

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

# Philosophy

<sup>for</sup>  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand



Dig Into life's  
ultimate questions

Take amazing insights from  
the great philosophers

Build your own personal  
worldview

**Tom Morris, PhD**

Author of *Plato's Lemonade Stand*  
and *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*





# Philosophy

2nd Edition

**by Tom Morris, PhD**

**for  
dummies<sup>®</sup>**  
A Wiley Brand

## Philosophy For Dummies® 2nd Edition

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, [www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com)

Copyright © 2022 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey

Published simultaneously in Canada

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, except as permitted under Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the Publisher. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

**Trademarks:** Wiley, For Dummies, the Dummies Man logo, Dummies.com, Making Everything Easier, and related trade dress are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc., and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

LIMIT OF LIABILITY/DISCLAIMER OF WARRANTY: WHILE THE PUBLISHER AND AUTHORS HAVE USED THEIR BEST EFFORTS IN PREPARING THIS WORK, THEY MAKE NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES WITH RESPECT TO THE ACCURACY OR COMPLETENESS OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS WORK AND SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ALL WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION ANY IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. NO WARRANTY MAY BE CREATED OR EXTENDED BY SALES REPRESENTATIVES, WRITTEN SALES MATERIALS OR PROMOTIONAL STATEMENTS FOR THIS WORK. THE FACT THAT AN ORGANIZATION, WEBSITE, OR PRODUCT IS REFERRED TO IN THIS WORK AS A CITATION AND/OR POTENTIAL SOURCE OF FURTHER INFORMATION DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE PUBLISHER AND AUTHORS ENDORSE THE INFORMATION OR SERVICES THE ORGANIZATION, WEBSITE, OR PRODUCT MAY PROVIDE OR RECOMMENDATIONS IT MAY MAKE. THIS WORK IS SOLD WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THE PUBLISHER IS NOT ENGAGED IN RENDERING PROFESSIONAL SERVICES. THE ADVICE AND STRATEGIES CONTAINED HEREIN MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR YOUR SITUATION. YOU SHOULD CONSULT WITH A SPECIALIST WHERE APPROPRIATE. FURTHER, READERS SHOULD BE AWARE THAT WEBSITES LISTED IN THIS WORK MAY HAVE CHANGED OR DISAPPEARED BETWEEN WHEN THIS WORK WAS WRITTEN AND WHEN IT IS READ. NEITHER THE PUBLISHER NOR AUTHORS SHALL BE LIABLE FOR ANY LOSS OF PROFIT OR ANY OTHER COMMERCIAL DAMAGES, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO SPECIAL, INCIDENTAL, CONSEQUENTIAL, OR OTHER DAMAGES.

For general information on our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 877-762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3993, or fax 317-572-4002. For technical support, please visit <https://hub.wiley.com/community/support/dummies>.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit [www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com).

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022933657

ISBN 978-1-119-87567-3 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-119-87568-0 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-119-87569-7 (ebk)

# Contents at a Glance

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Part 1: What Is Philosophy, Anyway?</b>	5
CHAPTER 1: Great Thinkers, Deep Thoughts	7
CHAPTER 2: Philosophy as an Activity	17
CHAPTER 3: The Love of Wisdom	25
<b>Part 2: How Do We Know Anything?</b>	39
CHAPTER 4: Belief, Truth, and Knowledge	41
CHAPTER 5: The Challenge of Skepticism	57
CHAPTER 6: The Amazing Reality of Basic Beliefs	73
<b>Part 3: What Is the Good?</b>	89
CHAPTER 7: What's Good?	91
CHAPTER 8: Happiness, Excellence, and the Good Life	105
CHAPTER 9: Ethical Rules and Moral Character	125
<b>Part 4: Are We Ever Really Free?</b>	139
CHAPTER 10: Fate, Destiny, and You	141
CHAPTER 11: Standard Views of Freedom	153
CHAPTER 12: Doing: Human Agency in the World	163
<b>Part 5: The Incredible, Invisible You</b>	169
CHAPTER 13: What Is a Person?	171
CHAPTER 14: The Case for Materialism	183
CHAPTER 15: The Case for Dualism	193
<b>Part 6: What's the Deal with Death?</b>	203
CHAPTER 16: From Dust to Dust: Fear and the Void	205
CHAPTER 17: Philosophical Consolations on Death	213
CHAPTER 18: Is There Life after Death?	225
<b>Part 7: Is There a God?</b>	245
CHAPTER 19: Two Worldviews	247
CHAPTER 20: Theistic Visions	257
CHAPTER 21: The Problem of Evil	277

