Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk. —Emerson

I do not know how to teach philosophy without becoming a disturber of the peace. —Baruch Spinoza

There are two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run, the sword is always beaten by the mind. —Napoleon

What I understand by “philosopher”: a terrible explosive in the presence of which everything is in danger. —Friedrich Nietzsche

Better to be on a runaway horse than to be a woman who does not reflect. —Theano of Crotona

Just before dawn on March 20, 2003, the United States unleashed an all-out missile and bomb attack on targets in Iraq. U.S. president George W. Bush then appeared on television before the world to state that the attack would free Iraqis from a terrible outlaw regime that threatened the world with weapons of mass murder. The Iraqi premier, Saddam Hussein, appeared on television a few hours later. The attack, he charged, was a criminal invasion in violation of international law. “It will be repelled by Iraqis through the grace of God,” he declared.

Some beliefs are so important that people are willing to kill and to die for them. Among these are many beliefs that are philosophical, including, especially, opinions about values and principles. An important part of the rationale offered by George W. Bush for attacking Iraq was that Iraqis should be liberated from totalitarianism and should have freedom and democracy. At the time, most Americans assumed, without giving it much thought, that people universally want these things. Many Americans were surprised when supporters of Saddam Hussein,
other Iraqi insurgents, and various religious leaders from the region actually denounced democracy, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion and referred to them as “Western perversions.” Could it really be, some Americans wondered, that some people actually think that totalitarianism is not evil and that freedom and democracy are not good? Unfortunately, it became all too clear that such “extremists” would stop at nothing to resist having what most Americans just assumed all people want and should have.

The American Civil War, which was fought over the institution of slavery, is another example of a clash in values that ended in bloodshed. And although the Cold War remained cold, it, too, pitted different belief systems—capitalism and communism—against each other. Wars often are fought for ideas. Philosophies matter.

Still, as you will discover when you read this book, many philosophical questions are abstract and theoretical, and few of us would resort to physical methods to defend them. Yet even abstract and theoretical issues can connect to ideas that people will go to extremes to enforce, defend, or spread. The philosophy department, as philosopher Van Meter Ames once said, works with potentially explosive material, dangerous stuff.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

The word philosophy comes from the Greek philein, which means “to love,” and sophia, which means “knowledge” or “wisdom.” Because knowledge can be discovered in many fields, the Greeks (who invented philosophy) thought of any person who sought knowledge in any area as a philosopher. Thus, philosophy once encompassed nearly everything that counted as knowledge.

This view of philosophy persisted for more than two thousand years. The full title of Sir Isaac Newton’s Principles, in which in 1729 Newton set forth his famous theories of mechanics, mathematics, and astronomy, is Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy. At that time, physics was still thought of as a variety of philosophy. In fact, at some point nearly every subject currently listed in your university’s catalog would have been considered philosophy. If you continue your studies and obtain the highest degree in psychology, mathematics, economics, sociology, history, biology, political science, or practically any other subject, you will be awarded a PhD, the doctorate of philosophy.

However, philosophy can no longer claim those subject areas that have grown up and moved out of it. What, then, is philosophy today?

PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

When we are confronted with a stark clash of values such as is happening in the Iraq war, we might well wonder whether there are objective standards or criteria by which the opposed philosophies might be evaluated. Is democracy really a
good? Does the United States do the right and proper thing in trying to spread freedom throughout the world? Well, of course we think so. George W. Bush refers to freedom as “almighty God’s gift to each man and woman in this world,” which fact, in his opinion, morally requires America to spread it. But the terrorists fighting America believe they are commanded by God to resist. Both sides cannot be correct, and if it is the other side that is mistaken, how do we know that? We might try to settle things by polling the world to see what most people think, but those who regard democracy as a “perversion” won’t accept the democratic assumption on which that solution depends.

To understand a subject, we should look at the questions it tries to answer. Is it good to spread freedom? How do we know that? And, by the way, what is freedom? These are questions of philosophy. As you can see, these questions are quite unlike those asked by economists, physicists, historians, communication studies experts, and so forth.

