

Part I

Metaphilosophy



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

- Three ways into philosophy
- The nature of philosophy
- The three most basic problems in philosophy
- Developing a philosophy of your own

Philosophy is a fascinating subject which is personally relevant to every intelligent human being. I want to tell you why that is so, I want to tell you a great deal about philosophy, and I want to engage you in thinking philosophically. When I speak of philosophy I mean western philosophy as it flourished in ancient Greece, then spread to Europe, Great Britain, and North America. Eastern, or Asian, philosophy is also important – especially Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, but if we were to study eastern philosophy as well as western, that would make this book far too long. However, I do encourage you to study the asian traditions in philosophy later. Because there are certain universal features of philosophy, you will find that *Thinking Philosophically* has prepared you for the study of asian philosophy, as well as for further studies in western philosophy.

### Three ways into philosophy

There are three common ways of introducing people to philosophy. One way is to focus on the ancient Greek thinkers who founded western philosophy, especially Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Because the rest of the history of philosophy builds on the work of the ancient Greeks, that approach provides students with a sound foundation for further studies in philosophy. However, some students who do not expect to take another philosophy course or do further reading in philosophy find that approach unsatisfying because there are so many other thinkers about whom they learn nothing.

Quite naturally, then, a second approach to introducing students to philosophy is to give them a survey of the history of philosophy. Then they can learn something about most of the giants of western philosophy, starting with the ancient

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Greeks, but moving quickly to later eras and other thinkers, such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Pascal, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Whitehead, and Sartre. That is a wonderful way to learn philosophy because philosophy is, in a very real sense, a 2,600-year-old conversation between individuals and generations. To know how the conversation has proceeded from its beginning, about 600 BC, to the present, is to be well-prepared to enter that conversation oneself. Still, that approach is not satisfying to some people because it does not do what they want to do most: think about and discuss philosophical problems. Consequently, the third and most popular way to teach philosophy is the “problems” approach.

The “problems” approach to philosophy is the one that we will be taking. It consists of identifying, explaining, and attempting to solve philosophical problems – problems that have to do with God, truth, morality, freedom, the mind, and more. As you will see, when discussing those problems I will mention the names and explain the ideas of many great philosophers, but when I do so, it will be to help you understand or attempt to solve some *problem* in philosophy. Consequently, instead of a section on René Descartes, for example, you will see Descartes’ name and ideas taken up briefly in different parts of *Thinking Philosophically* in relation to different problems.

In brief, my primary aims are to familiarize you with some of the most basic problems in philosophy, to present alternative solutions to those problems, and to involve you in evaluating those solutions – ultimately leaving you free to make your own decisions about them. The remainder of this introduction is an overview of what is to come. It should give you a broad sense of what we will do and why we will be doing it. As you proceed through *Thinking Philosophically* I encourage you to keep referring back to the tables of contents because they provide you with a quick way to review where we’ve been, see where we’re going, and understand how the many parts of philosophy relate to one another.

### The nature of philosophy

The first question we will take up is that of the nature of philosophy. This inquiry into the nature of philosophy is called “meta-philosophy.” Some writers prefer to explore specific philosophical problems before asking their readers to consider what philosophy is. There is wisdom in that approach because people can usually better understand a definition of something they have had some first-hand experience with. If a person has never seen or heard of a fish, it would no doubt be helpful to show her a few fish before lecturing her on the question, “What is a fish?” It is not the case, however, that you have no familiarity with

philosophy. I am confident that you have thought about some philosophical problems, listened to philosophical discussions about them, and perhaps have entered into those discussions. Maybe no one pointed out that you were listening to philosophy or doing it, but it was philosophy all the same – just as, if English is your native language, you were speaking English long before you learned it was English you were speaking.

To be sure, philosophy, like anything else, can be done well or poorly, in an unsophisticated way or in a highly sophisticated way. The difference between our untutored efforts in philosophy and professional philosophy is at least as great as the difference between amateur football and professional football. Yet just as there is continuity between amateur football and professional football, so there is continuity between our untutored efforts in philosophy and professional philosophy. Consequently, though you may not be familiar with philosophy in its most sophisticated forms, I'm confident you have enough familiarity with it that I need not begin as though you are totally ignorant of the subject.

