

Philosophy and Choice

SELECTED READINGS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



KIT R. CHRISTENSEN

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Kit R. Christensen

BEMIDJI STATE UNIVERSITY



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Preface

Like most philosophers who regularly teach college-level introductory courses, I am usually on the lookout for that ideal textbook, the one that seems custom built for the kind of initial experience with philosophy I hope to provide for students. But as interesting and serviceable as most textbooks are (including the ones I have used over the years), I have always ended up wishing that each was different in one way or another, in light of the intellectual interests and needs of the students with whom I most often work. It was this sort of reflection that eventually motivated me to put together a textbook myself, more closely matching my own pedagogical aims, which, from listening to colleagues around the country, are not at all unique to me. Thus, in addition to my strong preference for using an anthology of readings in order to expose students to many different voices on the various topics covered, this book was designed with the following goals in mind: (1) to provide a wide-ranging yet coherent “first encounter” with the *academic discipline* of philosophy, helping students see how it compares with other academic disciplines, where and why it emerged historically, and why it continues to be a worthwhile area of study; (2) to demonstrate the nature, application, limits, and personal relevance of philosophy as a distinctive type of *intellectual activity*, broadly construed as the reason-bound critical analysis of belief and its justifications; (3) to illuminate the reciprocal influence of philosophical discourse and the *social contexts* within which it has appeared. Implicit in these goals is the notion that studying philosophical issues in a systematic way gives students tools for living their own lives thoughtfully and responsibly. They can use the methods of philosophy to think through issues and then *choose* the ideas and beliefs that will become part of their worldviews.

It has become apparent to me over time that in order to fully achieve these goals, I also should not let students finish an “Introduction to Philosophy” course thinking that philosophy is exclusively a Western cultural phenomenon. In contrast to most introductory textbooks currently available in North America, then, this anthology includes historically diverse writings by men and women working within some of the Asian, African, Latin American, and native North American cultural traditions as well as readings from classical and recent Western sources. My intention is to present students with a global, multicultural, and gender-sensitive picture of philosophical inquiry and the range of issues it can productively confront. Other college

textbooks sharing this goal of wider inclusiveness have started to appear in the last few years, but unfortunately they are still comparatively few in number. Among other outcomes, I hope this book will contribute to a growing, healthy trend in our discipline. At the same time, it is distinguishable from these other textbooks because, first, to a greater extent I have used whole essays or book chapters as readings wherever feasible, rather than snippets from longer works. This way, students can better see how philosophical writing in different times and places has been done. Second, I place a much greater emphasis on value issues, as reflected not only in the questions before and after each reading, but also in the choice of readings themselves and their organization. For example, in addition to the conventionally categorized writings on both moral and political philosophy, I include a section on “Knowledge and Responsibility” in Part II (Epistemology) and an extensive list of readings in aesthetics (Part VI). In emphasizing value issues, one of my goals, again, is to help students see the connection between topics in philosophy and the choices they have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to make in their own lives.

Although not all of the authors exhibit the same philosophical methodology, the wide variety of philosophical issues dealt with throughout the book still can be approached critically by the reader in all cases. For this reason I have offered in the introduction a summary of the principles of good reasoning (logic) and guidelines for accurate interpretation and evaluation of attempts at persuasive writing. Also in the introduction is a section titled “Five Steps for Successful Reading,” to further help students make the most of their encounter with these diverse readings. Before each reading, a short biographical introduction provides the social and historical context rather than simply summing up beforehand the main philosophical points. Also preceding each reading are “Questions for Critical Reading” and “Terms to Note,” the latter feature comprising a nonexhaustive, variably sized (though always fairly short) list of terms used by that particular author. Terms likely to be unfamiliar to students are defined to make smoother the reading of that essay or excerpt. After each reading, “Discussion Questions” are aimed primarily at getting students to reflect on their own agreements and disagreements, or at least their similarity or difference of perspective, with the conclusions, and standpoint of the author. Although I have not included a common feature of many introductory textbooks—a “selected bibliography” following each selection—I identify some general reference sources for each of the six parts of the book, including Internet sites, in the Instructor’s Manual.

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Obviously a book project of this sort is a group project, and I owe thanks to many people whose diligent efforts have been indispensable in the development and publication of this anthology. Ken King, Barbara Armentrout, Lynn Rabin Bauer, Linda Ward, Susan Shook, Judith Brown, Martha Granahan, and the other staff at Mayfield Publishing Company all have been great to work with, and I am very appreciative of their professional expertise, editorial and otherwise, as well as their consistent enthusiasm, good spirits, and guidance. I also must thank the reviewers of the manuscript, whose comments and suggestions were very helpful to me at all stages of the writing and organization of the text material: Eric Kraemer, University of Wisconsin-La

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What Is Philosophy?

BECAUSE YOU DECIDED to take a philosophy course, you probably have some general notions about what philosophy is. Coaches talk about a “philosophy” of defensive strategy; CEOs write about their “philosophies” of management; a friend may tell you she is being “philosophical” in the face of a personal setback. What is meant when we talk about philosophy as an academic discipline is something different, however. Philosophy in this more formal sense can be defined as *the systematic, reflective, critical, primarily reason-bound inquiry into the basic assumptions and guiding beliefs that people use to make sense of any dimension of their lives*. As a subject of study, philosophy has its own history and its own place in human intellectual life; it is distinguished both by its subject matter and its methodology.

Even if they rarely spell them out, most people have some grounding beliefs about what is most important to them, how they know what they think they know, what is real, and how they think we ought to treat one another. These concerns are also the stuff of rigorous analysis, speculation, and debate among philosophers. The subject matter of philosophy thus is distinctive because of its breadth, since it can be an inquiry into any of the basic assumptions and beliefs that people use to make sense of their experiences. Its boundaries are determined solely by the philosopher’s own interests and curiosity.

