It's often said that everyone has a philosophy. It's also often said that philosophical musings are merely matters of opinion. But in very important ways, both of these assertions misrepresent philosophy. First, philosophy isn’t so much something you have; rather, it is something that you do. It is a process or activity, and a carefully crafted one at that. Second, when taking care to do philosophy well, it is unfair to say that philosophical judgments are merely matters of personal opinion. This chapter strives to reinforce these refined estimations of philosophy. The chapters that follow will further reinforce them. By the time you reach the end of the text, and with the help of some very notable philosophers from the history of philosophy, you should have a much better grasp of what philosophy is and how it is done. And as you work through the text, you’ll get a chance to watch—and think carefully about—some of your favorite films. What could be better than that?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon carefully studying this chapter, students should better comprehend and be able to explain:

- The ways in which philosophy, following the example of Socrates, can be distinguished from mere rhetoric and sophistry, and the value of philosophical exploration.
- A working definition of philosophy, including its primary sub-areas of philosophical exploration (especially metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics).
- Different kinds of arguments to employ and fallacies to avoid in (philosophical) reasoning.
- The debate about whether philosophical analysis can establish objectively true statements, and some arguments relevant to this debate.
- How Thank You for Smoking, Minority Report, and The Emperor’s Club can be employed to better understand and appreciate philosophy and the philosophical process.

philosophy: the intellectual activity of discerning and removing contradictions among nonempirical, reasoned beliefs that have universal importance, with the resulting benefit of achieving a greater understanding of the world and one’s place within it.
1.1 HISTORICAL SETTING

Gorgias (excerpt)\(^1\)

PLATO

Plato (427–347 BCE) is one the most important figures from the history of western philosophy. It is widely held that his Academy served as the model for modern universities. His greatest work is the Republic, which is an extended treatise on justice (among many other topics). Here we read an excerpt from one of his earlier dialogues; as is often the case, his famed teacher Socrates is the main character.

PREPARING TO READ
A Socrates and Gorgias attempt to define rhetoric. How would you define it?
B What is the most effective way to persuade someone of something?

Gorgias defines rhetoric

socrates: Gorgias, what is the art which you profess?
gorgias: Rhetoric, Socrates, is my art….
socrates: And are we to say that you are able to make other men rhetoricians?
gorgias: Yes, that is exactly what I profess to make them….
socrates: Very good then; as you profess to be a rhetorician, and a maker of rhetoricians, let me ask you, with what is rhetoric concerned: I might ask with what is weaving concerned, and you would probably reply, with the making of garments?
gorgias: Yes.
socrates: And music is concerned with the composition of melodies?
gorgias: It is….
socrates: Answer me in like manner about rhetoric: with what is rhetoric concerned?
gorgias: With discourse.
socrates: What sort of discourse, Gorgias? Such discourse as would teach the sick under what treatment they might get well?
gorgias: No.
socrates: Then rhetoric does not treat of all kinds of discourse?
gorgias: Certainly not.
socrates: And yet rhetoric makes men able to speak?
gorgias: Yes.
socrates: And to understand that about which they speak?
gorgias: Of course….
socrates: I am not sure whether I entirely understand you, but I dare say I shall soon know better; please answer me a question: you would allow that there are arts?…
gorgias: Yes.
socrates: And now let us have from you, Gorgias, the truth about rhetoric. Would you admit it to
be one of those arts which...fulfill all its ends through the medium of words?

gor: True.
soc: Words which do what? To what class of things do the words which rhetoric uses relate?
gor: To the greatest, Socrates, and the best of human things.
soc: But which are the greatest and best of human things? I dare say that you have heard men singing at feasts the old drinking song, in which the singers enumerate the goods of life, first health, beauty next, thirdly, as the writer of the song says, wealth honestly obtained.
gor: Yes, I know the song; but what of it?
soc: I mean to say that the producers of those things which the author of the song praises, that is to say, the physician, the trainer, the money-maker, will at once come to you, and first the physician will say: “O Socrates, Gorgias is deceiving you, for my art is concerned with the greatest good of men and not his.” And when I ask, Who are you? he will reply, “I am a physician.” And I shall say: do you mean that your art produces the greatest good? He will answer, “Certainly, for it is the greatest good and the best of all.” And after him the trainer will come and say, “I too, Socrates, shall be greatly surprised if Gorgias can show more good of his art than I can show of mine.” To him again I shall say, Who are you, honest friend, and what is your business? “I am a trainer,” he will reply, “and my business is to make people beautiful and strong in body.” When I am done with the trainer, there arrives the money-maker: “Consider Socrates,” he will say, “whether Gorgias or anyone else can produce any greater good than wealth.” And do you consider wealth to be the greatest good of man? “Of course,” will be his reply. And we shall rejoin: Yes; but our friend Gorgias contends that his art produces a greater good than yours. And then he will be sure to go on and ask, “What good? Let Gorgias answer.”

Now I want you, Gorgias, to imagine that this question is asked of you by them and by me. What is that which, as you say, is the greatest good of man, and of which you are the creator? Answer us.

gor: That good, Socrates, which is truly the greatest, being that which gives to men freedom in their own persons, and to individuals the power of ruling over others in their several states.
soc: And what would you consider this to be?
gor: What is there greater than the word which persuades the judges in the courts, or the senators in the council, or the citizens in the assembly, or at any other political meeting? If you have the power of uttering this word, you will have the physician your slave, and the trainer your slave, and the money-maker of whom you talk will be found to gather treasures, not for himself, but for you who are able to speak and to persuade the multitude.
soc: Now I think, Gorgias, that you have very accurately explained what you conceive to be the art of rhetoric; and you mean to say, if I am not mistaken, that rhetoric is the artificer of persuasion, having this and no other business, and that this is her crown and end. Do you know any other effect of rhetoric over and above that of producing persuasion?
gor: No: the definition seems to me very fair, Socrates; for persuasion is the chief end of rhetoric... Rhetoric is the art of persuasion in courts of law and other assemblies, as I was just now saying....

**Persuasion and knowledge**

soc: Then let me raise another question; is there such a thing as “having learned?”
gor: Yes.
soc: And there is also “having believed?”
gor: Yes.
soc: And is the “having learned” the same as “having believed,” and are learning and belief the same things?
gor: In my judgment, Socrates, they are not the same.
soc: And your judgment is correct. If a person were to say to you, “Is there, Gorgias, a false belief as well as a true?” you would reply, if I am not mistaken, that there is.
gor: Yes.
soc: Well, but is there a false knowledge as well as a true?
GOR: No.
SOC: Indeed; this again proves that knowledge and belief differ.
GOR: Very true.
SOC: And yet those who have learned as well as those who have believed are persuaded?
GOR: Just so.
SOC: Shall we then assume two sorts of persuasion, one which is the source of belief without knowledge, as the other is of knowledge?
GOR: By all means.
SOC: And which sort of persuasion does rhetoric create in courts of law and other assemblies? The sort...which gives belief without knowledge, or that which gives knowledge?
GOR: Clearly, Socrates, that which only gives belief.
SOC: Then rhetoric, as would appear, is the artificer of a persuasion which creates belief...but gives no instruction [knowledge]...?
GOR: True.
SOC: And the rhetorician does not instruct the courts of law or other assemblies...but he creates belief...; for no one can be supposed to instruct such a vast multitude...in a short time?
GOR: Certainly not.
SOC: Come, then, and let us see what we really mean about rhetoric; for I do not know what my own meaning is as yet. When the assembly meets to elect a physician or a shipwright or any other craftsman, will the rhetorician be taken into counsel? Surely not. For at every election he ought to be chosen who is most skilled; and, again, when walls have to be built or harbors or docks to be constructed, not the rhetorician but the master workman will advise; or when generals have to be chosen and an order of battle arranged,...then the military will advise and not the rhetoricians: what do you say, Gorgias?...
GOR: Socrates, if you only knew how rhetoric comprehends and holds under her sway all the inferior arts! Let me offer you a striking example of this. On several occasions I have been with my brother Herodicus or some other physician to see one of his patients, who would not allow the physician to give him medicine, or apply a knife or hot iron to him; and I have persuaded him to do for me what he would not do for the physician just by the use of rhetoric. And I say that if a rhetorician and a physician were to go to any city, and had there to argue in the assembly as to which of them should be elected state-physician, the physician would have no chance; but he who could speak would be chosen if he wished. In a contest with a man of any other profession the rhetorician more than any one would have the power of getting himself chosen, for he can speak more persuasively to the multitude than any of them, and on any subject. Such is the nature and power of the art of rhetoric.

Yet, Socrates, rhetoric should be used like any other competitive art, not against everybody—the rhetorician ought not to abuse his strength any more than a boxer or wrestler because he has powers which are more than a match either for friend or enemy; he ought not therefore to strike, stab, or slay his friends. Suppose a man to have been trained in the gymnasium and becomes a prize fighter and, he in the fullness of his strength, goes and strikes his father or mother... That is no reason why the trainers should be held in detestation or banished from the city. For they taught their art for a good purpose, to be used against enemies and evil-doers, in self-defense and not in aggression; others have perverted their instructions, and turned to a bad use their own strength and skill. But not on this account are the teachers bad, neither is the art in fault, or bad in itself; I should rather say that those who make a bad use of the art are to blame. And the same argument holds for rhetoric. For the rhetorician can speak against all men and upon any subject; he can persuade the multitude better than any other man of anything which he pleases, but he should not therefore seek to defraud the physician or any other artist of his reputation merely because he has the power. He ought to use rhetoric fairly, as he would also use his athletic powers. And if after having become a rhetorician he makes a bad use of his strength and skill, his instructor surely ought not on that account to be held in detestation or banished. For his teacher intended that he make good use of his instructions, but he abuses them. And therefore he is the person who ought to be held in detestation, banished, and put to death, and not his instructor...
Rhetoric, the masses, and the just person

soc: You say, Gorgias, that you can make any man, who will learn of you, a rhetorician?
gor: Yes.
soc: Do you mean that you will teach him to gain the ears of the multitude on any subject, and this not by instruction [knowledge] but by persuasion?
gor: Quite so.
soc: You were saying, in fact, that the rhetorician will have, greater powers of persuasion than the physician even in a matter of health?
gor: Yes, with the multitude at least.
soc: You mean to say, with the ignorant; for with those who know he cannot be supposed to have greater powers of persuasion.
gor: Very true.
soc: But if he is to have more power of persuasion than the physician, he will have greater power than he who knows?
gor: Certainly.
soc: And he who is not a physician must, obviously, be ignorant of what the physician knows.
gor: Clearly.
soc: Then, when the rhetorician is more persuasive than the physician, the ignorant is more persuasive with the ignorant than he who has knowledge? Is not that the inference?
gor: In the case supposed, yes.
soc: And the same holds of the relation of rhetoric to all the other arts. The rhetorician need not know the truth about things; he has only to discover some way of persuading the ignorant that he has more knowledge than those who know?
gor: Yes, Socrates, and is not this a great comfort? Without learning the other arts, but the art of rhetoric only, and yet to be in no way inferior to the professors of them?
soc: Whether the rhetorician is or not inferior on this account is a question which we will hereafter examine if the inquiry is likely to be of any service to us; but I would rather begin by asking, whether he is as ignorant of the just and unjust, base and honorable, good and evil, as he is of medicine and the other arts; I mean to say, does he really know anything of what is good and evil, base or honorable, just or unjust in them; or has he only a way with the ignorant of persuading them that he, not knowing, is to be esteemed to know more about these things than someone else who knows? Or must the pupil know these things and come to you knowing them before he can acquire the art of rhetoric? If he is ignorant, you who are the teacher of rhetoric will not teach him, this is not your business; but you will make him seem to the multitude to know them, when he does not know them and seem to be a good man when he is not. Or will you be unable to teach him rhetoric at all, unless he knows the truth of these things first?
gor: Well, Socrates, I suppose that if the pupil does chance not to know them, he will have to learn of me these things as well.
soc: Say no more, for there you are correct; and so he whom you make a rhetorician must either know the nature of the just and unjust already, or he must be taught by you.
gor: Certainly.
soc: And is not he who has learned carpentering a carpenter?
gor: Yes.
soc: And he who has learned music a musician?
gor: Yes.
soc: And he who has learned medicine is a physician, in like manner? He who has learned anything whatever is that which his knowledge makes him?
gor: Certainly.
soc: And in the same way, he who has learned what is just is just?
gor: To be sure.
soc: And he who is just may be supposed to do what is just?
gor: Yes.
soc: And must not the just man always desire to do what is just?
gor: That is clearly the inference.
soc: Surely, then, the just man will never consent to do injustice?
gor: Certainly not.
soc: And according to the argument the rhetorician must be a just man?
gor: Yes.
soc: And will therefore never be willing to do injustice?

