

# WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

“NON SCHOLAE SED VITAE DISCIMUS”

(“We learn for life, not for school”)

—based on a saying by Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE)

## [1] PHILOSOPHY: WHAT’S IN IT FOR YOU?



What does philosophy have to offer you? What is it good for? Why would anyone do it in the first place? This last question is the easiest to answer: You do philosophy because you’re human. Cows don’t philosophize (usually); plants and rocks don’t philosophize; but to be human is to be, at least occasionally, philosophical. Human beings are curiosity-filled animals: they wonder and worry and try to figure things out. Once their bellies are full and their other material needs are momentarily met, the same mental skills and dispositions that earlier had helped them find dinner now turn them to higher matters, namely, to an understanding of themselves and the world — not merely to improve these (although that is often *one* end of philosophy), but also to understand for its own sake. Human beings are “knowing animals”; sometimes they want to know in order to act, but quite often they simply want to know. So why should you bother with philosophy? You should bother because it’s in your very

nature to do so.

Who are you? What are you? Will the death of your body be the end of *you*? Are there any good reasons for believing in a loving God? Are there any good reasons *not* to? Is there such a thing as a right and a wrong that are true for everyone? What can we know for sure, and what *can't* we know, but simply have to believe on faith (if we believe at all)? Should we believe *anything* on faith? What does it mean to be *free*? Can I be free if the beliefs in my head were put there by someone else (my parents, my schoolteachers, cable television, ...)? What does it mean for a belief *to be my own*? How do I take ownership of my mind? Why do I believe what I do? Am I *justified* in believing as I do, or in anything at all? (How do I justify my beliefs?) How might we best get along with one another?

These are just some of the questions that philosophy can help you answer. And if you haven’t worried about any of these questions yet, maybe it’s time that you, like Whitman’s spider, began seeking the spheres to connect them.

[Poem]

### A NOISELESS PATIENT SPIDER

A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark’d how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to  
connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

— Walt Whitman (1819-92)

## [2] DEFINING PHILOSOPHY

### PRELIMINARY ANSWERS

Unlike any other academic discipline, the question of the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question. Discussing the nature of biology is not part of doing biology, but discussing the nature of philosophy is definitely part of doing philosophy.

Philosophy, in the popular sense, is a kind of private wisdom, or a certain way of approaching life (such as is found in Stoicism) — and in fact the word comes from the Greek words *'philein'* (to love) and *'sophia'* (wisdom), so etymologically 'philosophy' means "love of wisdom." Philosophy is commonly thought of as a repository of this wisdom (namely, as a certain set of beliefs), but the word's literal meaning is a better guide: Philosophy is the science of *pursuing* wisdom.

Historically, philosophy was thought of as the "rational explanation of anything" — and thus it was viewed as a general kind of science, indeed, even as "the first science" or "the science of science." The first person said to have called himself a philosopher was **Pythagoras**, a Greek living some 500 years "before the common era" (BCE) and who is best remembered by the Pythagorean Theorem in geometry. When asked if he was a wise man, he answered, "No, I am not wise, but I am a *lover* of wisdom." Pythagoras explained his meaning with an analogy: Philosophers are like spectators at the Olympic games, and at these games we find three kinds of people: *athletes*, who desire fame and prizes; *merchants*, who wish to make money; and *spectators*, who want merely to observe and to understand. The philosopher hopes for neither fame nor money, but desires rather to contemplate the spectacle. Human life as a whole and the world all around is our object of contemplation, and the philosopher strives to understand those matters concerning "the whole of life."

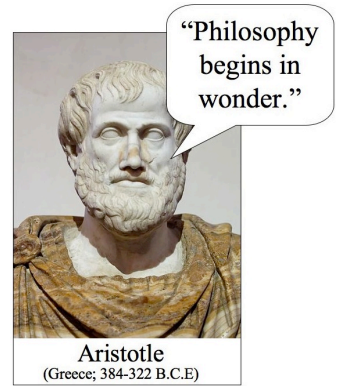
Aristotle wrote that "philosophy begins in wonder," but perhaps such a claim is overly broad, since *every* act of thinking begins with wonder, that is, with some question or puzzle or doubt. In the 19th century, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce pointed out that thinking occurs only in response to doubt or a question, since thinking just is the activity of dispelling doubt.

