Chapter 1

What's Philosophy All About?

In This Chapter

- Making light work of some common misunderstandings of philosophy
- Getting a handle on some of the big ideas
- Delving back into ancient history and exploring the origins of key philosophical ideas

In this chapter we find out 'what philosophy is' – and what I used to be too (which are not quite the same thing). We immediately solve one of philosophy's biggest problems – the problem of knowledge – and we look at the experiences of a greedy chicken and a sock with a hole in it too.

Defining the Job

> *Philosophy is the 'no-man's land' between science and theology, under attack from both sides.*
>
> – Bertrand Russell

Or, as philosophers might prefer to put it, science and religion are really two slices of bread, with philosophy the tasty bit in the middle. Scientists reduce the world to 'matter', make the world into a machine and destroy free will and purpose. On the other hand, spiritual types, who are searching for a purpose and the freedom to find it, are attracted to religions and to all those 'irrational' activities, such as astrology and watching TV. And they don't feel the need to get anything done. Between the two camps, it seems there's not much room left for philosophy!

But then, from the outside, philosophy seems to be a rather peculiar, not to say pointless, subject full of unanswerable riddles and questions like 'Is the King of France bald' or 'Does that table exist' that no one in their right minds would ask anyway.

Indeed, philosophy courses often start off (as if determined to disprove the point, but inadvertently just reinforcing it) by asking, 'What is philosophy?' – a question that no self-respecting study would normally need to ask. What is chemistry? What is cooking? What is geography? Yet philosophers certainly seem to like asking these 'what is' questions, and asking it about their own subject seems to them to be quite the right thing to do.The point for them, after all, is to ask questions, not to answer them.

So what is philosophy?

Philosophy is a subject that has no particular content and covers no particular area. It is, rather, a kind of intellectual cement that attempts to stick the rest of the (rather grand sounding) intellectual edifice together.

Or put another way (less grand sounding), philosophy is a kind of manure. Pile it high, in a few places, and it simply rots and stinks. But spread it around and it becomes surprisingly useful. That was the view of some of philosophy's defenders at the end of the last century. At the same time, people all over the Western World were asking the question 'what's the point of philosophy?' and had decided there wasn't one. People were beginning to see philosophy departments that were training people to ask strange unanswerable questions or to repeat obscure chunks of ancient texts as wasting their time. In the cold light of economic downturns, critics considered the efforts of serious philosophers to investigate the following sacred problems of philosophy and the like as a waste of money:

- How do I know I exist?
- How do I know God exists?
- How do I know the world exists?
- Is snow white?
- If a tree falls in a forest and there' no one there to hear it, does it make any sound?

So what is the point of philosophy?

But, on the other hand, the efforts of practical people to make sense of their useful subjects – doctors, lawyers, astronomers, physicists, chemists, historians, linguists; you name it, they need to do it – always seemed to come back to certain paradoxical or tricky questions that are, essentially, well, philosophical. So even as philosophy as a hobby of the leisured classes went

out one door, in came philosophy as a practical study – in the form of mini philosophy courses for medical ethics or business ethics or critical thinking and (for the scientists) theories of space and time.

And this in a way was a return to the roots of philosophy – because for the Ancient Greeks (who invented the word, but certainly not the activity – whatever you may read elsewhere!) , philosophy is fundamentally a guide to action – helping to answer the perennial question 'what should I do'?

Loving Wisdom

It makes good sense for a lot of philosophically-minded people today to avoid the use of the word *philosophy* and study practical questions instead.

Medical folk may want to look at questions like:

- When does 'life' begin?
- What is consciousness?

Business types may want to ponder puzzles like:

- When do successful companies become monopolies?
- Are organisations obliged to spread wealth?

And physicists and chemists ask themselves:

- Can time flow backwards?
- Is there a form of water on Mars made up of three hydrogen atoms to two oxygen atoms (H_3O_2 instead of H_2O) – and if so, is that still water?

Eventually, everyone begins to wonder:

- Do unicorns have one or two horns?
- Are all bachelors (really) unmarried men?

But hang on! Isn't this all becoming a bit like the old, traditional courses in philosophy? The questions aren't practical at all! What's changed? And the answer is, of course, nothing's changed. Philosophers, after all, don't like change. They like truth and certainty. They like problems they can be the sole experts on. Yet even if 'professional philosophers' are reluctant to change, when practical people take a look at the subject the fundamentals of philosophy become clearer.

