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**What is
PHILOSOPHY**

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy begins with wonder. Although many of us know very little about the jargon and history of philosophy, we have all been touched by the wonder with which philosophy begins. We wonder about why we are here; about who we really are; about whether God exists and what She or He is like; why pain, evil, sorrow, and separation exist; whether there is life after death; what true love and friendship are; what the proper balance is between serving others and serving ourselves; whether moral right and wrong are based on personal opinion or on some objective standard; and whether suicide, abortion, or euthanasia is ever justified.

This wondering and questioning begin early in our lives. Almost as soon as children learn to talk, they ask: Where did I come from? Where do people go when they die? How did the world start? Who made God? From the very beginning of our lives, we start to seek answers to questions that make up philosophy.

In fact, the word *philosophy* comes from the Greek words *philein*, meaning “to love,” and *sophia*, meaning “wisdom.” Philosophy is thus the love and pursuit of wisdom. It includes the search for wisdom about many basic issues: what it means to be a human being; what the fundamental nature of reality is; what the sources and limits of our knowledge are; and what is good and right in our lives and in our societies.

Although philosophy begins with wonder and questions, it does not end there. Philosophy tries to go beyond the answers that we received when we were too young to seek our own answers. The goal of philosophy is to answer these questions for ourselves and to make up our own minds about our self, life, knowledge, society, religion, and morality.

We accepted many of our religious, political, and moral beliefs when we were children and could not yet think for ourselves. Philosophy examines these beliefs. The aim is not to reject them but to learn why we hold them and to ask whether we have good reasons to continue holding them. By doing this we make our basic beliefs about reality and life our own. We accept them because we have thought them through on our own, not because our parents, peers, and society have conditioned us to believe them. In this way, we gain a kind of independence and freedom, or what some modern philosophers call *autonomy*. An important goal of philosophy, then, is autonomy, which is the freedom and ability to decide for yourself what you will believe in, by using your own reasoning powers.

PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

Plato is one of the earliest and greatest Western philosophers. He illustrated how philosophy aims at freedom with a famous parable called the Allegory of the Cave. The Allegory of the Cave is a story Plato

tells in *The Republic*, his classic philosophical work on justice. Here is an edited translation of the Allegory of the Cave, which Plato wrote in his native Greek:

Now let me describe the human situation in a parable about ignorance and learning. Imagine men live at the bottom of an underground cave. The entrance to the cave is a long passageway that rises upward through the ground to the light outside. They have been there since childhood and have their legs and necks chained so they cannot move. The chains hold their heads so they must sit facing the back wall of the cave. They cannot turn their heads to look up through the entrance behind them. At some distance behind them, up nearer the entrance to the cave, a fire is burning. Objects pass in front of the fire so that they cast their shadows on the back wall of the cave. The prisoners see the moving shadows on the cave wall as if projected on a screen. All kinds of objects parade before the fire including statues of men and animals. As they move past the fire their shadows dance on the wall in front of the prisoners.

Those prisoners are like ourselves. The prisoners cannot see themselves or each other except for the shadows each prisoner's body casts on the back wall of the cave. They also cannot see the objects behind them, except for the shadows the objects cast on the wall. Now imagine the prisoners could talk with each other. Suppose their voices echoed off the wall so that the voices seem to come from their own shadows. Then wouldn't they talk about these shadows as if the shadows were real? for the prisoners, reality would consist of nothing but shadows.

Next imagine that someone freed one of the prisoners from his chains. Suppose he forced the prisoner to stand up and turn toward the entrance of the cave and then forced him to walk up toward the burning fire. The movement would be painful. The glare from the fire would blind the prisoner so that he could hardly see the real objects whose shadows he used to watch. What would he think if someone explained that everything he had seen before was an illusion? Would he realize that now he was nearer to reality and that his vision was actually clearer?

Imagine that now someone showed him the objects that had cast their shadows on the wall and asked the prisoner to name each one. Wouldn't the prisoner be at a complete loss? Wouldn't he think the shadows he saw earlier were truer than these objects? Next imagine someone forced the prisoner to look straight at the burning light. His eyes would hurt. The pain would make him turn away and try to return to the shadows he could see more easily. He would think that those shadows were more real than the new objects shown to him.

