

An Introduction to Philosophy

What Makes Philosophers Tick?

Philosophy is a peculiar enterprise, a strange form of conversation that began in Ancient Greece some 2500 years ago and continues today. The purpose of this book is to invite you to join in. But what is it you might be getting into?

On the one hand, philosophers are anything but unique. Like scientists, scholars, and students of every sort they are energized by an experience, or even a feeling: that of being bowled over – by curiosity, interest, amazement, fascination, perplexity, or wonder. This in turn sparks them to ask questions, usually ones that begin with “why.” Philosophers want answers to their questions; that is, they want to explain why things are the way they are. In short, like other intellectuals they are driven by the desire to know.

Astronomers are amazed by the planets, and want to know why they move as they do. Biologists are fascinated by the intricate mechanisms of living organisms and they try to figure out why they work as well as they do. Mathematicians are captivated by the complexity of formal relations, which inspires them to summon ever more intensely their capacity for analytical reasoning. Historians spend their days in archives because they wonder about the when, where, and why of the past. They too want to know.

Philosophers are also seized by wonder and strive to answer questions that they experience as urgent. But what they (we) wonder about is different from what triggers the astronomer, biologist, mathematician, or historian. Natural scientists are amazed by things like bacteria, plants, animals, rocks, or stars. They are interested in the world outside of themselves and

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so they turn to the microscope or telescope to see it better. Philosophers, by contrast, are amazed at, and so they scope, themselves. Mathematicians are dedicated to solving problems in algebra or geometry. For philosophers the very life they are leading is the problem. Historians study the past. Philosophers wonder why they have a past in the first place and what role, if any, it should play in their lives.

A line from Plato's dialogue the *Phaedrus* makes this point sharply. Socrates – who is the inspiration for this book – is walking in the countryside with a companion who asks him whether he believes the stories about Boreas, the god to whom the Greeks assigned responsibility for the cold north wind. His companion's question implies that a scientific account, a little lecture in meteorology, would be far better than a silly old myth. Socrates responds by saying that while he admires the work of the scientists who debunk such stories, he himself has no time for such pursuits. He explains why:

The reason, my friend, is this. I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, *to know myself*; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into extraneous matters before I have understood that. (*Phaedrus* 230a)¹

The philosopher, at least according to Socrates, seeks *self-knowledge* rather than knowledge of the external world or of the mathematical structures that underlie it. But be careful. This does not mean that Socrates seeks to understand his uniquely personal self. He has no interest in probing the details of his childhood or learning how the traumatic events of his past made him into the person he became. Instead, his question is far more broad: What does it mean to be who I am; that is, a human being?

Another line, this one from the *Phaedo*, elaborates. Again, Socrates is contrasting himself with the natural scientists of his day. While he professes to admire their work, he describes himself as singularly unsuited for that kind of research. As he puts it, “I didn't have the nature” to study nature (96c). This statement implies that there are two senses of “nature.” One is external: the world of wind, water, and stars. The second, to which Socrates devotes himself, is human nature, which somehow is different.

When I was in biology class as a kid in high school, I was struck by how eagerly other students were peering into their microscopes. They were amazed at all the little creatures that were swimming around in the drop of pond water that was on the slide. Me? I was more interested in why they were so interested ... and why I was not.

The word “philosophy” is derived from two Greek words: *philia* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom). But to describe philosophy simply as “the love of

wisdom” is far too vague. After all, the biologist is also impelled by a love of wisdom – about living organisms – and the historian seeks wisdom about the past. What, then, distinguishes philosophers? Again: the wisdom for which they (we) strive concerns the nature and meaning of human life.

The biologist might object: “I too want to understand human life. After all, we are animals with hearts and lungs and, most interesting of all, with genes, those molecular stretches of DNA and RNA that contain the information responsible for building and maintaining our cells. Like all other organisms the human animal is subject to the laws of natural selection and so in studying fruit flies in my laboratory I’m actually studying myself.”

Where Socrates sees difference – there is human nature and then there are insects, plants, and cells – the biologist envisions an undivided realm of living organisms. Richard Dawkins, the renowned evangelist for Darwin’s theory of natural selection, makes this point forcefully:

An octopus is nothing like a mouse, and both are quite different from an oak tree. Yet in their fundamental chemistry they are rather uniform, and in particular the replicators that they bear, the genes, are basically the same kind of molecule in all of *us* – from bacteria to elephants. (*The Selfish Gene*, p. 21)

Note the word I have highlighted. For Dawkins “us” refers not only to himself, you and me, but also to the octopus and oak tree. “We” are all one.

Or consider what he says about natural selection: it is “the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence ... of *all* life” (*The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 5). Even more extravagantly, he says this:

Darwinism encompasses all of life – human, animal, plant, bacterial ... extraterrestrial. It provides the only satisfying explanation for why we all exist, *why we are the way that we are*. It is the bedrock on which rest all the disciplines known as the humanities. (*The Blind Watchmaker*, p. x)

Dawkins claims that the entire living world, including us (you and me), is of a single piece and that only Darwinism offers a satisfying explanation of “why we all exist.” What is striking about this assertion is that it cannot itself be proven by the biological science he admires so greatly. For it is a totalizing claim that cannot possibly be verified by empirical evidence. No biologist, however assiduous, could actually study all of life. So, just as much as it is supported by his research, Dawkins’s claim is also what initiates and shapes it. It tells him who he is as a thinker and as such is as much a presupposition as it is a conclusion.

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This is not a criticism. Every science, like every proof, method, or research program, requires just such presuppositions. After all, you can't begin a search until you know what you're looking for, or an inquiry until you have a sense of what sort of answers you hope to find. But Dawkins's claim is so extravagant that we should at least raise the question: if he cannot prove that all living beings are essentially the same, that Darwinian natural selection is not just the bedrock of the humanities but the only satisfying explanation of why we all exist, then why should we believe him?

To paraphrase Dawkins, I too want to understand why I am the way I am. Part of who I am these days includes the fact that I ride a bicycle around the city of Boston. Why? Here are some scattershot answers.

I enjoy the convenience of using a bike rather than a car in a crowded city. It's easier and more efficient than struggling in traffic and trying to park. It gets me from door to door.

I enjoy the physical exertion a bicycle demands, which in a small city like Boston is typically not much. I'm probably healthier as a result of my many years on the bike.

When I'm on my bike, especially at night when I'm on the esplanade flanking the Charles River, I feel a bit like a kid doing something slightly dangerous and out of bounds. This is one of my favorite times to ride.

Because of my years of cycling around Boston I now have intimate knowledge of several neighborhoods in my city. I understand the traffic patterns at various intersections, which streets are crowded, which have bike lanes or give me a good view of the harbor. I know what kind of people to expect on the sidewalks, where the parks are, and the best routes to good restaurants that have outdoor seating and serve cold beer. I know what the town feels like in a visceral way.

