

THE BIG Questions

A Short Introduction to Philosophy

10th Edition



Robert C. Solomon
Kathleen M. Higgins

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Tenth Edition

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Australia • Brazil • Mexico • Singapore • United Kingdom • United States

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For our nieces and nephews,

*Jem, Jesi, Danyal, Rachel, and Carrie Solomon,
Caitlin Higgins, Jeffrey and Matthew Cook,
Allison, Rachel, Daniel, Brett, and Marcus Felten,
Kevin and Emily Daily*

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Preface

It was the fall of 1806, in the college town of Jena, in what we now call Germany. Most students and professors would have been getting ready for their classes, with mixed annoyance and anticipation. The professors would have been finishing up their summer research; the students would have been doing what students usually do at the end of the summer.

But this year school would not begin as usual.

Napoleon's troops were already approaching the city, and you could hear the cannon from the steps of the university library. French scouts were already in the town, walking around the university, stopping for a glass of wine in the student bars, and chatting casually with the local residents, many of whom were in sympathy with the new French ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

As the battle was about to begin, a young philosophy instructor named **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** was hastily finishing the book he was writing—a very difficult philosophy book with the forbidding title *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But "spirited" is what the book was, and it perfectly captured the tension, excitement, and anxiety of those perilous days. It was the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a new one. The book was a vision of consciousness caught in the midst of gigantic forces and looking for direction in a new and terrifyingly human world. It was an appeal for hope and thoughtful effort toward universal understanding and a belief in what was then innocently called the "perfectibility of humanity."

Transfer the situation to our own times—it was as if life in our society were about to change completely, with all our old habits and landmarks, our ideas about ourselves and the ways we live, replaced by something entirely new and largely unknown. We talk about "game changers" and "tipping points," but, in fact, most of what we consider drastic changes are mere shifts of emphasis, sometimes inconvenient advantages that accompany new and improved technologies and techniques. If so many of us can get so melodramatic about computers, smart phones, and the Internet, how would we react to a *real* change in our lives? Hegel and his students felt confident, even cheerful. Why? Because they had a *philosophy*. They had a vision of themselves and the future that allowed them to face the loss of their jobs, even the destruction of their society and the considerable chaos that would follow. Their ideas inspired them and made even the most threatening circumstances meaningful.

A class of our students who had been reading Hegel's philosophy were asked to characterize their own views of themselves and their times. The answers

were not inspiring. For many of them, the word *dull* seemed to summarize the world; others spoke of “crisis” and “despair.” One said that life was “absurd” and another that it was “meaningless.” When asked why, they answered that gasoline was expensive, that most of them weren’t getting the job interviews they really wanted, and that television programs were bad. We agreed that these events were less than tragic, hardly “absurd,” and didn’t make life “meaningless.” Everyone agreed that the specters of nuclear war and terrorism had put a damper on our optimism, but we also agreed that the likelihood of such catastrophes was debatable and that, in any case, we all had to live as best we could, even if under a shadow. But why, then, in these times of relative affluence and peace (compared to most of the world throughout most of history), were our answers so sour? What were we missing that Hegel and his students, confronting the most terrible battles ever known, seem to have had—something that made them so optimistic and fulfilled? Again, the answer is a philosophy.

Meet the Philosopher: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** was born in Stuttgart in 1770. While he was a college student, he was enthusiastic about the French Revolution (1789–1795) and an admirer of Napoleon. Hegel was teaching at the University of Jena in 1806 when Napoleon marched in and took over the town, ending the 800-year-old Holy Roman Empire and initiating widespread reforms throughout the German states. It was in this atmosphere of international war and liberal hopes that Hegel formulated his philosophy, which centered on the notion of Spirit, by which he meant the unity of the world through human consciousness. His method was **dialectic**—that is, he tried to demonstrate how contradictory views can be reconciled and shown to be, in fact, different aspects of one underlying phenomenon—ultimately, of Spirit. Hegel is still considered one of the great synthesizers of human knowledge and values; his **Encyclopedia** (first published in 1817) is a short synthesis of the whole of human life, including logic, science, and psychology as well as philosophy, art, religion, metaphysics, and ethics. He died in 1831.