gor: Clearly not.
soc: But do you remember saying just now that the trainer is not to be accused or banished if the boxer makes a wrong use of his boxing skills; and in like manner, if the rhetorician makes a bad and unjust use of rhetoric, that is not to be laid to the charge of his teacher, who is not to be banished, but the wrong-doer himself who made a bad use of his rhetoric is to be banished, was not that said?

gor: Yes, it was.
soc: But now we are affirming that the aforesaid rhetorician will never have done injustice at all?

gor: True.
soc: And at the very outset, Gorgias, it was said that rhetoric treated of discourse, not [like arithmetic] about odd and even, but about just and unjust? Was not this said?

gor: Yes.
soc: I was thinking at the time, when I heard you saying so, that rhetoric, which is always discours-
ing about justice, could not possibly be an unjust thing. But when you added, shortly afterwards, that the rhetorician might make a bad use of rhetoric I noted with surprise the inconsistency into which you had fallen;…

Enter Polus: Rhetoric as a talent

polus: I will ask; and do you answer me, Socrates, the same question which Gorgias, as you suppose, is unable to answer: What is rhetoric?
soc: Do you mean what sort of an art?
pol: Yes.
soc: To say the truth, Polus, it is not an art at all, in my opinion.
pol: Then what, in your opinion, is rhetoric?
soc: I should say a sort of experience [talent]…. pol: An experience [talent] in what?…
soc: In my opinion, the whole of which rhetoric is a part is not an art at all, but the habit of a bold and ready wit, which knows how to manage mankind…..

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What does Gorgias believe rhetoric is? Put his view into your own words.

2. According to Gorgias, to what extent are rhetoric instructors responsible for their student’s misdeeds? Do you agree with him? Explain.

3. What does Socrates believe rhetoric is? Put his view into your own words.

**1.2 DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

Philosophy, classically conceived, is concerned with abstract or conceptual issues that are universally important. This isn’t to say that empirical data is completely irrelevant to studying philosophy; philosophers who ignore relevant empirical data rarely derive plausible conclusions. In *Minority Report* John Anderton learns that the three precognitives, in fact, do not always agree about the details of a common prevision. This impacts his previous view that Precrime coheres with basic principles of justice. There are many real-world correlates to this fictional example. Nevertheless, the disciplines of science and philosophy remain substantively distinct. This is because philosophy “goes beyond” the empirical data—hoping to make sense of it—in the attempt to articulate basic conceptual categories that describe how things ultimately are or ought to be. Yet philosophy is not merely the study of nonempirical...
and universally important beliefs. It is concerned with articulating and defending plausible reasons supportive of their truth. Thus philosophy is also an activity. A vital part of this process is discovering contradictions among nonempirical and universally important beliefs (by asking pertinent questions) and removing them through logical analysis (thinking critically and creatively). This process, if carefully conducted, results in bolstering one’s reasons for thinking that some nonempirical and universally important belief is true.

This is why philosophy is not merely something you have, but something you do. Doing philosophy well facilitates greater awareness of the world around you, and a clearer understanding of yourself and your place within it. Consequently, doing philosophy can provide you with a great deal of wisdom about how thing ultimately are (or ought to be), and thereby provide the noblest of results. In this way, philosophers couldn’t disagree more with Nick Naylor from Thank You for Smoking when he asserts that philosophical questions are nothing but matters of “B.S.” (see Figure 1.1).

The issues and questions philosophers explore invariably fall within distinct categories, or sub-areas. Sometimes philosophers seek answers to fundamental questions about what exists and the ways things exist: Does God exist, and if so, what is God’s nature? Are human persons merely physical beings? Of what does freedom of the will consist? What makes someone the same person over time? Such questions fall in the category known as metaphysics. Sometimes philosophers ask questions about the nature of knowledge: What does it mean to know some fact, and which facts (if any) can be known? Does all of our knowledge spring from the same source, and, if so, what? Are there different kinds of knowledge? Such questions fall into the category known as epistemology. Sometimes philosophers ask questions about right and wrong: Is ethical truth dependent on cultural moorings? Are there any cross-culturally binding moral principles, and, if so, do they hold without exception? What sorts of character traits should I develop and which should I avoid? Such questions fall into the category known as ethics.

It is widely accepted that metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are among the most fundamental categories of philosophy, but there are others. Logic uniquely cuts across all the categories. What is an argument and what conditions must be met for it to be rationally persuasive? Aesthetics is the study of art and beauty: What makes a sculpture or painting beautiful, and are all such judgments merely subjective? Social-political philosophy is difficult to define succinctly, but it involves exploring the nature of rights and justice.

belief: the mental acceptance of a proposition as true.
metaphysics: one of the primary sub-categories of philosophy, concerned with the study of ultimate existence.
epistemology: one of the primary sub-categories of philosophy, concerned with the study of knowledge.
ethics: one of the primary sub-categories of philosophy, concerned with the study of right living.
logic: one of the primary sub-categories of philosophy, concerned with the study of proper reasoning.

FIGURE 1.1
Thank You for Smoking, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2005. Nick Naylor (Aaron Eckhart) appears before a Senate sub-committee meeting to answer questions about “Big Tobacco.”
What public institutions are required for a state to be just? What, if anything, authorizes governmental control in the first place? And there are various more specialized categories: philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history, to name just a few. By exploring issues germane to these categories, philosophers attempt to gain wisdom into some of life’s most profound questions, which speaks to the nobility of the philosophical process.

Philosophy and sophistry

Nick Naylor’s comment to his son that “if you argue properly, you’re never wrong” is not new. Regardless of how it is categorized, the belief that philosophy is merely “cleverly playing with words” goes back to the ancient Greeks. Socrates, Plato’s famed mentor, denied such notions, and strove at every turn to distance himself from sophistry and the rhetoricians who employed it. Socrates held that philosophers (unlike rhetoricians) pursue the truth of universally important nonempirical topics. He furthermore held that not all arguments are successful vehicles for this pursuit.

Philosophers unsurprisingly follow Socrates in his quest for truth. This process begins with achieving clarity about issues and concepts. So let us begin by getting clearer about “argument.” Philosophers interpret “arguing properly” as employing true statements that follow well-established rules of logic. However, Nick regularly employs a broader interpretation of “arguing properly”—one that falls in line with the sophists of ancient Greece. He typically means effectively implementing principles of rhetoric to win arguments. This is a skill (or talent), but not one that interested Socrates because “winning” an argument can involve nonrational processes and maneuvers. A rhetorician may conceivably “win” an argument even if the premises do not logically guarantee or support the conclusion. However, philosophical arguments only employ rational processes; no philosophical argument is successful if the premises fail to prove the conclusion—regardless of how artful the philosopher is with words.

Philosophers indeed engage in a kind of rhetoric, if by that is meant (roughly) the careful use of words and argumentation. But philosophers are not merely rhetoricians. Sophists invariably employ rhetoric hoping to selfishly benefit from changing the attitudes of those hearing/reading their words. Philosophers only employ rhetoric to carefully seek the truth; they hope to persuade only with knowledge via rational processes. Therefore, philosophers do not view rhetoric as good for its own sake. Argumentation is valuable because it proves to be an effective instrument in seeking the truth. If the truth is found, there is no guarantee that one additionally benefits; sometimes the truth hurts. The end goal—discovering truth in nonempirical universally important matters—is intrinsically valuable. Finding the truth is its own reward and no additional selfish or self-centered motivations are involved. The differences between philosopher and sophist are thus important, even if sometimes subtle—which is why Socrates spent so much time distancing himself from sophistry.

Arguments and rational persuasion

Philosophers attempt to rationally persuade one to accept a conclusion as true via logical argument. An argument in this sense consists of a group of propositions or statements. One of the statements is supposed to follow logically from the others. The truth of the
proved statement follows necessarily or with a high degree of probability (depending on the
type of the argument) as a result of the preceding statements. The statement whose truth
has been established is called the conclusion; the remaining statements—those providing
rational support for the conclusion—are called premises. The sort of logical analysis philos-
ophers perform begins with constructing an argument for some philosophically significant
position or belief. Constructing an argument invariably involves posing careful questions
and offering clarifications about the premises or conclusion. This is the process by which
philosophers attempt to marshal reasoned beliefs.

Some philosophical arguments successfully establish their conclusions, but others do not.
This is determined by criteria germane to well-established standards of logic. Because
there are two basic kinds of argument, deductive and nondeductive (inductive and abduc-
tive), the standards of success are different. For deductive arguments, the conclusion is
to follow necessarily from the premises. There are two essential aspects to deductive argu-
ments: validity and soundness. A valid argument is one in which the logical structure of
the argument guarantees that the conclusion must be true if the premises are true. If it is
possible for the conclusion to be false if the premises are true, then the argument is inva-
lid. Because validity tracks the structure of an argument, some deductive forms are always
valid, while others are always invalid. After determining whether an argument is valid, one
then proceeds to assess its soundness. A sound argument is valid and has only true prem-
ises. If a valid argument contains a false premise, it is unsound (and all invalid arguments
are by definition unsound).

A common example of a sound argument is: All men are mortal (first premise); Socrates
is a man (second premise); thus, Socrates is mortal (conclusion). Some philosophers prefer
to “stack” arguments, putting them in a sequential arrangement, with premises and conclu-
sion numbered. That is, with the dividing line between statements (2) and (3) representing
the word “therefore,” the previous argument would appear:

1. All men are mortal.
2. Socrates is a man.
3. Socrates is mortal.

Some philosophers prefer this arrangement because it is easier for (many) students to see
how the premises logically lead to the conclusion. In any event, if a deductive argument is
sound, then it is a rationally persuasive argument—one must, on pain of being irrational
and illogical, accept the conclusion of a sound argument (because the conclusion of a sound
argument must be true).

Steven Spielberg’s Minority Report raises multiple philosophically significant issues.
Based upon a short story by Philip K. Dick, Spielberg casts a futuristic, neo-noir yarn about
genetically altered human beings—“precognitives”—who can foretell future criminal activ-
ity. One cluster of questions is epistemological: Do the “precogs” indeed know what they
are foretelling? What is their cognitive access to the future? Can the future be known at all?
Even if the precogs themselves don’t know the future, perhaps they act like the eyes of the
Precrime police; just as our eyes provide us with justified beliefs of our physical surround-
ings, perhaps the precogs do the same regarding the immediate future. Does the Precrime
team know future events even if the precogs do not?

Another battery of issues pertains to social-political philosophy. The Precrime police
team is very efficient in apprehending “future murderers” before they go through with their
fatal deeds (see Figure 1.2). There hasn’t been a murder in the Washington DC area in six years. The future murderer is summarily “haloed,” convicted, and placed indefinitely in a stasis-tube. But it might be asked whether Precrime is an unjust public institution. The future murderers never receive their day in court, and, as the Justice Department representative Danny Witwer would remind us, the Precrime team arrests “people who have committed no crime.” Are the rights of so-called future murderers unduly violated? If Precrime is unjust, is this sufficient reason to shut it down?

