

## ON THE STUDY OF PHILOSOPHY



**W**ELCOME to philosophy. For some of you, it will be the most practical subject you will study in college.

Why would we say that? Doesn't philosophy have a reputation for being *impractical*? Isn't it abstract and theoretical—the very opposite of practical?

Philosophy can be abstract and theoretical. But the study of philosophy can be practical in that it affects what you do with your life. This is because the abstractions and theories pertain to the basic concepts and values with which you confront experience.

Humans do things for reasons. We want certain things, and we believe that acting in certain ways will get us those things. So we act. Rocks don't act for reasons, but we do. It's part of what makes us human. Our desires and beliefs provide us with those reasons. Values and concepts are the building blocks of desires and beliefs. Thus our values and concepts play a big role in determining what we do and who we are.

Humans also reflect on and criticize the reasons we do things. Do we have good reasons for our reasons? Why do we want what we want? Why do we believe what we believe?

Having the capacity to reflect on one's reasons is another part of being human. It's a capacity that divides us from most of our fellow animals. We not only believe things, we can think about why we believe things. We not only want things, we can ask ourselves why we want them.

All humans have this capacity to reflect on their beliefs and desires, on their basic concepts and values. But not everyone likes to do so. It is the love of this activity that draws a person to philosophy. Do you worry about whether there is a God? What the difference between the future and the past is? Why we can't turn around in time as we can in space? Whether you are

really a brain in a vat in someone's experiment? Whether other humans have minds, or just you? How you would know if blue things looked to you just like green things look to everyone else? How you can be free, if every physical event has a physical cause? Have you ever wondered what made it wrong to lie and cheat? Whether democracy was really better than other political systems, or just the one you happened to grow up in? If this all sounds like you, taking a philosophy course may be one of the most enjoyable and most liberating experiences of your life.

Why should reflecting on one's beliefs and desires be liberating? Because in a very real sense your beliefs and desires, because they motivate what you do, define who you are. But where did those desires, values, and beliefs come from? Are they merely the accidental result of where you were born, who your parents and teachers and friends were? Philosophy can be liberating because it helps us reflect on the basic concepts with which we deal with experience and the desires that motivate us to do what we do, and to put our personal stamp on them. We can never fully escape limitations on our vision that result from the particular time and place we live. But through reading and thinking we can examine and challenge ideas that seem natural from our perspective with ideas that come from quite different points of view. Those of our values and concepts that survive this process will be more truly our own.

While college may seem like a hectic time, it is the best opportunity that most of us have to reflect intensively on who we are, to examine the source of our own way of looking at things, and seriously to consider alternatives. One of the saddest things that can happen to a person is to realize that she has committed a large part of her life to goals that upon

reflection don't seem very important, on the basis of beliefs that upon reflection don't seem very plausible. Because your philosophy class gives you tools and opportunity to reflect on your basic values and concepts, and to develop habits of reflection, it may be the most practical course you take in college.

The philosophy class in which you are enrolled, and for which this book is a text, is part of a long tradition, stretching back to ancient times, of reflecting on the most basic values and beliefs that humans have. Philosophy means thinking as hard and as clearly as one can about some of the most interesting and enduring problems that human minds have ever encountered. Some of these problems have been discussed since ancient times. What makes acts right or wrong? You can read what the ancient philosopher Plato, the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, and the contemporary philosopher Tom Nagel have to say about it. What is it to be conscious? You can read what the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, the pioneer of computer theory Alan Turing, and the contemporary philosopher John Searle think about that. Other problems are as timely as your morning paper. Is there anything wrong with a woman renting out her body? You can read what Debra Satz thinks about that. Is it immoral to get an abortion? You can read what Rosalind Hursthouse, reflecting on ideas of the ancient philosopher Aristotle, says about that.

To read philosophy well one must read slowly and aggressively. This may mean breaking some habits. There is a lot of emphasis today on reading fast. This is the age of information. To take advantage of the information available to us (even to cope with it) or to master that which is important for our job, for responsible citizenship, or for a full life—or at any rate for the final or the midterm—you have to learn to absorb large amounts of information in limited amounts of time. The college student, one hears, must learn to read at a minimum of 1000 words a minute. And 2000 or 3000 words is better; and those who really want to get ahead should read so fast that the only limiting factor in the speed with which they read is the speed with which they can turn pages.

