



## INTRODUCTION

# *What Is Philosophy?*





# *The Task of Philosophy*

## **CHAPTER OBJECTIVES**

In this chapter we will address the following questions:

- ◆ What Does “Philosophy” Mean?
- ◆ Why Do We Need Philosophy?
- ◆ What Are the Traditional Branches of Philosophy?
- ◆ Is There a Basic Method of Philosophical Thinking?
- ◆ How May Philosophy Be Used?
- ◆ Is Philosophy of Education Useful?
- ◆ What Is Happening in Philosophy Today?

*Reflection—thinking things over— . . .  
[is] the beginning of philosophy.<sup>1</sup>*

## *The Meanings of Philosophy*



Each of us has a philosophy, even though we may not be aware of it. We all have some ideas concerning physical objects, our fellow persons, the meaning of life, death, God, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, and the like. Of course, these ideas are acquired in a variety of ways, and they may be vague and confused. We are continuously engaged, especially during the early years of our lives, in acquiring views and attitudes from our family, from friends, and from various other individuals and groups. These attitudes also may be greatly influenced by movies, television, music lyrics, and books. They may result from some reflection on our part, or they more likely may result from a conventional or emotional bias. This broad, popular, man-in-the-street (*common-sense*) view of philosophy is not adequate for our purposes. It does not describe the work and task of the philosopher. We need to define philosophy more specifically; the broad view is vague, confused, and superficial.

The word philosophy is derived from the Greek words *philia* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom) and means “the love of wisdom.” A definition of philosophy can be offered from a number of perspectives. Here we present five, although some philosophers may wish to exclude one or more of them. Each approach must be kept in mind for a clear understanding of the many meanings of *philosophy* and what particular philosophers may say about the nature and function of philosophy.

1. *Philosophy is a set of views or beliefs about life and the universe, which are often held uncritically.* We refer to this meaning as the informal sense of philosophy or “having” a philosophy. Usually when a person says “my philosophy is,” he or she is referring to an informal personal attitude to whatever topic is being discussed.

2. *Philosophy is a process of reflecting on and criticizing our most deeply held conceptions and beliefs.* This is the formal sense of “doing” philosophy. These two senses of philosophy—

“having” and “doing”—cannot be treated entirely independent of each other, for if we did not *have* a philosophy in the formal, personal sense, then we could not *do* a philosophy in the critical, reflective sense.

Having a philosophy, however, is not sufficient for doing philosophy. A genuine philosophical attitude is searching and critical; it is open-minded and tolerant—willing to look at all sides of an issue without prejudice. To philosophize is not merely to read and know philosophy; there are skills of argumentation to be mastered, techniques of analysis to be employed, and a body of material to be appropriated such that we become able to think philosophically.

Philosophers are reflective and critical. They take a second look at the material presented by common sense. They attempt to think through a variety of life’s problems and to face all the facts involved impartially. The accumulation of knowledge does not by itself lead to understanding, because it does not necessarily teach the mind to make a *critical evaluation* of facts that entail consistent and coherent judgment.

Critical evaluations often differ. Philosophers, theologians, scientists, and others disagree, first because they view things from different points of view and with different assumptions. Their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and training may vary widely. This is especially true of people living at different times and in different places. A second reason philosophers disagree is that they live in a changing universe. People change, society changes, and nature changes. Some people are responsive and sensitive to change; others cling to tradition and the status quo, to systems that were formulated some time ago and that were declared to be authoritative and final. A third reason philosophers disagree is that they deal with an area of human experience in which the evidence is not complete. The evidence we do have may be interpreted in various ways by different people. Despite these disagreements, however, philosophers continue to probe, examine, and evaluate the material with the hope of presenting consistent principles by which we can live.

3. *Philosophy is a rational attempt to look at the world as a whole.* Philosophy seeks to combine the conclusions of the various sciences and human experience into some kind of consistent world view. Philosophers wish to see life, not with the specialized slant of the scientist or the businessperson or the artist, but with the overall view of someone cognizant of life as a totality. In speaking of “speculative philosophy,” which he distinguishes from “critical philosophy,” C. D. Broad says, “Its object is to take over the results of the various sciences, to add to them the results of the religious and ethical experiences of mankind, and then to reflect upon the whole. The hope is that, by this means, we may be able to reach some general conclusions as to the nature of the universe, and as to our position and prospects in it.”<sup>2</sup>

Although there are difficulties and dangers in setting forth any world view, there also are dangers in confining attention to fragments of human experience. Philosophy’s task is to give a view of the whole, a life and a world view, and to integrate the knowledge of the sciences with that of other disciplines to achieve a consistent whole. Philosophy, according to this view, attempts to bring the results of human inquiry—religious, historical, and scientific—into some meaningful interpretation that provides knowledge and insight for our lives.

4. *Philosophy is the logical analysis of language and the clarification of the meaning of words and concepts.* Certainly this is one function of philosophy. In fact, nearly all philosophers have used methods of analysis and have sought to clarify the meaning of terms and the use of language. Some philosophers see this as the main task of philosophy, and a few claim this is the only legitimate function of philosophy. Such persons consider philosophy a specialized field serving the sciences and aiding in the clarification of language rather than a broad field reflecting on all of life’s experiences. This outlook has gained considerable support during the twentieth century. It would limit what we call *knowledge* to statements about *observable facts* and their interrelations—that is, to the business

of the various sciences. Not all linguistic analysts, however, define *knowledge* so narrowly. Although they do reject and try to “clean up” many nonscientific assertions, many of them think that we can have knowledge of ethical principles and the like, although this knowledge is also experientially derived. Those who take the narrower view neglect, when they do not deny, all generalized world views and life views, as well as traditional moral philosophy and theology. From this more narrow point of view, the aim of philosophy is to expose confusion and nonsense and to clarify the meaning and use of terms in science and everyday affairs.