Some philosophers have indeed argued that *Minority Report* portrays an unjust system of punishment. The deductive argument, grounded in worries about freedom, foreknowledge, and moral responsibility proceeds via the following six premises: (1) If the “precogs” know that a person will commit a future murder, then there are now truths about how the future will unfold; (2) if there are now truths about how the future will unfold, then the future must obtain in just that way; (3) if the “future murderer” must act in just the way the precogs have foreseen, then that person cannot choose otherwise than as the precogs have foreseen; (4) if the future murderer cannot choose otherwise than as the precogs have foreseen, then his (future) act is not performed freely; (5) if a future act is not performed freely, then the person performing it is not morally responsible for its occurring; (6) if a person is not morally responsible for what he or she does, then that person is unjustly punished for those acts. Premises (1) to (6) deductively lead to the following conclusion: (7) If the precogs know that a person will commit a future murder, then that person is unjustly punished for it.

The fact that arguments can become as involved as this one further explains why some philosophers prefer arguments to appear with numbered premises and conclusion in a “stacked” format. Nevertheless, if this argument is sound, then its conclusion must be true, and Precrime indeed represents an unjust system. Furthermore, if this argument is sound, then its conclusion serves as the basis from which to construct another argument, one for the conclusion that Precrime methodology should be significantly reformed if not simply disbanded. (Attempt to articulate this further argument for yourself.) From this, we discover another element of complexity in philosophical arguments: individual arguments can be interlinked so as to establish deeper or further relevant conclusions. This, in turn, again explains why “stacking” arguments might be preferable; doing so helps us to keep better track of multiple argument strands.
Before accepting that Precrime should be disbanded, or hastily accepting any conclusion, one must verify that all the premises of a valid argument are indeed true. Are there reasons for thinking that some of the premises are false? Philosophers have more work to do in determining this. If we discover that at least one premise is false, then this valid argument is rendered unsound. And, if an argument is unsound, then there is no reason for one to be rationally persuaded by this argument. Philosophers caution that any judgment about a deductive argument’s success or lack thereof—its being sound or unsound—must be rationally justified. However, Naylor disagrees. He takes the sophist approach of persuasion without rational justification. But the philosopher’s goal is not to (nonrationally) persuade you that the argument is sound merely through artful words or rhetorical flourish. The philosopher follows well-accepted rules of logic to establish the truth of the conclusion. This (again) highlights a significant difference between philosophers and sophists.

Not all philosophical arguments are deductive; some are nondeductive. Nondeductive arguments do not aspire to the ambitious standards of deductive arguments. Inductive arguments are one type of nondeductive argument (with abductive, or arguments to the best explanation, being the other). A successful inductive argument is such that the premises, if true, make the conclusion more likely true than not. This is (more or less) a matter of probability. If the conclusion is more probably true than not, assuming the truth of the premises, then the argument is strong. If the conclusion is not so established, then the argument is weak. If a strong argument has only true premises, then it is cogent. If it has at least one false premise, it is uncogent (and all weak arguments are by definition uncogent). Sometimes it is difficult to definitively gauge a nondeductive argument’s strength, but, unlike deductive arguments, the mere possibility that the conclusion is false is not sufficient to render it unsuccessful (uncogent).

Arguments by analogy are common inductive arguments. The basic idea of these arguments is that because two things (A and B) are so similar in various ways (the more the better), and we independently know something call it, P, about A, we can (inductively) conclude that P also truly applies to B. So, because my friend’s car is the same make, model, year, and engine type as the car I am considering buying, and my friend’s car gets good gas mileage, it (inductively) follows that I will get good gas mileage with this car. Assuming all the premises are true, this seems to be a cogent argument by analogy. Of course, not all arguments by analogy are successful. If an argument by analogy either fails to choose similarities relevant to the conclusion or fails to recognize an obvious and important dissimilarity between A and B, then the argument is weak.

An interesting argument by analogy is offered in Thank You for Smoking (scene 18, beginning at 1:19:05 into the film). During his congressional testimony, Senator Finistirre asks Nick whether the fact that the Academy of Tobacco Studies is funded primarily by Big Tobacco illicitly taints the Academy’s research findings due to a conflict of interests. Nick replies that this poses no more a conflict of interests than does Senator Finistirre’s accepting campaign contributions from political interest groups. The argument seems to be something like this: It’s not clear that Senator Finistirre’s receiving funds from interest groups, although possessing their own interests, illicitly impinge on his adequately representing his public constituency—the great State of Vermont. The Academy of Tobacco Studies, similar to Senator Finistirre, receives funds from an interest group that possesses its own interests (Big Tobacco). Thus, it’s not clear that the Academy doesn’t adequately represent its constituency—the general public regarding the effects of tobacco use. Whether this argument is cogent first depends on whether it’s strong. Its strength, recall, depends on two criteria.

**inductive argument:** a nondeductive argument in which the conclusion allegedly follows with a high degree of probability from the premises.

**strong argument:** an inductive argument such that, assuming the premises are true, the conclusion is more likely true than not.

**argument by analogy:** an inductive argument in which a conclusion about an object or event is allegedly established as probably true by noting similarities between it and another object or event.

**cogent argument:** a strong argument such that each premise is (in fact) true.
First, it must be determined whether the similarity Nick employs between Senator Finistirre and the Academy is relevant to establishing his conclusion. Second, it must be determined whether there are any obvious dissimilarities between the two that Nick overlooks. If neither criterion is problematic, then the argument is strong, and its cogency depends on whether all of its premises are true. (It would be a good Socratic exercise to determine this for yourself.)

**Logical fallacies**

Philosophy and sophistry can be further distanced by becoming familiar with logical fallacies. If it can be shown that an argument is fallacious, then we have excellent reason to believe that it cannot be successful in securing truth. Detecting a fallacy signals that the person employing it has not “argued properly” regardless of how artful his words are or how frustrating it might be to “mount a snappy comeback” (as witnessed by the difficulties Senator Finistirre or his aide Ron Goode often had in responding to Nick’s rhetorical ploys).

There are formal and informal fallacies, roughly (although perhaps not perfectly) corresponding to deductive and nondeductive arguments. Formal fallacies are easier to spot, at least with a little practice. So, first consider this valid argument:

1. If the precog previsions are infallible, then future murders are unjustly punished.
2. Precog previsions are infallible.
3. Future murderers are unjustly punished.

If the premises are true (and whether they are true is debatable), so must be the conclusion. Where the variable P stands in for ‘The precog previsions are infallible,’ and the variable Q stands in for ‘Future murderers are unjustly punished,’ the underlying logical form of this argument is: If P, then Q; P; thus, Q. Any argument with that structure, regardless of content, is valid. But now consider this similar, but fallacious argument:

1. If the precog previsions are infallible, then future murders are unjustly punished.
2. Precog previsions are not infallible.
3. Future murderers are not unjustly punished.

Even if both premises are true, it doesn’t necessarily follow that future murderers are not unjustly punished. Recall Witwer: “We are arresting people who have committed no crime.” Thus, Precrime could still be unjust but for reasons not directly related to the infallibility of previsions. The problem ultimately lies with the argument’s underlying logical form: If P, then Q; not-P; thus, not-Q. Any deductive argument with this structure is invalid; such arguments commit the formal fallacy of “denying the antecedent.”

Informal fallacies are more difficult to spot because they can only be determined by carefully investigating the content and context of the relevant argument, but these obviously differ for each argument. To begin grasping the significance of this, recall the deductive argument about Socrates’ mortality: all humans are mortal; Socrates is human; thus, Socrates is mortal. The logical structure of this argument is the same as: all mammals are warm blooded; whales are mammals; thus, whales are warm blooded. Both arguments are valid. But now consider: all plants are chlorophyll producers; all factories are plants; thus, all factories are chlorophyll producers. Because this argument has the same underlying logical form as the previous two—all A are B; (all) C are A; thus (all) C are B—it should also
be valid, as validity is dependent on form. But it’s false that all factories are chlorophyll producers, even if there is a sense in which both premises are true. Thus, this argument is unexpectedly invalid. Why? Careful inspection of the content shows that the term “plant” is used in two different senses. This is to commit the (informal) fallacy of equivocation. Any argument that shifts the meanings of its terms is thereby fallacious and cannot rationally justify its conclusion.

Perhaps because they are not easily spotted, informal fallacies are regularly used by rhetorical virtuosos like Nick. And Nick is a charismatic speaker. Recall his aside, “Do you know the guy in school who could get any girl? I’m him, on crack.” However, his persuasive successes are often partly due to his use of informal fallacies to “win” arguments. If you aren’t paying careful attention to how Nick’s argument proceeds given the context, it’s easy to become flustered similar to Finistirre or Goode.

Consider that Nick sometimes employs what is known as the red herring fallacy to “win” arguments. He provides the viewer with a clear example of it during a quiet conversation with his son (scene 10). Nick and Joey rehearse a hypothetical argument between two people disagreeing about whether vanilla tastes better than chocolate. Nick informs Joey that he can’t win that argument, so he subtly shifts the topic to the importance of being able to choose between vanilla and chocolate: “Well, I need more than chocolate, and for that matter more than vanilla. I believe we need freedom. And choice when it comes to our ice cream…is the definition of liberty.” Joey immediately recognized that Nick didn’t prove that vanilla was the best. Nick instructs his son, “I didn’t have to. I proved that you’re wrong, and if you’re wrong then I’m right.” This is a classic template for the red herring fallacy. Nick subtly changed the topic to something that, although not completely unrelated, isn’t really at issue. However, by getting his discussion partner to agree to his position on the new issue, he thereby fallaciously concludes that the original debate has been won. To Joey’s credit, he tells his dad, “But you still didn’t convince me.” Joey didn’t fall for the rhetorical trick. Nick smiles and replies, “Cause I’m not after you; I’m after them,” as he points to the unsuspecting passersby. Nick’s sophistical colors are clear; he strives to (nonrationally) persuade others for personal gain.

Another tactic that Nick regularly employs is an ad hominem fallacy. This fallacy occurs whenever someone critiques not the argument given, but the person who just gave it. For example, after listening to a brief lesson about the dangers of second hand smoke—presented by Brad, a medical doctor currently dating Nick’s ex-wife Jill—Naylor responds, “Brad, I’m Joey’s dad; you’re just a guy sleeping with his mom.” But the fact that Brad is romantically involved with Joey’s mother is irrelevant. It is very likely that Joey’s health is endangered by his being subjected to second-hand smoke during his weekends with Nick. Nick’s mean-spirited quip does nothing to change that fact.

Sometimes Nick’s ad hominem rebuttals take a slightly different form. Some of his responses attempt to make the person giving an argument appear hypocritical. Attempts to discredit an argument by putting its arguer in a bad light is to commit the tu quoque (“you too”) fallacy. For example, during the Dennis Miller talk show, Nick muses that Senator Finistirre called for the American tobacco fields to be slashed and burned on the same day that he appeared at Farm Aid bemoaning the downfall of the American farmer. But the Senator’s appearance at Farm Aid in no obvious way affects his argument that tobacco should no longer be produced in the US. This is analogous to a congressman who, being known for advocating drunk driving legislation reform, gets arrested for drunk driving. The fact of the congressman’s arrest doesn’t thereby negate his arguments for reforming the law. Nick is
similarly merely putting Finisterrre in a bad light without directly addressing his arguments for tobacco reform.

The movie portrays other characters committing informal fallacies. At the congressional hearing, just before Naylor testifies, Finistirre subpoenas Señor Herera to speak on behalf of the Latino community. Herera argues that the “current use of words instead of imagery is an obvious move against the non-English speaking population of the United States.” Because the skull and crossbones symbol “speaks loudly in all languages,” he concludes that those who oppose the new warning label (namely Big Tobacco) are ultimately saying “they want those who cannot read English to die.” Herera’s argument commits the straw man fallacy (which is similar to the red herring fallacy). This fallacy occurs when someone distorts an opposing view so that it is easier to critique; once the distorted position is easily knocked down (hence the name “straw man”), it is fallaciously concluded that the original (stronger) view has been discredited. It seems incredibly unlikely that dissent about the new warning label is grounded in blatant disregard for non-English speaking Americans. Spotting this fallacy renders Señor Herera’s testimony moot and uncovers his (thinly veiled) role as Finistirre’s lackey.

