

THE BIG QUESTIONS



A SHORT INTRODUCTION
TO PHILOSOPHY

Fifth Edition

ROBERT C. SOLOMON

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PREFACE

It was the fall of 1806, in the college town of Jena, in what we now call Germany. It was about the time when most students and professors would have been getting ready for their classes, with mixed annoyance and anticipation. The professors would have been finishing up their summer research; the students would have been doing what students usually do at the end of the summer.

But this year school would not begin as usual.

Napoleon's troops were already approaching the city, and you could hear the cannon from the steps of the university library. French scouts were already in the town, walking around the university, stopping for a glass of wine in the student bars, chatting casually with the local residents, many of whom were in sympathy with the new French ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

As the battle was about to begin, a young philosophy instructor named **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** was hastily finishing the book he was writing—a very difficult philosophy book with the forbidding title *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But "spirited" is what the book was, and it perfectly captured the tension, excitement, and anxiety of those perilous days. It was the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a new one. The book was a vision of consciousness caught in the midst of gigantic forces and looking for direction in a new and terrifyingly human world. It was an appeal for hope and thoughtful effort toward universal understanding and a belief in what was then innocently called the "perfectibility of humanity."

Transfer the situation to our own times—it was as if life in America were about to change completely, with all our old habits and landmarks, our ideas about ourselves and the ways we live, replaced by something entirely new and largely unknown. We talk about "future shock" and "megatrends" but, in fact, most of what we consider drastic changes in American life are mere shifts of emphasis, the not always convenient advantages that accompany new and improved technologies and techniques. If so many of us can get so melodramatic about computers, television, and the Internet, how would we react to a *real* change in our lives? Hegel and his students felt confident, even cheerful. Why? Because they had a **philosophy**. They had a vision of themselves and the future that allowed them to face the loss of their jobs, even the destruction of their society and the considerable chaos that would follow. Their ideas inspired them and made even the most threatening circumstances meaningful.

I recently asked my American students, who had been reading Hegel's philosophy, to characterize their own views of themselves and their times. The answers were less than inspiring. For many of them, the word "dull" seemed to summarize the world; others spoke of "crisis" and "despair." One said that life was "absurd" and another that it was "meaningless." I asked why. The answers were that gasoline was expensive, that most of them weren't getting the job interviews they really wanted, and that television programs were bad. Everyone agreed that these events were less than tragic, hardly "absurd," and didn't make life "meaningless." Everyone agreed that the

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born in Stuttgart in 1770. While he was a college student, he was enthusiastic about the French Revolution (1789–95) and an admirer of Napoleon. Hegel was teaching at the University of Jena in 1806 when Napoleon marched in and took over the town, ending the eight-hundred-year-old Holy Roman Empire and initiating widespread reforms throughout the German states. It was in this atmosphere of international war and liberal hopes that Hegel formulated his philosophy, which centered on the notion of “Spirit,” by which he meant the unity of the world through human consciousness. His method was **dialectic**—that is, he tried to demonstrate how contradictory views can be reconciled and shown to be, in fact, different aspects of one underlying phenomenon—ultimately, of Spirit. Hegel is still considered one of the great synthesizers of human knowledge and values; his *Encyclopedia* (first published in 1817) is a short synthesis of the whole of human life, including logic, science, and psychology as well as philosophy, art, religion, metaphysics, and ethics. He died in 1831.

old specter of nuclear war and terrorism had put a damper on our optimism, but we also agreed that the likelihood of such catastrophes was debatable and that, in any case, we all had to live as best we could, even if under a shadow. But why, then, in these times of relative affluence and peace (compared to most of the world throughout most of history) were our answers so sour? What were we missing that Hegel and his students, confronting the most terrible battles ever known, seem to have had—something that made them so optimistic and fulfilled? Again, the answer is a philosophy.