Still, it would be surprising if you do not have a number of misconceptions about philosophy. For example, few beginners realize how broad philosophy is. Consequently, one of my objectives in the next few chapters is to give you an overview of the many fields within philosophy. Also, many first timers do not realize how rigorous and disciplined philosophy is. Consequently, in addition to explaining what philosophers do, I want to explain how they do it, why they do it, and what their attitude tends to be when they do it well.

Eventually you will want a definition of philosophy, and I will provide one. However, it will have to be *my* definition. There is no official definition of philosophy; I doubt that there can be. Philosophy is an open-ended, pioneering discipline, forever opening up new areas of study and new methods of inquiry. Consequently, philosophy is continually reconceiving itself. As a result, it is impossible to draw four sides around philosophy and say "That's it." Its history is too multifarious and its boldness too daring. However, there is a fairly stable cluster of concerns and questions that have, for the most part, constituted the substance of philosophy over the centuries since ancient Greece. My own conception of philosophy has grown and continues to grow out of my study of the history of philosophy. In my definition I will try to capture what seems to me to have been most distinctive and characteristic of philosophy over the centuries and in the present. Ultimately, however, we must each draw from our rich philosophical heritage and construct our own answers to the questions of philosophy – including the question of the nature of philosophy. That does not mean all answers are equally good. They are not. But it does mean that philosophy itself challenges us to formulate its nature in our own minds and to learn from and improve upon the answers of other people.

## The three most basic problems in philosophy

After examining the nature of philosophy we will begin our investigation of what are usually considered to be “the big three” problems of philosophy: the problem of knowledge, the problem of value, and the problem of reality. First we will take up the problem of knowledge. It is fascinating how young children are when they begin asking adults, “How do you know that?” Sometimes they ask that question so relentlessly that it becomes exasperating to the adult. It is unfortunate when we lose the impulse to ask that question. Throughout life it remains one of the most important questions we can ask – of ourselves (“How do *I* know that?”), as well as of others.

The area of philosophy that investigates the nature, sources, authority, and limits of human knowledge is called “epistemology.” Clearly, epistemology has a bearing on all that we will be doing, for we will look at various *possibilities* as to the nature of right and wrong, the nature of the good life, the nature of humankind, and the nature of reality. Whenever I present one of these possibilities as true, it is entirely appropriate for you to ask of me, “How do you know that?” When I do not affirm a position as true but simply confront you with alternative possibilities, it is appropriate for you to say, “Okay, that’s good, but how can we come to know which of those possibilities is definitely, or at least probably, true?” There are no simple answers to these questions, but there are valuable answers – answers which employ distinctions and insights that have been developed and refined over centuries of time by brilliant thinkers. Among these distinctions and insights, we will look at differences between assertions and arguments, truth and validity, knowledge and belief, and faith and hope. Then we will look into the pursuit of knowledge through ordinary perception, science, and religion. I cannot take you directly to your goal (absolute knowledge), but I can put you aboard the only ship I know of which is headed for that destination, introduce you to its crew, familiarize you with its rigging, and hand you an oar. No one I know of can do more than that.

The next leg of our voyage relates to the fact that the word “philosophy” literally means “love of wisdom.” This second leg of our voyage involves two forms of wisdom developed by philosophers: *axiology* and *ethics*. Together these disciplines constitute *value theory*, that is, the general theory of values, both moral and non-moral. Axiology, broadly conceived, is the study of the nature and achievement of happiness. Ethics, broadly conceived, is the study of the nature of moral behavior and character. In addition to examining each of these aspects of value theory, we will ask how they relate to one another. Some people think we must choose between happiness and morality. Some say that if we want to be

happy, we must forget about morality; it will only get in the way of our pursuit of happiness. Others say that if we want to be moral, we must forget about happiness; it will only distract us from doing our duty. Perhaps we can find a more satisfying way of relating these two important concerns to one another.

