the question is *what* each person actually believes in. Similarly, many people use such words as *truth, reality, morality, love,* and even *God* as buzzwords, words that make us feel good just because we say them. But to express the beliefs these words supposedly represent is to do something more than merely say the words; it is also to say what the words mean and what it is in the world (or out of it) to which we are referring. Buzzwords are like badges; we use them to identify ourselves. But it is equally important to know what the badges stand for.

The words *science* and *art* are examples of buzzwords that seem to be ways of identifying ourselves. How many dubious suggestions and simple-minded advertisements cash in on the respectability of the word *scientific*? What outrageous behavior is sometimes condoned on the grounds that it is *artistic*? And in politics, what actions have not been justified in the name of *national security* or *self-determination*? Such buzzwords not only block our understanding of the true nature of our behavior, but they also can be an obstacle—rather than an aid—in philosophy. Philosophers are always making up new words, often by way of making critical distinctions. For example, the words *subjective* and *objective,* once useful philosophical terms, now have so many meanings and are so commonly abused that the words by themselves hardly mean anything at all. Would-be philosophers, including some of the more verbally fluent philosophy students, may think that they are doing philosophy when they merely string together long noodle chains of such impressive terms. But philosophical terms are useful only insofar as they stay tied down to the problems they are introduced to solve and

retain the carefully defined meanings they carry. Buzzwords become not aids for thinking but rather *substitutes* for thinking, and long noodle chains of such terms, despite their complexity, are intellectually without nutritional value.

The abuse of buzzwords explains the importance of that overused introductory philosophical demand, "Define your terms." In fact, it is very difficult to define your terms, and most of the time, the definition emerges at the *end* of a thought process rather than at the beginning. You think you know quite well what you mean. But when certain philosophical terms enter our discussion, it is clear why this incessant demand has always been so important; many students seem to think that they have learned some philosophy just because they have learned a new and impressive word or two. But that's like believing that you have learned how to ski just because you have tried on the boots. The truth, however, is to be found in what you go on to do with them.

Articulation and Argument: Two Crucial Features of Philosophy

Philosophy is, first of all, **reflection**. It is stepping back, listening to yourself and other people (including the great philosophers), and trying to understand and evaluate what you hear and what you believe. To formulate your own philosophy is to say what you believe as clearly and as thoroughly as possible. Often we believe that we believe something, but as soon as we try to write it down or explain it to a friend we find that what seemed so clear a moment ago has disappeared, as if it evaporated just as we were about to express it. Sometimes, too, we think we don't have any particular views on a subject, but once we begin to discuss the topic with a friend it turns out that we have very definite views as soon as they are articulated. **Articulation**—spelling out ideas in words and sentences—is the primary process of philosophy. Sitting down to write out your ideas is an excellent way to articulate them, but most people find that an even better way, and sometimes far more relaxed and enjoyable, is simply to discuss these ideas with other people—classmates, good friends, family—or even, on occasion, a stranger with whom you happen to strike up a conversation. Indeed, talking with another person not only forces you to be clear and concrete in your articulation of your beliefs; it also allows you—or forces you—to engage in a second essential feature of doing philosophy: arguing for your views. Articulating your opinions still leaves open the question whether they are worth believing, whether they are well thought out, and whether they can stand up to criticism from someone who disagrees. **Arguments** serve the purpose of testing our views; they are to philosophy what practice games are to sports—ways of seeing just how well you are prepared and how skilled you are. In philosophy, they are also ways of seeing just how convincing your views really are.

MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Primary Features of Philosophy

Articulation: Putting your ideas in clear, concise, readily understandable language.

Argument: Supporting your ideas with reasons that draw on other ideas, principles, and observations to establish your conclusions and overcome objections.

Analysis: Understanding an idea by distinguishing and clarifying its various components. For example, the idea of "murder" involves three component ideas: killing, wrongfulness, and intention.

Synthesis: Gathering together different ideas into a single, unified vision. For example, the ancient philosopher Pythagoras's idea of the "harmony of the spheres" (the idea that the relationships among the movements of the heavenly bodies resulted in a type of music) synthesizes ideas from mathematics, music, physics, and astronomy.

Articulating and arguing your opinions has another familiar benefit: stating and defending a view is a way of making it your own. Too many students, in reading and studying philosophy, look at the various statements and arguments of the great philosophers as if they were merely displays in some intellectual museum, curiously contradicting each other, but, in any case, having no real relevance to us. But once you have adopted a viewpoint, which most likely was defended at some time by one or more of the philosophical geniuses of history, it becomes very much your own as well. Indeed, doing philosophy almost always includes appealing to other philosophers in support of your own views, borrowing their arguments and examples as well as quoting them when they have striking things to say (with proper credit in a footnote, of course). It is by *doing* philosophy, articulating and arguing your views, instead of just reading about other people's philosophy books, that you make your own views genuinely your own, that is, by working with them, stating them publicly, defending them, and committing yourself to them. That is how the philosophies of the past become important to us and how our own half-baked, inarticulate, often borrowed, and typically undigested ideas start to become something more. Philosophy, through reflection and by means of articulation and argument, allows us to conduct an **analysis**—break something apart—and then critically examine our ideas and synthesize our vision of ourselves and the world, to put the pieces together in a single, unified, defensible vision. Such a **synthesis** is the ultimate aim of philosophical reflection, and scattered ideas and arguments are no more "a philosophy" than a handful of unconnected words is a poem.

MASTER THE CONCEPTS: The Fields of Philosophy

For convenience and to break the subject up into course-size sections, philosophy is usually divided into a number of fields. Ultimately, these are all interwoven, and it is difficult to pursue a question in any one field without soon finding yourself in the others, too. Yet philosophers, like most other scholars, tend to specialize, and you, too, may find your main interests focused in one of the following areas:

Metaphysics: The theory of reality and the ultimate nature of all things. The aim of metaphysics is a comprehensive view of the universe, an overall worldview. One part of metaphysics is a field sometimes called **ontology**, the study of "being," an attempt to list in order of priority the various sorts of entities that make up the universe.

Ethics: The study of good and bad, right and wrong, the search for the *good life*, and the defense of the principles and rules of morality. It is therefore sometimes called **moral philosophy**, although this is but a single part of the broad field of ethics.

Epistemology: The study of knowledge, including such questions as "What can we know?" and "How do we know anything?" and "What is truth?"

Logic (or philosophical logic): The study of the formal structures of *sound* thinking and good argumentation.

Philosophy of religion (or philosophical theology): The philosophical study of religion, the nature of religion, the nature of the divine, and the various reasons for believing (or not believing) in God's existence.

Political (or sociopolitical) philosophy: The study of the foundations and the nature of society and the state; an attempt to formulate a vision of the ideal society and determine what ideas and reforms would need to be implemented in our own society to better achieve this.

Aesthetics (a subset of which is the **philosophy of art):** The study of the nature of art and the experiences we have when we enjoy the arts or similarly take pleasure in nature or everyday phenomena, including an understanding of such concepts as "beauty" and "expression."

Concepts and Conceptual Frameworks

The basic units of our philosophical projects and viewpoints are called **concepts**. Concepts give form to experience; they make articulation possible. But even before we try to articulate our views, concepts make it possible for

us to recognize things in the world, to see and hear particular objects and particular people instead of one big blur of a world, like looking through a movie camera that is seriously out of focus. But in addition to defining the forms of our experience, concepts also tie our experience together. Concepts rarely occur in isolation; they virtually always tie together into a conceptual framework.

An example of a concept would be this: As children, we learn to identify certain creatures as dogs. We acquire the concept "dog." At first, we apply our new concept clumsily, perhaps calling a "dog" anything that has four legs, including cats, cows, and horses. Our parents correct us, however, and we learn to be more precise, distinguishing dogs first from cats, cows, and horses and then later from wolves, coyotes, and jackals. We then have the concept "dog"; we can recognize dogs; we can talk about dogs. We can think about and imagine dogs even when one is not actually around at the time, and we can say what we think about dogs in general. We can refine our concept, too, by learning to recognize the various breeds of dogs and learning to distinguish between dangerous dogs and friendly dogs. On certain occasions, therefore, the concept takes on an undeniably practical importance, for it is the concept that tells us how to act, when to run, and when to be friendly in turn. But the concept "dog" also becomes a part of our vision of the world—a world in which dogs are of some significance, a world divided into dogs and nondogs, a world in which we can contemplate, for example, the difference between a dog's life and our own. (One of the great movements in ancient philosophy was called **Cynicism** after the Greek word for "dog." The cynics acquired their name by living a life of austerity and poverty that, to their contemporaries, seemed little better than a "dog's life.")

