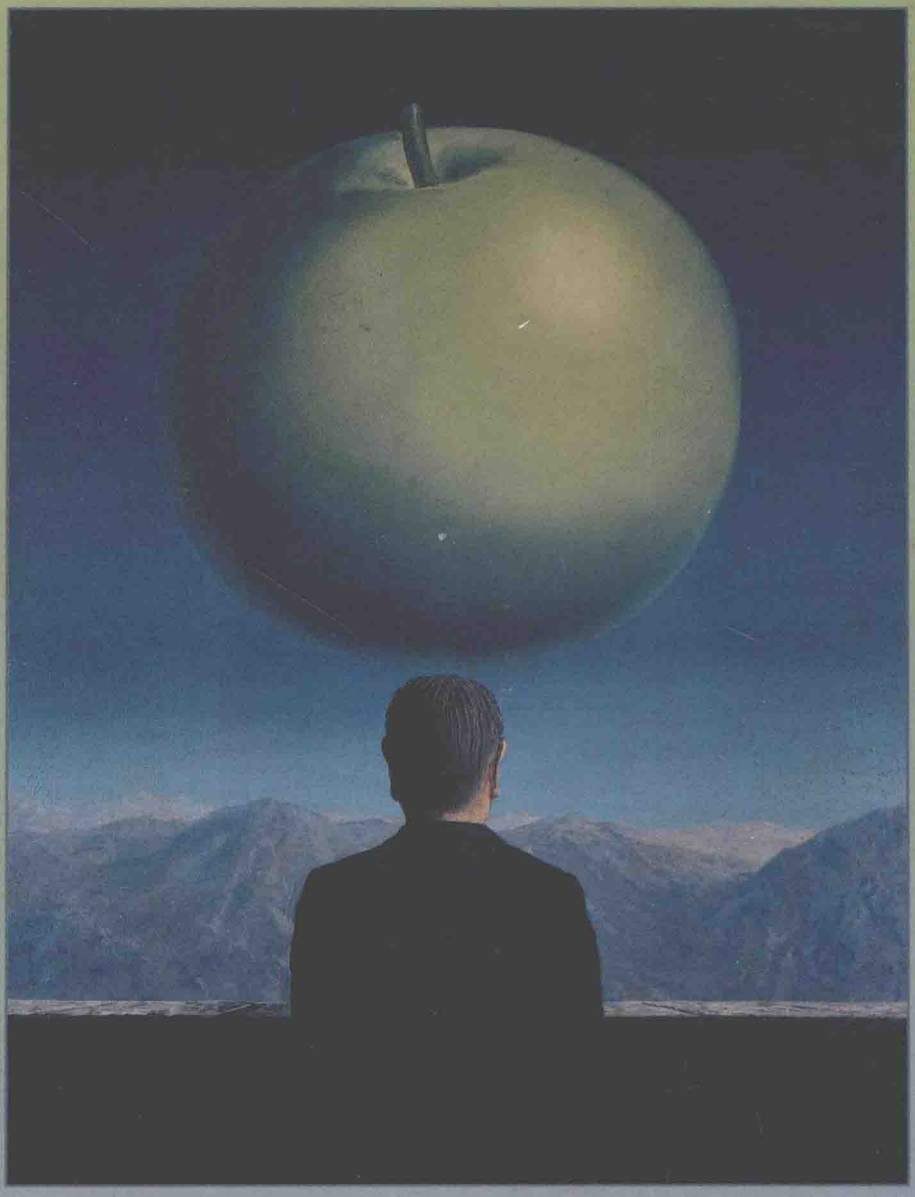
Core Questions in Philosophy

A TEXT WITH READINGS

Second Edition



ELLIOTT SOBER

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SECOND EDITION

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—For Aaron—

PREFACE

The philosophical problems investigated in this book concern fundamental facts about our place in the universe. Many of us were brought up to believe that God exists, that there is a real difference between right and wrong, that we can freely choose what sort of lives to lead, and that it is possible for us to gain knowledge of the world we inhabit. A major goal of philosophy is to discover whether these opinions can be rationally defended or are just comfortable illusions.

Core Questions in Philosophy emphasizes the idea that philosophy is a subject devoted to *evaluating arguments* and *constructing theories.* This is not the same as describing the history of what various philosophers have thought. Although I discuss historical texts, I do so because they are rich sources of ideas pertinent to answering philosophical questions. The point isn't to say solemn and respectful words about worthy figures now dead, but to engage them in dialogue—to grapple with the theories they have proposed, to criticize these theories, even to improve upon them.

Besides proposing answers to philosophical questions, I also try to make clear which questions I have *not* answered. I hope that the reader will approach what I say the way I have approached the philosophical texts I discuss. This is a book to argue with, to dissect. It isn't my goal to have the reader accept without question the conclusions I reach.

This work is a combination *textbook with readings.* The text part (which I call "lectures") is followed by a group of related readings (drawn from Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Anselm, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Mill, and others). The lectures flow together, so that the main areas covered—philosophy of religion, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and ethics—are connected to each other to make a coherent whole.