<b>Part 8: The Meaning of Life</b> .....	295
CHAPTER 22: What Is the Meaning of Life? .....	297
CHAPTER 23: Pascal's Wager: Betting Your Life .....	309
CHAPTER 24: Success and Happiness in Life .....	323
<b>Part 9: The Part of Tens</b> .....	339
CHAPTER 25: Ten Great Philosophers .....	341
CHAPTER 26: Ten Great Questions .....	353
<b>Index</b> .....	365

# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
About This Book	1
Foolish Assumptions	2
Icons Used in This Book	3
Beyond the Book	3
Where to Go from Here	3
<b>PART 1: WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY, ANYWAY?</b>	5
<b>CHAPTER 1: Great Thinkers, Deep Thoughts</b>	7
Listening to the critics	8
Consulting Socrates on What Counts	11
Asking The Deeper Questions	14
<b>CHAPTER 2: Philosophy as an Activity</b>	17
Adventuring for the Mind	17
Mapping Our Way Forward	18
Understanding the Power of Belief	19
The image of Plato's Cave	21
The philosophical Houdini	21
<b>CHAPTER 3: The Love of Wisdom</b>	25
Identifying Some Skills of Philosophy	26
Mastering analysis	26
Improving assessment	28
Using argument	29
Seeing How Wisdom Rules	33
Embarking on the Socratic Quest for Wisdom	36
<b>PART 2: HOW DO WE KNOW ANYTHING?</b>	39
<b>CHAPTER 4: Belief, Truth, and Knowledge</b>	41
Understanding Belief	42
The Importance of Belief	44
The Ideal of Knowledge	45
The truth about truth	48
The complete definition of knowledge	50
Truth and rationality	51

<b>CHAPTER 5: The Challenge of Skepticism</b>	57
Introducing the Ancient Art of Doubt	58
Asking Questions We Can't Answer	60
The questions of source skepticism	61
The questions of radical skepticism	66
What the skeptics show us	70
When it's good to doubt your doubts	70
Where Do You Go from Here?	71
<b>CHAPTER 6: The Amazing Reality of Basic Beliefs</b>	73
The Foundations of Knowledge	74
Empiricism and rationalism	74
What's lurking at the foundations	76
Evidentialism	76
The Principle of Belief Conservation	79
Belief conservation and radical skepticism	81
Belief conservation and source skepticism	82
The basic status of belief conservation	82
Evidentialism refuted and revised	83
William James on Precursive Faith	85
Leaps of Faith	87
<b>PART 3: WHAT IS THE GOOD?</b>	89
<b>CHAPTER 7: What's Good?</b>	91
Looking at Ethics and Morality	92
Defining the Good	93
Evaluating Three Views on Evaluation	94
The philosophy of noncognitivism: The boo/yay theory	95
Ethical subjectivism	97
Moral objectivism	99
Taking Teleological Target Practice	102
<b>CHAPTER 8: Happiness, Excellence, and the Good Life</b>	105
Memo to the Modern World	106
Exploring The Idea of Good	106
Divine command theory	107
Social contract theory	107
Utilitarianism	109
Deontological theory	109
Sociobiological theory	110
Virtue theory	111
Four Dimensions of Human Experience	112
The intellectual dimension	114



	The aesthetic dimension . . . . .	117
	The moral dimension . . . . .	119
	The spiritual dimension . . . . .	120
	The ultimate context of good. . . . .	123
<b>CHAPTER 9:</b>	<b>Ethical Rules and Moral Character . . . . .</b>	<b>125</b>
	Weighing Rules and Virtues . . . . .	126
	The Golden Rule and what it means. . . . .	128
	The precise role of the Golden Rule . . . . .	129
	Character, wisdom, and virtue. . . . .	131
	Teaching the Path of Goodness . . . . .	135
	Who am I? — A test of character. . . . .	136
	What should I do? — A test of action . . . . .	136
	The answer to the question . . . . .	137
	<b>PART 4: ARE WE EVER REALLY FREE? . . . . .</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>CHAPTER 10:</b>	<b>Fate, Destiny, and You . . . . .</b>	<b>141</b>
	Appreciating Free Will . . . . .	142
	Revealing the Theological Challenge . . . . .	143
	Considering the Logical Challenge . . . . .	147
	Determining the Scientific Challenge . . . . .	149
<b>CHAPTER 11:</b>	<b>Standard Views of Freedom . . . . .</b>	<b>153</b>
	Pondering God, Logic, and Free Will. . . . .	154
	The theological challenge answered. . . . .	154
	The Logical Challenge answered. . . . .	156
	Taking on The Scientific Challenge . . . . .	156
	Scientific determinists. . . . .	157
	Metaphysical libertarians . . . . .	158
	Compatibilism . . . . .	159
	Which approach is the right one? . . . . .	162
<b>CHAPTER 12:</b>	<b>Doing: Human Agency in the World . . . . .</b>	<b>163</b>
	Gaining Wisdom on Freedom . . . . .	164
	Being an Agent and Getting Your Due . . . . .	166
	<b>PART 5: THE INCREDIBLE, INVISIBLE YOU . . . . .</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>CHAPTER 13:</b>	<b>What Is a Person? . . . . .</b>	<b>171</b>
	Learning about Guitars and Ghosts . . . . .	171
	Glimpses of the Mind . . . . .	172
	Views of the Person. . . . .	174
	Monism . . . . .	174
	Dualism . . . . .	175