### FINDING A STRATEGY

A discipline is partly defined by the sorts of questions it addresses, and some typically philosophical questions are listed to the right. You might take a few minutes here to answer them.

Everyone, sometime during their life, will wonder about these kinds of questions (at least if they are well-fed and have the necessary leisure), but few people ever go beyond this initial stage of wondering. The reason for this is simple: They don't know *how* to go any further; the mind stumbles, they get confused, eventually they tire out — and the moment of wondering passes. But despite this frustration, a feeling often remains that these questions are nevertheless *important*, with important answers, if only we knew how to find them. Philosophy is useful in developing strategies (or methods, or skills) for studying and answering these questions. Just as mathematics has strategies for working-through certain mathematical problems (such as dividing numbers, or finding square roots), there are strategies in philosophy for tackling *its* problems.

A practicing philosopher is one who tries to find the answers to these questions, and who develops strategies and techniques for thinking about them. As such, philosophy is a discipline just like any other human discipline— such as physics, accounting, psychology, or nursing — and one characteristic of philosophy is the sort of questions that it tries to answer.



### A FEW QUESTIONS...

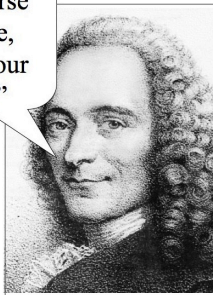
Where did the world come from?  
 Is my mind just my brain?  
 Does God exist?  
 Could a computer have a mind?  
 Am I genuinely free?  
 Is the death of my body the end of *me*?  
 Is anything ever *really* right or wrong?  
 Can I know anything with certainty?  
 What if God *doesn't* exist?  
 What is the good life and how do I get it?  
 What is truth?  
 Is good art just a matter of taste?  
 Is reality understandable? Or is it inherently irrational?  
 Where does value come from?  
 What is the meaning of life?

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

Philosophy is both theoretical and practical. Aristotle distinguished between theoretical reason and practical reason, and philosophy is our reason working each of these two angles. Theoretical reason aims at truth, while practical reason aims at action. Our theoretical side wants and needs to understand the world, while our practical side wants and needs to live in the world, and to live in the world as well as possible.

On the theoretical side, philosophical inquiry has three features. First, it is concerned with **the justification of fundamental beliefs**. Common sense tells us that there is a difference between right and wrong, that a world exists outside our minds, that other people exist, and so on. Philosophy aims to *justify* these common sense beliefs, or to show which beliefs are justified and which, if any, cannot be justified in that they are beyond justification. Occasionally, it may show that a common sense belief is not only unjustified, but very likely false.

“If you wish to converse with me, define your terms.”



Voltaire  
(France; 1694-1778)

In general, philosophy aims to uncover our common sense beliefs — our assumptions — and then discover to what extent these beliefs are well-grounded. It is not enough merely to have a belief or an opinion; to be well-educated, to be intellectually mature, is to understand *why* you believe as you do. Similarly, philosophy also investigates the assumptions of other disciplines — for example, the assumption behind the natural sciences that there is a physical world, or the assumption of theology that there is a God.

Second, philosophy is concerned with **conceptual analysis**. When I ask whether I’m free, I first need to ask what it means to be free; similarly with questions regarding the existence of God or the nature of truth, and so on. Notice that most of these questions cannot be answered simply by investigating the world (that is, they aren’t empirical questions). Further, these concepts are tools for thinking, and so they are basic assumptions underlying our thought. In analyzing our concepts, we often clarify our various assumptions.