Philosophy, religion, and science have always been closely related. The emphasis shifts, but the point is the same: the importance of ideas and understanding, of making sense out of our world and seeing our lives in some larger, even cosmic, perspective. *Ideas* define our place in the universe, our relations with other people; ideas determine what is important and what is not important, what is fair and what is not fair, what is worth believing and what is not worth believing. Ideas give life meaning. Our minds need ideas the way our bodies need food. We are starved for visions, hungry for understanding. We are caught up in the routines of life, distracted occasionally by those activities we call “recreation” and “entertainment.” What we as a nation have lost is the joy of thinking, the challenge of understanding, the inspirations as well as the consolations of philosophy.

This is odd, however; for America, more than any other nation on earth, was founded on ideas, was built upon philosophical principles. And yet how many educated Americans can even name a living American philosopher? Or, for that matter, how many of us know anything about the philosophical history that, toward the end of the eighteenth century, gave birth to this nation? We recite ideas that are two hundred, in some cases two thousand, years old without any attempt to understand them, without any awareness that many men and women have lived and died for them, without even trying to be critical about them, to work them into our vision of the world. That is philosophy: philosophy is simply *thinking hard* about life, about what we have learned, about our place in the world. Philosophy is, literally, the **love of wisdom**. It is the search for the larger picture, the demand for **knowledge**—the kind of knowledge that allows us to understand our lives and the world around us. It is, accordingly, the insistence on the importance of **values**, a refusal to get totally caught up

in the details of life and simply go along with the crowd. Philosophy and wisdom define our place in the universe and give our lives meaning.

When undergraduates ask questions about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe, it is philosophy that ought to answer the questions. But thousands of students, not trained in hard thinking but starved for ideas and understanding, will retreat to the easier alternatives—pop philosophies of self-help, exotic religions, extreme politics. . . . If the hard thinking of philosophy does not address the big questions, then perhaps these easier alternatives will. The difference between philosophy and the popular alternatives is ultimately one of quality—the quality of ideas, the thoroughness of understanding. Since we all live by our ideas anyway, the choice becomes not whether to do philosophy or not do philosophy, but whether to accept a cheap and unchallenging substitute or to try the real thing. The aim of this book is to give you an introduction—to the real thing.

THE SUBJECT OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy is sometimes treated as an extremely esoteric, abstract, and specialized subject that has little to do with any other subjects of study—or with the rest of our lives. This is simply untrue. Philosophy is nothing less than the attempt to understand who we are and what we think of ourselves. And that is just what the great philosophers of history, whom we study in philosophy courses, were doing: trying to understand themselves and their times and their place in the world. They did this so brilliantly, in fact, that their attempts remain models for us. They help us formulate our own ideas and develop our own ways of clarifying what we believe.

Throughout this book, I have tried to introduce at least briefly many of the great philosophers throughout history. (Brief biographies are included in the chapters and at the end of the book.) But philosophy is not primarily the study of *other* people's ideas. Philosophy is first of all the attempt to state clearly, and as convincingly and interestingly as possible, *your own* views. That is *doing* philosophy, not just reading about how someone else has done it.

This book is an attempt to help you do just that—to *do* philosophy, to state what you believe, using the great philosophers and the great ideas of the past as inspiration, as a guide to ways of putting together your own views, to provoke the present alternatives that you may not have thought of on your own. The aim of the book—and at least one aim of the course you are taking—is to force you to think through your ideas, connect them, confront alternative views, and understand what you prefer and why you prefer it. Some students inevitably think that once they are speaking abstractly, it doesn't matter what they say. So they talk utter nonsense, or they express ideas they have never thought about, or they recite mere words—for example, the popular word “value”—without having any sense of what they as individuals believe to be true. I had a very bright student one year who claimed he did not exist. (I didn't convince him otherwise, but I gave him a grade anyway.) Some students even feel that it doesn't matter if they contradict themselves—after all, “It's only ideas.” But if it is through ideas that we see the world, if they determine how we feel about ourselves and live our lives, then our ideas make all the difference. So it is urgent—as well as intellectually necessary—that you ask, at every turn, “Do I really believe that?” and, “Is that compatible with other things I believe?” Good philosophy, and *great* philosophy, depends upon the seriousness and rigor with which such questions are asked. And it is the aim of this book to help you ask them, to help you build for yourself a philosophical presentation of your own view of the world.