But perhaps the most striking examples of fallacious reasoning are portrayed by Joey Naylor. Joey’s sophistry is encouraged by his father, and Joey is a quick learner. Nick distinguishes between arguments and negotiations, reminding his son that the former can always be successful even if the latter are not. The difference lies in how persuasion is achieved. Jill denies Nick’s request that Joey accompany him on a California business trip. After Nick’s negotiation attempt fails, Joey appeals to his mother’s complicated emotional baggage regarding her ex-husband: “Mom, is it possible that you’re taking the frustration of your failed marriage out on me?” Jill is stunned. After claiming that much good could come out of the trip, Joey sympathizes, “But if you think it’s more important to use me to channel your frustration against the man you no longer love, I’ll understand.” We next see Jill waving goodbye to Joey as he piles into the car next to his father—bound for California. But Joey’s ploy succeeds only because of its psychological relevance. This is a kind of fallacious appeal to pity. Joey plays with his mother’s heartstrings rather than offering rational considerations for his accompanying his father.

Having a solid grasp of the different argument types and being able to spot various logical fallacies greatly improves one’s critical thinking skills. Nevertheless, those who are new to philosophy remain sympathetic to Nick’s sentiment that “you can argue anything you want.” Knowing the concepts of soundness and cogency is one thing, but are there actually any sound or cogent arguments? Can’t you argue anything all sorts of different ways such that what constitutes a sound argument varies depending on whom you ask? When investigating philosophically significant arguments, the intuition that “it’s all relative” seems particularly tenacious. Is there anything like an objectively true philosophically significant statement?

Subjectivity and objectivity in philosophy

Has anyone ever asked you to list all of your beliefs? This task is surprisingly difficult, but you might start with the easy ones, perhaps that each day lasts (about) 24 hours and that the earth has one natural satellite (the moon). You might describe yourself. Perhaps you like the taste of chocolate ice cream better than vanilla and you prefer rock to classical music. If you worked at this diligently, eventually the list would probably include more grandiose beliefs
about God’s existence, the nature of the afterlife, the importance of basic human rights, and moral judgments about abortion. Perhaps you believe that Nick is blameworthy for his rhetorical ploys to spin the truth about tobacco. Perhaps you believe Precrime is unjust and would vote no on the Precrime Initiative. Perhaps, upon watching The Emperor’s Club, you believe that Mr. Hundert leads a better life than Sedgewick Bell, despite the fact that Sedgewick is wealthier and more publically influential.

Yet what makes your beliefs—anyone’s beliefs—true? When it comes to cases like the length of one day or how many moons orbit the earth, the answer seems straightforward. For these beliefs, there is a fact “out in the world” that matches up to your belief about it. How things are, despite what individuals may feel about them, determines whether a day is 24 rather than 25 hours long, or whether the earth has one or two moons. But the situation seems crucially different for beliefs about the tastiness of ice cream flavors or whether rock music is worthy of your ear buds. If so, then perhaps it is the individual making the judgment—and not the “world out there”—that ultimately serves as the final arbiter about whether vanilla tastes better than chocolate or whether rock is preferable to classical music. These beliefs are true if and only if they accurately represent one’s (personal) feelings or sentiments.

Recall that some of your beliefs are philosophically significant. You no doubt believe that at least some of those beliefs are true. But what makes your philosophical beliefs (or judgments) true? Is there a fact (or set of facts) “out in the world” that makes them true? Is philosophical truth independent of belief in the way that ‘The earth has one moon’ is? Or, do individuals themselves somehow provide the ultimate criteria for philosophical truth? Are philosophical beliefs merely “true for you” but not “true for everyone?” After all, even though The Emperor’s Club seems to convey the message that Mr. Hundert leads a better life, some people might believe that Sedgewick Bell’s life is preferable. Some people believe God exists, but others do not. Some people believe abortion is always wrong, others disagree. Which of these beliefs are true and which are false? Are any of them false? If none of them are, is everything in philosophy merely a matter of what you believe? Is the only relevant fact of the matter how individuals feel about philosophical topics?

The concept of truth is one of the most fundamental and difficult philosophical issues. Most philosophers wince at any quick treatment of it. Nevertheless, let’s begin with the reminder that philosophers tend to call the things that can be true (or false) propositions. These are sometimes called assertions or statements. Statements are uttered in the attempt to describe how things are. Furthermore, as a rule, beliefs have propositional content. To say that you believe God exists is to accept the truth of the statement ‘God exists.’ Some statements are best understood as subjective truths—as we might say, they are “subjectively true”; however, others are best understood as objective truths (they are “objectively true”). Distinguishing statements in this way is primarily a matter of what kind of fact makes them true.

The idea that a statement is subjectively true is deceptively complex, but this is often understood to entail that its being true is essentially grounded in some feature specific to the person or persons who utter or believe it. These statements invariably report or express the opinions, sentiments, preferences, or attitudes of the speaker. If the statement accurately represents the speaker’s feelings about the topic, as it would unless the person was being dishonest, then the statement is true. (If the person is being dishonest and the statement doesn’t cohere with his or her actual feelings, then it is false.) And, again assuming honesty, these statements are believed by the speaker exactly because they accurately represent his or her feelings. So, subjective truths are person-specific in distinctive sorts of ways. In a moral judgment: a statement that is evaluative of ethically significant actions in terms of their being right or wrong (or good or bad).

subjectively true: a statement that is true merely because it is believed, often conveying some preference or sentiment of the speaker; an opinion is an example (although there may be others) of a subjective truth.

objectively true: a statement that is true even if it is not believed, often conveying some fact about the world; a scientific fact is an example (although they may be others) of an objective truth.
manner of speaking, on this account, truth is invented or created whenever someone comes to hold a new belief based on alterations to his or her relevant sentiments.

Care must be taken in developing the discussion of subjectivity any further. The potential problem is that some of our subjective (or “inside”) experiences are actually grounded in biological processes and responses to the world around us. Because human biology is largely uniform, so are many of our experiences, for example, the revulsion to rotting flesh. Some scholars stress the commonalities of our perceived experiences to argue that perceived experiences—and the sentiments arising from them—are not nearly as person-specific as the last paragraph suggests. However, other scholars remind us of the remaining qualitative differences among our perceptions, especially when the environmental inputs are largely identical, for example, whether one prefers the taste of vanilla over chocolate, Chevy over Ford, or Beethoven over Bach (or, caring nothing for classical music, even Sammy Hagar over David Lee Roth). How should we interpret these opinions, sentiments, or preferences?

It isn't implausible to assume that they have no obvious biological grounding. For the sake of the argument (and ease of discussion), the remainder of the chapter assumes that some personal preferences don't have convenient (or convincing) biological explanations, and, consequently, are person-specific.

We might say that the relevant sort of person-specific assertions (in part) define one's reality, occasioning the iconic “it's true for me that______.” So, assuming that there are such person-specific statements, nothing in addition to the speaker's personal feelings makes them true. Indeed, this might be their defining feature (thereby distinguishing them from the other subjective experiences introduced in the last paragraph). Furthermore, feelings or emotions are not the sorts of things that can be true or false in any impartial way. It may be (impartially) true that you feel positively about something, but your emotional reaction is not true in the same way that the earth has one moon or that two and two are four. There simply doesn't seem to be any person-neutral or impartial grounds for person-specific, subjective truths. There is no fact “out in the world” that makes these statements true. The only relevant fact of the matter is how you feel, but it is located completely “within” you. Thus, subjective truths tend to convey more about the speaker than about the subject matter being reported or discussed. Their truth (assuming honesty) is grounded solely in the sentiments of the speaker.

If a statement is objectively true, then its being true is essentially grounded in a feature of the world apart from the person who believes or utters it. Such statements are invariably uttered in the attempt to represent or report some fact “out in the world.” If such statements successfully “match up” with the relevant facts, then they are true (and if they don't, then they are false). These truths are thus importantly person-neutral and not grounded in the individual feelings or attitudes of the speaker. Because the world simply is as it is, these truths are not dependent upon anyone knowing, believing, or feeling positively about them. Even if we are currently unaware of some objective truth, it remains true. In this sense, objective truth is better described as discovered than invented. Sometimes one's discovery is as easy as peering into the night sky. Other times it involves realizing that if it is true that Socrates is human and true that all human beings are mortal, then it must also be true that Socrates is mortal. But, importantly, how you feel about celestial bodies or ancient Greek philosophers doesn't change the truth value of ‘The earth has one moon’ or ‘Socrates is mortal’.

The distinction between (person-specific) subjective and (person-neutral) objective truth leads some to argue that philosophical statements cannot be objectively true. The
argument begins with the common belief that there is a direct correlation between objective truth and being proven by science. If “being objectively true” is synonymous with “being true for everyone” or “being plain true,” it seems intuitive to equate objectivity with scientific fact. Everyone agrees that ‘Objects fall at 9.8 m/s²’, ‘Water is H₂O’, and ‘The earth has one natural satellite.’ Moreover, what better candidates for “being true for everyone” than those statements about which no one disagrees? The argument proceeds with a second premise that seems intuitively obvious to many: true philosophical statements, should there be any, are nothing like scientific truths. Scientific claims are grounded in observation and experiment; philosophy, almost by definition, does not lend itself to experimentation, at least not in any direct way. From these two premises, it (validly) follows that philosophical statements are not objectively true.

The conclusion to this argument serves as a springboard to another, leading to the further conclusion that philosophical statements, assuming they are true at all, are merely subjectively true. The second argument proceeds by noting that there seem to be only two kinds of truth, namely, (person-specific) subjective and (person-neutral) objective. That is, either truth is a matter of invention—a sort of reality of one’s own making—or it is a matter of discovery. These two alternatives seem mutually exclusive. By adding this premise to the conclusion of the first stage of the argument, it (validly) follows that philosophical statements, assuming they are true at all, are subjectively true. Consequently, any philosophically significant position whatsoever—God exists, abortion is always wrong, human persons are more than the sum of their physical parts—may be true, but only for those persons who believe it. No philosophical position is “true for everyone” or “just plain true.” Let’s call this the base-line argument for philosophical nonobjectivism.

Self-defeating claims and the law of noncontradiction

The baseline argument for philosophical nonobjectivism hinges on its first premise: If a statement is objectively true, then it is scientific in nature. The problem with the argument is that it seems its first premise cannot be true, exactly because it is not a scientific claim. This premise is ironically flawed in that it cannot meet its own requirement for being (objectively) true. Philosophers sometimes call such claims self-defeating; all self-defeating claims possess a similar ironic flaw. Consider the following example; let’s call it (E):

(E) This sentence cannot be understood in English.

Note two important observations about (E). First, it is (obviously) expressed in the English language. Second, its intended meaning is readily graspable. Putting these two facts together entails that (E) cannot be true. In a manner of speaking, it implodes given its own meaning. It is self-defeating; any (initial) reason to think that (E) might be true actually results in (E) proving itself false.

The first premise of the base-line argument suffers from a similar ironic flaw. Because it is supposed to be an objectively true claim, but it is philosophical (and not scientific) in nature, it follows that it cannot be true. If the statement were true, it would then provide a criterion for objective truth that all statements—including itself—must meet; however, it fails to meet that criterion. That it fails the proposed criterion entails that it cannot be true. Therefore, this premise cannot be true, entailing that the base-line argument cannot be sound. So, the argument ultimately fails to establish philosophical nonobjectivism.
Perhaps this result shouldn’t be too surprising. The conclusion to the first stage of the base-line argument is equivalent to:

\[(N) \text{ No philosophical statement is objectively true.}\]

Those who assert (N) intend it to be an objectively true statement about the nature of philosophy. It is supposed to be “just plain true” that when it comes to philosophy, truth is merely a matter of what you believe. But (N) suffers from a now familiar ironic flaw. Note that it is a philosophical claim—a philosophical claim about philosophy. If (N) were true, then there would be at least one objectively true philosophically significant statement, namely itself. But (N) entails that there are no objectively true philosophical statements. Thus, (N) cannot be (objectively) true. It is self-defeating, and no self-defeating claim can be true. But if (N) cannot be objectively true, then it cannot accurately describe the nature of philosophy; accordingly, it presents no difficulties for believing that some philosophical statements are objectively true.7

The success of the criticism leveled at (N) hinges on its being offered as an objective truth. It is thus initially tempting to contend that (N) should be rather interpreted as a subjective truth. In this way, (N) is only “true for them”—those who believe it—thereby circumventing the self-defeating criticism. However, this shift with regard to (N) serves only to undercut the original reason for asserting it. If (N) is understood to be merely subjectively true, then it only describes something about the person who believes it. It no longer describes philosophy as it actually is. It would be then akin to declaring “Of all the pieces of philosophy, I like subjectivism the best.” But whether someone likes or prefers philosophical subjectivism is no reason whatever to think that philosophical statements, in themselves, cannot be objectively true.