When I'm in a car I typically have the windows closed and either the heat or the air-conditioning on, and I listen to the radio. I'm sealed off from the streets, ensconced in my own little world, and there's little chance of surprise. This is often quite pleasant and I still enjoy driving a great deal, especially on highways. But I prefer the bike in the city where chance interactions with cars, pedestrians, buildings, and other cyclists are the norm. On the bike I am plunged directly into the flow of public life. At the same time, I'm also more independent. I don't have to wait for a train or bus, don't have to worry about traffic. I can go door to door and do so when I want. Yes, sometimes it takes longer and it demands work from me. But that's a small price to pay.

My wife and I no longer own a car, although we do belong to a car-sharing service, which allows us to rent one for short periods. We're both delighted to be saving as much money as we are by not having a car.

According to one estimate, the average cost of maintaining a car in 2012 was nearly \$8000 per year. (See <http://www.autoblog.com/2012/05/04/average-cost-of-car-ownership-rises-to-8-946-per-year/>.)

Because I can no longer simply jump into the car and go to the supermarket to buy a quart of milk, I've become more deliberate about my shopping. I need to plan routes carefully and, because I can carry so little on my bike, shop frequently. Because my transportation requires effort, I am more mindful of where and when I travel.

The best months for biking here in Boston are in the summer and early fall when the weather is warm and farmers' markets are scattered all over town. Since my wife and I have been on our bikes, the geography of our lives has shrunk dramatically. We don't go to the big-box stores on the highway in order to save money. Our shopping is almost exclusively local and we buy directly from the farmers, cheese-makers, and bakers who are selling their goods. We hand them cash instead of a credit card, and talk to them far more than we would to the minimum wage clerks at the supermarket who have no stake in the multinational corporation that has employed them. We also talk to the other customers, with whom we often feel something of a bond.

There's always some risk in riding a bike on a busy city street. I've narrowly missed serious accidents and many cyclists tell stories of being "doored" or otherwise hit by a car. But the little jolt of adrenaline that comes with competing against traffic on Commonwealth Avenue is part of the attraction. I'm alert and ready to turn quickly or clutch the brakes hard. Unlike most of my ordinary day, during which I'm preoccupied with my worries and responsibilities, when I'm on the bicycle my focus narrows. I'm more concentrated and attentive. It's both relaxing and energizing at the same time.

Like a car, a bicycle is a machine, a device that changes the direction or augments the magnitude of a force. But the force of a car is generated by burning an energy source external to the driver, while that of a bicycle is generated by the energy provided by the rider. On the bike I am responsible for making myself move and so it's more like an extension of my body than is a car – which is another reason why I feel more actively alive on the bike.

I'm usually scrupulous about obeying the same rules that apply to the cars. I stop at red lights. By doing so I let the cars around me know that I too belong on the road and so deserve their respect. I am telling them that I am an equal partner in the social contract they've made to obey the rules. As a result, I feel safer when I obey the law.

Because I no longer own a car I'm something of an outlier in my circle of friends. I've been on the margins before and it's a region where I feel at home. On the other hand, there are now so many cyclists on the road that

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riding a bike is almost like being part of a movement. In taking to our bicycles we make a statement. In the last 60 years the automobile has decisively shaped the infrastructure, economy, and way of life in American cities and suburbs. By and large this has been a disaster. Instead of celebrating and affirming the importance of vibrant public space, and their own bodies, instead of living small and in the local, most Americans move from one large private place to another in their cars. Being on the bike makes me part of the city in a new and politically healthy way.

Being on a bike forces me to acknowledge my vulnerability; in particular, my incapacity to alter the weather. I enjoy the warm sunshine, but suffer when I get caught in an unexpected storm. The car, by contrast, affords me a predictably comfortable ride. But the bargain I've made seems to me a good one.

By riding a bike rather than driving a car I am responsible for a little less carbon being spewed into the atmosphere. If the predictions are correct, then global warming will cause people around the world a great deal of harm. I am doing my tiny bit to counteract this frightening process. Perhaps we all should.

A biologist like Richard Dawkins can surely explain much about what I have just described. He can teach me a great deal about how my muscles work as they propel the bicycle through space, or how my brain processes the visual stimuli flying past my eyes. He can supply me with an account of how the human organism has evolved such that it now receives positive feedback from physical exercise and motion. He would have something to say about the good feeling I have of being connected to my community, of being public, when I'm on my bike. He might argue that human animals have evolved such that they now have a natural desire to cooperate with one another, and that doing so has increased the survival prospects of the species.

A psychologist perhaps could explain why I relish being an outlier and reverting to an activity that was an important part of my childhood. Maybe I've retained some remnant of my adolescent rebellion. And the social scientists can supply data that would verify my hunch that riding bicycles contributes to the well-being of a city. Researchers in Copenhagen, for example, have calculated that some \$30 million a year is saved by the reduction in air pollution, accidents, and wear and tear on the infrastructure that is due to the enormous number of people there who use bicycles instead of cars. (An extensive discussion of this can be found at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/justingerdes/2012/01/23/copenhagens-green-sheen-its-not-just-about-the-bikes/>.)

This statistic, whose accuracy I have no way of verifying, appeals to me. But neither it nor any other scientific account fully addresses the questions sparked by my own reflections on riding a bike.

What does it mean to feel more alive on the bicycle, when I'm powering a machine with my own muscles, than when I'm the passive beneficiary of the effortless motion of a fuel-burning car? Is being alive equivalent to the expression of power? In turn, is this equivalent to being physically active? If so, what would that say about my mind? Might I not be even more alive, more powerful, if I spent more time in my office thinking or working on my computer? Perhaps rather than augmenting my life I'm actually sacrificing precious time by giving so much of it to crude physical exertion instead of intellectual activity.

There are obvious health benefits to riding a bike. But what exactly is health? These days I feel pretty good. But is this fleeting sensation the best way to measure health? Perhaps a better assessment would be to methodically compare the life spans of cyclists to those of automobile drivers. The question would then become, am I tacking years onto my life by riding a bike? We won't know until I'm done, but I can ask this question now: is longer life equivalent to better life? Indeed, is good health something that can be measured quantitatively? Even more generally: is there a significant difference between merely staying alive and having a good life? If so, what is it?

In a similar vein: why deliberately put myself at some risk of injury by riding a bike rather than driving a car? Does the value of bike riding somehow trump the risks associated with it? This question leads to a more general one: is the value of any activity determined only by its future benefits? I'm saving money by not owning a car. Is having the extra cash what makes bike riding valuable? Or are some activities, even dangerous ones, valuable just because they are what they are? Are they good simply in and of themselves?