It may sound as if it is an overwhelming task to summarize your views about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe in a single course. But no matter how crude your first efforts, this kind of integrative critical thinking—putting it all together—is essential to what you will be doing all through your life: keeping your priorities straight, knowing who you are and what you believe. In this course, which may be your first introduction to philosophy, the idea is to get you started. And once you begin to think about the *big questions* you may well find, as many students and almost all professional philosophers have found, that it is one of the most rewarding and most accessible activities you will ever learn—you can do it almost anywhere, at any time, with anyone, and especially alone. And if it seems difficult to begin (as it always does), it is because you are not used to thinking as a philosopher, because our ideas are inevitably more complex than we originally think they are, and because, once you begin thinking, there is no end to the number of things there are to think about. So consider this as a first attempt, an exploratory essay, a first difficult effort to express yourself and your opinions—not just on this issue or that one, but concerning the whole of your view of the world. It is *doing* philosophy, even if it is only for the first time, that makes it so exciting and challenging.

The first chapter of the book consists of a set of preliminary questions, in order to get you to state your opinions on some of the issues that make up virtually every philosophical viewpoint. Some of the questions you will find amusing; some of them are deadly serious. But between the two, the outlines of what you believe and don't believe should begin to become clear. Each succeeding chapter also begins with a set of preliminary questions. And again the point is to encourage you to state your beliefs on these subjects before we begin to develop the views that philosophers have argued. Each chapter includes a discussion of various alternative viewpoints, with brief passages from some of the great philosophers. Special terms, which probably are new to you but have become established in philosophy, are introduced as they are needed, as a way of helping you make distinctions and clarify your beliefs more precisely than our ordinary language allows. (A glossary containing most of these terms—which are boldface in the text—appears at the back of the book.) Each chapter ends with a set of concluding questions that will help you locate your own views among the alternatives of traditional philosophy. There is a bibliography at the end of each chapter containing suggestions for further reading; you can explore those topics that interest or challenge you, since no textbook can substitute for original works.

FOR THE INSTRUCTOR

This fifth edition is easier to use and more flexible for teaching a variety of individually structured courses in introductory philosophy at both the college and advanced high school levels. The addition of two appendices, *Deductive Logic Valid Argument Forms* and *Common Informal Fallacies*, not only allows the text to be more simple and straightforward but also for these topics to receive focused attention. I expanded the final chapter on feminist and non-Western philosophies. As in the fourth edition, my intention for this and all chapters is to make such material available to those instructors who choose to use it but dispensable for those who do not. The discussion in every chapter is more or less self-contained, and the chapters can be used in just about any order. Some instructors prefer to start with the “God” chapter, for example, others with the more “epistemological” chapters on “Knowledge,” “Truth,” “Self,” and “Freedom.” I find that the opening chapters, with their broad collection of both playful and

serious philosophical questions and varied discussions of the "Meaning of Life," are helpful in loosening up and relaxing nervous first-time students and getting them to talk in a more free-wheeling way than they do if they are immediately confronted by the great thinkers or the most intractable problems of philosophy. So, too, I find the opening questions are helpful for getting students to think about the issues on their own before diving into the text. To encourage students to write and think about philosophical questions, to get them used to *interacting* with the text and arguments, I added space between each question, in which the students can write their own responses and comments directly in the book. The closing questions to each chapter, by the way, also serve as handy exam questions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank all those readers, both students and colleagues, who responded kindly and critically to my earlier text, *Introducing Philosophy* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977; Sixth Edition, 1997). The present text, *The Big Questions*, Fifth Edition, is a fresh attempt to reach an audience no longer addressed by that book, and I am indebted to all who pointed out the need for the new book and helped me develop and refine it.