Accordingly, regarding the question of whether some philosophical statements are objectively true or whether all of them are (merely) subjectively true, it is far from obviously true that the latter position can be established. On the one hand, in order to establish that philosophy is merely subjective, there must be a persuasive person-neutral reason for thinking that it is. This reason, whatever it might be, must objectively support truth of philosophical subjectivism. But any such reason would be philosophically significant, forcing the philosophical subjectivist to accept an objectively true philosophically significant statement. Thus any reason for thinking philosophy is inherently subjective renders the thesis self-defeating. On the other hand, if one attempts to establish philosophical subjectivism through subjective, person-specific preferences, this only serves to provide information about the speaker’s preferences and nothing about philosophy or philosophical statements in themselves. Therefore, it seems impossible to substantiate the belief that objectively true philosophical statements do not exist, no matter how commonly held this belief is.

There are two interesting immediate ramifications of this conclusion. The first is that when someone uses the phrase, “Well, it’s true for me that _____” when asserting something about how things are “out there” in the world, this is often a misleading way of asserting, “I believe that _____” regarding the world “out there.” So, when you are not merely referring to some internal psychological state of yours, it is more accurate to speak of your beliefs about how things are and not about “what is true for you.” The goal then becomes attempting to determine via rational means whether your beliefs about the world are, in fact, true. Second, given that (philosophical) subjectivism cannot be true, sophists such as Nick Naylor or Gorgias cannot avail themselves to it when attempt-
ing to persuade you to adopt some belief. If the world “out there” is the final arbiter of what is true and what isn’t, then it simply cannot be that “all answers are correct”; in this way, not all arguments are successful. Moreover, if all there were to truth is how things appear to individuals, then getting others to believe as you do—regardless of how this is accomplished—would undoubtedly serve your best interest. Reconsider the importance Gorgias places on honing this ability:

What is there greater than the word which persuades the judges in the courts, or the senators in the council, or the citizens in the assembly, or at any other political meeting? If you have the power of uttering this word, you will have the physician your slave, and the trainer your slave, and the money-maker of whom you talk will be found to gather treasures, not for himself, but for you who are able to speak and to persuade the multitude.

Armed with the knowledge that truth is not merely subjective, one is in a better rational position to avoid becoming the “slave” of Gorgias or Naylor—regardless of how artful each is with “the word.”

The analysis of the debate about philosophy and objectivity also serves to substantiate what is known as the law of noncontradiction. The law of noncontradiction is a fundamental principle of logic wherein a meaningful statement and its negation cannot be both true and false simultaneously. It uncontroversially applies to empirical disputes. It cannot be (simultaneously) that famed X-Files actor David Duchovny is both exactly six feet tall and not exactly six feet tall; Duchovny must be one or the other, but not both. We now have reason for believing that the law of noncontradiction also holds for nonempirical disputes. It cannot be that God exists and does not exist at the same time. If so, then there is an objective truth to the matter about God’s existence: either God exists or God doesn’t exist. It may not be currently known which of these alternatives is true, but it is currently known that, taken together, they cannot both be true and they cannot both be false. It must be that one of these options, objectively speaking, is true and the other is false. Therefore, in a manner of speaking, there can be objective truths in philosophy even if we have yet to determine all the truths from the falsehoods.

Although the law of noncontradiction all by itself does not inform us as to which specific philosophical statements are true and which are false, it seems that logical analysis can. One way to determine the objective truth of a philosophical statement is to make it the conclusion of a sound argument. Recall that conclusions to sound arguments must be true. This also pertains to philosophically significant arguments. Therefore, while the law of noncontradiction guarantees objectivity in philosophy generally, sound argumentation provides a means for discovering which specific philosophical statements are, in fact, objectively true. Moreover, once we are convinced that philosophical statements can be objectively true, it is also significant to determine which are probably true. Thus deductive and inductive arguments seem to be effective tools for discovering which philosophical statements are true. The more careful the argument, the more likely it is that we are correct in thinking that one philosophical statement is indeed (probably) true rather than another.

Duchovny’s The X-Files character Fox Mulder is renowned for asserting “the truth is out there”; indeed, this statement has become iconic in popular culture. Mulder intended this statement to describe those truths that were kept hidden from the public by secret government organizations. However, as we have just seen, Mulder’s statement also pertains to philosophical topics—the truth is out there, even about philosophy. Thus, there is something to discover via philosophical analysis. Indeed, this fact—there are philosophical truths to be
discovered—is your first philosophical discovery! This sustains the quest to discover more. We, therefore, have excellent reason for thinking that studying philosophy can lead to additional insights into how the world is and our place within it. In some ways, the remainder of this text will be a sustained exercise in attempting to accomplish just this—with the help of a few movies. With good fortune, this exercise will also bring you closer to being a lover of wisdom, that is, a philosopher.

The example of Socrates

In *The Emperor’s Club*, Mr. William Hundert advises one of his first-year students, “Follow the path, Mr. Masoudi, walk where the great men before you have walked… It’s better for you.” On its face, Hundert, St. Benedict’s beloved Assistant Headmaster and Western Civilization professor (see Figure 1.3), is simply requesting that Masoudi use the sidewalk rather than tearing up the quad lawn. On a deeper level, however, Hundert’s words provide the thematic backdrop for the entire film: By exploring how great persons of the past led their lives, we can learn valuable insights into how to lead ours in the present.

As Hundert is well-aware, Masoudi—and the rest of us—can do no better than to follow Socrates’ example. Some philosophers are important for what they write: Plato’s *Republic*, Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, and Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* quickly come to mind. However, Socrates wrote almost nothing. His incalculable contribution to philosophy—and arguably history—is how he lived. His reverence for the pursuit of truth and the philosophical process in seeking insights into the human condition informed almost everything he did.

There is no better way to learn about Socrates than reading Plato’s early dialogues: *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*. In this way, you could learn about him yourself, which coheres with Socrates’ view of education and knowledge acquisition. For now, a brief synopsis will have to suffice. Socrates, like his father, was a stone cutter and (perhaps) a sculptor. He was not particularly attractive and had few material possessions. But Socrates saw himself as the “gadfly” of Athens, buzzing about public areas keeping Athenians “on their toes”
regarding their beliefs and behaviors. He was prone to ask his fellow citizens, especially those of influence, important but difficult questions about the nature of justice, virtue, and righteousness. Socrates believed that the question-and-answer (and follow-up question) approach was imperative to discovering truths about the human condition. Because each of us is human, he believed nothing could be more important than this quest.

Yet Socrates’ quest led to confrontations with local authorities. In defense of himself, he explains to his fellow Athenians:

As long as I have breath and strength I will not give up philosophy and exhorting you and declaring the truth to every one of you whom I meet, saying, as I am accustomed, ‘My good friend… are you not ashamed of caring so much for the making of money and for fame and for prestige, when you neither think nor care about wisdom and truth and the improvement of your soul [psyche]?’ If he disputes my words and says that he does care about these things, I shall not at once release him and go away: I shall question him and cross-examine him and test him. If I think he has not attained [human] excellence, though he says that he has, I shall reproach him for undervaluing the most valuable of things, and overvaluing those that are less valuable. This I shall do to everyone whom I meet, young or old, citizen or stranger… For I spend my whole life in going about and persuading you all to give your first and greatest care to the improvement of your souls, and not till you have done that to think of your bodies or your wealth.9

Socrates was on trial because some politically influential Athenians seemingly believed that by his example (which, they claimed, often included the sophistical ploy of “making the weaker argument appear to be the stronger”) he was corrupting the youth. These people did not appreciate his self-proclaimed role as gadfly and were willing to finally rid themselves of Socrates even if the charges against him were spurious.

Although Socrates’ life was at stake, he stayed the course, thereby again demonstrating by example the importance of seeking human excellence. For Socrates: “A man who is good for anything should not calculate the chance of living and dying. He should only consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong and acting the part of the good man or of a bad man” (28b). Thus, for Socrates, whether he might be found guilty and executed did not truly matter. All that mattered for him was that he was doing the right thing by upholding the noblest of values—pursuing human excellence. To his unappreciative accusers, he declares, “If I tell you that no greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day and the other matters about which you have heard me arguing and examining myself and others, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, then you will believe me still less” (38a). But this is exactly what Socrates believed. For human beings to exist and not seek the truth about human excellence was not to live. This pursuit trumps all others, including wealth, fame, and influence.

*The Emperor’s Club* arguably offers a rendition of the rift between Socrates and his accusers in the form of the strained interactions between Mr. Hundert and his student Sedgewick Bell. Hundert aspires to aid the intellectual and emotional maturity of his students by immersing them in the lives of great men from the past. During one particularly inspirational classroom moment, he explains, “Aristotle, Caesar, Augustus, Plato, Cicero, Socrates—giants of history, men of profound character. Men whose accomplishments surpassed their own lifetimes, and survive even into our own. Their story is our story.”10 Each student was mesmerized, all except young Sedgewick Bell. Hundert strives to connect with reticent Bell. He succeeds, for a time, by inspiring Bell to compete for the coveted Julius
Caesar prize. Bell studies diligently and his performance improves. During the final round, however, Hundert catches Bell cheating, simply because he thought he could get away with it, and it would ensure victory of the most prestigious award at St. Benedict’s.

Decades later, a grown Sedgewick Bell contacts St. Benedict’s and offers to bestow upon the school its largest ever donation on the condition that Mr. Hundert agree to emcee another Mr. Julius Caesar contest with the same three finalists. It appears that Bell wishes to make amends after all these years. Bell and the rest of his classmates gather on his company’s estate (willed to him by his father). Everyone applauds Mr. Hundert as he begins asking questions from Greek and Roman history. Again, Masoudi is the first finalist to bow out, leaving Deepak Metha (now a Classics professor at Columbia) and Bell to compete for the crown. Soon, Hundert again discovers that Bell is cheating. Hundert is absolutely crestfallen. Although Metha wins again, Bell uses the event to announce his bid to become Senator—following in his father’s footsteps—running on a platform that features the importance of education. As the evening draws to a close, Bell affirms to the crowd that Mr. Hundert’s “virtue is a beacon of light.”

Hundert and Bell inadvertently meet in the men’s restroom after the competition. Hundert turns to his former student and solemnly admits that he has failed Sedgewick as a teacher. Yet Hundert hazards one last lecture: “All of us, at some point, are forced to look at ourselves in the mirror and see who we really are. When that day comes for you, Sedgewick, you will be confronted with a life lived without virtue, without principle, and for that I pity you.” Unmoved, Sedgewick responds: “Who out there gives a shit about your principles and your virtues? I mean, look at you. What do you have to show for yourself? I live in the real world where people do what they need to do to get what they want. If it’s lying and if it’s cheating, then so be it.” The message of the movie is clear: Sedgewick has become blind to the deeper truths that Hundert has attempted to embody and convey to his students, and Sedgewick is the worse because of it; he undervalues the most important of things and overvalues things that lack true importance. Sedgewick is arguably analogous to Socrates’ accusers: Each was led by pursuits of fame, wealth, and political influence, and each cared very little whether he was acting as the good or bad man; each gave little thought to the care of his soul.