Some concepts have very specific objects, like "dog." These specific concepts, derived from experience, are often called empirical concepts. We have already seen this word *empirical* referring to experience (for example, knowing the various breeds and behaviors of dogs). We will see it again and again; the root *empiri-* means having to do with experience. Through empirical concepts we make sense of the world, dividing it into recognizable pieces, learning how to deal with it, and developing our ability to talk about it, to understand and explain it, and to learn more and talk more about it. In addition to such specific concepts, we make use of a set of much more abstract concepts, whose objects are not so tangible or empirical and which cannot be so easily defined. These are *a priori* (Latin, "from the earlier") concepts, because they are conceptually *prior to* what we learn from experience. One example is the concept of "number." However important numbers might be in our talk about our experience, the concepts of arithmetic are not empirical concepts. Mathematicians talk about the concept of an "irrational number," but there is nothing in our everyday experience that they can point to as an example of one. To understand this concept requires a good deal of knowledge about mathematics because this concept, like most concepts, can be defined only within a system of other abstract concepts.

MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Types of Knowledge

Empirical knowledge: Knowledge based on experience (whether your own experience or the observations and experiments of others), for example, "The temperature in Chicago today is 17°F."

A priori knowledge: Knowledge that is independent of ("before") any particular experience, for example, "2 + 3 = 5" or "*A* + *B* = *B* + *A*."

The a priori concept of "number" raises problems far more difficult than the empirical concept of "dog," and it is with the most difficult concepts that philosophy is generally concerned. Because philosophical concepts are abstract, there may be far more room for disagreement about what they mean than about empirical concepts. For example, the concepts of a "good person" and the "good life" seem to mean very different things to different people and in different societies. So, too, the concept of "God" creates enormous difficulties, in fact so many difficulties that some religions refuse to define God at all, or even give him (and not always "him") a name. Within the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, there are very different conceptions of God; conceptions vary even within the Bible. When we begin to consider some of the other conceptions of God—for example, the Greek conception of Zeus and Apollo; the Hindu ideas of Vishnu and Shiva; or some modern conceptions of God as identical to the universe as a whole, or as a vital force, or as whatever a person takes to be his or her "ultimate concern in life"—you can see that simply agreeing on the word still leaves open the hardest questions: What is God like? What can we expect of God? What is involved in believing "in" God? What is our concept of God?

FROM THE SOURCE: Oxen Gods?

Xenophanes (ca. 570–ca. 475 BCE, Greek, Asia Minor)

Ethiopians say their gods are flat-nosed and black,
And Thracians that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.

If cows and horses or lions had hands,
Or could draw with their hands and make things as men can,
Horses would have drawn horse-like gods, cows cow-like gods,
And each species would have made the gods' bodies just like their own.[1]

The concept of "freedom" is also difficult. Some people think that freedom is being able to do whatever you want to do; others think that freedom makes sense

only within the rules of your society. But it is not as if the word *freedom* already means one or the other; the word and its meaning are open to interpretation, and interpretation is the business of philosophy. However, what we might disagree about is not simply the meaning of a word. What we disagree about is the *concept*, the basic idea, and the concept in turn determines the way we see the world.

The concept of "self" is like this, too. In a purely grammatical sense, the word *self* just points to a person—for example, to *myself* when I say, "I presented myself to the dean." But what is this self? Again, it is not defined by the word, which only points. Is my self just the *I*, the *voice* that is now speaking, or does it refer to a whole human being? Does it include every trivial and insignificant fact about me (for example, the fact that I forgot to comb my hair this morning)? Or does it refer just to certain *essential* facts—for instance, the fact that I am a conscious being? Is my self a *soul*? Or is my self perhaps a social construction, which must be defined not by referring to one person alone but by considering society and my particular role in it?

The concept of "truth" is an important concept in philosophy. Is the truth simply the "way things really are"? Or does it depend on the nature of what and how we believe as well? Could it be that we are all caught up in our limited view of the world, unable to see beyond the concepts of our own language and our own restricted range of experiences?

The most abstract and controversial concepts of all are not those through which we divide up the world into understandable bits and pieces but rather those grand concepts through which we try to put it all together. Religion is the traditional vehicle for this total understanding, but in our culture religion has been challenged by science, by art, by the law, and by politics for this ultimate role, as well as by philosophy.

Such all-embracing pictures and perspectives are our ultimate **conceptual frameworks**—that is, the most abstract concepts through which we "frame" and organize all of our more specific concepts. The term *conceptual framework* stresses the importance of concepts and is therefore central to the articulation of concepts that make up most of philosophy. But what we are calling a "conceptual framework" can also be viewed, from a more practical perspective, as a set of values and a way of looking at life, expressed as a way of living, or, in our contemporary vocabulary, as a **lifestyle**. If the emphasis is shifted to politics and society, the framework can be called an **ideology**—that is, a set of ideas about the nature of society and our political roles within it, which themselves are reflected in one's lifestyle. If we shift to a more historical viewpoint, we find that historians sometimes refer to the same thing as a **climate of opinion**, drawing attention to the way such frameworks change. If we shift the emphasis away from the concepts through which we give form to our world and emphasize instead the view of the world that results, we can use a popular philosophical term, **worldview** (which is often left in German, ***Weltanschauung*** because a number of German philosophers used this term quite often in the last century or so). But whether we use one term or the other, with one emphasis or another, the important point is that we in some sense already have such viewpoints, through which we give shape to

our world and define our lives within it. When we articulate them in philosophy, we are not just creating an arbitrary structure of ideas; we are making explicit and clarifying what we already believe—to be more aware of our ideas, to be able to defend them, to determine how or whether they work together, and, sometimes, to change them.

FROM THE SOURCE: The Cosmic Religious Feeling

Albert Einstein, from "Religion and Science," 1930

It is easy to see why the churches have always fought science and persecuted its devotees. On the other hand, I maintain that the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research. Only those who realize the immense efforts and, above all, the devotion without which pioneer work in theoretical science cannot be achieved are able to grasp the strength of the emotion out of which alone such work, remote as it is from the immediate realities of life, can issue. What a deep conviction of the rationality of the universe and what a yearning to understand, were it but a feeble reflection of the mind revealed in this world, Kepler and Newton must have had to enable them to spend years of solitary labor in disentangling the principles of celestial mechanics! Those whose acquaintance with scientific research is derived chiefly from its practical results easily develop a completely false notion of the mentality of the men who, surrounded by a skeptical world, have shown the way to kindred spirits scattered wide through the world and the centuries. Only one who had devoted his life to similar ends can have a vivid realization of what has inspired these men and given them the strength to remain true to their purpose in spite of countless failures. It is cosmic religious feeling that gives a man such strength. A contemporary has said, not unjustly, that in this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people.[2]

Our conceptual framework, our lifestyle, our ideology, our climate of opinion, or our worldview is usually taken for granted as the intellectual ground that we walk on. But sometimes it is necessary to examine that ground, to look carefully at what we usually take for granted. If we are planning to construct a house, it is a good idea to investigate the ground we will build on, especially when something seems wrong—the soil is too soft, or it is on a fault and susceptible to earthquakes. This is often the case, too, with our conceptual frameworks; as soon as we look at them, they may seem to be soft, ill formed, perhaps in danger of imminent collapse, or liable to disruption by a well-placed question or confrontation with someone who disagrees with us. This is a common experience among first-year college students, for example; they come to school with certain religious, moral, political, and personal views that they have always taken for granted, which they have never questioned or been forced to defend. Then they meet someone—a roommate, a teacher, a friend in a course—and these long-held views are thrown

into chaos. Students who are not prepared for intellectual confrontation may find that they are no longer so sure; then they get defensive, even offended and belligerent. But with time and some philosophical thinking, the same students again become clear about what they believe and why. Before the ground was examined, it might have been soft or near collapse, but once they see where they stand, they can fill in the holes, make it solid, protect themselves against unexpected "idea-quakes," and renew or revise their beliefs, which they now hold with a confidence much greater than before.

It is possible, of course, that you will find yourself using two or even more conceptual frameworks—for example, a scientific framework in school, a pleasure-seeking (or **hedonistic**) framework for Saturday night, and a religious framework on Sunday morning. The question then becomes, how do these different frameworks tie together? Which is most important? Are they actually inconsistent with one another? If our lives are to be coherent, don't we have to unify our various beliefs so that they all hang together? Ultimately, what makes an understanding of concepts and conceptual frameworks so important and rewarding is the fact that in understanding them, we are also in the process of *building* them, and in so doing enriching them, developing them, solidifying them, and giving new understanding and clarity to our everyday lives.