The Contenders . . . . .	178
Interactionism . . . . .	179
Epiphenomenalism . . . . .	179
Parallelism . . . . .	180
Narrowing the Options . . . . .	181
<b>CHAPTER 14: The Case for Materialism . . . . .</b>	<b>183</b>
Analyzing The Positive Arguments . . . . .	184
The man-is-an-animal argument . . . . .	184
The artificial intelligence argument . . . . .	185
The brain chemistry argument . . . . .	186
Considering The Negative Arguments . . . . .	187
The superfluity argument . . . . .	187
The mystery objection . . . . .	189
The problem of other minds . . . . .	191
Arriving at a Verdict on the Materialist Case . . . . .	192
<b>CHAPTER 15: The Case for Dualism . . . . .</b>	<b>193</b>
Examining Dualism . . . . .	194
Being a Soul, Man . . . . .	195
The introspection argument . . . . .	195
The discernibility argument . . . . .	196
The Cartesian argument . . . . .	198
The Platonic argument . . . . .	199
The parapsychology argument . . . . .	200
Needing More Evidence . . . . .	201
<b>PART 6: WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH DEATH? . . . . .</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>CHAPTER 16: From Dust to Dust: Fear and the Void . . . . .</b>	<b>205</b>
Exiting Life and the Four Fears . . . . .	206
Fear of the process of dying . . . . .	208
Fear of punishment . . . . .	209
Fear of the unknown . . . . .	210
Fear of annihilation . . . . .	211
<b>CHAPTER 17: Philosophical Consolations on Death . . . . .</b>	<b>213</b>
Calming Us, Philosophically . . . . .	214
The stoic response to fear of the process . . . . .	214
The Natural Process Argument . . . . .	215
The Necessity Argument . . . . .	215
The Agnostic Argument . . . . .	217
The Two Eternities Argument . . . . .	217
Epicurus' argument . . . . .	218

Considering Materialist Consolations. . . . .	220
Social immortality . . . . .	220
Cultural immortality . . . . .	221
Cosmic immortality . . . . .	221
Scientific immortality . . . . .	222
<b>CHAPTER 18: Is There Life after Death? . . . . .</b>	<b>225</b>
Considering Doubts and Denials. . . . .	226
The psychological origin argument. . . . .	226
The silence argument . . . . .	228
The trumpet analogy argument . . . . .	229
The brain damage argument. . . . .	231
Identifying Arguments for Survival . . . . .	233
Plato's indestructibility argument . . . . .	233
The nature analogy argument . . . . .	234
The argument from desire. . . . .	236
Moral arguments . . . . .	237
Seeing Light at the End of the Tunnel. . . . .	239
Claims of former lives . . . . .	239
Apparent contact with the dead . . . . .	240
Near-death experiences . . . . .	241
<b>PART 7: IS THERE A GOD? . . . . .</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>CHAPTER 19: Two Worldviews . . . . .</b>	<b>247</b>
Finding a Lost Beach Ball . . . . .	247
The Great Divide . . . . .	250
The mainline theistic worldview . . . . .	253
The naturalistic worldview . . . . .	253
How the two worldviews compare . . . . .	254
The Great Debate . . . . .	255
<b>CHAPTER 20: Theistic Visions . . . . .</b>	<b>257</b>
Reasoning to God's Existence . . . . .	258
The Ontological Argument . . . . .	258
Cosmology and God . . . . .	260
Living in a Designer Universe. . . . .	268
Having Experience Beyond Argument . . . . .	273
<b>CHAPTER 21: The Problem of Evil . . . . .</b>	<b>277</b>
Expecting Things of a God . . . . .	277
Understanding the Problem . . . . .	279
The main argument against theism . . . . .	279
The alleged incompatibility of God and evil . . . . .	280