The lectures are intended to be *launching pads* from which readers can pursue issues on their own. I believe students are best able to think about philosophy if they first are provided with some basic tools and concepts. It is the purpose of the lectures to provide these *core ideas.*

Following the lectures in Parts II through V, there are a number of readings; these are drawn mainly from historical texts, although a few are by contemporary philosophers. The lectures often discuss these readings, but the area of overlap is far from total. Many lectures contain material that isn't touched on in any reading; and the readings raise a wealth of issues that the lectures don't

address. The lectures are intended to stand on their own as well as to provide points of entry into the readings.

Each lecture is followed by review questions and by problems for further thought. These should help readers to consolidate their understanding of what I have said and to think creatively about related problems. The lectures often contain material in "boxes"; these boxes provide a nutshell restatement of a main idea or a brief discussion of a related matter that may interest the reader. A list of the boxes immediately follows the table of contents. Each main part of the text includes suggestions for further reading. And there is a glossary at the end of the book that provides simple definitions of the main concepts used.

Besides covering a number of traditional topics, this book also takes up some contemporary theories and problems, both from philosophy and from other disciplines. Creationism and evolutionary theory are hotly debated now. The issues they raise are continuous with a tradition of argument in philosophy of religion that goes back (at least) to Aquinas, Hume, and Paley. The relation of mind and body is as old a problem as philosophy engages; but the ideas of Freud and Skinner get a hearing along with those of Descartes. In ethics there has long been a debate as to whether ethical truths are discovered or created. Plato and Sartre are separated by more than 2,000 years, but both speak to this issue. The problem of free will raises the question of whether every event is caused. Here the contribution of modern physics must be brought into contact with a perennial problem of philosophy. Philosophy isn't the same as biology, psychology, or physics. But the problems of philosophy cannot be isolated from the sciences. One aim of this book is to connect philosophical problems with ideas derived from a wider culture.

The etymology of the word *philosopher* is *lover of wisdom*. This doesn't guarantee that all philosophers are wise, nor even that each individual philosopher is devoted to the attainment of wisdom. Philosophers *should* strive for wisdom; whether they do so, and whether they attain it, are separate questions.

Wisdom involves understanding—seeing how things fit together. When the pieces of a puzzle are fitted together, one attains a sense of wholeness. Current philosophy is embedded in a historical tradition of philosophical discourse. It also is connected with problems in the sciences, the other humanities, and the arts. This book aims to give the reader a sense of these multiple connections.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My debts to my colleagues in philosophy here in Madison are enormous. A fixed point in my work week has been discussions of the ideas and techniques that go into presenting central problems of philosophy to new students. My philosophical outlook, as well as the view I have of teaching, have been shaped by these conversations.

It is a pleasure to thank Michael Byrd, Claudia Card, Fred Dretske, Ellery Eells, Berent Enc, Malcolm Forster, Martha Gibson, Paula Gottlieb, Andy Levine, Steve Nadler, Terry Penner, Mark Singer, Dennis Stampe, Daniel Wikler, and Keith Yandell. They were generous enough to suffer my trespasses onto philosophical terrain that belonged more to them than to me. Some read parts of this book and gave me comments; others listened patiently while I tried out what I thought was a new angle.

The first edition of *Core Questions in Philosophy* elicited a steady stream of correspondence and phone calls from teachers of philosophy and their students. These took a variety of forms; there was praise and blame, suggestions on how to do better, and even a few not-so-gentle suggestions that I should turn my attention to other projects. On the whole, though, I was happy with what I heard, though this didn't mean that I felt that I should leave the first edition unchanged. I thank everyone who took the trouble to let me know what they thought. Usually (but not always), they will find evidence that I listened to what they said in the way the second edition differs from the first.

Deserving of special mention are Paul Christopher, Ronald Glass, and Burton Hurdle, who read through the entire second edition manuscript and provided me with many useful suggestions.

Writing an introduction to philosophy has been a challenge. I had to reconstruct what a problem or idea would sound like to someone who hadn't studied the subject before. There was difficulty in this task, but also exhilaration. The project was a kind of return to the beginning—to fundamentals. I hope that what I found by beginning again will be useful to those who set themselves the project of beginning for the first time.

Core Questions in Philosophy

CONTENTS

BOXES

PART I

Introduction

LECTURES

Lecture 1

What Is Philosophy?

Philosophy is a peculiar subject. If you asked biochemists "What is biochemistry?" they wouldn't have much trouble telling you what their subject includes. Different biochemists might provide slightly different answers. But biochemists probably wouldn't think it is terribly important to get clear on which answer is "really" correct.

Asking philosophers what their subject includes elicits a very different response. It is difficult to answer the question "What is philosophy?" and the fact that philosophers produce different answers to this question is often taken to show that they disagree in fundamental ways about the aims and methods of their subject.

Although biochemists don't spend much time developing theories about what biochemistry really is, some philosophers have developed theories about the nature of philosophy. Often, these theories have been regarded by other philosophers as controversial and even misguided. For better or worse, "What is philosophy?" is a philosophical question.