But suppose that once more someone takes him and drags him up the steep and rugged ascent from the cave. Suppose someone forces him out into the full light of the sun. Won't he suffer greatly and be furious at being dragged upward? The light will so dazzle his eyes as he approaches it that he won't be able to see any of this world we ourselves call reality. Little by little he will have to get used to looking at the upper world. At first he will see shadows on the ground best. Next perhaps he will be able to look at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and then maybe the objects themselves. After

this, he would find it easier to gaze at the light of the moon and the stars in the night sky than to look at the daylight sun and its light. Last of all, he will be able to look at the sun and contemplate its nature. He will not just look at its reflection in water but will see it as it is in itself and in its own domain. He would come to the conclusion that the sun produces the seasons and the years and that it controls everything in the visible world. He will understand that it is, in a way, the cause of everything he and his fellow prisoners used to see.



Walking with his
student Aristotle, Plato points upward:
“And the climb upward out of the
cave into the upper world is the ascent
of the mind into the domain of true
knowledge.”

Suppose the released prisoner now recalled the cave and what passed for wisdom among his friends there. Wouldn't he be happy about his new situation and feel sorry for them? Perhaps the prisoners would honor those who were quickest to make out the shadows. Or perhaps they honored those who could remember the order in which the shadows appeared and were best at predicting the course of the shadows. Would he care about such honors and glories or would he envy those who won them? Wouldn't he rather endure anything than go back to thinking and living like they did?

Finally, imagine that someone led the released prisoner away from the light and back down into the cave to his old seat. His eyes would be full of darkness. But even though his eyes were still dim, he would have to compete in discerning the shadows with the prisoners who had never left the cave. Wouldn't he appear ridiculous? Men would say of him that he had gone up and had come back down with his eyesight ruined and that it was better not to even think of ascending. In fact, if they caught anyone trying to free them and lead them up to the light, they would try to kill him.

I tell you now, that the prison is the world we see with our eyes; the light of the fire is like the power of our sun. The climb upward out of the cave into the upper world is the ascent of the mind into the domain of true knowledge.

PLATO'S ALLEGORY AND "DOING" PHILOSOPHY

Plato wrote this intriguing allegory more than two thousand years ago. It is important for us because we can interpret it as an explanation of what philosophy is.

PHILOSOPHY AS AN ACTIVITY. First, in the allegory, the activity of journeying upward from the dark cave to the light can be seen as what philosophy is. That is, philosophy is an activity. In this respect, it differs from other academic subjects. Unlike some other subjects, philosophy does not consist of a lot of information or theories. True, philosophers have developed many theories and views. However, philosophical theories are the *products* of philosophy, not philosophy itself. While studying philosophy, of course, you will study the theories of several important philosophers. But the point of studying them is not just to memorize them. You will study them, instead, as an aid to help you learn how to "do" philosophy. By seeing how the best philosophers have "done" philosophy and by considering their views you will better understand what philosophizing is. More importantly, you can use their insights to shed light on your own philosophical journey. It's the journey—the activity—that's important, not the products you bring back from your journey.

PHILOSOPHY IS HARD WORK. Second, as Plato made clear in the allegory, philosophy can be a difficult activity. The journey upward is hard because it involves questioning the most basic beliefs that each of us has about ourselves and the world around us. As the allegory suggests, your philosophical journey sometimes may lead your thinking in directions that society does not support. It may lead you toward views that others around you reject. Philosophy is also hard because it requires us to think

critically, consistently, and carefully about our fundamental beliefs. We may rebel against being asked to systematically and logically question and criticize views that we have always accepted. Yet the journey out of the darkness of the cave requires intellectual discipline and the hard work of reasoning as carefully and logically as we can. That is why someone taking the first steps in philosophy can be helped by a teacher. As Plato says, the teacher must “take him and drag him up the steep and rugged ascent from the cave and force him out into the full light of the sun.” The teacher does this by getting the student to ask the hard questions that the student is reluctant to ask on his or her own.