Here are a few other examples of philosophical questions.

- To what extent do we have a moral obligation to people we don’t know? For that matter, to what extent do we have a moral obligation to nonhuman living things? How about the environment: do we have a moral obligation to it?
- What are the ethically legitimate functions and scope of government? What form of government is best? What is the proper connection between religion and the state? Questions like these separate Democrats from Republicans, conservatives from liberals, communists from capitalists, and theocrats from democrats.
- Do people have natural rights? If so, how do we know that? Where do they come from? What makes one person’s list of rights superior to another person’s?
- Is there a God? Perhaps just as important, Does it make any difference whether there is or isn’t a God?
- Do ends justify means?
- What, if anything, is the self? Is a person more than a physical body? Do people really have free will?
- What is truth? Beauty? Art?
- Is it possible to know anything with absolute certainty?
- Does the universe have a purpose? Does life? Is there order in the cosmos independent of what the mind puts there?
- What is time?
- Could anything have happened before the Big Bang?

Clearly, it is possible to go through life without spending a moment wondering about such questions, but most of us have at least occasional moments of reflection about one or another of them. In fact, it is pretty difficult not to think

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philosophically from time to time. Whenever we think about a topic long enough, if our thinking is the least bit organized we may end up engaged in philosophy. Real-life ethical dilemmas provide an excellent illustration. For example, situations arise in which we must balance our own needs against the needs of others we care about—an aging parent might require care, for instance. Of course, we will try to determine the extent of our obligation. But we may go beyond this and ask what makes this our obligation, or even more generally, what makes anything our obligation. Is it simply that it strikes us that way? Or is there some feature of situations that requires a certain response? If we are led to questions like these, the rest of the university curriculum will be of little help. Other subjects tell us how things are or how they work or how they came about, but not what we should do or why we should do it. Unfortunately, when most people reach this point in their reflections, they really don’t know what to think next.

Of course, ethical dilemmas are not the only questions that lead one into philosophy. For instance, these days a controversy exists as to whether Intelligent Design is a scientific theory on all fours with evolution. Although many scientists are prepared (and qualified) to answer this question, in fact it is not a scientific question; you aren’t likely to find an article about it in a scientific journal. It is, rather, a question in the philosophy of science.

To take quite a different example of how philosophical questions crop up in everyday contexts, in the movie The Matrix, the hero discovers that the world he lives in is in fact a computer-generated virtual reality. The movie raises the question, How do you know you are not in the matrix; or, more generally, Can one really tell the difference between appearance and reality? This question was asked by the first philosophers more than two thousand years ago and has been discussed in various forms by philosophers throughout the ages.

Other sci-fi movies portray robots that think like people. Arnold Schwarzenegger appears in some of these movies. Will it someday be possible to build a computer that can actually think? The question requires a philosophical response. Of course, you might say, “Well, let’s just wait and see what they come up with.” Unfortunately, you can’t just go observe whether computers are thinking. Even if scientists succeeded in building a robot that walked and talked and acted like Arnold Schwarzenegger, one still might reasonably deny that the robot actually thought. “It isn’t made out of flesh and blood,” you might say. But then, on the other hand, intelligent beings from other galaxies might not be made out of flesh and blood either; so why would computers? Is it perhaps because computers don’t have “souls” or aren’t alive? Well, what is a soul, anyway? Why aren’t computers alive? What is it to be alive? These are philosophical questions. Philosophers have spent a great deal of time analyzing and trying to answer them.