MEET THE PHILOSOPHERS: Three Important Names to Know

Plato (427–347 BCE) was a student of Socrates and the leading spokesman for Socrates's ideas. He was shocked by Socrates's execution and dedicated his life to developing and spreading Socrates's philosophy. In 385 BCE he set up the Academy to educate the future leaders of Athens in morality and philosophy in general.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), a student of Plato, strongly disagreed with many of his teacher's theories. Aristotle was an accomplished scientist as well as a philosopher, and his ideas ruled most of the sciences—especially biology—until modern times. He was the tutor of Alexander (who became "the Great") and later founded his own school (the Lyceum) in Athens. When Alexander died, Aristotle was forced to flee, commenting that he would not let Athens "sin against philosophy a second time."

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was, in the opinion of many philosophers, the greatest philosopher of modern times. He spent his entire life in a small eastern Prussian town (Königsberg). He was famous for his simple, regular life. (He never married, and his neighbors were said to set their clocks by his punctual afternoon walks.) And yet this apparently uninteresting professor was also an enthusiast of the French Revolution—and a revolutionary in his own way, too. His ideas turned many of the traditional views of knowledge, religion, and morality upside down.

Doing Philosophy with Style

The quality of a philosophy depends on the ingenuity with which its ideas are presented, the thoroughness with which they are worked out, the care with which one idea is tied to another, and the vividness with which the entire view comes across to the reader. Many views of the greatest philosophers in history—for example, Plato, Aristotle, and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant—were not so different from those of most of their contemporaries, including other philosophers whom they knew and regularly talked with. But they became the great philosophers of our tradition because they presented their ideas with eloquence, defended them so brilliantly, and put them together in monumental constructions that are wonderful (if also very difficult) to behold. Philosophy is first of all articulation and argument, but it is also articulation and argument *with style*. (For some examples of the distinctive styles of particular philosophers, see Appendix A.) Every philosophy, and every essay or book in philosophy, is essentially *making a case*. That is why philosophical training is so valuable for students going into law, or politics, or business, or—ultimately—almost every career where articulation and argument are important.

Disjointed articulation and argument not aimed at making a case to some particular audience (even if that audience is only your roommate or philosophy instructor) are without a point or purpose. Philosophy should be persuasive. That means that, in addition to showing evidence of hard thinking and displaying wisdom, philosophical writing should be somewhat entertaining, witty, dramatic, and even seductive. It is working out common views in ways that are not at all common. But whether philosophy is the somewhat modest thinking of a first-year philosophy student or the hundreds of pages that make up the classic texts of the great philosophers, the activity is the same—that of trying to articulate, clarify, and present one's own view of the world as coherently and attractively as possible. It is possible to appreciate philosophy only by participating in it, by being a philosopher yourself. And by the time you have completed this course, you too will be a part (if a small part) of that long tradition that has come to define the world of Western philosophy, and perhaps non-Western, too. To be part of the extended conversation that is philosophy, you will need the following:

1. *Your ideas:* Without ideas, articulated clearly, there is nothing to think or write about.
2. *Critical thinking:* Ideas unqualified and uncriticized, undeveloped and unargued, are not yet philosophy. One of the most valuable tools you can carry away from a philosophy class is the ability to read and think critically, to scrutinize ideas as well as gather information.
3. *Argumentation:* Philosophy is not just stating your opinions; it is providing arguments to support your opinions, and arguments against objections

to your views. The best philosophy always includes a kind of point-counterpoint format. Don't just state your views. Argue for them and anticipate the kinds of objections that will probably be raised against you, countering them in advance. ("Now you might object that . . ., but against that I want to point out that . . .")

4. *A problem:* Philosophy does not consist of random speculations and arguments about some topic or other. It is motivated by a problem, a real concern. Death and the meaning of life are philosophical problems because—to put it mildly—we are all concerned with questions about life and death, *our* lives and deaths. Problems about knowledge arise because someone somewhere challenged our ability to know as much as we think we know, and philosophers ever since have been trying to answer that challenge. (For example, how do you know that you are not dreaming right now? Or, how do you know that the world wasn't created five minutes ago, with all of its fossils and supposedly ancient relics, and with us and all of our memories of the alleged past?) Philosophy may begin with wondering about life and the world in general, but it comes into focus through attending to a problem.
5. *Imagination:* A list of your ideas with qualifications and arguments might count as philosophy, but it would be uninspiring and dull. Don't be afraid to use metaphors and analogies. As you will see, some of the greatest philosophers developed their views of the world into visions that are as much poetry as philosophical essays.
6. *Style:* Anything in writing is readable only if it is written in a lively style. The rules of good essay writing apply to philosophy, of course, but so do the rules of entertaining—be exciting, attractive, appealing, persuasive. No matter how exciting an idea or incisive a criticism, it always comes across better when presented with eloquence, with a personal touch and an elegant turn of phrase.

Socrates might have said, "Everyone should think about his or her life because at least sometimes that helps us out of hard situations and makes life more valuable," but probably no one would remember it. Instead, he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living," and a hundred generations have been struck by the boldness and bluntness of his statement, whether or not, on examination, they have agreed with it. Socrates's aphorism is only a summary statement, however. The whole body of Socrates's philosophy includes all of his ideas, images, and arguments. Your philosophy, too, is nothing less than the entirety of your considered beliefs, articulated and argued as convincingly and as elegantly as you are able.

For more on philosophical style—and writing a philosophy essay or exam—see Appendix A.

A Little Logic

The central problem of logic is the classification of arguments, so that all those that are bad are thrown into one division, and those which are good into another.[3]

—Charles Sanders Peirce

Philosophy consists of ideas, grand theories, and visions, articulated in speech or in writing and presented in the clearest way possible. In presenting your ideas, accordingly, it is crucial to give **reasons** for them, to *support* your theories with a variety of examples and considerations that will show that your philosophy is more persuasive than its alternatives (or at least as persuasive). Accordingly, the key to good philosophical presentation is what we call an **argument**. In ordinary language, we sometimes think of an argument as a violent quarrel, filled with hostility and mutual resentment. This need not be the case, however; an argument is nothing more than the process of supporting views you hold with reasons. "I know that I am not dreaming right now because I never dream this vividly, I just pinched myself, and besides, if I were dreaming I'd probably be snoring." An argument ties your belief to other beliefs and helps persuade someone else to accept your position. A good argument can be presented in a perfectly coolheaded and amiable manner. Indeed, the best arguments are always defined by a process of careful thinking that we call **logic (or philosophical logic)**, often described as the "science (and the process) of proper reasoning."

Philosophers use a variety of arguments and argument types. So, of course, do politicians, salespeople, television talk show hosts, and each of us, every time we are trying to convince someone of something we believe or trying to think something through for ourselves. There are arguments by **example** ("Let's look at a particular case") and arguments by **analogy** ("Life is like a novel. There is a beginning and an end; it can be dull or exciting; there will surely be conflicts and bad scenes; there is suspense; the plot thickens. Therefore, the most important thing is to live an interesting life, develop your character, and not just play it safe."). There are arguments based on extensive scientific research, and there are arguments that are very abstract and largely verbal (concerned more with the words used to describe a phenomenon than with the phenomenon itself). There are arguments based on nothing more than a vicious attack on one's opponents, and there are arguments that—despite their appearance—are not really arguments at all. In general, we might divide arguments into two classes—good arguments and bad arguments—depending on the *relations* between various statements. (*Truth* and *falsity*, on the other hand, apply to the statements themselves, never to the arguments.)

What counts as a good or a bad argument depends on what kind of an argument it is. As a useful way to understand arguments and what makes them good or bad, it is convenient to divide them into two very general categories, to which philosophers and logicians (that is, those who study logic as their primary interest) apply the names **deduction** and **induction**.

Deduction

In a **deductive argument**, one argues for the truth of a conclusion by inferring a statement from a number of others. An example that might be familiar to you is any proof of a theorem you learned to formulate in high school geometry. Some statements are assumed to be true from the outset (for example, statements that are true by definition and statements so obviously true that they need not be proved at all, called **axioms**). Then, new statements are **deduced**, or **inferred**, by means of a number of established **rules of inference**—that is, the laws of thought, such as "A statement cannot be both true and false at the same time" or "If either *A* or *B,* but not *A,* then *B*." A deductive argument is thus a progression from one true statement to another. The statement one reaches is established as true, too; in fact, a deductive argument is sometimes defined as an argument whose final statement—or **conclusion**—is guaranteed to be true by the truth of the previous statements—or **premises**.

The best-known type of deductive argument is called a **syllogism**. An example of a syllogism is:

All philosophers are wise.
Socrates is a philosopher.

_____

Therefore, Socrates is wise.

What is important in such arguments is the form of the component statements. Substituting letters for subjects and predicates in these statements, we can see the basic form of this argument:

All Ps are Qs.
S is a P.

_____

Therefore, S is a Q.

