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Introduction to

Philos- ophy

Introduction to Philosophy

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OpenStax

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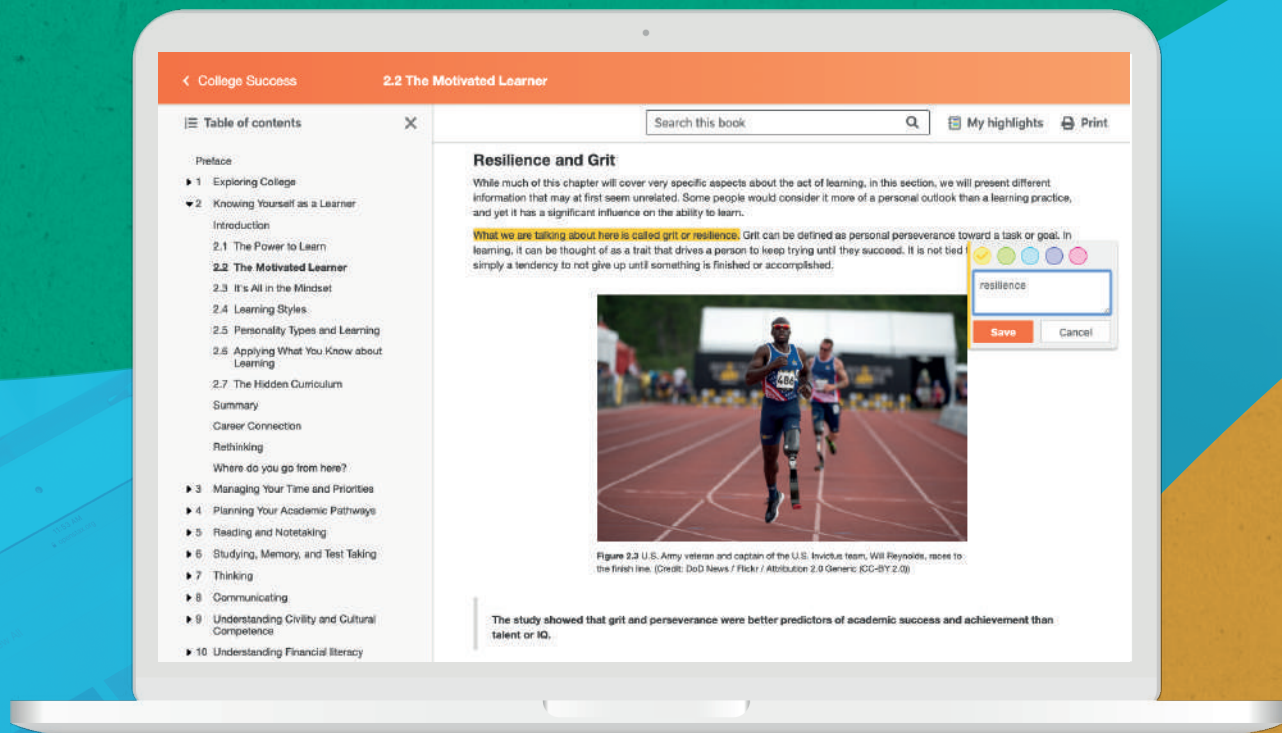


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Preface

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Format

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About *Introduction to Philosophy*

Introduction to Philosophy provides an overview of a common range of philosophical topics for a first- or second-year general education philosophy course. It is organized thematically, following the principal categories of academic philosophy (logic, metaphysics, epistemology, theories of value, and history of philosophy). A recurring theme of *Introduction to Philosophy* is its incorporation of multicultural and global perspectives. Texts, thinkers, and concepts from Middle Eastern, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Latin American, Indigenous, and African philosophy are fully integrated into discussions of concepts and topics, broadening the study of philosophy beyond the Western tradition. Another goal of the text is to help students develop critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

Reflecting the Full Diversity of Human Understanding

A multicultural and global perspective is a central organizing principle of *Introduction to Philosophy*. This text explores Eastern, African, and Indigenous perspectives in concert with and, in some cases, in juxtaposition to classical Western thinkers. Additionally, the authors have made a special effort to highlight the philosophical work of women, who have made important contributions to the history of philosophy in numerous traditions. This broader emphasis introduces students to approaches that open up traditional philosophical questions in provocative ways, offering fresh possibilities for social and individual understanding. As just one example, alongside discussion of the individualistic ways that Hume and Locke attempted to answer the question “what is the self” appears discussion of the African concept of *ubuntu*, sometimes translated as “a person is a person through other persons.” Discussions of the four noble truths of Buddhism as a path to achieve liberation from suffering, the four interrelated concepts at the heart of Mohist ethical theory, and Carol Gilligan’s care ethics are other examples of well-established answers to deep philosophical questions that provide fresh additions to classical Western ways of thinking.

Providing Students with Transferable Skills

Introduction to Philosophy is intentionally organized to develop critical thinking, research, reading, and writing skills. There is an entire chapter devoted to these transferrable skills associated with philosophy. Another chapter addresses logic and reasoning. Additionally, interspersed throughout the text are features providing guidance on how to read philosophy effectively, how to conduct research and evaluate sources, and how to write philosophy papers. These features aim to be very explicit about the habits and practices that enable one to be a good student of philosophy and, by extension, a good critical thinker.

Reminding Readers that Philosophy Is a Living Discipline

Calling attention to the fact that philosophy is not just a feature of our human past, *Introduction to Philosophy* discusses the ways contemporary academic philosophers address some of our most pressing ethical and moral issues. Examples include discussions of bioethics, emerging issues surrounding genetic engineering and communication technologies, what brain science can and cannot tell us about human consciousness, and morality pertaining to human treatment of the natural world. Through discussion of these topics and others, readers will gain awareness of the range of answers that contemporary philosophers offer to current issues and learn to appreciate the type of reasoning that philosophers use. Throughout the text, students are also encouraged to critically reflect on philosophical points of view and develop their own philosophical positions.

Enriching and Engaging Features

“Doing” Philosophy

While there is certainly not one method of “doing” philosophy, there are practices and habits that make someone a better reader, writer, researcher, and thinker in philosophy. A set of recurring features makes these skills explicit and concrete, with guidance geared toward the introductory student.

- **Think Like a Philosopher.** These features adopt one of two approaches. Some instances prompt students to engage with concepts key to philosophical argument, and thus to critical thinking, either in the form of interactive online exercises or as written guidance. Others guide students in formulating their own approaches to philosophical questions.
- **Write Like a Philosopher.** These features challenge the reader to articulate their own written responses to philosophical prompts or to craft their own philosophical arguments. Clear guidance is given on both the considerations that should appear in the response and the most effective structure for written philosophical discourse.
- **Read Like a Philosopher.** These features prompt students to engage with portions of key primary texts, such as Plato’s *Apology* or the *Daodejing*. Clear structure is provided, guiding the reader on what elements of the text to pay close attention to and what questions they should hold in their minds while reading.

“How It All Hangs Together”

Philosophy is an inherently interconnected undertaking that speaks to universal human concerns. The broad questions philosophers ask (e.g., what makes a good life, how does one define morality, how should people treat one another, what rights should be accorded individuals within society) touch many aspects of our social and individual existences. A number of features address the interconnectedness of philosophical inquiry and philosophical thought, as well as its relevance to all lives.

- **Connections features.** Throughout the text, callouts direct students to additional coverage of both important theories and key thinkers in other chapters.
- **Videos.** Video features provide supplemental information from trusted contemporary sources, such as the BBC Radio 4 series *A History of Ideas* and the e-series *Wi-Phi Philosophy*.
- **Podcasts.** Podcast links are provided from engaging series, such as *The History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* and *Philosophy Bites*.

Pedagogical Framework

An effective pedagogical framework helps students structure their learning and retain information.

- **Chapter Outlines.** Each chapter opens with an outline and introduction, familiarizing students with the material that will follow. Throughout the chapter, material is chunked into manageable sections of content within each of the larger main heads.
- **Learning Objectives.** Every main section begins with two to five clear, concise, and measurable learning objectives, tagged to Bloom’s levels. These objectives are designed to help the instructor decide what content to include or assign and to guide student expectations. After completing the textual sections and end-of-chapter exercises, students should be able to demonstrate mastery of the learning objectives.
- **Chapter Summaries.** Organized by section heads, chapter summaries distill the information presented in each chapter to key, concise points.
- **Key Terms.** Key terms are bolded and followed by in-text definitions. A glossary of key terms also appears at the end of each chapter.
- **Critical Thinking Questions.** Each chapter ends with 10 to 20 critical thinking questions, also organized by section head. Some of these questions assess recall of key concepts, while others ask students to think, read, and write like a philosopher. These more complex questions might prompt students to formulate thoughtful critiques of existing philosophical positions or to begin to articulate their own thoughts on philosophical questions. Any of these components can be used by instructors to build assessments and assignments for their courses.
- **“Further Reading” Suggestions.** Each chapter ends with suggested resources for students who wish to dive deeper into the thinkers and thoughts discussed in the chapters.

About the Authors

Senior Contributing Author



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Nathan Smith has a PhD in philosophy from Boston College and the University of Paris, Sorbonne. His dissertation was on René Descartes's early scientific and mathematical work. He has been a full-time instructor of philosophy at Houston Community College (HCC) since 2008. He has published on Descartes, phenomenology, and topics in Open Educational Resources (OER), including chapter contributions to an OER textbook through the Rebus Foundation. At HCC, he served as Chair of the Philosophy, Humanities, and Library Sciences Department from 2015 to 2017 and has served as the Open Educational Resources Coordinator since 2017. In this capacity he has secured and managed over \$500,000 in grants for the institution and leads a cross-disciplinary, district-wide effort to provide “zero cost books” courses and degree plans for students.

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Student and Instructor Resources

We've compiled additional resources for both students and instructors, including an instructor's manual, test bank, and lecture slides. Instructor resources require a verified instructor account, which you can apply for when you log in or create your account on OpenStax.org. Take advantage of these resources to supplement *Introduction to Philosophy*.

- **Comprehensive Instructor's Manual.** Designed to provide maximum guidance for delivering content in an interesting and dynamic manner, each chapter of the instructor's manual includes an in-depth lecture outline, a key terms list, a set of "questions for further thought," and a list of recommended resources for further reading and exploration. Authored by Kyle Hirsh, *Community College of Aurora*.
- **Test Bank.** With 500 true/false and multiple-choice questions in our test bank, instructors can customize tests to support a variety of course objectives. The test bank is available in Word format. Authored by Steve Wyre, *American Public University*.
- **PowerPoint Lecture Slides.** The PowerPoint slides provide outlines, images, and an overview of chapter topics as a starting place for instructors to build their lectures. Authored by Gregory Browne, *Eastern Michigan University*.

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Academic integrity builds trust, understanding, equity, and genuine learning. While students may encounter significant challenges in their courses and their lives, doing their own work and maintaining a high degree of authenticity will result in meaningful outcomes that will extend far beyond their college career. Faculty, administrators, resource providers, and students should work together to maintain a fair and positive experience.

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FIGURE 1.1 Philosophy begins with dialogue—with friends, with yourself, with other philosophers, and with the past. (credit: “Conversations Time moves slowly when talking with old friends” by Sagar/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 1.1** What Is Philosophy?
- 1.2** How Do Philosophers Arrive at Truth?
- 1.3** Socrates as a Paradigmatic Historical Philosopher
- 1.4** An Overview of Contemporary Philosophy

INTRODUCTION For most college students, an Introduction to Philosophy course is their first encounter with the study of **philosophy**. Unlike most of your other courses, philosophy is not something usually covered in high school. Yet you are probably familiar with the term *philosophy* and may have some preconceived notion about what philosophy is and what philosophers do. Perhaps you have stayed up late at night talking with friends or family about topics like free will or the existence of God. Maybe you have a friend who always talks about big ideas or asks tough questions that sound like riddles. Perhaps you think of them as “philosophical”; you might be right.

In this chapter, we will provide a brief introduction to the field of philosophy as a historical and academic discipline. This first chapter should prepare you for your philosophy course and give you a better idea of what it means to be a philosopher. As with all introductions, this one is just a start. Your job is to explore more, think more, read more, and write more like a philosopher. Soon you may even find that you are doing philosophy.

1.1 What Is Philosophy?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify sages (early philosophers) across historical traditions.
- Explain the connection between ancient philosophy and the origin of the sciences.
- Describe philosophy as a discipline that makes coherent sense of a whole.
- Summarize the broad and diverse origins of philosophy.

It is difficult to define philosophy. In fact, to do so is itself a philosophical activity, since philosophers are attempting to gain the broadest and most fundamental conception of the world as it exists. The world includes nature, consciousness, morality, beauty, and social organizations. So the content available for philosophy is both broad and deep. Because of its very nature, philosophy considers a range of subjects, and philosophers cannot automatically rule anything out. Whereas other disciplines allow for basic assumptions, philosophers cannot be bound by such assumptions. This open-endedness makes philosophy a somewhat awkward and confusing subject for students. There are no easy answers to the questions of what philosophy studies or how one does philosophy. Nevertheless, in this chapter, we can make some progress on these questions by (1) looking at past examples of philosophers, (2) considering one compelling definition of philosophy, and (3) looking at the way academic philosophers today actually practice philosophy.

Historical Origins of Philosophy

One way to begin to understand philosophy is to look at its history. The historical origins of philosophical thinking and exploration vary around the globe. The word *philosophy* derives from ancient Greek, in which the philosopher is a lover or pursuer (*philia*) of wisdom (*sophia*). But the earliest Greek philosophers were not known as philosophers; they were simply known as **sages**. The sage tradition provides an early glimpse of philosophical thought in action. Sages are sometimes associated with mathematical and scientific discoveries and at other times with their political impact. What unites these figures is that they demonstrate a willingness to be skeptical of traditions, a curiosity about the natural world and our place in it, and a commitment to applying reason to understand nature, human nature, and society better. The overview of the sage tradition that follows will give you a taste of philosophy's broad ambitions as well as its focus on complex relations between different areas of human knowledge. There are some examples of women who made contributions to philosophy and the sage tradition in Greece, India, and China, but these were patriarchal societies that did not provide many opportunities for women to participate in philosophical and political discussions.

The Sages of India, China, Africa, and Greece

In classical Indian philosophy and religion, sages play a central role in both religious mythology and in the practice of passing down teaching and instruction through generations. The Seven Sages, or Saptarishi (seven rishis in the Sanskrit language), play an important role in **sanatana dharma**, the eternal duties that have come to be identified with Hinduism but that predate the establishment of the religion. The Seven Sages are partially considered wise men and are said to be the authors of the ancient Indian texts known as the Vedas. But they are partly mythic figures as well, who are said to have descended from the gods and whose reincarnation marks the passing of each age of Manu (age of man or epoch of humanity). The rishis tended to live monastic lives, and together they are thought of as the spiritual and practical forerunners of Indian gurus or teachers, even up to today. They derive their wisdom, in part, from spiritual forces, but also from *tapas*, or the meditative, ascetic, and spiritual practices they perform to gain control over their bodies and minds. The stories of the rishis are part of the teachings that constitute spiritual and philosophical practice in contemporary Hinduism.

[Figure 1.2](#) depicts a scene from the Matsya Purana, where Manu, the first man whose succession marks the prehistorical ages of Earth, sits with the Seven Sages in a boat to protect them from a mythic flood that is said to have submerged the world. The king of serpents guides the boat, which is said to have also contained seeds,

plants, and animals saved by Manu from the flood.



FIGURE 1.2 This painting, from the late eighteenth century, depicts the first man, Manu, guiding seven sages through floodwaters, with the aid of the king of serpents. (credit: “Manu and Saptarishi” by unknown author/ Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Despite the fact that classical Indian culture is patriarchal, women figures play an important role in the earliest writings of the Vedic tradition (the classical Indian religious and philosophical tradition). These women figures are partly connected to the Indian conception of the fundamental forces of nature—energy, ability, strength, effort, and power—as feminine. This aspect of God was thought to be present at the creation of the world. The Rig Veda, the oldest Vedic writings, contains hymns that tell the story of Ghosha, a daughter of Rishi Kakshivan, who had a debilitating skin condition (probably leprosy) but devoted herself to spiritual practices to learn how to heal herself and eventually marry. Another woman, Maitreyi, is said to have married the Rishi Yajnavalkya (himself a god who was cast into mortality by a rival) for the purpose of continuing her spiritual training. She was a devoted ascetic and is said to have composed 10 of the hymns in the Rig Veda. Additionally, there is a famous dialogue between Maitreyi and Yajnavalkya in the Upanishads (another early, foundational collection of texts in the Vedic tradition) about attachment to material possessions, which cannot give a person happiness, and the achievement of ultimate bliss through knowledge of the Absolute (God).

Another woman sage named Gargi also participates in a celebrated dialogue with Yajnavalkya on natural philosophy and the fundamental elements and forces of the universe. Gargi is characterized as one of the most knowledgeable sages on the topic, though she ultimately concedes that Yajnavalkya has greater knowledge. In these brief episodes, these ancient Indian texts record instances of key women who attained a level of enlightenment and learning similar to their male counterparts. Unfortunately, this early equality between the sexes did not last. Over time Indian culture became more patriarchal, confining women to a dependent and subservient role. Perhaps the most dramatic and cruel example of the effects of Indian patriarchy was the ritual practice of *sati*, in which a widow would sometimes immolate herself, partly in recognition of the “fact” that following the death of her husband, her current life on Earth served no further purpose (Rout 2016). Neither a widow’s in-laws nor society recognized her value.

In similar fashion to the Indian tradition, the sage (*sheng*) tradition is important for Chinese philosophy. Confucius, one of the greatest Chinese writers, often refers to ancient sages, emphasizing their importance for their discovery of technical skills essential to human civilization, for their role as rulers and wise leaders, and for their wisdom. This emphasis is in alignment with the Confucian appeal to a well-ordered state under the guidance of a “philosopher-king.” This point of view can be seen in early sage figures identified by one of the greatest classical authors in the Chinese tradition, as the “Nest Builder” and “Fire Maker” or, in another case, the “Flood Controller.” These names identify wise individuals with early technological discoveries. *The Book of Changes*, a classical Chinese text, identifies the Five (mythic) Emperors as sages, including Yao and Shun, who are said to have built canoes and oars, attached carts to oxen, built double gates for defense, and fashioned bows and arrows (Cheng 1983). Emperor Shun is also said to have ruled during the time of a great flood, when all of China was submerged. Yü is credited with having saved civilization by building canals and dams.

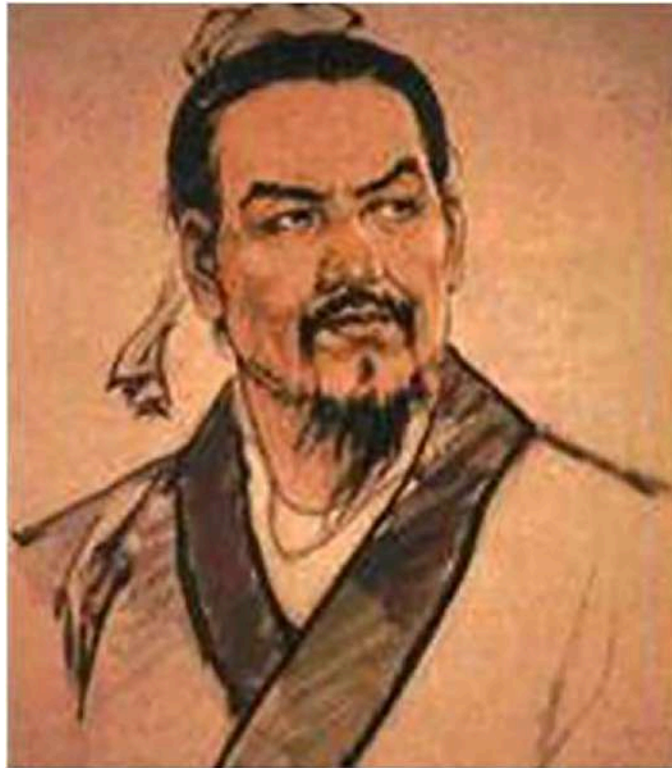


FIGURE 1.3 The Chinese philosopher and historian Han Feizi identified sages with technological discoveries. (credit: “Portrait of Han Fei” by unknown author/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

These figures are praised not only for their political wisdom and long rule, but also for their filial piety and devotion to work. For instance, Mencius, a Confucian philosopher, relates a story of Shun’s care for his blind father and wicked stepmother, while Yü is praised for his selfless devotion to work. In these ways, the Chinese philosophical traditions, such as Confucianism and Mohism, associate key values of their philosophical enterprises with the great sages of their history. Whether the sages were, in fact, actual people or, as many scholars have concluded, mythical forebearers, they possessed the essential human virtue of listening and responding to divine voices. This attribute can be inferred from the Chinese script for *sheng*, which bears the symbol of an ear as a prominent feature. So the sage is one who listens to insight from the heavens and then is capable of sharing that wisdom or acting upon it to the benefit of his society (Cheng 1983). This idea is similar to one found in the Indian tradition, where the most important texts, the Vedas, are known as *shruti*, or works that were heard through divine revelation and only later written down.

Although Confucianism is a venerable world philosophy, it is also highly patriarchal and resulted in the widespread subordination of women. The position of women in China began to change only after the Communist Revolution (1945–1952). While some accounts of Confucianism characterize men and women as

emblematic of two opposing forces in the natural world, the Yin and Yang, this view of the sexes developed over time and was not consistently applied. Chinese women did see a measure of independence and freedom with the influence of Buddhism and Daoism, each of which had a more liberal view of the role of women (Adler 2006).

A detailed and important study of the sage tradition in Africa is provided by Henry Odera Oruka (1990), who makes the case that prominent folk sages in African tribal history developed complex philosophical ideas. Oruka interviewed tribal Africans identified by their communities as sages, and he recorded their sayings and ideas, confining himself to those sayings that demonstrated “a rational method of inquiry into the real nature of things” (Oruka 1990, 150). He recognized a tension in what made these sages philosophically interesting: they articulated the received wisdom of their tradition and culture while at the same time maintaining a critical distance from that culture, seeking a rational justification for the beliefs held by the culture.

CONNECTIONS

The [chapter on the early history of philosophy](#) covers this topic in greater detail.



FIGURE 1.4 Engraving of Greek historian Diogenes Laërtius from a 1688 edition of his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. (credit: “Diogenes Laërtius, ancient Greek writer” by Unidentified engraver/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Among the ancient Greeks, it is common to identify seven sages. The best-known account is provided by Diogenes Laërtius, whose text *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* is a canonical resource on early Greek philosophy. The first and most important sage is Thales of Miletus. Thales traveled to Egypt to study with the Egyptian priests, where he became one of the first Greeks to learn astronomy. He is known for bringing back to Greece knowledge of the calendar, dividing the year into 365 days, tracking the progress of the sun from solstice to solstice, and—somewhat dramatically—predicting a solar eclipse in 585 BCE. The eclipse occurred on the day of a battle between the Medes and Lydians. It is possible that Thales used knowledge of Babylonian astronomical records to guess the year and location of the eclipse. This mathematical and astronomical feat is one of Thales’s several claims to sagacity. In addition, he is said to have calculated the

height of the pyramids using the basic geometry of similar triangles and measuring shadows at a certain time of day. He is also reported to have predicted a particularly good year for olives: he bought up all the olive presses and then made a fortune selling those presses to farmers wanting to turn their olives into oil. Together, these scientific and technical achievements suggest that at least part of Thales's wisdom can be attributed to a very practical, scientific, and mathematical knowledge of the natural world. If that were all Thales was known for, he might be called the first scientist or engineer. But he also made more basic claims about the nature and composition of the universe; for instance, he claimed that all matter was fundamentally made of up water. He also argued that everything that moved on its own possessed a soul and that the soul itself was immortal. These claims demonstrate a concern about the fundamental nature of reality.

Another of the seven sages was Solon, a famed political leader. He introduced the “Law of Release” to Athens, which cancelled all personal debts and freed indentured servants, or “debt-slaves” who had been consigned to service based on a personal debt they were unable to repay. In addition, he established a constitutional government in Athens with a representative body, a procedure for taxation, and a series of economic reforms. He was widely admired as a political leader but voluntarily stepped down so that he would not become a tyrant. He was finally forced to flee Athens when he was unable to persuade the members of the Assembly (the ruling body) to resist the rising tyranny of one of his relatives, Pisistratus. When he arrived in exile, he was reportedly asked whom he considered to be happy, to which he replied, “One ought to count no man happy until he is dead.” Aristotle interpreted this statement to mean that happiness was not a momentary experience, but a quality reflective of someone's entire life.

Beginnings of Natural Philosophy

The sage tradition is a largely prehistoric tradition that provides a narrative about how intellect, wisdom, piety, and virtue led to the innovations central to flourishing of ancient civilizations. Particularly in Greece, the sage tradition blends into a period of natural philosophy, where ancient scientists or philosophers try to explain nature using rational methods. Several of the early Greek schools of philosophy were centered on their respective views of nature. Followers of Thales, known as the **Milesians**, were particularly interested in the underlying causes of natural change. Why does water turn to ice? What happens when winter passes into spring? Why does it seem like the stars and planets orbit Earth in predictable patterns? From Aristotle we know that Thales thought there was a difference between material elements that participate in change and elements that contain their own source of motion. This early use of the term *element* did not have the same meaning as the scientific meaning of the word today in a field like chemistry. But Thales thought material elements bear some fundamental connection to water in that they have the capacity to move and alter their state. By contrast, other elements had their own internal source of motion, of which he cites the magnet and amber (which exhibits forces of static electricity when rubbed against other materials). He said that these elements have “soul.” This notion of soul, as a principle of internal motion, was influential across ancient and medieval natural philosophy. In fact, the English language words *animal* and *animation* are derived from the Latin word for soul (*anima*).

Similarly, early thinkers like Xenophanes began to formulate explanations for natural phenomena. For instance, he explained rainbows, the sun, the moon, and St. Elmo's fire (luminous, electrical discharges) as apparitions of the clouds. This form of explanation, describing some apparent phenomenon as the result of an underlying mechanism, is paradigmatic of scientific explanation even today. Parmenides, the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy, used logic to conclude that whatever fundamentally exists must be unchanging because if it ever did change, then at least some aspect of it would cease to exist. But that would imply that what exists could not exist—which seems to defy logic. Parmenides is not saying that there is no change, but that the changes we observe are a kind of illusion. Indeed, this point of view was highly influential, not only for Plato and Aristotle, but also for the early atomists, like Democritus, who held that all perceived qualities are merely human conventions. Underlying all these appearances, Democritus reasoned, are only atomic, unchanging bits of matter flowing through a void. While this ancient Greek view of atoms is quite different from the modern model of atoms, the very idea that every observable phenomenon has a basis in underlying

pieces of matter in various configurations clearly connects modern science to the earliest Greek philosophers.

Along these lines, the Pythagoreans provide a very interesting example of a community of philosophers engaged in understanding the natural world and how best to live in it. You may be familiar with Pythagoras from his Pythagorean theorem, a key principle in geometry establishing a relationship between the sides of a right-angled triangle. Specifically, the square formed by the hypotenuse (the side opposite the right angle) is equal to the sum of the two squares formed by the remaining two sides. In the figure below, the area of the square formed by c is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares formed by a and b . The figure represents how Pythagoras would have conceptualized the theorem.

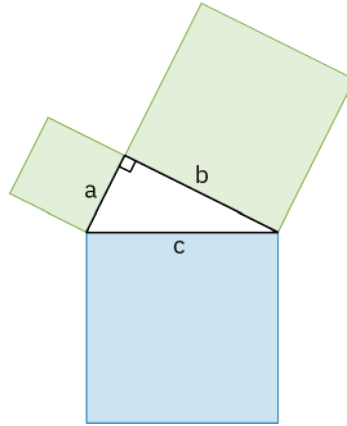


FIGURE 1.5 The Pythagorean Theorem describes the relationship between the sides of a right-angled triangle as demonstrated by the ancient Greek philosopher, Pythagoras. (credit: modification of "Pythagorean right angle" by Marianov/Wikimedia Commons, CC0)

The Pythagoreans were excellent mathematicians, but they were more interested in how mathematics explained the natural world. In particular, Pythagoras recognized relationships between line segments and shapes, such as the Pythagorean theorem describes, but also between numbers and sounds, by virtue of harmonics and the intervals between notes. Similar regularities can be found in astronomy. As a result, Pythagoras reasoned that all of nature is generated according to mathematical regularities. This view led the Pythagoreans to believe that there was a unified, rational structure to the universe, that the planets and stars exhibit harmonic properties and may even produce music, that musical tones and harmonies could have healing powers, that the soul is immortal and continuously reincarnated, and that animals possess souls that ought to be respected and valued. As a result, the Pythagorean community was defined by serious scholarship as well as strict rules about diet, clothing, and behavior.

Additionally, in the early Pythagorean communities, it was possible for women to participate and contribute to philosophical thought and discovery. Pythagoras himself was said to have been inspired to study philosophy by the Delphic priestess Themistoclea. His wife Theano is credited with contributing to important discoveries in the realms of numbers and optics. She is said to have written a treatise, *On Piety*, which further applies Pythagorean philosophy to various aspects of practical life (Waithe 1987). Myia, the daughter of this illustrious couple, was also an active and productive part of the community. At least one of her letters has survived in which she discusses the application of Pythagorean philosophy to motherhood. The Pythagorean school is an example of how early philosophical and scientific thinking combines with religious, cultural, and ethical beliefs and practices to embrace many different aspects of life.

How It All Hangs Together

Closer to the present day, in 1962, Wilfrid Sellars, a highly influential 20th-century American philosopher, wrote a chapter called "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" in *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*. He opens the essay with a dramatic and concise description of philosophy: "The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the

broadest possible sense of the term.” If we spend some time trying to understand what Sellars means by this definition, we will be in a better position to understand the academic discipline of philosophy. First, Sellars emphasizes that philosophy’s goal is to understand a very wide range of topics—in fact, the widest possible range. That is to say, philosophers are committed to understanding everything insofar as it can be understood. This is important because it means that, on principle, philosophers cannot rule out any topic of study. However, for a philosopher not every topic of study deserves equal attention. Some things, like conspiracy theories or paranoid delusions, are not worth studying because they are not real. It may be worth understanding why some people are prone to paranoid delusions or conspiratorial thinking, but the content of these ideas is not worth investigating. Other things may be factually true, such as the daily change in number of the grains of sand on a particular stretch of beach, but they are not worth studying because knowing that information will not teach us about how things hang together. So a philosopher chooses to study things that are informative and interesting—things that provide a better understanding of the world and our place in it.

To make judgments about which areas are interesting or worthy of study, philosophers need to cultivate a special skill. Sellars describes this philosophical skill as a kind of know-how (a practical, engaged type of knowledge, similar to riding a bike or learning to swim). Philosophical know-how, Sellars says, has to do with knowing your way around the world of concepts and being able to understand and think about how concepts connect, link up, support, and rely upon one another—in short, how things hang together. Knowing one’s way around the world of concepts also involves knowing where to look to find interesting discoveries and which places to avoid, much like a good fisherman knows where to cast his line. Sellars acknowledges that other academics and scientists know their way around the concepts in their field of study much like philosophers do. The difference is that these other inquirers confine themselves to a specific field of study or a particular subject matter, while philosophers want to understand the whole. Sellars thinks that this philosophical skill is most clearly demonstrated when we try to understand the connection between the natural world as we experience it directly (the “manifest image”) and the natural world as science explains it (the “scientific image”). He suggests that we gain an understanding of the nature of philosophy by trying to reconcile these two pictures of the world that most people understand independently.



READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

“Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”

This essay, “[Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man \(https://openstax.org/r/psim\)](https://openstax.org/r/psim)” by Wilfrid Sellars, has been republished several times and can be found online. Read through the essay with particular focus on the first section. Consider the following study questions:

- What is the difference between knowing how and knowing that? Are these concepts always distinct? What does it mean for philosophical knowledge to be a kind of know-how?
- What do you think Sellars means when he says that philosophers “have turned other special subject-matters to non-philosophers over the past 2500 years”?
- Sellars describes philosophy as “bringing a picture into focus,” but he is also careful to recognize challenges with this metaphor as it relates to the body of human knowledge. What are those challenges? Why is it difficult to imagine all of human knowledge as a picture or image?
- What is the scientific image of man in the world? What is the manifest image of man in the world? How are they different? And why are these two images the primary images that need to be brought into focus so that philosophy may have an eye on the whole?