Philosophy, religion, and science have always been closely related. The emphasis shifts, but the point of these endeavors is the same: the importance of ideas and understanding, of making sense out of our world and seeing our lives in some larger, even cosmic, perspective. *Ideas* define our place in the universe and our relations with other people; ideas determine what is important and what is not important, what is fair and what is not fair, what is worth believing and what is not worth believing. Ideas give life meaning. Our minds need ideas the way our bodies need food. We are starved for visions, hungry for understanding. We are caught up in the routines of life, distracted occasionally by those activities we call “recreation” and “entertainment.” What we have lost is the joy of

thinking, the challenge of understanding, the inspirations as well as the consolations of philosophy.

Philosophy is simply *thinking hard* about life, about what we have learned, about our place in the world. Philosophy is, literally, the *love of wisdom*. It is the search for the larger picture, and this involves the demand for *knowledge*—the kind of knowledge that allows us to understand our lives and the world around us. It is, accordingly, the insistence on the importance of *values*, a refusal to get totally caught up in the details of life and simply go along with the crowd. Philosophy and wisdom define our place in the universe and give our lives meaning.

When undergraduates ask questions about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe, it is philosophy that ought to answer the questions. But thousands of students, not trained in hard thinking but starved for ideas and understanding, will retreat to the easier alternatives—pop philosophies of self-help, exotic religious practices, extremist politics. If the hard thinking of philosophy does not address the big questions, then perhaps these alternatives will. The difference between philosophy and the popular alternatives is ultimately one of quality—the quality of ideas, the thoroughness of understanding. Because we all live by our ideas anyway, the choice becomes not whether to do philosophy or not do philosophy, but whether to accept cheap and unchallenging substitutes or to try the real thing. The aim of this book is to give you an introduction—to the real thing.

The Subject of Philosophy

Philosophy is sometimes treated as an extremely esoteric, abstract, and specialized subject that has little to do with any other subjects of study—or with the rest of our lives. This is simply untrue. Philosophy is nothing less than the attempt to understand who we are and what we think of ourselves. And that is just what the great philosophers of history, whom we study in philosophy courses, were doing: trying to understand themselves, their times, and their place in the world. They did this so brilliantly, in fact, that their attempts remain models for us. They help us formulate our own ideas and develop our own ways of clarifying what we believe.

In this book, we have tried to introduce at least briefly many of the great philosophers throughout history. (Brief biographies are included in the chapters.) But philosophy is not primarily the study of *other* people's ideas. Philosophy is first of all the attempt to state clearly, and as convincingly and interestingly as possible, *your own* views. That is *doing* philosophy, not just reading about how someone else has done it.

This book is an attempt to help you do just that—to *do* philosophy, to state what you believe, using the great philosophers and the great ideas of the past as inspiration, as a guide to ways of putting together your own views, and to provoke the present alternatives that you may not have thought of on your own. The aim

of the book—and at least one aim of the course you are taking—is to force you to think through your ideas, connect them, confront alternative views, and understand what you prefer and why you prefer it. Some students inevitably think that once they are speaking abstractly, it doesn't matter what they say. So they talk utter nonsense, they express ideas they have never thought about, or they recite mere words—for example, the popular word *value*—without having any sense of what they as individuals believe to be true. A very bright student one year claimed that he did not exist. (He received a grade anyway.) Some students even feel that it doesn't matter if they contradict themselves—after all, “It's only ideas.” But if we see the world through ideas, if they determine how we feel about ourselves and live our lives, then our ideas make all the difference. So it is urgent—as well as intellectually necessary—that you ask, at every turn, “Do I really believe that?” and, “Is that compatible with other things I believe?” Good philosophy, and *great* philosophy, depend on the seriousness and rigor with which such questions are asked. The aim of this book to help you ask them, to help you build for yourself a philosophical presentation of your own view of the world.

The task of summarizing your views about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe in a single course may sound overwhelming. But no matter how crude your first efforts, this kind of integrative critical thinking—putting it all together—is essential to what you will be doing all through your life: trying to keep your priorities straight, to know who you are, and to be sure of what you believe. The purpose of this course, which may be your first introduction to philosophy, is to get you started. Once you begin to think about the *big questions*, you may well find, as many students and almost all professional philosophers have found, that it is one of the most rewarding and most accessible activities you will ever learn—you can do it almost anywhere, at any time, with anyone, and even alone. And if it seems difficult to begin (as it always does), that is because you are not used to thinking as a philosopher, because our ideas are inevitably more complex than we originally think they are, and because, once you begin thinking, there is no end to the number of things there are to think about. So consider this as a first attempt, an exploratory essay, a first difficult effort to express yourself and your positions—not just your views on this issue or that one, but your entire view of the world. Engaging in the activity of *doing* philosophy, even if it is only for the first time, is what makes philosophy so exciting and challenging.