Finally, philosophy is concerned with **second-order questions**. Philosophy studies other disciplines. As part of its own inquiry into the nature of the world and human existence, philosophy has always turned its eye to our other intellectual pursuits as well; and so there are fields within philosophy such as philosophy of art, of religion, of law, of science, and so on. We might call these other disciplines, such as physics or theology, “*first-order*” disciplines, and call philosophy, because it studies them, a “*second-order*” discipline.

## PHILOSOPHY AS PRACTICAL

A danger in the above view of philosophy is that it tends to *over-intellectualize* philosophy, making it appear to avoid life in order to merely contemplate it. But this Pythagorean view of philosophy describes only the theoretical side. We don’t want merely to understand the world and our place in it; we also want to change it. And we want to change ourselves as well — we want to become better people. Philosophy can help us achieve both of these goals in several ways. First, it can save us from the effects of false beliefs. For instance, people are always trying to sell us a lifestyle — in books, in television shows and commercials, in movies, from the church pulpit, in the news media. Many of these exhortations are foolish, and philosophy can help uncover this foolishness.

### ON INTELLECTUAL MATURITY

The slow transition from a head full of unfounded beliefs to one of founded beliefs — *that* is growth towards intellectual maturity. We want to believe what is true, and we want the *cause* of our believing it to be its truth. We don’t want to believe merely from some accident or prejudice, since accidents and prejudices are not very reliable guides to the truth. We want to come to our beliefs in the right way; only then do we fully take control of our lives.

### A SIDE BENEFIT OF PHILOSOPHY

“Between 1974 and 1982, philosophy students scored at least five percentage points above average in admissions tests for professional and graduate schools in America. No other subject matches that... Philosophy PhDs earn more than the average humanities PhD, too. They are less likely to be unemployed even than chemists or biologists, disciplines more usually thought of as vocational. And, because philosophers are fanatically argumentative, law firms find that they make good lawyers.” [*The Economist*, April 26, 1986]

Consider this: The single basic message of most advertising is that human fulfillment depends upon goods and services that are for sale. If we just buy the right stuff, we will be happy. This message is pressed upon our conscious and subconscious minds virtually without cease, and yet it serves us rather badly, since the least reflection shows it to be utterly untrue.

Philosophy can also help us discover principles for guiding our lives. It helps us order our values, and fit them into a meaningful life. This was essentially Socrates' self-assigned task, and it will be one of the first to be addressed in the following pages.

Finally, philosophy is practical by demonstrating the unimportance of final answers. The mere contemplation and awareness of certain basic problems of human existence is itself rewarding and helpful. Philosophy helps us plumb the contours of human knowledge and ignorance, and thus helps us to better appreciate our place in the order of things.

## AREAS OF PHILOSOPHY

As with any other discipline, there are sub-disciplines within philosophy. What follows is a common scheme.

### Metaphysics (What is?)

This is the study of being or reality. Topics include ...

... the difference (if any) between reality and appearance:

- How do I know what really exists?
- How can I know what is real in a world of change?

... the nature of the self:

- Who am I, and what is to become of me?
- In what sense am I the same person as I was at birth?
- When did I come into existence?
- Will I stop existing?

... and the nature of God or the divine:

- Is there a God?
- What is God's nature?
- Is there some purpose to the universe?

### Axiology (What has value?)

'Axiology' comes from the Greek words *axios* (= worth) and *logos* (= science, account), and means the study of the nature of value. Since there are different kinds of value, and different kinds of value-questions, there are a number of different areas of axiology, including normative ethics (or ethics proper), metaethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and social philosophy.

*Normative ethics* is the study of what constitutes morally correct conduct (as opposed to the meaning of particular moral terms), and this requires the articulation and justification of moral principles. Here we find the following sorts of questions:

- How should I act?
- What makes an action right?
- Why should I help others?
- What kind of person do I want to be?