When a deductive argument proceeds correctly according to this form, we say that it is *deductively valid*, or simply **valid**. Arguments that are not valid are **invalid**. Deduction guarantees that our conclusions will be at least as certain as the premises. If the premises are certainly true, then the conclusions will certainly be true as well. But it is important to emphasize that an argument can be valid even if its premises and conclusion are false. For example, the following syllogism correctly follows the above form and is therefore valid:

All cows are purple.
Socrates is a cow.

_____

Therefore, Socrates is purple.

This is a valid argument, even though both the premises and the conclusion are false. But without true premises, even a valid argument cannot guarantee true conclusions.

It is important to realize that an argument can have a valid form and yet yield an absurd conclusion. A valid argument is guaranteed to reach a true conclusion only if all the premises are true. Thus a good deductive argument needs to be valid, but it must also have premises that are agreed to be true.

Notice that, contrary to common usage, philosophers restrict their use of the words *valid* and *invalid* to talking about correct and incorrect arguments; the words *true* and *false* apply to the various statements that one makes in an argument—its premises and its conclusion. Thus, the claim that "3 + 2 = 8" is false, not invalid; and the argument "If Socrates is a man and all goats eat cabbage, then Socrates is a goat" is invalid, not false (whether or not its premises or conclusion are false). When an argument is both valid and has true premises (when it is a good argument, in other words), it is called a **sound argument**. An argument is **unsound** (a bad deductive argument) if one or more of its premises are false, or if it is invalid. A good deductive argument, then, has two essential features:

1. It is a valid argument.
2. Its premises are true.

A more detailed discussion of valid argument forms can be found in Appendix B.

Induction

Inductive arguments, unlike deductive arguments, do not guarantee the truth of their conclusions, even if all the premises are agreed to be true. The most familiar form of induction is **generalization** from a number of particular cases—for example, noting that every animal we have seen with sharp front teeth eats meat and concluding that *all* animals with sharp front teeth eat meat. But notice that although we might be absolutely sure that we are correct about the particular cases—that every such animal we have seen does in fact eat meat—we might still be wrong in our generalization, our conclusion that *all* such animals are meat eaters. Thus, it is essential in any inductive argument to begin with a well-chosen number of particular cases and to make sure that they are as varied as possible (that is, to approximate what social scientists call a random sample). Inductive arguments can be **strong** or **weak**, depending on the weight of the evidence for the conclusion, the quality of the sample, and the plausibility of the generalization. However, inductive arguments are not evaluated as valid or invalid; in fact, given the definition of validity as the guarantee that the conclusion is true if the premises are true, *no* inductive argument is ever deductively valid. (That is not a mark against it, of course. Inductive arguments have other functions; they are not supposed to be deductively valid.)

MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Deductive and Inductive Logic

Deductive logic guarantees the truth of the conclusion, *if* the premises are true.

Example: If Moriarty didn't do it, then the Spiderwoman did. We know that Moriarty was in prison at the time, so the Spiderwoman must have done it. (Premises: "If M didn't do it, S did," and "M was in prison at the time.")

Inductive logic does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion, but only makes it more reasonable for us to believe the conclusion (compared with other possible conclusions).

Example: The pipe tobacco is the same kind he uses, and the footprints match his shoes. He was seen in the neighborhood only an hour before the crime, and he was heard to say, "I'm going to get even with her if it's the last thing I do." The best explanation of the evidence in this case seems to be the conclusion that he is guilty.

Although generalization is the most familiar example of induction, inductive arguments are commonly used to support virtually every statement of fact. For example, if you believe that Julius Caesar was murdered in Rome on March 15, 44 BCE, that is a statement of fact that you cannot directly observe today. The argument for its truth must therefore be inductive, based on information you have read in history books, colored by imagery from a play by Shakespeare, to be further verified—if you are curious—by an investigation into the **evidence** available in chronicles of the period, records of Roman politics, and perhaps a few relics from the times. In such inductive arguments, it is the **coherence** of the evidence that provides the argument—that is, the various elements of the argument fit together well. In a criminal trial, for instance, evidence is presented in favor of two contradictory statements of fact ("The defendant is guilty" versus "The defendant is not guilty"). The inductive question in the minds of the judge and the jury—and probably earlier in the minds of the detectives who worked on the case, too—is whether the evidence for conviction is more coherent than the evidence against. It is worth noting that what Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson continuously point to as Holmes's "amazing powers of deduction" are for the most part powers of **inductive reasoning**, drawing factual conclusions from scattered and sometimes barely noticeable evidence.

One of the most important ingredients in inductive reasoning is the **hypothesis**. In the context of science, the hypothesis is the statement that an experiment is supposed to prove or disprove. You are probably familiar with hypotheses in science, but throughout our lives we use hypotheses, suppositions we suspect to be true and for which we are seeking evidence. Induction would be a waste of time if we did not have some hypothesis in mind. Just as scientists try to organize their research around a particular topic and a specific claim, we organize our attention around particular concerns and specific hypotheses.

"Who ate the piece of chocolate cake that was in the refrigerator? It must have been either my roommate or a burglar. Which hypothesis is the more plausible?" Not only science but almost everything we know and want to know depends on hypotheses and inductive reasoning, from looking for the car keys in the morning ("Now, I probably left them somewhere near my books") to speculating on the existence and the nature of black holes in space.

From the preceding discussion, it should be clear that much of what passes for argument is not that at all. For example, many people seem to think that simply stating and restating their opinion—forcefully and with conviction—is the same thing as supporting it with arguments. It is not. Stating your opinion clearly is the essential preliminary to formulating an argument, but it is not the same thing. An argument goes beyond expressing the opinion itself; it involves supporting the opinion by deduction from other statements or with evidence based on experience. Some people seem to think that a single example will serve as a complete argument, but, at most, a single example serves as *part* of an argument. Most inductive arguments require many examples, and they must deal with examples that *don't* fit the hypothesis, too. Every argument is bound to meet up with several counterarguments and objections, so even a single argument is rarely enough to make one's case.

Similarly, many people seem to think that an appeal to **authority** will settle the case, but in most philosophical disputes, what counts as an authority is itself in question. If someone insists that God exists because it says so in the Bible, the question immediately shifts to the authority of the Bible. (A person who does not believe in God will probably not accept the authority of the Bible either.) If someone defends a political position because his mother said so or, for that matter, because Thomas Jefferson said so, the question then moves to the authority of the arguer's mother or Jefferson. One of the main functions of philosophy is to let us question authority and determine for ourselves what we should believe or not believe. Appeal to authority does not necessarily show respect for that authority, but often it does show disrespect for ourselves. **Legitimate** authority has to be earned as well as respected.

Criticizing Arguments

One of the most crucial philosophical activities—but by no means the only one—is **criticism**. Criticism does not necessarily mean—as in everyday life—negative remarks about someone or something. It means carefully examining a statement, testing it out, seeing if in fact the arguments for it are good ones. But this means that, whether it is our own statements or other people's statements that are being examined, it is important to find out what is *wrong* with them so that they can be corrected or strengthened. So we should criticize even our own positions, because that is how we make them more defensible.

A typical way to criticize a deductive argument is simply to show that its premises are not true; one can criticize an inductive argument by showing that the evidence on which it is based is false or distorted. A way to criticize a complex argument is to show that it consists of invalid deductive arguments or weak **inductive generalizations**. A particularly powerful way to do this is by the use of

counterexamples. For instance, if someone claims, "All American men love football," he or she has made an overly broad inductive generalization. We can refute this claim if we can find a single American man who does not like football. Any claim that takes the form "All X's are Y's" or "No A's are B's" can be refuted if we can point out a single counterexample—that is, a single X that is not Y, or a single A that is a B. If a philosophy student says, "No one knows anything for certain," a familiar response might be to hold up your hand, stick out your thumb, and say, "Here is a thumb: I know *that* for certain." This may not be the end of the argument, but often through such general claims and counterexamples to them philosophical arguments are made more precise.

Even if all of its arguments seem to be sound, a philosophy can be shown to be in trouble if it is **inconsistent**, that is, if the conclusions of its different arguments **contradict** one another. In the same way, one can raise doubts about a philosophy's acceptability if one shows that it results in **paradox**—a **self-contradictory** or seemingly absurd conclusion based on apparently good arguments—and consequently must be thoroughly reexamined. For example, suppose a philosopher argues that God can do absolutely anything. For instance, God can create a mountain. He can move a mountain. But now a critical listener asks, "Can God create a mountain so large that even he can't move it?"—and we have a paradox. Either God can create such a mountain but then can't move it (and so cannot do everything) or God cannot create such a mountain (and so cannot do everything). The paradox forces us to reexamine the original claim that God can do absolutely anything. (Perhaps it can be revised to say something like, "God can do anything that is logically possible.") Notice that the argument just given takes the form of what is called ***reductio ad absurdum***, Latin for a reduction to absurdity, in which a position is rejected because it results in a paradox.