A related question: if we assess the value of our activities by their consequences and possible benefits, does this imply that our orientation to the future is paramount in our lives? We are animated by our plans, expectations, hopes, and worries. What, then, are we to make of our engagement with the present? Why can't we simply be here now? Perhaps we should try. Or is the attempt to be in the present finally a fool's errand? Perhaps the present is no more than a vanishing moment, a gateway between past and present with no duration of its own. If so, there is no "now" for us to be in at all. Whatever the answer, we are forced to reflect on the fact that we are irrevocably implicated in the flow of time from the future through the present and into the past. And to ask, what is the best and healthiest stance we can adopt to this overwhelming fact of our lives?

Why, since it's possible to protect ourselves from inclement weather inside of a car, might it be preferable for us willingly to put ourselves at

the mercy of nature's unpredictable force? If it is possible to minimize contingencies with ever more powerful technologies, why not do so?

And that feeling of childhood joy, of playfulness, that comes with riding at night? I'm amazed and delighted that at my age I still enjoy this. But what's that all about? Is play merely a frivolous abdication of adult responsibility?

And that sense of being physically present in the city, in the public realm? Why is this good? What's positive about public space and cooperating with others? My bike riding represents a tiny protest against a culture that isolates us from one another. Or is that nonsense? If you think something's gone wrong in your own community, shouldn't you do more about it than ride a bike in silent protest? Perhaps I should run for office or become a political activist.

Farmers' markets are attractive because they are small, local, and personal. But the goods they sell are more expensive than what's available in the supermarket. Is it worth it to pay the higher price? Why is a small enterprise better than a huge one, especially when the latter, as we are so often told, is vastly more efficient in bringing goods to the market? What is so alluring about the local?

Should I obey the law simply because it's the law? Or should I do so only when I am benefited by doing so?

I take a small bit of pride in my membership in the biking community when most of my agetates are stuck in their cars. They know Boston hardly at all. I, by contrast, know much of it well. Or is this merely the voice of stubborn vanity? Am I just showing off?

I know what Boston looks like, how it feels, and how it moves because I interact with it physically. But does this really qualify as knowledge in any serious sense? I have some experience with the city's streets, but maybe that's all. What is knowledge?

Are people morally obligated to take the small measures we can in order to protect the fragile atmosphere on which our lives on earth depend?

These are a few of the questions that occur to me in thinking about bike riding, and they are not directly or fruitfully addressed by scientists whose basic task is to understand how things work or the brain has evolved. By contrast, this book is animated by the conviction that the philosophers to be studied in the chapters to follow will provide resources for seriously grappling with them. A third line uttered by Socrates, again from the *Phaedo*, helps clarify. He imagines a natural scientist responding to the simple question, "Why am I sitting here now?"

the reason that I am sitting here [says the imaginary scientist] is because my body consists of bones and sinews, because the bones are hard and are separated by joints, that the sinews are such as to contract and relax,

that they surround the bones along with flesh and skin which hold them together, then as the bones are hanging in their sockets, the relaxation and contraction of the sinews enable me to bend my limbs, and that is the cause of my sitting here with my limbs bent. (*Phaedo* 98d)

Socrates finds this answer unsatisfying. By his lights “the true cause [of my sitting here] ... is that *it seemed best* for me to sit here” (*Phaedo* 98e).

There are any number of ways of answering the question, why am I sitting here now? The physiologist will do so by explaining the mechanics of my body that put me in this chair. The evolutionary psychologist will explain how the human brain has evolved such that it can read and write, as I am now doing as I sit. The economist can explain why some people, like me, have enough free time to enjoy this kind of leisurely and perhaps pointless activity, while others work day and night just to put food on the table. Different kinds of explanations satisfy different kinds of inquiry. Dawkins, for one, believes that only Darwin’s theory of natural selection provides a satisfying answer to the *why* question. But this is because that’s what interests him. He is fascinated by the history and mechanisms of animal behavior and so, like Socrates’ imaginary scientist, would explain how my “bones and sinews,” which themselves are the result of millions of years of evolutionary development, brought me into this chair now.

Socrates admires such intellectual work. But he doesn’t find it satisfying, and not because the science of his day was primitive. No, other questions demanding different sorts of answers call out to him. As he puts it, he is sitting here now because it “seemed best” for him to do so. After all, had he wished to he could have stood up and walked away. But he didn’t. Why? And did he make the right decision? Again, a mechanical or evolutionary answer to such questions would, to Socrates at least, miss the target. As he said in the *Phaedrus*, it would provide only “extraneous” information. What he wants to understand instead is the *meaning* of his own action.

“Meaning” is a word with some pizzazz. It has two senses. The first is linguistic: “to signify” or “have import.” So, for example, the word “table” means a piece of furniture with vertical supports and a flat top on which to place objects. The second is “have as one’s purpose” or “intend,” as in “I have been meaning to call you but I forgot.” Put these two senses together and the familiar phrase, “the meaning of life,” suggests that life has a purpose that can be intelligibly signified and articulated. It is to this project, broadly construed, that Socrates is committed.

Whether you will continue reading this book or not will depend on what questions you find compelling. Would a lecture in anatomy or neuroscience

slake your thirst for knowledge? Would an evolutionary theory provide you with a satisfying answer to Dawkins's question, "why we all exist, why we are the way that we are?" If so, read no further. By contrast, if Socrates' comments about the natural scientists of his own day ring true, if his demand that our attention be focused on the meaning of our lives as we actually experience them has some pull, then perhaps you should continue.

Five Questions

This book will be organized around five broad questions that can be extracted from my reflections about riding a bike. To state them briefly:

- 1 *Are we social-political beings?* I enjoy shopping in a local farmers' market with my wife, riding my bicycle on the crowded streets of my city, and spending time in public places. I read the newspapers and care a great deal about what is happening in my country. I hold those people who are consumed by self-interest in contempt. But my doing so raises a question: are we by nature social-political beings? Are we more ourselves when we're involved and concerned with our community than when we're on our own? Or is it somehow only in solitude, far from the judgmental gaze of others, that we can be fully ourselves? Is being part of a community an abdication of our responsibility to be authentic individuals?
- 2 *What should we do?* Burning fossil fuels will likely harm other people, probably poor ones, by contributing to global warming. Are we therefore obligated to do our bit to lessen the impact? Is my eschewing of a car, then, a morally admirable act? But how do we determine when an act is genuinely moral? Realistically, riding my bike rather than driving a car will make no appreciable difference to the chemical composition of the atmosphere. Is an action's morality determined only by what it accomplishes? Or are some actions, regardless of their consequences, simply the right ones to take?
- 3 *Whom should we emulate?* This question is obviously similar to the previous one, but it is also significantly different. Rather than asking about the morality of specific actions – should I do X or refrain from doing Y? – it demands that we take a step back and examine our lives as a whole. What is the most excellent and fulfilling, what is the most truly human life available to us? Is there a specific type of person who can function as a model to emulate? If so, can he or she provide concrete guidance on how to conduct ourselves on a daily basis?