The first chapter of the book consists of a set of preliminary questions to get you to state your opinions on some of the issues that make up virtually every philosophical viewpoint. Some of the questions you will find amusing; some of them are deadly serious. But between the two, the outlines of what you believe and don't believe should begin to become clear. Each succeeding chapter also begins with a set of preliminary questions. And again the point is to encourage you to reflect on and state your views on these subjects before we begin to develop the views that philosophers have argued. Each chapter includes a discussion of various alternative viewpoints, with brief passages from some of the great philosophers. Special terms, which probably are new to you but have become established in philosophy, are introduced as they are needed, as a way of helping you make distinctions and clarify your positions more precisely than

our ordinary language allows. (A glossary containing most of these terms—which are boldface in the text—appears at the back of the book.) Each chapter ends with a set of concluding questions that will help you locate your own views among the alternatives of traditional philosophy. There is a bibliography at the end of each chapter containing suggestions for further reading; you can explore those topics that interest or challenge you, because no textbook can substitute for original works.

For the Instructor

This tenth edition is flexible for teaching a variety of individually structured courses in introductory philosophy at both the college and advanced high school levels. I have summarized the general layout of each chapter toward the beginning (usually within the first few paragraphs or at the end of the first section). Boxed features provide supporting material to complement what is discussed in the body of the text. The boxes in this edition fall primarily into three categories: biography, concept, and quotation boxes. Biography boxes are indicated by the heading “*Meet the Philosopher*” (or, occasionally, “*Meet the Thinker*”), and they provide a glimpse into the lives of many of the philosophers covered in the main text. “*From the Source*” boxes offer a wide variety of quotations and brief excerpts from key philosophical writings, as well as relevant popular sources. “*Master the Concepts*” boxes draw attention to important terms and point out important conceptual distinctions. Occasionally, I include “*Apply the Concept*” boxes, which encourage to student to link particular philosophical concepts with phenomena they encounter in everyday life. Key words are indicated by bold typeface, and they are defined in the glossary. In this edition, I have also provided a list of key words used at the end of each chapter for the convenience of students and instructors. I have also made the sources of quotations more evident by providing a section of endnotes (under the heading “Works Cited”) at the end of each chapter, followed by other suggested readings.

This edition is also supplemented by an expanded range of options through MindTap, a personalized program of digital products and services that provides interactive engagement for students and offers a range of choices in content, platforms, devices, and learning tools.

In this edition I have rearranged Chapters 10 and 11, reasoning that the Western emphasis of the chapter entitled “Beauty” should be grouped with the other chapters on Western philosophy and appear before the chapter on non-Western philosophy. I have considerably revised and reorganized the chapter on ethics in this edition, expanding the discussion of basic moral theories and elaborating more on how they can be applied to situations in everyday life. I have also included consideration of some topics that were not or were barely discussed in the previous edition: liberation theology (Chapter 3), intellectual virtues (Chapter 8), practical syllogisms (Chapter 8), metaethics (Chapter 8), good will (Chapter 8), and the mean (Chapter 8).

The discussion in each chapter is more or less self-contained, and the chapters can be used in just about any order. Some instructors prefer to start with the “God” chapter, others with the more epistemological chapters: “The Search for Truth,” “Self,” and “Freedom.” The opening chapters, with their broad collection of both playful and serious philosophical questions and varied discussions of the “Meaning of Life,” may be helpful in loosening up and relaxing nervous first-time students of philosophy and getting them to talk in a more free-wheeling way than they do if they are immediately confronted with the great thinkers or the most intractable problems of philosophy. So, too, the opening questions can help get students to think about the issues on their own before diving into the text. To motivate students to write and think about philosophical questions, to get them used to *interacting* with the text and arguments, we would encourage students to write their own responses and comments directly in the margins of book. The closing questions of each chapter might also serve as potential exam questions or questions to prompt classroom discussion.

Kathleen M.Higgins

Acknowledgments

I thank all those readers, both students and colleagues, who responded kindly and critically to my earlier text, *Introducing Philosophy* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich . . . [subsequently Oxford University Press]). The present text is a fresh attempt to reach an audience not as well addressed by that book, and I am indebted to all who pointed out the need for the new book and helped me develop and refine it.

