

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Hearing common misunderstandings of philosophy, courtesy of the famous
- » Examining the importance of the examined life — the life worth living
- » Looking at the questions to consider in a deep quest for understanding

Chapter **1**

Great Thinkers, Deep Thoughts

Conversation you're not likely to hear at any point in your life:

Him: "Hey, Honey, what do you want to do tonight?"

Her: "How about some philosophy?"

Him: "Sounds great!"

Her: "Invite the neighbors!"

Okay, let's face it. For at least a hundred years, philosophy hasn't exactly enjoyed the most appealing reputation in our culture. But that situation is about to change. This deepest, most exciting, and ultimately most practical activity of the mind has been misunderstood for long enough. It's time to acknowledge that there are many critics and move beyond them.

In this chapter, you'll be introduced to the broad array of worries and criticisms that otherwise highly intelligent and accomplished people have leveled against the enterprise of philosophy, and then you'll get to see more deeply the real truth about this ancient and profound way of thinking.

Listening to the critics

There may be no intellectual activity more misunderstood and wrongly maligned as philosophy. The great American historian Henry Adams once characterized the entire endeavor as consisting of nothing more than “unintelligible answers to insoluble problems.” As far back as the 16th century, the prominent French essayist Michael de Montaigne proclaimed that, “philosophy is doubt.” And, of course, who enjoys doubt? It’s often uncomfortable. It can even be scary.

The 19th-century philosophical wild man, Friedrich Nietzsche, took it one more step and characterized philosophy as “an explosive, in the presence of which everything is in danger.” So, then, it really comes as no surprise to see Nietzsche’s predecessor, the English poet John Keats, worry about all the questions and doubts encouraged by philosophers and ask, “Do not all charms fly at the mere touch of cold philosophy?”

In ancient times, the Roman statesman and author Cicero even complained, “There is nothing so absurd that it hasn’t been said by some philosopher.” Of course, he too was “some philosopher.” But then there are many other very smart and even truly wise people who adopt the label of philosopher with pride. It may be revelatory to understand them and how they see their distinctive activity of the mind.

Philosophers? Crazy! Philosophers? Otherworldly! Philosophers? Gloomy! When we hear the word, we tend to have a modern image come to mind of badly groomed academics, carelessly dressed in tweed sport coats, wrinkled shirts, badly rumpled pants, and old scuffed up shoes, who go through life coated with chalk dust, stroking their beards, bearing scowls on their faces and arcane thoughts in their heads, all the while writing on blackboards or whiteboards in capital letters such weighty words as “DEATH,” and “DESPAIR.”

In 1707, Jonathan Swift wrote the following comment:

The various opinions of philosophers have scattered through the world as many plagues of the mind as Pandora’s box did those of the body; only with this difference, that they have not left hope at the bottom.

In the century approaching our own era, the widely read American journalist and literary critic H.L. Mencken once went so far as to announce, “There is no record in human history of a happy philosopher.” (But, hey, he never met me.)

NOT EXACTLY FANS OF PHILOSOPHY

It is hard to find many general subjects that are as controversial among the well educated as philosophy. Not everybody is a fan. And that's because not everyone really understands what it's all about. The following quotes show what some prominent individuals have had to say about philosophy and philosophers, largely because they misunderstood the enterprise and what it aims to accomplish. It will help to hear this crowd of critics in order to get beyond their misapprehensions and dive deep into what philosophy really is.

Philosophy is such an impertinently litigious lady that a man had as good be engaged in lawsuits as have to do with her.

— Sir Isaac Newton

Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry the progress, ignorance the end.

— Montaigne

Philosophy will clip an angel's wings . . .

— John Keats

All philosophies, if you ride them home, are nonsense; but some are greater nonsense than others.

— Samuel Butler

Philosophy consists largely of one philosopher arguing that all the others are jackasses. He usually proves it, and I should add that he also usually proves that he is one himself.

— H.L. Mencken

If I wished to punish a province, I would have it governed by philosophers.

— Frederick the Great

There is only one thing that a philosopher can be relied on to do, and that is to contradict other philosophers.

— William James

When he who hears doesn't know what he who speaks means, and when he who speaks doesn't know what he himself means — that is philosophy.

— Voltaire

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There is nothing so strange and so unbelievable that it has not been said by one philosopher or the other.

— Descartes (*the strange and unbelievable father of modern philosophy*)

I have tried, too, in my time to be a philosopher but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking through.

— Oliver Edwards (*18th century*)

So what's the deal here? Philosophy, done right, should be the *opposite* of all this gloom and doom stuff. It should be stimulating, exciting, liberating, provocative, revelatory, illuminating, helpful, *and fun*. Philosophers themselves should be great company, the life of any party, a hoot and a half. (Okay, maybe I'm getting a little carried away here.) Even Cicero, despite his occasional grumblings about the wilder philosophers of his day once proclaimed, "If wisdom be attainable, let us not only win but enjoy it."