- 4 *What do we know and how do we know it?* I claim to have knowledge of Boston because I am familiar with its streets. But should this sort of accumulated experience really count as knowledge? Perhaps knowing is a far more demanding enterprise and is strictly an act of the mind. Perhaps the researchers in Copenhagen who have measured the economic impact of bicycle riding can, with quantitative precision, claim to know something. But me? What do I know? And if I do know something, how did I come to know it?
- 5 *What is it to be-in-time?* I'm restless and often preoccupied by future possibilities. I'm almost always slightly ahead of myself and so my morning writing sessions are often interrupted when I remind myself of what's on tap in the afternoon. My wife, by contrast, is better able to pay attention to what's before her eyes. She knows how to linger and enjoy, and she rarely worries – which is why she is often late for appointments. And yet at night she is often consumed by the past. Her regrets keep her awake.

We are inescapably temporal beings and how we orient ourselves to the future–present–past flow of time shapes who we are. Some of us aim relentlessly toward what might be tomorrow, others drift into what was yesterday, while some seem more comfortable in the present. But the big question is this: what is time? What reality does it have? After all, the past is gone, the future is not yet, and the present may be no more than a vanishing moment through which the future flies into the past. Here today, gone tomorrow: is that it? If so, then perhaps we should seek elsewhere – that is, to what is timeless – for solace. But what if nothing is exempt from the annihilating flow of time?

Perhaps one reason I like riding my bicycle on city streets, where the action is often fast and furious, is that it forces me to concentrate and be more fully engaged in the present than I usually am. I can't afford to worry about tomorrow while I'm riding. Instead, I have to pay attention to the parked cars in order to make sure a door doesn't open in my path. Perhaps riding a bike under these conditions is rewarding because it affords me a temporary refuge from the unyielding passage from future into past.

Reading Great Books

As with everything else in this introductory chapter, these five questions have been briefly sketched with an eye toward giving you some inkling of what the philosophical enterprise, inspired by Socrates, might be like.

By myself, however, using language of my own and drawing on my personal experiences and capacity for analyzing them, I cannot go very far in answering them. I'm just not that smart.

Fortunately, I'm not on my own. Throughout my adult life I've been a student of those old books typically labeled as "great" or "classic." If I have made any progress whatsoever in addressing, or even articulating, the questions just posed, it is because I have read them. Therefore, my own book will largely be about them. Authors to be discussed will include Plato, Rousseau, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Nietzsche, Mill, Kant, Descartes and Hume ... great thinkers all. (There will also be a brief chapter on two great Chinese thinkers: Confucius and Lao-Tzu.)

What makes a philosophical work great is that in it the author has generated a comprehensive answer to a question sparked by wonder. Since great thinkers wonder about everything and their minds are so powerful, they develop an enormous train of thought, one that stretches from beginning to end. They understand that no question, not even the broad ones sketched above, can be answered in isolation from all the others. For example, how we should act morally (2) and what sort of life we should aspire to (3), depends on how we are or should be oriented in time (5) and whether we are by nature social/political beings (1). Understanding how we know (4) underlies any response we might make to the other questions. A serious philosopher conceives a big picture and aspires to give a consistent account. Unless you're a genius, it's a bad idea to try this on your own. There is, then, no better way for most of us to learn how to think philosophically than by carefully working through all the many steps a great thinker has laid down in a book.

I could try to explain more of what I'm talking about, but that would not be wise. A far better way to illustrate what I mean is to do what I've been doing for 30 years in classrooms: open a book and work my way through it; try to retrace or reconstruct the author's thought process as he develops his account and do so as clearly as I can; and invite others to do the same. This is precisely what the chapters to follow will do.

A potential obstacle looms. A striking fact about these putatively great philosophers is that they *disagree* with one another. Aristotle, for example, believes that human beings are by nature political. This implies that to conceive of oneself as primarily an individual rather than a citizen, which is what most people in America do today, is to be less than fully human. Rousseau, by contrast, argues that by nature we are solitary beings. In society, he thinks, we continually compare ourselves to, and thus see ourselves through the eyes of, others. As such, in society we are invariably lost to ourselves. For him, then, Aristotle is dead wrong.

John Stuart Mill believes that a moral act is defined by the positive consequences it has on other people's lives. If riding a bike and thereby depositing a little less carbon into the atmosphere makes the world a better place, then perhaps it is moral to ride a bike. Kant, by contrast, argues that a moral act is not dependent on its consequences, but only on the principle that guides it. If, as he believes, we ought to keep our promises, then we ought not to break them under any circumstances.

In keeping with his commitment to the political nature of human being, Aristotle thinks that the best life is led by a mature, serious, fully rational adult, who accepts the responsibility of providing sound leadership to others. Nietzsche, by contrast, finds the paradigm of human flourishing in a child at play. As we will see in our one chapter on non-Western philosophy, Confucius and Lao-Tzu similarly disagree. The former finds some common ground with Aristotle, while the latter is closer in spirit to Nietzsche.

Descartes argues that some ideas are so clear and distinct that by utilizing them alone we can attain certain knowledge. Such knowledge is *a priori*; that is, it is independent of sensible reality and so neither can nor needs to be empirically verified. By his lights, my claim to have gained some sort of experiential knowledge of the city of Boston through bike riding is muddled nonsense. Hume, by contrast, believes that all our ideas, and thus the very possibility of knowledge, arise from our experiences. For him no purely cognitive capacity can discover the truth about the world in isolation from sensible reality.

Saint Augustine believes that everything that exists in time – everything we can see with our eyes or touch with our hands – is insubstantial and necessarily unsatisfying. For him what is here today and gone tomorrow is not fully real. He offers a brilliant analysis of what is now known as “time consciousness” and argues that a life implicated in the past–present–future flow of time is, by itself, no more than a disappearing wisp of smoke. As a result he thinks it is altogether reasonable for us to orient ourselves toward what is immune to the flow of time; to, in other words, the Eternal; to God. By contrast, Nietzsche finds Augustine's denigration of temporal flow despicable. For him, to deny the reality and goodness of the passage of time is a kind of self-hatred. Yes, time flies, but that's all we've got, and so Nietzsche challenges us to have the courage to affirm our lives for what they are rather than to escape into an imaginary and lifeless beyond.