5. *Philosophy is a group of perennial problems that interest people and for which philosophers always have sought answers.* Philosophy presses its inquiry into the deepest problems of human existence. Some of the philosophical questions raised in the past have been answered in a manner satisfactory to the majority of philosophers. Many questions, however, have been answered only tentatively, and many problems remain unsolved.

What are philosophical questions? The question “Did John Doe make a false statement on his income tax return?” is merely a question of fact. But the questions “What is truth?” and “What is the distinction between right and wrong?” have philosophical importance.

Most of us stop at times—sometimes because of startling events, often out of simple curiosity—and think seriously about fundamental life issues: What is life and why am I here? Why is there anything at all? What is the place of life in this great universe? Is the universe friendly or unfriendly? Do things operate by chance or through sheer mechanism, or is there some plan or purpose or intelligence at the heart of things? Is my life controlled by outside forces, or do I have a determining or even a partial degree of control? Why do people struggle and strive for their rights, for justice, for better things in the future? What do concepts like “right” and “justice” mean, and what are the marks of a good society?

Often men and women have been asked to sacrifice their lives, if need be, for certain values

and ideals. What are the genuine values of life and how can they be attained? Is there really a fundamental distinction between right and wrong, or is it just a matter of one's own opinions?

What is beauty? Should religion count in a person's life? Is it intellectually valid to believe in God? Is there a possibility of a "life after death?" Is there any way we can get an answer to these and many related questions? Where does knowledge come from, and can we have any assurances that anything is true?

These questions are all philosophical. The attempt to seek answers or solutions to them has given rise to theories and systems of thought, such as *idealism, realism, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, and process philosophy*. *Philosophy* also means the various theories or systems of thought developed by the great philosophers—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Royce, James, Dewey, Whitehead, and others. Without these people and their thoughts philosophy would not have the rich content it has today. Even though we may be unconscious of the fact, we are constantly influenced by ideas that have come down to us in the traditions of society.

### *Why We Need Philosophy*



We are living in a period that resembles the late stages of the Graeco-Roman civilization, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Industrial Revolution, when basic shifts took place in human thinking, values, and practices. Changes are occurring that reach to the foundations of human life and society. We now have immense power over nature, including outer space; we have made giant strides in the areas of science, technology, agriculture, medicine, and the social sciences. In this century, especially in the last few decades, we have seen great advances in society—men and women live longer, travel

faster, have more comforts and labor-saving devices, and produce more goods in fewer hours than ever before. The extension of the role of the computer and the age of automation undoubtedly will eliminate more drudgery and further increase production and reduce working hours. Controlling new sources of energy from the atom, the sun, the tides, and the winds is likely to change our lives beyond even our wildest imaginations.

Yet despite our amazing advances, many thoughtful people are disturbed and anxious. They are concerned that our physical power, scientific knowledge, and wealth stand in sharp contrast with the failure of governments and individuals to come to grips with the pressing intellectual and moral problems of life. Knowledge seems divorced from values; it is possible to have great power without insight.

Perhaps the most striking example is to be found in the onset of a nuclear age, which we have created through an application of scientific and technological power. We are unable, however, to solve the question of arms control. Nuclear weapons cannot be realistically used in the actual fighting of a war; using even one is likely to lead to an earthly cataclysm. Despite the appalling dangers of nuclear war, some people argue that we need to manufacture nuclear weapons as a means of deterring nuclear aggression by a potential enemy; that is, a nuclear war cannot be planned with the aim of winning it. Once again, we are in a paradoxical situation: we are unable to offer a solution to a problem that stems from our own ingenuity.

The twentieth century has been characterized by a war of ideas as well as of people, materials, and conflicting national interests. Irreconcilable philosophies compete for allegiance. Earlier in the century, the difference between life in the democratic and in the fascist countries was not a difference in technology, or in science, or even in general education; it lay in basic ideas, ideals, and loyalties. In a similar way, communism challenged many of our beliefs and ideals.

Editorials, articles, books, films, and television commentators unite in appealing for a

redirection of our society. They believe that we are adrift without moral and intellectual leadership. No doubt our period is characterized by personal and social instability. We are at a loss to form genuine communities that would lend satisfaction and hope to their members; we find commitment to selfishness and competition rather than to self-interest and cooperation. Our civilization often has been diagnosed; the diagnosticians are eloquent in their descriptions of the diseases, but it is a rare individual who proposes a cure; the most the critics can agree on is that it is time for a change.

Changes in customs and in history usually begin with people who are convinced of the worth of some ideal or who are captured by some vision of a different way of life. Following the Middle Ages, many people began to conceive of a way of life motivated by a belief that life on this earth is worthwhile in itself. In the broadest sense, this belief made possible the Renaissance, the Reformation, and our modern world with its factories, mass production, money and banks, rapid transportation, and, more recently, atomic power and exploration of outer space. All these are calculated to make this world better and to give us more control over it. But unless we develop some fairly consistent and comprehensive view of human nature, the nature of the total order within which we live, and some reasonable scale of values based on an order beyond mere human desires, such things are not likely to provide an enduring basis for our world. Philosophy, in conjunction with other disciplines, plays a central role in guiding us toward new desires and aspirations.

In his book *The Illusion of Technique*,<sup>3</sup> William Barrett proposes that today, more than any other time in history, it is necessary to place the idea of scientific technique in a new relation to life. As we have noted, ours is a society more and more dominated by technique. Barrett is convinced that modern philosophy must respond to technique and technology, or humanity will permanently lose purpose, direction, and freedom.

... anyone who would argue for freedom today has to concern himself with the nature of technique—its scope and its limits—... The question of technique is, in itself, an important one for philosophy—and more important particularly for modern philosophy, which has so often let matters of technique blind its vision. More significantly still, the question bears upon the uncertainties of a whole technological civilization, which even as it wields its great technical powers is unsure of their limits or possible consequences.<sup>4</sup>

### *Traditional Branches of Philosophy*



Historically, philosophical concerns have been treated under these broad categories: logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and value theory. We have organized our text around the basic *issues* of philosophy; therefore we will merely glance at the definitions of the traditional branches, trusting that the chapters that follow will further develop these definitions.