I especially thank all those people who taught me the joys and skills of philosophy, and how to teach it. First of all, there is my father, Charles M. Solomon, who always encouraged me in "that thinkin' stuff." There is Robert Hanson, who first thrilled me with Parmenides and Heraclitus at Cheltenham High School, and Doris Yocum, who taught my first philosophy course. I learned so much about teaching philosophy from Elizabeth Flower, James Ross, Peter Hempel, and Frithjof Bergmann, and I continue to learn from great colleagues like Bob Kane and Paul Woodruff. I also thank Donette Moss, Winkie Conlon, and Shirley Hull for their much-needed care and attention, and Jon Solomon for his advice on exotic matters in the book.

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Robert C. Solomon

CONTENTS

Preface	<i>iii</i>
INTRODUCTION: Doing Philosophy	1
Beyond Buzz Words and Verbal Spaghetti	3
Articulation and Argument: Two Crucial Features of Philosophy	4
Concepts and Conceptual Frameworks	6
Doing Philosophy with Style	11
A Little Logic	16
Deduction	17
Induction	18
Criticizing Arguments	20
Closing Questions	24
Bibliography and Suggested Readings	26
ONE: Philosophical Questions	27
Philosophical Questions	29
Opening Questions	30
Bibliography and Suggested Readings	42
TWO: The Meaning of Life	43
Opening Questions	44
The Meaning of Meaning	45
Children as Meaning	47
God as Meaning	48
Afterlife as Meaning	48
No Meaning at All	49
The Meanings of Life	51
Life as a Game	52
Life as a Story	53
Life as Tragedy	54
Life as Comedy	54
Life as a Mission	55
Life as Art	56
Life as an Adventure	57
Life as Disease	57
Life as Desire	59
Life as Nirvana	59
Life as Altruism	60
Life as Honor	60
Life as Learning	61

Life as Suffering	62
Life as an Investment	62
Life as Relationships	63
Closing Questions	64
Bibliography and Suggested Readings	65

THREE: God 67

Opening Questions	68
Believing in God	69
Gods and Goddesses	72
Our Traditional Conceptions of God	73
God as Transcendent	75
God as Immanent	75
God as Totally Immanent: Pantheism	76
God as Universal Spirit	80
God as Process	81
God as Transcendent Creator: Deism	81
God as the Unknown Object of Faith	82
God as a Moral Being	83
The Problem of Evil	84
Denial of God	84
Two Kinds of Evil	84
Denial of Evil	85
The Least of the Evils	85
The Aesthetic Totality Solution	87
The Free-Will Solution	87
Justice in the Afterlife	88
God's "Mysterious Ways"	88
Working Out an Answer	89
Faith and Reason: Ways of Believing	89
The Cosmological Argument	90
The Argument from Design	91
The Ontological Argument	93
Rational Faith	94
Pascal's Wager	95
Irrational Faith	97
Understanding Your Belief	99
Closing Questions	100
Bibliography and Suggested Readings	102

FOUR: The Nature of Reality 105

Opening Questions	106
The Real World	107
What Is Most Real?	109
The Reality Behind the Appearances	110
Dreams, Sensations, and Reason: What Is Real?	111
The Basis of Metaphysics	112
The First Metaphysicians	113
Thales	113
The Pre-Socratic Materialists	113
Early Nonphysical Views of Reality	116

Plato's Forms	119
Aristotle's Metaphysics	121
Mind and Metaphysics	122
Descartes	123
Spinoza	126
Leibniz	127
Idealism	129
Teleology	134
Metaphysics and the Everyday World	137
Closing Questions	139
Bibliography and Suggested Readings	141

FIVE: The Search for Truth 143

Opening Questions	144
What Is True?	145
Two Kinds of Truth	146
Empirical Truth	147
Necessary Truth	147
Rationalism and Empiricism	150
The Presuppositions of Knowledge	153
Skepticism	154
Descartes and the "Method of Doubt"	157
David Hume's Skepticism	158
The Resolution of Skepticism: Kant	162
Knowledge, Truth, and Science	163
The Nature of Truth	168
The Coherence Theory of Truth	170
The Pragmatic Theory of Truth	171
Rationality	172
Why Be Rational?	174
Subjective Truth: Any Truth at All?	175
Closing Questions	177
Bibliography and Suggested Readings	178