MASTER THE CONCEPT: Paradox

A **paradox** is a **self-contradictory** or seemingly absurd conclusion based on apparently good arguments. Sometimes the paradox is merely apparent and requires restating; on occasion a well-formulated paradox has brought about the total rethinking of the whole of a branch of science, philosophy, religion, or mathematics. Some examples of paradoxical statements are:

"This sentence is false." (If that is true, then it is false.)

"There is a barber who shaves everyone in town who does not shave himself." (If he lives in town, he doesn't shave everyone in town.)

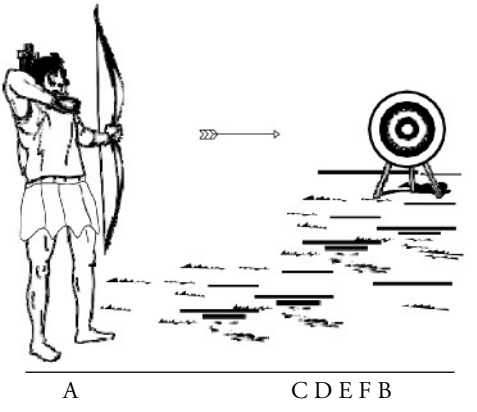
"God is all-powerful, so he could create a mountain so huge that even he could not move it."

If Achilles shoots an arrow from point A toward point B, it first must cover distance A–C, which is half of A–B; then it must cover distance C–D,

(continues)

Paradox (*continued*)

which is half of C–B, and then D–E, which is half of D–B, and so on, each moment covering half the distance it has covered in the moment before. The paradox is that if the arrow keeps moving forever, it will never reach point B.



A philosophy that does not contain outright inconsistencies or lead to paradoxes may still be unsuccessful, however, if it is **incoherent**. This means that the various claims have virtually nothing to do with each other, or mean very little, or can be interpreted only in an absurd way. A philosophy can be accused of **begging the question**, repeating as a supposed solution the very problem that it is attempting to resolve. An example of begging the question is the argument "Other people exist. I know because I've talked to them." This argument presupposes other people's existence, but that is the issue that is in question. (Note that the idea of "begging the question" does not mean merely *raising* a question. It means taking a conclusion you are trying to defend for granted in what you present as a reason to believing that conclusion.)

A philosophy can also be accused of being silly or trivial, which is just about the most offensive thing you can say, indicating that it is not even worth your time to investigate it further. It is much better to say something false but interesting than to say something silly or trivial. A common way in which philosophical claims can turn out to be trivial is when they express what logicians call *tautologies:* for example, "A is A." A **tautology** is a statement that is so necessarily true, so obviously correct, that a statement claiming the opposite would be self-contradictory.

An argument can be **ad hominem** (Latin, "to the man," or "to the person," from the phrase *argumentatum ad hominem*) (or **ad feminam**, "to the woman," when referring to a woman), aimed at discrediting the person but ignoring the issue completely. Accusing someone who disagrees of being an atheist, a communist, or a Nazi is an all-too-familiar example of an *ad hominem* argument.

Such bad arguments, in general, are called **fallacies**, whether or not they are formally invalid. (A *formal* fallacy is one that violates the proper rules of inference, of the sort we considered above in connection with syllogisms. An *informal* fallacy may not break the rules of inference but "cheats" by sneaking in ambiguous terminology, biased language, evasion of the facts, and distraction.) A more thorough list and discussion of such fallacies can be found in Appendix C.

MASTER THE CONCEPTS: The Basic Terminology of Logic

An *argument* is a sequence of assertions, or statements, to back up a viewpoint or idea. The *conclusion* is an assertion that is supported by all the other assertions. These assertions are thus the reasons for accepting the conclusion. The assertions that are assumed to be true (for the sake of that argument) are called *premises*. Arguments can be either deductive or inductive. *Deductive arguments* guarantee the truth of their conclusion if they are both *valid* (their form is such that if the premises are all true the conclusion will be true) and have all true premises; *inductive arguments* do not guarantee the truth of their conclusions, no matter how impressive the evidence. Deductive arguments are said to be valid or invalid. (Arguments are never true or false.) Invalid arguments are also called *fallacies*. Individual assertions or statements are *true* or *false*. (They are never said to be valid or invalid.) A deductive argument that is both valid and has true premises is said to be sound. (Otherwise, it is unsound.) An inductive argument that is well supported by its evidence is called strong; a poorly supported argument is called weak. *Logic* is the use and the study of good arguments and the means of differentiating these from bad arguments.

In emphasizing criticism, it is important to point out, as a matter of balance, that philosophy is nevertheless an especially *cooperative* enterprise. Argumentation and criticism are not hostile or defensive. They are ways of making your ideas and their implications clear—clear to yourself as well as to other people. Socrates used to say that his truest friends were also his best critics. Indeed, we would distrust a friend who was never critical and never argued. ("If you were really my friend, you would have told me!") Arguments and objections take place within an arena of shared interest and with a common concern for reaching the truth. But, just as important, arguments and objections and mutual respect between people who disagree are absolutely essential in a pluralistic democracy such as our own, in which everyone's opinion is respected and it is most unlikely that we will all agree. But to say that everyone's opinion is respected is not to say that everyone's opinion is of equal value; the depth of thinking and the quality of argument make some opinions better and more plausible than others. At the same time, cooperative respect, mutual concern for the importance of argument, and honest disagreement are indispensable to life as we want to live it.

MASTER THE CONCEPT: Tautology

A **tautology** is a trivially true statement. Some examples:

A man is free if he is free.

You can't know anything unless you know something.

I wouldn't be here if I hadn't arrived.

What about the following? Are they tautologies?

Business is business.

Boys will be boys.

"A rose is a rose is a rose." (Gertrude Stein)

"Become who you are." (Friedrich Nietzsche)

In developing your own thoughts about the various questions of philosophy, you will inevitably find yourself using both deductive and inductive arguments, and it is perfectly normal to catch yourself—or your friends—using some fallacious or poorly substantiated arguments as well. What is important, however, is that you can recognize these forms when they appear and that you are aware—even if only in a preliminary way—of what you are doing when you argue for a position or an idea. Arguments are not the whole of philosophy; an argument cannot be interesting if the statement it is intended to support is trivial or uninteresting. But the best ideas in the world can be rendered ineffective and unheeded if no good arguments are used to present them.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

Examine the following arguments. Are they inductive or deductive arguments? Are they valid and sound? If they are invalid or unsound, why? Is there anything else that is wrong with them? (You may want to consult Appendixes B and C.)

1. Every event in the world is caused by other events. Human actions and decisions are events in the world. Therefore, every human action and decision is caused by other events.
2. If God exists, then life has meaning. God does not exist. Therefore, life has no meaning.

3. All penguins are purple. Socrates is purple. Therefore, Socrates is a penguin.
4. William James and John Dewey both called themselves pragmatists. They are the leading American philosophers. Therefore, all American philosophers are pragmatists.
5. Believing in God makes people moral—that is, believers tend to do good and avoid evil.
6. If I try to doubt that I exist, I realize that I must exist if I am doing the doubting. Therefore, I must exist.
7. We haven't seen a fox all day. Therefore, there must be no foxes in the area.
8. If you don't agree with me, I'm going to hit you.
9. God must exist; the Bible says so.
10. He must be guilty; he looks like a criminal.
11. If she were innocent, she would loudly proclaim her innocence. She is loudly proclaiming her innocence. Therefore, she must be innocent.
12. "The state is like a man writ large." (Plato)
13. "I have terrible news for you. Mary is going out with Frank. I called Mary on Saturday night, and she wasn't home. Then I tried to call Frank, and *he* wasn't home, either!"