In short, the history of philosophy is a series of disagreements and disputes, of competing ideas, in which an uncontested winner has never emerged. Unlike contemporary chemists, who would agree on how many elements are on the periodic table, or the overwhelming number of biologists

who affirm the theory of natural selection, philosophers contest the most basic issues even today. Unlike their colleagues in the natural sciences or in economics, philosophers do not share a single theoretical framework by means of which they can join others in order to make cumulative progress. Instead, their job is to determine what the foundations and frameworks are. And on these issues they disagree. The competition goes on.

But here's the problem. If the authors just mentioned above disagree with each other so radically, how can they all be "great?" With views so thoroughly opposed, don't some of them simply have to be wrong?

One philosopher was so repelled by the endless disputation and lack of progress in his own discipline that he decided to chuck it all. Descartes wrote the following:

Concerning philosophy, I will say only that, seeing that it has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds that have ever lived and that, nevertheless, there still is nothing in it about which there is not some *dispute*, and consequently nothing that is not *doubtful*, I was not at all so presumptuous as to hope to fare any better. (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 5)

Descartes's apparent humility is bogus, for he was determined not only to junk traditional Western philosophy but to start from scratch and come up with something better; namely, a theoretical position that, unlike his predecessors', was not "doubtful." Of course, his attempt has also been disputed ever since he presented it some four hundred years ago. In other words, Descartes himself became part of the very tradition he held in contempt.

Even if within the history of philosophy there is no topic about which there has been full agreement, this need not be reason for despair. Descartes may have thought it was, but this is because (as we will see in Chapter 6) he was a thinker with a very specific intellectual temperament and consequent agenda. Most tellingly, he loved the clarity and certainty he found in his study of mathematics, which became for him the standard against which all other claims to knowledge had to be measured. As such, he recoiled at any whiff of ambiguity or doubt. But surely it is possible to conceive of philosophical disagreement in a more positive way. Regardless of how beautiful and powerful it may be, mathematics is not always the best example of knowledge. If that's true, then the competition between philosophers of the past need not be construed as a depressing litany of failure. Instead, it can be understood as a vibrant and ongoing conversation

into which, even today, we are not only welcome to enter but would benefit from doing so. To clarify, consider this example.

Rousseau must have read Aristotle's book *The Politics* for he uses the following line from it as the epigraph of his own work, *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*: "It is in things whose condition is according to nature that one ought particularly to investigate what is by nature, not in things that are defective."

In the passage to which Rousseau refers, Aristotle proposes a methodological principle: in order to understand any natural being – say an animal species – we should study the best representatives of that species, those whose condition is, as he puts it, "according to nature." To understand what it is to be an eagle, study a healthy adult in the prime of life who is fierce, flies high, and has powerful vision. Doing so will disclose "eagleness" or what it means to be an eagle. In a parallel fashion, to understand human nature study those people whom Aristotle would call "excellent." These are the ones who have actualized their natural capacities and maximally fulfilled their human potential. It is by looking to them rather than to those who "are defective" that we best learn what it means to be a human being.

In a sense Rousseau agrees, and his book is devoted to precisely the task of examining the most fully natural of human beings. But he disagrees entirely on who such individuals might be. In short, Aristotle gave Rousseau his question – what is human nature? – and a method for responding to it, but then Rousseau, entering the competition, thought it through for himself. As we will see in some detail in Chapter 2, he then forged an answer that, even while being indebted to Aristotle's, was radically opposed to it.

Once again, Descartes's challenge must be raised. If these two putatively "great" philosophers disagreed with one another so thoroughly, how could any of us adjudicate the competition between them? And why should we even try? Perhaps because both Aristotle and Rousseau were ignorant of recent discoveries in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology neither had a legitimate shot at answering the question in the first place. If so, why bother with them at all?

When I was a graduate student and would visit my parents on holidays, my father, an engineer and amateur mathematician, would tease me. "Any breakthroughs lately?" he'd ask. Deep down he was a generous and supportive man, but his question was meant to bite. He simply couldn't understand why I had decided to study philosophy. Why plunge into a useless discipline, which seems to go nowhere?

To develop a response I again turn to Socrates for assistance.

An Introduction to Socrates



Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*

The Greek word *apologia*, translated as “apology,” did not mean saying you’re sorry or regretfully acknowledging a fault. Instead, it was a legal term referring to a defense speech. Socrates had been accused by the authorities of a crime: “corrupting the young and not believing in the gods in whom the city believes” (24b). He was charged with subversion, which in turn was tied to his (alleged) rejection of traditional religion. In his “apology” he attempts to convince the jury that he is innocent.

He begins by recounting a story. His friend Chaerophon had consulted the Delphic Oracle and asked if anyone was wiser than Socrates. The answer: “no one was” (21a). Socrates took this to mean that he was “the wisest” (21b) of men. This puzzled him because, as he puts it, “I am very conscious that I am not wise at all” (21b). Presumably Socrates still finds the world a puzzling place. In any case, he explains to the jury that in order to fathom the meaning of the Oracle he attempted to find someone wiser than himself. To this end he sought out three kinds of people who, at least in the eyes of public opinion (and themselves), were counted as wise. In other words, he sought out the intellectual celebrities of his day, the ones who, were they living now, would appear on talk shows. These were the politicians, poets, and technical experts. Surely, he reasoned, a representative from one of these groups must be wiser than he.

First, let’s get clear on why Socrates singled out these three groups. Politicians, whether in ancient Athens or contemporary America, are inevitably and relentlessly assertive, for in order to compel their audience they must project a sense of authority. They are putative leaders who have to make quick decisions, some of them genuinely consequential, and they cannot be seen to falter. As a result, it’s hard to imagine a successful politician, having been asked a question, answering with, “You know, I’m really not sure. Let’s talk about it.” Instead, they invariably make pronouncements with the highest level of confidence in their own wisdom, and ask the rest of us to follow along.

“Poets” too had a reputation for wisdom. The meaning of this word in Greek is broader than it is in English. It refers to those who “make” (*poiein*) something, and so actually comes close to our own word “artist.” The contemporary equivalent of the ancient “poet” would thus include not only literary lights such as Robert Pinsky, but also playwrights, storytellers, video-makers, painters, and web site designers. These are the people who shape a culture, give it a voice, an image, and a sense of itself. Like the

politicians, the “makers” are so sure they understand the way things are that they eagerly sell their views to the public. Through the dissemination of their artwork they tell us – sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly – how we should look and talk, what we should do, think, feel, wear, and watch. They exert great influence over their audience, especially the young. Just like the politicians, then, their very activity implies a confident claim to know how things really are.