These skills may be suitable for some types of reading, but not for philosophy. Good philosophers

develop arguments and theories of some intricacy: arguments that are designed to convince the reader of the author's position on important issues. Reading such works is valuable insofar as one grapples with the ideas—fighting not only to understand the author but also, once one does, fighting with him or her for control of one's mind. One should not be easily convinced of one position or another on issues so weighty as the existence of God, the indirectness of our knowledge of the external world, or the nature of justice.

Of course, all generalizations are a bit suspect. When one is reading for pleasure or to absorb straightforward information from a reliable source, speed-reading can be fine. But, if one derives pleasure from reading philosophy, it should be the pleasure of grappling with important and sublime ideas, not the exhilaration of racing through a thriller. And, when one learns from reading philosophy, it should be a result of being forced to think through new ideas and grasp new concepts, not simply the uploading of a data file from the text to the mind.

College students will have learned that mathematics and other technical material cannot be read in overdrive. But, philosophy can be deceptive. It cannot be claimed that good philosophy always makes good reading, but some philosophy does. A lot of philosophy, including a good portion of the famous historical works included in this anthology, make pleasant reading. They do not contain symbols, equations, charts, or other obvious signs of technicality and intricacy. One can just sit down and read Hume, or even Descartes, getting a feel for the author's position and style and the historical perspective of the work. When these texts are assigned in courses that survey the literature of various periods—with an eye toward getting a sense of the flow of ideas and concerns—as parts of larger assignments that cover hundreds of pages a week, one may have little choice but to read philosophy in this way, that is, just to get a feel for what is going on.

But appearances to the contrary, philosophy is inevitably technical. The philosopher constructs arguments, theories, positions, or criticisms in an attempt to persuade his or her most intelligent and perceptive opponents. The ideas and issues dealt with have a long history: to say something new,

interesting, and persuasive, the philosopher must build his or her case with care. The result may be understood on various levels; to understand it at the deepest level, the reader must adopt the stance of the intelligent and perceptive opponent, thus coming to understand the case the philosopher is trying to make. This is what we mean by reading aggressively.

To read philosophy in this way, one should imagine oneself in a dialogue with the philosopher—as if the philosopher were one's roommate (or an intelligent and articulate new roommate) trying to convince one of a startling new idea.

To see this approach at work, let's consider an example. Here is a passage from Descartes's "First Meditation."

Today, then having rid myself of worries and having arranged for some peace and quiet, I withdraw alone, free at last earnestly and wholeheartedly to overthrow all my beliefs.

To do this, I do not need to show each of my beliefs to be false; I may never be able to do that. But, since reason now convinces me that I ought to withhold my assent just as carefully from what is not obviously certain and indubitable as from what is obviously false, I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs if I can find some ground for doubt in each. And, to do this, I need not take on the endless task of running through my beliefs one by one: since a building collapses when its foundation is cut out from under it. I will go straight to the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Let's start with the second paragraph. The first place to pause is the word *this*. Whenever one encounters a demonstrative pronoun or other device by which the author refers back to something earlier, one should pause and make sure one knows to what it refers.

DESCARTES: To do this . . .

YOU: Wait a minute. To do what? Oh yes, I see, *to overthrow all your beliefs*.

But what is to overthrow one's beliefs? This sort of phrase ought immediately to occasion a demand for clarification.

Y: What do you mean, "Overthrow all your beliefs" anyway? Every one of them? You must be kidding? You are trying to make yourself believe everything you now believe is false? Can that really be what you mean?

Of course, Descartes isn't your roommate and, in fact, is long dead. So he can't respond to you. Still, you should mentally—or on the margin of your book—note this question.

Y: Well, of course you can't respond. But this sounds pretty odd. I will keep my eye open for clarification of just what it is you are trying to do.

D: As I was saying: To do this, I do not need to show each of my beliefs to be false; I may never be able to do that.

Y: Well, I didn't have to wait long. It's a relief that you aren't going to show all of your beliefs to be false. Still, it sounds as if this is something you want to do but simply don't think you could. The point of even wanting to seems a bit obscure. Go ahead.

D: But, since reason now convinces me . . .