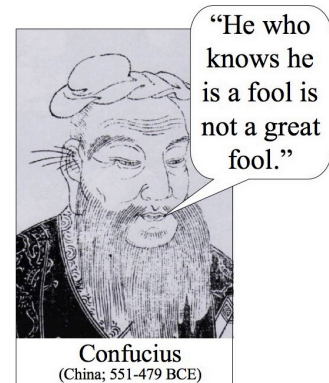
*Metaethics* is the study of the meaning of moral claims, and the nature of moral principles. It began as a discipline only in the last century, with the publication of G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* in 1903. Here we ask questions like:

- What does it mean to say that an action is right or that a state of affairs is good?

### WHAT GOOD IS IT?

"Philosophy is to be studied not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind is also rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good."

— Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912)





- Do moral statements like “Torture is wrong” have a truth-value (that is, are they either true or false)?
- If a moral statement is true, is it true for everyone in all cultures, or does the truth of the statement depend upon the culture in which it is made?
- How are moral beliefs justified?
- Why should I be moral?

*Aesthetics* is the philosophical study of art and of the nature of the beautiful. Here we find such questions as:

- What is the difference between judgments of taste and judgments of beauty?
- Do such judgments have a truth-value (and thus allow for being “scientific”)?
- What is “representation” in art?

*Political philosophy* is the study of the justification and use of force in the context of a state. Here we ask questions concerning government authority and my relation to it:

- Why should I obey the state?
- Where did the state obtain its authority?
- When, if ever, should I disobey the state?

Finally, *social philosophy* is the study of the ideal society or social organization. As such, this focuses less on the legitimacy of political authority and more on determining the best social arrangements for human flourishing.

### Epistemology (What is the relation between subject and object?)

This is the study of the **nature** of truth, belief, and knowledge:

- What is it to “know” something?
- What is the difference between knowing and believing?

Knowing a statement involves believing that statement, but also in being **justified** in one’s belief.

- How is a belief justified?

Another epistemological topic is the **source** of our knowledge:

- Where does knowledge come from?

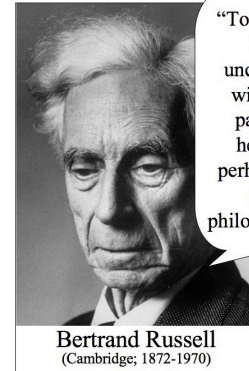
Two traditional views regarding the source of our knowledge are empiricism and rationalism: empiricism claims that our knowledge comes primarily, or even exclusively, through our senses. Rationalism claims that it is instead the product of our reason, either operating on sense-experiences, or working alone. Knowledge always involves statements like “Rabbits can run faster than tortoises” or “The sky above is a deep blue,” and these statements always consist of concepts (rabbit, run, faster than, tortoises, sky, above, deep blue), so the question regarding the source of knowledge is at least two-fold:

- Where do these concepts come from?
- Where do the statements (that link together those concepts) come from?

Finally, what are the **limits** of knowledge? Presumably there are things that I can think or believe, but cannot know; can I discover this boundary-line between knowledge and mere belief?

### Logic (What is good reasoning?)

This is the study of the principles of sound argument or reasoning, as opposed to mere rhetorical persuasion (which focuses on *ethos* and *pathos*, as well as *logos*). There are a number of different kinds of logic, the most familiar being *deductive* (arguments or reasoning based on mathematics, or from a definition, or in some syllogistic form), and *inductive* (these include arguments based on analogy, appeals to authority, generalizations from past experiences, and inferences to the best explanation). In general, deductive reasoning is *certain* (if the premises are true and the form of the argument is valid, then the conclusion being argued for is necessarily true) whereas inductive reasoning (like most of life) is simply *probable*.



“To teach how to live with uncertainty, yet without being paralyzed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy can do”

### [3] PREPARING TO DO PHILOSOPHY

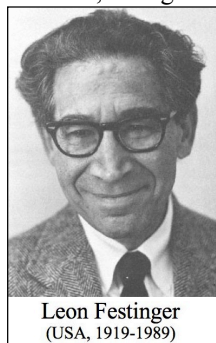
#### ON CHANGING OUR MINDS

In any philosophy discussion, *what* you believe is not nearly as important as *why* you believe it. Being able to give reasons for believing as you do is the first step in any civil conversation. Offering reasons that are acceptable to those with whom you initially disagree is how rational people are supposed to try to change each other's minds.