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Introduction

Doing Philosophy



Raphael Sanzio, *The School of Athens*, fresco, detail 1509–1511.
Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Rome.
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The unexamined life is not worth living.

—Socrates, fifth century BCE

Know thyself!

—Oracle at Delphi (Socrates motto)

Philosophy concerns our beliefs and attitudes about ourselves and the world. Doing philosophy, therefore, begins with the activity of stating, as clearly and as convincingly as possible, what we believe and what we believe in. This does not mean, however, that announcing one's allegiance to some grand-sounding ideas or, perhaps, some impressive word or "ism" is all that there is to philosophy. Philosophy is the development or revision of these ideas, the attempt to work them out with all their implications and complications. It is the attempt to see their connections and compare them with other people's views—including the classic statements of the great philosophers of the past. It is the effort to appreciate the differences between one's own views and others' views, to be able to argue with someone who disagrees, and to resolve the difficulties that others may throw in your path. One of our students once suggested that she found it easy to list her main ideas on a single sheet of paper; what she found difficult was showing how they related to one another and how she might defend them against someone who disagreed with her. In effect, what she was saying was something like this: she would really enjoy playing quarterback with the football team, as long as she didn't have to cooperate with the other players—and then only until the other team came onto the field. But playing football is cooperating with your team and running against the team that is out to stop you; philosophy is the attempt to coordinate a number of different ideas into a coherent viewpoint and defending what you believe against those who are out to **refute** you. Indeed, a belief that can't be tied in with a great many other beliefs and that can't withstand criticism may not be worth believing at all.



MEET THE PHILOSOPHER: Socrates (469 or 470–399 BCE)

Socrates was one of the greatest philosophers of all times, though he never recorded his philosophy in writing. (All that we know of him comes down to us from his student Plato and other philosophers.) Socrates was born in approximately 469 or 470 BCE and lived his whole long life in Athens. He had a spectacular gift for rhetoric and debating. He had a much-gossiped-about marriage, had several children, and lived in poverty most of his life. He based his philosophy on the need to "know yourself" and on living the "examined life," even though the height of wisdom, according to Socrates, was to know how thoroughly ignorant we are. Much of his work was dedicated to defining and living the ideals of wisdom, justice, and the good life. In 399 BCE he was placed on trial by the Athenians for "corrupting

the youth” with his ideas. He was condemned to death, refused all opportunities to escape or have his sentence repealed, and accepted the cruel and unfair verdict with complete dignity and several brilliant speeches, dying as well as living for the ideas he defended.

Beyond Buzzwords

To defend your ideas is quite different from insisting, no matter how self-righteously, on your commitment to a mere word. To say that you believe in freedom, for instance, may make you feel proud and righteous, but this has nothing to do with philosophy or, for that matter, with freedom, unless you are willing to spell out exactly what it is you stand for, what it is that you believe, and why this *freedom*, as you call it, is so desirable. But most students, as well as many professional philosophers, get caught up in such attractive, admirable words, which we can call “buzzwords.” These sound as if they refer to something quite specific and concrete (like the word *dog*), but in fact they are among the most difficult words to understand, and they provide us with the hardest problems in philosophy. *Freedom* sounds as if it means breaking out of prison or being able to speak one’s mind against a bad government policy; but when we try to say what it is that ties these two examples together, and many more besides, it soon becomes clear that we don’t know exactly what we’re talking about. Indeed, virtually everyone believes in freedom, but the question is *what* each person actually believes in. Similarly, many people use such words as *truth*, *reality*, *morality*, *love*, and even *God* as buzzwords, words that make us feel good just because we say them. But to express the beliefs these words supposedly represent is to do something more than merely say the words; it is also to say what the words mean and what it is in the world (or out of it) to which we are referring. Buzzwords are like badges; we use them to identify ourselves. But it is equally important to know what the badges stand for.

The words *science* and *art* are examples of buzzwords that seem to be ways of identifying ourselves. How many dubious suggestions and simple-minded advertisements cash in on the respectability of the word *scientific*? What outrageous behavior is sometimes condoned on the grounds that it is *artistic*? And in politics, what actions have not been justified in the name of *national security* or *self-determination*? Such buzzwords not only block our understanding of the true nature of our behavior, but they also can be an obstacle—rather than an aid—in philosophy. Philosophers are always making up new words, often by way of making critical distinctions. For example, the words *subjective* and *objective*, once useful philosophical terms, now have so many meanings and are so commonly abused that the words by themselves hardly mean anything at all. Would-be philosophers, including some of the more verbally fluent philosophy students, may think that they are doing philosophy when they merely string together long noodle chains of such impressive terms. But philosophical terms are useful only insofar as they stay tied down to the problems they are introduced to solve and

retain the carefully defined meanings they carry. Buzzwords become not aids for thinking but rather *substitutes* for thinking, and long noodle chains of such terms, despite their complexity, are intellectually without nutritional value.