As can be gathered from what we have said so far, an important feature of philosophical questions is that they cannot be answered in any straightforward way by the discovery of some fact or collection of facts. Certainly, facts often are relevant to a philosophical question, but they cannot by themselves provide an answer. To illustrate this point, we might consider Matthew Nagle, who (as we write this)
has been paralyzed from the neck down since 2001. In 2004, researchers at New England Sinai Hospital and Rehabilitation Center in Rhode Island planted a small sensor on the surface of the motor cortex area of Matthew Nagle's brain. The sensor had tiny electrodes that penetrated the surface of his brain, where they picked up electrical signals from brain neurons and transmitted them to a pedestal that protruded from Nagle's scalp. The pedestal was connected to computers, and over time Nagle learned how to turn a TV on and off, change channels, adjust the volume, play Pong, open e-mail, and do other things just by thinking about them.

Now, at the center of the controversy about whether a computer or a robot could think is the vexing philosophical problem of the relationship between thought and the brain. Experts from various fields, including computer science, cognitive science, and brain science, are grappling with this philosophical issue. A computer chip is a physical thing, and so is the brain; but a thought (many people would say) is something quite different. However, we need to remember, it is a computer that causes Matthew Nagle’s TV set to change channels, and it is electrical activity in Mr. Nagle’s brain that causes the computer to do that. Is Mr. Nagle's thought something separate from that electrical activity? This is a philosophical question that you cannot answer just by looking, and the research with Matthew Nagle does not answer it.

Often, too, philosophers ask questions about things that seem so obvious we might not wonder about them—for example, the nature of change. That things change is obvious, and we might not see anything puzzling in the fact. If something changes, it becomes different; so what?

For one thing, if we have a different thing, then we seem to be considering two things, the original thing and the new, different thing. Therefore, strictly speaking, shouldn’t we say not that something changed but rather that it was replaced? If, over the course of years, you replaced every part in the Prius you bought—every part, the engine block, all door panels, each nut, bolt, and piece of steel, glass, rubber, vinyl, battery, or whatever—would you still have the same Prius? If you gathered up all the original pieces and put them together again, would that be the original Prius?

Perhaps these questions seem to be questions of nomenclature or semantics and of no practical interest. But over the course of a lifetime every molecule in a person’s body may possibly (or probably!) be replaced. Thus, we might wonder, say, whether an old man who has been in prison for forty years for a murder he committed as a young man is really the same person as the young man. Since (let us assume) not a single molecule of the young man is in the old man, wasn’t the young man in fact replaced? If so, can his guilt possibly pertain to the old man, who is in fact a different man? What is at stake here is whether the old man did in fact commit murder, and it is hard to see how this might be simply a matter of semantics.

Other times, philosophical questions come up when beliefs don’t fit together the way we would like. We believe, for example, that anything that happens was caused to happen. We also believe that a cause makes its effect happen—if spoiled meat caused you to get sick, it made you sick. But we also believe that when we voluntarily decide to do something, nothing made us decide. And that belief seems to imply that our decision wasn’t caused. So, which is it? Is every happening caused? Or are some happenings uncaused? Or is it perhaps that decisions aren’t actually “happenings”? Do you see a way out of this dilemma? If so, congratulations. You are philosophizing.
Philosopher Nicholas Rescher compiled a list of contemporary American philosophical concerns. His list will give you an idea of some of the things philosophers currently are investigating.

- Ethical issues in the various professions (medicine, business, law, etc.)
- Computer-related issues: artificial intelligence, information processing, whether or not machines can think
- Rationality and its ramifications
- Social implications of medical technology (abortion, euthanasia, right to life, medical research issues, informed consent)
- Feminist issues
- Social and economic justice, policies that determine distribution of resources, equality of opportunity, human rights
- Truth and meaning in mathematics and formalized language
- Skepticism and relativism in knowledge and morals
- What it is to be a person; the rights and obligations of persons
- Issues in the history of philosophy

A common misconception about philosophy, one that goes with the idea that philosophical questions are unanswerable, is expressed in the comment, “Philosophy never makes any progress.” Now, progress comes in many forms. It doesn’t happen only when questions are answered. Questions can be clarified, subdivided,
and found to rest on confusions. They can be partially answered. These are all forms of progress. Even when a question is abandoned as unanswerable, that, too, is progress. Earlier answers to a question can be considered inadequate even if the final answer isn’t in, and that’s progress as well.

