

# I.1 What is Philosophy?

PHIL101: Introduction to Philosophy

Prof. Oakes

Winthrop University

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## Goals, this lesson:

- To gain a preliminary appreciation of the nature of philosophy;
- To become acquainted with the two main goals of philosophy;
- To become acquainted with three basic philosophical questions;
- To become acquainted with the idea of *Surface Tension*;
- To see what philosophers have said about philosophy.

## What is Philosophy?

The term ‘philosophy’ was coined in ancient Greece by the philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras.<sup>1</sup> Pythagoras (c. 570-490BCE) needed a term for a certain kind of individual, one who prized truth and knowledge above all things. Accordingly, he combined the ancient Greek terms for love, *philein* and wisdom, *sophia* to produce *philosophos*, one who loves wisdom. Philosophy, then, is the love of wisdom. It’s not as though Pythagoras invented *philosophy*, of course. What he was describing, our love of knowledge, of wisdom, has been with us perhaps since we first began to think. But he did invent a term that has proved useful in referring to this most basic and urgent of human abilities, the pursuit of knowledge. That term is *philosophy*.

While Pythagoras’ focus was on the philosopher, he or she whose life is dominated by the love of wisdom, it is fair to say that all of us are philosophical to one extent or another. We all enjoy the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge. In its most general sense, every instance of learning may count as the satisfaction of this basic desire.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, another ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384-322BCE), maintained that the pleasure of knowledge-acquisition is the greatest of human pleasures and makes for the best possible life.

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable for it to accord with the highest virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing in us. The best thing in us is reason ... and to understand what is fine and divine, by being itself either divine or the most divine element in us.

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<sup>1</sup> So, at any rate, it is reported by Liddell and Scott in their *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1889), p. 865. Possibly this claim is owing to the anecdote related by Diogenes Laertius (3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE): “[W]hen Leon the tyrant of Phlius asked [Pythagoras] who he was, he said, ‘A philosopher,’ and that he compared life to the Great Games, where some went to compete for the prize and others went with wares to sell, but the best as spectators; for similarly, in life, some grow up with servile natures, greedy for fame and gain, but the philosopher seeks for truth.” *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VIII.8. By the time of his *Republic* (c. 360BCE), Plato can employ the term thus: “[T]he one who readily and willingly tries all kinds of learning, who turns gladly to learning and is insatiable for it, is rightly called a philosopher ...” (475c; Grube/Reeve translation) Pythagoras, of course, is better known to undergraduates for the geometrical theorem bearing his name.

<sup>2</sup> Among the basic questions in psychology is our motivation to learn. See J. Litman for a recent discussion: “Curiosity and the Pleasures of Learning: Wanting and Liking New Information,” *Cognition and Emotion* 2005, 19 (6), 793-814.

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Hence complete happiness will be activity in accord with proper virtue; and we have said that this activity is the activity of study.<sup>3</sup>

We will consider further Aristotle's views on the good life, below, in our study of value, Section IV.

### The Goals of Philosophy

There are two primary goals, in philosophy.<sup>4</sup> One is a theoretical goal, namely, truth, and the other is a practical goal, namely, goodness. Truth is an account of what is, what the ancient Greeks called a *logos*, while goodness consists in the welfare of humans, roughly speaking.<sup>5</sup> Consider, for a moment, these lofty and even outrageous goals. As a seeker of truth, a theoretician, the philosopher seeks nothing less than a complete account of everything. A complete account of everything would presumably include the following:

- An overall account of everything as a whole;
- A complete account of each individual thing;
- An account of the relationships of each individual thing to every other individual thing;
- Accounts of groups of things and their interrelationships;
- An account of the future and of the past;
- An account of things that don't exist and of things that cannot exist;
- An account of what makes sense and what doesn't make sense;
- An account of morality, right and wrong, good and evil, the wise, the foolish;
- An account of beauty;
- An account of the divine;
- Etc.

Philosophers, over the ages, have pursued these goals, creating theories sometimes intricate, sometimes astonishing, sometimes bizarre. Their work has shaped our intellectual lives, which is to shape a good part of what it is to be human.

