

Enduring  
Issues  
<sup>in</sup>  
Philosophy

Gerald W. Eichhoefer

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Enduring  
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# Enduring Issues in Philosophy

Gerald W. Eichhoefer

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*This book is dedicated to my mother, Lucille Herman, and to Lorena, Mara, and Alethea, who have been long-suffering.*

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## FOREWORD

*"When a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a subject of interest."*

William Hazlitt

The Enduring Issues series is based on the concept that certain fundamental disciplines remain interesting and vibrant because they remain controversial, debatable, and mutable. Indeed, it is through controversy that these disciplines were forged, and through debate that they continue to be defined.

Each book in the Enduring Issues series aims to present the most seminal and thought-provoking issues in the most accessible way—by pitting the founders of each discipline side by side in a pro/con format. This running debate style allows readers to compare and contrast major philosophical views, noting the major and minor areas of disagreement. In this way, the chronology of the formation of the discipline itself is traced. As American clergyman Lyman Beecher argued, "No great advance has ever been made in science, politics, or religion, without controversy."

In an effort to collect the most representative opinions of these disciplines, every editor of each book in the Enduring Issues series has been chosen for his or her expertise in presenting these issues in the classroom. Each editor has chosen the materials for his or her book with these goals in mind: 1) To offer, both to the uninitiated and to the well read, classic questions answered by the leading historical and contemporary proponents for each question. 2) To create and stimulate an interest and excitement in these academic disciplines by revealing that even in the most esoteric areas there are questions and views common to every person's search for life's meaning. 3) To reveal the development of ideas, and, in the process, plant the notion in the reader's mind that truth can only be unearthed in thoughtful examination and reexamination.

The editors of the Enduring Issues series hope that readers will find in it a launching point to do their own investigation and form their own opinions about the issues raised by these academic disciplines. Because it is in the continued contemplation of these questions that these issues will remain alive.

# INTRODUCTION

You may be reading this book as a course requirement, because you are curious about philosophy, or both. In any case, a few preliminary observations will help you along the way. First, do not assume that philosophy is something completely foreign to you. Whether you know it or not, you have already done some serious philosophical thinking. If you have ever wondered whether God exists or whether you did the right thing you have engaged in philosophical inquiry. Most philosophical thinkers are ordinary people who are not aware that they are engaging in philosophy. Other people are more systematic. They carefully explore philosophical ideas and discuss them with others. Sometimes they write down and even publish them. These people may be professional philosophers, who make their living “doing philosophy,” or they may be people who have mastered other disciplines, like physics or religion or literature. A biologist, for example, may wonder about evolution and its implications for the existence of God, or a physicist may wonder how far the “scientific method” can be pushed to yield truth. The things these people have to say are interesting to ordinary people as well. Reading their reflections may help us answer or at least understand our own questions.

Second, do not make the mistake of thinking that philosophy is a waste of time. The study of philosophy helps develop clear and careful thought. It teaches people to make important distinctions and question assumptions. This book, which contains opposing points of view, makes it possible to develop these skills by comparing what different careful thinkers have to say about the same topics. The critical thinking that philosophy fosters can help a person be more successful in other areas of life, whether as a manager in a corporation or a parent dealing with children. It has been said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Philosophy is a systematic way of examining life and is a valuable tool for this purpose.

Third, do not think that philosophy is abstract and will not affect your personal values and beliefs. Examination of life as well as other topics will reveal both strengths and weaknesses in your own ideas. It is probably impossible for a person to critically examine his or her beliefs without finding ideas that are weak. This, obviously, is threatening. One way of dealing with

this is to read several points of view, as you can with this text. You may find that although one philosopher may challenge an important belief another may find weaknesses in the challenger's point of view. Still another philosopher may agree with you and support your position with stronger and more valid reasons than yours. You may finally decide after reading more deeply about your position that you have to change your mind or suspend your judgment in some areas. Remember to remain unintimidated by philosophers or authors. Read and think some more. Consider what other, equally qualified, people have to say. Practice some philosophical detachment yourself.

Fourth, be prepared to spend some time and effort in your study of philosophy. Philosophical understanding, like most valuable things, comes at a price. You cannot speed-read philosophical material. You will probably have to read the material several times. First read the entire article to get some impression of the what and how of the argument. Use the glossary at the back of the book or a good dictionary to look up terms that are not obvious to you from the context. Next, read the text in an attempt to answer the study questions provided with each reading. Some of these are obvious after reading the material, while some require a good deal of thought and may have more than one very good answer. The purpose is not just to read someone's opinions but to bring your own ideas and knowledge to bear upon the reading and to interact with the author, your professor, and fellow students. Do not expect to completely understand everything the authors have to say. That is a lifelong journey, not a bridge to cross.

Finally, I would like to call your attention to the way this book is organized. Philosophers, like everybody else, classify things. One major area of philosophy is introduced in each chapter of this collection. The first chapter begins by asking what it is possible to know. There is little point to inquiry if we have no idea how or where to look. This question cannot be entirely separated from the question of what reality is ultimately like, the topic of the second chapter. After all, we want to know what is real, do we not? Some questions about reality have wider implications than others. The big reality question, in the minds of most people, concerns whether God exists, which the third chapter considers. Examining the purpose of human existence in a universe created by an all-powerful being is quite dif-

ferent than in one where creation was accidental or random. Chapter 4, as is much of human life, is centered around moral questions. Pursuing moral questions may tell us something about the ultimate nature of things and about the significance of the God question.