I must admit that I know of at least a few great thinkers I'm glad I don't have as neighbors. And some of their books can be . . . well, should I say, "less than scintillating"? And, all right, as long as I'm trying to be as candid here as possible, I should be willing to acknowledge — without naming any names, of course — that I have actually met a few exceedingly peculiar social misfits who seem to be fish out of water in ordinary life, and whose only discernible accomplishment appears to be an academic doctoral degree in philosophy from a major university. Along with, perhaps, several unintelligible publications bearing their names. And, unfortunately, a teaching position that places them as ambassadors of philosophy in front of classrooms full of bewildered and yet sometimes bemused undergraduates. But things are not always what they seem. As the ancient poet Caecilius Statius once reminded us: "There is often wisdom under a shabby cloak."

The enterprise of philosophy itself, philosophy as a genuine human activity, can and should be great. Not to mention the fact that philosophers can be our friends. They often enjoy being taken out to dinner, or for a celebratory libation or two. On this topic, I should perhaps quote the great poet John Milton, who wrote:

How charming is divine philosophy!

Not harsh, and crabbed as dull fools suppose,

But musical as is Apollo's lute,

*And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,
Where no cruel surfeit reigns.*

In other words, good stuff indeed.

The same Cicero who loudly voiced his irritation at bad philosophers didn't shrink from praising a good one. He once described Socrates as "the first man to bring philosophy into the marketplace." In many ways, it's the example of Socrates that will be followed in this book. Philosophy can be brought back into the marketplace of ideas that are seriously contending for your attention. Some pretty lofty ideas can be pulled down to earth and examined for their amazing relevance to our day-to-day lives. The goal in this book is to help you get clearer on some of the issues that matter the most, but that you may ordinarily tend to think about the least.

I hope that together we can be explorers of the spirit, charting our way forward in new depths of awareness as we go. We take a close look at some exciting ideas, quite a few amazing questions, and several new perspectives for everything we think and do. We can't nail down a definitive answer for every question that may arise, but if you stick with me for the duration, you're likely to find yourself making more progress in appreciating and understanding these topics than you may at first imagine. I might sometimes ask some strange-sounding questions, but I promise you that, as you consider the answers, those queries can help you attain some pretty amazing perspectives on this life that we're living. Our goal, throughout, is nothing less than a quest for wisdom itself. And that's a vitally important matter, since, as the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson realized, "Life is a festival only to the wise."

Consulting Socrates on What Counts

The original public philosopher, Socrates liked to walk the streets and go to parties, along the way engaging anyone he could in philosophical dialogue. For him, philosophy was not a dry, intellectual subject, a game for pedants and scholars, but a requirement for living well. He even famously proclaimed the following axiom:

The unexamined life is not worth living.

But what in the world does this statement mean? Everyone knows what it means to say, "This car isn't worth \$80,000," or "This shirt isn't worth \$150," or "The tickets to this concert aren't worth \$125 each." But what exactly does it mean to

say about a certain form of life, a particular lifestyle — what Socrates is calling “the unexamined life” — that it’s “not worth living”?

Essentially, an item is “worth” what it costs if the value or benefits that you derive from it are equal to or greater than the price you pay for it — which is ultimately the same value as the underlying effort or energy that you put into obtaining the resources required to pay that price. Whenever I think about making a certain purchase, I always ask myself whether the item is truly worth the asking price: Is it worth that amount of money? Is it worth the work it took for me to earn that amount?

A pair of shoes that a wealthy individual could see as a “very good deal” might be perceived by a person of more modest means as far too extravagantly expensive. The less well-off shopper may need to work far too hard or too long to earn that amount of money. He may then conclude that the shoes aren’t worth the cost.

But how exactly does this commonplace sort of judgment relate to Socrates’ famous claim? What is the cost — or the worth — of “the unexamined life”? Well, first we need to understand what Socrates means by this phrase.

What is “the unexamined life”? Unfortunately, it’s the form of life far too many people live: getting up, dressing, eating, going to work, breaking for lunch, working some more, going home, eating again, watching TV, leafing through magazines or endlessly scrolling social media, exchanging a few words with family members or or friends on the phone, bathing, changing for bed, checking messages again, and falling to sleep — just to repeat the same routine over and over and over, without ever thinking about what it all means or how life should really be lived.

We wake up already in motion in this life. The raft is out on the river, and the current simply carries us forward. Habit and the demands of others tend to eat up the day.