The third and final leg of our journey will take us from the relatively pleasant waters of value theory into the stormy seas of metaphysics. Because value theory is closely related to the experiences and training you have had since childhood, and to the kinds of decisions you have been making for years, you'll probably feel at home in value theory. Metaphysics, by contrast, asks not how we *feel* or what we *want* or what we *ought* to do; it asks how things *are*. What is the nature of reality as a whole and in its parts? To answer that question requires a detachment of mind and a rigor of thought which few people acquire in their first twenty years of life. Consequently, the main difficulty you will probably have in doing metaphysics will be the simple act of trying to really appreciate a radically different way of understanding reality or some part of it.

Because of our pluralistic culture, most of us have been exposed to diverse ways of understanding the world; for that reason, we tend to think of ourselves as liberal and open, but the exposure has usually been superficial. Few of us have ever really had to or tried to understand the world in a way which is radically different from the prevailing way in our culture or subculture. Indeed, cultures, and especially subcultures, often try to protect us and sometimes try to prevent us from seriously examining other ways of understanding reality. They may shield us altogether from these different perceptions, or they may assure us in advance that they're not as good as what we've got (and may even be the work of wicked people or the devil!). In metaphysics, however, it is necessary to do just the opposite: to seek out and clarify all possible basic answers to a metaphysical problem in order that we might compare and evaluate them rigorously and fairly.

Immanuel Kant, one of the great modern philosophers, provides a model for us here. He once said that whenever he set out to find an answer to a philosophical or scientific question (he was a distinguished scientist as well as philosopher), he never settled for the first plausible answer that came to him. Rather, he tried to think of every possible answer to the problem, turning each answer sideways, upside down, and inside out. Why? In order not to become enamored of a wrong answer prematurely or of the right answer for the wrong reason. Consequently, if ABC seemed at first to be the answer to a problem, Kant would go through a process such as the following, unpacking all the possibilities: "Maybe we don't need B and C – maybe A alone is the answer; or maybe we don't need A and C – maybe B is the answer; or maybe C by itself is adequate; or maybe AB is the answer and C is unnecessary; or maybe BC is the

answer and A is unnecessary; or maybe AC is necessary but not B. Further, if the order of the elements is important, perhaps the answer is not ABC, but CBA, or BCA, or CAB, or BAC, or BA, or CA, or CB.” Clearly, if the answer has to be A or B or C, or some combination thereof, we have just run through all the possibilities and the answer must be among them. Similarly, as we examine each philosophical problem, we shall attempt to “run out the permutations”; that is, we shall try to think of all the basic possible solutions to each problem in order that we might be confident that we have not overlooked anything important when we finally fix on an answer. For example, we will want to consider not only whether there is or is not a God, but also whether God might be different than God is traditionally conceived to be. Perhaps God is finite rather than infinite, or is identical with the universe rather than different from it. But more of that later.

The first metaphysical problem we will take up is that of freedom versus determinism. At that point we will have already talked about morality, which specifies what we ought to do. But isn’t talk about what we ought to do based on the assumption that we are free to refuse to do what we ought to do? Immanuel Kant thought so and put his conviction bluntly: “Ought implies can.” That is, anything which we ought to do must be something which we can do; it is fitting to hold people responsible for what they ought to do, but it would not be right to hold them responsible for what they could not do. The central issue between libertarianism (which affirms human freedom) and determinism (which denies human freedom) is whether we ever really have a choice as to whether to do something or not do it. Is it the case or not that human actions are as completely determined as the behavior of rocks in a landslide or of geese migrating in fall? We will examine (1) libertarianism, which holds that our actions are not determined and we are responsible for them, (2) hard determinism, which says that our actions are determined and that, therefore, we are not responsible for them, and (3) soft determinism, which says that our actions are determined but we are responsible for them anyway!

Parenthetically, if we had taken up the problem of freedom versus determinism before taking up the problem of value, and had concluded that we are in fact free, then a natural next step would have been to ask, “Okay, now that we believe we have a free choice in what we do, what do we *want* to do with our freedom and – perhaps more important – what *ought* we to do?” Hence, the question of freedom/determinism resolved in the direction of freedom would lead naturally to questions about value and morality. By contrast, if we had decided that human behavior is determined, it would have been natural to ask, “Does that mean that we are not morally responsible?” And, “Do our values *cause* us to behave as we do?” The important point here is to note how these



philosophical problems lead to one another. As you'll see more and more, you can begin with just about any philosophical problem and find that it leads eventually to all the others. Hence, which problem you begin with in your study of philosophy is not important. What is important is that you begin and keep going. So let's do.