Humans are also practical animals: we have interests, goals, hopes, aspirations; we prefer one state or outcome to another. And as you can see from the above list, the theoretical body of philosophy includes an account of the value of our various ends and desires. This is Moral Philosophy: the theory of human action and goals, their comparative value. In one sense, moral philosophy generally is but a part of philosophical theory, the account of all that is. But more than an item of "philosophical" interest, our practical lives are after all what *matter* to us. The account of what is right and wrong, wise or foolish is not an account of mere theoretical interest; it is *the* knowledge that we pursue in order to live well. Thus, in addition to truth in general, the philosopher seeks an account of moral truth in particular. What, exactly, should we do with ourselves and our lives? How should we behave with respect to others? Are there right acts and wrong acts? What is the meaning of our lives? And what role does philosophy, both theoretically and practically, play in our pursuit of the good life?

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7.1177a13-18.

<sup>4</sup> As we will see, Aristotle points out that an important part of what a thing *is* is what that thing is *for* – its purpose or end or goal. Thus, in answer to the question what is philosophy, a consideration of its ends or goals may be helpful.

<sup>5</sup> As we will see, everything – and I do mean everything – is a matter of dispute in philosophy. There are no claims that go unchallenged, including this one, paradoxically. We will take this as a given: that my broad claims in introducing philosophy are representative of widely-held philosophical views, which views, nevertheless, remain sources of controversy and fascinating further philosophical study.



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idea or concept, it won't do simply to provide instances.<sup>6</sup> In the case of a fruit or a plant, notice that we are able to provide another instance of the same kind: another kind of fruit besides a tomato is a strawberry; another part of a plant is a stalk or stem. That is, part of our understanding of a thing involves an understanding of what it is not. But in the case of being, the "contrast class" is peculiar: non-being. I may be able to say what a tomato is by distinguishing it from a strawberry: strawberries hold their seeds on their surface, while tomato seeds are inside the fruit. But how does a being differ from a non-being? To be sure, it differs by being, whereas the non-being does not. But this is to use the term that we are trying to define, which doesn't advance our understanding. (It's like saying that a tomato is not a non-tomato.) Part of the problem, here, is that non-beings have no natures for us to contemplate.<sup>7</sup> At any rate, at this point, we seem clearly to be involved in a philosophical issue, one that underlies our thinking about not only tomatoes, but about all things that exist. By asking seemingly simple questions about an ordinary object, we encounter a philosophical problem: what is existence?

### Surface Tension

*Every ordinary human thought or statement implies one or more significant philosophical issue.*

Notice that the above process can reach a similar result regardless of our beginning point. That is, philosophical questions underlie our ordinary understanding of the world – to a surprising and even disturbing degree. Everything in our world is some kind of being or other, but to the extent that our question *what is being?* goes without an answer, we must recognize that we do not understand fully what anything in our world is.

Note then a kind of "surface tension" that exists with respect to our pre-philosophical or ordinary understanding of our world. Surface tension is a phenomenon pertaining to liquids in relation to their surrounding environment. The surface of a drop of water has a certain cohesion resisting penetration, and what lies beneath the surface of the water is quite different from that which lies on this side.<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> Compare the case of life. We might attempt to explain what life is by offering examples: lions, swallows, cacti, fish, bacteria. And we might further such an attempt by considering examples of the opposite, the non-living: rocks, water, hydrogen, a pencil. And these efforts certainly might point us in the right direction, if our goal is an account of what life is. But such examples are not the same thing as an account of life, what life is. Indeed, they presuppose an understanding of what life is, which is the question at issue.

<sup>7</sup> You might want to say that a unicorn is a non-being and unicorns have a nature, specifiable properties, such as having a single horn and otherwise the physiognomy of a horse. But this is not to consider the unicorn as a *non-being* but, rather, to consider what the unicorn would be like if it *were* a being. As a non-being, it seems that there is little or nothing that we can say about it.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the physics of surface tension, see the discussion here: <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/surten.html>.

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Similarly, our ordinary understanding of the world around us has a certain cohesion that resists penetration: it can be difficult to see beyond the surface appearance of the world; we require special tools to go beyond the appearance of the world. As with the case of the tomato, strange and difficult questions lie just beyond the surface of our understanding of the world. Philosophy provides us a set of tools by means of which to penetrate appearances and address the nature of reality more directly.