Sadly, the crooked timber of our souls often derails this process.

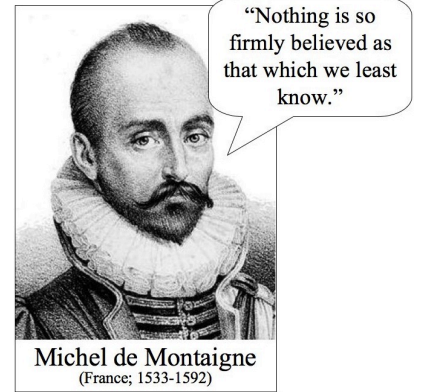
It isn't clear that we ever change our minds *merely* because we come across a good reason to do so. The mechanism underlying the alteration of belief is often a mystery — and a problem for teachers, insofar as they are interested in more than simply reinforcing a student's prior beliefs.

Adding new beliefs that are either unrelated to, or else consistent with, one's old beliefs is not difficult, since it requires only that one trust the teacher as a source of information. The most important part of anyone's college career, however, is not in this mindless accumulation of new information, but rather in the *re-evaluation* of previous beliefs. If it hasn't happened already, college is the time to take charge of your intellectual life — to make it your own, and to come to some understanding of who you are and what you are about. At least for the most successful students, college includes a spring-cleaning of the mind where windows are thrown open and everything is picked-up, dusted and, after a careful examination, either kept and made one's own or else discarded.



Unfortunately, how we actually carry out this mental housekeeping is a puzzle. Critically examining one's own beliefs, and changing them when this examination finds them wanting, is both difficult and unnatural — perhaps one of the most challenging tasks that humans face. Reason itself, as a mental capacity, appears to have evolved not to impartially discover the truth, but rather to convince others of your own beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Worse yet, once we have committed ourselves to some belief, we tend to maintain that belief despite significant evidence to the contrary. A famous early case study of this phenomenon was conducted in 1954 by the American psychologist **Leon Festinger**, who introduced the concept of **cognitive dissonance** — that uneasy feeling we experience when confronting new information that conflicts with a held belief. Festinger and his team studied a small group in Chicago who believed that aliens from the planet Clarion (not an actual planet) were going to visit Earth on December 21st of that year and rescue the true believers before a cataclysm would destroy the earth. The space ship failed to show up, of course, and the earth-destroying cataclysm failed to transpire, and you might think that such failures would have caused these people to give up their belief in the aliens from Clarion. Instead, Festinger found them remarkably ready to retain their belief at all costs, simply revising things to accommodate what should have been disconfirming evidence. In this case, it was revealed to the leader of the group that God had decided to spare the earth from destruction because of the group's incredible faith.<sup>2</sup>

In a more recent study of how new evidence is evaluated, subjects were divided into those who believed that capital punishment deterred future criminals, and those who believed the opposite. Half of the subjects from each group were then presented with evidence supporting the claim that capital punishment is a deterrent, while the other half was presented with evidence supporting the opposite. The researchers found that whenever the evidence supported the subjects' previous beliefs, those beliefs were considerably strengthened, whereas evidence opposed to the



<sup>1</sup> See Hugo Mercer and Dan Sperber, "Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory" in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34 (2011): 57-74.