Y: Reason. Reason. I wonder what exactly you mean by that. Hmm, this is the first use of the word. I mean, I know the meaning of the word *reason*, but it sounds as if you have something rather definite in mind. Actually, I use the word as a verb rather than a noun. Maybe I had better look it up in the dictionary. Here we are: "A statement offered in explanation." That doesn't seem to fit. *Motive, cause*, likewise. *Sanity*. That must be as in, "He has lost his reason." Or *intelligence*. One of these must be the closest. The latter seems better. So you are saying that your intelligence convinces you that you should be a great deal more cautious about what you believe—that's what this seems to amount to. Still, I have a hunch that more is packed into your use of the word *reason* than I can get out of the dictionary. The prof said you were a rationalist and that they put great emphasis on the power of reason. I'll keep it in mind that this is a key word and look for other clues as to exactly what you mean by it.

D: . . . That I ought to withhold my assent just as carefully from what is not obviously certain and

indubitable as from what is obviously false; I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs if I can find some ground for doubt in each.

Y: Wait a minute. You just said a mouthful. Let me try to sort it out. Let's see. *Withhold my assent*. So you said you were going to overthrow your beliefs at the end of the last paragraph. Then, you said to do this you don't need to show that they are false. So *withholding assent* must be how you describe the in-between position—you have quit believing something, although you haven't shown it false, you don't believe the opposite either.

Wait a minute. Does that make sense? If I don't believe that  $3 + 5 = 8$ , don't I automatically believe that it's not the case that  $3 + 5 = 8$ ? Hmm. I guess not. Suppose it was  $358 + 267$ . Until I add it up, I neither believe it does equal 625 nor believe that it doesn't. So I guess that's where one is at when one is *withholding assent*.

Here is another mouthful: "Not obviously certain and indubitable." I'll look up the last word. *Unquestionable: Too evident to be doubted*. How is that different from certain? If your *Meditations* is one of the all-time classics, why are you being redundant in this show-offy way? Maybe I should give you the benefit of the doubt.

Let's see, the contrast is between *certain and indubitable*—no, wait, *obviously certain and indubitable*—and *obviously false*. Clearly one withholds one's assent from what is obviously false. So what you are saying is that you are going to do the same for *everything*, except that which is obviously certain and indubitable. And your reason, which seems to amount to your intelligence, is what leads you to do this. OK, proceed.

D: . . . I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs . . .

Y: You seem to go back and forth between a pretty sensible position—not believing what you aren't really sure of—and something that sounds a bit weird. Before you said you were going to try to overthrow *all* your beliefs; now you are trying to justify rejecting *all* your beliefs. I must admit, even though you have quite a reputation as a philosopher, this project strikes me as sort of extreme.

D: . . . If I can find some ground for doubt in each . . .

Y: Oh dear, another technical sounding phrase: *ground for doubt*. I better pull out my *Webster's* again. Well, you aren't using *ground* to mean dirt and you don't mean the bottom of a body of water, so you must mean *basis for belief or argument*. It sounds as if you are going to look for some basis for an argument *against* every single one of your beliefs. *That* sounds like quite a project. I wonder how come your *Meditations* is so short if you are really going to go through each one of your beliefs.

D: And, to do this, I need not take on the endless task of running through my beliefs one by one . . .

Y: Well, that's a relief.

D: . . . Since a building collapses when its foundation is cut out from under it, I will go straight to the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Y: Relying on a metaphor at a crucial point, eh? I thought the prof said that was a dubious practice. She said we should look at the assumptions underlying the appropriateness of the metaphor. So it looks like you think your beliefs form a *structure* with a *foundation*. The foundation is principles. All your beliefs rest on—i.e., I suppose, depend on in some way—certain principles. For this all to make sense, these principles must be beliefs. So what you are saying is that you are going to isolate certain beliefs, on which the rest depend. If you have a ground for doubt for a principle, you will quit believing it, not in the sense of taking it to be false or believing the opposite, but in the sense of withholding your assent. In so doing, you will automatically have a ground for doubt for all other beliefs that depend on the dubious principle.

Well, I guess that's an intelligible project. It still seems like it ought to take a lot longer than 50 pages. We shall see . . .

This is what it is like to read aggressively.

But being part of the philosophy tradition doesn't just mean reading about what others have thought. It means thinking yourself, long and hard, about the problems that interest you, and writing about them.