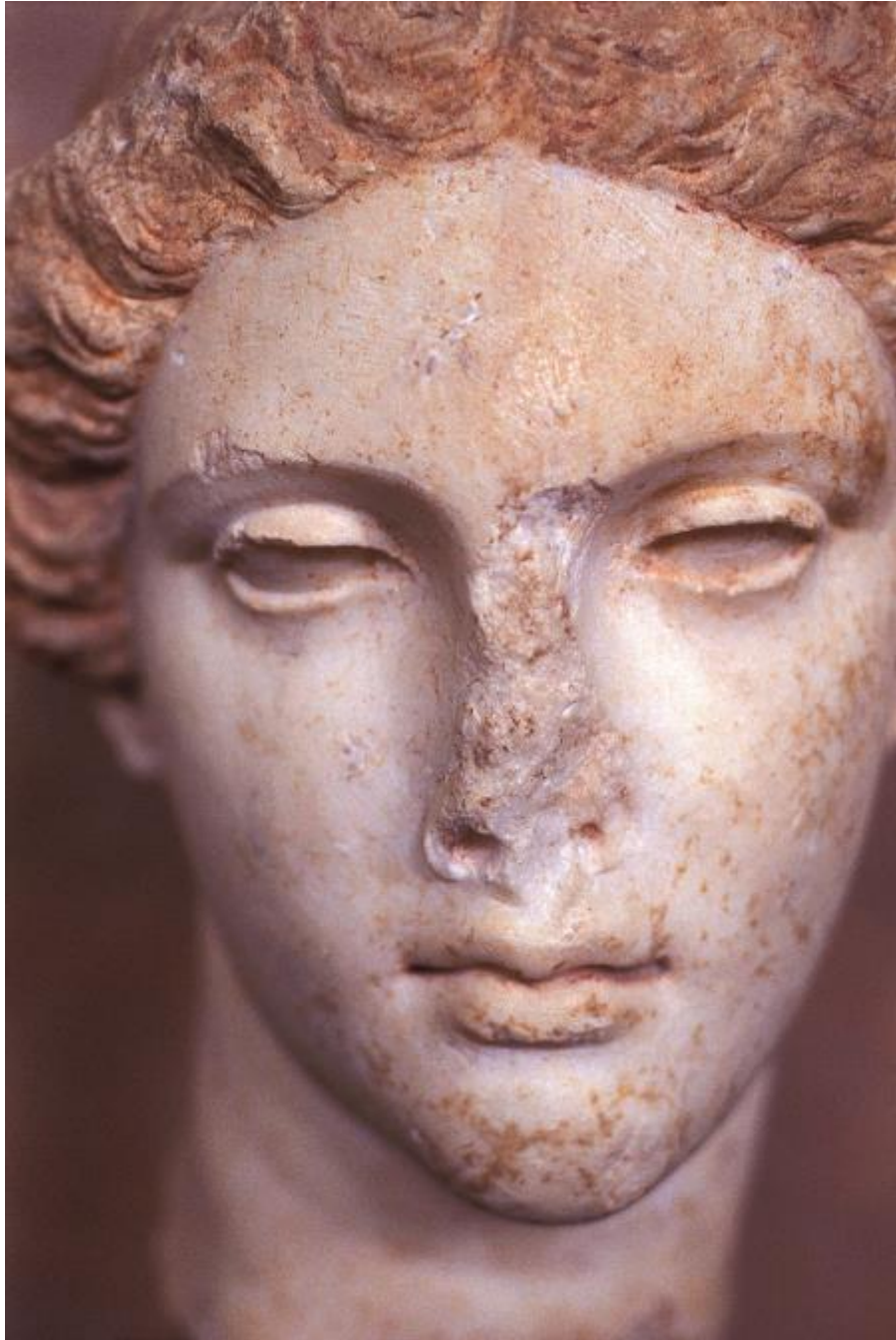
THE AIM OF PHILOSOPHY IS FREEDOM. Third, as Plato indicates and as we have already suggested, the aim of philosophy is freedom. Philosophy breaks chains that imprison and hold us down, chains we often do not even know we are wearing. Like the prisoners in the cave, we uncritically accept the beliefs and opinions of those around us. This unthinking conformity leads us to see the world in narrow, rigid ways. Philosophy aims at breaking us free of the prejudices and unthinking assumptions we have long absorbed from those around us. Once free, we can move toward more reflective views that are truly our own.

PHILOSOPHY EXAMINES OUR MOST BASIC ASSUMPTIONS. Fourth, Plato’s allegory suggests that philosophy examines our beliefs about the most basic issues of human existence. These include many assumptions we are not even aware of although they play a crucial role in our thinking and our actions. We are like the prisoner who is forced to look at the real objects whose shadows he had always assumed were real. In a similar way, doing philosophy means questioning the most basic assumptions we make about ourselves and the universe around us. The word *philosophy* itself suggests this, for, as we noted earlier, it means “the love of wisdom.” To do philosophy is to love wisdom. Wisdom is a true understanding of the most fundamental aspects of human living. So the love of wisdom is the desire to understand the fundamental assumptions we have about ourselves and our world.

The view that philosophy examines our beliefs about the most fundamental issues of life was perhaps most clearly expressed not by Plato, but by Perictione. Perictione was a woman philosopher who lived around the time of Plato. She wrote:

Humanity came into being and exists in order to contemplate the principle of the nature of the whole. The function of wisdom is to gain possession of this very thing, and to contemplate the purpose of the things that are. Geometry, of course, and arithmetic, and the other theoretical studies and sciences are also concerned with the things that are. But wisdom is concerned with the most basic of these. Wisdom is concerned with all that is, just as sight is concerned with all that is visible and hearing with all that is audible. . . . Therefore, whoever is able to analyze all the kinds of being by reference to one and the same basic principle, and, in turn, from this principle can synthesize and enumerate the different kinds, this person seems to be the wisest and most true and, moreover, to have discovered a noble height from which he will be able to catch sight of God and all the things separated from God in serial rank and order.