The abuse of buzzwords explains the importance of that overused introductory philosophical demand, “Define your terms.” In fact, it is very difficult to define your terms, and most of the time, the definition emerges at the *end* of a thought process rather than at the beginning. You think you know quite well what you mean. But when certain philosophical terms enter our discussion, it is clear why this incessant demand has always been so important; many students seem to think that they have learned some philosophy just because they have learned a new and impressive word or two. But that’s like believing that you have learned how to ski just because you have tried on the boots. The truth, however, is to be found in what you go on to do with them.

Articulation and Argument: Two Crucial Features of Philosophy

Philosophy is, first of all, **reflection**. It is stepping back, listening to yourself and other people (including the great philosophers), and trying to understand and evaluate what you hear and what you believe. To formulate your own philosophy is to say what you believe as clearly and as thoroughly as possible. Often we believe that we believe something, but as soon as we try to write it down or explain it to a friend we find that what seemed so clear a moment ago has disappeared, as if it evaporated just as we were about to express it. Sometimes, too, we think we don’t have any particular views on a subject, but once we begin to discuss the topic with a friend it turns out that we have very definite views as soon as they are articulated. **Articulation**—spelling out ideas in words and sentences—is the primary process of philosophy. Sitting down to write out your ideas is an excellent way to articulate them, but most people find that an even better way, and sometimes far more relaxed and enjoyable, is simply to discuss these ideas with other people—classmates, good friends, family—or even, on occasion, a stranger with whom you happen to strike up a conversation. Indeed, talking with another person not only forces you to be clear and concrete in your articulation of your beliefs; it also allows you—or forces you—to engage in a second essential feature of doing philosophy: arguing for your views. Articulating your opinions still leaves open the question whether they are worth believing, whether they are well thought out, and whether they can stand up to criticism from someone who disagrees. **Arguments** serve the purpose of testing our views; they are to philosophy what practice games are to sports—ways of seeing just how well you are prepared and how skilled you are. In philosophy, they are also ways of seeing just how convincing your views really are.



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Primary Features of Philosophy

Articulation: Putting your ideas in clear, concise, readily understandable language.

Argument: Supporting your ideas with reasons that draw on other ideas, principles, and observations to establish your conclusions and overcome objections.

Analysis: Understanding an idea by distinguishing and clarifying its various components. For example, the idea of “murder” involves three component ideas: killing, wrongfulness, and intention.

Synthesis: Gathering together different ideas into a single, unified vision. For example, the ancient philosopher Pythagoras’s idea of the “harmony of the spheres” (the idea that the relationships among the movements of the heavenly bodies resulted in a type of music) synthesizes ideas from mathematics, music, physics, and astronomy.

Articulating and arguing your opinions has another familiar benefit: stating and defending a view is a way of making it your own. Too many students, in reading and studying philosophy, look at the various statements and arguments of the great philosophers as if they were merely displays in some intellectual museum, curiously contradicting each other, but, in any case, having no real relevance to us. But once you have adopted a viewpoint, which most likely was defended at some time by one or more of the philosophical geniuses of history, it becomes very much your own as well. Indeed, doing philosophy almost always includes appealing to other philosophers in support of your own views, borrowing their arguments and examples as well as quoting them when they have striking things to say (with proper credit in a footnote, of course). It is by *doing* philosophy, articulating and arguing your views, instead of just reading about other people’s philosophy books, that you make your own views genuinely your own, that is, by working with them, stating them publicly, defending them, and committing yourself to them. That is how the philosophies of the past become important to us and how our own half-baked, inarticulate, often borrowed, and typically undigested ideas start to become something more. Philosophy, through reflection and by means of articulation and argument, allows us to conduct an **analysis**—break something apart—and then critically examine our ideas and synthesize our vision of ourselves and the world, to put the pieces together in a single, unified, defensible vision. Such a **synthesis** is the ultimate aim of philosophical reflection, and scattered ideas and arguments are no more “a philosophy” than a handful of unconnected words is a poem.