When we’re young, other people decide what we wear, what we eat, and when we can play. All too often, even after we’re older, other people still decide what we do during the day. We make choices, lots of them, but often from a limited selection of options that our environment, friends, families, employers, and simple routine together present to us. Rarely, if ever, do we stop to reflect on what we truly want in life, on who we are and desire to become, on what difference we’d like to make in the world, and so on what’s really right for us. And *that* is the unexamined life — the life that is lived at some level almost as a cosmic sleepwalker, somnambulating away the hours, days, and years. It’s a life that is experienced on automatic pilot — a life based on values and beliefs that we’ve never really looked at, never really tested, never examined for ourselves.



TIP

Many people seem to fear self-examination, as if looking at and evaluating their most basic beliefs and values is somehow a threat. But a philosophically reflective examination of our most basic assumptions and commitments doesn't necessarily have a corrosive effect. It may have a purifying and empowering impact. The fundamental goal of philosophical examination isn't criticism in a negative sense, or any sort of rejection or abandonment of ideas or beliefs. The true goal is this: understanding. And then a greater level of understanding often results in a refocusing, a shedding of unnecessary or unimportant activities, and an adoption of others — rebalancing and changing our lives in a positive way.

The unexamined life, on the other hand, isn't one of deep personal understanding. It's not a life of self-directed positive change. It simply continues on, largely out of inertia.

And you pay a *big* price for living such a life. Socrates identifies the price or the cost when he states that this form of life, the unexamined life, is not worth what you have to pay for it — when he, in fact, plainly says that this form of life simply is not worth *living*. The living itself, the spending of those precious hours, days, weeks, and years that you have is too high a cost to pay for an unexamined life.

The price that you pay for an unexamined life, therefore, is precisely that — *your entire life*. And you can pay no greater price for anything. Notice, however, that Socrates didn't say that the unexamined life is not worth *anything*. He wisely left open the viewpoint that some positive value exists in any life, however unreflective that life may be. This great thinker said only that the unexamined life isn't worth the high price that you must pay for it — the investment of all your time and energies in a direction that's not of your own careful and wise choosing.

Philosophy, on the other hand, as an activity of reflection giving rise to a wiser way of life, involves investing your life energies in something that may prove worth the cost. But it's not easy. The activity of self-examination and developing the self-knowledge that results from it can be quite hard. The great novelist Cervantes once acknowledged this in an extreme though accurate way when he advised: "Make it your business to know yourself, which is the most difficult lesson in the world." Pondering this, you might of course also begin to wonder whether the *examined* life is in the end itself guaranteed to be worth living. And the truth is that Socrates never actually said so. His statement about the unexamined life does seem to imply, by contrast, such a conviction. But the wise philosopher left us to draw that ultimate conclusion on our own, precisely by examining ourselves and our own lives. And I hope that what you find in this book helps show you the true worth of such an examination.

Asking The Deeper Questions

In this book, you get to look at some incredibly interesting questions dealing with issues of belief, skepticism, and knowledge; good and evil; free will and determinism; the nature of a person; death and life after death; the existence of God; the truth about success and happiness; and the meaning of life. As children, we were endlessly curious about life. And as we age, that should not stop. Philosopher John Locke once wrote: “There is frequently more to be learned from the unexpected questions of a child than then discourses of men, who talk in a road, according to the notions they have borrowed and the prejudices of their education.” In these pages you get a chance to explore some of those questions once more.

This book touches on many of the main fields of philosophy — epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of religion. And it consults many of the great thinkers in history. Throughout, the discussion will be as practical as it is theoretical, because I believe that the best use of theory is in better practice. With each issue, you should ask what difference it makes in your own life, and how it can help you to chart your way forward in the world.



TIP

Here are some of the questions you can expect to find in these pages:

- »» How can we really know anything?
- »» What is the importance of rationality to a good life?
- »» What does the word “good” really mean?
- »» Is ethics just a matter of opinion, or do objective moral rules exist that bind everyone?
- »» Why should we be moral?
- »» Why do people disagree so much on ethics?
- »» Are people really free, or are our actions all determined by genetics and environment?
- »» Can anyone predict the future, in principle, in every detail?
- »» What’s the difference between a human being and a robot?
- »» Do people have souls, or are we just physically complex organisms?
- »» What is death?
- »» Why is death so feared by so many people?
- »» Do we somehow still exist after death?
- »» Where does the concept of God come from?

- »» Does a God really exist?
- »» Why does the world contain so much evil?
- »» Can anyone prove what the truth is on such ultimate issues, or must we accept them just as matters of faith?
- »» What, for that matter, *is* faith?
- »» What is the meaning of life?
- »» How can people have true success and actually be happy?

These questions cover only a few of the basic concepts that I consider with you throughout this book. Ultimately, I hope to help you ask your own questions a little better, or a bit more deeply, and perhaps even come to some revelatory and satisfying answers. As the famous novelist James Thurber once pointed out, “It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all of the answers.” Asking the right questions well, and living with them, can enhance our lives.