Unlike other subjects that have clearly defined subject matter boundaries and relatively clear methods of exploration and analysis, philosophy intentionally lacks clear boundaries or methods. For instance, your biology textbook will tell you that biology is the “science of life.” The boundaries of biology are fairly clear: it is an experimental science that studies living things and the associated material necessary for life. Similarly,

biology has relatively well-defined methods. Biologists, like other experimental scientists, broadly follow something called the “scientific method.” This is a bit of a misnomer, unfortunately, because there is no single method that all the experimental sciences follow. Nevertheless, biologists have a range of methods and practices, including observation, experimentation, and theory comparison and analysis, that are fairly well established and well known among practitioners. Philosophy doesn’t have such easy prescriptions—and for good reason. Philosophers are interested in gaining the broadest possible understanding of things, whether that be nature, what is possible, morals, aesthetics, political organizations, or any other field or concept.

1.2 How Do Philosophers Arrive at Truth?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify philosophical methods of inquiry.
- Explain the role of logical consequences in assessing a philosophical position.
- Define conceptual analysis, coherence, argument, intuition, and experimental philosophy.
- Explain the importance of trade-offs in establishing a philosophical position.

We have seen some examples of how philosophy emerged in antiquity, its relationship to natural philosophy and modern science, and one goal of philosophy, specifically—to provide a coherent story of how the world as it appears to us can be explained in a way that also makes sense of what the sciences tell us. In this section, we describe in greater detail the specific strategies and tools that philosophers use to arrive at truth.

Sources of Evidence

Even though philosophy is not an empirical science, philosophical claims require evidence, and philosophers ought to have reasons for the claims they make. There are many different types of philosophical evidence, some of which follow.

History

A basic but underappreciated source of evidence in philosophy is the history of philosophy. As we have already seen, philosophical thinking has its origins around the world, from the beginning of recorded history.

Historical philosophers, sages, natural philosophers, and religious thinkers are often a source of insight, inspiration, and argument that can help us understand contemporary philosophical questions. For instance, the Greeks recognized early on that there is a difference between the way we use language to talk about things, with generic terms that apply to many different things at the same time (like cat, tree, or house), and the things as they actually exist—namely, as specific, individual beings or objects. Philosophers ask, what is the relationship between the general terms we use and the specific things that exist in the world? This sort of question is a perennial philosophical question. Today’s philosophers have their own response to this sort of question, and their answers often respond to and are informed by the historical treatment of these issues.

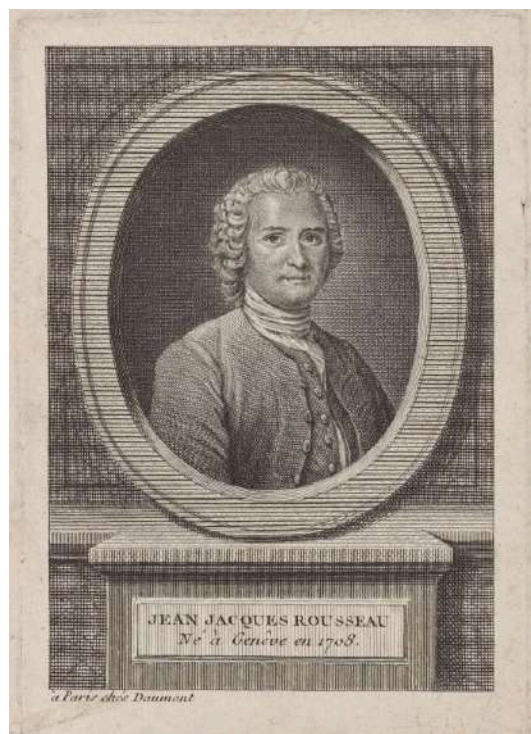


FIGURE 1.6 European philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau influenced the framing of the United States Constitution. (credit: “[Jean Jacques Rousseau. Né en Genève en 1708](https://openstax.org/r/digitalcollections) (<https://openstax.org/r/digitalcollections>)” by Maurice Quentin de La Tour/New York Public Library)

While you may expect questions about the natural world to change over time (and certainly they have changed due to scientific progress), questions of morality and social organization do not change as much. What constitutes the good life? How should communities be organized to benefit all the members of that community? These sorts of questions stay with us throughout time. In the United States, it is common for political leaders to appeal to the “founding fathers” of the US Constitution. People like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington were heavily influenced by early modern European philosophers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Hobbes. In similar fashion, the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, is fond of reading and citing the foundational philosopher Confucius. Most of Xi’s addresses include quotations from Confucius, and Xi stresses the importance of reading classical Chinese philosophers (Zhang 2015). For Chinese political leaders, Confucius provides an important reminder of the role of virtue and a sense of belonging among the Chinese people. There is a widespread belief among the Chinese political class that their intellectual heritage is an important factor in their contemporary political success, in much the same way as American political leaders trace their success back to the founding fathers. Given the influence of philosophy on world history, it is worthwhile to engage with the writings of past philosophers to inform our understanding of pressing philosophical questions of today.

Intuition

One of the hallmarks of philosophical thinking is an appeal to **intuition**. What philosophers today mean by intuition can best be traced back to Plato, for whom intuition (*nous*) involved a kind of insight into the very nature of things. This notion has had religious connotations, as if the knowledge gained through intuition is like catching a glimpse of divine light. But intuition does not have to involve faith. René Descartes defined intuition in the following manner: “By intuition [I mean] . . . the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding” (Descartes 1985, 14). This concept of intuition is clearest in mathematical examples. Importantly, it is quite different from the way that many people use the word *intuition* today to mean something like “gut feeling” or “hunch.” When philosophers talk about intuition, they mean something much more definite. Consider the equation $2 + 2 = 4$.

Examine the equation in your mind. Could it possibly be false? So long as we operate under the assumption that these numbers represent counting numbers, it seems impossible that this equation could be false. More than that, there is a kind of clarity and certainty about the equation. It is not just that you have learned $2 + 2 = 4$ by habit. You could easily perform the counting operation in your head and verify that the answer is correct. The truth of this mathematical sentence is so clear that if it turned out to be wrong, you would have to give up core beliefs about the nature of numbers, addition, and equality. This kind of clarity is a paradigm of intuition.

Intuition operates in other realms besides mathematics, such as in the use of language. For instance, it is obvious that a three-legged stool has three legs or that the tallest building is taller than any other building. These statements are true in an obvious way that is similar to the mathematical sentence above. We can branch out further, to say, for instance, that a camel is a mammal. We might intuitively know this statement is true, but we may also recognize that we are on slightly less certain ground. After all, whether a camel is a mammal is based on some understanding of the anatomy of a camel as well as the biological classification system that assigns animals to different classes. So the definition of *camel* as “a mammal” is not the same as “a three-legged stool has three legs.” Here, we can see that some statements are intuitively true by virtue of their definition. Others are intuitively true by virtue of some mental operation that we can perform very easily. Still others are intuitively true in that they rely on a body of knowledge that is commonly accepted and foundational for our understanding of the world.

There are many other places outside of pure linguistic analysis and mathematics where intuitions are helpful. Consider morality: the proposition that “it is better to be good than to be bad” may seem similar to the statement that “a three-legged stool has three legs,” but the former introduces the words *good* and *bad*, which are fraught terms that produce disagreement among people. Nonetheless, while it may be difficult to agree on what constitutes “good” or “bad,” everyone probably recognizes that whatever is good ought to be better than what is bad. That seems intuitively true. On this basis, we might imagine that there are intuitive truths even in morality. As we gain confidence in the ability of intuition to reveal truth, we might be tempted to extend intuitions even further. However, when intuitions extend into areas where there is no consensus on what is true, we have to be cautious. At that point, we might be using the term *intuition* to stand in for *belief* or *perspective*. Such “intuitions” do not have the same force as the intuition that $2 + 2 = 4$. It is not always easy to distinguish between intuitions that are certain and evident and those that are mere feelings or hunches; recognizing that distinction is part of the practical know-how philosophers try to develop.

Common Sense

We ought not to neglect a third source of evidence in philosophy, namely, common sense. The idea of **common sense** is frequently used to describe a basic set of facts or common knowledge that any adult human being ought to possess. But common sense is rarely defined. When philosophers talk about common sense, they mean specific claims based on direct sense perception, which are true in a relatively fundamental sense. In other words, philosophical champions of common sense deny that one can be skeptical of certain basic claims of sense perception.

Famously, early-20th-century British philosopher G. E. Moore argued that a perfectly rigorous proof of the external world could be given by simply making the appropriate gesture toward his right hand and saying, “Here is one hand.” So long as it is granted that the sensory perception of a hand is evidence of the existence of a hand and that there is such a thing as a hand in the external world, then it must be granted that there is an external world. Such an argument trades on the idea that knowledge of the existence of one’s own hands is something that does not need further proof; it is something we can know without proof. This idea is not something that all philosophers accept, but it is, in many cases, an important source of evidence in philosophical inquiry. At a certain point, it may be necessary to stop demanding proofs for the things we can plainly see, such as the fact that this is a hand (as we hold a hand in front of our faces and examine it). Common sense may be questioned by further philosophical interrogation, but the common-sense philosopher may respond that such interrogation is either unnecessary, excessive, or misses the point.

Experimental Philosophy

Experimental philosophy is a relatively recent movement in philosophy by which philosophers engage in empirical methods of investigation, similar to those used by psychologists or cognitive scientists. The basic idea motivating experimental philosophy is that philosophers use terms and concepts that can be tested in a laboratory. For instance, when philosophers talk about free will, they frequently cite the idea that free will is necessary to assign moral responsibility; thus, moral responsibility is one reason to believe in the existence of free will. Consequently, you might wonder whether most people do, in fact, believe that the existence of free will is necessary to assign moral responsibility. This claim can be tested, for instance, by posing problems or scenarios to research subjects and asking them whether the absence of free choice removes moral responsibility. Similar strategies have been applied to causation, philosophy of biology, consciousness, personal identity, and so forth. In these areas, philosophers use experimental methods to find out what average people think about philosophical issues. Since common sense and intuition are already a source of evidence in philosophical reasoning, it makes sense to confirm that what philosophers ascribe to common sense or intuition aligns with what people generally think about these things.

Such experimental research is subject to many of the same issues that confront experimentation in the social sciences. These studies need to be replicable and ought to fall within a psychological or biological theory that helps explain them. When philosophers tread into experimental philosophy, they behave a lot more like scientists than philosophers, and they are held to the same rigorous standards as other researchers in similar experimental disciplines.

Results from Other Disciplines

The relevance of experimental methods for philosophy suggests a broader source of evidence for philosophical claims, namely, the results of scientific disciplines. When philosophers make claims about the natural world, they ought to be aware of what the natural sciences say. When philosophers make claims about human nature, they ought to be aware of what biology and the social sciences say. As we have already seen, there is an important difference between philosophical investigation and these various disciplines. Yet, given that philosophers attempt to gain some understanding of truth as a whole, they ought to welcome evidence from other disciplines that can help them better understand portions of that whole truth.

[Table 1.1](#) summarizes these different types of philosophical evidence.

Type of Evidence	Description	Example
History	The insights of historical philosophers, sages, natural philosophers, and religious thinkers can help us understand contemporary philosophical questions.	The question “What is a good life?” is a perennial philosophical concern; attempts at answers from the past continue to have relevance for contemporary people.
Intuition	The philosophical meaning of intuition can best be traced back to Plato, for whom intuition involved a kind of insight into the very nature of things.	The truth of a mathematical sentence like “ $2+2=4$ ” is so clear that if it turned out to be wrong, you would have to give up core beliefs about the nature of numbers, addition, and equality.

TABLE 1.1 Types of Philosophical Evidence

Type of Evidence	Description	Example
Common sense	When philosophers talk about common sense, they mean specific claims based on direct sense perception.	Someone who is holding their hand in front of their face can rightly claim “this is my hand” without having to resort to any further proofs.
Experimental philosophy	The basic idea motivating experimental philosophy is that philosophers use terms and concepts that can be tested in a laboratory.	A philosopher might pose scenarios to research subjects and ask them whether they believe an absence of free choice would remove moral responsibility in these scenarios, in order to test a philosophical claim about moral responsibility and free will.
Results from other disciplines	Evidence from other disciplines can help philosophers better understand portions of philosophical inquiries.	Information provided by other social scientists (e.g., sociologists, historians, anthropologists) can be used to inform philosophical claims about human nature.

TABLE 1.1 Types of Philosophical Evidence

Logic

One of the first and most reliable ways that philosophers have of verifying and analyzing claims is by using **logic**, which is, in some sense, the science of reasoning. Logic attempts to formalize the process that we use or ought to use when we provide reasons for some claims. By interpreting the claims we make using logic, we can assess whether those claims are well founded and consistent or whether they are poorly reasoned. [The chapter on logic and reasoning](#) will provide much more detail about the nature of logic and how it is used by philosophers to arrive at truth.

CONNECTIONS

[The chapter on logic and reasoning](#) covers this topic of logic in greater detail.

Argument

The first and most important move in logic is to recognize that claims are the product of **arguments**. In particular, a claim is just the conclusion of a series of sentences, where the preceding sentences (called premises) provide evidence for the conclusion. In logic, an argument is just a way of formalizing reasons to support a claim, where the claim is the conclusion and the reasons given are the premises. In normal conversation and even philosophical writing, arguments are rarely written so clearly that one can easily identify the premises and the conclusion. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct any argument as a series of sentences with clearly identified premises and conclusions. This process is the first step in analyzing an argument: identify the claim that is being made, then identify the sentences that provide supporting evidence for the argument. This process will necessarily require some interpretation on the part of the reader. Therefore, it is important to try to remain faithful to the original intention of the argument and outline the premises and conclusions in such a way that they display the reasoning of the person making that claim.

Once the premises and conclusion are identified and written in order, it is possible to use formal techniques to evaluate the argument. Formal techniques will be covered in [the chapter on logic and reasoning](#). For now, it is sufficient to note that there is a process for evaluating whether claims are well supported by using the techniques of logic. Poorly supported claims may be true, but without good reasons to accept those claims, a

person's support of them is irrational. In philosophy, we want to understand and evaluate the reasons for a claim. Just as a house that is built without a solid foundation will rapidly deteriorate and eventually fall, the philosopher who accepts claims without good reasons is likely to hold a system of beliefs that will crumble.

Explanation

While arguments can be thought of as building blocks to construct a solid foundation for beliefs about the world, arguments can also be understood as explanations for phenomena that are evident but not well understood. To generate well-founded beliefs, we start with evidence in the form of premises and infer a conclusion from that evidence. To explain observed phenomena, we start with a conclusion in the form of some observation and reason backward to the evidence that explains why the observation is true. For example, we infer that there is a fire based on the appearance of smoke, or we infer lightning when we hear thunder, even if we do not see the lightning. We can compare the way we reason about explanations to the way a detective might reconstruct a crime based on the evidence found at a crime scene. By reconstructing the premises that led to a given conclusion, a philosopher can explain the reasons for a conclusion that are evident through observation. In summary, logical reconstruction can be used to investigate the world around us, providing a rational explanation for why the world is the way it appears.

Coherence

Finally, logic provides philosophers with a powerful technique for assessing a set of claims or beliefs. We can ask whether a set of beliefs is logically consistent with one another. Given that we expect our beliefs to present to us a world that makes rational sense, we want those beliefs to be internally consistent. A set of beliefs or statements is **coherent**, or logically consistent, if it is possible for them to all be true at the same time. If it is not possible for statements or beliefs to be true at the same time, then they are contradictory. It seems unreasonable for a person to accept contradictory claims because a contradiction is a logical impossibility. If a person holds contradictory beliefs, then they must be wrong about at least some of their beliefs. Metaphorically, the house of beliefs in which they live must be poorly founded, at least in some places. When you are reading philosophy, you should be aware of places where the author says things that appear to be inconsistent. If you discover inconsistencies, that is a good indication that at least one of their claims is false. You may not know which claim is false, but you can know it is logically impossible for all claims to be true.

When faced with the possibility of incoherent beliefs, the philosopher will need to either revise those beliefs so that they become consistent, or they will need to give up some beliefs to preserve others. Logical consistency cannot tell us that a set of beliefs is true; a complete fiction might be logically consistent. But logical consistency can tell us what is not true. It is impossible for a logically inconsistent set of beliefs to be wholly true.

Conceptual Analysis

One of the techniques that philosophers use to clarify and understand philosophical statements (either premises or conclusions) is **conceptual analysis**. Conceptual analysis involves the analysis of concepts, notions, or ideas as they are presented in statements or sentences. The term *analysis* has been a part of philosophical terminology and methodology since its beginning. In its most basic sense, analysis refers to the process of breaking apart complex ideas into simpler ones. Analysis also involves a cluster of related strategies that philosophers use to discover truths. Each of these techniques attempts to arrive at a clearer and more workable definition of the concepts in question.

When students are asked to give a definition of some concept or term, they frequently go to a dictionary. But a dictionary provides only a description of how a concept is used in ordinary speech. A dictionary cannot tell us what the word means in a fundamental sense because dictionary definitions never ask whether that common usage is coherent, accurate, or precise. It is up to the person engaged in reflection on the concept to figure out what the term means and whether that meaning fits within a larger understanding of the world. The next section illustrates four methods of analysis.

Predicates

When philosophers today talk about concepts, they are usually referring to a notion that comes from the work on logic done by German philosopher Gottlob Frege. Frege demonstrated that any sentence in natural language could be translated into a formal, symbolic language, provided that we consider the sentence to be a kind of function that describes a relationship between names (or objects) and concepts. This symbolic language is what has become modern logic. Frege modeled his logic on mathematics, with the idea that he could eliminate the ambiguity and vagueness of natural language by translating it into a purely symbolic notation. Following Frege, we can break sentences into parts, including names, or object identifiers, and concepts, or predicates.



FIGURE 1.7 Young Gottlob Frege in about 1879. (credit: “Young Frege” by Unknown author/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Predicates are descriptive terms, like “yellow,” “six feet tall,” or “faster than a speeding bullet.” Simple sentences like “the flower is yellow,” or “Superman is faster than a speeding bullet” can be easily analyzed into object terms and predicates. But any sentence can be analyzed in multiple ways. And some sentences express multiple relations between predicates and objects. So the role of conceptual analysis is to identify the right predicates for analysis and to clarify the relationship between them. Predicates can help us clarify statements. For any sentence, we can ask, what is being predicated, and how is it being predicated?

Descriptions

While the concepts that describe or categorize objects can be analyzed using predicates, the objects themselves can be analyzed by using descriptions. Bertrand Russell identified definite descriptions as the way to analyze proper names or objects. His idea is that in a sentence like “the flower is yellow” or “my dog likes naps,” the subject term—“flower” or “dog”—can be substituted with a descriptive sentence that uniquely identifies this particular flower or dog. There are unique characteristics that differentiate my dog from all others, for instance: my dog was born on a certain day, lives in a certain city, belongs to me, or occupies a specific location. Similarly, the flower can be identified by its position in a garden, field, or particular geographical location. One of Russell’s insights was that proper names, such as “Max” (suppose it is the name I

use to call my dog), are definite descriptions in disguise. That is, any proper name can be substituted with a description that identifies the one and only thing named.

A **definite description** is a way of analyzing names and object terms for the purpose of making them more like predicates. This way we can clarify what we are talking about without resorting to gestures, context, or direct experience. You probably do this in your everyday life when you encounter confusion about a name. For instance, suppose a coworker says, “Kevin used up all the paper in the printer.” If there is more than one Kevin in the office, you might answer, “Which Kevin?” And your coworker may then respond, “The one with brown hair whose workspace is right next to the entrance.” “Oh,” you might reply, “You mean the one with the picture of his kids on his desk?” In a sense, this process of disambiguating the reference for the name “Kevin” is a process of seeking a more definite description to supplement the proper name. Understanding that language is composed of definite descriptions and predicates can help us remove some of the ambiguity and vagueness that is a natural part of speech.

Enumeration

Sometimes, to understand the meaning of a concept, it is helpful to enumerate its component parts. For instance, we may say that a governmental body is composed of its legislature, its executive, and its judicial branches. Or we might recognize that a cell is composed of a nucleus, a cell wall, and organelles. The process of **enumeration** can help us specify the nature of the thing we are talking about. In effect, we are identifying the parts that make up a whole. Since claims about the whole can be analyzed as claims about its parts and claims about how the parts pertain to the whole, it is helpful to enumerate the parts and consider how claims about the whole relate to claims about the parts.

Just as enumeration is helpful in understanding material things, it can be used to understand abstract concepts. For example, Aristotle says that wisdom is composed of scientific knowledge, plus understanding, where understanding is the grasp of first principles and scientific knowledge is the grasp of demonstrated reasoning that follows from first principles. Whether or not Aristotle is correct, his enumeration may help us understand the nature of wisdom.

Thought Experiments

When philosophers want to clarify the relationship between concepts, they often consider hypothetical scenarios meant to isolate one or more features of a concept and place it in the appropriate relationship with other concepts. Such hypothetical scenarios are called **thought experiments**. These imaginative scenarios allow us to test or compare concepts to better understand their connections and logical consequences. Philosophers have used thought experiments for as long as we have a written record of philosophical thought. For instance, Plato devised an elaborate thought experiment in *The Republic*, in which he depicts Socrates and several of his friends describing an ideal city. The premise of this thought experiment is that if the philosophers could describe an ideal city in detail, they would be able to identify which part of the city gives rise to justice.

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher who followed Plato, arrives at the famous claim that “nature abhors a vacuum” (i.e., nature would not allow empty space between matter) by constructing a thought experiment. To argue for this conclusion, Aristotle assumes that there is such a void and then asks, how could one know the distance between two points in a vacuum? If there is any distance between two points, Aristotle reasons, that distance would have to be the property of something. But, by hypothesis, there is nothing between the two points: it is a pure void. Aristotle bases his reasoning on the idea that it is impossible for properties to exist without something they are the property of. This argument reveals that Aristotle thinks distance is a property of matter. Accordingly, it is impossible to measure distance in a pure void. Therefore, Aristotle reasons, it is not possible for a void to exist because it would occupy a distance that has no measure. Puzzles like this one can prompt fruitful philosophical reflection. What do you think about it?

Thought experiments are also common in ethics as a way of testing out moral theories. A moral theory could

be supported by a thought experiment if the result of applying the theory to a hypothetical case made good moral sense. On the other hand, the thought experiment might undermine the moral theory by demonstrating that when the theory is applied, it results in an absurd or immoral outcome. In any case, thought experiments can help us clarify the relationship between our concepts and theories.

[Table 1.2](#) summarizes these four methods of conceptual analysis.

Type of Conceptual Analysis	Description	Application
Predicates	Predicates are descriptive terms, like “yellow” or “six feet tall”. The role of conceptual analysis is to identify the right predicates for analysis and to clarify the relationship between them.	Predicates can help us clarify statements. For any sentence, we can ask, what is being predicated, and how is it being predicated?
Descriptions	A definite description is a way of analyzing names and object terms for the purpose of making them more like predicates. This way we can clarify what we are talking about without resorting to gestures, context, or direct experience.	Understanding that language is composed of definite descriptions and predicates can help us remove some of the ambiguity and vagueness that is a natural part of speech.
Enumeration	The process of enumeration can help us specify the nature of the thing we are talking about. In effect, we are identifying the parts that make up a whole.	Since claims about the whole can be analyzed as claims about its parts and claims about how the parts pertain to the whole, it is helpful to enumerate the parts and consider how claims about the whole relate to claims about the parts.
Thought experiments	Thought experiments are hypothetical scenarios meant to isolate one or more features of a concept and place it in the appropriate relationship with other concepts.	Thought experiments allow us to test or compare concepts to better understand their connections and logical consequences.

TABLE 1.2 Four Methods of Conceptual Analysis

Trade-offs

Conceptual analysis, logic, and sources of evidence together help philosophers compose a picture of the world that helps them get a better grasp of truth. Recall that philosophers are attempting to understand how things hang together in the broadest possible sense. However, it is unlikely that any single philosophical picture of the world will turn out to be so obviously compelling that it completely satisfies all criteria of logic, evidence, and conceptual analysis. It is much more likely that there will be competing pictures, each with strong reasons for believing in it. This situation is the basis for philosophical discussions. No one picture is so obviously true that all others can be discarded. Instead, we have to evaluate each picture of the world and understand the trade-offs that these pictures impose on us. We have to consider the practical and logical implications of the beliefs we hold to fully understand whether those beliefs are true and right.



READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Excerpt from “Thinking and Moral Considerations” by Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt was a German-Jewish philosopher who fled Germany in the 1930s and eventually settled in New York City, where she became a prominent public intellectual. She is best known for her work on totalitarianism, power, and the notion of evil. She coined the phrase “the banality of evil” when reporting for the *New Yorker* magazine on the Nuremberg trial of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann. The Nuremberg trials were a series of trials held in Nuremberg, Germany, after World War II in which Nazi leaders were held accountable for their war crimes before the international community. Subsequently, Arendt wrote the article “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in which she describes the ways that Eichmann’s inability or unwillingness to consider the real, moral consequences of his actions caused him to behave in radically immoral ways. Arendt diagnoses the core problem of a person like Eichmann as “not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think.” She considers thought to involve aesthetic and moral judgments; thus, for a person to engage in evil action, they must necessarily disregard self-reflection and conscientious thought.

Read this article, particularly focusing on the first two paragraphs and the last four paragraphs. You may be able to obtain a copy of the article through JSTOR (<https://openstax.org/r/jstor>) if you access this database through your college library. Then consider the following questions:

- In what sense does thinking require consideration of moral and aesthetic concerns? What is the relationship between thought and judgment?
- How does the word *conscience* function in Arendt’s analysis? What is important about this word for understanding the nature of thought?
- How does the figure of Socrates function in Arendt’s analysis to reveal the role of thinking?
- Why is thinking, in the sense that Arendt considers it, so easily disregarded by society? When does thinking matter most?

“Biting the Bullet”

Sometimes when weighing the trade-offs of a particular view and its logical consequences, you may decide to “bite the bullet.” This means that you are willing to accept the negative consequences of the view because you find the view attractive for other reasons. For instance, on the topic of free will, a philosopher might be committed to the idea that past events fully determine the future. In such a case, the philosopher is willing to accept the negative implication that free will is an illusion. In ethics, some philosophers are committed to the view that morality is entirely determined by the total quantity of effects caused by an action. Such philosophers may be willing to accept things that would otherwise seem immoral, like harming an individual person, if that action results in a greater quantity of positive effects in the end. No view is going to be perfect, and it is difficult to make sense of the world in terms that we can explain and understand. Nonetheless, we must be honest about the logical and moral consequences of the views we hold. If you are ultimately willing to accept those consequences to maintain the view, then you can bite the bullet.

Reflective Equilibrium

Another method for assessing the logical and moral consequences of our thinking is to use judgments about particular cases to revise principles, rules, or theories about general cases. This process of going back and forth between an assessment of the coherence of the theory and judgments about practical, applied cases is called **reflective equilibrium**. This process requires the revision of a theoretical and principled stance based on practical judgments about particular cases. Reflective equilibrium is achieved when you are able to establish some coherence between your theoretical and practical beliefs. Reflective equilibrium is a kind of coherence method: that is, reflective equilibrium justifies beliefs by assessing their logical consistency. As opposed to a traditional coherence approach, however, reflective equilibrium encourages the use of practical

and applied judgments about cases as part of the set of beliefs that is logically consistent. Reflective equilibrium is an important method for introductory students to understand because students are frequently tempted to think they need to solve theoretical issues first before they can consider applications. Or they may choose a theory and then try to apply it to cases. Reflective equilibrium emphasizes that this procedure is likely neither possible nor desirable. Instead, a philosopher should be aware of both the theoretical commitments and the practical concerns of their position and use their understanding of each to inform the final analysis of their beliefs.

1.3 Socrates as a Paradigmatic Historical Philosopher

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain Socrates's appreciation for the limits of human knowledge.
- Identify Socrates's primary moral principles.
- Describe Socrates's life, death, and philosophical interests.
- Compare Socrates's moral philosophy with classical Indian philosophy.

Socrates is a foundational figure for Western philosophy. Even though he did not write any works himself, his life and thought are captured by three different, contemporary sources whose works we still have. Socrates is depicted in several of Aristophanes's comedic plays. Aristophanes, an accomplished Athenian playwright, won several dramatic competitions of his day. Eleven of his 40 plays survive, and in three of them—*The Clouds*, *The Frogs*, and *The Birds*—Socrates appears as a main character. Aristophanes's depiction of Socrates is ridiculous, and Plato appears to think that this depiction is partially responsible for Socrates's ultimate trial and death. Another contemporary of Socrates, the historian Xenophon, wrote an account of Socrates's trial and death in his *Memorabilia*. Finally, and most important, Socrates's student and friend Plato made Socrates the central figure in nearly all of his dialogues. Plato and Aristotle are the most influential of the Athenian philosophers and have had a profound influence on the development of Western philosophy. Plato wrote exclusively in the form of dialogues, where his characters engage in discussion centered on philosophical issues. Most of what we know about Socrates is derived from Plato's depiction of him as the primary questioner in most of the dialogues. Therefore, even though Socrates did not write works of his own, his life—and death—remain a testament to his profound and impactful philosophical life. For that reason, it is useful for us to consider the figure of Socrates as a paradigm of the philosophical life.

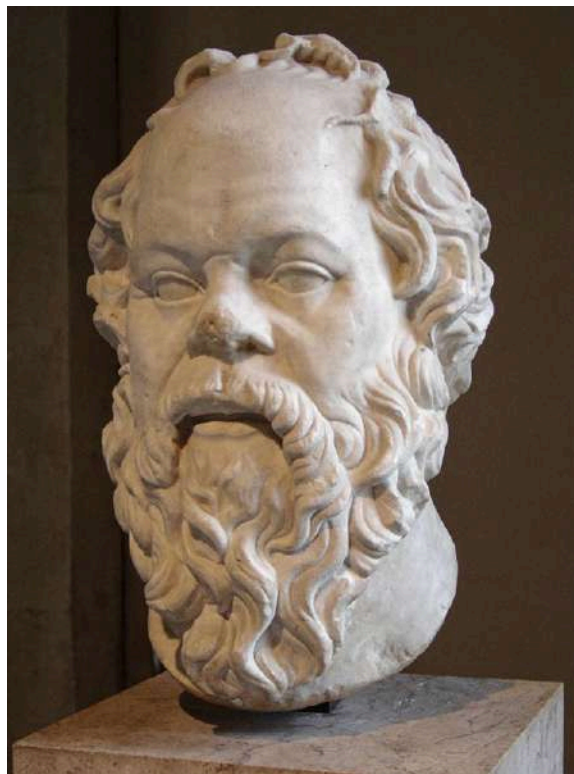


FIGURE 1.8 Roman 1st century marble sculpture of Socrates, which is perhaps a copy of a lost bronze statue made by Lysippos. (credit: “Head of Socrates, 1st Century, A.D.” by Nathan Hughes Hamilton/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In particular, Socrates’s defense of himself during his trial is in many ways a defense of the philosophical life. Socrates was accused by a young, upstart politician named Meletus of corrupting the youth and undermining the gods of the city. These crimes were considered to be a kind of treason that undermined the legitimacy and future of Athenian democracy. The speech Socrates gave in his own defense to the Athenians, as recorded by Plato, remains a vivid and compelling defense of the sort of life he lived. In the end, his defense was not successful. He was convicted, imprisoned, and killed in 399 BCE. Plato provides accounts of the trial and death, not only in the *Apology*, but also in the *Crito*, where Socrates argues with his friend Crito that it would be unjust for him to escape from prison, and in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates engages in a debate with several close friends, arguing in his jail cell just before he dies that the soul is immortal.



READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

This [excerpt from Plato’s *Apology*](https://openstax.org/r/platosapology) (<https://openstax.org/r/platosapology>), translated by Benjamin Jowett, records one account of Socrates’s defense at his trial. He is responding to accusations made against him in front of the Assembly, which was the main governing body and jury for trials in Athens. This body was composed of 500 citizens.

I dare say, Athenians, that someone among you will reply, “Why is this, Socrates, and what is the origin of these accusations of you: for there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All this great fame and talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men: tell us, then, why this is, as we should be sorry to judge hastily of you.” Now I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will endeavor to explain to you the origin of this name of “wise,” and of this evil fame. . . . I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit, and will tell you about my wisdom—whether I have any, and of what sort—and that witness shall be the god of Delphi. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the

oracle to tell him whether—as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether there was anyone wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself, but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of this story.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, “What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature.” After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, “Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest.” Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed to him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: “Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him.” Then I went to another, who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

After this I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, “Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle.” And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that some inferior men were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the “Herculean” labors, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable. When I left the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly, I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to speak of this, but still I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. That showed me in an instant that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them. And the poets appeared to me to be much in the same case; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians.

At last I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things; and in this I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets; because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom—therefore I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made answer to myself and the oracle that I was better off as I was.

This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself

possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, “He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.” And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and make inquiry into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.

“The Life Which Is Unexamined Is Not Worth Living”

After Socrates is convicted and has a chance to address the jury to persuade them to offer him a sentence or punishment other than death, he considers and then rejects the idea of exile. If he lived in exile, Socrates believed he would no longer be able to carry on his work as a philosopher because a foreign city would be even less welcoming of his strange questioning than his hometown. In speaking about this alternative, he says the following:

Someone will say: “Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you?” Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that this would be a disobedience to a divine command, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living—that you are still less likely to believe. (Plato, *Apology*)

This idea—that a life that is “unexamined” is not worth living—strikes at the heart of what Socrates tells us motivates him to live a philosophical life. The statement ought to make us pause and reflect, not only because Socrates himself demonstrates his commitment to a particular kind of life, to the point of accepting death, but also because the charge that an unexamined life is not worth living rightly seems like such a serious thing. To have lived a life that is not worth living: What could be worse? Given the stakes, we ought to wonder, what does Socrates mean by an unexamined life? Or, alternatively, what would it look like to examine one’s life in the appropriate way?

Examination of the Self

The first form of examination that Socrates clearly advises is self-examination. At the temple to the oracle at Delphi, one of three maxims engraved in stone is the phrase “know thyself.” Like most oracular statements, it is not clear what is meant by this phrase. Plato suggests it may be a kind of warning to those who enter the oracle: “Know your position relative to the gods!” Alternatively, it may be a command to understand your own nature and your own mind before you seek to understand other people or the things of the world. Based on our reading of Socrates’s life and works, we can assume that he considers this saying to be a command to investigate our beliefs and knowledge, to appreciate the limits of our own knowledge, and to strive to eliminate inconsistencies. After all, Socrates’s method of questioning as it is described in Plato’s dialogues (and as Socrates himself describes in the excerpted passage) is exactly such an inquiry.

Socrates questions others about whether their beliefs are consistent and whether they have adequate justification for the beliefs they hold. This line of questioning suggests that Socrates holds such consistency and internal justification in high regard. We can imagine that Socrates considers an unexamined life to be one in which a person holds beliefs without justification or holds beliefs that are inconsistent with one another. We may then speculate that an unexamined life is not worth living because it is dictated by beliefs and ideas that have never been tested, justified, or accounted for. You might respond that endless questioning is boring or difficult, or you may respond that “ignorance is bliss.” For a philosopher, this attitude is not only undesirable, but it also

approaches irrationality. It seems that, whatever makes life worth living for creatures capable of rational thought, a minimum requirement is that we believe things worth believing in, hold positions we can defend, and understand why we do what we do. To do that, we need to engage in self-examination.



FIGURE 1.9 This image depicts Socrates in deep conversation with Athenian statesman Alcibiades, Athenian politician and orator Pericles, and Aspasia, a well-known Milesian woman who gained political and philosophical influence as Pericles' romantic partner. (credit: "Drawing, Socrates, Pericles, Alcibiades, Aspasia in Discussion" by Felice Giani/Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, Public Domain)

Examination of Nature

Even though Socrates himself did not develop an account of nature and the cosmos like many of the pre-Socratic philosophers, we may imagine that living an examined life requires us to understand the world around us. Socrates himself was well aware of the various natural philosophical accounts that were prominent in his day. Plato frequently records Socrates quoting or citing another philosopher's account of the planets and stars, natural change, or other natural phenomenon when he is questioning others. Indeed, several of the dialogues place Socrates in conversations about the nature of the soul, the nature of causality, the classification of animals and plants, and so forth, all of which could fall under the examination of nature. Why might such a process of examination be important for a life worth living? We might speculate that it is important for us remain curious. The capacity to reason gives human beings the ability to investigate how things work—to discover truths about the world around them. Neglecting that drive to understand the world around us is like neglecting a natural skill. Methods of philosophical reflection can help us make sense of the world around us. Such investigation is characteristic of the ancient philosophers and may be considered part of a life worth living.

Human Wisdom Is Worth Little or Nothing

In the excerpt from Plato's *Apology*, Socrates investigates the oracle's strange response that he is the wisest of men. First, Socrates attempts to prove the oracle wrong by finding someone wiser than he. But, after a time, he comes to realize that the oracle's response was a kind of riddle. He interprets the oracle as saying that Socrates is wisest because he alone realizes that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. This realization is important for Socrates's own self-examination and provides an important lesson for philosophy students.

Understanding the Limits of Knowledge

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons you can learn from a well-rounded college education is just how much more there is to know about the world. Even the most respected scientists, philosophers, mathematicians, and historians recognize that the scope of their expertise is extremely limited. A lifetime of study can, at best, give a person deep insight into a tiny fraction of the universe of human knowledge. Beyond that, there is a vast domain of things that no human has yet discovered or understood. Consequently, it is a good idea to practice Socrates's advice: to be aware of what you do not know and not to assert knowledge where you lack it. People are often resistant to taking this position because they want answers. Someone who can convince others that they know the solution to their problems or personal dilemmas can exert a great deal of power over them. But we ought to recognize the dangers of asserting knowledge where we lack it. In technical areas, a refusal to admit ignorance can result in the failure of equipment, the malfunctioning of machines, and in the worst cases, injury and loss of life. In the moral and political arenas, asserting knowledge where you lack it may lead to unnecessary disagreements and polarization, or it may result in ill-considered actions that result in ethical mistakes or harm to others. Most importantly, if you are not aware when you lack knowledge, you will not seek to acquire the knowledge you lack. If you believe you already know something, you will not listen to the evidence that disproves what you believe. As a result, you will miss out on learning the truth.

The Socratic Method

Socrates engaged in a particular method of questioning, sometimes known as the **Socratic method**, that was characterized by his asking questions of others rather than explaining his own beliefs. Socrates is typically hesitant to offer his own ideas about the topic under discussion. Instead, he asks the people he is questioning to supply the subject matter for their discussion. Socrates's use of this strategy may be puzzling. One explanation may be that he is following the god's command, as he says in the *Apology*. Another explanation is that he does not claim to have knowledge about the topic in question and is genuinely happy to learn from others. Yet another possibility is that Socrates feigns ignorance and is being insincere. Perhaps his true goal is to trap or humiliate the other person by discovering some inconsistency or obvious falsehood in what they believe. It is hard to know which of these is the most likely explanation, but we will focus for a moment on a fourth possibility, namely, a pedagogical one.

In two different Platonic dialogues, Socrates explains what he is doing by using an analogy: he compares his method of questioning to the role taken by a midwife during childbirth. In fact, Plato tells us that Socrates's mother was a midwife and that he assumes her role in philosophical conversation. The goal of Socratic questioning, then, is to assist the person being questioned in discovering the truth on their own. By asking questions and examining the claims made by another person, Socrates allows that person to go through a process of self-discovery. This method provides an interesting lesson for teaching and learning. Often, students believe that their role is to simply receive knowledge from the teacher. But Socrates reminds us that real learning comes only through self-discovery and that the role of the teacher is to be an assistant, providing the kind of critical examination and evaluation necessary to help the student discover truth on their own.

The Importance of Doing No Harm

Even though many early philosophers were concerned with understanding nature, Socrates is much more concerned with ethics, or how to live a good life. He considers the primary purpose of philosophy to make one's life better by making the philosopher a better person. Even though Socrates rarely claims to have knowledge about anything at all, the few instances where he does profess knowledge relate directly to morality. In particular, Socrates asserts a pair of moral principles that are quite controversial and may appear at first glance false. However, upon closer inspection, you may find that these principles bear some truth that is worth consideration.

Socrates's Harm Principle

Socrates's harm principle claims the following:

1. No one willingly chooses what is harmful to themselves.
2. When a person does harm to others, they actually harm themselves.

The first principle is sometimes stated as “no one intentionally chooses evil,” but for the purposes of this discussion, it will be clearer to consider the above formulation. The important thing to understand about the first principle is that Socrates believes that when people choose bad things, they do so out of ignorance. The reason he thinks so is that he believes all people desire what is good. For Socrates, it is intuitively true that whatever someone desires, that desire is always directed at something that appears good to them, which means a person cannot choose what is harmful for its own sake. Instead, Socrates reasons, when individuals do harmful things, they believe that what they are doing will bring about some good for them. In other words, when people choose evil, they do so in the belief that it is good or will bring about something good. If, in fact, they are wrong, then that was the fault of ignorance, not a desire to do evil. If they had better understood the consequences of their actions, Socrates reasons, they would not have chosen something harmful.

The second principle derives from the fact that Socrates thinks the greatest harm that can come to anyone is for their soul—or their character—to become corrupted. Since a corrupted soul is the result of making the kinds of choices that produce harm, it follows that whenever someone does something harmful, they corrupt their soul, so they harm themselves. At the end of the *Apology*, Socrates argues that it is not possible to harm a good man because, even though you might kill him, you cannot harm his character or make him do evil. Socrates seems to regard physical suffering, and even death, as a temporary and minor harm. Moreover, he regards the harm to one’s character by living a life of ignorance or malevolence as far worse than physical death.



THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

- Do you agree with the first principle of Socrates, which leads him to claim that no one willingly does harm? Why do you agree or disagree with him?
- Can you think of examples from your own life or experience that demonstrate that people deliberately do harm for harm’s sake?
- Is the second claim true or false? Can you think of examples to prove the second claim true? False?
- Why might Socrates believe that harm to one’s character is more significant than even death? Is Socrates mistaken? If you believe he is mistaken, on what do you base your claim?

When you answer these questions, be sure to give Socrates the benefit of the doubt. After all, there is no question that Socrates was a smart person. He lived at a different time and may appear strange to you, but you will find that his ideas are still relevant if you give them some consideration. After you take Socrates seriously, can you still find an error in Socrates’s thinking?

Comparison of Socrates’s Harm Principle with *Ahimsa* in the Indian Tradition

It may be instructive to consider the possible connection between the core concept of **ahimsa** in classical Indian philosophy and Socrates’s harm principle as discussed above. Etymologically, the word *ahimsa*, in Sanskrit, literally means “the absence of doing injury or harm.” The concept is found throughout Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist texts and likely has its origins deep in classical Indian thought. A well-known illustration of *ahimsa* comes from Jainism, where the concept is taken to what most of us would consider to be extreme measures—at least in the case of Jain ascetics observing *ahimsa* as one of the “great vows.” Such ascetic Jains must take the greatest possible care not to cause harm, intentionally or unintentionally, to any creature, including insects, plants, and microbes. At the end of their lives, a devout Jain may even fast to death (stop eating) in one final renunciation of doing harm. Another well-known example of *ahimsa* can be seen the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, who used the concept to establish a nonviolent civil disobedience movement that some say helped speed the colonial British departure from India.

Ahimsa is identified as one of the highest virtues in the Vedic tradition (the Vedas are the most sacred scriptures of India) and is one of the loftiest teachings in Indian philosophy. The idea of *ahimsa* informs animal ethics, just-war theory, and interpersonal relations. On a metaphysical level, *ahimsa* is connected with karma—the causal law that links causes to effects, even across lifetimes. This informs the belief that an individual will bear a future burden for harms committed in the present through the process of *samsara*, or transmigration and rebirth of the soul. According to this religious and philosophical theory, the soul brings both its good and bad karma (fruit of action) with it from life to life and will either enjoy the fruits of prior good actions or suffer the consequences of bad ones. Because of the laws of karma and reincarnation, any action resulting in violence, injury, or harm has the direct consequence of chaining an individual's soul to a process of rebirth and material suffering. Insofar as a person causes injury and suffering to others, they increase the total negative effects in nature. In summary, the individual creates bad effects for themselves by acting badly. From the perspective of Indian philosophy, there is a natural connection among all beings, so causing harm or injury to one entity is like harming a family member or even a part of oneself. Additionally, because individual experience is governed by the laws of karma, harm and injury to others has the result of causing injury to oneself.

However, *ahimsa* does not focus only on the problem of causing harm. The practice of *ahimsa* also calls for the practice of love and compassion toward all beings. Following the same principles of karma and *samsara*, acts of love, kindness, and generosity have the effect of increasing the total amount of good in the world, of recognizing that we are, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality” and “tied in a single garment of destiny” (1963). The practice of love and compassion increases the possibility of liberation from material suffering.

It may be useful to consider possible comparisons between the Indian notion of *ahimsa* and Socrates's harm principle. Both doctrines teach that by causing harm, acting through violence, or causing suffering to others, we actually harm ourselves. They describe different mechanisms for how that harm comes to us. Which do you think sounds more likely to be true? Are there other advantages or disadvantages to either view?

Additionally, Socrates says that no one directly desires to cause harm or do evil; harm is the product of ignorance. For Indian philosophers, there is a connection between harm or suffering and ignorance as well. For them, suffering is caused by attachment to temporary things, both material and immaterial, including feelings, goals, or ideals. The remedy for attachment is enlightenment, which comes from recognizing that all perceptions, feelings, and desires emerge from prior causes and that the chain of causes continues without end. All things that are part of the chain of causes, according to Indian philosophers, are temporary. Once a person has this realization, they ought to recognize the harm that comes from attachment, from trying to hold on to any product of the unending chain of causes. The connection between ignorance and harm is quite different for each philosophy, but it may be worthwhile to consider how and why they are different. It may also be worthwhile to reflect on whether there is a connection between harm and ignorance and what it might be.

1.4 An Overview of Contemporary Philosophy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify the role of professional philosophers in academics and beyond.
- Identify the structure, organization, and thematic goals of the textbook.

Contemporary academic philosophy bears minimal resemblance to the classical traditions we have discussed in the previous sections. Philosophers today, like other academics, focus on specific areas of research expertise with the goal of producing new research that advances our philosophical understanding of specific problems or topic areas. That said, philosophical investigation is still motivated by the same desire to make sense of things in the most general way possible. In this section, we will introduce you to what philosophy majors do. Additionally, we will provide a brief summary of the themes and organization of the textbook.

What Can You Do with a Philosophy Major?

Majoring in philosophy is a great way to complete a liberal arts degree. Philosophy will introduce you to fascinating ideas and teach you to think analytically and creatively. If you enjoy the topics in this book, you should consider a philosophy major.

Becoming a Philosophy Teacher

To pursue a career in academic philosophy, you must major in philosophy as an undergraduate and continue your studies in the field by doing some graduate work. Community colleges and some four-year schools employ instructors with a master's degree in philosophy. However, it is very common for these jobs to be occupied almost entirely by people with PhDs. Academic jobs, particularly in the humanities and liberal arts, are extremely competitive. Even with a PhD, it will be difficult to find a job in an academic department. That said, it is much more common to find jobs teaching than doing research, but many teaching jobs still require some research. A philosophy professor or instructor may be asked to teach on a wide variety of subjects, depending on the needs of the school. By contrast, when doing research, academic philosophers tend to focus on a very specific area with the goal of becoming an expert in that topic. Expertise is generally marked by the production of research work, such as a dissertation, book, or several research articles on the topic. Academic research jobs are typically secured with tenure, meaning that there are strong protections against unjustified firing. However, recent studies of federal data show that 73 percent of all academic jobs are not on the tenure track (meaning there is no chance to secure tenure). Additionally, 40 percent of all academic teaching positions are occupied by part-time faculty. The distribution of tenured, tenure-track, non-tenure track, and part-time employees varies greatly by institution type, with community colleges employing far more part-time instructors and far fewer tenured and tenure-track instructors. Meanwhile, research universities employ more tenured and tenure-track faculty and fewer part-time faculty (AAUP 2018).

Alternatives to Academic Philosophy

Philosophy undergraduate and graduate degree majors have many options outside of teaching and research in an academic environment. There is a widespread and somewhat mistaken belief that the purpose of selecting a college major is to prepare you for a specific career. While that may be true for some technical degrees, like engineering or nursing, it is generally not true for degrees in the liberal arts and sciences. Many students enter college with a desire to pursue a career in some area of business or commerce. Others plan to go on to a professional graduate school in medicine or law. While it may seem like the best career decision would be to major in business, premed, or prelaw, this notion is probably misguided.

The original idea behind a liberal arts and sciences education was that high school graduates could study a broad range of fields in the core areas of knowledge that are foundational for our culture, society, and civilization—areas like the natural and social sciences, literature, history, religion, and philosophy. By studying these fields, students gain insights into the key ideas, methods of investigation, questions, and discoveries that underlie modern civilization. Those insights give you a perspective on the world today that is informed by the history and learning that make today's world possible. And that perspective can have a transformative effect that goes far beyond job preparation.

When philosophy majors are compared to other majors in terms of their long-term career earnings, it appears that philosophy majors do very well. While the starting salaries of philosophy majors are lower than some other majors, their mid-career salaries compare very favorably with majors in areas like finance, engineering, and math.

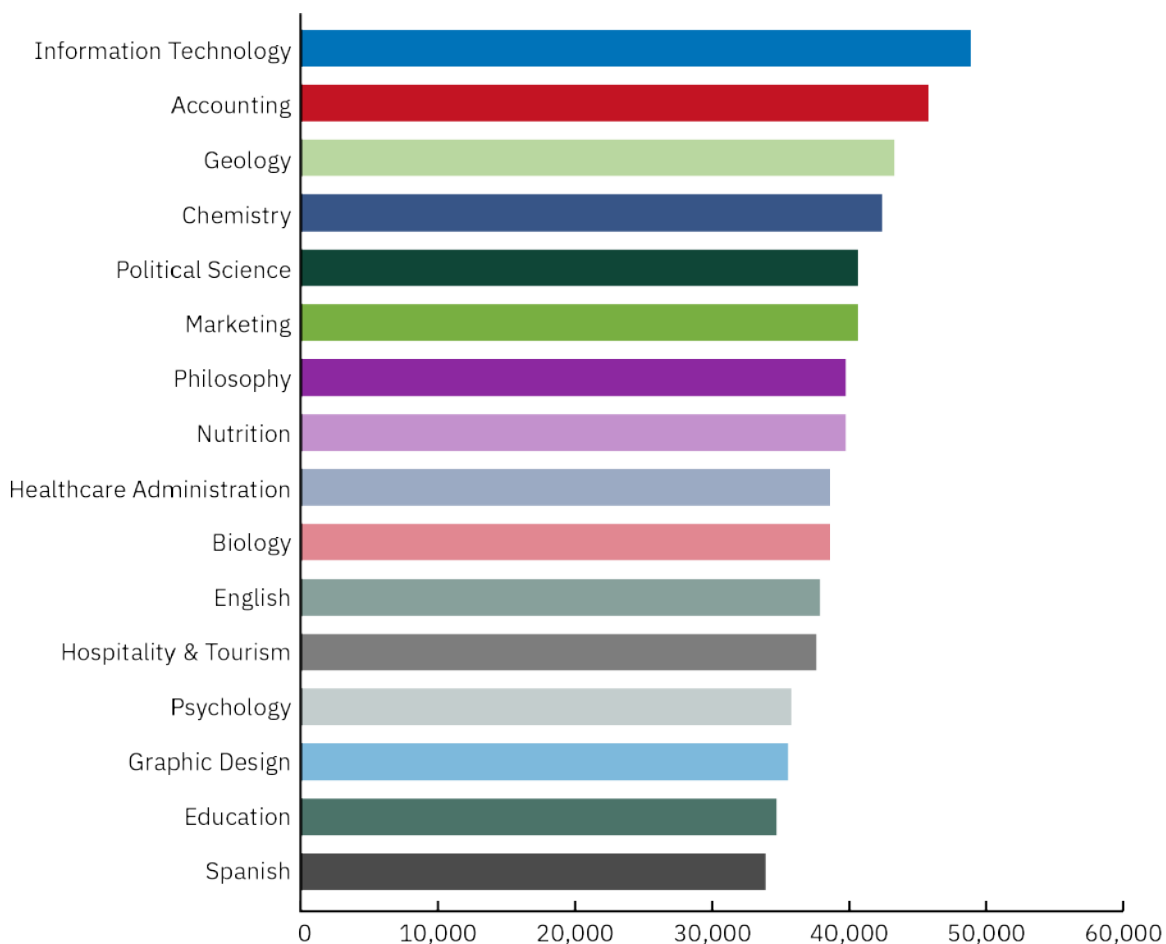


FIGURE 1.10 Median mid-career salaries (10 years after graduation) by college major. Philosophy majors make more, on average, than those majoring in many other areas. (source: *Wall Street Journal*) (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax under CC BY 4.0 license)

Additionally, philosophy majors have some of the highest LSAT and GMAT scores of any major (these are the tests generally required for admission to law school and business school, respectively). Quite a few former philosophy majors have gone on to become CEOs of large corporations, such as Reid Hoffman, cofounder of LinkedIn, and Carly Fiorina, CEO of Hewlett-Packard (Chideya 2015).

Many philosophers who have earned a graduate degree in philosophy and held positions as professors and instructors have made successful transitions to other careers, including start-ups, technology, business, ethics review boards, and public philosophy. Nigel Warburton, a former philosophy professor, started the philosophy podcast “Philosophy Bites” that is one of the most downloaded podcasts on academic topics. He also is an editor-in-chief of the online magazine *Aeon*. David Barnett, a former philosophy professor, founded the company PopSockets in 2012 after leaving academia. That company now employs over 200 people and generates hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue. Additionally, there are a growing number of technology, neuroscience, and medical firms that are specifically looking to hire philosophers to help with research and ethics reviews. Marcus Arvan maintains a public directory of academic philosophers who have found work outside of academia at [Philosophers in Industry \(https://openstax.org/r/philosopher\)](https://openstax.org/r/philosopher). In short, philosophers can be found nearly everywhere doing useful work and making good money. You should not let concerns about career prospects drive you away from studying philosophy.

An Overview of Your Philosophy Textbook

This textbook is organized in a way that generally reflects the broad areas of specialization in contemporary academic philosophy. Areas of specialization can be grouped into the following fields: historical traditions;

metaphysics and epistemology; science, logic, and mathematics; and value theory. The fields of science, logic, and mathematics include research into contemporary symbolic logic as well as interdisciplinary work in the philosophy of mathematics and the sciences; these areas are closely related to metaphysics and epistemology. Value theory includes metaethics and the meaning of value, aesthetics, normative moral theories (ethics), and political philosophy. This textbook aims to provide a general overview of each of these areas. We give students a theoretical survey of each field in philosophy and introduce applications of these areas of study to contemporary issues of interest. Additionally, we have an explicitly multicultural focus. We emphasize that philosophy has been studied and practiced throughout the world since the beginning of recorded history. In doing so, we are attempting to confront the Eurocentric bias that has been inherent to the study of philosophy in the West and create a more inclusive curriculum.

Throughout this text, we introduce you to the stunning array of philosophers and ideas from ancient Greece, Rome, and China, the classical Islamic and the late medieval European worlds, Africa, India, Japan, and Latin America. We help situate you within the different regions and time periods using timelines and other tools.

Whether you go on to study philosophy or this is the only philosophy course you take, the habits of mind and techniques of philosophical thought you will learn can have a transformative effect. When you allow yourself to reflect on how a certain situation connects to the whole, when you critically examine your own biases and beliefs, when you investigate the world with an open mind, informed by rational methods of investigation, you will arrive at a richer sense of who you are and what your place is in the world.

Summary

1.1 What Is Philosophy?

The word “philosophy” derives from ancient Greek, in which the philosopher is a lover or pursuer (*philia*) of wisdom (*sophia*). The earliest Greek philosophers were not known as philosophers; they were simply known as sages. The sage tradition is a largely prehistoric tradition that provides a narrative about how intellect, wisdom, piety, and virtue lead to the innovations central to the flourishing of ancient civilizations. Particularly in Greece, the sage tradition blends into a period of natural philosophy, where ancient scientists or philosophers try to explain nature using rational methods.

Wilfrid Sellars emphasizes that philosophy’s goal is to understand a very wide range of topics—in fact, the widest possible range. That is to say, philosophers are committed to understanding everything insofar as it can be understood. A philosopher chooses to study things that are informative and interesting—things that provide a better understanding of the world and our place in it. To make judgments about which areas are interesting or worthy of study philosophers need to cultivate a special skill. Sellars describes this philosophical skill as a kind of know-how. Philosophical know-how has to do with knowing your way around the world of concepts and being able to understand and think about how concepts connect, link up, support, and rely upon one another—in short, how things hang together.

1.2 How Do Philosophers Arrive at Truth?

The goal of philosophy is to provide a coherent story of how the world as it appears to us can be explained in a way that also makes sense of what the sciences tell us. Given the influence of philosophy on world history, it is worthwhile to engage with the writings of past philosophers to inform our understanding of pressing philosophical questions of today.

What philosophers today mean by intuition can best be traced back to Plato, for whom intuition (*nous*) involved a kind of insight into the very nature of things. This notion has had religious connotations, as if the knowledge gained through intuition is like catching a glimpse of divine light.

When philosophers talk about common sense, they mean specific claims based on direct sense perception, which are true in a relatively fundamental sense. In other words, philosophical champions of common sense deny that one can be skeptical of certain basic claims of sense perception.

Experimental philosophy is a relatively recent movement in philosophy by which philosophers engage in empirical methods of investigation, similar to those used by psychologists or cognitive scientists. Philosophers use experimental methods to find out what average people think about philosophical issues. Since common sense and intuition are already a source of evidence in philosophical reasoning, it makes sense to confirm that what philosophers ascribe to common sense or intuition aligns with what people generally think about these things.

Logic attempts to formalize the process that we use or ought to use when we provide reasons for some claims. The first and most important move in logic is to recognize that claims are the product of arguments. In particular, a claim is just the conclusion of a series of sentences, where the preceding sentences (called premises) provide evidence for the conclusion. In logic, an argument is just a way of formalizing reasons to support a claim, where the claim is the conclusion and the reasons given are the premises.

A set of beliefs or statements is coherent, or logically consistent, if it is possible for them to all be true at the same time. If it is not possible for statements or beliefs to be true at the same time, then they are contradictory. It seems unreasonable for a person to accept contradictory claims because a contradiction is a logical impossibility. If a person holds contradictory beliefs, then they must be wrong about at least some of their beliefs.

One of the techniques that philosophers use to clarify and understand philosophical statements (either premises or conclusions) is conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis involves the analysis of concepts,

notions, or ideas as they are presented in statements or sentences. The term analysis has been a part of philosophical terminology and methodology since its beginning. In its most basic sense, analysis refers to the process of breaking apart complex ideas into simpler ones. Analysis also involves a cluster of related strategies that philosophers use to discover truths. Each of these techniques attempts to arrive at a clearer and more workable definition of the concepts in question.

1.3 Socrates as a Paradigmatic Historical Philosopher

Most of what we know about Socrates is derived from Plato's depiction of him as the primary questioner in most of the dialogues. The idea that a life which is "unexamined" is not worth living strikes at the heart of what Socrates tells us motivated him to live a philosophical life. The first form of examination that Socrates clearly advises is self-examination. Even though Socrates rarely claims to have knowledge about anything at all, the few instances where he does profess knowledge relate directly to morality. In particular, Socrates asserts a pair of moral principles that are quite controversial and may appear at first glance false. Socrates claims the following: 1) No one willingly chooses what is harmful to themselves; 2) When a person does harm to others, they actually harm themselves.

Socrates engaged in a particular method of questioning, sometimes known as the "Socratic method," which was characterized by his asking questions of others rather than explaining his own beliefs. The goal of Socratic questioning is to assist the person being questioned in discovering the truth on their own. By asking questions and examining the claims made by another person, Socrates allows that person to go through a process of self-discovery.

1.4 An Overview of Contemporary Philosophy

Contemporary academic philosophy is different from the classical traditions, although the motivation for doing philosophy remains the same. If you are interested in pursuing a career in academic philosophy, a graduate degree—most likely a PhD—is required. However, philosophy majors at any level can have fulfilling and rewarding careers in a variety of fields.

This textbook is organized in a way that generally reflects the broad areas of specialization in contemporary academic philosophy. Areas of specialization can be grouped into the following fields: historical traditions; metaphysics and epistemology; science, logic, and mathematics; and value theory. The fields of science, logic, and mathematics include research into contemporary symbolic logic as well as interdisciplinary work in the philosophy of mathematics and the sciences; these areas are closely related to metaphysics and epistemology. Value theory includes metaethics and the meaning of value, aesthetics, normative moral theories (ethics), and political philosophy. This textbook aims to provide a general overview of each of these areas.

Key Terms

Ahimsa one of the highest virtues of classical Indian religions. It is the practice of refraining from harming other living things.

Argument a set of sentences, where some of those sentences (called premises) provide support for another sentence, called the conclusion.

Coherence a situation in which it is possible for a set of beliefs or statements to be true at the same time.

Common sense knowledge primarily derived from perception that seems clearly or obviously true.

Conceptual analysis the process of taking apart and making sense of sentences or claims by examining their component parts.

Definite description a method of conceptual analysis that substitutes a descriptive phrase that uniquely identifies the object or thing named for an object term or proper name.

Enumeration the listing of the component parts of a concept, notion, or thing.

Experimental philosophy philosophy that uses methods from experimental science to test claims made in philosophy.

Intuition certain and evident cognition; the kind of knowledge that is so clear that it seems impossible for it to be false.

Logic the formalization of reasoning.

Milesians a school of early philosophers from Miletus; followers of Thales. They were known for examining the underlying causes of natural phenomena.

Philosophy the “love of wisdom.” An academic discipline that attempts to grasp the broadest possible understanding of things. It is characterized by rational explanation and a willingness to question assumptions.

Predicate the portion of a sentence that provides the description or characterization of an object or name. (A philosophical predicate is different from the predicate of grammar, and their definitions should not be confused.)

Reflective equilibrium a process of reviewing a theoretical position by going back and forth between the theory and its practical applications. This process seeks coherence between theory and practice.

Sage a wise person. Many ancient cultures designated important wise figures as “sages.”

Sanatana dharma the core or absolute set of moral and religious duties ordained for all people of ancient India, regardless of class or caste, and that predate the term *Hinduism*.

Socratic method a method of questioning used by Socrates (and named after him later) to help people understand what they were thinking and to arrive at some truth.

Thought experiment an imaginative scenario that tests some philosophical theory or concept by considering how it might apply in the imagined situation.

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Review Questions

1.1 What Is Philosophy?

1. What are some common characteristics of ancient sages in the Greek, Indian, and Chinese traditions?
2. What characteristics are essential for being identified as a "sage"?
3. What is the connection between sages and philosophers?
4. Provide one example of an ancient philosopher or sage who was doing something like natural science. What made this philosopher's activity scientific?
5. What does it mean for philosophy to "have an eye on the whole"? How is this different from other disciplines?
6. Why is it necessary for philosophers to discard suppositions or assumptions that may be acceptable in other disciplines?

1.2 How Do Philosophers Arrive at Truth?

7. What are five sources of evidence commonly used in philosophy? Which of these are empirical? Which do not require observation or experiment?
8. What are three techniques used in conceptual analysis? Explain how they work.
9. What is coherence? What does it mean for a set of beliefs or statements to be coherent?
10. What do philosophers mean by intuition?
11. What are thought experiments?