Perictione is saying that the search for wisdom is a search for an understanding of the ultimate truths about ourselves and our universe. It is a search for a kind of understanding that goes beyond mathematics and the other sciences. These—mathematics and the other sciences—look only at particular aspects of our world. Philosophy, on the other hand, desires to know the ultimate truth about all aspects of our world. It desires to understand the assumptions that underlie the sciences as well as everything we think and do.



A woman philosopher who lived about the time of Plato, Perictione saw

philosophy as a search for understanding: “humanity came into being and exists in order to contemplate the principle of the nature of the whole.”

For example, philosophy examines the basic assumptions that underlie religion when it asks: Is there a God? Is there an afterlife? What truth is there in religious experience? Philosophy examines the basic assumptions that underlie science when it asks: Can science tell us what our universe is really like? Are scientific theories merely useful approximations, or do they impart real truths about the universe? Is there such a thing as truth in science? Philosophy examines the basic values that underlie our relations with one another when it asks: Is there really such a thing as justice? What, if anything, do we truly owe each other? Is true love really possible or are all our activities based on self-interest? And it examines the basic notions that underlie our views about reality. For example, it asks: Are we truly in control of the choices we think we make, or is everything we do determined by forces we do not control? Are the ordinary objects we experience all that reality contains, or does another kind of reality exist beyond the world that appears around us? Philosophy, then, examines the basic assumptions that underlie everything we do and believe. In fact, we can define philosophy—the love and pursuit of wisdom—as critically and carefully examining the reasons behind our most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and the world around us.

ASSUMPTIONS AND CRITICAL THINKING

Doing philosophy, then, often involves trying to discover the assumptions we are making or that others are making. Assumptions are beliefs we take for granted and that would have to be true if the other things we believe and say are true, or if what we do makes sense. For example, most of our religious beliefs and activities assume that God exists. If it were not true that God exists, then most traditional religious beliefs could not be true and traditional religious activities would make little sense. In a similar way, most of us assume that what we perceive with our five senses is real. If it were not true that what we see is real, then most of our beliefs about what we know about reality would not be true. And most of us assume that what we are doing is worth doing, for otherwise it would make little sense for us to continue doing it. It is important to be aware of the assumptions we and others make. Otherwise we risk becoming like the prisoners in Plato’s cave who unthinkingly assume the shadows they see are real objects. To help you identify assumptions in the readings, the boxes entitled Analyzing the Reading will sometimes point out an assumption the author may be making. An example is the fourth question in the Analyzing the Reading box you saw at the end of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Read it now and see what you think. Later we will look more closely at the process of identifying assumptions. Doing this kind of thinking—trying to discover our own and others’ assumptions—is an important part of what is called critical thinking. What is critical thinking? We are always thinking, of course, and we use our thinking any time we decide what we should do or believe. But our thinking can be illogical, biased, close-minded, or based on mistaken assumptions, unsupported beliefs, false generalizations, and fallacious reasoning.

Such thinking risks leading us astray. **Critical thinking** is the opposite of this kind of risky undisciplined thinking. Critical thinking is the kind of disciplined thinking we do when we base our beliefs and actions on unbiased and valid reasoning that uses well-founded evidence, that avoids false generalizations and unrecognized assumptions, and that considers opposing viewpoints. Using this kind of disciplined critical thinking to examine an issue involves seven steps: (1) identify and state your own views on the issue, (2) clarify your views by defining key words or terms your views contain, getting rid of ambiguities, and providing examples of what your views involve, (3) identify the important assumptions on which your views depend, (4) determine the reasons or evidence that support your views and make sure these reasons support your views with sound and valid reasoning and are not false generalizations, (5) consider other views people may have about the same issue and the reasons they have for their views, (6) come to a conclusion about whether your own view or one of the other views makes the most sense, and (7) determine the consequences of your conclusion. Don't worry if these steps are not completely clear to you yet. As you move through this book, the meaning of each should become clear.

Obviously, critical thinking is important in every aspect of life. But it is especially essential in philosophy because, as we have said, philosophy is the activity of thinking through the most basic beliefs we have accepted about ourselves and our world, and trying to form our own views about these. If such philosophical thinking is not to go wrong, it has to be critical thinking. Because critical thinking is so important in philosophy, this book contains several sections, like this one, entitled Thinking Critically.