In addition to the broad categories mentioned, philosophy also deals with the systematic body of principles and assumptions underlying a particular field of experience. For example, there are philosophies of science, education, art, music, history, law, mathematics, and religion. Any subject pursued far enough reveals within itself philosophical problems.

### LOGIC

Philosophy endeavors to understand the nature of correct thinking and to discover what is valid reasoning. One thread running throughout the history of philosophy is its appeal to reason, to argumentation, to logic.

We all use arguments in everyday life to support our opinions and to refute the opinions of others with whom we disagree. But how do we distinguish between valid and invalid arguments? Basically, an argument is simply the reasons

(called the **premises**) for or against a position (called the **conclusion**). An **inference** is a conclusion derived either from general premises (deduction) or from factual evidence (induction). **Deduction** and **induction** are both processes of reasoning that we need to understand if we are to avoid serious fallacies in our thinking. They are terms used to describe methods by which we move from evidence to conclusions based on the evidence. Deduction is the process by which we draw a conclusion from one or more premises. If our inference is correct and the conclusion does follow, we say that the deduction is valid. For example, if we say, "All men are mortal" and "Socrates is a man," we may conclude that "Socrates is mortal." Here the premises are all the evidence that is relevant to the soundness of the conclusion. Induction, on the other hand, is **empirical**, in that it deals with matters of fact. It attempts to draw conclusions concerning all the members of a class after examining only some of them or concerning an unexamined member of a class. The aim is to make statements or propositions that are true. For example, after examining some crows, or even a large number of them, is it valid for us to conclude that all crows are black? May we conclude that the next crow we see will be black?

Argumentation and **dialectic** are indispensable tools of the philosopher. The arguments must have a sound and reasonable basis. The task of devising tests to determine which arguments are valid and which are not belongs to that branch of philosophy known as *logic*. **Logic** is the systematic study of the rules for the correct use of these supporting reasons, rules we can use to distinguish good arguments from bad ones. Most of the great philosophers from Aristotle to the present have been convinced that logic permeates all other branches of philosophy. The ability to test arguments for logical consistency, understand the logical consequences of certain assumptions, and distinguish the kind of evidence a philosopher is using are essential for "doing" philosophy.

## METAPHYSICS

Some of the philosophical outlooks that we will consider in Part Four will take us into that branch of philosophy traditionally known as **metaphysics**. For Aristotle (See biography and excerpt, pp. 8–9), the term *metaphysics* meant "first philosophy," discussion of the most universal principles; later the term came to mean "comprehensive thinking about the nature of things."

Metaphysics undoubtedly is the branch of philosophy that the modern student finds most difficult to grasp. Metaphysics attempts to offer a comprehensive view of all that exists. It is concerned with such problems as the relation of mind to matter, the nature of change, the meaning of "freedom," the existence of God, and the belief in personal immortality.

Today philosophers disagree about whether a world view or a metaphysics is possible. Some contemporary philosophers, with their emphasis on sense perception and objective scientific knowledge, are skeptical about the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and the meaningfulness of metaphysical questions. There are, however, many philosophers, ancient and modern, who believe that problems of value and religion—metaphysical problems—are closely related to one's conception of the fundamental nature of the universe. Many of these philosophers believe there is in humanity something that transcends the empirical order of nature.

## EPISTEMOLOGY

In general, **epistemology** is the branch of philosophy that studies the sources, nature, and validity of knowledge. What is the human mind capable of knowing? From what sources do we gain our knowledge? Do we have any genuine knowledge on which we can depend, or must we be satisfied with opinions and guesses? Are we limited to knowing the bare facts of sense



## Aristotle



Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) was a philosopher, scientist, and educator. He is widely considered to be one of the most influential thinkers in Western civilization. He was born in Stagira in Northern Greece and at age eighteen years entered Plato’s Academy, where he remained for nearly two decades until the death of Plato. For a time he traveled, and for four years he was the tutor of the prince Alexander, who later became “The Great.” About 334 B.C.E., Aristotle returned to Athens and founded his own school, the Lyceum. He summarized and developed the knowledge of his day and enriched it by his own investigations and critical thinking.

Aristotle was interested in medicine and zoology among many other things, and set up laboratories and museums. At one time his royal patrons are said to have placed at his disposal one-thousand men throughout Greece and Asia who collected and reported details concerning the life conditions and habits of living things. He also collected constitutions and documents concerning the political arrangements of many states.

His writings show an interest in all areas of knowledge including science (nature), society and the state, literature and the arts, and the life of man. His logic (*Organon*) developed deductive, or syllogistic, logic; his ethics (*Nicomachean Ethics*) was the first systematic treatise in the field and is still read.

experience, or are we able to go beyond what the senses reveal?

The technical term for the theory of knowledge is *epistemology*, which comes from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning “knowledge.” There are three central questions in this field: (1) What are the *sources* of knowledge? Where does genuine knowledge come from or how do we know? This is the question of origins. (2) What is the *nature* of knowledge? Is there a real world outside the mind, and if so can we know it? This is the question of appearance versus reality. (3) Is our knowledge *valid*? How do we distinguish truth from error? This is the question of the tests of truth, of verification.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally, most of those who have offered answers to these questions can be placed in one of two schools of thought—**rationalism** or **empiricism**. The rationalists hold that human reason alone can discover the basic principles of the universe. The empiricists claim that all knowledge is ultimately derived from *sense experience* and, thus, that our knowledge is limited to what can be experienced. It should be clear that there is a necessary relation between metaphysics and epistemology. Our conception of reality depends on our understanding of what can be known. Conversely, our theory of knowledge depends on our understanding of ourselves in relation to the whole of reality.