1.3 Socrates as a Paradigmatic Historical Philosopher

12. Consider Socrates's conclusion that "human wisdom is worth little or nothing." Do you think this is true? Why or why not?
13. Do you think the Socratic method is an effective way of maintaining humility about knowledge?
14. What do you think Socrates means by "the life which is unexamined is not worth living"? Do you agree?
15. Compare and contrast Socrates's moral philosophy with that of the Hindu principle of *ahimsa*.

1.4 An Overview of Contemporary Philosophy

16. What are the primary areas of specialization in academic philosophy?

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FIGURE 2.1 Thinking: a sculpture of two figures in Prague. (credit: modification of “Thinking” by Kurtis Garbutt/ Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 2.1** The Brain Is an Inference Machine
- 2.2** Overcoming Cognitive Biases and Engaging in Critical Reflection
- 2.3** Developing Good Habits of Mind
- 2.4** Gathering Information, Evaluating Sources, and Understanding Evidence
- 2.5** Reading Philosophy
- 2.6** Writing Philosophy Papers

INTRODUCTION You have likely heard the term “critical thinking” and have probably been instructed to become a “good critical thinker.” Unfortunately, you are probably also unclear what exactly this means because the term is poorly defined and infrequently taught. “But I know how to think,” you might say, and that is certainly true. Critical thinking, however, is a specific skill. This chapter is an informal and practical guide to critical thinking and will also guide you in how to conduct research, reading, and writing for philosophy classes.

Critical thinking is set of skills, habits, and attitudes that promote reflective, clear reasoning. Studying philosophy can be particularly helpful for developing good critical thinking skills, but often the connection between the two is not made clear. This chapter will approach critical thinking from a practical standpoint,

with the goal of helping you become more aware of some of the pitfalls of everyday thinking and making you a better philosophy student.

While you may have learned research, reading, and writing skills in other classes—for instance, in a typical English composition course—the intellectual demands in a philosophy class are different. Here you will find useful advice about how to approach research, reading, and writing in philosophy.

2.1 The Brain Is an Inference Machine

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the role of emotion in thought.
- Explain how cognitive systems produce inferences without conscious thought.

One of the first steps to becoming a more critical and reflective thinker is to understand how and why you are prone to making mistakes in thinking. These mistakes are not the result of a lack of intelligence but are a function of the way our minds work and how they naturally lead us astray.

From a biological perspective, we have been shaped by hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, which have primed our brains to become extremely effective **inference** machines. An inference is the mental process that allows us to draw conclusions from evidence. While we tend to think of inference as a deliberative and conscious process, we infer all kinds of things unconsciously, effortlessly, and immediately; in fact, most of sense perception is a kind of inference. Inference making has been crucial to human survival, but our conclusions are not always correct. By becoming aware of how our brains function to ward off threats and provide us with “cognitive ease,” or a feeling of well-being and comfort, we can begin to correct for and guard against faulty thinking.

The Brain’s Adaptive Ability to Plan Ahead

One insight of evolutionary biology is that every cell and organ in our body is adapted to its local environment for the purpose of making it more likely that our genes will survive into the next generation. Consequently, it’s helpful to think about the brain’s role in propagating our genes. Our brains facilitate our survival and promote our ability to find a partner and reproduce by using thought, calculation, prediction, and inference. For this reason, our natural and genetically primed ways of thinking do not necessarily serve the goals of philosophy, science, or truth.

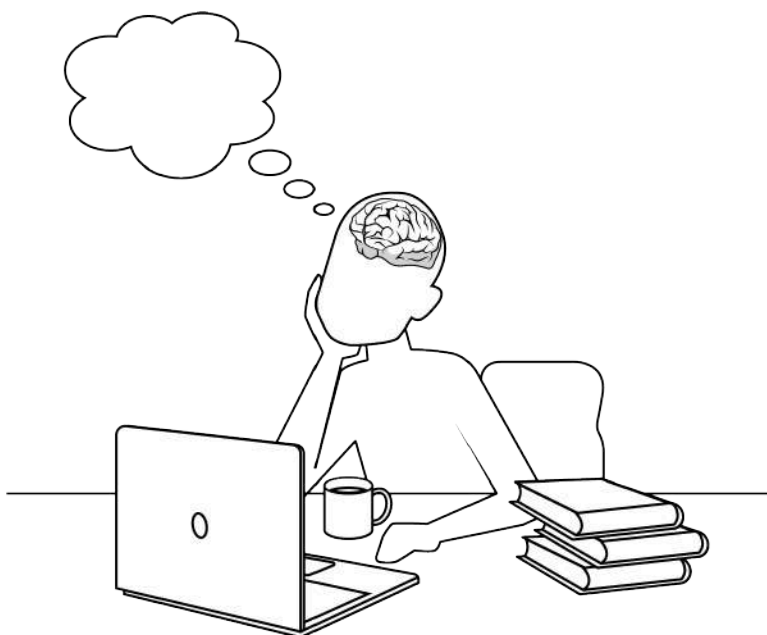


FIGURE 2.2 The “mind-brain” problem points to the unclear relationship between our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, and the neurological and electrochemical interactions that take place in the brain. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Philosophical Caveats about “Brain Talk”

Before we get much further, note that it is important to be cautious when we talk about brains and minds, which are distinct concepts. In fact, the relationship between mind and brain is one of the central problems of metaphysics, known as the “mind-body problem,” which might just as well be called the “mind-brain problem.” Briefly stated, the mind-body problem is the problem of understanding the relationship between the organic gray and white matter in our skulls (the brain) and the range of conscious awareness (the mind). We know that the brain and central nervous system provide the physical basis for our thoughts, perceptions, emotions, imagination, and desire—in short, our entire mental life. But biology does not tell us what the relationship is between our private mental life and the neurological, electrochemical interactions that take place in the brain. Is the relationship of the mind to the brain like the relationship between lightning and electrical discharge or a rainbow and the refraction of light through water droplets? In other words, is “the mind” just the term we use to label certain kinds of brain activity? Some philosophers think so. However, mental activity is not easily associated with any specific brain activity. Additionally, there seems to be something about the subjective experience of our mental life that is lost when we attempt to explain it fully in terms of brain activity. So other philosophers maintain that the mind is something different from the brain. Nonetheless, the mind and the brain are closely and somewhat mysteriously connected. As a result, it can be helpful to use the resources of psychology and **cognitive science** (the study of the brain’s processes) to help us understand how to become better thinkers. We can think of the resources from psychology and cognitive science as providing us with a description of how the brain actually behaves. By contrast, when we study critical thinking, we are interested in how we *ought* to think. Being aware of how we do think may help us devise effective strategies for how we ought to think, but we should understand that the descriptions provided by psychology are not determinative. In this chapter, we explore psychological findings that can help you become more reflective about the ways your thinking can go wrong.

CONNECTIONS

Read more about the nature of the mind and the mind-body problem in the [chapter on metaphysics](#).

Representation as Projection

While you may consider thinking to be made up of ideas or thoughts, philosophers and cognitive scientists use the term **representation** to describe the basic elements of thinking. Representations are information-bearing units of thought. This notion of representation can be traced back to Aristotle and has played a significant role in the history of philosophy, but in contemporary philosophy the term *representation* is more precise. When we think about things, whether through perception, imagination, memory, or desire, we represent those things. What is represented may be something present and real, or it may be fictitious, imagined in the future, or remembered from the past. Representations may even be unconscious. That is, the mind may have some defined content that is directed toward an object without the person being aware that they have produced such a representation.

During the process of representation, even in a relatively simple case of visual perception, the brain makes a complex set of inferences. For instance, consider the checkerboard below. You might imagine that when you perceive something like a checkerboard, your brain passively takes a mental picture of the grid. In this analogy, the eye functions like the lens of a camera, and the brain develops the picture to present to the mind. But there are several problems with this model. First, where is the picture in your brain? Who is viewing the picture in your head? There are further problems with the camera analogy that can be revealed when we examine optical illusions. Look at the checkered set of squares in [Figure 2.2](#). Are the horizontal lines parallel?

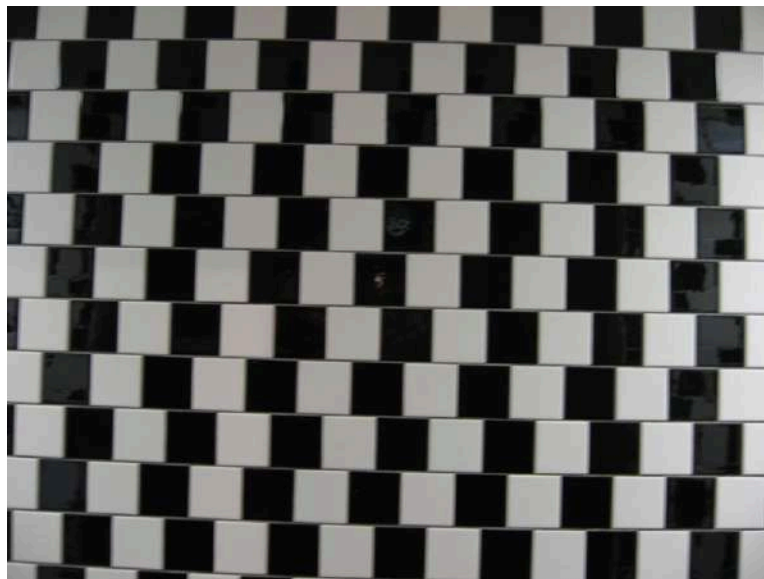


FIGURE 2.3 The horizontal lines on this grid are parallel, but unless you look at the image from the side, it is impossible to “see” this. This is one of many examples of common perceptual illusions. (credit: “Optical Illusion” by Selena N. B. H. CC BY 2.0)

In fact, the horizontal lines are parallel, but unless you look at the image from the side, it is impossible to visualize this. There are countless examples of these types of perceptual illusions. We represent the world outside as a stable picture that is completely filled in, in full focus, and uniformly colored. In reality, our visual field is limited and hazy around the edges, and colors change dramatically depending on lighting conditions, distance, movement, and a host of other factors. In fact, your brain is not passively capturing the world, like a camera, but is actively projecting the world so that it makes sense to you. In the illusion above, your brain is automatically adjusting your perception of the colored squares by accounting for the shadow cast by the cylinder. So your brain presents square B as if it is lighter than A by adjusting the hue of B to account for the shadow.

Neuroscientist David Eagleman (2011) uses the analogy of the front page of a newspaper to describe how perception works. The front page is a representation of the world’s events for a given day. Of course, it does not

present a full or complete picture of the world, but a summary intended to highlight the events of consequence, those that have changed, and those that we are most likely to care about. Like a newspaper editor, your brain is working overtime to project an image of the world based on what is relevant to your survival. You unconsciously adjust the images you perceive to give you the impression that they are far away, nearby, moving, and so forth. Instead of the fully formed, three-dimensional image of the world we seem to see, we actually perceive a kind of sketch, highlighting what we need to know to navigate safely in our environment and obtain what we need. You probably think that sense perception is the clearest and most certain way you can know the world around you. As the adage says, “Seeing is believing.” To become a better critical thinker, however, you will need to become skeptical of some of your basic beliefs. There are times when you absolutely should not believe your lying eyes.

Emotions and Reason: Homeostasis and Allostasis

In addition to the editorial license of mental representation, thinking is not always as rational as we imagine. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994) was one of the first to popularize the notion that rational thought is tempered by emotions. He is critical of what he perceives as the philosophical bias against emotion in the history of philosophy. In *Descartes’ Error*, he says modern philosophers have neglected the role of emotions in thought, imagining that the goal of rational thinking is to eliminate the influence of emotions. Instead, his years of clinical work with patients revealed to him that emotions cannot be separated from reason. Our most rational thoughts are, in fact, guided, informed, and influenced by emotions. According to Damasio, reasoning and intelligence function best when we care about something. Without feelings, says Damasio, we are less rational, not more rational.

Damasio (1994) explains that emotions serve to maintain **homeostasis** in the brain through the chemical messengers known as neurotransmitters. Homeostasis is the biological tendency to find a neutral state of equilibrium (the word *stasis* means “standing still,” and *homeo* means “same or similar”). This process relies on a feedback loop where current bodily states are monitored, observed, and then altered to bring the body back into balance. Most homeostatic processes in the body are unconscious, but emotions are linked to conscious awareness. For instance, when your blood sugar is low and your body needs calories, there is a series of chemical processes that give rise to the feeling of hunger. This is a conscious signal that you need to eat; it promotes behavior that ensures survival. Similarly, a rustling sound in the bushes at night will trigger a series of physiological responses (heightened senses, increased heart rate, pupil dilation, etc.) that correspond to the feeling of fear and promote behavior, such as fight or flight, that are necessary for survival. What Damasio demonstrates is that emotions have their own feedback mechanism, so that an idea or image can generate physiological responses even in the absence of an external stimulus. Because emotional responses and conscious thought are closely linked, decision-making can be influenced by this emotional-physiological feedback mechanism. Our thinking can go astray because we are afraid of bad outcomes, and that fear dominates a more rational calculation about which course of action is most beneficial (1994, 172–175).

In addition to maintaining equilibrium, the brain also anticipates future events and circumstances by projecting likely scenarios based on a catalog of past experiences and concepts generated through social norms and social interactions. The process of regulation that prepares the body to anticipate future needs before they arise is called **allostasis** (*allo* means “other or different”). Psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) explains that the brain stores neural pathways that are triggered by external or internal stimuli to provide the closest match to the current situation. The neural pathways form a kind of template of action, promoting behavior like increased heart rate, pupil dilation, or motion. Feelings are a goal-oriented response to certain situations: they prepare us to behave and react in certain ways that promote what is beneficial to the body and sharpen and shape our awareness of the world.

In summary, the brain makes inferences about the world through perceptions, emotions, and concepts that are largely unconscious and deeply ingrained in our psyches. This process allows us to navigate fluidly and accurately through a world with so many and varied stimuli. Our reactions to stimuli are partially homeostatic,

meaning that the body tends to bring itself back into an optimal state of equilibrium, and partially allostatic, meaning that the body prepares for and anticipates future situations. Together, these impulses construct a picture of the world that we experience seamlessly and dynamically. Our experience is far more complicated than the crude mental model we imagine. We are projecting and constructing the world we experience as much as we are recording and viewing it. And that fact has important consequences for the kind of reflective and critical thought we ought to engage in when we try to think clearly about the world.

The Evolutionary Advantage of Shortcuts

Human beings have evolved to navigate the world most effectively and efficiently by engaging conscious awareness only when necessary. For that reason, you can walk through the grocery store while thinking about what you are going to cook for dinner. You do not have to consciously think about where to go, how to slow down to make way for other people, or how hard to push the shopping cart so that it maintains momentum in front of you even as its weight changes as you add groceries to the basket. All that biomechanical activity can be outsourced to unconscious mechanisms as you scan your shopping list. The brain is quite good at engaging in habitual activities without the assistance of conscious thought. And that is a good thing because conscious thought is expensive in energy terms. Consider the picture that follows.



FIGURE 2.4 Many inferences can be made about this woman’s inner experience based on her expression and posture. While such inferences can be made quickly, they cannot be verified without further investigation, and they are highly susceptible to error, bias, and stereotyping. (credit: “CL Society 226: Woman with mobile phone” by Francisco Osorio/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

You are probably immediately able to provide complex inferences about this picture, such as the woman is worried, concerned, or anxious about something. The inferences you make about this image are easy, fast, and complex. They are driven by the kind of emotional and conceptual thought processes that are unconscious and efficient. While these inferences are quick and easy, you may also be aware that they are provisional without more information. Given more data about the circumstances surrounding this picture, you might revise your perception about what is going on. This is exactly the sort of thinking that drives the emotional projections discussed in the previous section.

A different type of thinking is required to solve a math problem. The following example comes from psychologist Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2013). Try to solve the following in your head:

$$24 \times 14 =$$

Do you know the answer? For most people, multiplying two-digit numbers without pen and paper (or a calculator) is quite difficult. You might need perhaps 10 or 20 seconds of effortful thinking to solve the problem in your head since you do not have the unconscious mechanisms to do so automatically. Long-term social and evolutionary pressures have shaped our brains to find efficient solutions to complex questions about facial expressions. The same cannot be said for math problems. Knowing the solution to a math problem may be useful, but it is not the sort of thing generally required for survival and reproduction. On the other hand, quickly reading other people's emotions is at times vital for survival. There are other interesting differences between these two kinds of thinking. While it is difficult to solve the math problem, once you solve it, you can be 100 percent certain the answer is correct. By contrast, it is easy to generate a story about facial expressions, but this story is highly susceptible to error, bias, and stereotyping. As a result, critical thinkers should be careful not to jump to the first, most obvious solution.

Energy Demands on Deliberate Thinking

Solving a math problem requires rational thought and effort. When we engage in rational thought, our brains use up precious energy stores that may be required for the maintenance of the body. Because evolutionary pressures seek to keep us alive long enough to pass our genes to the next generation, we have a biological tendency to avoid effortful thinking. In a sense, it is evolutionarily wise to be lazy.

The resources demanded by conscious thought can be understood in terms of the familiar notion of "attention." When a task requires significant attention, it places increased energy demands on the brain. Periods of high-attention activity can be stressful, as the body increases blood flow to the brain, delivering more glucose and oxygen for increased mental activity. Additionally, attention is limited and focused on specific tasks. Consider the "selective attention test" developed by Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris. Watch the video below and see how you perform on this test.

VIDEO

Selective Attention Test

[Click to view content \(https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/2-1-the-brain-is-an-inference-machine\)](https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/2-1-the-brain-is-an-inference-machine)

How many passes did you count? Did you miss anything in the process? When our attention is focused on a novel and complex task, we become less aware of other stimuli outside the specific area of focus. Additionally, we may become fatigued, stressed, or anxious while engaged in paying close attention. Not surprisingly, our brains prefer automated shortcuts.

Heuristics and Learning

Kahneman (2013) calls these mental shortcuts **heuristics**, or rules of thumb for drawing inferences. Problem-solving with heuristics is largely unconscious, automated, effortless, and efficient, but it is not always correct. Rational thinking or computation requires conscious attention and effort and may not even be possible without some practice. We are forced to engage in effortful thinking when confronted with something new and possibly dangerous—or even with something slightly outside of our normal routine. For example, you have probably driven home from work or school along a familiar route on "autopilot," preoccupied with your thoughts. Maybe you have even gotten home and felt as if you cannot remember how you got there. By contrast, you have probably experienced the stress of navigating a new, unfamiliar city. In the first case, navigation can be carried out using easy, largely automatic processing, whereas in the second case, navigation requires the intense resources of active attention and rational calculation.

Sometimes complex activities can become effortless, but unlike when we are on “automatic pilot,” such activities feel pleasant and fulfilling. When you become fully immersed in a complex activity to the point at which it becomes effortless, you have entered the state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 2008).

Flow states are possible only for someone who has achieved some level of proficiency at a task. They are characterized by intense concentration and awareness as well as a sense of personal control or agency, but they are pleasurable because the challenge of engaging in the task is commensurate with your ability. By contrast, a novice may find the same tasks stressful and frustrating. This phenomenon can be illustrated using the notion of the “learning curve” that describes how a novice grows in proficiency.

What this means is that a person may be able to rely on intuitions, gut reactions, and other automatic responses in a field in which they are an expert, but the novice should be skeptical of these methods of thinking. As a novice, your mental heuristics are frequently faulty, so you are susceptible to prejudice, implicit bias, and error.

Consider the case of buying a car. Someone who is deeply familiar with the automobile market as either a buyer or a seller may be able to estimate the true value of a car easily, but the average person would need to do a great deal of research to arrive at a true estimate. Because of the effort required for nonexperts to appraise car value, they are easily influenced by dealer incentives, marked-up list prices, financing options, and other tricks of the trade. Given that we are all susceptible to these types of errors, it seems like a good idea to try to become more self-aware and critical and not rely exclusively on gut reactions or intuitions when encountering new material. Since you are probably a novice in philosophy if you are reading this textbook, you ought to be suspicious of your gut reactions to and intuitions about philosophical questions. Keep an open mind, and don’t assume you already understand the philosophical problems you will encounter in the chapters that follow. Being open to new ideas and allowing yourself to admit some degree of ignorance are important first steps in becoming a better thinker.

Heuristics and Substitution in Decision-Making

The cognitive biases that we will examine in the next section are based on a more fundamental “substitution heuristic.” This term describes our tendency to answer a difficult question or problem by substituting it with an easier question to answer. While substitution often results in an incorrect or inappropriate response, it gives us a sense of satisfaction or “cognitive ease” in thinking we have solved a problem. For instance, when you are asked to evaluate something complex and uncertain, like the future value of an investment or the political prospects of a politician, you are likely to substitute that complex calculation for an easier one. In particular, you may substitute your positive or negative feelings toward the politician or the investment product. But your feelings are likely to be guided by your preconceptions.

When the brain defaults to heuristics that produce a less-than-optimal result or even an incorrect decision, it is operating with a **cognitive bias**. A cognitive bias is a pattern of “quick” thinking based on the “rule of thumb.” A person operating under a cognitive bias does not use logic or careful reasoning to arrive at a conclusion. Cognitive biases are like perceptual illusions. Just like perceptual illusions, cognitive biases are the result of the natural and, ordinarily, efficient operation of the brain. Even though mental heuristics often work perfectly well to help give us an estimation of reality without the mental effort required to generate a more comprehensive picture, cognitive biases are the result of misleading and faulty patterns that arise from this process.

2.2 Overcoming Cognitive Biases and Engaging in Critical Reflection

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Label the conditions that make critical thinking possible.
- Classify and describe cognitive biases.
- Apply critical reflection strategies to resist cognitive biases.

To resist the potential pitfalls of cognitive biases, we have taken some time to recognize why we fall prey to them. Now we need to understand how to resist easy, automatic, and error-prone thinking in favor of more reflective, critical thinking.

Critical Reflection and Metacognition

To promote good critical thinking, put yourself in a frame of mind that allows critical reflection. Recall from the previous section that rational thinking requires effort and takes longer. However, it will likely result in more accurate thinking and decision-making. As a result, reflective thought can be a valuable tool in correcting cognitive biases. The critical aspect of critical reflection involves a willingness to be skeptical of your own beliefs, your gut reactions, and your intuitions. Additionally, the critical aspect engages in a more analytic approach to the problem or situation you are considering. You should assess the facts, consider the evidence, try to employ logic, and resist the quick, immediate, and likely conclusion you want to draw. By reflecting critically on your own thinking, you can become aware of the natural tendency for your mind to slide into mental shortcuts.

This process of critical reflection is often called **metacognition** in the literature of pedagogy and psychology. Metacognition means thinking about thinking and involves the kind of self-awareness that engages higher-order thinking skills. Cognition, or the way we typically engage with the world around us, is first-order thinking, while metacognition is higher-order thinking. From a metacognitive frame, we can critically assess our thought process, become skeptical of our gut reactions and intuitions, and reconsider our cognitive tendencies and biases.

To improve metacognition and critical reflection, we need to encourage the kind of self-aware, conscious, and effortful attention that may feel unnatural and may be tiring. Typical activities associated with metacognition include checking, planning, selecting, inferring, self-interrogating, interpreting an ongoing experience, and making judgments about what one does and does not know (Hackner, Dunlosky, and Graesser 1998). By practicing metacognitive behaviors, you are preparing yourself to engage in the kind of rational, abstract thought that will be required for philosophy.

Good study habits, including managing your workspace, giving yourself plenty of time, and working through a checklist, can promote metacognition. When you feel stressed out or pressed for time, you are more likely to make quick decisions that lead to error. Stress and lack of time also discourage critical reflection because they rob your brain of the resources necessary to engage in rational, attention-filled thought. By contrast, when you relax and give yourself time to think through problems, you will be clearer, more thoughtful, and less likely to rush to the first conclusion that leaps to mind. Similarly, background noise, distracting activity, and interruptions will prevent you from paying attention. You can use this checklist to try to encourage metacognition when you study:

- Check your work.
- Plan ahead.
- Select the most useful material.
- Infer from your past grades to focus on what you need to study.
- Ask yourself how well you understand the concepts.
- Check your weaknesses.
- Assess whether you are following the arguments and claims you are working on.

Cognitive Biases

In this section, we will examine some of the most common cognitive biases so that you can be aware of traps in thought that can lead you astray. Cognitive biases are closely related to informal fallacies. Both fallacies and biases provide examples of the ways we make errors in reasoning.

CONNECTIONS

See the [chapter on logic and reasoning](#) for an in-depth exploration of informal fallacies.

Watch the video to orient yourself before reading the text that follows.

VIDEO

Cognitive Biases 101, with Peter Bauman

[Click to view content \(https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/2-2-overcoming-cognitive-biases-and-engaging-in-critical-reflection\)](https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/2-2-overcoming-cognitive-biases-and-engaging-in-critical-reflection)

Confirmation Bias

One of the most common cognitive biases is **confirmation bias**, which is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms or supports your prior beliefs. Like all cognitive biases, confirmation bias serves an important function. For instance, one of the most reliable forms of confirmation bias is the belief in our shared reality. Suppose it is raining. When you first hear the patter of raindrops on your roof or window, you may think it is raining. You then look for additional signs to confirm your conclusion, and when you look out the window, you see rain falling and puddles of water accumulating. Most likely, you will not be looking for irrelevant or contradictory information. You will be looking for information that confirms your belief that it is raining. Thus, you can see how confirmation bias—based on the idea that the world does not change dramatically over time—is an important tool for navigating in our environment.

Unfortunately, as with most heuristics, we tend to apply this sort of thinking inappropriately. One example that has recently received a lot of attention is the way in which confirmation bias has increased political polarization. When searching for information on the internet about an event or topic, most people look for information that confirms their prior beliefs rather than what undercuts them. The pervasive presence of social media in our lives is exacerbating the effects of confirmation bias since the computer algorithms used by social media platforms steer people toward content that reinforces their current beliefs and predispositions. These multimedia tools are especially problematic when our beliefs are incorrect (for example, they contradict scientific knowledge) or antisocial (for example, they support violent or illegal behavior). Thus, social media and the internet have created a situation in which confirmation bias can be “turbocharged” in ways that are destructive for society.

Confirmation bias is a result of the brain’s limited ability to process information. Peter Wason (1960) conducted early experiments identifying this kind of bias. He asked subjects to identify the rule that applies to a sequence of numbers—for instance, 2, 4, 8. Subjects were told to generate examples to test their hypothesis. What he found is that once a subject settled on a particular hypothesis, they were much more likely to select examples that confirmed their hypothesis rather than negated it. As a result, they were unable to identify the real rule (any ascending sequence of numbers) and failed to “falsify” their initial assumptions. Falsification is an important tool in the scientist’s toolkit when they are testing hypotheses and is an effective way to avoid confirmation bias.

In philosophy, you will be presented with different arguments on issues, such as the nature of the mind or the best way to act in a given situation. You should take your time to reason through these issues carefully and consider alternative views. What you believe to be the case may be right, but you may also fall into the trap of confirmation bias, seeing confirming evidence as better and more convincing than evidence that calls your

beliefs into question.

Anchoring Bias

Confirmation bias is closely related to another bias known as anchoring. **Anchoring bias** refers to our tendency to rely on initial values, prices, or quantities when estimating the actual value, price, or quantity of something. If you are presented with a quantity, even if that number is clearly arbitrary, you will have a hard time discounting it in your subsequent calculations; the initial value “anchors” subsequent estimates. For instance, Tversky and Kahneman (1974) reported an experiment in which subjects were asked to estimate the number of African nations in the United Nations. First, the experimenters spun a wheel of fortune in front of the subjects that produced a random number between 0 and 100. Let’s say the wheel landed on 79. Subjects were asked whether the number of nations was higher or lower than the random number. Subjects were then asked to estimate the real number of nations. Even though the initial anchoring value was random, people in the study found it difficult to deviate far from that number. For subjects receiving an initial value of 10, the median estimate of nations was 25, while for subjects receiving an initial value of 65, the median estimate was 45.

In the same paper, Tversky and Kahneman described the way that anchoring bias interferes with statistical reasoning. In a number of scenarios, subjects made irrational judgments about statistics because of the way the question was phrased (i.e., they were tricked when an anchor was inserted into the question). Instead of expending the cognitive energy needed to solve the statistical problem, subjects were much more likely to “go with their gut,” or think intuitively. That type of reasoning generates anchoring bias. When you do philosophy, you will be confronted with some formal and abstract problems that will challenge you to engage in thinking that feels difficult and unnatural. Resist the urge to latch on to the first thought that jumps into your head, and try to think the problem through with all the cognitive resources at your disposal.

Availability Heuristic

The **availability heuristic** refers to the tendency to evaluate new information based on the most recent or most easily recalled examples. The availability heuristic occurs when people take easily remembered instances as being more representative than they objectively are (i.e., based on statistical probabilities). In very simple situations, the availability of instances is a good guide to judgments. Suppose you are wondering whether you should plan for rain. It may make sense to anticipate rain if it has been raining a lot in the last few days since weather patterns tend to linger in most climates. More generally, scenarios that are well-known to us, dramatic, recent, or easy to imagine are more available for retrieval from memory. Therefore, if we easily remember an instance or scenario, we may incorrectly think that the chances are high that the scenario will be repeated. For instance, people in the United States estimate the probability of dying by violent crime or terrorism much more highly than they ought to. In fact, these are extremely rare occurrences compared to death by heart disease, cancer, or car accidents. But stories of violent crime and terrorism are prominent in the news media and fiction. Because these vivid stories are dramatic and easily recalled, we have a skewed view of how frequently violent crime occurs.

Tribalism

Another more loosely defined category of cognitive bias is the tendency for human beings to align themselves with groups with whom they share values and practices. The tendency toward **tribalism** is an evolutionary advantage for social creatures like human beings. By forming groups to share knowledge and distribute work, we are much more likely to survive. Not surprisingly, human beings with pro-social behaviors persist in the population at higher rates than human beings with antisocial tendencies. Pro-social behaviors, however, go beyond wanting to communicate and align ourselves with other human beings; we also tend to see outsiders as a threat. As a result, tribalistic tendencies both reinforce allegiances among in-group members and increase animosity toward out-group members.

Tribal thinking makes it hard for us to objectively evaluate information that either aligns with or contradicts the beliefs held by our group or tribe. This effect can be demonstrated even when in-group membership is not

real or is based on some superficial feature of the person—for instance, the way they look or an article of clothing they are wearing. A related bias is called the **bandwagon fallacy**. The bandwagon fallacy can lead you to conclude that you ought to do something or believe something because many other people do or believe the same thing. While other people can provide guidance, they are not always reliable. Furthermore, just because many people believe something doesn't make it true. Watch the video below to improve your “tribal literacy” and understand the dangers of this type of thinking.

VIDEO

The Dangers of Tribalism, Kevin deLaplante

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Sunk Cost Fallacy

Sunk costs refer to the time, energy, money, or other costs that have been paid in the past. These costs are “sunk” because they cannot be recovered. The **sunk cost fallacy** is thinking that attaches a value to things in which you have already invested resources that is greater than the value those things have today. Human beings have a natural tendency to hang on to whatever they invest in and are loath to give something up even after it has been proven to be a liability. For example, a person may have sunk a lot of money into a business over time, and the business may clearly be failing. Nonetheless, the businessperson will be reluctant to close shop or sell the business because of the time, money, and emotional energy they have spent on the venture. This is the behavior of “throwing good money after bad” by continuing to irrationally invest in something that has lost its worth because of emotional attachment to the failed enterprise. People will engage in this kind of behavior in all kinds of situations and may continue a friendship, a job, or a marriage for the same reason—they don't want to lose their investment even when they are clearly headed for failure and ought to cut their losses.

A similar type of faulty reasoning leads to the **gambler's fallacy**, in which a person reasons that future chance events will be more likely if they have not happened recently. For instance, if I flip a coin many times in a row, I may get a string of heads. But even if I flip several heads in a row, that does not make it more likely I will flip tails on the next coin flip. Each coin flip is statistically independent, and there is an equal chance of turning up heads or tails. The gambler, like the reasoner from sunk costs, is tied to the past when they should be reasoning about the present and future.