I'll discuss this question from two angles. First, I'll give a sketch of some of the main philosophical problems I'll examine in this book. That is, I'll describe some *examples* of philosophy. But giving examples doesn't really answer the question. If you asked "What is a mammal?" and I showed you a human being, a hippo, and a cat, that might give you a *hint* about what a mammal is. However, citing examples isn't the same as saying what it is to be a mammal.

That is why there will be a second stage to my discussion of what philosophy is. After giving some examples of philosophical problems, I'll present some theories about what philosophy is. I believe these theories have some merit, though none is fully adequate. These preliminary efforts to say what philosophy is will be enough for now. A better answer to the question will be available to you once you have read this book to the end, not here at the outset.

Examples

The first philosophical problem we'll consider is whether God exists. Some philosophers have constructed arguments that attempt to establish that God

exists; others have tried to show there is no God. I'll evaluate some of the more influential arguments and try to see whether they work.

The second problem we will consider concerns knowledge. It is pretty clear that belief and knowledge are different. Some people long ago thought the earth is flat. They *believed* this, but they didn't *know* it, since it isn't true. Of course, they *thought* they knew it, but that is different.

It also is pretty clear that true belief isn't the same as knowledge. If you believe something for no reason at all, but happen to be right by accident, you have true belief but not knowledge. For example, think of a gullible gambler at a race track who believes for no good reason that the first horse in every race will win. Occasionally, this person will be right—he will have a true belief. But it isn't plausible to say that he knew, on those races about which he turned out to be right, that the first horse would win. So having knowledge involves something more than having a true belief.

The philosophical problem about knowledge will split into two parts. First, there are the questions: What is knowledge? What makes knowledge different from true belief? Second, there is the question: Given some clarification of what knowledge is, do human beings ever have it? One philosophical position we will consider says that we human beings don't know anything. Sure, we have beliefs. And granted, some of our beliefs are true. Knowledge, however, we never have. We don't even know those things we take to be most obvious. This position is called *philosophical skepticism.* We will consider arguments for skepticism and arguments that attempt to refute it.

The third philosophical problem on the agenda is the so-called mind/body problem. You have a mind; you also have a brain. What is the relationship between these items? One possible answer is that they are identical. Although "mind" and "brain" are two words, they name the same thing, just like the names "Superman" and "Clark Kent." An alternative position in this area is called *dualism;* it says that the mind and the brain are different things. We will consider other theories that have been advanced about the mind/body problem as well.

The next topic on the agenda is human freedom. Each of us has the personalities we have because we inherited a set of genes from our parents and then grew up in a sequence of environments. Genes plus environments make us the sorts of people we are. We didn't choose the genes we have, nor did we choose the environments we experienced in early life. These were thrust upon us from the outside.

Each of us performs certain actions and abstains from performing others. This pattern of what we do and don't do results from the personalities we have. Can we be said to perform actions freely? Is it really in our control to perform some actions and abstain from others? Perhaps our actions aren't freely chosen because they are the results of factors that were totally outside of our control—namely, our genes and environment.

Of course, we talk in everyday life about people doing things "of their own free will." We also think of ourselves as facing real choices, as exercising control over what we do. However, the philosophical problem of freedom asks whether

this common way of thinking is really defensible. Maybe freedom is just an illusion. Perhaps we tell ourselves a fairy tale about our own freedom because we can't face the fact that we aren't free. The philosophical problem will be to see whether we can be free if our personalities are the results of factors outside our control.

The last problem area I'll address is ethics. In everyday life, we frequently think that some actions are right and others are wrong. The philosophical problem about this familiar attitude divides into two parts. First, we'll want to consider whether there really are such things as ethical facts. Maybe talk about ethics, like talk about freedom, is just an elaborate illusion.

Consider a parallel question about science. In every science, there are questions that are controversial. For example, physicists have different opinions about how the solar system began. But most of us think that there is something else to physics besides opinions. There are facts about what the world is really like.

Clashes of opinion occur in what I'll call the *subjective realm*. Here we find one human mind disagreeing with another. But facts about physics exist in the *objective realm*. Those facts exist independently of anybody's thinking about them. They are out there, and science aims to discover what they are.

The question about ethics is whether both these realms (subjective and objective) exist in ethics, or only one of them does. We know that people have different ethical opinions. The question is whether, in addition to those opinions, there are ethical facts. In other words, does ethics parallel the description I've just given of science, or is there a fundamental difference here?

	Subjective realm	*Objective realm*
Science	physical opinions	physical facts
Ethics	ethical opinions	ethical facts

The idea that there are no ethical facts, only ethical opinions, I'll call *ethical subjectivism*. We'll consider arguments supporting and criticizing this position.

The second question that arises in ethics is this: If there are ethical facts, what are they? Here we assume a positive answer to the first question and then press on for more details. One theory we'll consider is *utilitarianism*. It says that the action you should perform in a given situation is the one that will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals. This may sound like common sense, but in fact, I'll argue there are some serious problems with this ethical theory.

Three Theories About What Philosophy Is

I've just described a menu of five central philosophical problems: God, knowledge, mind, freedom, and ethics. What makes them all *philosophical* problems? Instead of giving examples, can we say something more general and complete