Another idea people have is that as soon as progress is made in a philosophical inquiry, the matter is turned over to (or becomes) another field of learning. It is true, as we have already observed, that many disciplines that today are independent of philosophy had their origin within philosophy. But philosophy doesn’t always relegate its subjects to other disciplines. To take the most obvious example, logic is still a branch of philosophy, despite an enormous expansion in scope, complexity, and explanatory power during the last hundred years.

A couple of other ideas people have about philosophy ought to be discussed here at the outset.

First is the idea that one person’s philosophy is as correct as the next person’s and that any philosophical position is as good, valid, or correct as any other opinion. This idea is especially widespread when it comes to values. If one person thinks that one should contribute a major part of one’s income to help support an aging parent, and another person thinks a much lower limit is called for, you might say something like, “Well, the first person’s view is correct for that person, and the second person’s view is correct for the second person.” Or let’s say you think there is nothing wrong with same-sex marriage, and your roommate doesn’t agree. You might be tempted to say something like, “Well, my view is correct for me, and my roommate’s view is correct for my roommate.”

“My view is correct for me, and my roommate’s view is correct for my roommate.” What this means is far from clear. Does it mean that it would be okay for you to marry someone of the same sex but wrong for your roommate to do so? That proposal probably would not be acceptable either to you or to your roommate. If your roommate thinks gay marriage is wrong, he or she probably thinks it is wrong for you as well as for him or her. He or she probably thinks gay marriage is wrong, period. And someone who believes there is nothing wrong with gay marriage probably doesn’t think there is anything wrong with either you or your roommate marrying someone of the same sex.

In other words, if you and your roommate disagree as to whether there is anything wrong with two people of the same sex getting married, you cannot both be correct. You and your hypothetical roommate have contradictory opinions that cannot both be correct. So much, then, for thinking that one person’s philosophy is as correct as the next person’s or that any philosophical position is as good, valid, or correct as any other opinion. This may hold true for such matters as whether chocolate ice cream tastes good, but it does not hold true for a philosophical thesis.

Another misconception about philosophy is that it is nothing but opinion. In fact, we should distance ourselves from this notion, or at least from the “nothing but” part. This is because philosophy requires opinions to be supported by good reasoning. If you express your opinion without providing supporting reasoning, your philosophy teacher is apt to say something like, “Well, that is an interesting opinion,” but he or she won’t say that you have produced good philosophy. Philosophy requires supporting your opinions—which, by the way, can be hard work.
Another idea people sometimes have when they first enter into philosophy is that “truth is relative.” Now, there are numerous things a person might mean by that statement. If he or she means merely that people’s beliefs are relative to their perspectives or cultures, then there is no problem. If, however, the person means that the same sentence might be both true and not true depending on one’s perspective or culture, then he or she is mistaken. The same sentence cannot be both true and not true, and whatever a person wishes to convey by the remark, “Truth is relative,” it cannot be that. Of course, two different people from two different cultures or perspectives might mean something different by the same words, but that is a separate issue.

A different sort of misconception people have about philosophy is that it is light reading, something you relax with in the evening after all the serious work of the day is done. In reality, philosophical writing generally takes time and effort to understand. Often it seems to be written in familiar, everyday language, but that can be deceiving. It is best to approach a work in philosophy with the kind of mental preparedness and alertness appropriate for a textbook in mathematics or science. You should expect to be able to read an entire novel in the time it takes you to understand just a few pages of philosophy. To understand philosophy, you have to reread a passage several times and think about it a lot. If your instructor assigns what seem to be short readings, don’t celebrate. It takes much time to understand philosophy.

A PHILOSOPHICAL TOOL KIT

Philosophy isn’t light reading, and it isn’t mere expression of opinion. Philosophers support their positions with arguments, which (ideally) make it plain why the reasonable person will accept what they say.
Argument

When you support a position by giving a reason for accepting it, you are giving an argument. Logic, the study of correct inference, is concerned with whether and to what extent a reason truly does support a conclusion. Giving and rebutting arguments (itself a form of argument) is the most basic philosophical activity; it distinguishes philosophy from mere opinion.