In some sense, the study of philosophy is the study of ourselves—we want to know about the universe because we want to know who and what we are. The fifth chapter discusses what role government should play in our lives given our concern for morality and justice and our value as conscious beings.

I hope that this book will be only a launching point for a lifelong exploration of self-knowledge and self-reflection. Humans are unique, at least in this small part of the cosmos, in their ability to communicate in detail with others their ideas, thoughts, and deepest self-doubts. By exploring these topics, you explore what it means to be human. Take on the journey.

# TO THE INSTRUCTOR

## Suggestions for the Use of This Book

This collection is suitable for use with a one-semester introduction to philosophy course either as a stand-alone text, a book of readings to support a systematic or historical introductory text, or for independent study. If it is used as a text, the instructor will need to provide fairly extensive supporting lectures. For the most part, the selections are organized according to topic and an attempt is made to present them in an intuitive order that represents an ongoing discussion or set of discussions within each chapter. The discussions are generally in historical order, but clarity was a more important organizational consideration than sequence. For this reason Aristotle, for example, shows up near the middle rather than the beginning of Chapter 4, "What Is Morality?" A broad selection of classical and contemporary writers is included, so it is possible to choose selections in historical order rather than on the basis of chapter titles. Many of the selections could have been included under more than one topic.

Study questions specific to each reading are included and more general questions, suitable for extended class discussions and papers, are included at the end of the book. The questions are carefully thought out and are not designed simply to verify that chapters have been read. The reading-specific questions require a careful and thoughtful reading of the texts. In keeping with the philosophy of the *Opposing Viewpoints* series, a wide variety of viewpoints are included. Some philosophers are mentioned but viewpoints by them are not included because of space limitations. Viewpoints that are often neglected in general introductory collections, like process metaphysics, are included here.



# *What Can We Know?*

# CHAPTER PREFACE

It is common prudence to verify sources of information when that information is extremely important. When people claim to know the answers to significant questions like what is ultimately real or whether there is a God or a real right and wrong, it is philosophically prudent to ask them how they know. Philosophers are not merely interested in how someone obtained a particular set of facts, but whether it is even possible to obtain those facts. For example, when someone claims that there really are such things as souls or electrons, philosophers want to know how anyone could know such things.

This type of questioning stems from Renaissance thinkers, who developed a powerful skeptical tradition that questioned all major religious and philosophical beliefs. René Descartes, who had skeptical teachers, realized that many of his beliefs could not stand up to skeptical attack. He responded by using skepticism as a method for discovering truth. He did this by using his reason to doubt everything he could possibly doubt. He claimed that anything that could not possibly be doubted must be true. Modern philosophy, with its emphasis in epistemology, or the theory of truth, was born. Descartes' use of his reason to obtain certain knowledge was the beginning of what is called the rationalist school of philosophy.

This rationalist approach was opposed by a group of philosophers, known as the empiricists, who argued that all knowledge comes through the senses rather than through reason. John Locke and other members of this group believe that all of our ideas originate in experience. Despite the carefully reasoned arguments of both the rationalists and the empiricists, neither side succeeded in completely discrediting the other. Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher, argued that neither side had the whole truth and that knowledge is the result of both the use of the mind and the senses. Kant argued that the mind contributed the basic structures, which he called categories or ideas, that made all human experience possible. He believed that the senses provided the content of these experiences. Early in the twentieth century Henri Bergson criticized this approach because he believed that reality is dynamic and flowing and that sharp rigid categories like those Kant proposed did more to distort reality than to reveal it. Bergson

replaced reason and sensory experience with intuition. In contrast with reason and experience, which are external to reality, he argued that intuition placed the knower empathetically within the flow of reality.

With the considerable success of the physical and biological sciences in the twentieth century many philosophers were convinced that science held the only key to truth. These philosophers, who include Quine and Ullian, elevated the hypothetical-deductive method of science to the very highest status. They believe, in essence, that whatever humans can know will be discovered by using this method. Not all philosophers and scientists, however, share this opinion. The famous mathematical physicist James Jeans argued that the hypothetical-deductive method cannot lead to truth because the hypotheses of modern physics do not allow any way of looking at the world that makes sense to human beings. The difficulty in conceptualizing quantum mechanics especially has convinced many thinkers that the world simply cannot be understood by humans. Consciousness has proved to be equally conceptually difficult. Thomas Nagel, a brilliant philosopher and cognitive scientist, has reflected deeply on the problems of consciousness, much like Jeans and others have done with physics. Nagel argues that there are facts which humans must acknowledge as true but which we can never understand or even express. Thus the issue of human knowledge remains as hotly contested today as it ever was.





# *All Knowledge Is Gained Through Reason*

**RENÉ DESCARTES**

René Descartes (1596-1650) made major contributions to mathematics and is regarded as the founder of modern philosophy because of his contributions to epistemology, the theory of knowledge and truth. The oft quoted “I think, therefore I am” first appeared in Descartes’ best-known work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The following viewpoint contains the first and second meditations. Descartes begins by discussing many of his beliefs and deciding to examine his fundamental beliefs in order to eliminate error and lay secure foundations for truth. He does this by systematically doubting his beliefs until he finds something which he cannot doubt, which turns out to be the existence of his own mind or self. In the course of his doubting he finds that his belief in the physical world and even the truths of his beloved mathematics are uncertain. Descartes’ quest for certain foundations

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