Recent guides on 'what philosophy is'

Wondering what philosophy really is? These four writers offer some of the most popular answers:

> 'What is philosophy? This is a notoriously difficult question. One of the easiest ways of answering it is to say that philosophy is what philosophers do, and then point to the writings of Plato, Aristotle , Descartes . . . and other famous philosophers.'
>
> – Nigel Warburton in *Philosophy: the Basics*
>
> 'Philosophy, noun. The topic of this dictionary. Those who study it disagree to this day on how they should define their field.'
>
> – Geoffrey Vesey and Paul Foulkes in their *Dictionary of Philosophy*
>
> 'Philosophy is thinking about thinking.'
>
> – Richard Osborne in *Philosophy for Beginners*
>
> 'What is philosophy? Many people who have been studying and teaching the subject for years wouldn't agree on a definition . . . Just as you can learn to swim only by getting in the water, you can only find out what goes on in philosophy by engaging in it. Nevertheless, to describe philosophy, let's try at least one plausible suggestion which covers most if not all of what people that are engaged in thinking and writing about the subject are constantly doing. The suggestion is that philosophy is the study of justification.'
>
> – John Hospers in *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*

Of them all, the first is just what real philosophers call a *circular argument* – it immediately raises the question: if philosophy is what philosophers do, then what is it that makes someone a philosopher? And that's clearly by doing philosophy. And the only possible answer to that question is, the thing that makes someone into a philosopher is their doing philosophy. Certainly, it looks plausible, but actually the answer just leads you round in a circle.

The second answer is frankly a cop-out. But it saves the writer a lot of bother! (I opted for this answer when I edited a dictionary too.)

The third response is more artistic but is just wrong.

The fourth answer is more complicated but is basically saying philosophy is the study of the reasons people have for thinking as they do think – for delving a bit deeper into every other subject. And so maybe, unfashionable as it looks, this last answer may still be the best. That's because it's the only answer left standing after the rest have been knocked down.

Philosophy isn't a body of knowledge with a set of 'answers' to common questions to be learned. Philosophy is a technique, a way of teasing apart and examining reality so not only do you understand it a little bit better, but you can act more effectively, achieve your aims more completely, live a little bit better. And it's no contradiction that increasingly these days you find the true philosophers not in dusty philosophy departments poring over the misleadingly named 'philosophy' journals full of language chopping (arguing about definitions of words) and not very good maths (philosophical logic), but in the hospitals, the appeal courts, the physics laboratories – anywhere but up there in the ivory towers.

Deciding What Counts as 'Real' Knowledge

Of course, professional philosophers *can* help find answers too – when they want to. In fact, philosophers can have a special role as a kind of umpire or referee in disputes emerging from the nitty-gritty of research or practice in all other subjects and areas. They can come into an area unencumbered by too many presumptions and clarify the fundamentals. And what could be more fundamental than deciding what counts as knowledge as opposed to mere belief or superstition? Because no one likes thinking that he knows something if there's a chance that someone may later shown him up as being wrong. Lots of 'facts' are like this – they're things you think you know but actually you just take them on trust from the person (or book, or TV show) that tells you, rather than really know. Very few things exist that you can know directly, for yourself.

For example, take 'knowing' that you can bite into an apple because it's crisp and crunchy, unlike a rock, which is very hard, or knowing that the sun will come up tomorrow. Both of these seem pretty safe to count as 'things you know', but wouldn't you guess it, the philosophers dispute even these. Their complaint is that both assumptions rely on nothing more than past experience, and past experience is an unreliable guide.

The 20th-century British philosopher Bertrand Russell tells a nice story about some chickens to illustrate this problem. These domesticated birds have a little coop outside the farmhouse and each morning the farmer's wife comes and throws a handful of grain to them. Each morning, therefore, it makes sense for the birds to rush to leave the coop and get the first cluck at the tasty grain. Such is the chicken's theory of the matter anyway. But one day (not that the chickens know it) the farmer's wife is intending to make chicken soup. Does it make sense to rush out of the chicken coop towards the farmer's wife that morning?