To illustrate, if you tell someone you believe that God exists, that’s not philosophy. That’s just you saying something about yourself. Even if you add, “I believe in God because I was raised a Catholic,” that’s still just biography, not philosophy. If, however, you say, “God must exist because the universe couldn’t have caused itself,” then you have given an argument that God exists (or at least once existed). This remark counts as philosophy.

But if you want to be good at philosophy, you must also consider challenges to and criticisms of your arguments; such challenges are known as counterarguments. Suppose, for example, someone challenges your argument with “Well, if God can be self-caused, then why can’t the universe?” You are now being called upon to defend your assumption that the universe could not be self-caused. Good philosophizing requires the ability to reason correctly, to defend assumptions, and to anticipate and rebut rebuttals.

The Socratic Method

Philosophers have spent much time over the centuries trying to arrive at a proper understanding of several important concepts: truth, beauty, knowledge, justice, and others you will be reading about shortly. One of the most famous of all philosophers, the Greek philosopher Socrates [SOK-ruh-teez] (c. 470–399 B.C.E.), championed a method for doing this, which is now called the Socratic method. To see how this works, imagine that you and Socrates are discussing knowledge:

You: You’re asking me what knowledge is? Well, when you believe something very strongly, that’s knowledge.

Socrates: But that would mean that kids who believe in fairies actually know there are fairies, if they believe this strongly.

Y: That’s a good point. To know something, then, isn’t just to believe it very strongly. The belief also must be true.

S: That still doesn’t sound quite right. That means a mere hunch is knowledge, if a person believes it strongly, and it turns out to be correct.

Y: Well, you’re right again. So, for one to know something, one must believe it strongly, it must be true, AND it must NOT be a mere hunch. In other words, it must be based on good evidence or solid reasoning. . . .

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3 When you see a word or phrase in bold print in this book, it is defined in the glossary/index at the back of the book.)
The exchange might continue until you offer an analysis of knowledge with which
Socrates cannot take issue.

So, the Socratic method as practiced by Socrates involves proposing a defi-
nition, rebutting it by counterexample, modifying it in the light of the counterex-
ample, rebutting the modification, and so forth. Needless to say, the method can be
practiced by one person within his or her own mind. Clearly, the method can help
advance understanding of concepts, but it can also be used to improve arguments
or positions.

If you are reading this book as a part of a class in philosophy, you may see your
instructor utilizing the Socratic method with the class.

Thought Experiments

“Cassie, share! How would you like it if Jessica didn’t give any of her candy to
you?” Mom, here, is asking Cassie to do a thought experiment—to imagine a
situation in order to extract a lesson about something (in this case about sharing
and selfishness). Imagining yourself in someone else’s shoes is a simple example of
a thought experiment.

Thought experiments are not uncommon in science; in philosophy, they are
among the most common methods used to try to establish something. You will
encounter thought experiments in this book, and although some of them may
seem far-fetched, you shouldn’t discount them for that reason. For example, to
establish the impossibility of time travel, a philosopher might ask us to imagine
someone stepping into a time machine, going back in time to before she was born
and, while there, accidentally killing her parents. The thought experiment seems
to show that, on the one hand, the person existed at the time she entered the time
machine; but, on the other hand, because her parents never gave birth to her, she
could not have existed at that or any other time. The thought experiment thus
shows, or seems to show, that time travel leads to contradictions and therefore is
impossible.

Reductio ad Absurdum

Philosophers will often attempt to establish a thesis by using the reductio ad
absurdum—demonstrating that the contradictory of the thesis is or leads to (i.e.,
“reduces to”) an absurdity. The thought experiment about time travel is an exam-
ple of this method as well as an illustration of a thought experiment.