KEY WORDS

a priori knowledge (p. 8)
ad feminam (p. 20)
ad hominem (p. 20)
aesthetics (p. 6)
analogy (p. 14)
analysis (p. 5)
argument (p. 14)
Arguments (p. 4)
articulation (p. 4)
authority (p. 18)
axioms (p. 15)
begging the question (p. 20)
climate of opinion (p. 9)
coherence (p. 17)
concepts (p. 6)
conceptual frameworks (p. 9)
conclusion (p. 15)
contradict (p. 19)
counterexamples (p. 19)
criticism (p. 18)
Cynicism (p. 7)
deduced (p. 15)
deduction (p. 14)
deductive argument (p. 15)
Deductive logic (p. 17)
empirical knowledge (p. 8)
epistemology (p. 6)
ethics (p. 6)
evidence (p. 17)
example (p. 14)
fallacies (p. 21)
generalization (p. 16)
hedonistic (p. 11)
hypothesis (p. 17)
ideology (p. 9)
incoherent (p. 20)
inconsistent (p. 19)

induction (p. 14)
inductive arguments (p. 16)
inductive generalizations (p. 18)
inductive logic (p. 17)
inductive reasoning (p. 17)
inferred (p. 15)
invalid (p. 15)
legitimate (p. 18)
lifestyle (p. 9)
logic (or philosophical logic) (p. 14)
metaphysics (p. 6)
moral philosophy (p. 6)
ontology (p. 6)
paradox (p. 19)
philosophy of art (p. 6)
philosophy of religion (or philosophical theology) (p. 6)
political (or sociopolitical) philosophy (p. 6)
premises (p. 15)
reasons (p. 14)
reductio ad absurdum (p. 19)
reflection (p. 4)
refute (p. 2)
rules of inference (p. 15)
self-contradictory (p. 19)
sound argument (p. 16)
syllogism (p. 15)
synthesis (p. 5)
tautology (p. 20)
unsound argument (p. 16)
valid argument (p. 15)
weak argument (p. 16)
Weltanschauung (p. 9)
worldview (p. 9)

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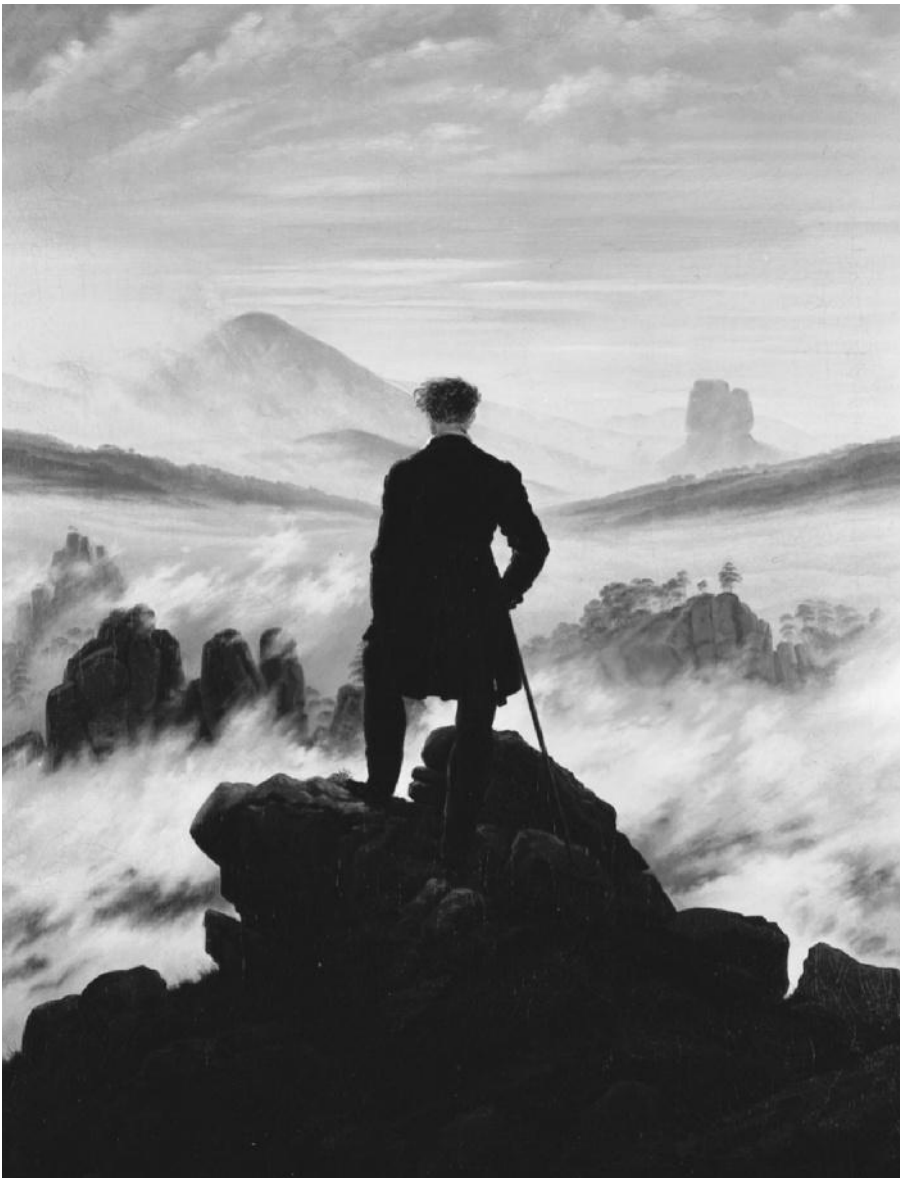
Philosophical Questions



Caspar David Fredrich, *Wanderer Uber Dem Nebelmeer.* © Bildanchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.
Friedrich, Caspar David (1774–1840), *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, ca. 1817. Oil on canvas. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, . . . but 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.[1]

—Bertrand Russell

Philosophy begins with nagging personal questions. Quite often, our philosophical awareness begins in disappointment or tragedy, when we first start wondering whether life is fair or whether we are really learning anything in school. Sometimes, philosophy begins when we find ourselves forced to make difficult decisions that will affect the rest of our lives and other people's lives, too—for example, whether to attend college or enter a trade or the military, whether to get married, or whether to have children. We all feel a need to justify ourselves from time to time—living in relative luxury in a world in which millions are starving, attending college when it sometimes seems as if we are not really getting much out of it (or not putting very much into it), saying that we believe in one thing when our actions (or inaction) would seem to indicate that we believe something quite different.

Our philosophizing can begin with a trivial incident: we catch ourselves lying to a friend, and we start thinking about the importance of morality; we suffer from (or perhaps enjoy) a momentary illusion or hallucination, and we begin to wonder how it is that we know anything is real or even that we are not dreaming all the time; we have a quick brush with death (a near car wreck, a sudden dive in an airplane), and we start thinking about the value and meaning of life. In such moments, philosophy takes hold of us, and we see and think beyond the details of everyday life. *Doing* philosophy, in turn, is thinking further about these dramatic questions that can suddenly become so important to us. In this chapter, we will consider some of these questions and some of the possible answers.

What Is Philosophy?

Philosophy, simply stated, is the experience of asking and seeking to answer such grand questions about life, about what we know, about what we ought to do or believe in. It is the process of getting to the bottom of things, questioning ideas that, most of the time, we simply take for granted and probably never put into words. We assume, for example, that some acts are right and some are wrong. Why? We know that it is wrong to take a human life. Why is this? Is it always so? What about in wartime? What about the life of a person who is hopelessly sick

and in great pain? What if the world were so overcrowded that millions would die in one way if others did not die in another?

However you respond to these difficult questions, your answers reveal a network of beliefs and doctrines that you may never have articulated before you first found yourself arguing about them. Not surprisingly, the first time an individual tries to argue about issues he or she has never before discussed, the result may be awkward, clumsy, and frustrating. That is the point behind philosophical questions in general: to teach us how to think about, articulate, and argue for the things we have come to believe in, to clarify and perhaps revise our views, and to present them in a clear and convincing manner to other people, who may or may not agree with us. Very often, therefore, philosophy proceeds through disagreement, as when two philosophers or philosophy students argue with one another. Sometimes the dispute seems trivial or just a matter of semantics. However, because what we are searching for are basic meanings and definitions, even arguments about the *meaning of words*—especially such words as *freedom, truth,* and *self,* for example—are essential to our philosophical positions. With that in mind, let's begin our study with a series of somewhat strange but provocative questions, each of which is designed to get you to think about and express your opinions on a variety of distinctly philosophical issues. (It will help enormously if you write down your answers to the questions before you read on in the text.)

MEET THE PHILOSOPHER: René Descartes (1596–1650)

René Descartes was born into the French aristocracy in 1596. As a young man he discovered the connections between algebra and geometry (a field that we now call analytic geometry), established the mathematical basis for a number of sciences, and used mathematics-like thinking in philosophy and theology. An early Enlightenment thinker, he developed a method of thinking based on individual reason that did not allow for appeal to any authority except the "clear light of reason" itself. His approach was to doubt everything until he could prove it to his own satisfaction. The first premise of his philosophy was the indubitability of his own existence (see Chapter 6). He died in 1650.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Is there anything you would willingly die for? If so, what?
2. If you had only a few minutes to live, what would you do with them? What if you had only a few days? What if you only had twenty years?
3. Suppose that someone told you that human life is no more significant than the life of a cow or an insect. We eat, sleep, stay alive for a while, and reproduce so that others like us can

eat, sleep, stay alive for a while, and reproduce, but without any ultimate purpose at all. How would you respond? What purpose does human life have, if any, that is not to be found in the life of a cow or an insect? What is the purpose of *your* life?

4. Do you believe in God?

   If so, for what reason(s)? What is God like? (That is, what is it that you believe in?) How would you prove to someone who does not believe in God that God exists, that your belief is true? (What, if anything, would change your mind about this?)