**Excerpt from Aristotle:**

*Nicomachean Ethics*,  
Book I (1094)

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities which produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of ship-building a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity—as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others—in all of these the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is the sake of the former that the latter are pursued. It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.

R. McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941).

**VALUE THEORY**

Value theory is the branch of philosophy that studies values. It can be subdivided into ethics, aesthetics, and social and political philosophy.

In broad terms **ethics** concerns itself with the question of morality. What is right and what is wrong in human relations? Within morality and ethics there are three major areas: *descriptive* ethics, *normative* ethics, and *metaethics*. Descriptive ethics seeks to identify moral experience in a descriptive way. We seek to identify, within the range of human conduct, the motives, desires, and intentions as well as overt acts themselves. We consider the conduct of individuals,

or *personal morality*; the conduct of groups, or *social morality*; and the culture patterns of national and racial groups. Descriptive ethics is in part an attempt to distinguish what *is* from what *ought to be*.

A second level of inquiry is *normative ethics* (what ought to be). Here philosophers try to work out acceptable judgments regarding what ought to be in choice and value. “We ought to keep our promises” and “you ought to be honorable” are examples of normative judgments—of the *moral ought*, the subject matter of ethics. From the time of the early Greeks, philosophers have formulated principles of explanation to examine *why* people act the way they do, and what

the principles are by which people ought to live; statements of these principles are called *ethical theories*.<sup>6</sup>

Third, there is the area of *critical* or *metaethics*. Here interest is centered on the analysis and meaning of the terms and language used in ethical discourse and the kind of reasoning used to justify ethical statements. Metaethics does not propound any moral principle or goal (except by implication), but rather consists entirely of philosophical analysis. What is the meaning of “good?” and Can ethical judgments be justified? are typical problems for metaethics.

Philip Wheelwright has written a clear and precise definition of ethics: “Ethics may be defined as that branch of philosophy which is the systematic study of reflective choice, of the standards of right and wrong by which it is to be guided, and of the goods toward which it may ultimately be directed.”<sup>7</sup>

Broadly speaking, **aesthetics** concerns the theory of art and beauty. Questions of art and beauty are considered to be part of the realm of values because many philosophical problems in aesthetics involve critical judgments. There are wide differences of opinion as to what objects call forth the aesthetic response, and what beauty really is. Our concepts of beauty may differ not because of the nature of beauty itself, but because of varying degrees of preparation in discerning beauty. Therefore, if we cannot perceive beauty in objects that others find beautiful, it may be wise to withhold judgment until we are capable ourselves of making a competent analysis of the aesthetic experience.

Social and political philosophy investigates value judgments concerning society, the state, and the individual’s relation to these institutions. The following questions reflect the concerns of social and political philosophy: Why should individuals live in society? What social ideals of liberty, rights, justice, equality and responsibility are desirable? Why should anyone obey any government? Why should some individuals or groups have political power over others? What criteria are to be used in determining who should have political power? What criteria are to

be used in determining the scope of political power, and what rights or freedoms should be immune from political or legal control? To what positive goals should political power be directed, and what are the criteria for determining this? Conflicting answers and applications of these philosophical questions permeate human history; the values and moral convictions of human beings are reflected in our daily social and political life.

### *Philosophical Methodology— Socratic Dialectic*

Because philosophy begins with wondering, questioning, and reflecting about our fundamental assumptions,

◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆ we need to consider *how* it proceeds to answer questions. Philosophical problems cannot be resolved by appealing exclusively to the facts: how then does philosophy solve the problems it raises? What method does philosophy employ?

We have defined philosophy as a process of reflecting on and criticizing our most deeply held beliefs. To achieve that end, we believe that the basic method of philosophical inquiry is *dialectical*.

Philosophy proceeds through the **dialectic** of argument. The term *dialectic* refers to a process of thinking that originated with the philosopher Socrates. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates (See biography and excerpt from Plato’s writings, pp. 12 and 13) is the main character—the protagonist. Socrates employs the method of dialectic; he engages in argumentation, in a relentless analysis of any and every subject. Socrates was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation, with the investigator acting as an intellectual midwife; we call the method he used *dialectic*. This is a deceptively simple technique. It always begins with a discussion of the most commonly accepted aspects of any problem. The dialectical process is a dialogue between opposing positions. Socrates, and many later philosophers,<sup>8</sup> believed that

through the process of this dialogue, in which each participant in the conversation was forced to clarify her or his ideas, the final outcome of the conversation would be a clear statement of what was meant. What is important is that the dialectic is *the development of thought through an interplay of ideas*.

Dialectical thinking, and consequently dialectic as a method, attempts to develop a sustained pattern of argument in which the implications of different positions are drawn out and interact with each other. As the argument unfolds, we find that neither position represents a complete understanding of the truth; new considerations and alternatives emerge. At each stage of the dialectic we gain a deeper insight into the original problem, and by so doing perhaps come closer to the truth.

When entering a course of study, a student is generally prepared to memorize facts, learn formulas, or master a set of material; philosophy demands something quite different. By using the dialectical method, we come closer to the truth but often, in fact frequently, the original philosophical problem remains unsolved. There are always more questions to be asked, more arguments to be challenged. The student of philosophy, however, must not despair. With this method we can arrive at tentative answers; some answers will appear to be more philosophically satisfactory than others, some we will abandon altogether.

In Socratic fashion, philosophy proceeds by attempting to correct incomplete or inaccurate notions, by “coaxing” the truth out of the situation. Socrates is famous for his belief that the unexamined life is not worth living. Similarly, philosophy proceeds with the conviction that the unexamined idea is not worth having. Dialectic necessarily involves critical reflection.

### *The Uses of Philosophy*



Before registering for an introductory philosophy course, students frequently ask: “Why

study philosophy?” “What use is philosophy?” “Is philosophy of any value to me personally, and will it help my career?”