Now there may be a bit of a problem here. We said that in taking this philosophy class you are

joining a tradition that goes back to Hume and Descartes and Aristotle and Plato. We have invited you to think about big issues and basic concepts. But when you get your writing assignments, your teacher will no doubt warn you against trying to be too deep and profound.

Imagine going to the ballet. You are impressed with the ballerina, and decide that you want to become one. The day of your first ballet lesson arrives. You have visions of a whole new world opening up to you; you imagine yourself gliding across the floor, spinning, jumping. But you find that your ballet lesson isn't like that at all. You spend a lot of time stretching and doing other exercises that you don't remember anyone doing when you saw *Swan Lake*.

Your first experience writing philosophy is going to be like that. You have read some of the works of the great philosophers. You are eager to share with the world some of your own deep philosophical thoughts, and to attack head on some big problems. But what you will be asked to do, in all likelihood, is to write a very short and very clear essay on a very restricted topic. And when your teacher grades the essay, she may miss all the profundity and focus on the fact that you didn't state with absolute clarity some mundane things she should have known anyway.

A good ballet requires numerous small precise movements on the part of the dancer, the ones she has practiced over and over for years. But these are not visible without close inspection; instead one sees a beautiful, creative, and seemingly effortless movement of the whole dancer. Somewhat similarly, as one reads a good philosophy article the original ideas, broad themes, and central conclusions will be apparent. But underneath there will be a solid structure of close argumentation, where the philosopher gives you reasons for adopting her view and for rejecting the views of others. So don't be discouraged because you are being asked to master this skill. Plato, Descartes, Hume, Lewis, and Anscombe all went through the same thing.

Here are some of the skills you need to master to do well in philosophy:

- Analyzing statements and arguments.

When you were working to understand Descartes in the passage we went through earlier, you were analyzing his statements. You were making sure you understood each word, and knew the possible ambiguities.

In a good philosophical essay the statements will add up to arguments, with premises and a conclusion. (For more about arguments, see the entry *deductive argument* in the glossary and the related entries.) You need to learn to spot the main conclusions the philosopher is arguing for, and the premises she uses to establish them.

- Imagining alternatives to familiar views and situations.

Nothing is more important to a philosopher than a good imagination. If you encounter a generalization, you should try to see if you can think of a counterexample. If you encounter a view that seems strange or absurd, you should try to see if you can imagine what experiences would lead someone to hold that view.

- Stating things explicitly, clearly, and succinctly.

Saint Paul said, "Faith, Hope and Charity, but the greatest of these is Charity." As a novice philosopher, your motto should be "Truth, Profundity, Clarity, but the greatest of these is Clarity." The reason is this. Our language is built around familiar ideas and situations. Philosophers often need to express thoughts that push the limits of language, because they want to consider unfamiliar ideas and odd situations. When doing this, it's relatively easy to sound profound, but very difficult to be clear. But if you are not clear, you cannot be sure that what you say is true, nor can you get the help of others to figure out whether it is.

Looking constantly for concrete examples that nail down what you are getting at is one of the best ways of keeping your thinking and writing clear. Another is to imagine a reader of your own work, who is reading it as slowly and aggressively as we encouraged you to read the philosophical works you encounter. Indeed, don't just imagine such a reader,

become such a reader, rooting out unclarity and ambiguity in your own work.

- Thinking creatively.

A lot of philosophy is analysis and criticism: criticism of the concepts and values you inherit, criticism of the ideas you encounter in the work of others, and criticism of your own ideas. But one of the most important values of the philosophical tradition has been the new concepts and values that emerge from the stubborn reflection on old ones. At the beginning of virtually every social and scientific revolution, there stands a philosopher who not only questioned some idea or practice of her age, but was able to suggest something better.

If you can develop these skills as a philosophy student, then there is another way in which

philosophy may be a very practical pursuit for you. Most professions highly value persons who can carry the analysis of a position or an argument to a deeper level, who can identify and untangle assumptions, and who can communicate effectively about complicated matters. Our world is a world replete with documents, deliberations, and decisions. The person who can bring rigor, clarity, and imagination to bear on dealing with these documents, deliberations, and decisions can make an enormous contribution in any number of areas of life.

In all these senses, then, philosophy can be a practical pursuit for the college student. Our fondest hope for this book is that it encourages those students with a bent toward reflection to plunge into philosophy and to reap the rewards its study can bring.