There are important social and evolutionary purposes for past-looking thinking. Sunk-cost thinking keeps parents engaged in the growth and development of their children after they are born. Sunk-cost thinking builds loyalty and affection among friends and family. More generally, a commitment to sunk costs encourages us to engage in long-term projects, and this type of thinking has the evolutionary purpose of fostering culture and community. Nevertheless, it is important to periodically reevaluate our investments in both people and things.

In recent ethical scholarship, there is some debate about how to assess the sunk costs of moral decisions. Consider the case of war. Just-war theory dictates that wars may be justified in cases where the harm imposed on the adversary is proportional to the good gained by the act of defense or deterrence. It may be that, at the start of the war, those costs seemed proportional. But after the war has dragged on for some time, it may seem that the objective cannot be obtained without a greater quantity of harm than had been initially imagined. Should the evaluation of whether a war is justified estimate the total amount of harm done or prospective harm that will be done going forward (Lazar 2018)? Such questions do not have easy answers.

[Table 2.1](#) summarizes these common cognitive biases.

Bias	Description	Example
Confirmation bias	The tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms or supports prior beliefs	As part of their morning routine, a person scans news headlines on the internet and chooses to read only those stories that confirm views they already hold.
Anchoring bias	The tendency to rely on initial values, prices, or quantities when estimating the actual value, price, or quantity of something	When supplied with a random number and then asked to provide a number estimate in response to a question, people supply a number close to the random number they were initially given.
Availability heuristic	The tendency to evaluate new information based on the most recent or most easily recalled examples	People in the United States overestimate the probability of dying in a criminal attack, since these types of stories are easy to vividly recall.
Tribalism	The tendency for human beings to align themselves with groups with whom they share values and practices	People with a strong commitment to one political party often struggle to objectively evaluate the political positions of those who are members of the opposing party.
Bandwagon fallacy	The tendency to do something or believe something because many other people do or believe the same thing	Advertisers often rely on the bandwagon fallacy, attempting to create the impression that “everyone” is buying a new product, in order to inspire others to buy it.
Sunk cost fallacy	The tendency to attach a value to things in which resources have been invested that is greater than the value those things actually have	A business person continues to invest money in a failing venture, “throwing good money after bad.”
Gambler’s fallacy	The tendency to reason that future chance events will be more likely if they have not happened recently	Someone who regularly buys lottery tickets reasons that they are “due to win,” since they haven’t won once in twenty years.

TABLE 2.1 Common Cognitive Biases



THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

As we have seen, cognitive biases are built into the way human beings process information. They are common to us all, and it takes self-awareness and effort to overcome the tendency to fall back on biases. Consider a time when you have fallen prey to one of the five cognitive biases described above. What were the circumstances? Recall your thought process. Were you aware at the time that your thinking was misguided? What were the consequences of succumbing to that cognitive bias?

Write a short paragraph describing how that cognitive bias allowed you to make a decision you now realize was irrational. Then write a second paragraph describing how, with the benefit of time and distance, you would have thought differently about the incident that triggered the bias. Use the tools of critical reflection and metacognition to improve your approach to this situation. What might have been the consequences of behaving differently? Finally, write a short conclusion describing what lesson you take from reflecting back on this experience. Does it help you understand yourself better? Will you be able to act differently in the future? What steps can you take to avoid cognitive biases in your thinking today?

2.3 Developing Good Habits of Mind

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define epistemic humility and the Dunning-Kruger effect.
- Identify three strategies to increase the ability to think objectively.
- Analyze emotional responses to information.

One of the ways to respond to cognitive biases is to develop good habits of mind. There are no quick fixes or easy solutions to cognitive biases. Remember, these biases are a result of the way the brain works. Nevertheless, metacognition and critical reflection, as well as good mental habits, can help combat these natural tendencies in thought that otherwise leads us astray. The strategies outlined below can help you become a better philosopher. You should compare them with the methods philosophers use to arrive at truth, covered in Chapter 1.



CONNECTIONS

See the [introduction to philosophy chapter](#) to learn more about how philosophers arrive at the truth.

Strive for Objectivity

We are likely to assume that our experience or our perspective is generally true for others. To be more objective in thinking about issues, problems, or values, we should actively engage in strategies that remove us from our naturally subjective mindset. In this section, we will explore several strategies for approaching philosophical problems with less subjective bias.

Abstract from Specific Circumstances

Most people's point of view is based on generalizing from their specific circumstances and experiences. However, if your view of morality, consciousness, or free will is tied to notions that come from a specific time or location, then your view is not likely to be objective. Your personal experience has limitations when it comes to understanding what is going on in the world at large. To arrive at more general and representative notions, use your imagination to separate the specific properties of your experience from your worldview. This process of abstraction can make the concept appropriately general. For instance, if you wish to imagine a governing arrangement among citizens, you will probably default to the governmental organizations you are familiar with in your community, state, or nation. But these institutions differ from the way government works in other countries or in different eras of history. So when you think about justice in political organizations, it is important to imagine those not limited by your personal experience, moment in history, or location.

In some cases, however, the specific features of your experience are indispensable to the philosophical position you wish to take. In such instances, your specific experience provides critical information that needs to be preserved. For example, the prevailing views in philosophy as well as any other subject are biased in that they reflect the views of the dominant cultural group who wrote the texts. If you are a person who belongs to a nondominant or minority group or a group that has been historically marginalized, your personal experience may shed new light on a problem. In such cases, specific experience can help you, as well as others, reshape the general view so that it is more comprehensive and inclusive. In these cases, abstracting from the particular circumstances may not be useful.

Promote Alternative Points of View

Actively considering points of view contrary to your own is most useful in political or ethical areas of philosophy. But a similar strategy may also be useful in metaphysics or epistemology. For instance, when considering issues in metaphysics, you may believe that parts of experience—like consciousness, God, or free will—cannot be explained by the natural sciences. Or, conversely, you may think there is a scientific

explanation for everything. When considering these views philosophically, try to actively promote the alternative point of view. Sometimes this strategy is called **steelmanning** the opposing argument. When you steelman an argument, you make the strongest possible case in favor of it. This is the opposite of strawmanning an argument, in which you construct a weaker version of the argument to easily defeat it. You may be tempted to strawman arguments you naturally disagree with, but you will become a better philosopher when you steelman those arguments instead.

CONNECTIONS

Learn more about the strawman fallacy in the [chapter on logic and reasoning](#).

Identify Counterexamples

Generating counterexamples is an effective way to test your own or others' claims. A counterexample is an instance that renders an argument invalid by satisfying all the premises of the claim but demonstrating the conclusion is false. Suppose someone wants to argue that the only legitimate way to know something is to have direct experience of it. To produce a counterexample to this claim, we must imagine something that everyone knows is true but that would be impossible to experience directly. Here is an example: I know my mother was born. Clearly, given that I was born, I had a mother, and she, too, must have been born to have given birth to me. My mother's birth necessarily preceded my birth by many years, so it would be impossible for me to have any direct experience of my mother's birth. And yet, just as surely as I know I was born, I know that my mother was born. Counterexamples are powerful tools to use in evaluating philosophical arguments. If you practice using this tool, you will become a better critical thinker.

CONNECTIONS

See the section on counterexamples in the [chapter on logic and reasoning](#) for more discussion of this topic.

Maintain Skepticism of Strong Emotions

While emotions play an important role in thinking, they can also cloud judgment. Strong reactions to claims made by philosophers, other students, your professor, or anyone else may prevent you from considering the argument objectively. You should be wary of any strong attachment or aversion you feel toward a philosophical claim. Emotions can guide us, but they may threaten our ability to objectively consider the arguments being made.

To respond to strong emotions, use the tools of metacognition to reflect on the source of those emotions and attempt to manage them. There may be good reasons for your emotions, but recognize that those reasons, not the emotions themselves, are philosophically relevant. Manage emotions by taking a step back from your personal investment in the issue and considering it from another perspective. Sometimes a short break can allow the immediate emotional reaction to subside. Sometimes imaginative strategies can help; for example, substitute the features of the problem that trigger strong emotions for features that are more neutral. This advice is not to suggest that emotions are harmful or have no place in philosophical thinking. Instead, the purpose of this strategy is to remind you that the way to derive meaning and guidance from your emotions is to reflect on them and think through the causes, origins, or reasons for the emotions.

Adopt Epistemic Humility

A final concept that is a critical component for becoming a better critical thinker is adopting a stance of **epistemic humility**. As we have already seen, our thinking can be clouded by cognitive biases. Additionally, our perspective on the world is always colored by our own experience and rooted in the particular place and time in which we live. Finally, even our best scientific knowledge of the universe explains only a fraction of it, and perhaps even less of our own experience. As a result, we should recognize these limitations of human

knowledge and rein in our epistemic confidence. We should recognize that the knowledge we do possess is fragile, historical, and conditioned by a number of social and biological processes.



FIGURE 2.5 The principle of epistemic humility calls upon us to recognize that the knowledge we possess is fragile, fallible, and colored by our own experiences. (credit: “Life is a long lesson in humility.” by e.r.w.i.n./Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Question Yourself: Do I Really Know What I Think I Know?

We retain all sorts of beliefs from many different sources: memory, testimony, sense perception, and imagination. Some of these sources may be reliable, while others may not. Often, however, we forget the source of our beliefs and claim to “know” something simply because we have believed it for a long time. We may become very confident in believing something that never happened or did not happen in the way we remember it. In other cases, we may have been told something repeatedly, but the ultimate source of that information was unreliable. For instance, most people recommend wearing warm clothes outside when the temperature drops so that they do not “catch a cold.” This is the sort of wisdom that may have been passed down through generations, but it makes little sense from a medical standpoint. There are not many ways that getting a chill or even lowering the body temperature will lead to a respiratory infection. Colds are caused by viruses, not by a drop in temperature. Without thinking through the source of the belief that “if you get cold, you may catch a cold,” you end up believing something that is not true.

Be Aware of the Dunning-Kruger Effect

An even more pernicious form of epistemic overconfidence is revealed in the psychological phenomenon known as the **Dunning-Kruger effect**. David Dunning and Justin Kruger demonstrated a widespread illusion in which incompetent people or novices rate their own knowledge of a subject more highly than they ought to, while highly competent people or experts rate their knowledge slightly lower than they ought to. These findings do not mean that the experts considered themselves to be less competent than novices. In fact, experts are fairly accurate in rating their own knowledge. However, they tend to assume that everyone else has a similar level of expertise. By contrast, novices consider themselves to be far more competent in comparison to others and misrepresent their own incompetence, which can be a dangerous in many situations.

The lesson from the Dunning-Kruger effect is that you should be extremely wary when assessing your expertise about anything, but especially about something that is a new area of learning for you. The reality is that your intuitive sense of your own knowledge is likely to be inaccurate. It takes time to build expertise in a subject area, and the expert is more capable of assessing their own knowledge accurately.

2.4 Gathering Information, Evaluating Sources, and Understanding Evidence

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify four moves for fact-checking.
- Apply fact-checking to specific exercises.

Start with a Strong Foundation

When you are learning a new concept or writing a paper, you probably do some internet research to locate information about the topic. However, as you probably know, not all internet sources are reliable. Philosophy students are fortunate to have two online philosophy encyclopedias that provide excellent information about a wide array of topics. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://openstax.org/r/ieputmedu>) provides good general topic coverage of the major areas of philosophy. The IEP is a traditional encyclopedia, and its articles are written for new students without a lot of prior knowledge. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://openstax.org/r/platostanford>) provides in-depth, up-to-date articles on a wide range of topics and includes both general and specific coverage. The articles in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* are well written, but they typically go into greater depth and sometimes include technical terms or information you will have to look up. These articles provide an excellent, free introduction to a wide range of specific topics in philosophy. As with all encyclopedia entries, students should start with the article itself and then move on to sources cited in the article. Think of these articles as an entry point into research.

Wherever possible, read articles and books written by philosophers on the topics you are interested in. You can usually find these resources at your college or university library. You may want to cast a wider net on the internet itself by tapping into YouTube channels, podcasts, and other websites that can help you understand philosophical issues or provide information for philosophy papers. However, be discriminating when selecting material. In this section, we will outline some tools and habits that can make you a better, more critically engaged online researcher.

Finally, many instructors in philosophy will encourage their students to engage only with the assigned texts in the class. This can be a valuable technique for learning philosophy since philosophical thinking is cultivated by serious, critical engagement with good philosophical writing. If you can learn to engage directly with primary sources (texts written by philosophers about philosophy), you will be a better philosophy student. However, we acknowledge that most students are accustomed to using the internet for research when they are learning something new. So this section is intended to provide some guidance for students who want to supplement their class readings with information gleaned from online sources.

The SIFT Method (Four Moves for Student Fact Checkers)

Information literacy scholar Michael Caulfield came to realize that the methods of research taught by librarians and information literacy educators often did not work well for students. Typically, students are encouraged to assess the quality of information using an acronym like CRAAP: currency, relevancy, authority, accuracy, and purpose. But these criteria are not always useful in spotting misinformation turned up through search engines. After all, many sources that provide misinformation appear current and relevant and are generated by organizations that appear to be authoritative while they conceal a hidden agenda.

To find out how students evaluate sources they find on Google, Caulfield relies on the empirical research of Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew (2016). The researchers compared the behavior of Stanford University students to trained fact-checkers at newspapers and magazines. Not surprisingly, the online fact-checkers used search engines more effectively. Based on this research, Caulfield developed his own protocol to make students better researchers.

The first thing to know about using a search engine like Google is that results are not ranked by authority, accuracy, or relevance. Internet companies are notoriously secretive about the algorithms (mathematical

procedural rules) they use to generate search engine results, but we know that they prioritize paid advertisements, popularity, and web interconnectivity (the degree to which key words and links from a website are shared with other websites). Thus, websites interested in sharing misinformation can use the same search engine optimization tools that legitimate companies or media sources use to move up the ranks of search results. So you need to learn to use the search engine to your advantage. Caulfield recommends using the acronym SIFT, or the “four moves” of student fact checkers.



FIGURE 2.6 The four moves for student fact checkers: stop; investigate the source; find better coverage; and trace the claims to the original context. (credit: “SIFT (The Four Moves)” by Michael Caulfield/hapgood.us, CC BY 4.0)

Stop

The first move reiterates something we have already discussed: to become a better critical thinker, slow down the quick and efficient thinking that leads to errors and engage in critical reflection and metacognition. By stopping, slowing down, or taking your time to allow for critical reflection, you will be using rational and reflective thinking to assess claims. Additionally, after some searching, you will want stop, return to your original source, and check its claims again. When you circle back after going down a bit of a rabbit hole, you will have a new perspective from which to evaluate these claims.

Investigate the Source

Next, investigate the source of your information. Internet searches will often lead you through a series of links, in which you jump from one document to another. Strive to understand this electronic paper trail. Who wrote each document? What are their credentials? You can prioritize academic sources, such as web pages of philosophy faculty members, and you can discount sites that aggregate student papers or provide content without clear authorship. But investigating authorship does not mean that you should just read the “About” page on a website. Rather, Wineburg and McGrew (2016) found that fact-checkers used search tools to check the reputation of the sites they were investigating, a move they called “reading laterally.” You do not have to spend a lot of time on the site itself. Instead, search reviews or critiques of the website and the authors on the site. Find out what other authoritative sources say about the site. Is this a website that is approved by other people you trust? Or do people you trust indicate that the website or its information are questionable?

Find Better Coverage

Check the claims and information on the site you are reading. What do other sources say about the same information? Is there other coverage on the same topic? This move is particularly important for controversial claims you might find on social media, where the original source is frequently obscured. Is this information being covered elsewhere, and does the coverage agree with what you have read? This move can help in evaluating your original source or gaining familiarity with the claims being made. If the claims by one source do not match up with what you are reading elsewhere, be skeptical.

Trace Claims, Quotes, and Media to the Original Context

Frequently, claims made on the internet are divorced from their original context. It is important to trace those claims back to the original source. This advice holds for online research in philosophy. You may discover a claim or quote about a philosopher that lacks context. To evaluate the claim, you need its original context, which will reveal whether the claim or quote was mischaracterized or portrayed in a misleading way. Look for citations, and then follow those citations to the original publication. If the source you have found does not have citations, then you will need to search key terms or phrases in quotation marks to see if you can locate the claim or quote using another method. Good academic sources ought to provide citations so you can verify the original source of the claim. If it is hard to verify a claim or quote, that should be a red flag to not trust the source making those claims or providing those quotes.



THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Here are three examples of claims made online. Use the four moves to assess whether these claims are true. You have been provided with a screen capture of a headline, so you do not have links back to a website. Therefore, use search tools on the web to verify the claims being made. In each case, find a source that either verifies or debunks the claim. The source you use to verify or debunk the claim should be reputable and authoritative.

Mexico's Border Wall

This post claims to be picture of fencing from Mexico's southern border. Is the photo accurate? Is this an image of Mexico's southern border? Has the Mexican government constructed a wall to prevent the flow of migrants from across its southern border?



This is the Border Fence Mexico built on their border with Guatemala to keep out freeloaders. Notice The Barbed Wire & Towers with Armed Guards. Shouldn't the United States have the same right as Mexico to protect its border?



744

186 Comments 1.9K Shares

FIGURE 2.7 This social media image claims to show a wall Mexico constructed on its southern border. (credit: "Mexico's Border Wall?" by Michael Caulfield/fourmoves.blog, CC BY 4.0)

Smart Toilet?

This image was shared on the web. Is it a real product or satire?



FIGURE 2.8 This web headline about Kohler's smart toilet, under the heading "Smart Home," suggests that Kohler's has invented a smart toilet that uses Alexa. (credit: "Alexa Smart Toilet" by Michael Caulfield/fourmoves.blog, CC BY 4.0)

Drilling Stonehenge?



FIGURE 2.9 This newspaper headline claims that engineers drilled a hole into Stonehenge as part of a controversial tunnel project. (credit: "Stonehenge damaged by blundering engineers?" by Michael Caulfield/fourmoves.blog, CC BY 4.0)

2.5 Reading Philosophy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe strategies for reading philosophy.
- Distinguish the goals of philosophical reading from other types of reading.
- Employ a three-part method for reading philosophy.

To be successful in a philosophy course, you must be able to read primary and secondary sources in philosophy. Many students in their first philosophy class struggle with the required readings. You may find yourself rereading a passage several times without having a clear notion of what the author is trying to say. Or you may get lost in the back-and-forth of arguments and counterarguments, forgetting which represent the author's opinion. This is a common problem. Using the strategies described below, you can track the key claims and arguments in your reading. Eventually, you will reach the point where you can begin to reflect on, evaluate, and engage with the philosophical concepts presented.

Prepare to Read

Preparing your reading space will help you focus and improve the chances of retaining the reading material. Read at a table with a comfortable chair instead of on a couch or in a bed. Sitting up straight improves concentration. Have something to drink nearby, and avoid distractions, like TV or music with lyrics. Some people find it helpful to have a little bit of bustle around them (for example, you might choose to work in a café or library), while others find this distracting. Some people like music; others prefer silence. Find the setting that helps you concentrate.

Next, choose an annotation tool. You will need to write notes, underline, and flag portions of the reading, so use text you can alter whenever possible. If you are working with a printed text, use a pencil so that you can erase and rewrite notes in the margin. Many students use highlighters when reading text, but readers have a tendency to highlight too much, which makes the highlighting useless when you go back and reread. A better system is to write marginal notes or markers to flag and identify key passages. You can devise a simple coding system using symbols to identify different parts of a text: for example, main ideas or topics, examples, arguments, references to other philosophers, questions, and quotations to use in papers. If you are working with a digital text, there are many tools you can use to write notes and place markers in the text. OpenStax provides a useful annotation tool for its web-based textbooks, allowing you to create notes that link passages and even to review your notes all together. The purpose of annotation is to create a visual trail you can come back to for easy tracking of an argument. This will ensure you do not need to reread large portions of the text to find key information for studying or writing a paper. Annotations allow you to move quickly through a text, identifying key passages for quotes or citations, understanding the flow of the argument, and remembering the key claims or points made by the author.

Engaging with Philosophical Texts

The purpose of philosophical writing is to engage the reader in a sequence of thoughts that either present a problem to be considered, prompt reflection on previous ideas and works, or lead to some insight or enlightenment. Philosophy consists of ideas and arguments. Your goal is to engage with those ideas and arguments to arrive at your own understanding of the issues. You may critically engage with the author, or you may have your perspective changed by reading the author. In either case, your goal ought to be to reach a new understanding. This is somewhat different from writing in most other disciplines, in which the purpose may be to convey information, evoke emotions, tell a story, or produce aesthetic enjoyment. While engaging with philosophical ideas can be pleasurable and may involve understanding some basic information, the primary purpose of the writing is to engage thought and reflection. This means that you should read the work as fast or slow as you need to engage thoughtfully with it. The speed of reading will depend on how quickly you grasp the ideas and arguments presented or how familiar you are with the claims being made. It is not as important to read sequentially for plot or narrative; much more important is to follow the sequence of ideas and arguments. Consequently, it may make sense to cross-reference passages, jumping from one section to another to compare claims, and link ideas that appear in different places in the text.

Philosophical Methods at Work

Look for philosophical methods at work in your readings. Recall that philosophers use a variety of methods to arrive at truth, including conceptual analysis, logic, and the consideration of trade-offs. Philosophers may also

draw on a variety of sources of evidence, including history, intuition, common sense, or empirical results from other disciplines or from experimental philosophy. In any case, most philosophical works will be attempting to develop a position through argumentation. Sources of evidence will be used to bolster premises for the purpose of reaching a desired conclusion. Additionally, the author may use a variety of methods to make an argument. If you can identify these methods, strategies, and sources of evidence, you will be able to better evaluate the text.

The Principle of Charity

The **principle of charity** is an interpretative principle that advises the reader to interpret the author's statements in the most rational and best way possible. Sometimes a philosopher's argument may be unclear or ambiguous. For example, philosophers from older historical periods may use terminology and expressions that are difficult for a modern reader to understand. In these cases, the reader should start from the assumption that the author is putting forward a rational, thoughtful view. The reader's goal should be to understand that view in the best light possible. This does not mean that you should ignore difficulties or avoid criticizing the author. Rather, when you encounter difficulties, look for an interpretation that makes the most sense of what the author is saying. All the primary- and secondary-source authors you will read are smart, thoughtful people. Therefore, assume the author has a response to simple or obvious objections, and look for that response. Try to understand the work on its own terms, and then critically engage with the best version of that work.

Working with the Dialectic

The dialectical process that is common to many philosophical writings is initially confusing for many students. **Dialectic**, a method for discovering truth through dialogue, involves an exchange of ideas with the goal of arriving at a position that more accurately reflects the truth. In practical terms, philosophers will frequently move back and forth between the view they are advancing and competing views that they may or may not support. These alternative views may provide criticisms, or they may represent views that are common in philosophy. The author's goal is to present alternative perspectives—in addition to their own—to demonstrate the range of perspectives on the problem. If one view emerges through this dialectical process, there is a greater chance that it has some share of the truth since it has survived the criticisms and contrary opinions of others.

When reading a philosophical work that uses a dialectical method, pay attention to tracking different strands of argument. Do not assume that every argument or claim in what you are reading is the considered opinion of the author. Rather, various claims may represent contrasting views that will eventually be rejected. Track the back-and-forth between views to grasp the thread of argument that the author endorses.



FIGURE 2.10 Find a comfortable place to do your philosophy readings. (credit: "Woman sitting in the forest and reading a book, autumn rest" by Marco Verch/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Pre-reading

Start your reading with a pre-read. This is a very useful practice when tackling academic works. So much information can be learned simply by reviewing the surrounding features of the article, book, or chapter. Spend some time reviewing these elements to grasp the context for what you are about to read. Start with these elements.

Title, Author, and Publication

What does the title and author tell you about the work? When was it written? Who has published the text—an academic press or a popular press? If you do not know this information, you may want to do some preliminary internet searches to try to find out. Where does this work fit into the author's broader body of work? What can you learn or what do you know about the author? What are the author's main contributions to philosophy?

Table of Contents and Bibliography

Develop a mental outline for the work by looking carefully at the table of contents, usually at the front of the book. For a shorter work, scan through the article, looking for section headings and breaks. If the headings are labeled, you may have enough information to track the general flow of the article just by reading them. If the headings are not helpful or there are no headings, quickly skim the first and last paragraph, and pick out topic sentences or words that indicate what individual paragraphs are about to get a sense of where the overall argument is going.

At this stage, you want to look at the bibliography or references. Depending on the length and style of the work, the reference list may be very long. As a novice, you may not be able to get much information from a bibliography, but as you become more familiar with your subject, you will get a sense from titles and authors in the bibliography about the perspective that informs this author's writing.

First Read

You may need to read material more than once to become engaged in critical reflection. However, because you are planning to do multiple readings, do not linger too long on the first read. Move quickly and purposefully through the material with the goal of understanding the flow of the argument. Use the information you gleaned from pre-reading to fill in gaps in knowledge where possible, and flag places for follow-up.

Identify Key Claims

During the first read, you should identify the key claims in the text. In a traditional academic article, these

claims ought to be highlighted in the introduction or abstract. In a book or historical work, these key claims may be harder to find. Look for sentences that introduce claims with expressions such as, “I aim to show,” “What this chapter will demonstrate,” or “The purpose of this work is.” Mark key claims so that you can come back to them easily. Ask yourself what the author is trying to say; what does the author hope the reader will take away from reading?

Identify Sources of Evidence and Methods of Argument

Look for the evidence the author is providing to support the key claims. What methods does the author use to generate this evidence? Is the author using logical argumentation? Are there thought experiments or other forms of conceptual analysis? Does the author provide empirical evidence to back up the claims? In the best-case scenario, evidence will be provided shortly before or after the claim is announced. However, sometimes evidence and claims are mixed together. During this stage, try to flag the dialectic in the argument. Is the author presenting their own view, a rival view, a criticism, or a supporting view?

Flag for Follow-Up

Use annotation flags to chart the course of the argument and claims being made. Use a simple notation system that works for you. But you should consider flagging things like thesis, definition, claim, evidence, argument, question, counterargument, objection, response, and so forth. Flagging should also be used to identify words or ideas you do not understand. When you are moving quickly, you may ask questions that you later understand, or you may flag something incorrectly and need to revise your notes. This is fine. You are engaged in a process of gradually becoming acquainted with the text.

Close Read

At this stage, you will read for thoughtful engagement with the ideas and arguments presented in the text. Now is when you critically reflect on, evaluate, and understand the author’s writing.

At this point, you should not move any more quickly than you can think alongside the author. Use this time to follow up on questions you posed during flagging. Look up terms; do some research on concepts you do not understand. You do not need to understand the article perfectly, but you should understand it well enough to think about it. If you have a good understanding of what you read, you will have something to say about the material after you finish reading it.

Reading slowly and actively involves asking the author questions: How does this claim follow from that one? Where is the evidence to support this assertion? Is the evidence adequate to support the claim being made? What are the implications of this claim? How does this idea fit with the overall emphasis on some other set of ideas? If something in the text does not sit well with you, try to articulate what is bothering you. Write a short objection in the margin. Even if you are not sure, try to work out why you do not agree with the author. The more you can articulate your concerns and think through your own reactions, the more you will understand the material and your own reaction to it.

The close reading is intended to prepare you for talking and writing about the author’s work. That means you are preparing yourself to do philosophy alongside and with the author. Hold yourself to the same standards to which you hold the author. Provide reasons for your claims, support your opinions with adequate evidence, and consider possible objections.



READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Identify a reading from Chapter 1 (or another introductory reading from this course). This exercise will work best if the reading is a fairly short, primary source reading from someone who is doing philosophy. Follow the three-step method for reading:

- Pre-read
- Fast read with flagging
- Close read and revise flagging

Consider the following prompts in writing a short review of the article (no more than two paragraphs in length):

- Provide a brief synopsis of the argument and dialectical structure of the text.
 - What are the primary claims that the author makes?
 - What evidence does the author provide to support those claims?
 - What methods does the author use to generate evidence or make arguments?
 - Is the evidence adequate to support the claims the author makes?
 - Where do you think the evidence falls short?
 - Do you agree with the author's claims?
 - Where do you disagree, and why?
-

When you are writing philosophy papers, you should plan the structure of your argument in advance, spend time thinking about a thesis, and focus on an achievable aim relative to the length of your paper.

2.6 Writing Philosophy Papers

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify and characterize the format of a philosophy paper.
- Create thesis statements that are manageable and sufficiently specific.
- Collect evidence and formulate arguments.
- Organize ideas into a coherent written presentation.

This section will provide some practical advice on how to write philosophy papers. The format presented here focuses on the use of an argumentative structure in writing. Different philosophy professors may have different approaches to writing. The sections below are only intended to give some general guidelines that apply to most philosophy classes.

Identify Claims

The key element in any argumentative paper is the claim you wish to make or the position you want to defend. Therefore, take your time identifying claims, which is also called the thesis statement. What do you want to say about the topic? What do you want the reader to understand or know after reading your piece? Remember that narrow, modest claims work best. Grand claims are difficult to defend, even for philosophy professors. A good thesis statement should go beyond the mere description of another person's argument. It should say something about the topic, connect the topic to other issues, or develop an application of some theory or position advocated by someone else. Here are some ideas for creating claims that are perfectly acceptable and easy to develop:

- Compare two philosophical positions. What makes them similar? How are they different? What general lessons can you draw from these positions?
- Identify a piece of evidence or argument that you think is weak or may be subject to criticism. Why is it weak? How is your criticism a problem for the philosopher's perspective?
- Apply a philosophical perspective to a contemporary case or issue. What makes this philosophical position applicable? How would it help us understand the case?
- Identify another argument or piece of evidence that might strengthen a philosophical position put forward by a philosopher. Why is this a good argument or piece of evidence? How does it fit with the philosopher's other claims and arguments?
- Consider an implication (either positive or negative) that follows from a philosopher's argument. How does

this implication follow? Is it necessary or contingent? What lessons can you draw from this implication (if positive, it may provide additional reasons for the argument; if negative, it may provide reasons against the argument)?



THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

The following multiple-choice exercises will help you identify and write modest, clear philosophical thesis statements. A thesis statement is a declarative statement that puts forward a position or makes a claim about some topic.

1. Which of the following is a declarative statement that puts forward a position or claim?
 - a. How does Aristotle think virtue is necessary for happiness?
 - b. Is happiness the ultimate goal of human action?
 - c. Whether or not virtue is necessary for happiness.
 - d. Aristotle argues that happiness is the ultimate good of human action and virtue is necessary for happiness.
2. Which of the following declarative statements goes beyond mere description?
 - a. René Descartes argues that the soul or mind is the essence of the human person.
 - b. Descartes shows that all beliefs and memories about the external world could be false.
 - c. Some people think that Descartes is a skeptic, but I will show that he goes beyond skepticism.
 - d. In the meditations, Descartes claims that the mind and body are two different substances.
3. Which of the following statements proposes a comparison between two philosophical views?
 - a. Descartes says that the mind is a substance that is distinct from the body, but I disagree.
 - b. Contemporary psychology has shown that Descartes is incorrect to think that human beings have free will and that the mind is something different from the brain.
 - c. Thomas Hobbes's view of the soul is materialistic, whereas Descartes's view of the soul is nonphysical. In this paper, I will examine the differences between these two views.
4. Which of the following statements identifies a weakness in a philosopher's argument and proposes a criticism of that argument?
 - a. John Stuart Mill reasons that utilitarian judgments can be based on qualitative differences as well as the quantity of pleasure, but ultimately any qualitative difference must result in a difference in the quantity of pleasure.
 - b. Mill's approach to utilitarianism differs from Bentham's by introducing qualitative distinctions among pleasures, where Bentham only considers the quantitative aspects of pleasure.
 - c. J. S. Mill's approach to utilitarianism aligns moral theory with the history of ethics because he allows qualitative differences in moral judgments.
5. Which of the following is an example of a statement that applies a philosophical idea to a contemporary issue or problem?
 - a. Rawls's liberty principle ensures that all people have a basic set of freedoms that are important for living a full life.
 - b. The US Bill of Rights is an example of Rawls's liberty principle because it lists a set of basic freedoms that are guaranteed for all people.
 - c. While many people may agree that Rawls's liberty principle applies to all citizens of a particular country, it is much more controversial to extend those same basic freedoms to immigrants, including those classified by the government as permanent residents, legal immigrants, illegal immigrants, and refugees.