### PHILOSOPHY AS INESCAPABLE

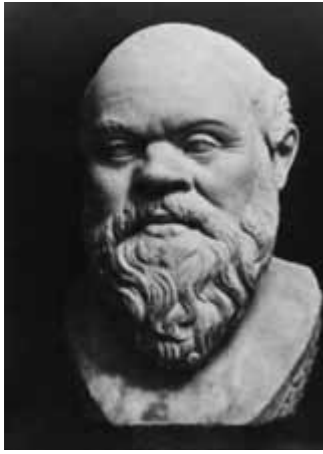
Everybody has some notion of reality. Whether fully examined or not, ideas about the origin, destiny, and fabric of existence—including views about God and human nature—have a place in each person’s mind. Everyone also has some notion of knowledge. Ideas about the authentic sources of knowledge, about subjective beliefs in contrast to objective truths, and about methods that prove a conclusion true or false form a part of everyday life. We all have some notion of values, including right or wrong. Most of us try to think correctly and to reason in a valid fashion so that others will heed us when we set forth our ideas. Far from being merely a classroom exercise, issues of metaphysics, epistemology, values, and logic are part of everyday living.

### THE STUDY OF PHILOSOPHY

Shallowness, incompleteness, poor reasoning, and assertions with flimsy foundations prevent a truly enlightened citizenry. Persuasive orators can sway minds and hearts and thereby wage wars, gain political control, establish cults, and otherwise seduce an unsuspecting public. Unaware of the complexities of an issue, unfamiliar with a comprehensive view of a topic, unable to distinguish between valid and invalid reasoning, ready to yield to authoritarian approaches, individuals and entire communities have been asked to sacrifice their lives for certain values and ideals. However, people who have studied philosophy are more likely to pursue an issue in depth and to examine it comprehensively with sound reasoning. Having the courage to question the conventional and traditional is useful for individuals in achieving intellectual autonomy and in helping communities to make informed choices.

Failure to obtain a specific answer to a philosophical question or an acceptable solution to a problematic issue frequently leads to frustration.

## Socrates



Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.) was a Greek philosopher of Athens. Famous for his view of philosophy as a pursuit necessary to all intelligent humans, Socrates lived by his principles even though they ultimately cost him his life. Socrates was widely known for his intellectual power and use of the dialectical method. According to Plato’s report of Socrates’ speech in the *Apology*, the oracle at Delphi pronounced that there was no one wiser than Socrates in all of Greece. However, Socrates never himself claimed to be wise; he always professed ignorance. Thus, he became convinced that his calling was to search for wisdom about right conduct by which he might guide the intellectual and moral development of the Athenians. Neglecting his own affairs, he spent his time discussing virtue, justice, and piety wherever his fellow citizens congregated. In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was brought to trial for corrupting youth and for religious heresies. The trial and death of Socrates are described in the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo* of Plato with great dramatic power.

Nonetheless, exploration of the possible, reasonable solutions clarifies the options open to thoughtful persons. The usefulness of choosing from reasoned, researched alternatives rather than from bigoted, impulsive, and unclear claims is apparent in all dimensions of our lives. Ideally, the study of philosophy nurtures our capacity for making informed choices.

### SPECIFIC PERSONAL USES

Examining our everyday language often leads to philosophical questions. “I want to do the *right* thing” is an expression regularly used by all of us; ethical reflection can illuminate an individual’s sense of *right*. “Wait and see what happens” may imply philosophical fatalism: Is fatalism a reason-

**Excerpt from Plato:**

*Meno*, 71B–72A (c. 390 B.C.E.)

*Socrates*: . . . Meno, be generous and tell me what you say that virtue is; for I shall be truly delighted to find that I have been mistaken, and that you and Gorgias do really have this knowledge, although I have just been saying that I have never found anybody who had.

*Meno*: There will be no difficulty, Socrates, in answering your question. Let us first take the virtue of a man—he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. . . . Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female, bond or free, has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do. And the same may be said of vice, Socrates.

*Socrates*: How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping. Suppose that I carry on the figure of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? and you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as for example, beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?

*Meno*: I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.

*Socrates*: And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike. . . .

Plato, *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. Grube. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1981).

able view?<sup>9</sup> “I believe in God”: How is such belief supported? What kind of God? “That painting is beautiful”: What is beauty? “I’m a Gemini”: Are there solid premises for the predictions of astrology?

“Developing a philosophy of life” was an objective considered essential or at least important by about 45 percent of American college

freshmen in 1993.<sup>10</sup> More important were, in ascending order, helping others who are in difficulty, becoming an authority in one’s field, raising a family, and being very well-off financially. We wonder whether the responses were based on a clear understanding of the nature of values and the possible meanings of “developing a philosophy of life.” Were the surveyed students aware of

the meanings, branches, and tools of philosophy? Had they any notion of the benefits of choosing adequate views of reality and maintaining a coherent, consistent world view? We propose that a mature person's philosophic beliefs are well established; such a man or woman is well integrated, and sustains a harmony between thought and action that is indispensable to his or her well-being.

As the ancient philosophers long ago discerned, philosophy is a quest for wisdom. We all are aware that a person can have a great deal of knowledge and still be a learned fool. In our age of confusion and uncertainty, we need a sense of direction. Wisdom is what provides us with that sense: it is an affair of values. As Abraham Kaplan has written regarding wisdom:

Whatever else wisdom may be, it is in some sense an *understanding* of life. It is not a purely cerebral attainment; wisdom is as much a matter of what we do and feel as it is of how we think. But thought is central to it. . . . Wisdom is a matter of *seeing* things—but as they are, not subjectively.<sup>11</sup>

Wisdom is intelligent conduct of human affairs. We experience intellectual discomfort when confronted with fragmentary and confused views of the world. Without some unity of outlook, the self is divided. Among other benefits, study of philosophy gives our lives an inner integration, helps us to decide what to approve and what to disapprove, and provides a sense of the meaning of human existence.