Moral justification for allowing evil . . . . .	281
Moral justification and the atheist's argument . . . . .	282
The theist's claim . . . . .	284
Considering The Great Theodicies . . . . .	285
The punishment theodicy . . . . .	285
The free will theodicy . . . . .	287
The soul-making theodicy . . . . .	289
A fourth and combination theodicy . . . . .	292
Exploring the Element of Mystery . . . . .	292
<b>PART 8: THE MEANING OF LIFE . . . . .</b>	<b>295</b>
<b>CHAPTER 22: What Is the Meaning of Life? . . . . .</b>	<b>297</b>
Asking Critical Questions . . . . .	298
Pondering Meaning and This World . . . . .	301
Nihilism: The ultimate negativity . . . . .	302
The Do-It-Yourself Approach to the meaning of life . . . . .	303
Pairing Meaning and God . . . . .	306
<b>CHAPTER 23: Pascal's Wager: Betting Your Life . . . . .</b>	<b>309</b>
Introducing Pascal: Philosopher-Genius . . . . .	310
Wagering like Pascal . . . . .	311
Criticizing the Wager . . . . .	315
The immorality objection . . . . .	315
The probability assignment objection . . . . .	317
The many claimants objection . . . . .	318
The single case objection . . . . .	320
Choosing a Worldview Right for You . . . . .	320
<b>CHAPTER 24: Success and Happiness in Life . . . . .</b>	<b>323</b>
Finding Enough in The Race for More . . . . .	324
Aiming for True Success . . . . .	327
Mastering the Conditions of Success . . . . .	329
A clear conception of what we want, a vivid vision, a goal clearly imagined . . . . .	331
A strong confidence that we can attain the goal . . . . .	331
A focused concentration on what it takes to reach the goal . . . . .	332
A stubborn consistency in pursuing our vision . . . . .	333
An emotional commitment to the importance of what we're doing . . . . .	334
A good character to guide us and keep us on a proper course . . . . .	334
A capacity to enjoy the process along the way . . . . .	335
Concluding with a Note on Happiness . . . . .	336

<b>PART 9: THE PART OF TENS</b>	339
<b>CHAPTER 25: Ten Great Philosophers</b>	341
Socrates	341
Plato	342
Aristotle	343
Saint Thomas Aquinas	344
William of Ockham	345
René Descartes	346
Immanuel Kant	346
G.W.F. Hegel	348
Soren Kierkegaard	349
Bertrand Russell	350
<b>CHAPTER 26: Ten Great Questions</b>	353
Is Philosophy Practical?	353
Can We Ever Really Know Anything?	354
Is There Ultimately an Objectivity to Ethics?	355
Who Am I?	355
Is Happiness Really Possible in Our World?	356
Is There, After All, a God?	357
What Is the Good Life?	359
Why Is So Much Suffering in the World?	360
Does a Tree Falling Solo Make a Sound?	360
What's Stronger: Reason or its Opposite?	362
<b>INDEX</b>	365



# Introduction

**P**hilosophy *For Dummies*? What a concept! Is this the ultimate oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, or at least an utter impossibility in the making, an exercise in futility on a par with *Advanced Calculus For Toddlers* or *Neurosurgery For Nitwits*? No. Not at all. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (fifth century, BCE) thought that, when it comes to The Ultimate Questions, absolutely everyone starts off as a dummy. But he also thought that if you'll humbly admit how little you actually know, you can really begin to learn. With an open mind and a keen focus, you can discover great things.

The word *philosophy* comes from linguistic roots that mean, simply “the love of wisdom.” And this is worth pondering. Consider for a moment any real object of love. When you lack it, you pursue it. When you have it, you embrace it. Philosophy, then, is just about the pursuit and embracing of wisdom, which involves some of the most fundamental truths and insightful perspectives about life that can help us on our path through the world.

## About This Book

This is the right book for you if you ever wonder about the big issues in life, or the deeper truths, and want a little guidance for making some progress with them. It is also a great help if you're a student taking your first course in philosophy and are not quite sure about what's going on in class. I aim to be clear about things that are often confusing and help you make progress in thinking through for yourself some of the most important and basic human questions. My son's Introduction to Philosophy professor at Harvard long ago once confided to him that he used this book to prepare for his own Friday discussion groups. But we'll just keep that between us, okay? So, yeah, even if you're an Ivy League professor, I hope you'll find things here that are helpful. We'll do some real philosophy together and have more fun with it than you might ever have thought possible.