### Summary

So, what have we seen thus far? We have raised the question, What is philosophy? In response, we have drawn one statement of what philosophy is from the etymology of the term: philosophy is the love of wisdom. This is not to say that this is the only correct definition of philosophy; it is one guide. We have identified two primary goals in philosophy, knowledge of truth on the one hand and achieving or realizing states of goodness on the other. We have seen that three basic questions constitute a means of pursuing these goals, and that these questions correspond to the three basic areas of philosophical study, metaphysics (what is it?), epistemology (how do I know?), and value theory (what is it worth?). And we have seen that the extent of philosophy may be regarded as ubiquitous: philosophical issues underlie all of our beliefs and activities.

### What Philosophers have said about Philosophy

The following is a collection of statements about philosophy made by a number of philosophers, many of them among the most important philosophers of our civilization. Think about what each has to say about what philosophy is. Think, too, about your own questions about the nature of the world in which you live.

Henri Amiel: “Philosophy means the complete liberty of the mind, and therefore independence of all social, political, or religious prejudice. It is to begin with neither Christian nor pagan, neither monarchical nor democratic, neither socialist nor individualist; it is critical and impartial; it loves one thing only—truth. If it disturbs the ready-made opinions of the church or the state—of the historical medium—in which the philosopher happens to have been born, so much the worse, but there is no help for it.

“The philosopher is like a man fasting in the midst of universal intoxication. He alone perceives the illusion of which all creatures are the willing playthings; he is less duped than his neighbor by his own nature. He judges more sanely, he sees things as they are. It is in this that his liberty consists—in the ability to see clearly and soberly, in the power of mental record.” Amiel, H. 2005. *Amiel’s Journal*. Ward, Mrs. H., trans. Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8545/pg8545.html>. Entries for Aug. 29, 1872.

Aristotle: “For it is owing to their wonder that people both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g., about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant; therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance, evidently they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end.” Aristotle. 1941. *Metaphysics* 982b12-23. In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. McKeon, R. ed., W. Ross, trans. New York: Random House. (p. 692)

Aristotle: “I have gained this by philosophy: that I do without being commanded what others do only from fear of the law.” Aristotle. Diogenes Laertius. *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. I (V.20). R. Hicks, trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972. (p. 463)

Simon Critchley: Philosophy begins “in an experience of *disappointment*, that is both *religious* and *political*. That is to say, philosophy might be said to begin with two problems: (i) religious

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disappointment provokes the problem of *meaning*, namely, what is the meaning of life in the absence of religious belief?; and (ii) political disappointment provokes the problem of *justice*, namely, ‘what is justice’ and how might justice become effective in a violently unjust world?” Critchley, S. *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Routledge, 2004. (p. 2)

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: “[P]hilosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts.” *What is Philosophy?* Tomlinson, H. and G. Burchell, trans. London: Verso, 1994. (p. 2)

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: “The greatness of a philosophy is measured by the nature of the events to which its concepts summon us or that it enables us to release in concepts. so the unique, exclusive bond between concepts and philosophy as a creative discipline must be tested in its finest details. The concept belongs to philosophy and only to philosophy.” *What is Philosophy?* Tomlinson, H. and G. Burchell, trans. London: Verso, 1994. (p. 34)

Rene Descartes: “Nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher.” Descartes, R. *Discourse on Method* 2.16. In Cottingham et al. eds. 1985. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (p. 118)

Denis Diderot: “The first step toward truth is doubt.” Diderot, D. 1746. *Pensees Philosophiques*. Wikiquote – Denis Diderot, 2011. [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Denis\\_Diderot](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Denis_Diderot)

Epicurus: “Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young nor weary in the search thereof when he is grown old. For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. And to say that the season for studying philosophy has not yet come, or that it is past and gone, is like saying that the season for happiness is not yet or that it is now no more.” Epicurus. 1994-2009. “Letter to Menoeceus.” Hicks, R., trans. The Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html>.

Epictetus: “Observe, this is the beginning of philosophy, a perception of the disagreement of men with one another, and an inquiry into the cause of the disagreement, and a condemnation and distrust of that which only ‘seems,’ and a certain investigation of that which ‘seems’ whether it ‘seems’ rightly, and a discovery of some rule, as we have discovered a balance in the determination of weights, and a carpenter's rule in the case of straight and crooked things. This is the beginning of philosophy.” Epictetus, Discourses, II:11. *The Internet Classics Archive*. <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/discourses.2.two.html>.