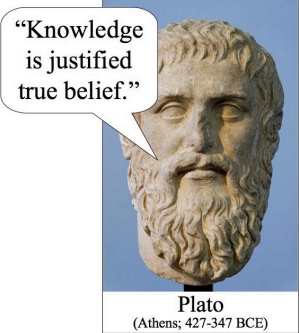
<sup>2</sup> One might compare this with the more recent followers of Christian radio host Harold Camping, who predicted that the Rapture (and thus the beginning of the "End Times") would occur on May 21, 2011. When that date came and went without incident, Camping revised his beliefs, claiming now that May 21 was simply a "spiritual" day of Judgment, and that the "physical rapture" would occur a few months later, on October 21, at which time God would also destroy the universe. On the Chicago group, see Leon Festinger, *et al.*, *When Prophecy Fails* (Harper, 1956).

subjects' previous belief hardly affected their belief at all. This tendency, called "**belief perseverance**," shows that we place a disproportionate degree of credibility on evidence that supports a *held* belief while discrediting evidence that opposes that belief.<sup>3</sup> One strategy to help correct this bias is simply to imagine holding the opposite opinion, and then to reconsider the evidence.

Most difficult of all are those beliefs that we have already surrounded with justifications. Even should we discover that our initial reason for holding the belief is wrong, once we have woven the belief into a larger explanatory framework, it is remarkably difficult to dislodge.

"I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabrics of their life."  
 — Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)

**KNOWLEDGE, JUSTIFIED BELIEF, AND MERE OPINION**



Knowing something requires three things: that I **believe** it, that my belief is **justified**, and that the thing believed is actually **true**. For instance, in order for me to *know* that the gestational period of chimpanzees is similar to that of humans, I obviously need to *believe* this claim, and it also has to be more than a guess: I need to be *justified* in believing this claim (e.g., either I've observed the reproductive cycle of chimpanzees, or else I've consulted reliable authorities).

Finally, the claim has to be *true*. Not long ago, most people believed that the earth was immobile, and they certainly would have said this was something that they knew, as well. What is more, they were justified in their belief, since the immediate evidence of their senses (and ours) certainly suggests a stationary earth. *We* know, however, that their belief was false, and therefore that they didn't *know* that the earth is immobile — rather, they merely *believed* it.

The upshot of all this is that we often aren't certain that we know something, and this for the simple reason that we aren't certain that it is true. When the certainty is high, we usually call it 'knowledge', but only out of convenience. For instance, I would say that I know that "2 + 5 = 7," that "the sun will rise in the morning," that "lead is denser than water," and that "Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo in 1815." I have very good reasons for believing each of these claims, although I am completely certain only of the first claim.

We don't believe claims that *we think* are false, even though we often believe claims that are *in fact* false (for instance, a Cubs fan might believe that the Cubs will win the World Series that season; or someone might believe that the earth is flat or motionless). On the other hand, we often hold beliefs that are not justified, or not adequately justified and, among those justified beliefs, not all will be true — although the more a belief is justified, the more reason we have to believe that it is true (this is just what we mean by 'justified'). There is no difference between "believing P" and "believing that P is true," but there *is* a difference between "believing P" and "believing that I am justified in believing P."

Knowledge (= justified true belief)	"The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides" (provable as a theorem in Euclidean geometry). "Naragon prefers his spinach raw rather than boiled" (a stated preference). "Lead is denser than water" (empirically testable). "Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo in 1815" (an historical claim, justified through records).
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<sup>3</sup> C. G. Lord, L. Ross, and M. Lepper, "Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence" in the *Journal of Personality and social Psychology* 37 (1979): 2098-2109. See also Michael Gazzaniga, *Nature's Mind* (Basic Books, 1992), p. 136, and Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning" in the *Psychological Bulletin* 108 (1990): 480-98. A related source of irrational beliefs is **confirmation bias**: this is the common tendency for us to look for evidence that confirms our current beliefs, rather than to seek out evidence that might disconfirm it.

Justified False Belief	“The earth is motionless” (justified by the direct evidence of our senses). “All swans are white” and “The next swan I inspect will be white” (justified by an inspection of a great many white swans, and a failure to locate any non-white swans).
Unjustified False Belief	“Drinking gasoline cures most head colds” (this is <i>not</i> true, folks). “The Cubs will win the World Series this year” (normally a false belief).
Unjustified True Belief (“a lucky guess”)	“The Cubs will win the World Series this year” (if believed in a year when they win). “The square root of 289 is 17” (if believed without the benefit of any calculation).