In fact, it doesn't make sense for the chicken to do anything but hide in the very deepest recesses of the coop that morning, but there is no evidence drawn from the past that could point the chicken away from its assumption, and indeed plenty of evidence that would support the assumption! This is what philosophers call the *problem of induction*, which is a complicated sounding way of reasoning that's based on assuming that what you've already seen tells you about what you'll find next. People do this all the time, but philosophically it's not valid; indeed, it's straightforwardly illogical.

A dialogue between chickens

Imagine a conversation between two chickens who are wondering whether to leave the safety of their chicken coop one morning.

Chicken 1: I'm not going out there (for the grain); I don't trust those farmers.

Chicken 2: Why not? I trust them. Yesterday they gave us grain, the day before they gave us grain, the day before that they give us grain . . . They've given us grain for as long as I can remember! Chicken, I think they're going to give us some grain today!

Chicken 1: Well, I dunno, those are just facts about the past. They prove nothing about what's going to happen this time. It's not any kind of logical proof, is it?

Chicken 2: I seem to recall hearing somewhere that the British philosopher John Locke once said: 'The man that, in the ordinary affairs of life, would admit of nothing but direct plain demonstration would be sure of nothing in the world but of perishing quickly.'

Chicken 1: (Impressed.) Well, yes, but I have a hunch that today the farmers are planning to kill us! I'm not going out until you can persuade me there's no doubt that it's safe.

Chicken 2: Well, now, my cowardly friend, I have a theory I call 'the Principle of Belief Conservation', which says that you can accept certain basic beliefs without absolute proof if discarding them would require throwing away many of your other beliefs. Beliefs are your indispensable map of reality that guides us through the day. Knowledge, on the other hand, is very much a bolt-on extra.

(Chicken 2 leaves the coop and is throttled by the farmer's wife, who's making Sunday lunch.)

Why do people follow illogical lines of thinking? The answer is, because (as John Locke says) people have no choice. If you acted only on things that you 'really, really know' to be the case, you wouldn't act on many things at all.

In practice, many people would say that, given human frailty, it's enough to say that you know something if:

- You believe it to be the case
- You have a good, relevant reason for your belief and
- The thing you believe you know is actually as you believe – you're right!

A few famous philosophers deciding what counts for 'real' knowledge

The French philosopher René Descartes distinguished 'clear and distinct' beliefs from other ones and called these *knowledge*. A more recent Oxford philosopher of language, J.L. Austin, suggested that to say you know something is to give your word that it's so, to make a special kind of promise. On the other hand (and philosophers always try to look at the other side of any question), Francis Bacon, the English philosopher credited with coining the phrase 'knowledge is power' (thinking of practical knowledge), once said: 'If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts – but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.'

This is knowledge as what philosophers call knowledge as 'justified, true belief'. It's called that because you believe it, that's the 'belief bit'; you have a reason for our belief, that's the justification bit, and (what else?) it's true. That's the 'true' bit. Sorting out knowledge is easy! However, in many cases, like that of Chicken Two (see the nearby sidebar), some claims satisfy all three conditions and yet you still might feel they don't really count as real knowledge – that you need something more to make it absolutely certain. (In Chapter 9 I look at what that 'something else' might be.)

Crunching Up Three Types of Knowing

Many different ways of knowing something exist. You can know a fact, know a friend, and you can know how to paint or how to tie your shoelace:

- **To know that** this fruit is tasty, that two plus two makes four, that the weather will be good tomorrow
- **To know how** to ride a bicycle, read, check logical proofs
- **To know by acquaintance** the best way to get to town in the rush hour, a very good cheese shop, the neighbours

It's the first type of knowledge that interests philosophers most, even if they fall out over just what counts as knowledge as opposed to mere belief or value judgement.

Reasons for action

Facts are all very well, but everyone knows that what motivates you in everyday life is anything but. Rather than following some grand and logically valid system of deductions, people follow their whims and their prejudices. Your actions are affected by a complex mixture of emotion, suspicion and plain prejudice. Can philosophy help improve on this? Don't you believe it.

A lot of complicated-sounding nonsense is written about this, but the bottom line, according to one fairly standard view, as professional (read dull) philosophers like to say, is that your beliefs and desires determine the reasons for your actions. No room for facts!

belief + desire → action

For example, the belief that 'money makes people happy' plus the desire 'I want to be happy!' might lead to the action 'I'm going to rob a bank'.

But what if you *also* believe robbing banks is wrong? Then you have a conflict in your belief system that you need to resolve. And this is where that other great use for philosophy comes in: deciding the 'right' thing to do. (I explore this in Chapter 13.) Just a pity people don't use this aspect of philosophy more!