[ANS: 1.d 2.c 3.c 4.a 5.c]



WRITE LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Use the following templates to write your own thesis statement by inserting a philosopher, claim, or contemporary issue:

1. [Name of philosopher] holds that [claim], but [name of another philosopher] holds that [another claim]. In this paper, I will identify reasons for thinking [name of philosopher]'s position is more likely to be true.
2. [Name of philosopher] argues that [claim]. In this paper, I will show how this claim provides a helpful addition to [contemporary issue].
3. When [name of philosopher] argues in favor of [claim], they rely on [another claim] that is undercut by contemporary science. I will show that if we modify this claim in light of contemporary science, we will strengthen or weaken [name of philosopher]'s argument.

Collect Evidence and Build Your Case

Once you have identified your thesis statement or primary claim, collect evidence (by returning to your readings) to compose the best possible argument. As you assemble the evidence, you can think like a detective or prosecutor building a case. However, you want a case that is true, not just one that supports your position. So you should stay open to modifying your claim if it does not fit the evidence. If you need to do additional research, follow the guidelines presented earlier to locate authoritative information.

If you cannot find evidence to support your claim but still feel strongly about it, you can try to do your own philosophical thinking using any of the methods discussed in this chapter or in Chapter 1. Imagine counterexamples and thought experiments that support your claim. Use your intuitions and common sense, but remember that these can sometimes lead you astray. In general, common sense, intuitions, thought experiments, and counterexamples should support one another and support the sources you have identified from other philosophers. Think of your case as a structure: you do not want too much of the weight to rest on a single intuition or thought experiment.

Consider Counterarguments

Philosophy papers differ from typical argumentative papers in that philosophy students must spend more time and effort anticipating and responding to counterarguments when constructing their own arguments. This has two important effects: first, by developing counterarguments, you demonstrate that you have sufficiently thought through your position to identify possible weaknesses; second, you make your case stronger by taking away a potential line of attack that an opponent might use. By including counterarguments in your paper, you engage in the kind of dialectical process that philosophers use to arrive at the truth.

Accurately Represent Source Material

It is important to represent primary and secondary source material as accurately as possible. This means that you should consider the context and read the arguments using the principle of charity. Make sure that you are not strawmanning an argument you disagree with or misrepresenting a quote or paraphrase just because you need some evidence to support your argument. As always, your goal should be to find the most rationally compelling argument, which is the one most likely to be true.

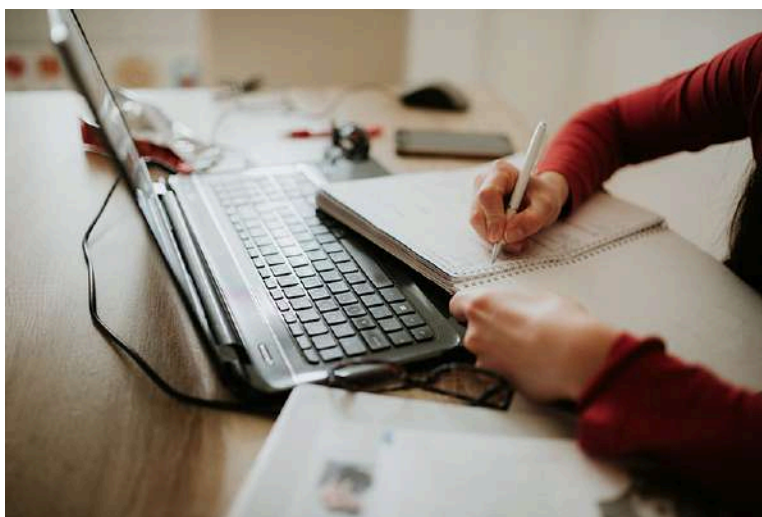


FIGURE 2.11 Good organization is key to strong writing. (credit: "Female hand writing at home." by Nenad Stojkovic/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Organize Your Paper

Academic philosophy papers use the same simple structure as any other paper and one you likely learned in high school or your first-year composition class.

Introduce Your Thesis

The purpose of your introduction is to provide context for your thesis. Simply tell the reader what to expect in the paper. Describe your topic, why it is important, and how it arises within the works you have been reading. You may have to provide some historical context, but avoid both broad generalizations and long-winded historical retellings. Your context or background information should not be overly long and simply needs to provide the reader with the context and motivation for your thesis. Your thesis should appear at the end of the introduction, and the reader should clearly see how the thesis follows from the introductory material you have provided. If you are writing a long paper, you may need several sentences to express your thesis, in which you delineate in broad terms the parts of your argument.

Make a Logical and Compelling Case Using the Evidence

The paragraphs that follow the introduction lay out your argument. One strategy you can use to successfully build paragraphs is to think in terms of good argument structure. You should provide adequate evidence to support the claims you want to make. Your paragraphs will consist of quotations and paraphrases from primary and secondary sources, context and interpretation, novel thoughts and ideas, examples and analogies, counterarguments, and replies to the counterarguments. The evidence should both support the thesis and build toward the conclusion. It may help to think architecturally: lay down the foundation, insert the beams of your strongest support, and then put up the walls to complete the structure. Or you might think in terms of a narrative: tell a story in which the evidence leads to an inevitable conclusion.

CONNECTIONS

See the [chapter on logic and reasoning](#) for a developed account of different types of philosophical arguments.

Summarize Your Argument in the Conclusion

Conclude your paper with a short summary that recapitulates the argument. Remind the reader of your thesis and revisit the evidence that supports your argument. You may feel that the argument as written should stand on its own. But it is helpful to the reader to reinforce the argument in your conclusion with a short summary.

Do not introduce any new information in the conclusion; simply summarize what you have already said.

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide you with basic tools to become a successful philosophy student. We started by developing a sophisticated picture of how the brain works, using contemporary neuroscience. The brain represents and projects a picture of the world, full of emotional significance, but this image may contain distortions that amount to a kind of illusion. Cognitive illusions produce errors in reasoning, called cognitive biases. To guard against error, we need to engage in effortful, reflective thinking, where we become aware of our biases and use logical strategies to overcome them. You will do well in your philosophy class if you apply the good habits of mind discussed in this chapter and apply the practical advice that has been provided about how to read and write about philosophy.

Summary

2.1 The Brain Is an Inference Machine

Our brains facilitate our survival and promote our ability to find a partner and reproduce by using thought, calculation, prediction, and inference. For this reason, our natural and genetically primed ways of thinking do not necessarily serve the goals of philosophy, science, or truth.

The relationship between mind and brain is one of the central problems of metaphysics, known as the “mind-body problem.” The mind-body problem is the problem of understanding the relationship between the organic gray and white matter in our skulls (the brain) and the range of conscious awareness (the mind). Biology does not tell us what the relationship is between our private mental life and the neurological, electrochemical interactions that take place in the brain.

It can be helpful to use the resources of psychology and cognitive science (the study of the brain’s processes) to help us understand how to become better thinkers. Your brain is not passively capturing the world, like a camera, but is actively projecting the world so that it makes sense to you. When the brain defaults to ways of thinking that produce a less than optimal result or even an incorrect decision, it is operating with a cognitive bias. A cognitive bias is a pattern of “quick” thinking based on the ‘rule of thumb.’ Cognitive biases are like perceptual illusions.

2.2 Overcoming Cognitive Biases and Engaging in Critical Reflection

Metacognition means thinking about thinking and involves the kind of self-awareness that engages higher order thinking skills. Cognition, or the way we typically engage with the world around us, is first-order thinking, while metacognition is higher-order thinking.

One of the most common cognitive biases is confirmation bias, which is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms or supports your prior beliefs. Anchoring bias refers to our tendency to rely on initial values, prices, or quantities when estimating the actual value, price, or quantity of something. If you are presented with a quantity, even if that number is clearly arbitrary, you will have a hard time discounting it in your subsequent calculations; the initial value “anchors” subsequent estimates. The availability heuristic refers to the tendency to evaluate new information based on the most recent or most easily recalled examples. The availability heuristic occurs when people take easily remembered instances as being more representative than they objectively are (i.e., based on statistical probabilities).

Another more loosely defined category of cognitive bias is the tendency for human beings to align themselves with groups with whom they share values and practices. Tribal thinking makes it hard for us to objectively evaluate information that either aligns with or contradicts the beliefs held by our group or tribe. A related bias is called the bandwagon fallacy. The bandwagon fallacy can lead you to conclude that you ought to do something or believe something because many other people do or believe the same thing.

The sunk cost fallacy is thinking that attaches a value to things in which you have already invested resources that is greater than the value those things have today. A similar type of faulty reasoning leads to the gambler’s fallacy, in which a person reasons that future chance events will be more likely if they have not happened recently.

2.3 Developing Good Habits of Mind

One of the ways to respond to cognitive biases is to develop good habits of mind. There are no quick fixes or easy solutions to cognitive biases, but some strategies can be helpful.

To be more objective in thinking about issues, problems, or values, we should actively engage in strategies that remove us from our naturally subjective mindset. When considering philosophical views, try to actively promote the alternative point of view. Another good strategy is to identify counterexamples – instances that render an argument invalid by satisfying all the premises of the claim but demonstrating the conclusion is

false. To respond to strong emotions, use the tools of metacognition to reflect on the source of those emotions and attempt to manage them.

A final concept that is a critical component for becoming a better critical thinker is adopting a stance of epistemic humility. We should recognize these limitations of human knowledge and rein in our epistemic confidence. We should recognize that the knowledge we do possess is fragile, historical, and conditioned by a number of social and biological processes.

2.4 Gathering Information, Evaluating Sources, and Understanding Evidence

Effective internet research requires knowing how to find information and evaluate the quality of sources. The SIFT method for evaluating sources teaches students how to become seasoned fact-checkers when searching online. The four moves for student fact checkers are: stop, investigate the source, find better coverage, trace the claims to the original context.

2.5 Reading Philosophy

Read at a table with a comfortable chair, instead of on a couch or in a bed. Sitting up straight improves concentration. Have something to drink nearby, and avoid distractions, like the TV or music with lyrics. Next, choose an annotation tool. You will need to write notes, underline, and flag portions of the reading, so use text you can alter whenever possible.

Philosophy consists of ideas and arguments. Your goal is to engage with those ideas and arguments to arrive at your own understanding of the issues. It is not as important to read sequentially for plot or narrative; it is much more important to follow the sequence of ideas and arguments. The author may use a variety of methods to make an argument. If you can identify these methods, strategies, and sources of evidence, you will be able to better evaluate the text.

An effective method for reading philosophy involves three key steps: pre-read, first read, and close read. When encountering a new philosophical text, students who use this systematic method will better understand challenging content.

2.6 Writing Philosophy Papers

Most philosophy papers require students to produce an argument in support of a claim about the readings in philosophy class. The first and most important step to writing a good argumentative paper is to find a clear, defensible thesis. The next step is to construct an argument using evidence from assigned readings and external research, original arguments, and applied cases. However, the goal of writing in philosophy is to approach truth, not just to win an argument.

Key Terms

Allostasis the biological process whereby the body prepares itself for anticipated needs.

Anchoring bias the tendency to make estimates based on an earlier initial value.

Availability heuristic the tendency to evaluate new information based on the most recent or most easily recalled examples.

Bandwagon fallacy the fallacy that we ought to do something or believe something because many other people do or believe the same thing.

Cognitive bias a systematic pattern of reasoning that deviates from a rationally optimal or logical judgment based on available facts and probabilities.

Cognitive science the study of the brain and the mechanisms underlying thought, perception, memory, emotion, and other functions of the brain.

Confirmation bias the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms or supports established beliefs.

Dialectic a method of discovering truth that comes from dialogue and uses the exchange of different points of

view to arrive at a position that is more likely to be true.

Dunning-Kruger effect the cognitive bias in which people with little expertise in a specific task rate their knowledge too highly relative to others with more knowledge.

Epistemic humility a stance in philosophical and scientific investigation that recognizes the limits of one's own ability to know truth and reality in a direct or complete way.

Gambler's fallacy the reasoning that holds that if a chance event has happened less frequently in the recent past, it is more likely to happen in the near future (or vice versa).

Heuristics mental shortcuts or rules of thumb that provide a method of problem-solving that is not necessarily optimal but is efficient.

Homeostasis the biological process whereby the body regulates itself to maintain a state of equilibrium.

Inference the mental process that leads from one set of information (premises, data, or information) to another (a conclusion, construction, or projection).

Metacognition the process of thinking about thinking. Metacognition engages self-awareness and higher-order thinking skills so that an individual can regulate, monitor, and critically analyze their own thought processes.

Principle of charity the interpretative principle that says a reader ought to interpret the author's statements in the most rational and best possible way.

Representation an information-bearing unit of thought. Representations are the objects that minds consider when they think.

Steelmanning a strategy for making opposing arguments as strong as possible so that it is difficult to knock them down.

Sunk-cost fallacy the fallacy of attaching a greater value to something than is warranted because a person has already invested time, resources, and emotion in that thing (or person).

Tribalism the tendency for human beings to align their beliefs and attitudes with groups of people who have similar attitudes, practices, or beliefs.

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Review Questions

2.1 The Brain Is an Inference Machine

1. Distinguish homeostasis from allostasis, and describe the relationship of both to the emotions and rational thought.
2. What are heuristics?
3. What is the role of emotion in rational thought?
4. Describe some of the reasons for effortless thinking and gut intuitions. Explain why these are sometimes faulty.

2.2 Overcoming Cognitive Biases and Engaging in Critical Reflection

5. What are some of the conditions that make critical thinking possible?
6. Define three of the common cognitive biases identified in this chapter.
7. Describe critical thinking strategies that can be applied to two of the cognitive biases identified in the chapter.

2.3 Developing Good Habits of Mind

8. What is epistemic humility, and how does it relate to the Dunning-Kruger effect?
9. How can you apply the strategies for thinking objectively to your philosophy class?
10. How can you manage your emotions when reading and thinking about philosophy?

2.4 Gathering Information, Evaluating Sources, and Understanding Evidence

11. What are the four moves of fact-checking, and how do they work?

2.5 Reading Philosophy

12. What is the three-part method for philosophical reading?
13. What are some differences between reading philosophical texts and other kinds of texts?

2.6 Writing Philosophy Papers

14. What is a thesis statement, and how should you go about developing a thesis statement for your papers?

Further Reading

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The Early History of Philosophy around the World

3

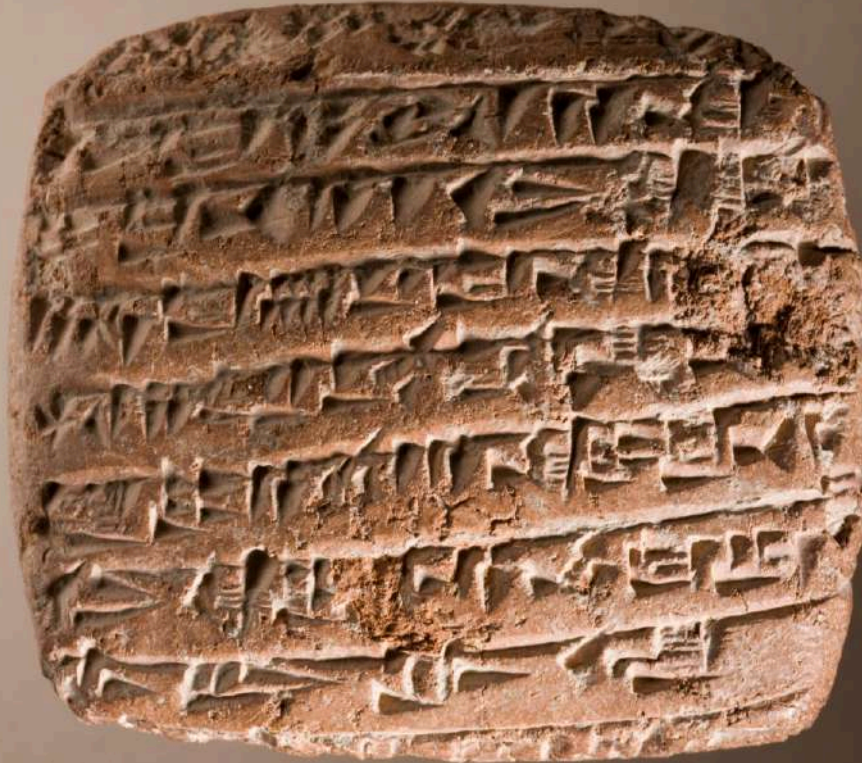


FIGURE 3.1 This cuneiform tablet from Anatolia has been dated to circa 1875–1840 BCE. The development of writing should not be equated with the development of a culture’s sense of meaning and history, but writing does make that meaning and history available to those living much later. (credit: “Tablet with Cuneiform Inscription LACMA M.79.106.2 (4 of 4)” by Ashley Van Haeften/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 3.1 Indigenous Philosophy
- 3.2 Classical Indian Philosophy
- 3.3 Classical Chinese Philosophy

INTRODUCTION As discussed in previous chapters, the figure of the sage, the individual found in early societies around the world who mediated between the everyday and the transcendent realm, is an important precursor to philosophy. In most societies, this figure predates the recognition of the philosopher as the individual seeker of wisdom by many hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Justin E. H. Smith (2016) argues that philosophical thought requires abstract thinking of the sort required for the bureaucratic administration of society and that many societies developed philosophical traditions out of these practices of abstract reasoning. These traditions furnished shared beliefs about ethics, metaphysics, and other realms of philosophical inquiry.

Homo sapiens have inhabited the earth for at least 250,000 years, originating in the Blue Nile rift region of northern Africa. However, the oldest forms of human writing were discovered in ancient Sumer, in

Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where they enter the Persian Gulf, dating to around 3500 BCE (approximately 5,500 years ago). The vast period of time between the emergence of biological humans and the emergence of human writing is typically called *prehistory*. This term does not imply that early human beings lacked a sense of their past and the lessons they may draw from it. We know from studying modern illiterate societies that many of them possess oral traditions of storytelling that provide historical perspective. However, whatever perspective prehistoric humans gained from oral history is completely lost to us.

The use of writing to record human thought marks the transition from prehistory to history. The first recorded texts include genealogies, accounts of heroic and everyday actions by human beings, and legal codes. These earliest writings offer a glimpse into early human systems of government and everyday life. Writing expressing philosophical questions came later, primarily in the form of religious and mythological stories, and this is where we begin. There is concrete evidence that at this turning point in human history, people were aware of and concerned with history; engaged in questions of the origins of nature and the self; speculating about the goals and purposes of human life, whether moral or spiritual; and reasoning about right, wrong, justice, and injustice. This turning point is what German intellectual Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) has called the “Axial Period” (1953), more commonly translated as the “Axial Age.” Jaspers observed that this “axis” of the emergence of philosophical thought occurred during a somewhat well-defined period, between 800 BCE and 200 BCE, in multiple locations around the world, principally the Mediterranean region, Mesopotamia, India, and China. Remarkably, human beings in these disparate locations appear to have made roughly simultaneous transitions, first from prehistory to history, and then from a mythological and religious understanding of human beings and their place in the world to a more systematic study of human beings and the world around them. This chapter will cover the period of time from the so-called axial age to the development of rich philosophical traditions in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

3.1 Indigenous Philosophy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify challenges in the study of Indigenous philosophies.
- Describe metaphysical and epistemological ideas explored by Indigenous African philosophies.
- Describe metaphysical and epistemological ideas explored by Indigenous Native American philosophies.
- Describe metaphysical and epistemological ideas explored by Mesoamerican philosophies.

Some of the best-known ancient texts, connected to many of the great civilizations around the world, are religious or mythological in nature. Examples include the Vedas of India, the earliest literature of China, and the Jewish Talmud. These texts introduce aspects of philosophical inquiry—such as questions concerning the origins of the cosmos and the nature and purpose of human life, morality, justice, human excellence, knowledge, and so forth—in terms of stories and explanations that rely on the supernatural. These stories provide context, meaning, and direction for human life within a framework that assumes that the natural world is infused with supernatural importance. Such texts are a testament to the fundamental and binding nature of religion in human societies.

When humans shift from religious answers to questions about purpose and meaning to more naturalistic and logical answers, they move from the realm of myth to the realm of reason. In Greek, this movement is described as a move from **mythos** to **logos**, where *mythos* signifies the supernatural stories people tell, while *logos* signifies the rational, logical, and scientific stories they tell. This distinction may lead one to believe that there is a clear transition from religious thought to philosophical or scientific thought, but this is not the case. The earliest philosophers in Greece, Rome, India, China, and North Africa all used mythological and analogical (analogy-based) stories to explain their rational systems, while religious texts from the same period often engage in serious, logical argumentation. Rather than seeing a decisive break between mythological thinking and rational thinking, one should understand the transition from mythos to logos as a gradual, uneven, and

zig-zagging progression. This progression teaches that there are close connections between religion, philosophy, and science in terms of the desire to understand, explain, and find purpose for human existence.

Challenges in Researching Indigenous Philosophy

There is growing interest in **Indigenous philosophy** in contemporary academic philosophy, as a way of engaging with both the historical and present-day thought of Indigenous peoples around the world. Indigenous philosophy broadly refers to the ideas of Indigenous peoples pertaining to the nature of the world, human existence, ethics, ideal social and political structures, and other topics also considered by traditional academic philosophy. Unlike the philosophies of ancient Greece, India, and China, Indigenous philosophies did not spread across vast territorial empires or feature centers of formal learning that documented and developed philosophical ideas over hundreds or thousands of years. The study of Indigenous philosophies, or **ethnophilosophy**, often must rely on different methods than typical academic philosophy. Indigenous philosophy is not usually recorded in texts that can be read and analyzed. Instead, those seeking to understand Indigenous philosophical thinking must engage in the kind of research often used in ethnographic and sociological study, including identifying individuals who hold and transmit cultural knowledge about philosophical thought and recording interviews and conversations with them. Most of the philosophy of Indigenous peoples has been passed down through oral traditions, in much the same way that prehistoric thought was transmitted.

There are additional challenges to studying Indigenous philosophy. The discipline of academic philosophy has traditionally dismissed or ignored the philosophical thought of Indigenous peoples, considering it to lie outside the realm of logos. The long history of erasure of Indigenous philosophical thought in academic philosophy makes it difficult to engage in academic discussion with it. There is an absence of past scholarship in this field in the West. Indigenous peoples have also been subjected to racist practices, such as forced education in languages other than their own, that make it difficult for them to retain a lively philosophical tradition. Furthermore, many Indigenous customs have been lost because of the loss of life and cultural heritage among Indigenous peoples following colonization by Europeans and Americans.

Indigenous African Philosophy

If the transition from mythos to logos is predicated on the development of written language, then this transition may have first occurred in Africa. Africa was home to the development of many ancient writing systems, including the system of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics that developed during the fourth millennium BCE. The modern Western understanding of the deep history of philosophy is severely hampered by the lack of scholarship in English and other European languages, the loss of collective cultural knowledge exacerbated by colonialism, and the sometimes deliberate destruction of historical records, such as the burning of the Library of Alexandria. As a result, research has relied heavily on oral traditions or the rediscovery and translation of written evidence. The philosophical legacy of ancient Egypt is discussed in the chapter on [classical philosophy](#). This chapter will examine research into ethnophilosophy from other regions of Africa.

The seizure of the city of Ceuta, bordering present-day Morocco, by the Portuguese in 1415 marks the first attempts by Europeans to colonize Africa. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European nations were engaging in what is called the “scramble for Africa.” Prior to this period, European settlement in Africa had been limited by the mosquito-borne disease malaria, the inappropriateness of African terrain to equine (horse-based) conquest, and the power of strong coastal states. European nations now gained access to the interior of Africa with the help of the discovery of quinine to treat malaria and the development of mechanized vehicles and advanced weaponry. During the colonial era, young Africans identified as having intellectual promise were sent to study at European universities, where they read Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and other Western philosophers. Whether the intent was to help these communities enter the modern age or to create local administrations that would further the interests of Western parties—or both—the result was the failure to preserve knowledge about the history and thought of localities and regions.

In later decades, some Western-educated Africans began to engage directly with African philosophies. In 1910, Congolese philosopher Stefano Kaoze (c. 1885–1951) described the thought of the Bantu people pertaining to moral values, knowledge, and God in an essay entitled “The Psychology of the Bantus” (Dübgen and Skupien, 2019). *Bantu* is a blanket term for hundreds of different ethnic groups in Central and Southern African that speak what are referred to as Bantu languages and share many cultural features (see [Figure 3.2](#)). In later writings, Kaoze explored other African thought systems, arguing that these systems had much to teach Western thought systems grounded in Christianity (Nkulu Kabamba and Mpala Mbabula 2017).



FIGURE 3.2 Approximate territory of Bantu peoples. Bantu is a blanket term for hundreds of different ethnic groups that speak what are referred to as Bantu languages and share many cultural features. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

It was not until 1945, when Belgian missionary Placide Tempels (1906–1977) published *Bantu Philosophy*, that the topic of African philosophy gained significant attention in the West. Tempels rejected the characterization of African philosophy and theology as consisting of magic, animism, and ancestor worship, instead exploring the richness of Bantu thought pertaining to individuals, society, and the divine. Tempels described Bantu peoples as believing in a “vital force,” the source of which is God. He observed that what Western thinkers envisioned as a divine being, the Bantu understood as various forces, including human forces, animal forces, and mineral forces. They viewed the universe as comprising all of these forces, and these forces could directly impact the “life force” of an individual (Okafor 1982, 84).

Later African scholars and theologians, such as John Mbiti (1931–2019) and Alexis Kagame (1912–1981), indicated that Tempels was somewhat inventive in his descriptions and interpretations. They engaged in a more authentic study of Bantu philosophy, recording and analyzing African proverbs, stories, art, and music to illuminate what they presented as a shared worldview. One example of this shared worldview is the Zulu term *ubuntu*, which can be translated as “humanity.” Variations on the term appear in many other Bantu languages, all referring to a similar concept, expressed through maxims such as “I am because we are.” The concept of *ubuntu* holds that human beings have a deep natural interdependence, to the point that we are mutually dependent on one another even for our existence. The notion of *ubuntu* has inspired a uniquely African approach to communitarian philosophy, which refers to ideas about politics and society that privilege the community over the individual.

Nigerian philosopher Sophie Olúwólé (1935–2018) was a practitioner and scholar of Yoruba philosophy. The Yoruba are a prominent ethnic group in Nigeria and other locations in sub-Saharan Africa. Among other

accomplishments, Olúwolé translated the Odu Ifá, the oral history concerning the pantheon and divination system of Ifá, the religion of the Yoruba peoples. Olúwolé proposed that Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the high priest featured in the Odu Ifá, was a historical figure and the first Yoruba philosopher. She argued that Ọ̀rúnmìlà had an equal claim to that of Socrates as the founder of philosophy. In *Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmìlà: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy* (2015), Olúwolé compares the two philosophers and finds many similarities. Both are considered founders of philosophical traditions. Neither wrote anything down during their lifetimes. They both placed a primacy on the concepts of virtue and learning to live in keeping with virtue. Surprisingly, they shared cosmological views, such as a belief in reincarnation and predestination. Olúwolé compiled quotes from each philosopher on specific topics, some of which are listed in [Table 3.1](#). Olúwolé argues that Yoruba ideas as conveyed through the Odu Ifá should be given full standing as a philosophy.

Topic	Socrates's Quote	Ọ̀rúnmìlà's Quote
The nature of truth	"But the highest truth is that which is eternal and unchangeable."	"Truth is what the Great Invisible God uses in organizing the world. . . . Truth is the Word that can never be corrupted."
The limits of human knowledge	"And I am called wise for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others. But the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise. . . . And so I go about the world, obedient to the God."	"When they turned to me and said: 'Bàbá, we now accept that you are the only one who knows the end of everything,' I retorted, 'I myself do not know these things.' For instruction on this matter, you have to go to God through divination, for He alone is the possessor of that sort of wisdom."
Good and bad	"And are not all things either good or evil, or intermediate and indifferent?"	"Tribulation does not come without its good aspects. The positive and the negative constitute an inseparable pair."
Human nature	"No man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature."	"No one who knows that the result of honesty is always positive would choose wickedness when s/he is aware that it has a negative reward."

TABLE 3.1 Olúwolé's Comparison of Socrates's and Ọ̀rúnmìlà's Ideas. (source: Olúwolé 2015)

Olúwolé does identify one important distinction between the ideas of Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmìlà. Socrates held a binary metaphysical theory of matter and ideas, contrasting the unchanging eternal with the forms in which the eternal manifests itself in the physical world. By contrast, Ọ̀rúnmìlà taught that matter and ideas are inseparable. Similarly, while Socrates distinguished the concepts of good and bad, Ọ̀rúnmìlà held that they are "an inseparable pair" (Olúwolé 2015, 64). The strict binary of the Greeks and of the West, Olúwolé concludes, leads to an either-or perspective on truth and debate. The Yoruba, she contends, maintain a complementary dualist view of reality.

VIDEO

Watch Professor Olúwolé discuss what Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmìlà have in common.

[Click to view content \(https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/3-1-indigenous-philosophy\)](https://openstax.org/books/introduction-philosophy/pages/3-1-indigenous-philosophy)



WRITE LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Review the contents of [Table 3.1](#). Translate each of the quotes into everyday language and compare your translations of the sayings of Ọ̀rúnmìlà and Socrates. Where do they agree, and how do they differ?

In the 1970s, Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka (1944–1995) launched a field study to record the philosophical thoughts of sages in modern-day Kenya. Researchers interviewed individual thinkers from various ethnic groups and questioned them about their views on central concepts in Western philosophy and issues related to applied ethics. Among other aims, this project was intended to demonstrate that philosophy is not an undertaking that is unique to the literate world. Odera Oruka's findings were published in 1990, but no systematic attempt has been made to analyze them (Presbey 2017).

As these philosophers and their work demonstrate, African philosophy has emerged as a body of thought that stands on its own. The philosophy of African peoples, both those living on the African continent and those elsewhere in the world, is rooted in and developed out of concepts that both complement and challenge the Western tradition.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on [classical philosophy](#) discusses Egyptian and Ethiopian philosophers who contributed to the development of classical philosophy in the ancient and early modern worlds.

Indigenous North American Philosophical Thought

Work on Native American philosophy has expanded in recent years, as philosophers, many of them Native American themselves, have engaged in collective research on Native American thought. This work has included the development of academic societies and journals devoted to the topic. Like many Indigenous African peoples, Native American peoples did not rely on written documents to preserve their history and culture but instead preserved knowledge through oral tradition. These oral traditions included rituals, ceremonies, songs, stories, and dance. What is known about Native American philosophy comes from this oral tradition as well as the experiences and thoughts of contemporary Native American people.

Any attempt to define Indigenous North American philosophical thought is further complicated by the fact that thousands of distinct societies have existed on the continent, each with their own ideas about how the world was created, what are the basic elements of reality, what constitutes the self, and other metaphysical issues. There is a rich expanse of philosophical views to synthesize—and for every possible generalization, there are exceptions. Still, some generalizations of Indigenous North American philosophy are true more often than not. One such generalization is the perception that the creative process of the universe is akin to the thought process. Another is that more than one being is responsible for the creation of the universe—and that these beings do not take on anthropomorphic forms (Forbes 2001).

Additionally, there are a number of characteristics common to Indigenous North American metaphysical concepts. Many Native American peoples, for example, emphasize balance, complementarity, and exchange between the different entities that make up the world. For instance, the Diné see breath as a fundamental force in nature, with the exchange of the internal and the external passing through all natural processes. Similarly, the Zuni note that twins, such as the twin Evening Star and the Morning Star—both of which are actually Venus—share a complementary and mirrored existence, serving as a reminder that there can be multiple manifestations of the same thing in nature. Additionally, concepts such as gender identity are understood as animated, nonbinary, and non-discrete, such that gender may develop and change over time (Waters 2004, 107). These generalizations point to a Native American metaphysics that is based on animate processes that are complementary, interactive, and integrated.

