Introduction
When asked “do you have a philosophy?” most people say “yes,” but what do they mean? They usually have in mind a set of beliefs that they admit are difficult to prove are true, but that nonetheless are important to the way they think of themselves and the world they inhabit. Sometimes people describe their philosophies by saying what they think makes an action right or wrong. The statement “it’s part of my philosophy that people should help each other” might be an example. A person’s philosophy might include the fundamental ethical principles he or she believes. But people often have more than ethics in mind when they talk about their philosophies. A religious person might say that it is part of his or her philosophy that God exists; an atheist might say that it is part of his or her philosophy that there is no God and that there is no life after death. These propositions are important to the people who believe them. They describe what exists; philosophers would say that they are part of metaphysics, not ethics. Metaphysics is the part of philosophy that attempts to describe, in very general terms, what there is.

If every day people think of their philosophies as the important beliefs they have that are difficult to prove, how does this idea of philosophy relate to how philosophers understand their own subject? Sometimes a term is used in ordinary talk in a way that differs dramatically from the way it is used by specialists. People sometimes say that tomatoes are vegetables, but a botanist will tell you that tomatoes are fruits. Every day people say they
are concerned about “ecology,” but biologists understand “ecology” in a very different way. Perhaps philosophers use the term “philosophy” in a way that departs fundamentally from what ordinary people mean when they say that they have a philosophy.

To gain a better purchase on what philosophy is, I’m going to discuss the question of what is distinctive about philosophy from two angles. First, I’ll sketch some of the main philosophical problems that I’ll examine in this book. That is, I’ll describe some examples of philosophy. But giving examples doesn’t really answer the question of what philosophy is. If you asked, “What is a mammal?” and I showed you a human being, a hippo, and a cat, these examples might give you a hint about what a mammal is. However, citing examples isn’t the same as saying what it is to be a mammal. That is why there will be a second stage to my discussion of what philosophy is. After giving some examples of philosophical problems, I’ll present some theories about what philosophy is. I believe these theories have merit, though I admit none is entirely adequate.

**Examples**

The first philosophical problem we’ll consider in this book is whether God exists. Some philosophers have constructed arguments that attempt to establish that God exists, others have tried to show there is no God, and still others think that the question can’t really be answered. I’ll evaluate some of the more influential arguments and try to see whether they work.

The second problem we will consider concerns knowledge. It is pretty clear that belief and knowledge are different. Long ago some people thought that the earth is flat. They believed this, but they didn’t know it, since it isn’t true. Of course, they thought they knew it, but that’s different. It is also pretty clear that true belief isn’t the same as knowledge. If you believe something for no reason at all, but happen to be right by accident, you have true belief but not knowledge. For example, think of a gullible gambler at a racetrack who believes for no good reason that the first horse in every race will win. Occasionally this person will be right—he will have a true belief. But it isn’t plausible to say that he knew, on those races about which he turned out to be right, which horse would win. So having knowledge involves something more than having a true belief.

The philosophical problem about knowledge will split into two parts. First, there are the questions: What is knowledge? What makes knowledge different from true belief? Second, there is the question: Do human beings ever know anything? One philosophical position we will consider answers this last question in the negative. Sure, we have beliefs. And granted, some of our beliefs turn out to be true. Knowledge, however, we never have. We don’t even know those things that we take to be most obvious. This position is called philosophical skepticism. We will consider arguments for skepticism and arguments that attempt to refute it.

The third philosophical subject that will be addressed in this book consists of a collection of topics from the philosophy of mind. The first of these is the so-called mind/body problem. You have a mind; you also have a brain. What is the relationship between these items? One possible answer is that they are identical. Although “mind” and “brain” are different words, they name the same thing, just like the names “Superman” and “Clark Kent.” An alternative position in this area is called dualism; it says that the mind and the brain are different things. We will consider other theories that have been advanced about the mind/body problem as well.
Another topic from the philosophy of mind that we’ll address concerns human freedom. Each of us has the personalities we have because we inherited a set of genes from our parents and then grew up in a sequence of environments. Genes plus environments make us the sorts of people we are. We didn’t choose the genes we have, nor did we choose the environments we experienced in early life. These were thrust upon us from the outside. Each of us performs certain actions and abstains from performing others. This pattern of what we do and don’t do results from the personalities we have. Can we be said to perform actions freely? Is it really in our control to perform some actions and abstain from others? Perhaps the fact that our actions are the results of factors outside our control (our genes and our early environment) shows that it is a mistake to say that we freely choose what we do. Of course, we talk in everyday life about people doing things “of their own free will.” We also think of ourselves as facing real choices, as exercising control over what we do. However, the philosophical problem of freedom asks whether this common way of thinking is really defensible. Maybe freedom is just an illusion. Perhaps we tell ourselves a fairy tale about our own freedom because we can’t face the fact that we aren’t free. The philosophical problem will be to see whether we can be free agents if our personalities are the results of factors outside our control.