   If you do not believe in God, why not? Describe the Being in whom you do not believe. Are there other conceptions of God that you would be willing to accept? What, if anything, would change your mind about this?

5. Which is most "real"—the chair you are sitting on, the molecules that make up the chair, or the sensations and images you have of the chair as you are sitting on it?

6. Suppose that you were an animal in a psychologist's laboratory but that you had all the mental capacities for thought and feeling, the same "mind," that you have now. You overhear the scientist talking to an assistant, saying, "Don't worry about that; it's just a dumb animal, without feelings or thoughts, just behaving according to its instincts." What could you do to prove that you do indeed have thoughts and feelings, a "mind"?

   Now, suppose that a psychological theorist (for example, the late B. F. Skinner of Harvard University) claims that, in general, there are no such things as "minds," that people do nothing more than "behave" (that is, move their bodies and make sounds according to certain stimulations from the environment). How would you argue that you do indeed have a mind, that you are not just an automaton or a robot, but a thinking, feeling being?

7. Suppose that you live in a society in which everyone believes that the earth stands still, with the sun, the moon, and the stars revolving around it in predictable, if sometimes complex, orbits. You object, "You're all wrong: The earth revolves around the sun." No one agrees with you. Indeed, they think that you're insane because anyone can *feel* that the earth doesn't move at all, and you can *see* the sun, moon, and stars move. Who's right? Is it really possible that only you know the truth and everyone else is wrong?

8. "Life is but a dream," says an old popular song. Suppose that the thought occurred to you (as it will in a philosophy class) that it

is possible, or at least conceivable, that you are just dreaming at this moment—that you are still asleep in bed, dreaming about reading a philosophy book. How would you prove to yourself that this is not true, that you are indeed awake? (Pinching yourself won't do it. Why not?)

9. Describe yourself as if you were a character in a story. Describe your gestures, habits, personality traits, and characteristic word phrases. What kind of a person do you turn out to be? Do you *like* the person you have just described? What do you like—and dislike—about yourself?

10. Explain who (what) you are to a visitor from another planet.

11. We have developed a machine, a box with some electrodes and a life-support system, that we call the "happiness box." If you get in the box, you will experience a powerfully pleasant sensation that will continue indefinitely with just enough variation to keep you from getting too used to it. We invite you to try it. If you decide to do so, you can get out of the box any time you want to; but perhaps we should tell you that no one who has gotten into the happiness box has ever wanted to get out of it. After ten hours or so, we hook up the life-support system, and people spend their lifetimes there. Of course, they never do anything else, so their bodies tend to resemble half-filled water balloons after a few years because of the lack of exercise. But that never bothers them either. Now, it's your decision: Would you like to step into the happiness box? Why or why not?

12. Will a good person (one who does no evil and does everything he or she is supposed to do) necessarily also be happy? Will a wicked person surely suffer, at least in the long run? In other words, do you believe that life is ultimately fair? (If not, why should anyone bother trying to be good?)

13. Do you believe that it is wrong to take a life under *any* circumstances? *Any* life?

14. Have you ever made a decision that was *entirely* your own, that was no one's responsibility but yours? (That is, it was not because of the way your parents raised you; not because of the influence of your friends, television, books, or movies; and not because you were in any way forced into it or unduly influenced by someone or by certain circumstances.)

15. Is freedom always a good thing?

16. Do you want to have children? If so, why?

Some of these questions we begin with seem frivolous; others are clearly "profound." But they all are aimed at getting you to articulate what you believe about yourself and the world. More important than your beliefs, however, are your **reasons**. Your philosophy will begin to unfold in your reasons for believing what you believe.

Let's look at the questions one by one, and you can compare your answers with those of some of the famous philosophers of history. (It may also be a good idea to compare and contrast your answers with those of your friends and your classmates. They may well have thought of angles that did not occur to you, and you may have some answers that did not occur to them.)

1. Is there anything you would willingly die for?

   The philosopher Socrates went willingly to his death because he believed he had an obligation to respect the laws of his city, even when those same laws condemned him to death (see the excerpt from Plato's account of a discussion of these views between Socrates and his student Crito in the "Living Well" box later in this chapter). Socrates died by poisoning. He was forced to drink a cup of hemlock and was dead within half an hour. His friends tried to convince him to escape. He himself thought he was condemned unjustly. But his respect for the laws and his own sense of honor were so strong that he decided that he should show his belief in his own principles by dying for them. In modern times, in our own country, the young patriot Nathan Hale said as he was about to be hanged by the British during the Revolutionary War, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

   Some students say that they would willingly die to save the lives of members of their immediate family. (Some cautiously qualify their answers, adding that they would do so only if risking their own lives would mean a fairly good chance of saving the others' lives.) Some students say they would give their lives "for Jesus," but they are not very clear about the circumstances that would call for such a sacrifice. A few veterans have said they would give their lives for freedom, but some, disillusioned by certain U.S. military involvements, have been highly skeptical about what would count as a fight for freedom. It is worth noting that very few students in our classes have written that they would die for "honor" as such. Socrates did, though, and most of his fellow Greeks also would have considered death preferable to shame in the eyes of their countrymen. Quite a few students have said that there is really *nothing* they would willingly die for. What does that indicate about their values and what they think is most important in life?

2. If you had only a few minutes (a few days, twenty years) to live, what would you do with them?

   There is an old quip that there are no atheists in foxholes. The idea is that when faced with death, we all search for some ultimate source of support. Of course, the foxhole example can represent desperation and terror as well as some latent religious impulse, but the point has been made

FROM THE SOURCE: Living Well

Plato, from *Crito*, fourth century BCE

Socrates is in prison, condemned to die. His friend Crito has arranged an escape.

CRITO: *. . . I do not think that what you are doing is right, to give up your life when you can save it . . .*

SOCRATES: *My dear Crito, your eagerness is worth much if it should have some right aim. . . . We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not . . . 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: *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? . . . 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. . . . 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? . . .*

"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. . . . 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.*[2]

again and again that the thought of death brings out the philosopher in all of us. Would your last thoughts turn to God? If so, why? Would they turn to your best friends, your family, or your work? Your frustrated ambitions for the future? Unfinished business? Sex, or a final meal? A last listen to your favorite music or a farewell note to the world? In the 1970s movie *The King of Hearts,* the hero says in panic, "We've only got three more minutes to live!" The heroine replies with excitement, "Three whole minutes. That's wonderful!"

3. What purpose does human life have that is not to be found in the life of a cow or an insect? What is the purpose of *your* life?

   The question of the "meaning of life" is, perhaps, the biggest question of philosophy. We suppose that there is an enormous difference between the significance of the life of a mosquito, for example, and that of a person. But what is this difference? One suggestion is that we alone have a special place in God's creation and a special role to play. But what is that role, and why are we so sure that mosquitoes don't have it, too? Can life lack meaning even if we are God's creations? How does one know what one's assigned role is?

   Can life have meaning if there is no God?

   It is sometimes suggested that human life is meaningful because we, unlike cows and insects, are *reflective*. What does this mean—and what difference does it make? Does being reflective—even being thoughtful and philosophical—guarantee that life is meaningful? What are we asking for when we ask about the "purpose" or "meaning" of life?

4. Do you believe in God?

   Most college students seem to have no trouble answering this; even those who aren't sure what to believe are quick to say that they aren't sure what to believe. Of all philosophical questions, this one is perhaps the most thought about because it is obviously so important—even if it is, compared with most of our concerns in life, distinctly philosophical. But it is much more difficult to say *why* we believe and *what* we believe in. Many people will recognize that they believe in God, if they do, because they were brought up to do so. Is that a legitimate ground for believing? Many Americans seem to feel that a reason for believing in God is that it makes them happier and more secure—a reason that would have horrified the original Christians. *Is* this a reason? Doesn't it imply that it really doesn't matter what you believe in so long as you're happy?

   If you believe in God, what does that signify about the rest of your life? For example, ever since the third century CE there has been a dispute in Christianity about whether it is more important to have faith (as argued by the philosopher Saint Augustine) or to take the initiative in moving toward salvation by performing good works (as argued by the monk Pelagius, Augustine's contemporary). If you believe in God, does that mean that other people should, too? Do you have an obligation to convince them to do so? Or is belief in God your own personal concern and nobody else's business? If you believe in God, how do you account for the amount of evil and suffering in the world? If you don't believe in God, can you still think that life has some ultimate meaning? In fact, if you don't believe in God, can you believe there is any reason for the universe to exist at all?

5. Which is most "real"—the chair you are sitting on, the molecules that make up the chair, or the sensations and images you have of the chair as you are sitting on it?