Socrates seemingly held that “caring for one’s soul” is tantamount to becoming an excellent human being. For Socrates, the pursuit of human excellence—becoming an excellent human being—is analogous to those who pursue excellence in carpentry, music, or medicine. Furthermore, just as excellence in carpentry, music, or medicine cannot be achieved without knowledge, the same is true of human excellence. Once the relevant sort of knowledge is firmly in place, one who has become an excellent doctor, for example, invariably acts accordingly and important and beneficial results obtain. Analogously, once knowledge regarding human excellence is firmly in place, one who has become an excellent human being invariably acts accordingly—in all facets of life—and thus truly important and beneficial results obtain. This begins to explain Socrates contention in the Gorgias that “he who has learned what is just is just . . . and the just man always desires to do what is just” (460b).

Socrates pursued human excellence, in part, by entering into dialogue with almost everyone he met. Upon beginning a conversation, Socrates would soon masterfully find an underlying assumption about a philosophically significant topic. Socrates would beg his discussion partner to explain and define a term pertinent to the assumption, for example, “What is justice?” or “What is piety?” The discussion partner typically offers a definition, sometimes smugly, to help rid Socrates of his ignorance. Socrates would, in turn, ask a few
exploratory and clarifying questions about the offered definition. This led Socrates and his discussant to carefully examine the proposed definition, and, invariably, they discover that it is somehow rationally unacceptable (typically because it involves some sort of contradiction). Socrates then invites his discussion partner to offer a second definition and the process begins all over again. Eventually, the discussion partner typically gives up without any definitive resolution to the debate. Plato’s message in ending the dialogues in this way is fairly clear: We should not act as Socrates’ dialogue partners; we should remain steadfast in engaging Socrates because few, if any, pursuits could be more important.

For as influential as Socrates is to the history of philosophy, it must be admitted that Socratic dialogue, regardless of how carefully conducted it is, does not often provide direct knowledge about philosophical topics. However, it is extremely effective at bringing one indirectly closer to the truth by realizing that some beliefs are simply indefensible. Socrates was fully aware of the limitations and benefits of his dialogues with others. This holds the key to understanding better the wisdom of Socrates. Socrates was not wise because he was in possession of a great many insights into the human condition. In fact, he often professed his ignorance about the specifics of human excellence. Rather his wisdom was that, even though there were many things he didn’t fully understand, he believed insights into the human condition could be ascertained, and because nothing could be more important than gaining such knowledge, we must help each other get as close to the truth as we possibly can. With enough time and effort, perhaps we come to know of what human excellence consists. Socrates invites us to walk the path.

If Mr. Hundert, paraphrasing Socrates, is correct that living well—and not merely living—is truly important, how will you do that? It is almost—as if Mr. Hundert is asking you: What path will you walk? What will be your contribution? How will history remember you? These questions are arguably among the most important questions there are. Hopefully, you will be in a much better position to begin answering them as a result of studying—of “doing”—some philosophy. I invite you to begin with the chapters that follow.

1.3 FILMS

**Thank You for Smoking** (2005)

**DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER:** JASON REITMAN

**Plot summary**

*That’s the beauty of argument; if you argue correctly, you’re never wrong.*

Nick Naylor, the vice president of the Academy of Tobacco Studies, informs the public about all the research performed in the investigation of the effects of tobacco. He regularly appears on television and often does newspaper and magazines interviews. But today, he appears before his son’s grade school class to explain his job. He informs Joey’s classmates that he is a bit like a movie star; he talks for a living—on behalf of cigarettes. A girl volunteers that her mommy believes cigarettes kill. Immediately, Nick retorts, “Really, is your mommy a doctor, or a scientific researcher of some kind?” When the blond-haired cherub answers “no,” Nick quickly concludes, “Well, she doesn’t exactly sound like a credible
expert now, does she?” Nick clarifies that it’s good to listen to parents, but “there will always be people trying to tell you what to do and what to think.” He is merely pointing out “that when someone tries to act like some sort of an expert, you can respond, ‘Who says?’” A puzzled little boy calls out, “So cigarettes are good for you?” The teacher jumps out of her chair: “No!” Nick further clarifies: “That’s not what I’m getting at; my point is that you have to think for yourself.” The children would never accept simply being told that chocolate was dangerous. So, Nick suggests that they “should find out for themselves” about cigarettes.

**BOX 1.1 INSIDE THANK YOU FOR SMOKING**

*Thank You for Smoking* (92 minutes; rated R for adult language and some sexual content) raises many interesting moral issues, including whether there are ethical constraints on how a person should employ arguments and rhetoric. Along the way, it provides engaging (and sometimes humorous) examples of fallacious arguments and rhetorical devices. Being able to spot these allows one to be a better critical thinker.

To get a sense of how the movie portrays these issues, begin with scenes 2 and 3, continuing to 13:05 into scene 4. Scene 2 begins roughly at 5:50 into the film, with a white screen transitioning into a television studio audience. At 13:05 of scene 4, you’ll see Joey (Cameron Bright) falling asleep on his dad’s lap. Then go to scene 9, which begins at 31:29. Here Joey has a discussion with his mother. Continue watching until 32:20, where Joey gets in the car with Nick (Aaron Eckhart) and Jill (Kim Dickens) waves goodbye. Skip ahead to scene 10, which begins at 37:48 with a shot of Santa Monica Yacht Harbor Cafes. Pay close attention to the conversation between Joey and Nick until 39:45, where Joey and Nick enjoy ice cream on a Ferris wheel. Next go to scene 12, beginning at 51:06. This scene opens with a white screen transitioning into Finistirre (William H. Macy) and his aide walking down some stairs; watch until 53:25, where you’ll see a cutaway shot of an airplane in flight. Finally, go to scene 18, and continuing watching to 1:25:07 of scene 19. Scene 18 begins roughly at 1:15:37 with a shot of the Senate hearing room. At 1:25:07 of scene 19, you’ll see Nick’s response to B.R. (J. K. Simmons) offering him his job back. Watching these scenes, along with reading the plot summary carefully, may give you a sufficient grasp of the movie.

Yet your instructor might show you the movie in its entirety or assign it to be watched outside of class. (If the latter, she might assign you to answer the “trivia” questions from Box 1.2). Either way, a good way to proceed is to watch until scene 8, 30:55 into the film. (There is a fade to black here.) Stop to discuss or reflect on the movie. Skip ahead to scene 9 (thereby omitting the few R-rated shots of Nick and Heather [Katie Holmes] alone together) and continue until scene 12, 53:25 into the film. Stop here for additional discussion or reflection on the movie. Skip ahead to scene 13 (again omitting some intimate moments between Nick and Heather), finish watching the film, and discuss or reflect on it as a whole.

After school, Nick and Joey spend the evening together, as they do almost every weekend since the divorce. Joey looks up and asks his dad for help with his homework, an essay to
explain why America has the best government. Nick, after expressing some scorn about the assignment, indignantly asks whether America indeed has the best government in the world and what the phrase “best government” might mean in the first place. Joey initially rolls his eyes; however, he becomes intrigued when Nick claims that the question calls for a “B.S.” answer. Nick reiterates, “Because even if America had the best government, there’d be no way to prove it, and definitely not in two pages.” Nick assures Joey that he can write pretty much whatever he wants; any answer will be correct.

Nick is summoned by the “Captain”—the last great man of tobacco and founder of the Academy of Tobacco Studies. The Captain is famous for introducing filters in 1952 after Reader’s Digest slammed cigarettes for being unhealthy. The Captain wishes to speak to Nick about the idea of bribing Hollywood producers to show actors smoking on screen. (This was Nick’s idea, but Nick’s boss B. R. seems to have taken credit for it.) The Captain authorizes the Hollywood plan and Nick’s (other) idea of promoting an anti-teen-smoking campaign to the tune of 50 million dollars (so long as it’s not too persuasive chuckles the Captain).

Nick meets weekly with his “colleagues” and kindred spirits Polly Bailey and Bobby Jay Bliss for lunch. The three jointly represent the chief spokespeople for the alcohol, tobacco, and firearms industries. Polly works for the Moderation Council and somehow managed to have the Pope endorse red wine. Bobby Jay works for S.A.F.E.T.Y.—the society for the advancement of firearms and effective training for youth. Bobby recounts his recent interview with the Washington Post regarding the latest “disgruntled postman.” Bobby asked the reporter: “Now, if a plane crashes on account of pilot error, do you blame the Boeing Corporation?” Polly and Nick agree that this was a good response, but Polly and Bobby advise Nick not to meet with reporter Heather Holloway. Bobby Jay reminds Nick that beautiful female reporters have ways of obtaining information.

Joey accompanies Nick on a business trip to California. They meet Jeff Megall, an influential Hollywood agent. It’s rumored that Megall invented product placement in movies. Nick asks Megall if he is concerned about the “health issue” associated with cigarettes. Megall reassures Nick: “I’m not a doctor…Whatever information there is exists; it’s out there. People will decide for themselves…It’s not my role to decide for them. It’d be morally presumptuous.” But Megall also advises that the character seen smoking should be from the future, a time when the health thing has blown over and smoker and nonsmoker live in perfect harmony. Luckily, there is a science fiction picture (starring Brad Pitt and Catherine Zeta-Jones) looking for co-financing. Perhaps Big Tobacco would be interested?

If your instructor assigns the film to be watched outside of class, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. On what television talk show does Nick appear at the very beginning of the film?
2. Who taught the Captain the secret to making his favorite drink (mint julep)?

(continued)
Nick’s next stop is a guest spot on the Dennis Miller talk show. The other guest (via remote link) is Nick’s arch nemesis Senator Ortolan Finistirre, who is currently leading a crusade against Big Tobacco. They are to discuss Finistirre’s proposal to place a skull and crossbones label on every pack of cigarettes sold in the US. After opening volleys against each other’s position, Miller interrupts them to hear from a caller. The caller informs everyone that he will soon dispatch Nick Naylor from this earth for all of the pain and suffering he has caused as a lobbyist for Big Tobacco.

The threat was not idle. Back in DC, Nick is abducted by men in a white van. They slap dozens of nicotine patches on his bare skin and leave him for dead. Nick awakes in a hospital room. His friends and family are there, including the Captain via remote link. Nick’s doctor frankly informs Nick: “No nonsmoker could have withstood the amount of nicotine in your bloodstream; I hate to say it, but cigarettes saved your life.” Things only get worse for Nick. Heather’s article is published. It divulges a great deal of information, including things said while she and Nick were intimate. Nick asks her, “How can you do this to me?” and she answers, “For the mortgage.” Nick is professionally ruined. B.R. tells him: “Your job relied on your ability to keep secrets and spin the truth.” B.R. summarily fires Nick. The Academy removes his belongings and the FBI discontinues its search for his kidnappers. He locks himself in his apartment.

Nick eventually makes a public appearance on Capitol Hill. In front of a congressional committee, Nick (finally) admits to the dangers of cigarette smoking, but adds, “Sir, I don’t just see the point of a warning label for something people already know.” If a skull and crossbones is called for on items dangerous to the public’s health, then they should also appear on airplanes, automobiles and foods high in cholesterol—“the real demonstrated number one killer in America.” Finistirre scoffs at the implication; another Senator again redirects. He reminds Nick that the warning imagery is really for those who don’t know about cigarettes: the children. Nick pauses, but carefully explains that it is the job of teachers and especially parents to warn children about the dangers of cigarettes so that one day, they can choose for themselves. Finistirre becomes agitated. He inquires: On your son’s 18th birthday, will you share a cigarette with him? Nick looks Finistirre in the eye: “If he really wants a cigarette, I’ll buy him his first pack.”