William Halverson: “Philosophy is man’s quest for the unity of knowledge: it consists in a perpetual struggle to create the concepts in which the universe can be conceived as a universe and not a multiverse. This attempt stands without rival as the most audacious enterprise in which the mind of man has ever engaged: Here is man, surrounded by the vastness of a universe in which he is only a tiny and perhaps insignificant part - and he wants to understand it.” Halverson, W. 1967. *A Concise Introduction to Philosophy*. New York: Random House. (pp. 18-19)

Martin Heidegger: “*Was ist das, die Philosophie?*” (“What is it to ask – what this thing, philosophy, is?”)<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, M. 1958. *What is Philosophy?* Kluback, W. and J. Wilde, trans. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. (p. 18)

Walter Kaufmann: “The intensity of great philosophy and poetry is abnormal and subversive: it is the enemy of habit, custom, and all stereotypes. The motto is always that what is well known is not known at all well.” Kaufmann, W. 1958. *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. New York: Harper Books. I.5.

Thomas Nagel: “Philosophy is the childhood of the intellect, and a culture that tries to skip it will never grow up.” Nagel, T. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press. (p. 12)

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1987), pp. 19-20. Steiner calls attention to the bafflement expressed in Heidegger’s phrasing, which may be read, “What *is* this thing, philosophy?!”

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Friedrich Nietzsche: “[T]he aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life.” Nietzsche, F. 1967/1872. *The Birth of Tragedy* §1. Kaufmann, W., trans. New York: Random House. (p. 34)

Friedrich Nietzsche: “Whenever a philosophy begins to believe in itself it always creates the world according to its own image. It cannot do otherwise. Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual form of the will to power, to 'creation of the world', to the *causa prima*.” *Beyond Good and Evil* §9. Marion Faber, trans., ed. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Plato: “The sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin.” Plato. 1961. *Theaetetus* 155d. In *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Hamilton, E. and H. Cairns, eds., F. Cornford, trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (p. 860)

Plato: “The one who readily and willingly tries all kinds of learning, who turns gladly to learning and is insatiable for it, is rightly called a philosopher.” Plato. 1992. *Republic* 475c. Grube, G., trans. Reeve, C., rev. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. (p. 150)

Plato: “And is not philosophy the practice for death?” Plato. 2011. *Phaedo* 81a. In *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. S. Cohen et al, eds. G. Grube, trans. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. (p. 289)

Bertrand Russell: “Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.” Russell, B. 1959. *The Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press. (p. 161)

Bertrand Russell: “The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.” Russell, B. 1985. *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Chicago: Open Court. (p. 53)

Alfred Whitehead: “I hold that philosophy is the critic of abstractions. Its function is the double one, first of harmonising them by assigning them their right relative status as abstractions, and secondly of completing them by direct comparison with more concrete intuitions of the universe, and thereby promoting the formation of more complete schemes of thought.” Whitehead, A. 1926. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: The MacMillan Company. (p. 126)

Alfred Whitehead: “Philosophy is the most effective of all the intellectual pursuits. It builds cathedrals before the workmen have moved a stone, and it destroys them before the elements have worn down their arches. It is the architect of the buildings of the spirit, and it is also their solvent.” Whitehead, A. 1926. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: The MacMillan Company. (p. x)

Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.” Wittgenstein, L. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* §4.112. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. (p. 44)

Ludwig Wittgenstein: “The difficulty in philosophy is to say no more than we know.” Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *The Blue Book*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (p. 28)

Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. §109. G. Anscombe, trans. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co. (p. 47)

Ludwig Wittgenstein: “The philosopher is not a citizen of *any* community of ideas. That is what makes him a philosopher.” Wittgenstein, L. 1991. Quoted in R. Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. New York: Penguin Books. (p. 247)

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### **Ask Yourself:**

To complete this lesson, you should think about and “process” what you have read. Ask yourself the following questions, and review the reading until you are able to answer them readily. Bear in mind that some questions pertain to information stated explicitly, above, while others may require some thought, on your part.

1. What are the twin goals of philosophy?
2. What are the three basic questions of philosophy? What are the three basic areas of philosophical study?
3. What is “Surface Tension”?
4. What is striking to you, or of interest, in what philosophers have said about philosophy?
5. What is philosophy? Can you say?