You might think separating facts from opinion is pretty simple, but wait until you've read today's newspaper, let alone some more philosophy. For example, you might think that your location in space and time is pretty certain, but many physicists would say, strictly speaking, that there isn't any absolute or true answer, and it's more a matter of convention. Or you might think that the weather forecaster who says it will rain tomorrow doesn't really know whether it will or not – but if he's right, what then? Did he really know?

Philosophers are inclined to narrow down the task of defining knowledge to just the simplest claims, even if it turns out that they're little more than tautologies (the same thing said twice). They prefer people to say things like 'Apples are apples'. Depart from these simple claims and you may make mistakes. For example, 'Apples are fruits' is only safe to say because everyone agrees that, well, apples are fruits, but woe betide you if you say 'strawberries are fruits'! Stick to 'strawberries are strawberries and you won't go wrong . . .

When it comes down to it, the search for knowledge is really about making sense of different kinds of beliefs. And put that way, it's clear that that there are different kinds of knowledge just as there are different kinds of belief. Perhaps the most important distinction for philosophy is between facts and opinions – or to use some often heard jargon, between objective and subjective claims:

- *Objective claims* are about things 'out there' in the world that you know about through sense perception, through experience and through measurement. This is what philosophers call *empirical knowledge*.
- *Subjective claims* are based on things like your personal opinions, your values, your judgements and your preferences. These are the claims that give your life purpose and meaning, although, typically, philosophers ever since Plato have given subjective claims rather lower status than those supposedly objective ones.

Exploring the Physical World Around You

People often think of philosophers as being concerned only with ideas and abstractions, and leave the physical world to less brainy folk like, well, the scientists. And you can easily trace this prejudice (for that's what it is, really) back to the most important figure of ancient philosophy: Plato himself. But Plato didn't manage to persuade Aristotle, who spent nearly 20 years studying under him, that being only concerned with ideas was the case. Instead, Aristotle's method for obtaining knowledge was to start by looking around him both at the physical evidence and at the conventional opinion of the time (something his boss, Plato, particularly despised!).

One of Aristotle's most influential experiments was to decide whether the Earth was – or wasn't – fixed immovably at the centre of the universe.

Actually, 2,000 or so years ago, everyone said the Earth was flat and fixed in space. Why did they think that? Well (wouldn't you guess) it's because the philosophers had convinced them of it through their arguments. Now everyone says the Earth is a sphere whirling around the Sun. If you think this is right, you must count this at least as an example of how 'everyone' can be wrong. And it shows how incredibly influential philosophy can be, *for good or bad*.

But in fact, there'd been some debate about all this amongst the ancients, with one, Archimedes, noting (in *The Sand Reckoner*) that he'd heard a chap called Aristarchus had brought out a book consisting of certain hypotheses including amazing notions like these:

- The stars and the Sun are motionless.
- The Earth rotates around the Sun in a circle, with the Sun lying in the middle of its orbit.
- The distance from the Earth to the fixed stars is enormous.

Aristrachus's book, however, lost out in the battle of ideas, even if his moving Earth theory was influential enough for a former boxer called Cleanthes, who, amongst other things, was the head of the Stoics in ancient Greece (the Stoics were a group philosophers whose name has ended up in everyday language meaning people who are good at enduring pain!). Cleanthes recommended the prosecution of Aristarchus on . . .

> *. . . the charge of impiety for putting in motion the hearth of the universe [and] supposing the heaven to remain at rest and the earth to revolve in an oblique circle, while it rotates, at the same time, about its own axis . . .*

Happily, Aristarchus was never prosecuted, although his book seemed to disappear. Instead, it was the muddled theory of another lot of ancient philosophers – the Pythagoreans – that had both the Earth and the Sun orbiting a 'central fire' that had to challenge the everyday impression that humans lived on a motionless rock which the heavens and Sun whirled around. Plato was very influenced by the Pythagoreans, and even hints (in the *Timaeus*) at the then rather racy idea that the Earth might be rotating on its axis.

Testing whether the Earth is moving

Aristarchus's idea that the Earth might move was clearly catching on! Of course, you know that Aristarchus was right, and Cleanthes and everyone else down the centuries was wrong. The story of how philosophy led people to think that the Earth (and thus humanity itself) really was fixed immovably at the centre of the universe is a cautionary one.