SIX: Self 179

Opening Questions	180
The Essential Self	181
Self as Body, Self as Consciousness	184
The Self as a Problem	189
No Self, Many Selves	193
The Mind-Body Problem	195
Behaviorism	197
Identity Theory	198
Functionalism	200
The Egocentric Predicament	201
The Self as Social	204
Self and Relationships	208
Closing Questions	211
Bibliography and Suggested Readings	212

SEVEN: Freedom..... 213

Opening Questions 214

Freedom and the Good Life 215

Why Is Freedom So Important to Us? 216

What Is Freedom? 220

Free Will and Determinism 224

Determinism Versus Indeterminism 227

The Role of Consciousness 231

"Soft" Determinism 232

In Defense of Freedom 233

Closing Questions 236

Bibliography and Suggested Readings 237

EIGHT: Morality and the Good Life 239

Opening Questions 240

The Good Life 243

Hedonism 243

Success 245

Asceticism 246

Freedom 247

Power and Creativity 247

Religion 248

Happiness 249

Egoism versus Altruism 250

Morality and Theories of Morality 255

Duty-defined Morality 259

Kant and the Authority of Reason 259

Consequentialist 261

Utilitarianism: Bentham and Mill 262

Aristotle and the Ethics of Virtue 264

Morality—Relative or Absolute? 266

Nietzsche and the Attack on Morality 268

Closing Questions 271

Bibliography and Suggested Readings 272

NINE: Justice and the Good Society..... 275

Opening Questions 276

Morals and Society 277

The Nature of Society 278

Who Should Rule?—The Question of Legitimacy 280

Anarchism, the Free Market, and the Need for Government 282

What Is Justice? 285

The Meaning of Equality 288

The Origins of Justice and the Social Contract 291

Rights and the Notion of the Self 294

Libertarianism 295

Liberalism 295

Communitarianism 296

Closing Questions 296

Bibliography and Suggested Readings 297

TEN: Philosophy, Sex, Race, and Culture..... 299

Opening Questions 300

Expanding the Philosophical "Canon" 301

Beyond the "Western Tradition" 304

Other Cultures, Other Philosophies 305

South Asian Philosophy 307

East Asian Philosophy 313

The Middle East 316

Native American and African Philosophy 318

Sexual Politics: The Rise of Feminist Philosophy 321

Women and Nature 323

Plato: Patriarch or Early Feminist? 325

Reason versus Passion in Ethics: The Ethics of Care 325

Feminist Epistemology and Feminist Science 327

The Revival of African-American Philosophy 328

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X 328

Closing Questions 330

Bibliography and Suggested Readings 331

Appendix I: Writing Philosophy 333

Opening Questions 333

The Rules of Good Writing in Philosophy 334

Organize 334

Write Simply 336

Be Clear 336

Be Human 337

Use Examples 338

Argue Your Point 340

Consider the Objections and Alternatives 343

Define Your Specialized Terms 344

Use the History of Philosophy 345

Indirect Styles 346

Dialogue Style 346

Ironic Style 349

Aphoristic Style 351

Appendix II: Deductive Logic Valid Argument Forms 355

Appendix III: Common Informal Fallacies..... 361

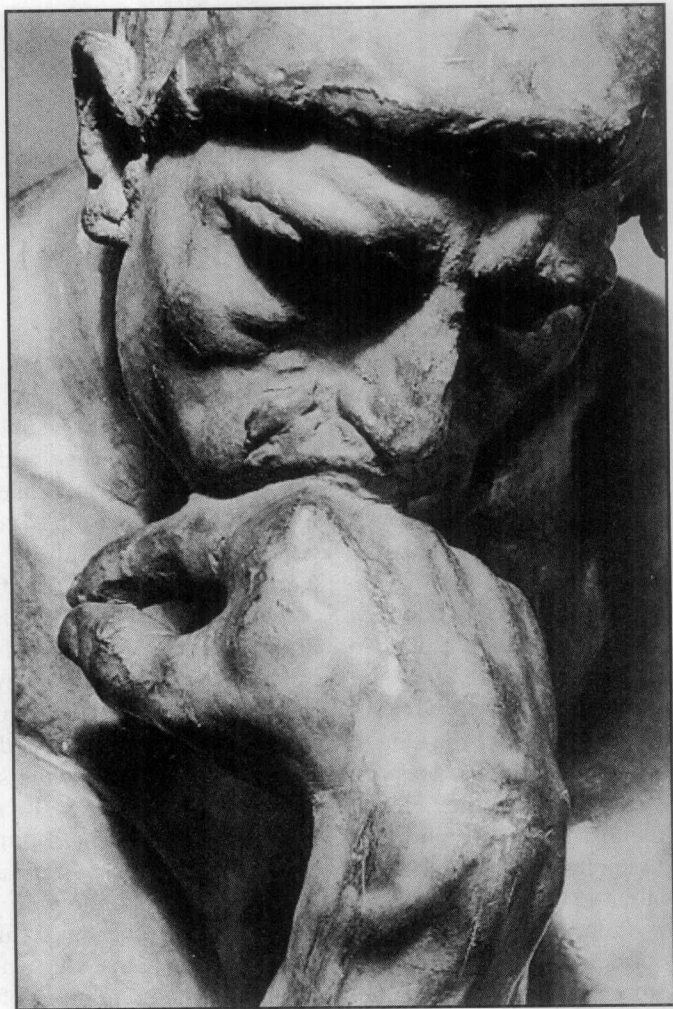
"Informal" Fallacies 361

Brief Biographies 367

Glossary 371