3. What is the name of the Captain’s airplane?
4. Where do Nick and reporter Heather Holloway first meet?
5. How much money do Brad Pitt and Catherine Zeta-Jones require to smoke together on screen?
6. When does Jeff Megall sleep?
7. What brand of cigarette did Marlboro Man Loren Lutch smoke?
8. What color sports coat does each of the Captain’s pallbearers wear?
9. What nickname (via Newsweek) does Joey call his dad?
10. Complete this sentence: The great state of Vermont will not apologize for ________.
Discussion questions

1. Is Nick a good father to Joey? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

2. Are some jobs (or careers) morally unacceptable? If so, does Nick have one of them? Explain your answers.

3. At the Congressional hearing, Nick implicitly argues that, by putting poison labels on packs of cigarettes, the US government would be bound to put poison labels on all consumer goods dangerous to our health (scene 18, roughly 1:20:20 to 1:21:45). Senator Finistirre scoffs at this position. With whom do you agree and why?

4. At the very end of the film, Nick claims, “Michael Jordan plays ball, Charles Manson kills people, and I talk; everyone’s got a talent” (scene 20, roughly 1:27:10). Is there something morally dubious (suspicious or suspect) about Nick’s claim? Explain.

5. What seems to be the basic moral message of the film?


Director: Steven Spielberg
Screenwriter: Scott Frank
(based on a short story by Philip K. Dick)

Plot summary

Imagine a world without crime… Within a year, Precrime has effectively stopped murder in our nation’s capital. Now Precrime can work for you.

In 2046, the US homicide rate reaches epic proportions. But in the same year, the US government authorizes a federal grant to conduct experiments in “precrime.” By 2049, the Precrime unit is operational. By 2054, the pilot Precrime unit in Washington, DC, runs so effectively that homicide, at least within a 200-mile radius, has become a thing of the past. The program is a success, and Precrime is about to go national. If the pending national referendum vote is favorable, it will.

Precrime is the latest advance in criminal science. The police can now “see” homicides before they actually happen. In fact, the police “see” the homicides through the eyes of others, namely the “precognitives.” The three “precogs,” as they are commonly known, are accidents of genetic research and advancement. To some, however, the accidents were unfortunate at best. The precogs are the children of “neurorine” addicts, inflicted with a condition called Renning’s syndrome as a result of their parents’ addiction. The syndrome has grave effects upon a child’s cerebral cortex. The world’s top geneticists, in particular Dr. Iris Hineman, work to aid the children. However, for some of the children the “cure” afflicts them with a further unique condition, the ability to see the future—and more importantly, the ability to predict, with seemingly absolute certainty, homicides that are about to take place.

John Anderton is the chief of the Washington, DC, Precrime unit. Anderton’s supervisor, Lamar Burgess, informs him that the Justice Department, in the person of Danny Witwer, will soon visit the Precrime division. Before Precrime goes national, the Justice
Department wants to ensure that it runs as smoothly and effectively as possible. The primary concern is whether the system is infallible; if it is not, then the Precrime division could arrest innocent people—those who have committed no crime and will not commit a crime, at least not the one the precogs claim they will commit. Because Precrime police science is grounded in the idea that murders should be stopped before they happen, “previsions” are the only “evidence” the Precrime police have to make arrests; therefore, the precogs can never be wrong. If they are, then Precrime law enforcement seems unjust.

Minority Report (145 minutes; rated PG-13 for violence and adult themes) intriguingly conveys various philosophical topics, including epistemology, human freedom, ethics, and political philosophy. Some of the more pertinent scenes for understanding the film and the philosophical topics it conveys begin with scene 1 at about 57 seconds into the film. This is the title shot (you’ll see “Minority Report” in hazy blue lettering). Continue viewing until 16:00 minutes into the film; you’ll see a very dark shot of a man jogging down a dark alley. Skip ahead to the beginning of scene 4 at 21:09. This scene begins with a shot of futuristic cars oddly traveling down the outside of a building. View until the end of scene 4 at 24:39; the scene concludes with Witwer (Colin Farrell) saying, “It seems you’ve been kept out of the loop, John.” (Scene 5 begins with a shot of Agatha [Samantha Morton] in the “milk.”) For some helpful thematic background on Precrime police procedure (if time permits), skip ahead to scene 10 at 55:12 and view to 1:03:58 into scene 11. This segment ends with a shot of Hineman (Lois Smith) saying the line “The female,” as she sprays her flowers. Finally (and again time permitting), skip ahead to 1:39:39 in scene 18 to glean Spielberg’s intriguing message about freedom and foreknowledge. Continue viewing until 1:46:16. This segment begins with a shot of Agatha and Anderton (Tom Cruise) embracing, speaking into each other’s ear; it ends with a close-up shot of Anderton’s watch alarm beeping and hitting “zero.”

Your instructor may require you to watch the film in its entirety outside of class (and it is well worth a full viewing); if so, then you should be able to answer the trivia questions in Box 1.4.

Fletcher, Anderton’s lieutenant, informs Witwer about Precrime procedures. Skeptical, Witwer directs his response to the entire unit present: “I’m sure you’ve all grasped the legalistic drawback to Precrime methodology. Look, I’m not with the ACLU on this…But let’s not kid ourselves, we are arresting individuals who’ve broken no law.” After some protestation from the unit, Witwer continues, “But it’s not the future if you stop it. Isn’t that a fundamental paradox?” Just then, Anderton enters the room and the discussion. After affirming that it does seem paradoxical, he announces to Witwer, “You’re talking about predetermination, which happens all the time.” Anderton takes a wooden egg out of Fletcher’s hand and rolls it on a table toward Witwer. Just before it falls to the ground, Witwer catches it, prompting Anderton to ask why Witwer caught the egg. “It was going
to fall,” replies Witwer. “You’re certain?” inquires Anderton, to which Witwer answers affirmatively. “But it didn’t fall. You caught it,” Anderton pauses, seemingly for effect, and concludes, “The fact that you prevented it from happening doesn’t change the fact that it was going to happen.”

Soon after, an alarm sounds, signaling that the precogs have foreseen another murder. The victim’s name is Leo Crow. To Anderton’s horror, the perpetrator is identified as “John Anderton.” Will Anderton soon commit homicide—kill a man that he does not even know? Surely there has been some mistake. But the precogs are never wrong! Has someone tampered with the system and framed him for a crime that he will never commit? He quickly but quietly leaves Precrime headquarters. The quiet is soon broken. Alarms sound and Chief Anderton is now a wanted fugitive for the “future murder” of Leo Crow.

Anderton desperately makes his way to Dr. Hineman’s residence. Now a recluse, perhaps the inventor of Precrime will be able to inform Anderton how someone could tamper with the system resulting in a false prevision. With great effort—including a run-in with her genetically altered (and poisonous) doll’s-eye plants—he finds Hineman. She reminds Anderton of what he already knows—the precogs are never wrong. Hineman further informs him that she is not aware of any way to fake a prevision. Anderton is beyond despair. Hineman picks up her tea, and looking over the cup at Anderton, also informs him,
“But occasionally they do disagree…. Once in a while, one will see things differently than the other two.” Anderton is stunned. He was unaware of these “minority reports”; he, like everyone else, believed that the infallible precogs all “saw” the same murders in pretty much the same way. Anderton asks whether Burgess knows about these minority reports. Hineeman admits that he does. Anderton despondently asks, “Are you saying that I’ve haloed innocent people?” Hineeman replies, “I’m saying that every so often those accused of a precrime might—just might—have an alternative future…. But we felt their existence was an insignificant variable.” Anderton quickly interjects, “Insignificant to you, maybe, but what about those people I put away with alternate futures? My God, if the country knew there was a chance…”

Of course, obtaining his minority report, if he has one, will be difficult. He must avoid retinal scans, or “eye-dents.” He seeks the help of an ex-con surgeon who agrees to give him a new set of eyes, thereby avoiding the danger of retinal scan. But he must keep his old eyes in order to enter the temple. Concurrently, Anderton’s old teammates employ all of their legal resources to apprehend their ex-chief. Most strikingly, they send their artificially intelligent, metal recon “spiders” into an apartment building in which they suspect Anderton is hiding. The spiders enter every apartment in order to “eye-dent” each person inside—man, woman, and child—regardless of whether they have reason to believe that Anderton is in that room. The “spiders” intrude on a single mother and her two children, interrupt a couple making love, and humiliate a man using the toilet. Anderton narrowly escapes (thanks to his new eyes). He must now use them to kidnap Agatha in order to determine whether he has a minority report.

Anderton does not know Leo Crow; he has never even met him. But just as Hineeman told Anderton, “a series of events has started that will lead you, inexorably, to his murder.” This series began with Anderton’s visit with Hineeman. It continues with his successful escape from the temple with Agatha. He must now keep her safe until he can access her “memories.” But how? Soon, Anderton begins to recognize some of the previsions from the Crow future murder. He looks at his watch; the time of the future murder draws near. Anderton—inexorably—drags Agatha up to the apartment where the future murder is about to happen. Agatha is desperate. She reminds Anderton that he can leave. She pleads with him, “You still have a choice! The others never saw their future. You still have a choice…. You can choose!”

Discussion questions
1 If you were to vote on the nationalization of the Precrime Initiative (scene 3, roughly 14:44 into the film), would you vote for or against it? Why?
2 Why is it so important that Precrime police “science” be infallible?
3 If Precrime is infallible and the precogs foresee someone committing murder tomorrow, is that person justly punished now for his (future) act? Explain. Is Anderton’s explanation to Witwer in scene 4 (21:09–24:39) helpful in clarifying this debate? Explain.
4 Does Anderton act permissibly in removing Agatha from the “temple?”
5 Are any of the following morally objectionable infringements on our basic rights: pervasive “eye-dents,” the metallic recon spiders, Precrime itself? Explain. What does your answer show about the relationship between legality and morality?
CHAPTER 1   PHILOSOPHY, RHETORIC, AND ARGUMENT

Plot summary

Yes, but at what cost? Remember Socrates? It is not living that is important, but living rightly.

William Hundert, longtime teacher of Classics and History of Western Civilization at St. Benedict’s Preparatory School for Boys reminisces about the first time he met the freshman class of 1972. He recalls introducing them to Shutruk-Nahhunte, King of Elam circa 1000 BCE. He asks his students if any have ever heard of this ancient King. Not surprisingly, none have. Hundert informs them that this king does not appear in any of the history books. This sets up his very first lesson: “conquest without contribution is without significance.” Unlike other kings, emperors, and philosophers—those like Caesar, Plato, and Aristotle—Nahhunte left no indelible mark on history. Mr. Hundert asks his students what they will contribute to history and society. He invites his students to “follow the path—walk where the great men before them have walked,” in order to determine what that their contributions might be.

Sedgewick Bell soon joins the class. Bell is the son of the senior senator from West Virginia, Hiram Bell. Sedgewick is also unlike the other boys in other ways. He has little respect for his studies, or even Mr. Hundert. Sedgewick immediately makes himself to be a problem. Hundert makes an appointment to see Senator Bell. Hundert informs the Senator that Sedgewick is neither applying himself nor learning the material. Unmoved, the Senator asks Hundert: “What’s the good of what you’re teaching those boys?” Hundert solemnly answers: “The Greeks and Romans provided a model of democracy which the framers of our own Constitution used as their inspiration. But more to the point, when the boys read Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Julius Caesar, even, they’re put into contact with men who in their own age exemplified the highest standards of statesmanship, of civic virtue, of character, conviction.” Senator Bell is flabbergasted. Hundert continues, “Sir, it is my job to mold your son’s character.” Bell interjects: “Mold him!? Your job is to teach him. I will mold him.” Hundert leaves Bell’s office discouraged but determined.

Hundert makes a surprise visit to Sedgewick’s dorm room. Hoping to inspire the boy, Hundert presents him his old high school textbook. Hundert suggests that it might be helpful with the upcoming Mr. Julius Caesar competition. On the first written exam, Sedgewick receives a C–. Happily surprised that he passed, Sedgewick studies earnestly for the second exam. Hundert’s plan is seemingly working. Sedgewick slowly climbs up the class rankings. The top three will compete in the oral competition, answering questions in front of family, friends, and classmates. Sedgewick attempts to check out a reference book from the school library. The librarian refuses, saying that it would be unfair to the other students. But the library closes in minutes, and Sedgewick is the only patron present. Mr. Hundert happens by and vouches for Sedgewick’s character. The librarian acquiesces—if Sedgewick promises to return to the book first thing in the morning.