The third sort of notable Socrates interrogates are the ancient versions of today’s engineers; those who have some form of technical expertise. These are people who figure out how to construct devices that the rest of us use to make life easier. The ancient potter knew how to make jars that could efficiently store olive oil and wine for long periods of time. The carpenter could build houses. And today’s software engineer writes the code that provides user-friendly access to vast amounts of information. Socrates acknowledges that these are very smart people. As he puts it, “they had knowledge of many fine things ... they knew things I did not know” (22d). But, like the politicians and the poets, they overreach. Because they are good at what they do, and the results of their work are often both powerful and useful, “they thought themselves very wise in other *most important* pursuits” (22d). Socrates doesn’t specify what these are, but we can guess. What is most important – at least to him – are questions like, is it best for me to be sitting here now? Or, by being so preoccupied with the future am I squandering the little time allotted to me here on earth? Why is having dinner with friends a vital ingredient in leading a meaningful life? What’s good about riding a bike in Boston? Why should I care about the impact of my actions on other people? What should I do when things are going badly in my country? Do I really know anything, and if so how did I manage that? In short, his questions all concentrated on the goal of, broadly construed, self-knowledge.

Politicians continually harangue us with their declarations of how things should be, but they rarely stop to ask themselves what counts as genuinely good, beautiful, or just. Poets may tell terrific stories, their characters may spring to life off the page or on screen, but they can’t explain what their artwork means. And, regardless of how rigorous his training has been, the expertise of the engineer confers no knowledge as to how technological innovations should be put to good use in the human world. By itself this is no failing. Instead, where techies go wrong is in thinking “they know something when they do not” (21d). Merely having technical knowledge isn’t enough for them. Instead, they think they know that the latest device is good and that it should be used. They believe that technical knowledge is the be-all and end-all of the human intellect, and that those who possess it should run the show.

Socrates exposes the fraudulence of such blowhards by rigorously testing their assertions. How exactly he does this is a long story. Suffice it to say here that by his lights – and of course his own lights need to be thoroughly scrutinized – those who are most famous for being wise don't measure up at all.

So far, this brief description of Socrates' philosophical activity seems entirely negative. He knocks top dogs off their pedestals by showing them that they don't know what they think they do. But there's a positive side to his story as well. After interrogating one of the politicians and revealing the emptiness of his claims, he concludes that,

I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know. (21d)

Socrates claims to possess what he calls "*human wisdom*" (20d). He recognizes his limitations, but precisely by doing so he becomes wiser than anyone else. His wisdom, then, is simultaneously negative and positive. To clarify, consider the following example.

When I woke up this morning, I got dressed, made coffee and then opened the newspaper to the sports page to find out who won the baseball game last night. I did so because I knew that (1) there was a game; (2) since a baseball game cannot end in a draw there was a victor; (3) I did not know the outcome of the game; (4) I wanted to know the outcome of the game; (5) the newspaper would contain the answer to my question.

Just like Socrates, asking questions is simultaneously negative and positive. It's an admission that answers are lacking, but it also requires the possession of background knowledge that makes it possible to ask questions in the first place. I did not know the outcome of the game. But I did know the five items listed above, and that's why I opened the newspaper in order to discover the answer to my question.

Of those five items, the first two are simple facts of which I was knowledgeable: there was a game last night and, given the rules of baseball, it could not have ended in a draw. The third item – I knew that I did not know the outcome of the game – presupposed that I already knew the first two facts but required something additional: some introspection. I recalled that I went to bed early last night and so did not stay up to watch the whole game. As a result, I was aware of my own ignorance this morning. The fourth item – I knew that I wanted to know the outcome – also

required a tiny bit of self-knowledge. I am a life-long sports fan who, for better or worse, cares about boxscores. As a result, I know what to do when I see a newspaper: open it to the sports page. I was conscious not only of the knowledge I lacked but of its significance to me, and so I strove to overcome my ignorance. For this reason I asked a question (of the newspaper): “Who won the game last night?”

Finally, I knew where to find the answer to my question: the sports page. After all, I’ve been reading newspapers my whole life and am familiar with what sort of information they contain. When we ask questions – or at least when we do so with intelligence and seriousness of purpose – we already have in mind what the answer might look like and how it might be found. Had I not already known a great deal about baseball, simply seeing the headline, “Red Sox Lose to Orioles,” would have been meaningless to me.

To sum up so far: asking questions has both a negative and a positive side, and this helps us understand the peculiarity of Socrates’ self-description in the *Apology*. On the one hand, with apparent modesty he denies having wisdom and claims that his only advantage over the intellectual celebrities of his day is his cognizance of his own deficiency. On the other, he claims to possess a kind of wisdom. And about this he can be remarkably arrogant. At one point, for example, he compares himself to a famous athlete. (The Greeks were as mad for sports as we are today.) Because he achieves victory for the home team and makes the fans watching him from their seats in the stadium scream for joy, the athlete “makes you think yourself happy.” But Socrates claims that this momentary elation is illusory. After all, the fan does no more than bask in the glow of someone else’s achievement. By contrast, Socrates says, “I make you be really happy” (36e).

This is strange. How can Socrates, who aggressively unmasks ignorance, make people happy? Because he propels them into a state of questioning. And this requires him to do more than make them cognizant of their deficiencies. He must inculcate in them a positive desire to know. He must make them hungry. As items (3) and (4) above suggest, you don’t ask a question unless you realize not only that you lack knowledge but that you want to overcome this lack. If the first stage of Socratic examination is to show people they are ignorant of “the most important matters,” the second is to convince them that this should bother them, and they should do something to remedy the situation. For this reason, he exhorts people to ask the most pressing of questions – such as, why is it best for me to be sitting here now? – and to try to find answers. By doing so, he claims, they will become genuinely happy.

Again, this is strange. You might rather think that having answers would make you happy. No, says Socrates, it's the asking of questions. He expresses this point emphatically:

I say it is the greatest good for a human being to discuss *virtue* every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for *the unexamined life is not worth living for men*. (38a)

The best life is one of self-examination in which we enter into philosophical conversation. And our topic should be “virtue” or, as the Greek word (*aretê*) is also translated, “excellence.” In other words, the “greatest good” available to human beings is discussing what the greatest good might be. To this question we should pose possible answers and then test them against competitors. Together we should strive for understanding. Indeed, so paramount is this activity that Socrates declares that “the unexamined life,” the one spent in unreflective assurance that you know what’s really going on, is not worth living. At this moment of the *Apology*, Socrates is no longer Mr. Humility who is aware only of his own ignorance. He is more like a Hebrew prophet who thunders that his fellow human beings, especially the intellectual celebrities who pontificate on talk shows, might as well be dead.

How could this outrageous statement possibly be true? Perhaps only if the following is true: at the core, the human being is a questionable animal. Because of who we are and the world in which we live, because of the nature of both our intellects and the objects of our inquiries, rather than being fixed and settled we are in-between and on-the-way. Our nature is ever to strive. To think – and worse, to act as if – we possess definitive answers to our most pressing questions is to distort our very being.