Each of these sections explains some aspect of critical thinking and applies critical thinking to the philosophy discussed in the book. The aim of these sections is to enable you to learn, step by step, how to evaluate your own philosophical thinking, as well as the philosophical thinking of others. It is sometimes said that philosophy "Teaches you how to think." This is absolutely true. To learn philosophy is, at the same time, to learn to think critically.

THE DIVERSITY OF PHILOSOPHY

Both Plato and Perictione are representatives of so-called Western philosophy. Western philosophy is a part of the cultural tradition that began in ancient Greece and eventually spread to Europe, England, and the United States. Yet the search for wisdom has been a concern of all races and cultures. The study of Western philosophy is important for us because it has had a profound and direct influence on our society. And it continues to influence and shape the thinking of each of us today. Yet, non-Western philosophical traditions have had equally profound impacts on our planet's civilizations. Moreover, the world's nations have become so interdependent that non-Western philosophies now directly influence our own thinking. So learning about those other philosophical traditions is as vital as learning about the Western traditions that have shaped us and our society.

We will spend a good deal of time discussing the views of Western philosophers. But we will not ignore the contributions of non-Western philosophers, such as Indian, African, and Asian philosophers. By looking at their contributions, you can expand your horizons. These perspectives provide new ways of looking at yourself and reality. By looking at worlds that are different from the one you live in, you can understand what your world is really like. More important, perhaps, you can envision ways of making it better.

We will also not ignore the contributions of a group of people who are sometimes overlooked in philosophy courses. This is the group of people that make up 50 percent of the human race: women. For many historical reasons (including subtle and overt sexism), the major contributors to Western philosophy have been males. Nevertheless, several important women philosophers, like Perictione, have made significant philosophical contributions. Therefore, this book includes discussions of an approach to philosophy that tries to capture the special philosophical insights of female philosophers. This approach is what is generally referred to as “feminist philosophy.” Feminist philosophy attempts to look at philosophical issues from the perspectives of women. The pages that follow, then, do not ignore the contributions of feminist philosophy. Instead they include numerous discussions of the views of important feminist philosophers.

REASONING

We said earlier that philosophy “requires us to think critically” and that thinking critically requires “valid reasoning.” So reasoning is an essential component of philosophical thinking. Reasoning is the process of thinking by which we draw conclusions from the information, knowledge, or beliefs we have about something. We call the information from which we draw a conclusion the “reasons” or the “premises” or the “evidence” for the conclusion. We are reasoning, for example, when we use the information we have about the universe to try to figure out whether we should believe that God exists. We also use reasoning when we use our knowledge of a person to try to figure out whether we should marry that person, or when we use the information we have about a college to figure out whether we want to go to that college. In fact, reasoning pervades our whole life since we use reasoning every time we rely on the knowledge or information we have about something, to figure out what we should believe or do about it.

Although reasoning pervades our lives, it plays an especially important role in philosophy because when we philosophize we are always engaged in reasoning. In fact, so essential is reasoning in philosophy, that you could almost say that philosophizing *is* reasoning: It is reasoning about our most fundamental beliefs and assumptions. But philosophers do not engage in just any kind of reasoning. Philosophers want their reasoning to be good reasoning. Good reasoning is reasoning in which the reasons we have for a conclusion provide sound and valid evidence for that conclusion. Consequently, a lot of the work of philosophizing involves trying to figure out or evaluate whether the reasons or evidence for a conclusion provide sound and valid support for that conclusion. Because we all use reasoning when we make important decisions in life, learning to evaluate reasoning will help you throughout your life. Good reasoning is not only a key to philosophy, it is also a key to success in getting whatever it is that you want out of life.

SUMMARY

This module tries to communicate some of the interest and importance of philosophy and to show that philosophy is not to be feared but rather to be cultivated and relished. We began by observing that everyone philosophizes in daily life, and we saw how Plato pictured philosophy as a climb from darkness to light in the pursuit of wisdom. We saw the value of studying philosophy: Nevertheless, we noted that some feminists have charged that up to now philosophy has had a male bias.

ASSIGNMENT

In your own words, discuss Thomas Hobbes philosophy

REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

- Plato, *The Republic*, from bk. 7. This translation copyright © 1987 by Manuel Velasquez.
- *A History of Women Philosophers*, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 56.
- Gail Stenstad, "Anarchic Thinking: Breaking the Hold of Monotheistic Ideology on Feminist Philosophy," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 333.