Philosophical questions deal with serious issues, but serious isn't the same thing as somber. You can actually have fun and enjoy thinking about things that matter. In a top university course I had the joy of teaching for many years, I told stories derived from my own wild life experiences, as well as borrowing many

illustrations from the great philosophers of previous centuries to clarify the issues. Personal tales from my own path through the world often provided just the right imaginative boost necessary to help my first-time students see the importance of a big question about life — and then maybe glimpse a good path or procedure toward for its resolution. I hope my stories here help you in the same way.

In philosophy, ultimately, there are no final authoritative experts. You and I are in this together. I often ask you to consult your intuitions about something, and I sometimes make a suggestion about what most people usually tend to conclude when they do so. I sketch out the deep contours of some experiences that are common among human beings across space and time. And I ask you to think through many issues for yourself. You and I are on a journey of understanding together. So feel free to talk back to me if you ever think I'm getting something wrong.

A final piece of advice: Catch yourself if you spend too much time staring blankly at a page, mesmerized. Deep questions can sometimes have that effect. And, please, try not to ever fall asleep with this book in your hands. It might give other people the wrong idea about the exciting, rousing, exhilarating enterprise of philosophy.

## Foolish Assumptions

I am assuming you are new to philosophy. You're not new to all the questions of philosophy — you've likely been asking some of them since you were quite young. But I'm assuming that you are new to the careful discipline of philosophical thinking. I don't take for granted that you've ever sat in a philosophy classroom, or that you've ever donned a toga. I assume only that you sometimes wonder about life and this world and want to get your bearings a little better. If you are that rare reader who already has had an introduction to philosophy, or even proudly hold a (non-income generating) degree in philosophy, I'm just going to assume you're willing to suspend or rethink some things you thought you knew already, and go at this afresh. And I'm also going to assume that you and I can have an adventure here, thinking about things that matter, which actually isn't foolish at all.



# Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, icons in the margins highlight certain types of valuable information that call out for your attention. Here are the icons you'll find and a brief description of each.



TIP

The Tip icon marks suggestions and perspectives that can help you think through an issue.



REMEMBER

The Remember icon indicates information that's especially important to know and keep in mind.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

The Technical Stuff icon alerts you to information of a more difficult nature that you can skip over initially, if you'd prefer.



WARNING

The Warning icon tells you to watch out! It flags important cautionary notes that can save you intellectual confusion, needless effort, or the fallacious *faux pas* to be avoided.

## Beyond the Book

In addition to the abundance of information and guidance related to the philosophical questions to be found in this book, you get access to even more help and information online at [Dummies.com](http://Dummies.com). Check out this book's online Cheat Sheet. Just go to [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and search for "Philosophy For Dummies Cheat Sheet." But don't worry, it's not the sort of cheating to be pondered in the ethics chapters.

## Where to Go from Here

The deepest philosophical issues are all connected with each other in interesting ways, as you'll come to see. But I've written this book so you can start anywhere or read different chapters independently of each other. If you see your favorite

topic in the table of contents, jump right into it if you like. But of course, if you start with chapter one and read on consecutively, you'll be following the order of my own thinking and pick up some tools early on. But the point is that you need not. This is a reference guide for your convenience and is intended to answer at least many of the questions you might have about philosophy and philosophical thought. It's written in the great *For Dummies* style that organizes lots of important information in an easy to access format. Go enjoy the journey!

# 1

## **What Is Philosophy, Anyway?**

**IN THIS PART . . .**

Cut through the false image of philosophy in our time.

Find out what philosophy really is and does.

Explore a philosophical way of thinking and living.

- » Hearing common misunderstandings of philosophy, courtesy of the famous
- » Examining the importance of the examined life — the life worth living
- » Looking at the questions to consider in a deep quest for understanding

## Chapter **1**

# Great Thinkers, Deep Thoughts

*Conversation you're not likely to hear at any point in your life:*

**Him:** "Hey, Honey, what do you want to do tonight?"

**Her:** "How about some philosophy?"

**Him:** "Sounds great!"

**Her:** "Invite the neighbors!"

**O**kay, let's face it. For at least a hundred years, philosophy hasn't exactly enjoyed the most appealing reputation in our culture. But that situation is about to change. This deepest, most exciting, and ultimately most practical activity of the mind has been misunderstood for long enough. It's time to acknowledge that there are many critics and move beyond them.