North American Indigenous peoples also have views of the self that differ from the European tradition. The Pueblo possess a sense of personal and community identity shaped by both place and time. Known as a **transformative model of identity**, this social identity is understood to spiral both outward and inward through expanding and retracting influences over a certain area of land (Jojola 2004). Extant petroglyphic spirals show the migration of a clan outward to the boundaries of its physical and spiritual territory as well as the inward journey homeward. These journeys also reflect a temporal component, as they were coordinated

with the cycles of the solstice calendar. Such metaphysical understandings are reflected in the tendency of many Native American cultures to build moral and ethical concepts on the idea that human beings are fundamentally social rather than individual—a “we,” not an “I.”

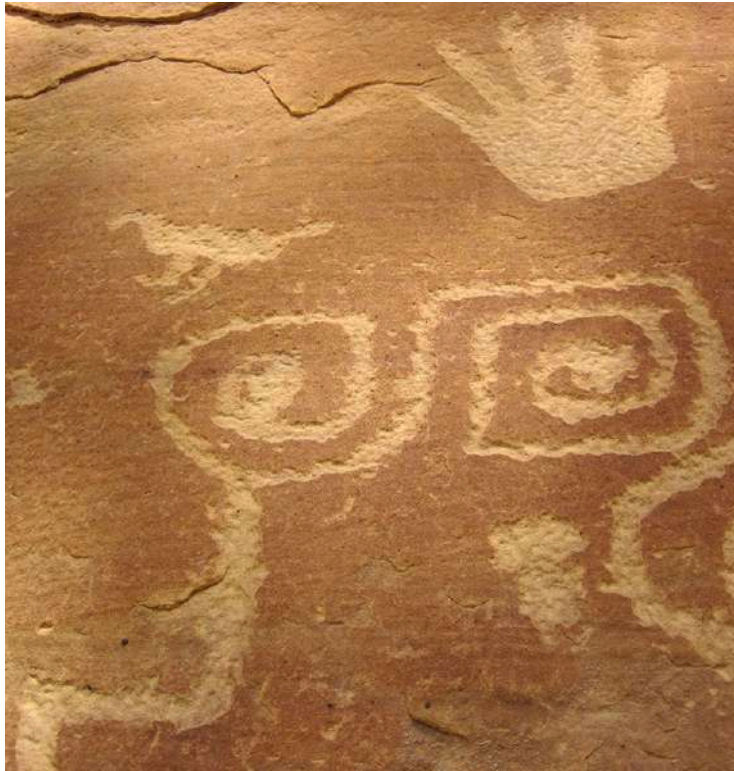


FIGURE 3.3 These petroglyphic spirals created by the Ancestral Pueblo represent both physical and spiritual journeys. The boxy spiral shown here likely represents the path that many Southwestern tribes believe they took when they emerged from the earth. Many contemporary scholars identify this with the geographic feature of the Grand Canyon. (credit: “Anasazi Indian Petroglyphs (~600 to 1300 A.D.) (Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, USA) 1” by James St. John/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Mesoamerican Philosophy

Mesoamerican peoples include an array of tribes and cultures, speaking multiple languages, that developed several sophisticated civilizations between 2000 BCE and the arrival of European colonialists in the 1500s CE. This area of the world developed both pictographic/hieroglyphic and alphabetic/phonetic forms of writing that allowed them to record thoughts and ideas, providing modern scholars access to some of the philosophical reflection that occurred within these societies. This section will examine some examples of the thought of Mesoamerican peoples by looking at the preserved writings of the Maya and the Aztec. Though the philosophical thought of each civilization is examined as if it were uniform, note that each encompassed many diverse tribes and cultures with a variety of languages, cultural practices, and religious beliefs.

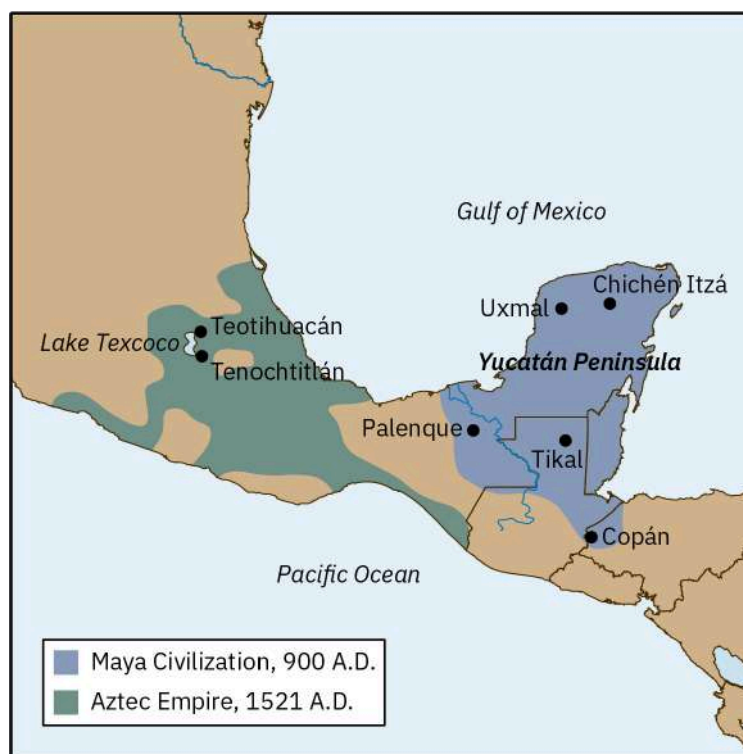


FIGURE 3.4 The Maya and Aztec were powerful civilizations for centuries. The existence of written records from each of these peoples has given contemporary scholars access to their philosophy, spirituality, and scientific advances. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Mayan Writings

The Maya first settled in villages in the area that runs from southern Mexico through Guatemala and northern Belize around 1500 BCE. Between 750 and 500 BCE, large city-states arose and established a trading network. At the height of their civilization, between approximately 250 CE and 900 CE, the Maya possessed a written language that appears to have been a combination of an alphabetic/phonetic language and a pictographic/hieroglyphic language, used not only by the priesthood but also by the urban elite. This writing appears on stone slabs, pottery, and sculptures as well as in books called **codices** (plural of *codex*), written on a paper made from tree bark.

The Maya possessed advanced knowledge of mathematics and natural philosophy. However, following the Spanish conquest of this territory, Catholic priests burned almost all of the Maya codices as well as their scientific and technical manuals (*Yucatan Times* 2019). In the years that followed the conquest, the Maya lost their written language. However, some writings in clay did survive, providing scholars a glimpse into Maya thought. They implemented a numerical system using symbols that allowed for representation of very large numbers, and they may have been the first to use the number 0 in mathematics. This numerical system enabled the Maya to gain insights into arithmetic and geometry that surpassed those of the Egyptians. Their knowledge of astronomy was so advanced that they could correctly predict the timing of solar eclipses. Unlike other early civilizations, the Maya had a highly sophisticated calendar and a unique conception of time.



FIGURE 3.5 This piece of Mayan writing, known as the Dresden Codex because it was found in the city of Dresden, Germany, in the 1700s, is one of the oldest known examples of writing from the Americas. It has been dated to the 11th or 12th century. (credit: “Dresden Codex” by Chris Protopapas/Flickr, Public Domain)

Maya Calendar

The Maya developed a calendar that tracked many cycles simultaneously, including the solar year and the “calendar round,” a period of 52 years. The calendar played a central role in Maya rituals and sacred celebrations. Astronomical events, in particular the position of Venus relative to the sun and moon, have been noted to align with the dates of historical battles, causing some to hypothesize that the Maya may have scheduled battles to coincide with these cycles. The Maya placed great importance on customs and rituals surrounding the solar calendar. Using these calendars, the Maya were able to record complex histories of their civilization.

Maya Concept of Time and Divinity

The Maya had a complex understanding of time. They recognized an experiential or existential aspect of time—for instance, observing that disinterest or concentration can elongate or shorten time. The experience of “awe” was considered particularly important because of its ability to bring a person into the present moment, increasing their awareness of the immediate effect of fundamental forces such as the energy of the sun and making them more capable of clear thinking, decision-making, and understanding.

Although the Maya worshipped an array of gods, they believed in a single godlike force, the sun’s force or energy, called *K’in*. This force was understood in terms of the position of the sun relative to the planets and the moon during different periods of the calendar. The king served as a conduit through which this divine force, the solar energy, passed to subjects. The Maya also believed that time is the expression of *K’in*. The ability of rulers and priests to predict natural events, such as an eclipse or the coming of spring, and thus seemingly to control time served to secure the allegiance of their subjects and legitimized their rule.

Aztec Metaphysical Thought

For the Aztecs, the fundamental and total character of the universe was captured by the concept of *teotl*, a godlike force or energy that is the basis for all reality. They considered this energy to be a sacred source fueling all life, actions, and desires as well as the motion and power of inanimate objects. In this sense, Aztec metaphysics adopted a view of the world that was pantheistic and monist, meaning that it viewed all reality as composed of a single kind of thing and that thing was divine in nature. However, *teotl* is not an agent or moral force, like the Abrahamic God, but rather a power or energy that is entirely amoral.

Teotl is not a static substance but a process through which nature unfolds. It changes continually and develops through time toward an endpoint or goal, a view that philosophers call *teleological*. For the Aztecs, time was not linear but rather cyclical. Thus, even though *teotl* tends toward an end point and there is an end of humanity and Earth as we know it, from the point of view of the universe, this is part of a cycle, just like leaves

fall from trees before winter. Moreover, because *teotl* is both the matter from which everything in the universe is made and the force by which things are created, change, and move, it is an all-encompassing, dynamic, and immanent force within nature (Maffie 2013).

Teotl has three different shapes, aspects, or manifestations, each with different characteristics, including different motions, powers, and goals. These three aspects of *teotl* have been assigned metaphorical positions related to weaving, aligning an important cultural practice of the Aztecs with their conception of fundamental reality.

Aztec Epistemological Thought

Philosophers use the term **epistemology** to refer to the study of knowledge involving questions such as how we know what we know, what is the nature of true knowledge, and what are the limits to what humans can know. Aztec epistemology understood the concept of knowledge and truth as “well-rootedness.” To say that someone knows or understands the truth is to say that they are well-grounded or stably founded in reality. The Aztecs understood truth not in reference to some belief or proposition of reality but as a property of one’s character when one is well-grounded. Being well-grounded means understanding the ways reality presents itself and being capable of acting according to what reality dictates. Being well-rooted in reality allows one to grow and develop, following the metaphor of a plant that is able to thrive because of its well-rootedness in the soil. This concept has both an epistemological aspect (relating to knowledge) and an ethical aspect (providing the means by which people may flourish).

In Aztec culture, rooting oneself in the constantly changing and growing power of *teotl* was considered necessary because existence on Earth was considered to be “slippery,” meaning that it is part of a process of cyclic change that is constantly evolving. The fundamental question for human beings is, How does one maintain balance on the slippery earth? This question motivates the need to develop the type of character that allows one to remain well-rooted and to find stability and balance, given the shifting and changing nature of Earth.



READ LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

In the short article “[What the Aztecs Can Teach Us about Happiness and the Good Life \(https://openstax.org/r/whattheaztecs\)](https://openstax.org/r/whattheaztecs)”, Sebastian Purcell outlines an Aztec approach to virtue and the good life grounded in the Aztec folk wisdom that “the earth is slippery, slick.” In response to this state of affairs, Aztec thinkers advocated for living a well-rooted life. What does it mean to say that “the earth is slippery”? Do you think this is accurate? What does it mean to live a well-rooted life? What are the levels of well-rootedness? How might well-rootedness facilitate happiness and a good life? Do you think that this accurately describes the way one might achieve happiness? What is missing?

3.2 Classical Indian Philosophy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify key Indian metaphysical concepts.
- Distinguish between major schools of Indian thought.
- Compare and contrast Indian philosophical writings with other areas of philosophy.

The philosophical depth and richness of Indian philosophy rivals that of European philosophy, and to do justice to it would require a book-length survey. Still, this introductory discussion is intended to show the richness of various Indian philosophical traditions that are more ancient than the Greek origins of European philosophy. Beginning with the Vedic texts, which date from between the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, Indian philosophical traditions are a few centuries older than the earliest European philosophical traditions.

An important parallel between Greek and Roman philosophy and Indian philosophy lies in their respective conceptions of philosophy. Philosophers from both of these traditions understand philosophy as something more than a theoretical activity. For all of these ancient philosophical traditions, philosophy is a practical endeavor. It is a way of life.

The Vedic Tradition

The earliest philosophical texts in India constitute the Vedic tradition. The four **Vedas** are the oldest of the Hindu scriptures. They are the *Rigveda*, the *Samaveda*, the *Yajurveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*. The four Vedas were composed between 1500 and 900 BCE by the Indo-Aryan tribes that had settled in northern India. The Vedas are also called Shruti, which means “hearing” in Sanskrit. This is because for hundreds of years, the Vedas were recited orally. Hindus believe that the Vedas were divinely inspired; priests were orally transmitting the divine word through the generations.

The *Rigveda* is the most ancient of the four Vedic texts. The text is a collection of the “family books” of 10 clans, each of which were reluctant to part with their secret ancestral knowledge. However, when the Kuru monarchs unified these clans, they organized and codified this knowledge around 1200 BCE. The Brahmanic, or priestly, culture arose under the Kuru dynasty (Witzel 1997) and produced the three remaining Vedas. The *Samaveda* contains many of the *Rigveda* hymns but ascribes to those hymns melodies so that they can be chanted. The *Yajurveda* contains hymns that accompany rites of healing and other types of rituals. These two texts shine light on the history of Indo-Aryans during the Vedic period, the deities they worshipped, and their ideas about the nature of the world, its creation, and humans. The *Atharvaveda* incorporates rituals that reveal the daily customs and beliefs of the people, including their traditions surrounding birth and death. This text also contains philosophical speculation about the purpose of the rituals (Witzel 1997).

The Later Texts and Organization

Later Hindu texts developed during the Vedic and post-Vedic periods were integrated into the four Vedas such that each Veda now consists of four sections: (1) the Samhitas, or mantras and benedictions—the original hymns of the Vedas; (2) the Aranyakas, or directives about rituals and sacrifice; (3) the Brahmanas, or commentaries on these rituals; and (4) the **Upanishads**, which consists of two Indian epics as well as philosophical reflections.

The Upanishad epics include the Bhagavad Gita (Song of the Lord), which is part of a much longer poem called the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana. The Mahabharata is an epic depicting the battles of the noble house of Bharata, while the Ramayana focuses on the ancient king Rama during his 14-year exile. There are 13 principal Upanishads and more than 100 minor ones, composed between 800 and 200 BCE in a mix of prose and verse. *Upanishad* derives from the Sanskrit words *upa* (near), *ni* (down), and *shad* (to sit), which comes from the fact that these texts were taught to students who sat at their teachers’ feet. Additionally, the term signifies that these texts reveal esoteric doctrines about the true nature of reality beyond the realm of sense perception. The Upanishads became the philosophical core of Hinduism.

Metaphysical Thought in the Vedic Texts

The Vedic texts state that through reflection on the self, one comes to understand the cosmos. Like the Greeks much later, these texts claim that there is a structural analogy between the self and the universe, with one sharing the form of the other. Through inner reflection on oneself, one can then understand the nature of the world.



FIGURE 3.6 The Vedic texts state that reflection on the self can lead to knowledge of the cosmos, proposing that the two share the same form. (credit: “Nightfall” by Mike Lewinski/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The *Rigveda* examines the origin of the universe and asks whether the gods created humanity or humans created the gods—a question that would later be posed by the Greek philosopher Xenophanes. More than half of the verses in the *Rigveda* are devoted to metaphysical speculation concerning cosmological theories and the relationship between the individual and the universe. The idea that emerges within Hinduism is that the universe is cyclical in nature. The cycle of the seasons and the cyclical nature of other natural processes are understood to mirror the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth among humans and other animals. Related to this conception is the philosophical question of how one puts an end to this cycle. The Hindus suggest that the answer lies in purification, with ascetic rituals provided as means to achieve freedom from the cycle of reincarnation.

Another area of similarity between the universe and humanity is that both are understood to have a hierarchical structure. Hindu theology assigns a rigid hierarchy to the cosmos, with the triple deity, Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva, standing above the other gods. India first developed its hierarchical caste system during the Vedic period. Vedic rituals cemented caste hierarchies, the remnants of which still structure Indian society today.

CONNECTIONS

See the chapter on [the emergence of classical philosophy](#) for more on Hindu views of the nature of the self.

Classical Indian Darshanas

The word **darshana** derives from a Sanskrit word meaning “to view.” In Hindu philosophy, *darshana* refers to the beholding of a god, a holy person, or a sacred object. This experience is reciprocal: the religious believer beholds the deity and is beheld by the deity in turn. Those who behold the sacred are blessed by this encounter. The term *darshana* is also used to refer to six classical schools of thought based on views or manifestations of the divine—six ways of seeing and being seen by the divine. The six principal orthodox Hindu *darshanas* are Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Non-Hindu or heterodox *darshanas* include Buddhism and Jainism.

Samkhya

Samkhya is a dualistic school of philosophy that holds that everything is composed of **purusha** (pure, absolute consciousness) and **prakriti** (matter). An evolutionary process gets underway when *purusha* comes into contact with *prakriti*. These admixtures of mind and matter produce more or less pure things such as the

human mind, the five senses, the intellect, and the ego as well as various manifestations of material things. Living beings occur when *purusha* and *prakriti* bond together. Liberation finally occurs when mind is freed from the bondage of matter.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on [metaphysics](#) explores Hindu and Buddhist views of self that emerged from Samkhya metaphysics.

Western readers should take care not to reduce Samkhya's metaphysics and epistemology to the various dualistic systems seen in, for example, the account of the soul in Plato's *Phaedo* or in Christian metaphysics more generally. The metaphysical system of creation in Samkhya is much more complex than either of these Western examples.

When *purusha* first focuses on *prakriti*, *buddhi*, or spiritual awareness, results. Spiritual awareness gives rise to the individualized ego or I-consciousness that creates five gross elements (space, air, earth, fire, water) and then five fine elements (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste). These in turn give rise to the five sense organs, the five organs of activity (used to speak, grasp, move, procreate, and evacuate), and the mind that coordinates them.

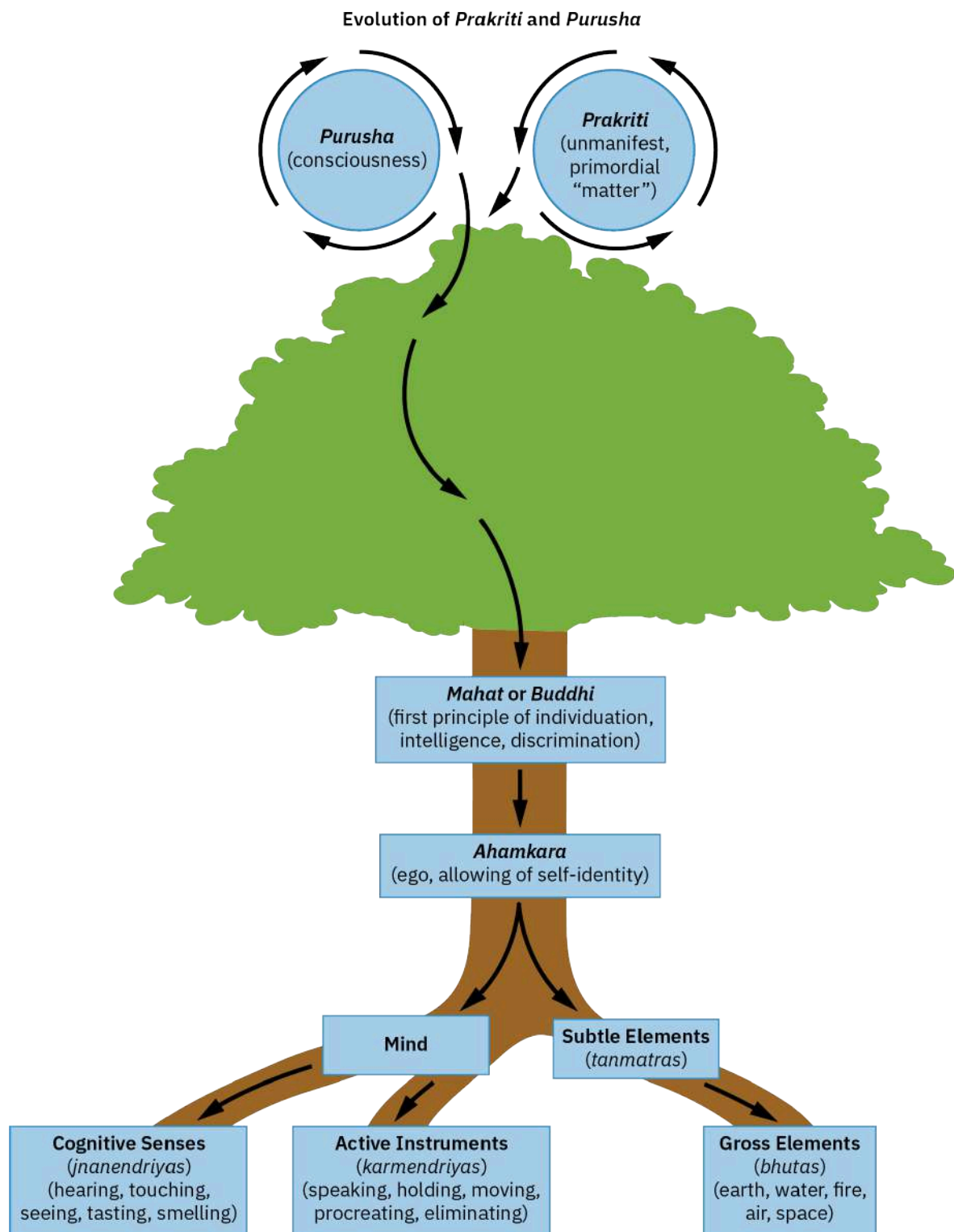


FIGURE 3.7 In Hinduism, the interaction between *purusha* (pure, absolute consciousness) and *prakriti* (matter) is understood to result in many elements of existence. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Yoga

Yoga has become popularized as a fitness practice throughout the world, but the Westernization of this concept has emptied it of much of its original content. Although yoga instructors will still sometimes use Sanskrit

terms for various poses, the movement has largely lost its cultural and spiritual vitality as it has become popular in the West. It originally developed during the Vedic period and influenced Buddhist meditation practices.

First mentioned in the *Rigveda*, Yoga is the mental process through which an individual's soul joins with the supreme soul. Originally a part of the Samkhya school, it emerged as a practice during the first millennium BCE. The teachings of the sage Patanjali, who lived circa 400 BCE, regarding ancient Yoga traditions and beliefs were compiled into approximately 200 Yoga sutras. The purpose of Yoga is the stopping of the movement of thought. Only then do individuals encounter their true selves, and only then is the distinction between the observer and that which is being observed overcome (Rodrigues 2018).

Yoga involves eight limbs. The first involves the observance of the *yamas*, moral restraints that keep individuals from being violent, lying, stealing, hoarding, and squandering vital energies (often interpreted as a practice of celibacy). The second limb consists of personal codes of conduct, known as the *niyamas*—purity, discipline, self-study, contentment (gratitude and nonattachment), and surrender to the higher being. The third and fourth limbs, familiar to Western practitioners, are the postures, *asana*, and breath control, *pranayama*. The fifth and sixth limbs involve the mastering of the senses needed to achieve a peaceful mind and focus, the ability to concentrate deeply on one thing—a mental image, a word, or a spot on the wall (Showkeir and Showkeir 2013). The seventh limb involves meditation, which allows one to reach the eighth limb, *samadhi*, the oneness of the self and true reality, the supreme soul.

During the Upanishadic period (900–200 BCE), Yoga was incorporated into the new philosophic traditions that gave rise to Jainism and Buddhism. Yoga influenced the emergence of Bhakti and Sufism within Islamic culture in the 15th century CE following the conquest of India by Islamic leaders. New schools and theories of Yoga evolved. Swami Vivekananda's translations of scriptures into English facilitated the spread of Yoga in the West in the 19th century. Today, Yoga is practiced as a form of spirituality across the globe (Pradhan 2015).

Nyaya

Nyaya, which can be translated as “method” or “rule,” focuses on logic and epistemology. Scholars seek to develop four of the Hindu *pramanas*, or proofs, as reliable ways of gaining knowledge: perception, inference, comparison, and testimony. Practitioners seek liberation from suffering through right knowledge. They believe that everything that exists could be directly perceived and understood if only one had the proper method for doing so. False knowledge is delusion that precludes purification and enlightenment.

Vaisheshika

The Vaisheshika system developed independently of Nyaya but gradually came to share many of its core ideas. Its epistemology is simpler, allowing for only perception and inference as forms of reliable knowledge. It is known for its naturalism, and scholars of the Vaisheshika school developed a form of atomism. The atoms themselves are understood to be indestructible in their pure state, but as they enter into combinations with one another, these mixtures can be decomposed. Members of the Vaisheshika school believe that only complete knowledge can lead to purification and liberation.

Mimamsa

The Mimamsa school was one of the earliest philosophical schools of Hinduism, grounded in the interpretation of the Vedic texts. It seeks to investigate *dharma*, or the duties, rituals, and norms present in society. The gods themselves are irrelevant to this endeavor, so there are both theistic and atheistic aspects of this school. Scholars of the Mimamsa school carefully investigate language because they believe that language prescribes how humans ought to behave.

Vedanta

Vedanta comprises a number of schools that focus on the Upanishads, and the term itself signifies the end or culmination of the Vedas. All the various Vedanta schools hold that *brahman* exists as the unchanging cause of

the universe. The self is the agent of its own acts (*karma*), and each agent gets their due as a result of karma. As with the other Hindu schools, adherents of Vedanta seek liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Like many philosophical traditions, classical Indian philosophy casts the living world as something to ultimately escape. Practices and teachings such as Yoga provide a particularly explicit set of instructions on how one might go about achieving this transcendent aim. The incorporation of these teachings into other traditions and cultures, in both the past and the present, points to their broad and enduring appeal.

3.3 Classical Chinese Philosophy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Distinguish the three main schools of classical Chinese philosophy: Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism.
- Explain the five constant virtues of Confucian moral philosophy.
- Identify the key principles of Mohism.
- Evaluate Daoism's approach to ethics.

In 2013, archaeologists made a remarkable discovery—Chinese characters on a stone axe dating to 5,000 years ago (Tang 2013). Previously, the earliest known Chinese characters had been dated to approximately 1600 BCE. The stone axe suggests that a written language was in use much earlier than previously thought.

The first written records referring to names, dates, and accounts that were part of Chinese prehistory, like the details of other prehistoric periods around the world, are unverifiable. But this discovery of very early writing suggests that what were once considered myths of Chinese history may have a basis in reality. The so-called Five Emperors and the great leaders Yao, Shun, and Yu are frequently referenced in early writings. These great leaders are identified as sages and are said to have invented the key tools for agrarian civilization, including traps, nets, the plow, and river dams to provide a stable water supply.

CONNECTIONS

Read more about the role of sages in the chapter on [introduction to philosophy](#).

That early sages were rulers and inventors of key technological advances is typical of Chinese thought, which emphasizes the practical importance of wisdom. Classical Chinese philosophers were less interested in questions of epistemology and logic; instead, the most enduring impact of classical Chinese philosophy pertained to ethics. Chinese philosophers were less concerned with bridging the gap between internal thought (subjectivity) and the external world (objectivity) than with understanding how the individual fits in a larger social system so that each may act in the best possible way. This section will examine how the main schools of Chinese philosophy—Confucianism, Daoism, and Mohism—address these questions.

Early Chinese Philosophical Thought prior to Confucius

Philosophical thought in China initially developed during an epoch known as the Spring and Autumn period, between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE. The period gets its name from a historical document attributed to Confucius called the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. This period was characterized by the rise of a sophisticated feudal system and relative stability in Chinese politics. Despite advances in government, agriculture, art, and culture, the earliest Chinese texts reveal a concern with the supernatural and highlight the connections that were thought to exist between human beings and the spiritual realm. Great rulers governed not only the affairs of human beings but also the spiritual forces that influence human affairs (Fung 1952). Similarly, the arts of divination, astrology, and magic were celebrated as evidence of the capacity of some human beings to manipulate spiritual forces to benefit humanity.

Magical and mystical thinking of this early period was connected to scientific and philosophical thought. For instance, it was thought that there were five fundamental elements: earth, wood, metal, fire, and water. It was

believed that there was connection between these five elements and the five visible planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) as well as the five constant virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness). The connections between human virtues, the planets, and the material elements provided some rational basis for belief in spiritual and magical forces (Fung 1952).



FIGURE 3.8 Huangdi of China, a mythical-historical sage from the third millennium BCE, is considered both the first ruler to establish a centralized state in China and the author of the texts that served as the basis for Chinese traditional medicine for thousands of years. (credit: “Chinese Woodcut, Famous Medical Figures: The Yellow Emperor” by Gan Bozong/Wellcome Collection, Public Domain)

Early Chinese writings often refer to the concept of heaven in opposition to the earth, but the word has a meaning that is likely unfamiliar to a modern Western audience. In these texts, the word *heaven* might refer to a material or physical space, like the sky; a ruling or presiding power, like the emperor; something over which human beings have no control, like fate; nature as a whole; or a moral principle guiding human action. Some of these resemble the familiar Western religious concept, but others are quite different. Nonetheless, records of great speeches in the *Zuozhuan* suggest that even in the sixth century BCE, leading thinkers of the period encouraged people to move away from a concern with heavenly matters and toward a greater interest in human affairs on Earth (Fung 1952).

Writings from this period also show the beginnings of the theory of **yin and yang**, the two fundamental forces that are characterized as male and female, or dark and light, or inactivity and activity. The move toward a theory that explains natural phenomena through fundamental forces rather than through spiritual or heavenly forces characterizes a shift from a more mythological and religious age to a more rational and philosophical age.

Another key concern of early Chinese texts is distinguishing between identity and harmony, where harmony is understood to produce new things, while identity does not. The point seems to be that whereas the same matter or form repeated does not generate anything novel, two or more different things, when combined together in a harmonious way, can produce something new. To illustrate, consider the fact that there is no music if there is only one note, but many different notes in harmony with one another can produce beautiful

melodies. A wise and powerful ruler combines elements in harmonious ways to influence their citizens and exercise their power. Whether the elements are five tastes; five colors; the six notes of the pitch pipe; the ingredients of soup; the forces of wind, weather, or seasons; or the five virtues, a wise leader institutes a harmonious relation between these elements, and that relation is what is said to be responsible for the leader's success.

Confucianism

Confucius (551–479 BCE) was the founder of **Confucianism**, a philosophy that has influenced society, politics, and culture in East Asia for more than 2,000 years. Confucius lived just before the beginning of what is called the Warring States period, a time in Chinese history plagued with violence and instability. Though not a member of the aristocracy, Confucius rose from lowly positions to become the minister of justice of Lu, a province in eastern China. He challenged three powerful families that were trying to wrest control of the government. After a clash, Confucius left his home with a small group of followers, hoping to serve as an adviser for rulers in other provinces. After 14 years, he returned to Lu and was able to provide some advice to government ministers, but he never achieved his goal of finding a leader to carry out his ideas (Huang 2013). Confucius is credited with authoring or editing the Chinese classical texts that became the core educational curriculum for hundreds of years, though it was only after his death that Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty first adopted Confucianism as the official state ideology.

One measure of the immediate impact of Confucius's success is that he spawned an entire class of scholars known as *shih*, who were trained in classical studies and language and were only suited for teaching and government work. They maintained their livelihood through a system of patronage. This system has had an enduring impact in China. Contemporary exams for government officials include testing on traditional knowledge about classical Chinese philosophy and literature (Fung 1952).

Though Confucius was labeled an atheist and considered an innovator, he was in other ways culturally conservative. He believed in a well-ordered society where rules and guidance come from the very top (the emperor or “the heavens,” as it may be). Scholars today identify Confucianism as a form of **virtue ethics** because it is an approach to ethics that focuses on personal virtue or character.

CONNECTIONS

Learn more about Confucianism and virtue ethics in the chapter on [normative moral theory](#).