It all comes down to a simple philosophical argument posed by Aristotle in a particularly rambling account called 'On the Heavens'. He starts by reminding his readers that those 'Pythagoreans' think

> *. . . that at the centre there is fire, whilst the earth, which is seen as one of the stars, moves around it in a circle which produces night and day . . .*

Then he quickly dismissing the idea as 'impossible'. You can see this, Aristotle explains, by considering the evidence of the eyes, notably that a rock thrown vertically upward falls vertically downward, rather than slightly to one side, as it would if the Earth was in any kind of motion. In fact, all objects instead behave in a similarly very sensible way and make no movements other than that diligent effort to return to the centre of the universe. For Aristotle this proved 'that it so happens that the Earth and the universe have the same centre', and he deduced the Earth must be not only motionless in space, but also motionless on its axis.

Of course, rocks (and other things) do fall straight down – but not for the reason Aristotle gives. It's to do with momentum – but that concept hadn't even been invented then! This illustrates the important philosophical principle that what you observe depends not just on what's 'out there' (the facts) but on what's 'in there', in your head – that is, what you observe depends on your concepts and yes, your beliefs too. This is an idea you keep coming back to in whatever part of philosophy you're looking into.

Suffice to say here, for the moment, that when (some 400 years later) the astronomer Ptolemy constructed his cosmological picture, the Earth was placed securely at the centre, immovable as a rock, just as it appears to be in ordinary life. And there it remained for thousands of years until another philosopher–astronomer, Galileo, stirred things up by arguing the opposite.

It might seem easy to laugh at the people who put the Earth at the centre of the universe and made the Sun and the stars trot obediently around it, but in many ways this is the sensible way to proceed. After all, consider for a moment your own position in the universe. One minute ago where were you exactly? In the same place? Perhaps if you're on a train you might (cunningly) say, 'No, I was a 20 kilometres away!' But if you're instead sitting quietly somewhere, it seems odd to say, 'Why, I was 100 kilometres away due to the Earth's rotation spinning me around.' And stranger still, you could say, 'Why, I was 1,000 kilometres away due to the Earth's rotation around the Sun.' And that's leaving aside the solar system's rotation around the centre of the galaxy and the galaxy's headlong rush away from the original site of the Big Bang!

In fact, over the centuries, this Earth-centered model proved itself a valuable tool for ships and navigators, and even for predicting celestial phenomena, such as eclipses. Indeed, scientifically speaking, to make sense of planets circling the sun you have to accept all sorts of strange ideas to do with what the great 20th-century physicist Albert Einstein described as heavenly objects falling through 'curved space time' – not in itself an immediately commonsensical supposition!

You can read more about some of Aristotle's impressive and not so impressive conclusions in Chapters 4 and 8, but the idea that real knowledge has to be ultimately based on sense perception wasn't just Aristotle's. One of Britain's most sensible philosophers, John Locke, writing in the 17th century in England, held equally sensible views. The sensible son of a sensible, middle-class family of Somerset merchants, he was particularly influenced and impressed by the new discoveries in natural philosophy (which is what we now call physics) – especially those of his fellow Englishman Isaac Newton.

How Newton's philosophy shapes our world

Isaac Newton's great idea was that the physical world is made up of lots of objects bouncing around and hitting each other – reacting to forces like momentum and gravity. Everyone knows his invention of a new – gravity – to explain why apples fall from trees. It's hard to think how people managed without gravity before him! Yet, pause a minute and you'll see that the idea is really rather odd, because gravity acts instantaneously, invisibly and across vast empty voids of space. It's philosophy, not science, that comes up with stuff like that.

One of Locke's common sense views was that you gather 'all the materials of human knowledge' (that is, all the facts and opinions you share about the world and how it works) from the world around you via sense perception, or indirectly from the same sources via your internal, mental world through *introspection* – that is, by thinking about (or half remembering) things you've seen, smelt or tasted earlier. But is that right? You can take a look at some reasons to think knowledge gathering isn't that simple after all in Chapters 10 and 11. But for Locke, it's all plain sailing. He believed your brain is a kind of blank tablet of wax on which external objects continually make marks. Locke puts it this way:

> *All those sublime thoughts which tower above the clouds, and reach as high as heaven itself, take their rise and footing here; in all that great extent wherein the mind wanders in those remote speculations it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond these ideas which sense or reflection have offered for its contemplation.*