In this chapter, you'll be introduced to the broad array of worries and criticisms that otherwise highly intelligent and accomplished people have leveled against the enterprise of philosophy, and then you'll get to see more deeply the real truth about this ancient and profound way of thinking.

# Listening to the critics

There may be no intellectual activity more misunderstood and wrongly maligned as philosophy. The great American historian Henry Adams once characterized the entire endeavor as consisting of nothing more than “unintelligible answers to insoluble problems.” As far back as the 16th century, the prominent French essayist Michael de Montaigne proclaimed that, “philosophy is doubt.” And, of course, who enjoys doubt? It’s often uncomfortable. It can even be scary.

The 19th-century philosophical wild man, Friedrich Nietzsche, took it one more step and characterized philosophy as “an explosive, in the presence of which everything is in danger.” So, then, it really comes as no surprise to see Nietzsche’s predecessor, the English poet John Keats, worry about all the questions and doubts encouraged by philosophers and ask, “Do not all charms fly at the mere touch of cold philosophy?”

In ancient times, the Roman statesman and author Cicero even complained, “There is nothing so absurd that it hasn’t been said by some philosopher.” Of course, he too was “some philosopher.” But then there are many other very smart and even truly wise people who adopt the label of philosopher with pride. It may be revelatory to understand them and how they see their distinctive activity of the mind.

Philosophers? Crazy! Philosophers? Otherworldly! Philosophers? Gloomy! When we hear the word, we tend to have a modern image come to mind of badly groomed academics, carelessly dressed in tweed sport coats, wrinkled shirts, badly rumpled pants, and old scuffed up shoes, who go through life coated with chalk dust, stroking their beards, bearing scowls on their faces and arcane thoughts in their heads, all the while writing on blackboards or whiteboards in capital letters such weighty words as “DEATH,” and “DESPAIR.”

In 1707, Jonathan Swift wrote the following comment:

*The various opinions of philosophers have scattered through the world as many plagues of the mind as Pandora’s box did those of the body; only with this difference, that they have not left hope at the bottom.*

In the century approaching our own era, the widely read American journalist and literary critic H.L. Mencken once went so far as to announce, “There is no record in human history of a happy philosopher.” (But, hey, he never met me.)

## NOT EXACTLY FANS OF PHILOSOPHY

It is hard to find many general subjects that are as controversial among the well educated as philosophy. Not everybody is a fan. And that's because not everyone really understands what it's all about. The following quotes show what some prominent individuals have had to say about philosophy and philosophers, largely because they misunderstood the enterprise and what it aims to accomplish. It will help to hear this crowd of critics in order to get beyond their misapprehensions and dive deep into what philosophy really is.

*Philosophy is such an impertinently litigious lady that a man had as good be engaged in lawsuits as have to do with her.*

— Sir Isaac Newton

*Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry the progress, ignorance the end.*

— Montaigne

*Philosophy will clip an angel's wings . . .*

— John Keats

*All philosophies, if you ride them home, are nonsense; but some are greater nonsense than others.*

— Samuel Butler

*Philosophy consists largely of one philosopher arguing that all the others are jackasses. He usually proves it, and I should add that he also usually proves that he is one himself.*

— H.L. Mencken

*If I wished to punish a province, I would have it governed by philosophers.*

— Frederick the Great

*There is only one thing that a philosopher can be relied on to do, and that is to contradict other philosophers.*

— William James

*When he who hears doesn't know what he who speaks means, and when he who speaks doesn't know what he himself means — that is philosophy.*

— Voltaire

(continued)

(continued)

*There is nothing so strange and so unbelievable that it has not been said by one philosopher or the other.*

— Descartes (the strange and unbelievable  
father of modern philosophy)

*I have tried, too, in my time to be a philosopher but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking through.*

— Oliver Edwards (18th century)

So what's the deal here? Philosophy, done right, should be the *opposite* of all this gloom and doom stuff. It should be stimulating, exciting, liberating, provocative, revelatory, illuminating, helpful, *and fun*. Philosophers themselves should be great company, the life of any party, a hoot and a half. (Okay, maybe I'm getting a little carried away here.) Even Cicero, despite his occasional grumblings about the wilder philosophers of his day once proclaimed, "If wisdom be attainable, let us not only win but enjoy it."