The most famous reductio ad absurdum in the history of philosophy is St.
Anselm’s ontological proof that God exists. As we shall see in detail in Chapter 13,
St. Anselm (c. 1033–1109) began his famous proof by assuming—merely for the
sake of argument—that God, a being “greater than which cannot be conceived,”
does not exist. This assumption, Anselm argued, leads to the absurd result that a
being greater than which cannot be conceived is not a being greater than which
cannot be conceived. In other words, the idea that God does not exist “reduces” to an absurdity; therefore, God exists. Likewise, in the foregoing dialogue between you and Socrates, Socrates argued that the assumption that knowledge is identical with strong belief leads to an absurd result; which means that knowledge is not identical with strong belief.

Fallacies

A fallacy is a mistake in reasoning. Some mistakes are so common that they have earned names, many in Latin. You won’t often find philosophers making these mistakes, but you will often find them referring to the mistakes, so you should at least be familiar with the more common specimens.

1. Switching the burden of proof: Logically, you can’t prove your position by asking an opponent to disprove it. You don’t prove that God exists by challenging a listener to prove that God doesn’t exist. Another example from “real life”:

   Friend: I like charter schools. They do a much better job educating kids than public schools do.

   You: Do you have evidence of that?

   F: Well, do you have any evidence they don’t?

   It is up to your friend to prove his or her position. It is not up to you to disprove that position. Your friend has switched the burden of proof, a fallacy.

2. Begging the question: These days, you frequently hear people assert that something “begs the question.” Generally, when people say this they mean that the thing invites some question. However, this is not what “begging the question” means to logicians or philosophers. To them, you beg the question when you assume the very thing you are trying to prove, which means that your “proof” doesn’t go anywhere. For example, if you want to give a reason for thinking that God exists, and your reason is that “It says so in the Bible, and the Bible is the word of God,” you are assuming that God exists, when that is what you were supposed to prove. It’s exactly like trying to prove that someone committed a crime because “he was the one who did it.”

3. Argumentum ad hominem (argument against the person): This fallacy amounts to transferring the qualities of a spokesperson to his or her insights, arguments, beliefs, or positions. For example, thinking that a person’s position is frightening because the person himself is frightening would be an obvious mistake in reasoning, an argumentum ad hominem.

   It is especially important to note that the fact that a person believes something now that earlier he or she didn’t believe does not show that what he or she thinks now is contradictory or even incorrect. For example, if a critic of a war at one time supported the war, that fact does not mean that the criticism is defective. The two things (the earlier support and the present criticism) are logically
unrelated. The fact that someone has changed positions is a fact about the person, not his or her position.

From time to time, you hear someone ask an opponent if he or she really believes what he or she has said. The question is irrelevant. In his book Republic, Plato portrays Socrates as conversing with the Athenian general Thrasymachus. Socrates asks Thrasymachus whether he really believes his own argument. Thrasymachus responds by saying,

What difference does it make to you whether I believe it or not? Why don’t you test the argument?  

This is the correct response to this type of questioning.

• **Straw man:** This fallacy occurs when you think you have refuted a view by distorting, misrepresenting, or exaggerating it. When the Irish philosopher George Berkeley maintained that physical objects really exist only in the mind, the English writer Samuel Johnson “refuted” Berkeley by kicking a rock and proclaiming, “I refute him thus!” But Samuel Johnson misrepresented Berkeley, for Berkeley never maintained that rocks aren’t solid; Berkeley’s position was that solid things like rocks (and legs and boots) exist only in the mind.

Suppose we argue that there is no such thing as free will, because our decisions are predetermined by our heredity and environment. If an opponent then points out that people obviously can choose what they do, the opponent has brought in a straw man. Our position wasn’t that people don’t make choices but that choices were predetermined by heredity and environment. What we said was X; our opponent acts as if we had said Y.

• **False dilemma** (either–or fallacy): This is the fallacy of offering two choices when in fact more options exist. Suppose someone says, “Either God exists, or there is no explanation for the universe.” This is a false dilemma because it ignores a third possibility, namely, that there is an explanation of the universe that does not involve God.