If the people at Poison Control tell you that drinking gasoline can kill you, then you are probably justified in believing this. There is a wide range of justification possible, however; evidence might place the likelihood of the truth of a claim anywhere from “next to zero” to “almost certain.” For instance, it is possible that “the sun won’t rise in the morning” — in other words, that between now and next morning the sun will go out of existence and/or the earth will stop spinning — but this is highly unlikely. There is a higher likelihood that “California will suffer a devastating earthquake within the next 24 hours,” but even this claim is not well justified. That “snarling dogs tend to bite” is much more justified for you, and the belief that “holding your hand directly over an open flame will cause a burn” even more so. In general, to have evidence for the truth of P is to have some justification to believe P. The hard part is figuring out when there is enough evidence to actually justify your believing P.

We’ve considered the nature of knowledge and of justified belief; what about what we call “mere opinion”? Consider the following two exchanges:

**Exchange #1**

*John:* Penicillin is much better than Erythromycin for treating this kind of infection.  
*Mary:* Thanks for the advice; I’ll switch to penicillin.

**Exchange #2**

*John:* Chocolate ice cream is much better than vanilla ice cream.  
*Mary:* That’s just your opinion.

John’s two claims have the same outward appearance — they both appear to be making a judgment about things in the world — but they differ in an important way. In the first exchange, Mary accepts John’s claim — she obviously trusts him as an authority here — and were she doubtful, she could ask him for evidence to support his claim (for instance, whether it is supported by any clinical trials).

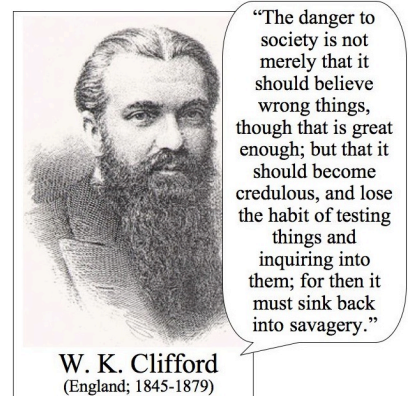
Her reply in the second exchange, however, suggests that John is simply stating a preference of his, and that there is no reason available for anyone else to share that preference. It would be odd for Mary to counter with “What evidence do you have for believing that?” John’s claim about ice cream should actually be understood as a claim about himself (viz., “John prefers chocolate to vanilla ice cream”), and Mary’s response is an acknowledgement of that fact. Consider a similar exchange:

**Exchange #3**

*John:* I prefer chocolate ice cream to vanilla.  
*Mary:* That’s just your opinion.

Here we find Mary’s response to be strangely argumentative. “Of course it’s his opinion,” we want to say, “what else could it be?” But more importantly, we view John as the final authority on the truth of his preferences, so what he is stating is rather more than some “unsupported belief” or “mere opinion”. This is something about which he can’t be wrong.

“Why do you believe that?” is a response appropriate for statements like “smoking cigarettes increases your chance of developing lung cancer” or “all objects fall at the same rate, once air resistance is taken into account” or “it’s raining outside” — but not for statements like “I enjoy listening to Bach cantatas.” In the first three, we can meaningfully ask for evidence that supports the truth of the





claim, but there is no additional evidence that could be given to support the last statement: It is true by virtue of someone saying it (so long as they are sincere).

Finally, we sometimes encounter people holding unjustified beliefs:

**Exchange #4**

*John:* Intelligent life inhabits the interior of Mars.

*Mary:* What evidence do you have for believing that?

*John:* I had a dream last night about those Martians.

*Mary:* Well, that’s hardly a good reason for believing it.

This is different from Exchange #2, where John is really just telling us something about himself, rather than about ice cream (that is, it concerned a matter of taste). Here the claim does appear to involve Mars (a matter of judgment), except that it lacks any proper justification.