The last problem area we will address is ethics. In everyday life, we frequently think that some actions are right and others are wrong. The philosophical problem about this familiar attitude divides into two parts. First, we’ll consider whether there really are such things as ethical facts. Maybe talk about ethics, like talk about freedom, is just an elaborate illusion. Consider a parallel question about science. In every science, there are questions that are controversial. For example, physicists have different opinions about how the solar system began. But most of us think that there is something else to physics besides opinions. There are facts about what the world is really like.

Clashes of opinion occur in what I’ll call the subjective realm. Here we find one human mind disagreeing with another. But facts about physics exist in the objective realm. Those facts exist independently of anybody’s thinking about them. They are out there, and science aims to discover what they are. In science, there are both subjective opinions and objective facts—people have beliefs, but there also exists, independently of what anyone believes, a set of facts concerning the way the world really is. The question about ethics is whether both these realms (subjective and objective) exist in ethics, or only one of them does. We know that people have different ethical opinions. The question is whether, in addition to those opinions, there are ethical facts. In other words, does ethics parallel the description I’ve just given of science, or is there a fundamental difference here? The accompanying two-by-two table illustrates this question. Ethical subjectivism is the philosophical thesis that there are no ethical facts, only ethical opinions. According to this position, the claim that “murder is always wrong” and the claim that “murder is sometimes permissible” are both misguided—there are no facts about the ethics of murder for us to have opinions about. We’ll consider arguments supporting and criticizing this position.
The second question that arises in ethics is this: If there are ethical facts, what are they? Here we assume a positive answer to the first question and then press for more details. One theory we’ll consider is utilitarianism, which says that the action you should perform in a given situation is the one that will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals. This may sound like common sense, but I’ll argue that there are some serious problems with this ethical theory.

**Three Theories about What Philosophy Is**

I’ve just described a menu of four central philosophical problems: God, knowledge, mind, and ethics. What makes them all philosophical problems? Instead of giving examples, can we say something more general and complete about what distinguishes philosophy from other areas of inquiry? I’ll offer three theories about what is characteristic of at least some philosophical problems.

Several of the problems just described involve fundamental questions of justification. There are many things that we believe without hesitation or reflection. These beliefs that are second nature to us are sometimes called “common sense.” Common sense says that the sense experiences we have (via sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell) provide each of us with knowledge of the world we inhabit. Common sense also says that people often act “of their own free will,” and common sense holds that some actions are right while others are wrong. Philosophy examines the fundamental assumptions we make about ourselves and the world we inhabit and tries to determine whether those assumptions are rationally defensible.

Another characteristic of many philosophical questions is that they are very general; often they’re more general than the questions investigated in specific sciences. Physicists have asked whether there are electrons; biologists have investigated whether genes exist; geologists have sought to find out whether the continents rest on movable plates. However, none of these sciences really bother with the question of why we should think that physical objects exist. The various sciences simply assume that there are things outside the mind; they then focus on more specific questions about what those things are like. In contrast, it is a characteristically philosophical question to ask why you should believe that there is anything at all outside your mind. The idea that your mind is the only thing that exists is called solipsism. Philosophers have addressed the question of whether solipsism is true. This is a far more general question than the question of whether electrons, genes, or continental plates exist.

The third view of what philosophy is says that philosophy is the enterprise of clarifying concepts. Consider some characteristic philosophical questions: What is knowledge? What is freedom? What is justice? Each of these concepts applies to some things but not to others. What do the things falling under a concept have in common, and how do they differ from the things to which the concept does not apply?

We must be careful here, since many questions that aren’t especially philosophical sound like the examples just given. Consider some characteristic scientific questions: What is photosynthesis? What is acidity? What is an electron? How does the first batch
of questions differ from these? One difference between these questions concerns the ways in which reason and observation help answer them. You probably are aware that philosophy courses don’t include laboratory sections. Philosophers usually don’t perform experiments as part of their inquiries. Yet, in many sciences (though not in all), laboratory observation is central. This doesn’t mean that observation plays no role in philosophy. Many of the philosophical arguments we will consider begin by making an observation. For example, in Chapter 5, I’ll consider an argument for the existence of God that begins with the following assertion: Organisms are complicated things that are remarkably well adapted to the environments they inhabit. The thing to notice here is that this fact is something we know by observation. So philosophers, as well as scientists, do rely on observations.

Nonetheless, there is something distinctive about how observations figure in a philosophical inquiry. Usually the observations that are used in a philosophical theory are familiar and obvious to everyone. A philosopher will try to show by reasoning that those observations lead to some rather surprising conclusions. That is, although philosophy involves both observation and reasoning, it is the latter that in some sense does more of the work. As you will see in what follows, philosophical disputes often involve disagreements about reasoning; rarely are such disputes decidable by making an observation.

Each of these ways of understanding what philosophy is should be taken with a grain of salt (or perhaps with two). I think there is something to be said for each, even though each is somewhat simplified and distorting.

The Nature of Philosophy Has Changed Historically

One thing that makes it difficult to define “what philosophy is” is that the subject has been around at least since the ancient Greeks and has changed a great deal. There are many problems that are just as central to philosophy now as they were to the ancient Greeks, but there are other problems that have broken away from philosophy and now are thought of as purely scientific.