• **Appeal to emotion:** This is trying to establish a point by arousing pity, anger, fear, and so on. Suppose we try to “prove” that God exists with the “argument” that “if you don’t believe in him, you will burn in hell.” We haven’t really given an argument; we are just trying to scare the listener into agreeing with us.

• **Red herring:** When someone brings an irrelevancy into a conversation, it is called a red herring. As you can see, many of the fallacies just discussed qualify as red herrings.

If you are reading this book as a part of a course, there could be lots of discussion in class, and the discussion will involve disagreements. In addition, people will defend their positions with arguments. Perhaps you will find examples of these fallacies among the arguments you hear. You may even find an example or two in the arguments you read in this book.

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Most philosophical questions tend to fall into one of these four areas:

- **Questions related to being or existence.** **Metaphysics** is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with these questions. Two basic questions of metaphysics are: What is being? and What are its fundamental features and properties? Some of the questions listed earlier are questions of metaphysics, including: Is there a God? and Do people really have free will? Metaphysics has little to do with the occult or Tarot cards and the like.

- **Questions related to knowledge.** **Epistemology,** the theory of knowledge, is the branch of philosophy concerned with these questions. What is the nature of knowledge, and what are its criteria, sources, and limits? These are basic questions of epistemology, and thus it includes such questions from the list at the beginning of the chapter as: What is truth? and Is it possible to know anything with absolute certainty?

- **Questions related to values.** Included under this heading are primarily
  (1) **moral philosophy (ethics),** the philosophical study of moral judgments;
  (2) **social philosophy,** the philosophical study of society and its institutions;
  (3) **political philosophy,** which focuses on the state and seeks to determine its justification and ethically proper organization; and (4) **aesthetics,** the philosophical study of art and of value judgments about art.
Questions of logic, the theory of correct inference, which seeks to investigate and establish the criteria of valid reasoning and demonstration.

Part One of this book is devoted to metaphysics and epistemology, which are closely related. Part Two is concerned with questions of values, especially moral and political values. We talked a bit about logic earlier in this chapter.

Although philosophy has four main branches, they do not each contain an equal number of theories or concepts or words. Your library probably has more holdings under political philosophy than under the other areas and the fewest under epistemology or aesthetics.

There are other ways of dividing philosophy. Many universities offer philosophy courses that examine the fundamental assumptions and methods of other disciplines and areas of intellectual inquiry, such as science (philosophy of science), language (philosophy of language), and religion (philosophy of religion). Philosophy of science and philosophy of language are covered in Part One because most of the issues in these two areas are either metaphysical or epistemological issues. Part Three is devoted entirely to the philosophy of religion, especially to the question of whether God’s existence can be proved.

The fourth and last part of this book is called “Other Voices,” and in it we consider various current themes in philosophy as well as influences and traditions beyond mainstream Western philosophy.
According to one source, on the combined Verbal, Quantitative, and Analytical sections of the GRE,

Philosophy students score higher than every other major in the Humanities and Arts, higher than every major in the Social Sciences, higher than every major in the Life Sciences, higher than every major in Education, higher than every major in Business, and higher than every major listed under “Other Fields.” In fact, Philosophy students score higher than four out of the six majors listed in Physical Sciences, and five out of the seven listed in Engineering. . . averaging the rank order in each of the areas of the GRE, Philosophy does better than any other major of the fifty listed.8

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Philosophers on Philosophy

Wonder is a feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. —Plato

All definite knowledge—so I should contend—belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man’s Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man’s Land is philosophy. —Bertrand Russell

Without it [philosophy] no one can lead a life free of fear or worry. —Seneca

Uncertainty, in the presence of vivid hopes and fears, is painful, but must be endured if we wish to live without the support of comforting fairy tales. . . . To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it. —Bertrand Russell