**MATTERS OF TASTE AND MATTERS OF JUDGMENT**

A common belief held by students new to philosophy goes something like this: “Philosophy is just a matter of opinion. None of it can be proved one way or another, so each opinion is just as good as the next.”

This is a belief about other beliefs — so we could call it a *meta-belief*. It is the belief that all beliefs are of equal value or worth, and that each is as likely to be true as the next (or else, that *none* are true or false). This meta-belief goes by the name of *relativism*, and for some it is a view held of nearly all beliefs.

While this meta-belief may be common, a little reflection suggests that it is very likely false. First, it misunderstands the relationship between **proof** and **evidence**. A belief may not be proven, but there may still exist evidence in its favor that warrants our believing it. While there are areas of life where one opinion *does* seem to be just as worthy as the next, philosophy isn’t one of them, no more than any other field of academic study, for as soon as we admit that there *is* evidence for or against some belief, then we have left the realm of “mere opinion” and entered the realm of “justified belief.”

If I say I don’t like the taste of pickled herring, then there’s little point in arguing with me. You might think my opinion of pickled herring unfortunate (perhaps you wanted to take me to eat at your favorite pickled herring deli), but it isn’t wrong or misinformed. There’s no being wrong in matters of taste: either you like something or you don’t, and that’s the end of the discussion. The claim that “Pickled herring tastes good” is a *mere opinion*, a matter of taste.

Matters of judgment are quite different in this regard. With these, it is quite appropriate to ask for the evidence, for the “reasons to believe.” Many matters of judgment have been conclusively determined to be true or false; others are still being debated. What is important here is to see that the debate is legitimate and meaningful — that there is a truth waiting to be discovered. You might believe, for instance, that the heavier an object is, the faster it will fall to the ground when dropped. Not only will a physicist disagree with you, she’ll prove by experiment that weight and acceleration in free fall are wholly unrelated, and you will have no choice but to change your mind about the matter.<sup>4</sup> Here there is no room for intelligent

**ON READING PHILOSOPHERS**

“In studying a philosopher, the right attitude is neither reverence nor contempt, but first a kind of hypothetical sympathy, until it is possible to know what it feels like to believe in his theories, and only then a revival of the critical attitude, which should resemble, as far as possible, the state of mind of a person abandoning opinions which he has hitherto held. Contempt interferes with the first part of this process, and reverence with the second. Two things are to be remembered: that a man whose opinions and theories are worth studying may be presumed to have had some intelligence, but that no man is likely to have arrived at complete and final truth on any subject whatever.”

— Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945)

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Galileo’s thought experiment is fairly decisive. He argued that the speed of objects in free fall is not related to their weight. Imagine two ten-pound bowling balls falling through the air. Now tie a string between them, producing one twenty-pound object: Will it now drop twice as fast? If you like, substitute a rigid steel rod for the string. It is clear, simply from our imagined experiment, that weight and speed of free fall are unrelated.

disagreement, because the truth of the matter has been decided. But unlike matters of taste, which are purely subjective, here the matter is entirely *objective*, and the evidence supporting the belief can be presented and examined.

Philosophical claims do not appear to be matters of taste. But how much objectivity they enjoy is still an open question, as is their decidability. None of the theories used in the natural sciences have been proven in the sense that they are irrefutably true for all time: perhaps all of them will be overturned sometime in the future. But that doesn't mean that one theory is just as good as the next, and that it is all a matter of opinion whether  $E = mc^2$ . There is good solid reasoning, including much empirical evidence, behind these theories that makes them superior to their competitors. Similarly with theories or claims in philosophy: What makes one theory better than another isn't that we know the one is true and the other false, but rather that we have *better reasons* for believing the one than the other. We will now turn to logic, which is a discipline for helping us think through these reasons to believe.



*"It sort of makes you stop and think, doesn't it."*

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Dropping balls of different weight from the leaning tower of Pisa, as legend claims Galileo did, is quite unnecessary for making this simple point.