For example, ancient Greek philosophers discussed what the basic constituents of physical things are. Thales (who lived around 580 B.C.E.) thought that everything is made of water; many other theories were discussed as well. Now such questions are thought to be part of physics, not philosophy. Similarly, until the end of the nineteenth century, universities put philosophy and psychology together in the same academic department. It is only recently that the two subjects have been thought of as separate. Scientists in the seventeenth century—for example, Isaac Newton—used the term “natural philosophy” to refer to what we now think of as science. The term “scientist” was invented in the nineteenth century by the British philosopher William Whewell. The idea that philosophy and science are separate subjects may seem clear to us now, but the separation we now find natural was not so obvious in the past. Many of the problems that we now regard as philosophical are problems that have not broken away from philosophy and found their way into the sciences. Perhaps there are problems now
Philosophical Method

Having tried to say something about what philosophy is, I now want to say something about what philosophy is not (at least not in this book). You may have the impression that doing philosophy involves lying under a tree, staring up at the sky, and making deep and mysterious pronouncements off the top of your head that sound very important but that are hard to make sense of when you try to think about them clearly. I’ll call this the mystical guru model of philosophy. Your experience reading this book won’t correspond to this impression.

There is, however, another experience you’ve probably had that comes closer. If you took a high school geometry course, you’ll remember proving theorems from axioms. If your geometry course was like the one I had, the axioms were given to you with very little explanation of why you should believe them. Maybe they looked pretty obvious to you, and so you didn’t wonder very much about their plausibility. Anyhow, the main task was to use the axioms to prove theorems. You started with the axioms as assumptions and then showed that if they are true, other statements must be true as well.

Philosophers tend to talk about “arguments” rather than “proofs.” The goal is to try to reach answers to important philosophical questions by reasoning correctly from assumptions that are plausible. For example, in Chapter 4, I’ll examine some attempts to prove that God exists. The idea here is to start with assumptions that practically anybody would grant are true and then show that these assumptions lead to the conclusion that there is a God. This resembles what you may have done in geometry: Starting with simple and supposedly obvious assumptions, you were able to establish something less obvious and more complex—for example, that the sum of the angles of a triangle equals two right angles (180°).

Sometimes the philosophical questions we’ll consider will strike you as difficult, deep, even mysterious. I won’t shy away from such questions. I’ll try, however, to address them with clarity and precision. The goal is to take hard questions and deal with them clearly, which, I emphasize, should never involve trying to pull the wool over someone’s eyes by making deep-sounding pronouncements that mean who-knows-what.

Summary

I began this chapter by describing how every day people use the term “philosophy.” In fact, their usage is not so distant from what philosophers mean by the term. Philosophy does address the most fundamental beliefs we have about ourselves and the world we inhabit. Precisely because these assumptions are so central to the way we think and act, it is difficult to step back for a moment from these assumptions and examine them critically.
The French have an expression: “the most difficult thing for a fish to see is water.” Some assumptions are so natural and seemingly obvious that it is hard to see that we are making assumptions at all. Philosophy is the effort to help us identify these assumptions and evaluate them. Each of us does have a philosophy. What divides some people from others is their willingness to ask probing questions about what they believe and why. This is what philosophy as a discipline tries to add to the philosophies that each of us carries with us through our lives.

**Review Questions**

1. What is the difference between objective and subjective?
2. If you want to say what philosophy is, why isn’t it enough to list some examples of philosophical problems?

**A Problem for Further Thought**

Which of the ideas presented here about what philosophy is also apply to mathematics? Which do not?

**Supplementary Reading**

**Bertrand Russell**

**The Value of Philosophy**

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), a British philosopher and logician, was one of the greatest and most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. In this short passage, Russell defends the practice of philosophy against the criticism that it is frivolous or has resulted in few definite answers, arguing that philosophy’s value lies in the questions it asks rather than in the answers it yields.

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**READ AND REVIEW**

**READ**

1. Bertrand Russell, “The Value of Philosophy”
   - According to Russell, what does the study of philosophy contribute to a person’s life? How does philosophy, and not science or other pursuits, provide that benefit?
WATCH AND LISTEN

1. Listen “Edward Craig on What Is Philosophy?”—Philosophy Bites podcast
   - Edward Craig, editor of the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, argues that philosophy has been too narrowly defined in the past and that there is no sharp division between “philosophical” thought and “nonphilosophical” thought. Why does Craig think that scientific and religious statements are also philosophical? Does this make the definition of “philosophy” too vague?

2. Listen “John Armstrong on What Can You Do With Philosophy?”—Philosophy Bites podcast
   - John Armstrong claims that philosophy provides its students with a wide variety of intellectual resources. In what kinds of fields does Armstrong think that these resources are useful? Do you see any instances of philosophical reasoning in your daily life?

3. Listen “Joking, and Learning, About Philosophy”—Weekend Edition interview
   - In this clip, Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, authors of Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar, tell some of their favorite philosophical jokes. According to the authors, what do jokes have in common with philosophy?

RESEARCH AND EXPLORE

1. Research philosophical methodology
2. Research natural philosophy