Index 387

INTRODUCTION
DOING PHILOSOPHY



Auguste Rodin, The Thinker, detail, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Thomas F. Ryan, 1910.

INTRODUCTION

DOING PHILOSOPHY

The unexamined life is not worth living.

— Socrates

Know thyself!

— Oracle at Delphi (Socrates' motto)

Philosophy consists of our views—our beliefs and attitudes about ourselves and the world. Doing philosophy, therefore, is first of all the activity of stating, as clearly and as convincingly as possible, what we believe and what we believe in. This does not mean, however, that announcing one's allegiance to some grand-sounding ideas, or, perhaps, some grand-sounding word, is all that there is to philosophy. Philosophy is the development of these ideas, the attempt to work them out with all their implications and complications. It is the attempt to see their connections with other people's views—including the classic statements of the great philosophers of the past. It is the effort to appreciate the differences between one's own views and others' views, to be able to argue with someone who disagrees and resolve the difficulties that they may throw in your path. One of my students once suggested that she found it easy to list her main ideas on a single sheet of paper; what she found difficult was showing how they related to one another and how she might defend them against someone who disagreed with her. I pointed out that she was saying something like this: She would really enjoy playing quarterback with the football team, as long as she didn't have to cooperate with the other players—and then only until the other team came onto the field. But playing football is cooperating with your team and running against the team that is out to stop you; philosophy is the attempt to coordinate a number of different ideas into a single viewpoint, and holding out for what you believe against those who are out to refute you. Indeed, a belief that can't be tied in with a great many other beliefs and that can't withstand criticism may not be worth believing at all.

Socrates was perhaps the greatest philosopher of all times, though he never wrote a word. (All that we know of him comes down to us from his student Plato and other philosophers.) Socrates was born in 470 B.C. and lived his whole long life in Athens. He had a spectacular gift for rhetoric and debating. He had a much-gossiped-about marriage, several children, and lived in poverty most of his life. He based his philosophy on the need to “know yourself” and on living the “examined life,” even though the height of wisdom, according to Socrates, was to know how thoroughly ignorant we are. Much of his work was dedicated to defining and living the ideals of wisdom, justice, and the good life. In 399 B.C. he was placed on trial by the Athenians for “corrupting the youth” with his ideas. He was condemned to death, refused all opportunities to escape or have his sentence repealed, and accepted the cruel and unfair verdict with complete dignity and several brilliant speeches, dying as well as living for the ideas he defended.