Locke's ideas have been influential. For example, look at the distinction he made between primary and secondary qualities:

- The *primary* qualities are somehow fundamental and inseparable from the object, being solidity, extension, figure, whether the object's at rest or in motion, and number.
- The *secondary* qualities, on the other hand – colours, smells, sounds and so on – are 'in truth', as Locke puts it in Book II of his philosophical classic, the Essay on Human Understanding, nothing in the objects themselves but merely 'powers to produce various sensations in us'. A secondary quality of fire, for example, is that it produces pain. (Under certain circumstances; it may be warmth under others.) Pain isn't an essential part of fire, nor is (wait for it, philosophers *adore* this example!) being white an essential part of being snow.

Secondary qualities are prone to error, due to blue spectacles, a cold or whatever. (Hey, everything looks blue today, and my apple crumble doesn't

smell right . . .) But as another Great Briton (Irish, to be precise), Bishop George Berkeley, soon pointed out, you can say the same of the primary qualities, like size and weight. For example, objects can seem smaller when further away, or a bag can feel heavier when you're tired.

The bishop's aim was to remind people that common sense is often wrong. Nevertheless, Locke's view that the physical word consists only of matter in motion became the accepted basis of theories of sound, heat, light and electricity. And even today, when quantum mechanics works on completely different principles, much of people's understanding follows his way of thinking, wrong (based on false beliefs!) or not.

Looking for Locke's Sock

But common sense only goes so far.

John Locke recognised this when he proposed a scenario regarding a favourite sock that develops a hole. He pondered whether the sock would still be the same after a patch was applied to the hole. If yes, then would it still be the same sock after a second patch or even a third was applied? Indeed, would it still be the same sock many years later, even after all of the material of the original sock had been replaced with patches?

The sock problem worried him, at least a bit, because if the sock was the same despite all those practical changes, it could only be because something above and beyond the physical 'sense perception' sock existed, defined by its location in space and time.

Reading Locke's theory not long afterwards, Berkeley wrote (in the *Principles of Human Knowledge*) that

> *. . . upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves – that we have first of all raised up a dust and then complain that we cannot see.*

It was in a bid to dispel some of this 'philosophical dust' that the good bishop came up with one of the weirdest, most quoted – and least understood – philosophical theories of them all. He devised the doctrine that *esse est percipi* ('to be is to be perceived'). In other words, material objects – everything in the world around you – exists only through being perceived by conscious beings. To the objection that in that case a tree in a forest, for instance, would cease to exist when no one was around, he replied that God always perceived everything. In his opinion, this was a clinching argument, but then he *was* a bishop.

Being mystical with Bishop Berkeley

George Berkeley's best writings are dialogues in the style of Plato, and he wrote them while still in his 20s. In a book called *Dialogues of Hylas and Philonous* (published in 1713) his argument against the scientists and their world of dull, inert matter is set out best. The book starts with two blokes arguing in a 'talking to the taxi driver' style: Hylas, who sounds like a 'cabbie' and speaks up for scientific common sense, and Philonous (like a hapless passenger), who puts forward Berkeley's own view. After some amiable remarks in the manner of Plato and Socrates, Hylas says he's heard that his friend holds the view that there's *no such thing as matter.* Can anything be 'more fantastical, more repugnant to common sense or a more manifest piece of scepticism, than this', he exclaims!