### SPECIFIC VOCATIONAL USES

In recent years, professionals and businesses have begun to pay attention to the ethical dimensions of their practices. In business ethics, many of the following issues are discussed: What is the goal of a corporation? What are the ethics of “whistle-blowing”? What is fair in competition? How can we resolve conflicts of profit making with the good of the environment? Ought we to demand truth telling in advertising? How should we view job discrimination, affirmative-action hir-

ing practices, respective rights of employers and employees, social responsibilities of business, responsibilities of business to the consumer, the role of government in business, and so on?

For those in the health-care professions, the thorny ethical issues regarding reproductive technologies, allowing or helping chronically and terminally ill patients to die with dignity, suicide, patients' rights, genetic engineering, and public health care are in the forefront of investigations.

Each occupation is in the process of identifying the ethical issues it confronts in practice. The usefulness of identifying and understanding the options—a task undertaken by philosophers—is evident. “Applied philosophy” today is not only a useful part of our lives, it is necessary to our daily existence.

### Values and Education



Elaborating on our discussion of personal and vocational uses of philosophy, we shall

now explore briefly a pertinent philosophical area, the philosophy of education. Philosophical thinking about education (indeed, about the courses for which this textbook is intended) is linked to our values and to our convictions about the role of the liberal arts in various curricula.

Do you go to a *good* college? Is your philosophy course a *good* one? Is your instructor a *good* teacher? Such common questions ask for an evaluation of an institution, a course, and a professional. A rating based on some scale or standard of values is sought; to answer these questions, an individual must have some idea of what he or she values in a college, course, or instructor.

Some students believe that for a college to qualify as “good” it must be internationally prestigious; apparently they value privately funded and well-known institutions. By this standard, neither public nor local colleges can be rated as “good.”

A philosophy course may be rated “good” if the instructor demands little work and gives high grades, if the reading assignments are short and

entertaining, and if the emphasis is immediate relevance and obvious utility. A demanding course with long-range as well as some immediate benefits, dedicated to traditional knowledge, may be judged a “bad” course.

A teacher may be valued highly because of personal qualities, such as speaking ability, warmth, and participation in extracurricular student activities. Professional standards such as thoroughness, up-to-date subject knowledge, and reasonable academic expectations for students may be ignored or entirely overlooked when those students rate an instructor.

### RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY TO EDUCATION

If we are to give thoughtful answers to evaluative questions about education, we must acknowledge their dependence on philosophy. Educational value judgments, like all value judgments, are debatable: Do they express subjective feelings or objective knowledge? On what bases are particular educational values justified?

Other relevant philosophical considerations are: (1) *What is meant by education?* Is it the learning of skills for a job? Is it the memorization of data? Is it, as Alfred Whitehead said, a collection of “inert ideas—ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilised, tested, or thrown into fresh combinations?”<sup>12</sup> Is it a process of continuous reinterpretation of one’s individual and social life? (2) *What is human nature?* Which image reflects accurately the creature to be educated? How do human beings learn? What is the mind?<sup>13</sup> (3) *What is knowledge?* What are the sources and nature of knowledge? What methods can we use to distinguish valid from invalid knowledge?<sup>14</sup>

Different philosophical outlooks and religious traditions present contrasting explanations of value, human nature, knowledge, and education.<sup>15</sup> For example, the pragmatism of John Dewey offers a particular interpretation of reality (including human nature), knowledge, and values with definitive consequences for an approach

to education. A Hindu’s understanding of these issues would be quite different.

### PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

The application of general philosophical positions to educational problems is called *philosophy of education*. One model of this field focuses on three issues: (1) basic objectives and specific goals of education; (2) methods of teaching and learning; and (3) curricula. To establish a college requires a philosophy of education, and the answers to a number of basic questions: What are the basic objectives and specific goals of the school? What methods of teaching and learning are consistent with these basic objectives? What will constitute the curriculum? Various founders of colleges and universities have different answers to these questions. Throughout the world, institutions of higher education have different purposes, teaching and learning methods, and curricula.

If a college or university system lacks a coherent educational philosophy, the result can be a series of conflicting objectives and aims, random teaching and learning methods, and unstable, trendy curricula. Similarly, if a local public school board appoints or elects members with conflicting philosophies, an incoherent patchwork of aims, methods, and curricula may result.

### A DILEMMA: LIBERAL ARTS OR VOCATIONAL TRAINING?

Many students today, perhaps the majority, believe that the basic objective of all education, especially at the college or university level, is to provide vocational training; that is, to prepare students for a job or career. They believe that the need for occupational skills should be the basis of a curriculum; methods of teaching and learning should include whatever means are available to communicate clear-cut vocational information; a diploma or college degree should be an entry ticket to a good job. One student, studying philosophy because it was required in a vocational program, exclaimed in anguish during a

provocative class session, “You’re messing up my mind! I didn’t come here to think; I came for an education.” One wonders whether such a student has connected a view of education with reflected comprehension of human nature, knowledge, and values. Are students to be trained only in order to get a job? Should worthwhile knowledge be defined only as that which can be used to earn a living? Is occupational competence the only valuable purpose of education?

Many believe that if vocational training is the sole content of education, the graduate enters the marketplace unprepared. One reason is vocational training can become obsolete very quickly. New technologies, new products, new management styles, and new industries appear so rapidly that skills learned today are inadequate only a few years later. Training of men and women solely with occupational information often ignores their need for a better understanding of themselves and the world. An education that has the humanities at its core provides the student with permanent knowledge, the ability to think critically, and exposure to powerful minds, inquiring intellects, and events of human significance. Whether vocational training takes place alongside such “freeing arts” (the literal meaning of “liberal arts”), at separate institutions, or in the marketplace depends on the educational philosophies of individual institutions. Over a decade ago a national magazine asserted that, in addition to good technical training, new leaders need to be educated in the humanities.<sup>16</sup> They need to have the kind of understanding of the human psyche—of the struggle against regressive and irrational forces—that comes from reading great writers such as Sophocles, Plato, Shakespeare, and Ibsen who make us see how difficult it is for human beings to deal with each other.