BEYOND BUZZWORDS AND VERBAL SPAGHETTI

To defend your ideas is quite different from insisting, no matter how self-righteously, on the mere sound of a word. To say that you believe in “freedom,” for instance, may make you feel proud and righteous, but this has nothing to do with philosophy, or, for that matter, with freedom, unless you are willing to spell out exactly what it is you stand for, what it is that you believe, and why it is that this “freedom,” as you call it, is so desirable. But most students, as well as many professional philosophers, get caught up in such attractive, admirable words, which we can call “buzzwords.” These sound as if they refer to something quite specific and concrete (like the word “dog”), but in fact they are among the most difficult words to understand and they provide us with the hardest problems in philosophy. “Freedom” sounds as if it means breaking out of prison or being able to speak one’s mind against a bad government policy; but when we try to say what it is that ties these two examples together, and many more besides, it soon becomes clear that we don’t know exactly what we’re talking about. Indeed, virtually everyone believes in “freedom,” but the question is *what* it is that they believe in. Similarly, many people use such words as “truth,” “reality,” “morality,” “love,” and even “God” as buzzwords, words that make us feel good just because we say them. But to express the beliefs these words supposedly represent is to do something more than merely say the words; it is also to say what they mean, and what it is in the world (or out of it) to which we are referring. Buzzwords are like

badges; we use them to identify ourselves. But it is equally important to know what the badges stand for.

Some buzzwords seem to be ways of identifying ourselves—the words “science” and “art,” for example. How many dubious suggestions and simple-minded advertisements cash in on the respectability of the word “scientific”? What outrageous behavior is sometimes condoned on the grounds that it is “artistic”? And in politics, what actions have not been justified in the name of “national security” or “self-determination”? But such buzzwords not only block our understanding of the true nature of our behavior; they can also be an obstacle—rather than an aid—in philosophy. Philosophers are always making up new words, often by way of making critical distinctions. For example, the words “subjective” and “objective,” once useful philosophical terms, now have so many meanings and are so commonly abused that the words by themselves hardly mean anything at all. Would-be philosophers, including some of the more verbally fluent philosophy students, may think that they are doing philosophy when they merely string together long noodle chains of such impressive terms. We call this “verbal spaghetti,” and it is to philosophy what a howling dog is to music. Philosophical terms are useful only in so far as they stay tied down to the problems they are introduced to solve and retain the carefully defined meanings they carry. Buzzwords become not aids for thinking but rather *substitutes* for thinking, and verbal spaghetti, despite its complexity, is intellectually without nutritional value.

The abuse of buzzwords and the ease with which some people can overwhelm serious discussions with verbal spaghetti explain the importance of that overused introductory philosophical demand, “Define your terms.” In fact, it is very difficult to define your terms, and most of the time, it is unnecessary and a waste of time. You know quite well what you mean. But when certain philosophical terms enter our discussion, it is clear why this incessant demand has always been so important; many students seem to think that they have learned some philosophy just because they have learned a new and impressive word or two. But that’s like believing that you have learned how to ski just because you have tried on the boots and skis. The truth, however, is to be found in what you go on to do with them.

ARTICULATION AND ARGUMENT: TWO CRUCIAL FEATURES OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy is, first of all, **reflection**. It is stepping back, listening to yourself and other people (including the great philosophers), and trying to understand and evaluate what it is that you hear, and what it is that you believe. To formulate your own philosophy is to say what it is that you believe as clearly and as thoroughly as possible. Often we believe that we believe something, but as soon as we try to write it down or explain it to a friend we find that