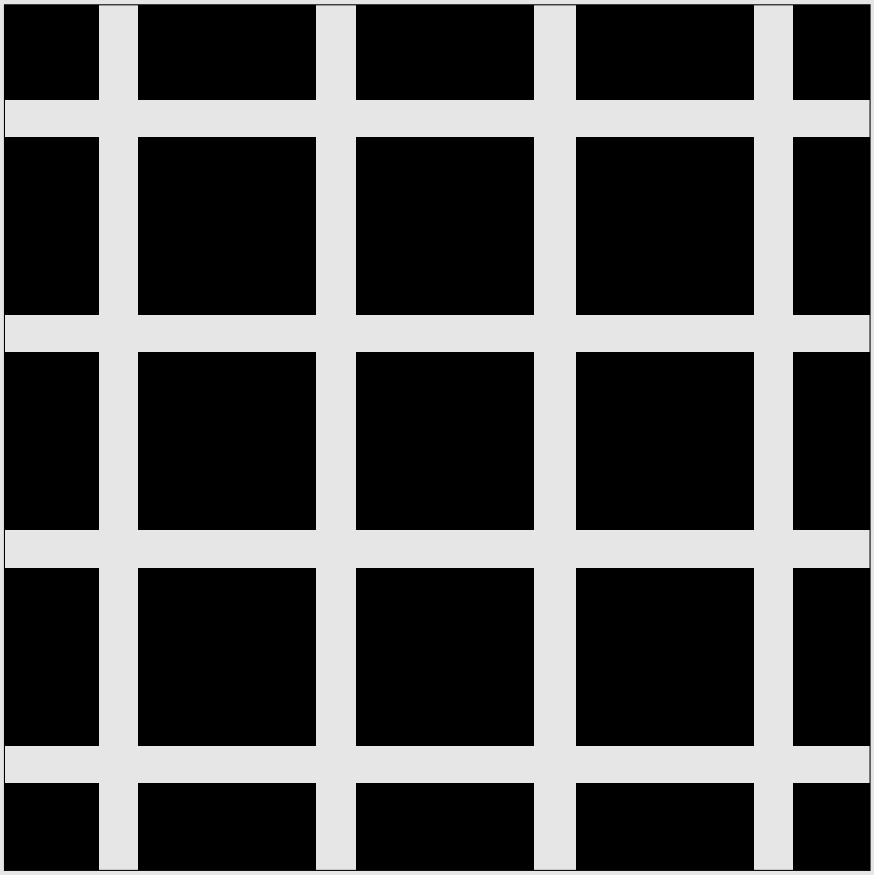
Philonous tries to explain that sense data are in fact mental, as is shown by the everyday experience of lukewarm water. Put a cold hand in the water and it appears warm; put a hot hand in it and it appears cold. Hylas accepts this point, but clings to the reality of other everyday cases of sense experience. Philonous then says that tastes are either pleasant or unpleasant, and are therefore mental, and the same can be said of smells.

Hylas valiantly rallies at this point, and says that sounds don't travel through a vacuum. From this, he concludes, they must be 'motions of air molecules', not mental thingumajigs, as his friend is trying to persuade him. Philonous responds that if this is indeed real sound, it bears no resemblance to what he knows as sound, so in that case sound may as well the mental phenomenon after all! The same argument fells Hylas when it comes to a discussion of colours, when he realises that they too disappear under certain conditions, such as when you see a golden cloud at sunset but close up it's just a grey mist.

Even something like size varies depending on the observer's position. Here, Berkeley's convenient straight-man, Hylas, obligingly tries to defend common sense by saying that you should distinguish the object from the perception, allowing that maybe the act of perceiving is all in the mind, but that a material object still exists out there. Philonous quickly pounces, replying: 'Whatever is immediately perceived is an idea: and can any idea exist out of the mind?' In other words, the perception, say of a tree, exists only in the mind – not 'out there'. Even Hylas's brain, Philonous cheekily suggests, 'exists only in the mind'!

Are colours real?

For philosophers at least, there are (at least) two fairly tricky problems about colour. One is whether it really is 'out there', or is only 'in here'? Is it in the mind of the beholder, or made up of little electromagnetic vibrations? Anyway, what difference exists between a real sensation of colour and an imaginary one? (Are the grey blobs in the image below, known as *The Grid Illusion* real or imaginary?) Not to forget colour-blind people who see green as red, and animals, which hardly see colours at all. Worse still, what's true of colours is also true for all the other sense perceptions, even if John Locke *et al* have tried to mark colour off as a special case of unreliable knowledge.



Berkeley's own conclusion is that compelling, logical grounds exist for concluding that the physical world is an illusion and only minds and mental events really exist. However, if you're beginning now to think this is all just too mad to take seriously and it's better to stick to science, you might be interested to hear that the 20th century's greatest scientist Albert Einstein himself explained (in 1938) that he'd come to realise that:

> *. . . physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world.*

Einstein went on to offer his own metaphor of a ticking watch to explain the problem of making sense of the world:

> *In our endeavour to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility or the meaning of such a comparison.*

In fact, as Einstein says, the only way to approach the core truths of reality is through philosophy. The world really is more complex than people normally think it is. It's not just the philosophers creating mysteries.