Some people think that many of our leaders display a lack of understanding about human nature, that they appropriate simple-minded psychological theories of what motivates people and tend to believe that everyone is motivated by the desire for money or to “keep up with the Joneses.” They seem to lack the qualities gained from exposure to the liberal arts and social

sciences, qualities that are essential in an effective leader.

A commission funded by the Rockefeller Foundation credits the humanities with enabling men and women to make critical judgments about ethics and social policy, to understand diverse cultures, and to interpret current events in light of the past. The thirty-two-member group described the humanities as integral to elementary and secondary education. They recommended that subjects such as languages, history, philosophy, and English, which nurture critical thinking, be taught early in the student’s academic career.<sup>17</sup> Consistent with the commission’s recommendations is the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. Founded in 1974, the Institute has been responsible for the development of curriculum materials and teaching methods that improve thinking and problem-solving skills. For similar reasons, the American Philosophical Association has active committees concerned with the teaching of philosophy at all levels.

## EVALUATING EDUCATION

Any evaluation of a school, a course, or a teacher depends on the general philosophy of the evaluators, including their position on values, philosophy of education, and commitment to the humanities. Clearly, many educational philosophies are possible, and evaluators disagree, whether they are members of an accrediting team or students chatting in a cafeteria. The evaluation of a college, course, or professor as “good” is a philosophical judgment that reflects a wide range of other philosophical convictions. If people have no understanding of logic, ethics, and metaphysics, their evaluations of philosophies of education are of questionable worth because a philosophy of education needs to be grounded in an articulated philosophy.

The educational philosophy of a university dedicated to research may differ legitimately from the aims, methods, and curriculum of a small teaching college. Both may have value if





Far from being an academic luxury, philosophy should play a central part in any well balanced college or university curricula. The study of philosophy contributes distinctively and substantially to the development of students' critical thinking. It enhances their ability to deal rationally with normative issues. It extends their understanding of interdisciplinary questions. It strengthens their grasp of our intellectual history and of our culture in relation to others. It increases their capacity to articulate and assess world views. And it improves their skills in writing and speaking. . . .

Philosophical reflection can be brought to bear on any subject matter whatsoever; every discipline raises questions which philosophical investigation can help clarify; and every domain of human existence confronts us with problems on which philosophical reflection can shed light. The study of philosophy can help students in all the ways this suggests, and the philosophical techniques they assimilate can help them both in their other academic work and in their general problem solving over the years.<sup>19</sup>



## *Glossary Terms*

**AESTHETICS** The branch of philosophy concerned with art and the nature of the work of art.

**CONCLUSION** A proposition inferred from the premises of an argument.

**DEDUCTION** An inference in which the conclusion follows necessarily from one or more premises. When the conclusion does so follow, the deduction is said to be valid.

**DIALECTIC** As most frequently used by philosophers, the critical analysis of conceptions in order to determine their meaning, implications, and presuppositions. Also, a method of reasoning used by Socrates, Hegel, and others in which opposites are reconciled.

**EMPIRICISM (EMPIRICAL)** The view that knowledge comes from experience or through the senses, in opposition to *rationalism*.

**EPISTEMOLOGY** Theory of knowledge; the branch of philosophy which studies the sources, nature, and validity of knowledge.

**ETHICS** The study of moral conduct. The term may also be applied to the system or the code followed (such as "Buddhist ethics.")

**INDUCTION** Reasoning that attempts to reach a conclusion concerning all the members of a class after inspection of only some of them. Inductive knowledge is empirical. The conclusion of an inductive argument, unlike that of a deductive one, is not logically necessary.

**INFERENCE** A conclusion derived either from general premises (deduction) or from factual evidence (induction). Not to be confused with *implication*; one proposition is said to *imply* another when their relation is such that if the first is true the second *must* also be true.

**LOGIC** The branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and problems of clear and accurate thinking and argument.

**METAPHYSICS** A critical study of the nature of reality. Metaphysics is often divided into ontology and cosmology.

**PREMISE** A proposition supporting or helping to support a conclusion.

**RATIONALISM** The view that the mind has the power to know some truths that are logically prior to experience and yet not analytic.



5. A current educational dilemma is whether the basic objective of all education is to provide vocational training or “permanent education” of the liberal arts.

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

1. Philosophy has in recent decades been concerned almost exclusively with questions about the nature and role of philosophy or a discussion of the terms and language through which thoughts are expressed.
2. Recently a growing number of some philosophers have broadened the scope of their inter-

ests. Applied philosophy, concerned with areas such as brain research, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, definitions of life and death, the nature and role of technology in modern thought, gender issues, animal rights, value or moral problems in medicine and business, and so on, has captured the interest of many philosophers.

## REFLECTIONS

1. The usefulness of philosophy is well attested to by its several theoretical and practical applications to human living.



## *Study Questions and Projects*

1. Is there justification for saying that our age is facing unprecedented problems? Are these problems any different, except in degree and intensity, from the problems of past ages? Which contemporary conditions or trends do you consider encouraging, and which discouraging?
2. Does each person need a philosophy? Can one really choose whether he or she is to have a philosophy of life?
3. What justification can you give for saying that some of the great issues of our time are philosophical problems? In what sense are some of these issues also timeless?
4. Organize some of your present beliefs and convictions regarding life and the world into a statement of no more than 2000 words. Keep a copy of this statement of personal philosophy and compare it with a similar statement that you write toward the end of the course.
5. Has your secondary and college education developed in you any set of convictions or values regarding your personal life, social relationships, and the world in general? Should education be concerned with such questions or only with descriptive knowledge in specialized areas?
6. Indicate the extent and areas of your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