I must admit that I know of at least a few great thinkers I'm glad I don't have as neighbors. And some of their books can be . . . well, should I say, "less than scintillating"? And, all right, as long as I'm trying to be as candid here as possible, I should be willing to acknowledge — without naming any names, of course — that I have actually met a few exceedingly peculiar social misfits who seem to be fish out of water in ordinary life, and whose only discernible accomplishment appears to be an academic doctoral degree in philosophy from a major university. Along with, perhaps, several unintelligible publications bearing their names. And, unfortunately, a teaching position that places them as ambassadors of philosophy in front of classrooms full of bewildered and yet sometimes bemused undergraduates. But things are not always what they seem. As the ancient poet Caecilius Statius once reminded us: "There is often wisdom under a shabby cloak."

The enterprise of philosophy itself, philosophy as a genuine human activity, can and should be great. Not to mention the fact that philosophers can be our friends. They often enjoy being taken out to dinner, or for a celebratory libation or two. On this topic, I should perhaps quote the great poet John Milton, who wrote:

*How charming is divine philosophy!*

*Not harsh, and crabbed as dull fools suppose,*

*But musical as is Apollo's lute,*



*And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,  
Where no cruel surfeit reigns.*

In other words, good stuff indeed.

The same Cicero who loudly voiced his irritation at bad philosophers didn't shrink from praising a good one. He once described Socrates as "the first man to bring philosophy into the marketplace." In many ways, it's the example of Socrates that will be followed in this book. Philosophy can be brought back into the marketplace of ideas that are seriously contending for your attention. Some pretty lofty ideas can be pulled down to earth and examined for their amazing relevance to our day-to-day lives. The goal in this book is to help you get clearer on some of the issues that matter the most, but that you may ordinarily tend to think about the least.

I hope that together we can be explorers of the spirit, charting our way forward in new depths of awareness as we go. We take a close look at some exciting ideas, quite a few amazing questions, and several new perspectives for everything we think and do. We can't nail down a definitive answer for every question that may arise, but if you stick with me for the duration, you're likely to find yourself making more progress in appreciating and understanding these topics than you may at first imagine. I might sometimes ask some strange-sounding questions, but I promise you that, as you consider the answers, those queries can help you attain some pretty amazing perspectives on this life that we're living. Our goal, throughout, is nothing less than a quest for wisdom itself. And that's a vitally important matter, since, as the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson realized, "Life is a festival only to the wise."

## Consulting Socrates on What Counts

The original public philosopher, Socrates liked to walk the streets and go to parties, along the way engaging anyone he could in philosophical dialogue. For him, philosophy was not a dry, intellectual subject, a game for pedants and scholars, but a requirement for living well. He even famously proclaimed the following axiom:

*The unexamined life is not worth living.*

But what in the world does this statement mean? Everyone knows what it means to say, "This car isn't worth \$80,000," or "This shirt isn't worth \$150," or "The tickets to this concert aren't worth \$125 each." But what exactly does it mean to

say about a certain form of life, a particular lifestyle — what Socrates is calling “the unexamined life” — that it’s “not worth living”?

Essentially, an item is “worth” what it costs if the value or benefits that you derive from it are equal to or greater than the price you pay for it — which is ultimately the same value as the underlying effort or energy that you put into obtaining the resources required to pay that price. Whenever I think about making a certain purchase, I always ask myself whether the item is truly worth the asking price: Is it worth that amount of money? Is it worth the work it took for me to earn that amount?

A pair of shoes that a wealthy individual could see as a “very good deal” might be perceived by a person of more modest means as far too extravagantly expensive. The less well-off shopper may need to work far too hard or too long to earn that amount of money. He may then conclude that the shoes aren’t worth the cost.

But how exactly does this commonplace sort of judgment relate to Socrates’ famous claim? What is the cost — or the worth — of “the unexamined life”? Well, first we need to understand what Socrates means by this phrase.

What is “the unexamined life”? Unfortunately, it’s the form of life far too many people live: getting up, dressing, eating, going to work, breaking for lunch, working some more, going home, eating again, watching TV, leafing through magazines or endlessly scrolling social media, exchanging a few words with family members or or friends on the phone, bathing, changing for bed, checking messages again, and falling to sleep — just to repeat the same routine over and over and over, without ever thinking about what it all means or how life should really be lived.

We wake up already in motion in this life. The raft is out on the river, and the current simply carries us forward. Habit and the demands of others tend to eat up the day.

When we’re young, other people decide what we wear, what we eat, and when we can play. All too often, even after we’re older, other people still decide what we do during the day. We make choices, lots of them, but often from a limited selection of options that our environment, friends, families, employers, and simple routine together present to us. Rarely, if ever, do we stop to reflect on what we truly want in life, on who we are and desire to become, on what difference we’d like to make in the world, and so on what’s really right for us. And *that* is the unexamined life — the life that is lived at some level almost as a cosmic sleepwalker, somnambulating away the hours, days, and years. It’s a life that is experienced on automatic pilot — a life based on values and beliefs that we’ve never really looked at, never really tested, never examined for ourselves.