Benevolence and Reciprocity

The Confucian concept of *de* is closely related to moral virtue in the sense that *de* identifies characteristics of a person, understood to be formed through habitual action, that make it more likely the person will act in morally excellent ways. In Confucianism, the five constant virtues are *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and *xin*. Each of these terms is difficult to translate consistently, having varied meanings. Loose translations are sometimes given as follows: *ren* is benevolence, *yi* is righteousness, *li* is propriety, *zhi* is wisdom, and *xin* is trustworthiness. More broadly, ***ren*** means something like shared humanity, empathy, or care for others. Similarly, the institutionalized rituals of the Zhou dynasty are captured in the Chinese word ***li***, which is translated as both propriety and ritual. Though Confucius emphasized the importance of ritual and tradition in daily practice, he also recognized that such actions are empty if they do not have a solid foundation in benevolence. These terms can be seen related in the following passage: “If a man is not *ren* [benevolent], what can he do with *li* [ritual]? If a man is not *ren*, what can he do with music?” (Confucius 2015, p. 9, 3.3).

To emphasize the relational and communal character of Confucian ethics, it is worth noting that alongside the five virtues, Confucius highlights three fundamental bonds or relationships: father and son, lord and retainer, and husband and wife. These bonds designate the fundamental relationships that are necessary for social life (Knapp 2009, 2252). The ethical obligations of children to their parents are frequently captured in the notion

of **filial piety**, or simply *filiality*, which is a widespread Chinese value. Even though Confucius emphasizes that there is a subordinate relation between sons and their fathers, wives and their husbands, and subjects and their lords, he also recognizes that the superior party has obligations to the subordinate one. These obligations can be characterized by the virtue of benevolence, wherein the good and upstanding person demonstrates goodwill toward those with whom they have relations. Whereas the virtue of benevolence emphasizes the common humanity of all people and seems to advise a common concern for all, filial piety introduces the idea of care with distinctions, where the moral and right thing to do is to show compassion to all human beings but to recognize that some people are owed more than others. In the case above, Confucius clearly advises that greater concern is due to one's family members, then to one's local community, and finally to the state.

An important concept in Confucianism is *zhong*, usually translated as “loyalty.” Later commentators have defined *zhong* as “the ‘exhaustion of one's self’ in the performance of one's moral duties” (Fung 1952, 71); it might also be translated as conscientiousness or devotion. Another related virtue is reciprocity. Confucius explains reciprocity with a version of the Golden Rule: “Zigong asked, ‘[s] there a single saying that one may put into practice all one's life?’ The Master said, ‘That would be “reciprocity”: That which you do not desire, do not do to others’” (Confucius 2015, p. 85, 15.24).

Each of these virtues is identified as fundamental, but they all are expressions of the underlying virtue of benevolence. The importance of benevolence runs through the relational and community-driven nature of Confucian ethics. This is quite different from Western ethics, particularly modern Western ethics, which emphasizes the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of individuals.

Wisdom and the *Dao*

The Chinese concept of ***dao*** is another difficult-to-translate term. Often, it is interpreted as “way” or “path,” but in Confucius, it is just as frequently translated as “teaching.” One can see the goal of Confucius's teaching as relating a way or pattern of behavior that could be adopted by careful students. The wisdom gained through reading and, more importantly, living according to the *dao* is a kind of natural awareness of what is good and right and a distaste for what is wrong. Confucius also recognizes that a rejection of materiality is a sign of one who follows the *dao*. He frequently cites poverty, the ability to enjoy simple foods, and a lack of concern for the trappings of wealth as signs of one who is devoted to the right path or right ethical teachings.

Propriety and *Junzi*

One of the five constant virtues is propriety, in the sense of following the appropriate rituals in the appropriate contexts. Rituals include wearing ceremonial dress, reading and reciting the classic poetry of the *Shijing*, playing music, and studying culture. However, Confucius also makes clear that the foundations of ritual lie in filial respect for parents and elders, demonstrating care and trustworthiness, and having good relations with people in general (Confucius 2015, pp. 1–2, 1.6). Acting according to propriety or ritual is connected to the idea of the ***junzi***, a person who represents the goal or standard of ethical action and acts as a model for others. One can observe key characteristics of virtue by listening to Confucius's description of the *junzi*. For instance, he suggests that a *junzi* is someone who is thoughtful, but decisive: “The *junzi* wishes to be slow of speech and quick in action” (Confucius 2015, p. 17, 4.24). Similarly, Confucius frequently comments on the lack of material desires or a rejection of material wealth as a sign of the *junzi*'s virtue: “The *junzi* does not hem his upper robes with crimson or maroon. He does not employ red or purple for leisure clothes. In hot weather, he always wears a singlet of fine or coarse hemp as an outer garment.” (Confucius 2015, p. 47, 10.6).

These virtuous characteristics are connected to propriety and one's obligations toward others in interesting ways. Confucius articulates what is required in order to become a *junzi* as an ordered series of obligations. The best and highest sense of a *junzi* is one who serves their lord faithfully and without shame, the next best is one who is thought to be filial by their local community, and the least of the *junzi* is one who can keep their word and follow through on their actions. This suggests that personal responsibilities to others—keeping one's word and following through on one's actions—are the minimum, most basic requirements for being a *junzi*; next is

being known as one who is respectful of one's parents and elders in one's local community, and greater than that is being loyal and trustworthy to the regional government.

In a famous passage on filial piety, Confucius introduces a potential moral dilemma for the *junzi*: “The Lord of She instructed Confucius, saying, ‘There is an upright man in my district. His father stole a sheep, and he testified against him.’ Confucius said, ‘The upright men in my district are different. Fathers cover up for their sons and sons cover up for their fathers. Uprightness lies therein’” (Confucius 2015, p. 70, 13.18). Here, Confucius suggests that the appropriate way to resolve the dilemma is to favor familial relations over relations with the state. This is consistent with the previous passage, where Confucius suggests that good family relations are the most necessary relations to maintain, while relations with the state are the highest relations. What Confucius means is that it is a sign of the highest standards of conduct that one can act in accordance with his obligations to the state, but it is essential for one to maintain obligations to family, so if the two are in conflict, then the *junzi* should uphold the relations within the family.



THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Consider the moral dilemma presented here. One of your parents has stolen money from their employer, and you are approached by law enforcement asking what you know about the theft. Do you lie to protect your parent, or do you tell the truth? Which is the more ethical thing to do? Confucius gives one answer here, but philosophy texts elsewhere offer other answers. For instance, Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue begins with Euthyphro telling Socrates that he is prosecuting his father for killing a worker in his fields, claiming that the pious thing to do is to prosecute people who commit murder no matter who they are. Socrates is shocked to hear this and questions Euthyphro on the nature of piety. What do you think? If your obligation to protect a parent is in conflict with your obligation to tell the truth about a theft and follow the law, which obligation do you choose to uphold? Why?

The Legacy of Confucius

It is difficult to overstate the importance of Confucius for Chinese culture, philosophy, and history. After his death, many of Confucius's disciples became influential teachers. The greatest among them were Mencius (372–289 BCE) and Xunzi (c. 310–c. 235 BCE).

Mencius expanded and developed Confucius's teachings, spreading the ideas of Confucianism more widely and securing the philosophical foundations of Confucius's legacy. One of the doctrines for which he is best known is the idea that human beings are innately benevolent and have tendencies toward the five constant virtues. This view led Mencius to argue, for instance, that human beings have a natural disposition toward concern for a child in need or an obviously suffering human being or animal. In one famous example, he argues that all human beings have hearts that are “not unfeeling toward others”:

Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among one's neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries. (quoted in Van Norden 2019)

Given that human beings are innately good, it remains for them to develop the appropriate knowledge of how to act on that goodness in order to become virtuous. In order to do so, Mencius encourages people to engage in reflection and the extension of their natural compassion for some to others. For instance, in one account, he tries to convince a king to care for his subjects by reminding the king of a time he felt compassion for an ox that was being led to slaughter. The reflection necessary for extending one's compassion from those for whom one naturally feels compassion to others requires an awareness that is grounded in practical motivation. In this sense, Mencius holds that virtue is the result of knowledge grounded in the caring motivations and relations that individuals have with one another. He locates this grounding in a process of reflection that, he says, is the natural function of the heart.

By contrast with Mencius, Xunzi held that human beings have an innately detestable nature but that they have the capacity to become good through artifice—that is, by acquiring traits and habits through deliberate action. Unlike Mencius, Xunzi did not believe that goodness came from reflection on one's innate tendency toward compassion. Rather, he held that one's innate emotional attachments would lead one to harmful behavior toward others, but through teaching in accordance with Confucian principles, one can become virtuous and ultimately transform those innate tendencies into something beneficial for humankind. This difference in perspective led Xunzi to emphasize the importance of external forces to guide behavior. He thought that the best guide toward virtue was the rituals that were handed down by ancient sages. Along these lines, Xunzi emphasizes the importance of music for developing an appreciation for ritual. Ultimately, rituals are the signposts that help mark the way, which flows from the constant and enduring guidance of heaven. Here, Xunzi returns to Confucius's appreciation for tradition (Goldin 2018).

Long after Confucius's death, in the eighth century CE, a new school of Chinese philosophy known as Neo-Confucianism became prominent. Thinkers such as Han Yu and Li Ao reinvigorated classical Confucianism with less emphasis on tradition and religion and a greater emphasis on reason and humanism. Neo-Confucianism engages critically and seriously with the traditions of Buddhism and Taoism, which had become prominent in Chinese thought. These schools of thought are distinct from Confucius's own philosophy, but they explicitly link their ideas with his. Classical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism continue to influence modern philosophical writing in China, and their influence extends even beyond China, to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.



FIGURE 3.9 Although Confucius was considered an atheist by his contemporaries, the following he has inspired has many elements of what most consider a religion. This contemporary Confucian temple in Urumqi, Xinjiang, China, features shrines, altars, and spaces for offerings. (credit: “Confucian Temple” by David Stanley/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Confucius remains a central and celebrated cultural figure in China. His teachings have produced a following that at times resembles a religion. The degree to which Confucianism is entrenched in Chinese political and cultural life suggests that it performs the function of what has been called a “civil religion”—namely, a set of cultural ideals without the specific doctrinal components that typically characterize religion that nevertheless provides a common basis for moral norms and standards of conduct in political speech and political life (Bellah 1967).

Daoism

The *dao* as a philosophical concept or a school of philosophical thought is associated primarily with the texts the *Daodejing*, commonly attributed to Laozi or the “Old Master,” and the *Zhuangzi*, attributed to Zhuangzi (c.

fourth century BCE). Many contemporary scholars question whether Laozi actually existed. It is likely that both texts are collections of writings from a variety of thinkers who belonged to a common school known as **Daoism**. Daoism is a belief system developed in ancient China that encourages the practice of living in accordance with the *dao*, the natural way of the universe and all things. Daoism is associated with a countercultural religious movement in ancient China, contrary to the dominant, traditionalist Confucianism. The religious movement of Daoism varied depending on the region, but the unifying theme among Daoist religions is a focus on a naturalistic, nontheological view of the underlying basis for morality and goodness. Part of the attraction and variability of Daoism is the fact that the *dao* is commonly understood to be empty of content, equally open to interpretation by anyone. This perspective leads to a kind of anarchism, resisting traditional hierarchies and authorities.

Daoism is highly critical of Confucianism, as can be seen from passages such as the following in the *Daodejing*: “When the Great Dao was discarded, only then came *ren* and right. When wisdom and insight emerged, only then came the Great Artifice. When the six kinship classes fell out of harmony, only then came filiality and parental kindness. When the state is darkened with chaos, only then do the loyal ministers appear” (Eno 2010, p. 15, 18). Here, the author criticizes the five constant virtues of Confucius by suggesting that these emerged only after China had lost its way and been separated from the *dao*. Similarly, the *Daodejing* is highly critical of Confucian benevolence (*ren*) and sagehood. It sees the notions of right, virtue, and goodness as concepts that distract the masses and obscure their awareness of the *dao*. Consequently, it recommends a kind of antisocial tendency to reject the way of the masses and act contrary to conventional wisdom.

The Dao as a Metaethical Concept

One of the ways in which Daoism differs from Confucianism and Mohism is that it emphasizes the grounds for moral norms but refrains from offering specific moral guidelines for action. Daoism starts with a certain conception of the natural world that serves as the basis for an ethical perspective on life, whereas Confucianism largely ignores any description of nature untouched, focusing directly on moral behavior. The *dao* itself is understood as a natural force that guides all life: “Men emulate earth; earth emulates heaven (*tian*); heaven emulates the Dao; the Dao emulates spontaneity” (Eno 2010, p. 17, 25). The general moral guidance of Daoism involves becoming aware of the *dao* and ensuring that one’s action doesn’t oppose natural forces.

In a general sense, the *dao* is considered to be an order governing the universe from its beginnings through the various forces of nature and reaching into human affairs. The human condition sets human beings against the *dao* and places them in opposition to this underlying force, so most of the *Daodejing* is focused on attempts to bring human beings back into alignment with the *dao*. The text warns, “As a thing the Dao is shadowed, obscure” (Eno 2010, p. 16, 21b). The problem is that the typical strategies for illuminating and clarifying things further obscure the *dao* because the *dao* itself appears contradictory: “To assent and to object—how different are they? Beauty and ugliness—what is the distinction between them?” (Eno 2010, p. 15, 20).

Language and rational concepts pull one away from the *dao*, which is either contentless and empty or contradictory: “When the Dao is spoken as words, how thin it is, without taste” (Eno 2010, p. 21, 35). This is why followers of the *dao* should resist attempts to categorize it in a determinative way: “Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know” (p. 27, 56). Instead, the one who follows the *dao* is capable of embracing contradiction: “One who knows white but preserves black becomes a standard for the world. Such a one never deviates from constant virtue and returns again to being limitless” (p. 18, 28a). Here, it is evident how Daoists draw lessons about the study and mastery of morality from their understanding of metaphysics. If reality is fundamentally contradictory and escapes the human capacity to capture it in language, then the person who wants to remain closest to fundamental reality should refrain from attempting to categorize it and should be willing to live with contradiction.

That said, this teaching leads to several tensions. It seems difficult to derive ethical prescriptions from nature when nature itself seems to lack a prescriptive force. The *dao* is simply the total forces of nature, neither good nor bad. Yet when Daoists advise one to allow the forces of nature to govern all activity, they themselves must

refrain from theorizing. Nevertheless, in order to provide guidance, the Daoist must speak or write. This leaves the reader in a difficult interpretive position (Hansen 2020).

Skepticism, the belief that one can never attain certain knowledge, is entrenched in Daoism. It's not clear, however, whether the reason for skepticism is that there is no ultimate answer, that there is an answer but it cannot be known, or that the answer can be known but it cannot be communicated. The *Daodejing* suggests that the best path is to recognize the limits of human knowledge: "To know you do not know is best; not to know that one does not know is to be flawed. / One who sees his flaws as flaws is therefore not flawed" (Eno 2010, p. 32, 71).

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on [epistemology](#) takes a deeper look at Daoism and other forms of skepticism.

The Ethics of *Wuwei*

Daoist texts teach readers to adopt a stance that is typically called **wuwei**, meaning nonaction, softness, or adaptiveness to the circumstances at hand. *Wuwei* is contrasted with action, assertion, and control. In the *Zhuangzi*, followers of the *dao* are characterized in a way that resembles the psychological state known as flow, where they find themselves completely absorbed in their task, losing awareness of themselves as a distinct ego and becoming completely receptive to the task at hand. The *Zhuangzi* tells the story of Cook Ding, a butcher who was so skillful that he had used the same knife without sharpening it for 19 years. He never dulled the blade by striking bone or tendon. Instead, he was able to find the gaps in the joints and cut through with the thin edge of his blade, no matter how small the gaps. He explains, "At the beginning, when I first began carving up oxen, all I could see was the whole carcass. After three years I could no longer see the carcass whole, and now I meet it with my spirit and don't look with my eyes" (Eno 2019, p. 23, 3.2). The metaphor of flow also resembles descriptions of *wuwei* that compare it to water: "Nothing in the world is more weak and soft than water, yet nothing surpasses it in conquering the hard and strong—there is nothing that can compare" (Eno 2010, p. 34, 78).

Moreover, being in a state of nonaction, softness, and flow allows one to be spontaneous and reactive to circumstances. Spontaneity is another characteristic of someone who follows the *dao*: "To be sparse in speech is to be spontaneous" (Eno 2010, p. 17, 23). Here, speech seems to be associated with control. This may be because speech exercises a certain control over the world by placing names on things and identifying them as similar to or different from other things, grouping them in categories, and assembling these categories and things into chains of reason. For the Daoists, this puts a distance between humanity and the fundamental forces of nature. The *Zhuangzi* states, "The Dao has never begun to possess boundaries and words have never yet begun to possess constancy" (Eno 2019, p. 23, 2.13). The attempt to use language to provide distinctions in the *dao* obscures the *dao*. This is a function of the nature of words to be true or false, allowable or unallowable. The implication is that these distinctions are foreign to the nature of the *dao*. In another section, the *Zhuangzi* reiterates this principle with the slogan "A this is a that; a that is a this" (Eno 2019, p. 16, 2.7). The point is that anything that can be designated as a "this" could also be designated as a "that," which the author takes to imply that language is relative to the perspective of the speaker.

As a result, the Daoists instruct one to surrender their attempts to understand and control nature: "The wish to grasp the world and control it—I see its futility. The world is a spiritlike vessel; it cannot be controlled. One who would control it would ruin it; one who would grasp it would lose it" (Eno 2010, p. 19, 29a). Inaction and the lack of a desire to grasp or comprehend the nature of the world are characteristic of *wuwei*: "He who acts, fails; he who grasps, loses. / Therefore the sage takes no action (*wuwei*) and hence has no failure, does no grasping and hence takes no loss" (p. 30, 64c). In contrast with Confucius, the Daoists link inaction and the lack of reason (spontaneity) with virtue: "The highest virtue does not act (*wuwei*) and has no reason to act; the lowest virtue acts and has reason to act" (p. 21, 38).



WRITE LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

Philosophers from around the world believe in the human ability to use reason to create both individual and social flourishing. Describe the qualities an individual has to possess to achieve ethical well-being in Aztec, Confucian, and Daoist thought. Then discuss what qualities you personally believe an individual needs to accomplish this goal.

Mohism

The school of **Mohism** is named after the philosopher Mozi (c. 470–391 BCE), who lived immediately after Confucius and was critical of the Confucian school. Less is known about Mozi than Confucius because even the earliest Chinese histories relegated him to relative obscurity. He appears to have been a tradesman who was skilled in his craft and slowly rose through the ranks of civil society. He was trained in Confucianism but resisted the way Confucius was overly wedded to ritual and hierarchy. Mozi was a universalist, insisting on the equal value of all people, without preferential treatment for family, neighbors, and country. He was followed enthusiastically by his disciples, many of them tradespeople who found solace in his egalitarian approach to philosophical questions.

Mozi's followers, known as Mohists, were numerous and intensely loyal during his life and immediately afterward. Stories from this time indicate that he held strict control over his disciples (Fung 1952). Mohism has had a much smaller influence on classical Chinese ethics and philosophy than Confucianism. The absence of immediate cultural relevance should not indicate that Mohism lacks philosophical importance. In fact, it may be argued that in many ways, Mozi is more philosophical in the contemporary sense of the word than Confucius. Whereas Confucius transmitted and codified the ritualistic values and customs of the Zhou dynasty, Mozi challenged traditional values by insisting on a more rational approach to ethics and a rejection of hierarchical norms. He derived his ethical system from first principles rather than tradition. Followers of Mohism developed an interest in traditional areas of philosophy that were neglected by the Confucians, such as logic, epistemology, and philosophy of language.

What is known of Mohism is derived from a collection of texts with obscure authorship, simply titled *Mozi*. The collection originally consisted of 71 texts written on bamboo strip scrolls, though 18 are missing and many have been corrupted through natural degradation. It is unclear how many of the texts were written by Mozi himself or even during his lifetime. It is likely that many of the doctrines surrounding epistemology, logic, and philosophy of language are later developments. The core of the texts consists of 10 three-part essays expounding on and defending the 10 main doctrines of the Mohist school. Those doctrines are presented in five pairs of principles: “Promoting the Worthy” and “Identifying Upward,” “Inclusive Care” and “Condemning Aggression,” “Moderation in Use” and “Moderation in Burial,” “Heaven’s Intent” and “Understanding Ghosts,” and “Condemning Music” and “Condemning Fatalism” (Fraser 2020a). The doctrines of inclusive care and anti-aggression are discussed below.

Inclusive Care and Anti-aggression

Perhaps the most central doctrine of Mohist philosophy is the principle that every human being is valued equally in the eyes of heaven (*tian*). With minimal religious or theological commitments, Mohists believe that heaven constitutes the eternal and ideal beliefs of a natural power or force that created and governs the universe. According to Mohists, it is apparent that heaven values every individual human being with exactly the same worth. In contrast to Confucius, who emphasized the importance of care with distinctions, Mozi advanced the doctrine of inclusive or impartial care, sometimes translated as “universal love.”

The doctrine of inclusive care leads directly to the doctrine of anti-aggression because the greatest threat to human well-being and care is aggression and war. Mozi lived during the period known as the Warring States period, immediately following the decline of the Zhou dynasty. During this period, local rulers fought for power in the absence of a strong central government. Mozi reasoned that the greatest calamities of the world are the

result of wars between states, aggression between neighbors, and a lack of respect among family members. These calamities are the result of partiality in care—that is, thinking that one group of people has a greater value than another. Partiality of care is the basis of loyalty among families and nations, but it is also the source of enmity and hostility between families and nations (Fung 1952).

In defense of the principle of inclusive care, Mozi offers a sophisticated philosophical argument, developed in dialogue form. He starts with the observation that if other states, capitals, or houses were regarded as if they were one's own, then one would not attack, disturb, or harm them. If one did not attack, disturb, or harm others, this would be a benefit to the world. Those who benefit and do not harm others are said to care for others and, therefore, to express inclusive or universal rather than partial care. Thus, inclusive care is the cause of benefit, while partial care is the cause of harm. The virtuous person should benefit the world, so the virtuous person should adopt inclusive care (Fung 1952). Mozi adds another argument by thought experiment: Imagine two people who are sincere, thoughtful, and otherwise identical in thought, word, and deed, except one of them believes in inclusive care while the other believes in partial care. Suppose you had to put your trust in one of the two people to protect yourself and your family. Which would you choose? He concludes that everyone would choose the person who believes in inclusive care, presumably because it would guarantee that their family would be protected and cared for just the same as anyone else. Trusting someone who believes in partial care only works if you know that the person is partial to you.

One of the key aspects of Mohist ethics is that Mozi asks about the appropriate rational basis for moral principles. Instead of starting from tradition and developing a system of ethics that conforms to and explains traditional views, as Confucius had, Mozi prefers to seek a rational ground for his ethical views. In particular, he asks about the appropriate “model” for ordering and governing society. He rejects any of the usual models, such as parents, teachers, and rulers, concluding that one cannot be certain that any of these people actually possess benevolence and therefore provide the right standard for ethical action. Instead, Mozi insists on finding an objective standard that is not fallible in the way a particular person or cultural tradition may be. Ultimately, the only acceptable model is heaven, which is entirely impartial in its concern for all human beings.

This sort of rational reasoning has led scholars to classify Mohism as a form of consequentialism, a philosophical approach that looks at the consequences of an action to determine whether it is moral.

CONNECTIONS

The chapter on [normative ethical theory](#) explores Mohism as a type of consequentialism in further depth.



THINK LIKE A PHILOSOPHER

What doctrines within Mohism and Confucianism might have made Confucianism the more popular choice for Chinese rulers?

Mohist Epistemology

The search for “models” sets Mohism apart in terms of its philosophical grounding. Mohists consider a wide range of possible candidates for models, including a rule, law, or definition; a person (i.e., a role model); and a tool or measuring device, such as a yardstick or compass. There are three different types of standards or models for assessing the value of anything: its root (the historical precedent), its source (the empirical basis), and its use (whether it produces benefit). The third standard has priority and reinforces the pragmatic character of Mohism. The purpose of a model is to help a student better follow the way (*dao*). The fact that there are so many different types of models reflects the fact that there are so many different practical contexts in which one needs to understand the appropriate way to act. Models are applied to practical situations not as a

principle or premise in an argument but rather as a prototype for the purpose of selecting things of a certain kind and casting off things that do not conform to that prototype. “The central questions for early Chinese thinkers are not What is the truth, and how do we know it? but What is the *dao* (way), and how do we follow it?” (Fraser 2020a).

Knowledge, for Mohists, is based on the concept of “recognition” or “knowledge of.” This sort of knowledge involves being able to reliably pick out what a given word means rather than understanding or conceptualizing the word. This can be illustrated by a passage in which Mozi says that the blind do not know white and black, not because they are unable to use the terms *white* and *black* correctly, but because they are not able to select the things that are white and differentiate them from the things that are black. For Mohists, there is little value in investigating the conceptual or ideal nature of terms like *white* and *black*. The focus is, instead, entirely practical: they want to be able to distinguish the things that are white from the things that are black. It is not necessary to know the essence or nature of something in order to be able to reliably distinguish it from other things. Similarly, Mohists have little interest in seeking justifications or foundations of knowledge. Such justifications are unnecessary in order to make the correct distinctions, which is the primary aim of knowledge. Reliable and consistently correct identification is what counts as knowledge, not having access to the right rational justifications or definitions (Fraser 2020a).

Summary

3.1 Indigenous Philosophy

When humans shift from religious answers to questions about purpose and meaning to more naturalistic and logical answers, they move from the realm of myth to reason. In Greek, this movement is described as a move from *mythos* to *logos*, where *mythos* signifies the supernatural stories we tell, while *logos* signifies the rational, logical, and scientific stories we tell. Rather than seeing a decisive break from mythological thinking to rational thinking, we should understand the transition from *mythos* to *logos* as a gradual, uneven, and zig-zagging progression.

Indigenous thought has in the past been seen as wisdom lying outside the realm of academic discussion; however, recent scholarship has challenged this assumption. The philosophies of Indigenous African and North American peoples provide understandings of the self and of society that complement and challenge traditional Western ideas. The Maya possessed advanced understandings of mathematics and astronomy as well as metaphysical concepts of a solar life force. The Aztec had a highly developed epistemology that grounded truth within an understanding of an individual's character and recognized the fundamental and total character of the universe as a godlike force or energy.

3.2 Classical Indian Philosophy

Indian philosophical traditions are a few centuries older than the earliest European philosophical traditions.

Philosophers from both Greek and India see philosophy as not just a theoretical activity but also a practical endeavor—a way of life. The earliest philosophical texts in India are the four Vedas. The Upanishads, a body of scripture added later, contain much of the philosophical core of these Hindu scriptures. According to this tradition, there is a rigid hierarchy to the cosmos that is reflected in the earthly world. Six *darshanas*, or schools of thought, emerged in Hindu philosophy, each pointing to a different path to seeing and being seen by a sacred being or beings.

The six principal *darshanas* are Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Samkhya holds that everything is composed of *puruṣa* (pure, absolute consciousness) and *prakṛti* (matter). Liberation occurs when the mind is freed from the bondage of matter. The purpose of yoga is the stopping of the movement of thought. Only then do individuals encounter their true selves. Nyaya, which can be translated as “method” or “rule,” focuses on logic and epistemology. The Vaisheshika system developed independently of Nyaya, but gradually came to share many of its core ideas. Its epistemology was simpler, allowing for only perception and inference as the forms of reliable knowledge. The Mimamsa school was one of the earliest philosophical schools of Hinduism, and it was grounded in the interpretation of the Vedic texts. It sought to investigate *dharma* or the duties, rituals, and norms present in society.

3.3 Classical Chinese Philosophy

Early Chinese writings show the beginnings of the theory of yin and yang, the two fundamental forces that are characterized as male and female, dark and light, inactivity and activity. In Confucianism, the five constant virtues are benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and trustworthiness (*xin*). The unifying theme among Daoist religions is a focus on a naturalistic, nontheological view of the underlying basis for morality and goodness. The general moral guidance of Daoism involves becoming aware of the *dao*, or the natural way of things, and ensuring that one's actions don't oppose those natural forces.

The most central doctrine of Mohist philosophy is the principle that every human being is valued equally in the eyes of heaven (*tian*). In contrast to Confucius, who emphasized the importance of care with distinctions, Mozi advanced the doctrine of inclusive care, following the principle that every human being has equal value in the eyes of heaven. The doctrine of inclusive care leads directly to the doctrine of anti-aggression because the greatest threat to human well-being and care is mutual aggression and war.

Key Terms

Codices singular *codex*; Maya books that transmitted the collective mathematical, scientific, historical, religious, and metaphysical knowledge of the Maya.

Confucianism a normative moral theory developed in ancient China during the Warring States period that proposes that the development of individual character is key to the achievement of an ethical and harmonious society.

Dao in Confucianism, ethical principles or a path by which to live; in Daoism, the natural way of the universe and all things.

Daoism a belief system developed in ancient China that encourages the practice of living in accordance with the *dao*, the natural way of the universe and all things.

Darshana a way of beholding the sacred or manifestations of the divine in Hindu thought.

Epistemology the study of knowledge, involving questions such as how humans know what they know, what is the nature of true knowledge, and what are the limits to what humans can know.

Ethnophilosophy the study of the philosophies of Indigenous peoples.

Filial piety the ethical obligation of children to their parents.

Indigenous philosophy the ideas of Indigenous peoples pertaining to the nature of the world, human existence, ethics, ideal social and political structures, and other topics also considered by traditional academic philosophy.

Junzi in Confucianism, a person who is an exemplary ethical figure and lives according to the *dao*.

Li rituals and practice that develop a person's ethical character as they interact with others.

Logos a way of thinking that rationally analyzes abstract concepts and phenomena independent of accepted belief systems.

Mohism a type of consequentialism established in ancient China by Mozi during the Warring States period.

Mythos a way of thinking that relies on the folk knowledge and narratives that often form part of the spiritual beliefs of a people.

Prakriti in Hindu thought, matter; one of two elements that make up the universe.

Purusha in Hindu thought, pure, absolute consciousness; one of two elements that make up the universe.

Ren a central concept in Confucianism that refers either to specific virtues or to someone with complete virtue.

Samkhya a dualist approach in Hindu metaphysics that views the universe as composed of pure consciousness and matter, which undergoes an evolutionary process.

Skepticism a philosophical position that claims people do not know things they ordinarily think they know.

Transformative model of identity an understanding of social identity as spiraling both outward and inward through expanding and retracting influences over a certain area of land.

Upanishads Hindu texts that contain the philosophical core of Hinduism.

Vedas the four oldest books within Hinduism, consisting of the *Rigveda*, the *Samaveda*, the *Yajurveda*, and the *Atharvaveda*.

Virtue ethics an approach to normative ethics that focuses on character.

Wuwei a natural way of acting that is spontaneous or immediate, in which a person's actions are in harmony with the flow of nature or existence.

Yin and yang an explanation of natural phenomena through two fundamental forces, the male yin and the female yang.

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Review Questions

3.1 Indigenous Philosophy

1. How are the terms *mythos* and *logos* used to classify bodies of thought?
2. What are some of the challenges of studying Indigenous philosophy?
3. How did the study of African thought as a philosophy begin?
4. What are some of the shared metaphysical ideas between African and Native American philosophies?
5. How did Maya rulers use the metaphysical beliefs of their society to establish political legitimacy?

3.2 Classical Indian Philosophy

6. What are some similarities between classical Greek and Indian philosophies?
7. What cosmological ideas emerged from the *Rigveda*?
8. What metaphysical approach is advanced by the Samkhya school of philosophy?
9. What is the principal epistemological tool found in the Nyaya school of philosophy?

3.3 Classical Chinese Philosophy

10. Why is Confucianism considered a conservative philosophy?
11. What are the five constant virtues in Confucianism?
12. What is the relational and communal character of Confucian ethics?
13. What are the legacies of Confucianism and Mohism, and what factors might explain this?
14. What is the most central doctrine of Mohism, and how does it contrast to Confucian ethics?
15. In what way can Daoism be seen as a rejection of Confucianism?
16. What are unifying themes within Daoism?

Further Reading

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