To clarify, recall my simple example. To ask (of the newspaper) who won the game last night is to locate myself in between knowledge and ignorance. For asking it requires me not only to understand a couple of simple facts, but also to know both what I lack and that trying to overcome this lack is a meaningful task. Finally, I must know what an answer to my question would look like and have an intuition about where to find it. What if this kind of being-in-between, this mingling of lack and desire, of negative and positive, constitutes human nature itself? If so, then asking a question would express and fulfill, would do justice to, our nature. Asking the right questions, and being willing to test our answers by engaging in philosophical competition, would itself be a kind of answer.

No doubt, at this point Descartes is rolling his eyes in disbelief. For how could a question be an answer, and why should anyone ask “what is

excellence?” if, as Socrates seems to believe, definitive resolution is not readily, if ever, forthcoming? Furthermore, while it’s obvious that the sports page contains the answer to my question about the game last night, do we have even the slightest clue about where to find answers to such questions as “what is goodness?” or “what is beauty?” or “what is the meaning of our lives?” How, then, do we heed Socrates’ exhortation and begin our inquiry?

Socrates suggests a sort of solution: use him as a “model” or “paradigm” (23b) of the philosophical life. Watch him as he converses with others and as he relentlessly examines their assertions and beliefs. To begin, pay attention to the way in which his questions are specifically tailored to the person with whom he is conversing.

In the dialogue titled the *Euthyphro* Socrates interrogates a very religious young man by this name who is deeply convinced of his own piety. And so the question he forces Euthyphro to confront is, “what is piety?” This is typical. In his conversations, Socrates begins by addressing what matters the most to the person with whom he’s talking. He does not pummel Euthyphro with puzzles, paradoxes, or what contemporary philosophers call “thought experiments.” Instead, he begins with what the human being standing in front of him cares about. Answers to the questions Socrates asks, which most people (falsely) think they already possess, are what give shape and direction, give meaning, to one’s life.

In the *Laches* Socrates converses with two generals. He asks them, “what is courage?” After all, this is what such leaders demand of both their soldiers and themselves. They must, therefore, believe they can recognize it when they see it, that they know what it is. In the *Republic* the main interlocutor is a young man animated by political ambition. To him Socrates asks, “what is justice?” In the *Theaetetus* he conducts a dialogue with two mathematicians, the topic being, “what is knowledge?” When, in the *Lysis*, he meets two boys who are close friends, he asks them, “what is friendship?” In each case, his questions are meant to invite people to wonder about the core principles on which they, however unreflectively, have staked their lives. Socratic philosophy is designed to force us to look into ourselves.

Consider another, somewhat complicated example. In the *Apology* Socrates cross-examines Meletus, the man who has charged him with subversion or “corrupting the young”; that is, with making them worse. He begins by asking him this: since you accuse me of corrupting the young, you obviously believe that older people should make younger people better, right? Meletus agrees. Okay, Socrates says next, since you identify me as someone who fails to fulfill this obligation, are you also able to identify those men who succeed? When Meletus says yes, Socrates asks, who are

they? Meletus falls silent, and so Socrates pushes him. Finally, Meletus answers: it is “the laws” that make people better. Socrates disqualifies this response, for he wants the name of a person. Again, Meletus hesitates, but then he says that the members of the jury (there were 501) and the audience at the trial make the young better. Indeed, by his lights, all Athenians “make the young into fine good men” (25a). All except Socrates.

To attack this assertion, and thereby to defend himself, Socrates offers an analogy. When it comes to young horses, no one would say, as Meletus has just said about Socrates in his relationship to the young men of Athens, that everybody makes them better and only one person makes them worse. For in this case there is a recognizable expert who can manage the task far better than the rest of us: the professional horse trainer. If everyone, especially non-experts, were allowed to suggest ways of improving young horses – if, for example, a vote were taken about what sort of diet they should have – the animals would certainly be damaged. When it comes to making horses better, it’s clear that we require knowledge possessed by only a few people. Surely, Socrates seems to suggest, it must be similar when it comes to young men. The majority can’t improve them, as Meletus said they could. Only someone with real knowledge can. Such a person, whom Socrates does not identify, would be an expert in human excellence. Once again, Meletus falls silent.

Socrates has succeeded in showing the jury that Meletus hasn’t thought very much about how young people are actually made better. By itself this doesn’t prove that his accusation of Socrates is false. It only shows that he is thoughtless. That this is indeed the case is revealed when he fails to challenge the most striking element of Socrates’ cross-examination: the analogy between the horse trainer and horses, and the virtue-expert and human beings. Meletus *should* have challenged this, for it is certainly problematic. When it comes to horses, expert trainers can be readily identified (and then hired), but it is not obvious that there are analogously identifiable experts when it comes to making young people into excellent citizens. Properly trained horses will take the bit and bridle, and allow their movement to be controlled by a human master who holds the reins. People are far more complex than horses and rarely are willing to be so thoroughly subordinated to someone else. Therefore, making a young person better is a vastly more difficult, and less obvious, enterprise than training a horse.

Think, for example, of all the many parents who would love their children to become good people. While they may be confident that the school to which they send their kids will teach them to read and write, it is far harder to identify a teacher-of-virtue. Would it be the local clergyman? The baseball coach? While there may be institutions that teach and then

certify horse trainers, there does not seem to be a viable analogue when it comes to human excellence.

It is of course possible that Socrates takes himself to be one of the few virtue-experts. But this is unlikely. After all, he claims to possess only “human wisdom,” which entails his recognition that he is not wise. By his lights the greatest good for human beings is not giving expert advice to others – which is what the politicians, poets, and technocrats do – but examining one’s own life.

The purpose of this little exchange between Socrates and Meletus – and here I am speaking about Plato-the-author’s purpose – is to invite the reader into a dialogue. He wants us to question the notion of the virtue-expert that the analogy implies. If such a person exists, what does he know and how does he teach? And if such a person can be identified should he, like the horse trainer, be put in charge of the young? If there is no recognizable expert – and Plato surely wants us to consider this possibility – then perhaps Meletus’ answer, however thoughtless it may be, isn’t entirely wrong. After all, when he says that all the Athenians make the young people better he might be referring to the familiar procedures by which a democracy makes decisions. In countries like the United States, when an important question about human excellence comes up – such as, should physician-assisted suicide be allowed or gay marriage legalized? – people are unwilling to submit to the authoritative judgment of a virtue-expert. Instead, all citizens get to vote. And if the vote doesn’t go their way they are obligated to follow the judgment of the majority and be good losers. If there are no virtue-experts, no analogues to the horse trainer, then democratic decision making makes real sense. It is likely that a commitment to democracy, whose Greek roots mean “rule” (*cratos*) of the “people” (*demos*), is for Meletus a deeply held, even if poorly understood, conviction.