- (a) “There is no more direct way of elevating our life than by elevating our ideas.”  
—Ernest Dimmet
- (b) “Make it thy business to know thyself, which is the most difficult lesson in the world.”—Cervantes
- (c) “Money buys everything except love, personality, freedom, immortality, silence, and peace.”—Carl Sandburg
- (d) “The great sickness of our age is aimlessness, boredom, and lack of meaning and purpose in living.”—Dr. Dana L. Farnsworth

7. Philosophical journals are an important storehouse of current thinking in the field. Familiarize yourself with as many of them as you can and see how many of them are in your library. Fairly complete lists may be found in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and in the *Directory of American Philosophers*. The following is a partial list: *Ethics*; *The Humanist*; *International Philosophical Quarterly*; *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*; *The Journal of Philosophy*; *The Journal of the History of Ideas*; *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*; *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*; *The Monist*; *The Philosophical Forum*; *The Philosophical Review*; *Philosophical Studies in Education*; *Philosophy and Phenomenological Re-*

*search; Philosophy East and West; Review of Metaphysics; Free Inquiry; Public Affairs Quarterly; The Thomist.*

8. State the difference between “first-order questions” and “second-order questions” and give some examples. See Mortimer J. Adler, *The Conditions of Philosophy*, pp. 42–48.
9. Do you think teachers of philosophy should be committed and speak out, or neutral and silent, on the great pressing, but controversial, issues of the day?
10. What is meant by the statement that “civilization is basically a set of ideas and ideals?”
11. What is the meaning of the word *philosophy*, and in what ways do philosophers understand the nature and function of philosophy?
12. Write an article for a junior high school newspaper entitled “Philosophy: Its Meaning, Method, and Branches.”
13. Evaluate your school according to its philosophy of education as published in its current catalogue. (Offices of admissions and the registrar usually have catalogues available.)
14. Respond to the student in an introductory philosophy class who complained angrily, “I didn’t come here to think; I came here for an education.”
15. In a carefully organized, thoughtful essay comment on the following statement: “Many groups in the United States provide definitive answers to questions of reality, truth, and values for their members. Their firm convictions have eliminated the need to reflect philosophically.”



### *Suggested Readings*

Adler, M. J. *The Conditions of Philosophy*. New York: Dell, 1967.

A clear statement of the nature of philosophy and what is needed to restore it to a place of eminence in the contemporary world.

Barrow, R., and Woods, R. *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 1989.

An excellent introduction for students with no previous background in philosophy.

Barth, E. M. *Women Philosophers: A Bibliography of Books through 1990*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1992.

More than 2,800 philosophical works written by women are listed.

Brumbaugh, R. S., and Lawrence, N. M. *Philosophers on Education: Six Essays on the Foundations of Western Thought*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986.

First published in 1963, this book studies educational theories developed by Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, Dewey, and Whitehead.

Copleston, F. C. *History of Philosophy*. 9 vols. New York: Image/Doubleday, 1976.

An excellent, comprehensive history of Western philosophy.

Edwards, P. (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 8 vols. New York: Macmillan/Free Press, 1967.

A mine of information on the subjects related to the field of philosophy. Many articles written from the point of view of analytic philosophy.

Ewing, A. C. *The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951.

Professor Ewing seeks to deal with all the main issues of philosophy insofar as they can be stated and discussed profitably and simply. Among other questions, he treats the place of reason in knowledge and life, the relation of body and mind, the problem of evil, and the existence of God.

Hocking, W. E. *Types of Philosophy*. New York: Scribner's, 1939.

Hocking's classic introduction to the problems of philosophy is still a good book for those “who are not devoting their lives to the study of philosophy.”

- Hoy, R. C., and Oaklander, L. N. (eds.). *Metaphysics: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1991.
- An anthology that delves into five topics—time, identity, mind, freedom, and reality.
- Jones, W. T. A. *A History of Western Philosophy*. 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1969–1975.
- A five-volume history of western philosophy that, in addition to being an excellent history, reveals a great deal about the philosophical enterprise and the role that philosophy plays in the general culture.
- Kim, J., and Sosa, E. (eds.). *A Companion to Metaphysics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993.
- An alphabetically arranged survey of metaphysics with more than 200 articles by distinguished scholars.
- Knight, George R. *Issues and Alternatives in Educational Philosophy*, 2nd ed. Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1989.
- Knight presents a succinct and clearly written survey of the major philosophies and philosophic issues relevant to education.
- Lipman, M., Sharp, A. M., and Oscanyan, F. S. *Philosophy In The Classroom*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.
- The authors argue for the integration of thinking skills into every aspect of the curriculum.
- Ozmon, Howard A., and Samuel M. Craver. *Philosophical Foundations of Education*, 4th ed. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1990.
- In their widely used text, Ozmon and Craver present a well-done introduction to the most important schools of educational philosophy.
- Parkinson, G. H. R. (ed.). *The Handbook of Western Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- Although some articles are quite technical, the topics are of current interest and are grouped within six parts: Meaning and Truth; Theory of Knowledge; Metaphysics; Philosophy of Mind; Moral Philosophy; and Society, Art and Religion.
- Pelikan, J. *The Idea of the University—A Reexamination*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992.
- The author provides an analysis of what a university is and ought to be; he explains why universities are indispensable to a modern society.
- Post, J. F. *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Paragon, 1991.
- Topics include defining metaphysics, why there is anything at all, whether time and the universe have a beginning, conflicting ideas about God, and so forth.
- Schoedinger, A. B. (ed.). *Introduction to Metaphysics: The Fundamental Questions*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1991.
- An introductory anthology of historical and contemporary readings concerning the problem of universals, causation, personal identity, free will and agency, and artificial intelligence.
- Taylor, R. *Metaphysics*. 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1992.
- In the “Foundations of Philosophy Series,” this text explores the need for metaphysics, persons and bodies, the mind as a function of body, freedom and determinism, fate, space and time, the relativity of time and space, temporal passage, causation, God, polarity, and metaphysics and meaning.
- Thomson, G. *An Introduction to Modern Philosophy*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993.
- An introduction to the claims and arguments of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant.