The Emperor’s Club (2002)

DIRECTOR: MICHAEL HOFFMAN
SCREENWRITER: NEIL TOLKIN
Sedgewick takes the full three hours to carefully finish the last written exam. Sedgewick’s hard work pays dividends; Hundert scores his exam as an A–. However, Sedgewick finishes in fourth place, one point behind the third place student, Martin Blythe. Hundert thoughtfully peruses the standings, pauses for a moment, and decides to re-evaluate Sedgewick’s exam. Hundert subsequently rescores Bell’s exam as an A+, which provides Sedgewick the points necessary to overtake Martin for third place. Sedgewick will compete for the Julius Caesar award after all.

Mr. Hundert emcees the Julius Caesar oral examination. If a boy cannot answer a question, he is disqualified. The last boy standing is crowned Mr. Julius Caesar. Sedgewick struggles with many of the questions. Hundert begins to suspect that Sedgewick is cheating. In a sidebar, the Headmaster surprises Hundert by telling him to ignore it. Hundert, now crestfallen with Sedgewick, asks a question not from his prepared list. Sedgewick misses it, but the other remaining boy does not. After the competition, Hundert visits Sedgewick to ask why he cheated. Sedgewick simply answers, “Why not?” Sedgewick then asks Hundert: “Why didn’t you call me out? It wasn’t because of my father was it?” Sedgewick’s academic career subsequently returns to its unimpressive beginnings. He manages to graduate from St. Benedict’s in 1976 and his father’s connections gain him entrance to Yale. Hundert remains crestfallen.

*The Emperor’s Club* (109 minutes; rated PG-13 for some sexual content) conveys intriguing issues about character and virtue. For example, does nonvirtuous action only result from ignorance (as Socrates more or less believed)? Moreover, can the virtues be taught by learning about great figures from history? What is the proper relationship between teacher and student, and what is proper education in the first place?

For a sampling of some of the more poignant segments, begin with scenes 3, 4 and part of 5. Scene 3 begins at 7:18 with a shot of Mr. Hundert (Kevin Kline) learning his student’s names, and the segment ends at 21:30 with a shot of Hundert looking out of a window after dismissing his class. The second segment consists of scenes 12 and 13. Scene 12 begins at 53:38 with a shot of the campus; continue watching into scene 13 until 1:03:35 to view Bell’s (Emile Hirsch) first Julius Caesar contest and Hundert confronting him about cheating. This segment ends with a shot of Hundert leaving Bell’s dorm room. The third segment begins with scene 17 at 1:23:06 with a shot of a dinner reception. Continue watching into scene 18 until 1:36:10 to witness the intricacies of the second Julius Caesar contest. The segment ends with a shot of Hundert’s back as he sits on a couch, but pay particularly close attention to the restroom conversation between Hundert and Sedgewick from 1:32:35 to 1:35:43. If time permits, continue watching until the end of the film, making particular note of what Sedgewick says to the television cameras in the beginning of scene 19 (1:38:33–1:39:40), and Hundert’s interactions with his other students later in scene 19 (1:39:40–1:42:18).

This is truly a quality film, and a full viewing is highly recommended. If you do watch the film in its entirety, then you should be able to answer the trivia questions from Box 1.6.
In 2001, Hundert is ready to become St. Benedict's new Headmaster. However, the board has different ideas; they have hired a younger faculty member, James Ellerby. The board reassures Hundert that Ellerby is a forward-thinking man. He has reached out to the community and built relationships with some of the school’s most important alumni. Although the board maintains that Ellerby “is a wonderful communicator with impeccable moral standing and an unwavering commitment” to St. Benedict’s, it is pretty clear that Hundert is being passed over because he seems to lack the worldly penchants for marketing and fundraising. Hundert promptly resigns. The board is horrified. One member begs him to reconsider, pleading, “You are the finest teacher the school has ever had!”

Sedgewick, now a wealthy and powerful businessman, subsequently contacts St. Benedict’s. He informs Headmaster Ellerby that he will make a sizeable donation only if a rematch for the Mr. Julius Caesar contest is arranged—complete with Mr. Hundert as the master of ceremonies. Hundert agrees (but not before he points out the irony to Ellerby—he is the lynchpin in the school’s largest ever donation). Sedgewick flies out his old classmates and Mr. Hundert to his private estate. In a quiet moment before the competition, Hundert confides in Martin Blythe, “I never gave you your due.” Martin kindly rebuffs his teacher, replying “Of course you gave me my due, Mr. Hundert. That recommendation you wrote for me to the Academy was glowing.”

The rematch begins. It goes much the same way it did 25 years previously. Hundert soon realizes that the contest is going too much like the first contest. He suspects that Sedgewick is cheating again. This time, Hundert spies a small earpiece in Bell’s ear. Hundert turns around and sees an awkward looking young man in the corner of the room. He is standing in front of a computer with books scattered about. Once again, Hundert puts down his index cards. He slowly looks at Bell and asks, “Who is Shutruk Nahhunte?” His classmates giggle. Why would Mr. Hundert ask such an easy question so deep into the competition?

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**BOX 1.6 TRIVIA**

If your instructor assigns the film to be watched outside of class, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What is Hundert’s favorite morning activity?
2. What out-of-the-ordinary garment do Hundert’s students wear on Sedgewick’s first day of class?
3. What game does Hundert play with the boys in the quad?
4. How many brothers and sisters does Hundert have?
5. What does Senator Bell attempt to give Hundert as a gift?
6. By what means does (young) Sedgewick cheat at the first Julius Caesar contest?
7. What project does Hundert attempt to finish once he retires?
8. What item does a grown Sedgewick return to Mr. Hundert at the hotel?
9. What two items do his past students present Hundert just before he leaves the resort hotel?
10. Whose son does Hundert meet at the very end of the movie?
Martin yells out, “Come on, Bell, it was on the plaque above the damn door!” But Sedgewick wasn’t present the first day of class. Bell’s accomplice cannot find Nahhunte in any of the history books. Sedgewick fails to answer. Bell’s classmate Deepak Metha recites the answer, thereby winning the competition (again). Bell admits defeat, but reassures his guests that there is no shame in losing to the brightest minds of their generation. Upon asserting that education must be a priority in this country again, he thanks Mr. Hundert, saying, “Your virtue is a beacon of light.” He then announces his bid for the Senate following in his father’s footsteps. His classmates congratulate him and many quickly offer donations to his campaign fund.

Discussion questions

1. One predominate idea from the film is: “Great ambition and conquest without contribution is without significance.” What does this mean?

2. Hundert claims (scene 3, roughly 10:00 into the film) that regarding the giants of history—including Socrates, Caesar, Augustus and Plato—“their story is our story.” What does this mean?

3. Reconsidering the exchange between Hundert and Senator Bell (scene 8, 35:58–37:29), is it ever appropriate for a teacher to attempt to mold a student’s character? Explain.

4. Why is it so important to live a life of “virtue and principles?”

5. Who leads the better life, Mr. Hundert or Sedgewick Bell? Which life would you rather lead? Defend your answers.

1.4 SYNTHESIS, REVIEW, AND GOING FORWARD

Reviewing through the three films

1. Imagine that Gorgias and Socrates view Thank You for Smoking and The Emperor’s Club. How might they (contrastively) interpret Nick Naylor, Joey Naylor, William Hundert, and Sedgewick Bell?

2. Among the three movies, which do you find most philosophically interesting? Why? Do any convey philosophical messages you don’t agree with? Explain.

3. Do any of the featured movies convey subjectivist messages about philosophical truth? Do any convey objectivist messages about it? As carefully as you can—ideally via a deductive argument—explain why it is so difficult to defend the view that all philosophical statements are (merely) subjectively true.

4. Between the government placing stringent warning labels on cigarette cartons (per Thank You for Smoking) or the government shutting down Precrime (per Minority Report), which do you agree with more? Explain your answer.

5. Reconsider the six movie quotes in the chapter margins and explain whether each, given the adjacent paragraphs, illustrates a point the author is making, supplements (or extends) a point the author is making, or contrasts (for emphasis) a point the author is making. Explain your answers.
NOTES

1 Excerpted from *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowlett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920). Section headings and slight grammar emendations have been provided to aid reader comprehension.


3 The term “antecedent” refers to the first half of a conditional (or “if-then”) statement, that is, the “if-part.” Any deductive argument that proceeds by negating or denying the antecedent is thereby invalid. Consider: If George Washington was killed in a plane crash, he is dead; George Washington wasn’t killed in a plane crash; thus, George Washington is not dead. These true premises take us to an obviously false conclusion, which means that this argument (form) breaks the very definition of a valid argument. Thus even though the premises are true, the argument is unsound.

4 Careful inspection thus reveals that, because the term “plant” has a different sense in premise one than it does in premise two, the chlorophyll argument actually has the form: All A are B; All C are D; Thus, All C are B. This is an invalid deductive form, because valid syllogisms may only contain three (class) terms.

5 The phrase “out there in the world” is a gloss for the idea that there are some mind-independent truths that remain so even if they are not believed. The world—objective reality—presents itself to us in various ways that we attempt to decipher, that is, come to know. On this account, objective reality provides the ultimate standard for truth in terms of states of affairs that represent mind-independent facts—facts that exist even if they are not known. Nevertheless, how we discuss and come to know those facts—via language—is often a matter of convention. Thus, how we use the term “day” or even “hour” could have been different. But once our terms and their meanings have been made sufficiently clear, whether the statement ‘A day is 24 hours long’ is true ultimately depends on how the world, in fact, is. Something like this account seems to be the default view, but it is not without controversy, which speaks to the inherent philosophical complexity of discerning the nature of truth, fact, and belief.

6 Strictly speaking, the first premise of the baseline argument should probably read: If a statement is objectively true, then it is scientific in nature or it is true by straightforward definition. The argument would be reformulated so that the second premise reads something to the effect that philosophical statements are neither pieces of science nor true by definition. However, adding this level of specificity will not affect the overall point of the argument, or (more importantly) the subsequent critique of it.

7 The critique of (N) given here can be put another way. Like all meaningful statements, either (N) is false or it’s true. If (N) is false, then its logical opposite is true, namely some philosophically significant statements are objectively true. If (N) is true, then, ironically, it follows that at least one philosophically significant statement is objectively true, namely (N) itself. Either way, it cannot be the case that no philosophically significant statements are objectively true. This is, again, to see how (N) is self-defeating, and how difficult it is to prove philosophical subjectivism.

8 As it turns out, *The X-Files* portrays many philosophical themes. In some ways, the show itself is philosophical. For more on the philosophical nature of *The X-Files*, please see *The Philosophy of The X-Files*, revised ed., ed. Dean A. Kowalski (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).
Plato, *Apology*, trans. F. J. Church, trans. rev. Robert D. Cumming, in *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), 35–36. It has become customary to cite passages from Plato by standardized margin numbers; this passage can be found at 29d–30a. Subsequent citations to Plato are liable to be cited in text by margin number. Finally, the Greek word “psyche” is traditionally translated into English as “soul.” However, this now harbors religious connotations that Socrates (and Plato) probably did not intend. Consequently, a more apt translation might be “inner person,” referring to the essential characteristics of being human, or one’s humanity.

During the time at which Masoudi and Bell attended, St. Benedict’s was a boys-only preparatory school. This probably explains why Hundert focused on the great men of Greek and Roman history in his course. Near the very end of the film, Hundert’s class is filled with young men and women. He, no doubt, would alter his curriculum by including some great women of history to reflect this change.

**FOR FURTHER READING**


**FOR FURTHER VIEWING**

*Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), director and screenwriter Mike Figgis.
*A Man for All Seasons* (1966), director Fred Zinneman, screenwriter Robert Bolt.
*A Man without a Face* (1993), director Mel Gibson, screenwriter Malcolm MacRury.
*Twelve Angry Men* (1957), director Sidney Lumet, screenwriter Reginald Rose.