The second metaphysical problem we will take up is that of the nature of a human. Why is that problem important? Because questions about what we ought to do and whether we are free cannot be answered adequately apart from a consideration of what kind of thing a human is. If a human is a machine of some kind (even a biochemical machine), then it seems unlikely that humans are free, and questions of morality and punishment must be approached in that light. If humans are not like machines, then perhaps they are free in a way that makes them morally responsible. Hence, we shall ask first, "What is a human?" or in more personal terms, "What am I?" In response to that question we shall try to run out the permutations: Am I a body and nothing more? a soul and nothing more? a combination of the two? something else altogether? Your answer to the question, "What am I?", will have important implications for how you should live this life and for whether you should expect life after death.

As I indicated above, nearly every philosophical question and answer has a bearing on all others. When you begin to see those connections, you will have really begun to understand philosophy. Speaking of philosophical connections, we cannot answer the question of the nature of humans without giving attention to the nature of that of which humans are a part: reality as a whole. For example, if reality consists of nothing but matter and space, then a person cannot be a soul or even have a soul. Different implications regarding the nature of humans follow from other positions regarding the nature of reality.

We will look at three very different views of reality. The first, *theism*, has been the most common conception of reality in the western world. It is the belief that reality consists of God and all that God creates. The second position, *materialism*, denies the reality of God, claims that only the physical world exists, and is fast catching up with theism in popularity and influence. Third, and finally, we shall look at *idealism*, which, in one of its forms, says that what should be denied is not God but matter!<sup>1</sup>

Consider the possibilities again: Theism says, "Mind and matter are both real." Materialism says, "No, only matter is real." Idealism affirms the remaining possibility: "Matter is not real; only mind is." Because metaphysical idealism is so uncommon in the west, it is difficult for many westerners to appreciate it; however, it is a common position in Asia and in certain western circles, such as Christian Science. Consequently, it is important for us to develop a feeling for its persuasiveness.

## Developing a philosophy of your own

Having begun our voyage with the problems of epistemology and worked our way through value theory and metaphysics, I will conclude by encouraging you to begin again – only this time to begin at the end with the problems of metaphysics, then to work your way back through the questions of value theory and epistemology, keeping in mind each step of the way the insights you gained during earlier steps, realizing that a philosophy of life is something to have available for guidance at every moment of life, and yet to continually evaluate, revise, and cultivate.

To be sure, philosophy is an academic subject of study – something that one can keep at arms length to a certain extent; but more deeply philosophy is a way of being in the world – of questioning it, interacting with it, and responding to it. Indeed, humankind is an ongoing dialogue about the topics of philosophy – topics such as good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsity, appearance and reality. The purpose of this book is to help prepare you to take up your rightful place in that dialogue – to help you become a more appreciative, willing, patient, knowledgeable, insightful, articulate participant in that dialogue.

### Note

- 1 *Metaphysical* idealism, which we will examine toward the end of *Thinking Philosophically*, is a way of understanding the nature of reality. It should not be confused with idealism in the common sense of being strongly committed to lofty ideals. An idealist in that sense may or may not be an idealist in the metaphysical sense. Similarly, a metaphysical materialist may or may not be a materialist in the sense of placing a high value on material possessions.

### Reading Further

Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave,” in *The Republic*, Book VII, sections 514a–517a. For an introduction to Asian philosophies read *The Bhagavad-Gita* (a classic Hindu text), *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, edited by E. A. Burtt (especially “The Dhammapada,” pages 51–73), and the *Tao Te Ching*, the masterpiece of Chinese Taoism (see, for example, *The Way of Lao Tzu*, translated and edited with excellent notes by Wing-Tsit Chan, or *The Wisdom of Laotse*, trans. Lin Yutang, which includes the profound and humorous commentary of Chuangtse).