The most important and interesting thing which philosophers have tried to do is no less than this; namely: To give a general description of the whole Universe, mentioning all of the most important kinds of things which we know to be in it, considering how far it is likely that there are in it important kinds of things which we do not absolutely know to be in it, and also considering the most important ways in which these various kinds of things are related to one another. —G. E. Moore

The philosopher has to take into account the least philosophical things in the world. —G. Chincholle

Life involves passions, faiths, doubts, and courage. The critical inquiry into what these things mean and imply is philosophy. —Josiah Royce

What is philosophy but a continual battle against custom; an ever-renewed effort to transcend the sphere of blind custom? —Thomas Carlyle

[Philosophy] consoles us for the small achievements in life, and the decline of strength and beauty; it arms us against poverty, old age, sickness and death, against fools and evil sneerers. —Jean de la Bruyère

Not to care for philosophy is to be a true philosopher. —Blaise Pascal

There is no statement so absurd that no philosopher will make it. —Cicero

The most tragic problem of philosophy is to reconcile intellectual necessities with the necessities of the heart and the will. —Miguel de Unamuno

Without philosophy we would be little above animals. —Voltaire

Philosophy asks the simple question, What is it all about? —Alfred North Whitehead

Philosophy limits the thinkable and therefore the unthinkable. —Ludwig Wittgenstein

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8 http://www.lclark.edu/~phil/gre.html
Such facts suggest that philosophy students have exceptional aptitude for some of the most useful of all skills, including analytical thinking, critical thinking, careful reasoning, problem solving, and communication. Now, one of the things you learn when you study philosophy is that causal connections are difficult to establish, and it is an open question whether studying philosophy makes students better thinkers or whether better thinkers are attracted to philosophy in the first place. But philosophical training does emphasize the aforementioned skills. Finding answers to philosophical questions involves being good at exposition and logic, making nuanced distinctions, recognizing subtle similarities and differences, and detecting unstated assumptions.

More than this, those who have learned their philosophical lessons well may not be as prone as others to superficiality and dogmatism. Philosophy requires objectivity, reasonableness, and an open mind. These general attributes, along with the critical thinking skills that come with the practice of philosophizing, can stand one in good stead when faced with the problems life generously provides.

5. Can two people both be correct if one says, “Two members of the same sex should not have the right to get married,” and the other says, “Two members of the same sex should have the right to get married”? Defend your answer with an argument.

6. If, by the time you become an adult, every molecule in your body has been replaced with a different one, are you—the-adult the same person as you—the-child?

7. Are all philosophical questions unanswerable? How about the question you mentioned in question 4?

8. Does it matter if God exists? Take a position, and defend it with an argument.

9. Does what is true depend on what your society believes is true? Was the world flat when people believed it was flat?

10. “2 + 2 = 4.” Was this true before there were people (or other beings) around to think it? Explain.

LINKS

http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

A guide to writing philosophy papers. We strongly encourage you to read it before you write your first paper.
http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html
   An excellent encyclopedia of philosophy. You can look up most philosophical topics here.
http://www.amherst.edu/askphilosophers
   Ask a question, get an answer, maybe.
http://homepages.ed.ac.uk/pmilne/links_html/journals.html
   Information about philosophy journals.
http://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews.cfm
   An online journal of reviews of philosophy books. Browsing this site will help you see what contemporary philosophers are interested in.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

Here are some of the best reference books on philosophy in the English language.


History of Philosophy, www.friesian.com/history.htm. Essays on many philosophical topics; the ones we have looked at seem pretty good and not too difficult.


The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, www.iep.utm.edu. Maintained by the University of Tennessee at Martin. A pretty good source of information on philosophical topics.

Chapter 1 · Powerful Ideas


*Meta-Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://www.ditext.com/encyc/frame.html. Enables you to compare the entries in various philosophy encyclopedias on various topics. A good place to start research.


*Readings in Modern Philosophy*, www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/readings.htm. Writings of many modern philosophers from around 1500 to 1750. If you like the excerpts you read in this text, look here for more.