We tend to think of "reality" as what is most true, most obvious, and most evident to our senses. But sometimes, what is evident to our senses turns out to be an illusion, and what is obvious turns out to be untrue. Scientists tell us that our belief that the chair is obviously and evidently a solid object is, in fact, not correct. Instead, the chair is an enormous complex of invisible electrons, atoms, and molecules in various arrangements whizzing around at tremendous speeds in mostly empty space. On the other hand, a philosopher or psychologist might tell you that what is so obvious and evident to your senses is not the chair itself, but rather, your sensations—particularly those of sight and touch—from which you *infer* the existence of something causing these sensations. If this is so, how can you be so sure that the chair you experience is real?

6. What could you do to prove that you do indeed have thoughts and feelings, a "mind"?

One of the basic but continuously debated distinctions in philosophy is the one between the *physical* aspects of our *bodies*—tangible and explainable through the techniques of physics, chemistry, and biology—and those aspects that are *mental,* that have to do with our *minds.* The problem is that mental events and processes—such as our feelings and our thoughts—can be known directly only to the person who has them, whereas our physical traits can be observed by almost anyone. But how, then, can anyone ever *know* that anyone else has a mind as well as a body, if all that one can ever observe is another's body? Usually, of course, we *assume* that the visible movements of a person's body (his or her behavior, gestures, and speech) are expressions of mental processes, which are not visible. But how could you prove this? And how could you prove that you have a mind (thoughts and feelings) to someone who did not assume that your bodily movements were expressions of mental processes? How would you argue with someone who claimed that you (and he or she) did not have a mind at all?

7. Suppose that you alone believe that the earth moves around the sun, rather than vice versa. Is what you believe true?

There was a time, about five hundred years ago, when only a few people believed that the earth moved around the sun, the most famous being Copernicus. The heliocentric theory is now accepted by all scientists (and virtually everyone else). But it is worth noting that our ordinary way of talking is still riddled with words and phrases such as "sunrise," "sunset," and "summer constellations," as if the earth were indeed stationary. The fact is that even in this scientific climate, most students are incapable of giving any convincing reasons for believing the Copernican theory rather than what would seem to be the obvious testimony of the senses. If you were not surrounded by an entire society that kept insisting that the earth does in fact move around the sun, what reasons would you have for believing it at all?

But let us return to our question. You are stubborn, and you insist on the geocentric view. Is what you believe—against everyone else and against most facts of common sense—*true*? Well, that depends on what we mean by "truth." If the truth is "the way things really are," then it doesn't matter how many people know it or deny it. But suppose that part of what we mean by "truth" has to do with what people believe and agree to? For example, it is impossible that only one person should know the meaning of a word in English; a word has meaning in English because English speakers agree on its meaning (more or less). Truths of arithmetic—such as "2 + 5 = 7"—depend in part on **conventions**, general agreement about the meaning of certain symbols (such as "2" and "+"). Could this be true of scientific theories about the world, too?

8. Suppose that the thought occurred to you that it is possible, or at least conceivable, that you are just dreaming right now—that you are still asleep in bed, dreaming about reading a philosophy book. How would you prove to yourself that this is not true, that you are in fact awake?

This has long been one of those standard questions that philosophers use to test the rigor of their theories of knowledge. As the French philosopher René Descartes states the question in his *Meditations,* "How often, asleep at night, am I convinced . . . that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!"[3]

Of course, very few philosophers would actually say that they are dreaming right now, but having to **prove** it forces them to be very clear about what they think knowledge is, what they think reality is, and how we can, in fact, know anything at all. For example, if you say that reality is "what you experience" or "what you believe" at any given time, then it may be impossible to prove that what you are experiencing right now is any more real than a dream.

What implications does this problem have for all of the other things that you believe?

9. Describe yourself as if you were a character in a story.

Part of the problem of finding an adequate conception of ourselves is that we spend almost all our time seeing ourselves from the inside, rather than as others see us. From the inside, however, it is all too easy not to see ourselves at all. We do not see the gestures or hear the words that would give us a strong impression of someone we were meeting for the first time. For just this reason, people are often shocked to see themselves in a video or hear recordings of themselves. Many, in fact, think of themselves as if in a kind of daydream, with very little contact with what—to anyone else—would be their most obvious characteristics. This exercise is designed to correct such tendencies, to get you to look at yourself as others look at you and to try to say what is *essential* about you. But it is also a way of asking what it is that you really value, in others as well as in yourself. What do you admire? What sort of person do you want to be?

A German philosopher once said that the test of who you are is whom you admire. Do you admire athletes more than artists? Do you admire people with wealth or power? Do you admire a person who stands up for what he or she thinks is right and becomes a martyr as a result? Do you admire a person because you wish you were like him or her? Or for some other reason? Some people admire athletes because they are enjoyable to watch, but they do not intend to emulate them. Some people admire Jesus, not so much because of the kind of person he was (about which we know very little) but because he was the Son of God. But if you admire people who are very different from yourself, that raises the possibility that you admire people who make you feel inferior. Why would a person do that? Do you admire people in order to provide inspiration and perhaps a measuring stick for yourself? Or just to be amused? Or in order to *discourage* yourself? What would you have to do to become a person you would admire? (Or are you already such a person?)

Writing up a list of virtues (see Aristotle's list in Chapter 8) is a way of seeing what we value in ourselves and what kind of a person we think is ideal (assuming, of course, that you aren't just thinking like a babysitter, for whom virtue in one's wards is that they sit quietly and do nothing bothersome). Try to arrange your list in order—that is, with the most important virtues first. Is being honest, for example, as important as being considerate? Is being neither a borrower nor a lender as important as helping friends in need? Is being cautious as important as being courageous? Or is being polite as important as being entertaining or provocative?

10. Explain who you are to a visitor from another planet.

"A student at the university" will obviously not be very informative. (The creature will look up *university* and *student* in its American dictionary, but what will this tell it?) You say, "I am a human being." What does that mean? The creature pulls out a weapon that you guess to be a ray gun, and you hurriedly try to talk it out of disintegrating you. What would you say? What reasons can you give that are not just of personal importance (that is, reasons that would be understood only by you and people like yourself—for example, "I have to take my midterm exam in two days," or "I've still got books out from the library")? What is particularly impressive about being human, being a student, being *you*?

11. Would you like to step into the happiness box?

The point of the question is obvious enough. What do you value? If it is pleasure and contentment, you ought to get in the box. (Are pleasure and contentment the same thing as happiness?) If, on the other hand, you think life is about relationships with other people, fulfilling ambitions, and *doing* something, you certainly won't get in the box. But then again, if the reason you like to have friends and lovers is because you *enjoy* them, if the reason you like success and accomplishment is because they give you pleasure, then why not just get in the box? There, you'll find genuine

enjoyment and pleasure, without the hassle of other people, and without having to work, sweat, or worry about the possibility of failure. After all, isn't that what you really want?

12. Will a good person necessarily be happy, too? Is life ultimately fair?

One of the central ideas in our way of looking at the world is our belief that virtue should be rewarded and evil should be punished. In fact, of course, this does not always occur. Governments try to catch and punish criminals, but they do not always succeed. The events of life sometimes punish the wicked and reward the good, but—unfortunately—not all that often. In order to preserve the belief that life is fair, many religions invoke God (or karma) to provide some assurance that things will come out right. Yet even among theologians, the question arises whether we can believe that God does fulfill this function (see "The Problem of Evil" in Chapter 3). Still, even if we can't be sure that justice will triumph, it doesn't follow from this that there is no reason to be good—or not to be wicked—if there are no guarantees of ultimate reward and punishment. For example, the ancient Greeks did not believe in ultimate rewards and punishments, but they did believe in the importance of honor, and for them, we might say, this was its own reward.

13. Do you believe it is wrong to take a life under *any* circumstances?

Two contexts in which this question comes up immediately are the controversial question of abortion and the age-old quandary of when war is justified. But what the question also provokes is a sense of the very nature of morality. Do moral principles hold *no matter what*? Suppose you had a chance to save an entire city by sacrificing one innocent child (as in the ancient Greek tragedy *Iphigenia,* in which the warrior Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to ensure victory in the Trojan War). Or suppose God said to you—as he says to Abraham in the biblical account—that he wanted you to take the life of your child to prove your faith? On the other hand, would it be right to artificially extend the life of a person suffering horribly from incurable cancer? Is life, by itself, worth more than anything else under all circumstances? And what about the lives of animals? Under what circumstances, if any, is it right to take their lives? Is it right to kill animals for the purpose of eating them? Does it matter what kind of animal we have in mind?

What if we discover that another society has different views from our own about when it might be appropriate to take a life? This raises the general question of whether we have the right to impose our moral laws (even if we consider them absolute for ourselves) on other cultures. If a band of cannibals has long practiced the custom of killing and eating the weakest among them, do we have the right to say that they are wrong? You can't just reply, "Yes, because killing is immoral," if you already accept some exceptions to this rule. Why pick on the poor hungry cannibals?