TIP

Many people seem to fear self-examination, as if looking at and evaluating their most basic beliefs and values is somehow a threat. But a philosophically reflective examination of our most basic assumptions and commitments doesn't necessarily have a corrosive effect. It may have a purifying and empowering impact. The fundamental goal of philosophical examination isn't criticism in a negative sense, or any sort of rejection or abandonment of ideas or beliefs. The true goal is this: understanding. And then a greater level of understanding often results in a refocusing, a shedding of unnecessary or unimportant activities, and an adoption of others — rebalancing and changing our lives in a positive way.

The unexamined life, on the other hand, isn't one of deep personal understanding. It's not a life of self-directed positive change. It simply continues on, largely out of inertia.

And you pay a *big* price for living such a life. Socrates identifies the price or the cost when he states that this form of life, the unexamined life, is not worth what you have to pay for it — when he, in fact, plainly says that this form of life simply is not worth *living*. The living itself, the spending of those precious hours, days, weeks, and years that you have is too high a cost to pay for an unexamined life.

The price that you pay for an unexamined life, therefore, is precisely that — *your entire life*. And you can pay no greater price for anything. Notice, however, that Socrates didn't say that the unexamined life is not worth *anything*. He wisely left open the viewpoint that some positive value exists in any life, however unreflective that life may be. This great thinker said only that the unexamined life isn't worth the high price that you must pay for it — the investment of all your time and energies in a direction that's not of your own careful and wise choosing.

Philosophy, on the other hand, as an activity of reflection giving rise to a wiser way of life, involves investing your life energies in something that may prove worth the cost. But it's not easy. The activity of self-examination and developing the self-knowledge that results from it can be quite hard. The great novelist Cervantes once acknowledged this in an extreme though accurate way when he advised: "Make it your business to know yourself, which is the most difficult lesson in the world." Pondering this, you might of course also begin to wonder whether the *examined* life is in the end itself guaranteed to be worth living. And the truth is that Socrates never actually said so. His statement about the unexamined life does seem to imply, by contrast, such a conviction. But the wise philosopher left us to draw that ultimate conclusion on our own, precisely by examining ourselves and our own lives. And I hope that what you find in this book helps show you the true worth of such an examination.

# Asking The Deeper Questions

In this book, you get to look at some incredibly interesting questions dealing with issues of belief, skepticism, and knowledge; good and evil; free will and determinism; the nature of a person; death and life after death; the existence of God; the truth about success and happiness; and the meaning of life. As children, we were endlessly curious about life. And as we age, that should not stop. Philosopher John Locke once wrote: “There is frequently more to be learned from the unexpected questions of a child than then discourses of men, who talk in a road, according to the notions they have borrowed and the prejudices of their education.” In these pages you get a chance to explore some of those questions once more.

This book touches on many of the main fields of philosophy — epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of religion. And it consults many of the great thinkers in history. Throughout, the discussion will be as practical as it is theoretical, because I believe that the best use of theory is in better practice. With each issue, you should ask what difference it makes in your own life, and how it can help you to chart your way forward in the world.



TIP

Here are some of the questions you can expect to find in these pages:

- » How can we really know anything?
- » What is the importance of rationality to a good life?
- » What does the word “good” really mean?
- » Is ethics just a matter of opinion, or do objective moral rules exist that bind everyone?
- » Why should we be moral?
- » Why do people disagree so much on ethics?
- » Are people really free, or are our actions all determined by genetics and environment?
- » Can anyone predict the future, in principle, in every detail?
- » What’s the difference between a human being and a robot?
- » Do people have souls, or are we just physically complex organisms?
- » What is death?
- » Why is death so feared by so many people?
- » Do we somehow still exist after death?
- » Where does the concept of God come from?

- » Does a God really exist?
- » Why does the world contain so much evil?
- » Can anyone prove what the truth is on such ultimate issues, or must we accept them just as matters of faith?
- » What, for that matter, *is* faith?
- » What is the meaning of life?
- » How can people have true success and actually be happy?

These questions cover only a few of the basic concepts that I consider with you throughout this book. Ultimately, I hope to help you ask your own questions a little better, or a bit more deeply, and perhaps even come to some revelatory and satisfying answers. As the famous novelist James Thurber once pointed out, “It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all of the answers.” Asking the right questions well, and living with them, can enhance our lives.