Is Socrates, then, anti-democratic? To the extent that he actually affirms the analogy between the horse trainer and the virtue-expert, perhaps he is. But, to ask again, who are the virtue-experts and what sort of knowledge could they possibly possess? Would they know what virtue itself really is?

By carefully tracking Socrates’ conversation with Meletus, by considering the unstated presuppositions that lie behind his response, the reader learns what her task is: to do what Meletus doesn’t; that is, to think hard about what human excellence is. As such, even if it doesn’t result in definitive answers, a Socratic examination can still teach us something. It can help us understand not only what a bad answer is like, but what a good one might be like.

Consider the *Euthyphro*, where, as mentioned above, Socrates is interrogating a self-righteous young man confident that he is wise in matters

concerning the gods. To show him that he is deluding himself Socrates asks, “what is piety?” After all, if Euthyphro is the expert he thinks he is, he should be able to answer this question. He tries. Piety, he offers, is what is loved by the gods. Socrates then attacks by asking him whether the gods love someone who is pious because he is pious, or is someone pious because the gods love him? If Euthyphro says the latter, then he runs the risk of admitting that the pious person – and of course he thinks himself to be one – doesn’t really deserve any credit. For on this account, a person is pious only because the gods love him, which they may do for reasons that have nothing to do with the person himself, or for no reason at all. It may seem more likely, then, that a person is pious because he is a certain kind of human being who merits the love of the gods. But Euthyphro cannot identify what qualities the pious person might have. He can only repeat that piety is what is loved by all the gods.

Socrates’ interrogation is meant to convince Euthyphro that he should ask himself whether, when the gods love someone, they do so for a reason. If not, do they love arbitrarily? If that’s the case and the gods love for no discernible reason, then there really isn’t much to talk about when it comes to piety, nor can there be any real wisdom concerning it. But perhaps the gods are more rational than that. If so, and if they love certain people for good reasons, then it should be possible to specify why they do so. Defining piety as that which is loved by the gods is therefore inadequate. Because he is so full of religious enthusiasm and intellectual bravado, Euthyphro hasn’t thought the issue through. And he is dangerously self-righteous as a result.

Socratic examination, as we have briefly seen in the cases of both Meletus and Euthyphro, demands that people think “backwards” toward the fundamental *presuppositions* that lie behind their assertions. Before confidently posing an answer to Socrates’ question, Meletus should have investigated the issue, what is human excellence and how is it attained? Before making his impassioned speeches, Euthyphro should have thought harder about whether the divine is rational or not. By exposing the weakness of such opponents Socrates reveals what a better answer to one of his questions would be like. It must be able to trace its origin to first principles, to basic assumptions, that are fully exposed to the light of day for rational inspection and can then be defended.

Another example: in Book I of the *Republic* Socrates questions Thrasymachus who claims justice is “the advantage of the stronger” (338c). By the “stronger” he means the ruling body. On his account, justice depends on who is in power. It therefore varies from regime to regime. Justice in China is what is advantageous to the Communist Party, which is

the ruling body. By contrast, justice in a democracy such as the United States is what is advantageous to the “people” (*demos*). Thrasymachus, then, implicitly denies that there is an “absolute” justice that exists independently of any given regime. Instead, he’s a *relativist*. For him the many different conceptions of justice – authoritarian rule in China, monarchy in Saudi Arabia, democratic rule in Great Britain – are all equally valid in their local context. There is no “justice itself,” only justice according to the Chinese, justice according to the Saudis, and so on.

Socrates attacks this definition. If justice is the advantage of the stronger, if those who are in power act justly simply because they are in power, then it follows that it must be just for the subjects of the ruling body to obey all the edicts their leaders stipulate. They must, in other words, obey all the laws. Now, since even the smartest rulers occasionally make mistakes, at some point they will enact laws that are actually disadvantageous to themselves. A ruler may, for example, impose an onerous income tax on his subjects because he believes that this will increase his wealth and so be to his advantage. According to Thrasymachus, subjects are required by the demands of justice to obey this and every other law. In reality, however, it may turn out that the tax ends up bankrupting first the subjects and then the ruler himself. As a result, Thrasymachus’ definition of justice contains a fatal, if hidden, flaw. Subjects are required to obey all laws, even ones that are ultimately disadvantageous to the ruling body. But this means that Thrasymachus has contradicted himself. Justice both is and is not doing what is advantageous to the ruler.

What counts as a good answer to a Socratic question is beginning to emerge. It must be what the Greeks called a *logos*, a rational account, that articulates and defends both its *presuppositions* and its *consequences*, and does so without contradiction. It must be both consistent and comprehensive; that is, a logical whole, a rigorously connected body of well-defended propositions. That’s a tall order, and so it’s no wonder that the people with whom Socrates converses regularly fall short. Indeed, Socrates himself never supplies us with such a *logos*, such a theory. But he has, at least, given us some idea of what to strive for.

Socrates, whose conversations often seem to be frustratingly negative, actually teaches us much that is positive. Most basically, that we should be energetically thoughtful about “the most important matters”; those core principles that give shape to our lives. He shows us that far too often about these matters the vast majority of people, especially celebrated intellectuals, have thought least. In other words, he shows us that most people, and we ourselves, are not wise. But equally importantly, he tries to convince us that this should bother us. Without philosophical self-examination we will

operate unreflectively and, as Socrates so stridently puts it, “the unexamined life is not worth living for men.” And so he exhorts us to overcome this lack and gives us some indication of what doing so would be like. Ours should be lives of rational examination, of conversation and competition, wherein we discuss virtue every day. We should be hungry for genuine wisdom, for a complete account whose first principles and their consequences are clear. In short, Socrates tries to convince us to become philosophers.

The best way to flesh out what has only been briefly sketched above – that is, to begin to grasp the nature of the philosophical enterprise – is to plunge into the activity itself. That we will do in the chapters to follow. Each of the philosophers we will discuss tries to forge a comprehensive and consistent answer to a basic question. By following their thinking as well as we can, we will enter the conversation. With them we will seek and strive; that is, we will compete.

Note

- 1 Visitors to Apollo’s temple at Delphi were greeted by two inscriptions: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.” When I mention Socrates in this book I am referring only to the Socrates who appears in Plato’s dialogues. Whether Plato’s picture is an accurate depiction of the historical figure himself, who lived from 469 to 399 BCE, is another story altogether. For a general introduction to both Socrates and Plato, as well as to other figures in Greek philosophy, you might consider David Roochnik, *Retrieving the Ancients: An Introduction to Greek Philosophy* (London: Blackwell, 2004).