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: The Fields of Philosophy

For convenience and to break the subject up into course-size sections, philosophy is usually divided into a number of fields. Ultimately, these are all interwoven, and it is difficult to pursue a question in any one field without soon finding yourself in the others, too. Yet philosophers, like most other scholars, tend to specialize, and you, too, may find your main interests focused in one of the following areas:

Metaphysics: The theory of reality and the ultimate nature of all things. The aim of metaphysics is a comprehensive view of the universe, an overall worldview. One part of metaphysics is a field sometimes called **ontology**, the study of “being,” an attempt to list in order of priority the various sorts of entities that make up the universe.

Ethics: The study of good and bad, right and wrong, the search for the *good life*, and the defense of the principles and rules of morality. It is therefore sometimes called **moral philosophy**, although this is but a single part of the broad field of ethics.

Epistemology: The study of knowledge, including such questions as “What can we know?” and “How do we know anything?” and “What is truth?”

Logic (or philosophical logic): The study of the formal structures of *sound* thinking and good argumentation.

Philosophy of religion (or philosophical theology): The philosophical study of religion, the nature of religion, the nature of the divine, and the various reasons for believing (or not believing) in God’s existence.

Political (or sociopolitical) philosophy: The study of the foundations and the nature of society and the state; an attempt to formulate a vision of the ideal society and determine what ideas and reforms would need to be implemented in our own society to better achieve this.

Aesthetics (a subset of which is the **philosophy of art**): The study of the nature of art and the experiences we have when we enjoy the arts or similarly take pleasure in nature or everyday phenomena, including an understanding of such concepts as “beauty” and “expression.”

Concepts and Conceptual Frameworks

The basic units of our philosophical projects and viewpoints are called **concepts**. Concepts give form to experience; they make articulation possible. But even before we try to articulate our views, concepts make it possible for

us to recognize things in the world, to see and hear particular objects and particular people instead of one big blur of a world, like looking through a movie camera that is seriously out of focus. But in addition to defining the forms of our experience, concepts also tie our experience together. Concepts rarely occur in isolation; they virtually always tie together into a conceptual framework.

An example of a concept would be this: As children, we learn to identify certain creatures as dogs. We acquire the concept “dog.” At first, we apply our new concept clumsily, perhaps calling a “dog” anything that has four legs, including cats, cows, and horses. Our parents correct us, however, and we learn to be more precise, distinguishing dogs first from cats, cows, and horses and then later from wolves, coyotes, and jackals. We then have the concept “dog”; we can recognize dogs; we can talk about dogs. We can think about and imagine dogs even when one is not actually around at the time, and we can say what we think about dogs in general. We can refine our concept, too, by learning to recognize the various breeds of dogs and learning to distinguish between dangerous dogs and friendly dogs. On certain occasions, therefore, the concept takes on an undeniably practical importance, for it is the concept that tells us how to act, when to run, and when to be friendly in turn. But the concept “dog” also becomes a part of our vision of the world—a world in which dogs are of some significance, a world divided into dogs and nondogs, a world in which we can contemplate, for example, the difference between a dog’s life and our own. (One of the great movements in ancient philosophy was called **Cynicism** after the Greek word for “dog.” The cynics acquired their name by living a life of austerity and poverty that, to their contemporaries, seemed little better than a “dog’s life.”)

Some concepts have very specific objects, like “dog.” These specific concepts, derived from experience, are often called empirical concepts. We have already seen this word *empirical* referring to experience (for example, knowing the various breeds and behaviors of dogs). We will see it again and again; the root *empiri-* means having to do with experience. Through empirical concepts we make sense of the world, dividing it into recognizable pieces, learning how to deal with it, and developing our ability to talk about it, to understand and explain it, and to learn more and talk more about it. In addition to such specific concepts, we make use of a set of much more abstract concepts, whose objects are not so tangible or empirical and which cannot be so easily defined. These are *a priori* (Latin, “from the earlier”) concepts, because they are conceptually *prior* to what we learn from experience. One example is the concept of “number.” However important numbers might be in our talk about our experience, the concepts of arithmetic are not empirical concepts. Mathematicians talk about the concept of an “irrational number,” but there is nothing in our everyday experience that they can point to as an example of one. To understand this concept requires a good deal of knowledge about mathematics because this concept, like most concepts, can be defined only within a system of other abstract concepts.



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Types of Knowledge

Empirical knowledge: Knowledge based on experience (whether your own experience or the observations and experiments of others), for example, “The temperature in Chicago today is 17°F.”

A priori knowledge: Knowledge that is independent of (“before”) any particular experience, for example, “ $2 + 3 = 5$ ” or “ $A + B = B + A$.”

The a priori concept of “number” raises problems far more difficult than the empirical concept of “dog,” and it is with the most difficult concepts that philosophy is generally concerned. Because philosophical concepts are abstract, there may be far more room for disagreement about what they mean than about empirical concepts. For example, the concepts of a “good person” and the “good life” seem to mean very different things to different people and in different societies. So, too, the concept of “God” creates enormous difficulties, in fact so many difficulties that some religions refuse to define God at all, or even give him (and not always “him”) a name. Within the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, there are very different conceptions of God; conceptions vary even within the Bible. When we begin to consider some of the other conceptions of God—for example, the Greek conception of Zeus and Apollo; the Hindu ideas of Vishnu and Shiva; or some modern conceptions of God as identical to the universe as a whole, or as a vital force, or as whatever a person takes to be his or her “ultimate concern in life”—you can see that simply agreeing on the word still leaves open the hardest questions: What is God like? What can we expect of God? What is involved in believing “in” God? What is our concept of God?



FROM THE SOURCE: Oxen Gods?

Xenophanes (ca. 570–ca. 475 BCE, Greek, Asia Minor)

Ethiopians say their gods are flat-nosed and black,
And Thracians that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.

If cows and horses or lions had hands,
Or could draw with their hands and make things as men can,
Horses would have drawn horse-like gods, cows cow-like gods,
And each species would have made the gods’ bodies just like their own.¹

The concept of “freedom” is also difficult. Some people think that freedom is being able to do whatever you want to do; others think that freedom makes sense

only within the rules of your society. But it is not as if the word *freedom* already means one or the other; the word and its meaning are open to interpretation, and interpretation is the business of philosophy. However, what we might disagree about is not simply the meaning of a word. What we disagree about is the *concept*, the basic idea, and the concept in turn determines the way we see the world.

The concept of “self” is like this, too. In a purely grammatical sense, the word *self* just points to a person—for example, to *myself* when I say, “I presented myself to the dean.” But what is this self? Again, it is not defined by the word, which only points. Is my self just the *I*, the *voice* that is now speaking, or does it refer to a whole human being? Does it include every trivial and insignificant fact about me (for example, the fact that I forgot to comb my hair this morning)? Or does it refer just to certain *essential* facts—for instance, the fact that I am a conscious being? Is my self a *soul*? Or is my self perhaps a social construction, which must be defined not by referring to one person alone but by considering society and my particular role in it?

The concept of “truth” is an important concept in philosophy. Is the truth simply the “way things really are”? Or does it depend on the nature of what and how we believe as well? Could it be that we are all caught up in our limited view of the world, unable to see beyond the concepts of our own language and our own restricted range of experiences?

The most abstract and controversial concepts of all are not those through which we divide up the world into understandable bits and pieces but rather those grand concepts through which we try to put it all together. Religion is the traditional vehicle for this total understanding, but in our culture religion has been challenged by science, by art, by the law, and by politics for this ultimate role, as well as by philosophy.

Such all-embracing pictures and perspectives are our ultimate **conceptual frameworks**—that is, the most abstract concepts through which we “frame” and organize all of our more specific concepts. The term *conceptual framework* stresses the importance of concepts and is therefore central to the articulation of concepts that make up most of philosophy. But what we are calling a “conceptual framework” can also be viewed, from a more practical perspective, as a set of values and a way of looking at life, expressed as a way of living, or, in our contemporary vocabulary, as a **lifestyle**. If the emphasis is shifted to politics and society, the framework can be called an **ideology**—that is, a set of ideas about the nature of society and our political roles within it, which themselves are reflected in one’s lifestyle. If we shift to a more historical viewpoint, we find that historians sometimes refer to the same thing as a **climate of opinion**, drawing attention to the way such frameworks change. If we shift the emphasis away from the concepts through which we give form to our world and emphasize instead the view of the world that results, we can use a popular philosophical term, **worldview** (which is often left in German, *Weltanschauung* because a number of German philosophers used this term quite often in the last century or so). But whether we use one term or the other, with one emphasis or another, the important point is that we in some sense already have such viewpoints, through which we give shape to