What has counted as a worthwhile philosophical topic has changed over the centuries, however. Sometimes the changes have been due to changes in society, and sometimes they have been due to the development of alternative investigative techniques that are more productive in answering certain kinds of questions. For example, in the not-too-distant past, explanations of planetary motion, disease, and urban population growth were assumed to be within the purview of philosophical speculation. Today, these subjects are usually assigned to the separate academic disciplines of astronomy, medicine, and sociology, respectively. However, as you will see, the boundaries of philosophy in relation to other disciplines still can be quite permeable. Some of the readings in this text address the similarities and differences between philosophy and what are now called the sciences, and some of the authors themselves were trained as scientists rather than as philosophers.

The Methods of Philosophy

Although the range of issues investigated by philosophers is virtually unlimited, philosophical inquiry—or the critical analysis of beliefs and their justifications—is not meaningfully practiced in just any old way. To critically analyze a belief means to evaluate its plausibility and reasonableness and thus determine whether the reasons offered for it are adequate. This assumes a situation in which someone is trying to communicate persuasively, that is, to convince a listener or reader to accept the belief in question. Because not all communication is meant to be persuasive, naturally, critical analysis is not always relevant in our interactions with others or in our attempts at self-understanding and, in fact, can get in the way of mutual understanding and personal insight in some circumstances. But when it comes time to decide whether to adopt a particular belief over another, philosophers generally have agreed that principles of correct reasoning are needed to provide an intellectual common ground for assessing the alternatives. These “rules,” in effect, guide our rational thinking in everyday life more thoroughly than many people realize, in much the same way that rules of grammar guide our use of a language, whether we are aware of it or not. Similarly, as we can be more or less grammatically correct, or fluent, and subsequently more or less successful in communicating with others in that language, so also we can reason well or badly, and thus be more or less persuasive to a reasonable audience.

For at least a few thousand years the study of these rules of reasoning has constituted a subfield within the discipline of philosophy, called logic. Although there has been plenty of debate among logicians regarding other issues, two distinct kinds of rational, sequential thought are almost universally recognized. These two “logics” are referred to as deduction and induction; and they are different enough to require different standards of evaluation even though they both involve deciding to accept some belief, statement, or judgment as true *because of* some other beliefs, statements, or judgments one also accepts as true.

Logical analysis tries to determine whether the assertions offered as reasons for accepting a primary assertion justify that acceptance in the way the speaker or writer intended. All these assertions together constitute an argument. An argument, as normally defined by philosophers, is not merely some sort of dispute but, more technically, a set of two or more statements, one of which (the conclusion) is to be believed because the other statement or statements (the premise or premises) provide adequate reason for such belief. Determining whether a strong enough relationship exists between premises and conclusions in arguments is essential to effective critical analysis, and this is where distinguishing between deductive and inductive argumentation becomes crucial.

Deductive Argumentation

When people use deductive reasoning to justify their claims, they try to show that if the premises they offer are accepted, then the particular conclusion they want to “prove” necessarily follows. In other words, from a rational standpoint, it would be impossible for that conclusion not to be the case if the premises are true. Consider this example of a deductive argument:

Premise: People must be 18 in order to vote in the upcoming election.

Premise: By that time, Joe will be only 17.

Conclusion: Therefore, he won't be able to vote in the election.

If we accept as true both of the premises as stated, we cannot deny the conclusion without being logically inconsistent. Since logical consistency is one of the foundational principles of correct reasoning, we are rationally compelled to recognize that this argument exemplifies what we call a valid deductive inference. As assumed by most philosophers, validity is attributed only to a deductive argument, in which the conclusion follows necessarily, unavoidably from the premises.

When the conclusion does not follow necessarily from the premises, even though it is intended to, the argument is invalid. For example:

Premise: In the election four years from now, people will have to be at least 18 in order to vote.

Premise: Joan is 17 now.

Conclusion: Therefore, she won't be old enough to vote in that election.

A second condition is required for a deductive argument to be rationally persuasive. Not only does it need to be valid rather than invalid, but also all of its premises have to be true. Consider this argument:

Premise: All herbivores are mammals.

Premise: An iguana is an herbivore.

Conclusion: Therefore, an iguana is a mammal.

If we were to accept as true the two premises in this case, we would have to admit that the conclusion should also be true because it does follow necessarily from those premises. But an iguana is a reptile, not a mammal, so something must be wrong other than the relationship between the premises and conclusion, because it is a valid inference. Obviously, the problem is that the first premise is false, and once we realize this we can reject the argument on that basis alone. A deductive argument that is valid and has all true premises is called a sound argument; an argument that fails to meet one or both of these criteria is called an unsound argument.

Inductive Argumentation

When using inductive reasoning to argue a point, the speaker or writer claims only that the conclusion probably rather than necessarily follows from the premises. In other words, in an inductive argument the premises are intended to provide sufficient reasons for accepting the conclusion as true, even though strictly speaking there would be no logical inconsistency in denying it. For example, here is an argument that entails a rationally compelling inductive inference:

Premise: The sun always has risen in the east in the past.

Conclusion: Therefore, it will rise in the east tomorrow.

If we accept this premise, the evidence it provides in favor of the conclusion is strong enough that it would be unreasonable not to accept it. But this conclusion does not necessarily follow because one could come up with a logically possible scenario, no

matter how unlikely or unbelievable, in which tomorrow the sun would not rise in the east. In evaluating inductive argumentation then, the relationship between premises and conclusion need not be one of ironclad necessity, just one of sufficient probability.

When the premises give a high enough degree of probability, or likelihood, for the truth of the conclusion, usually the evidence offered is called a strong inductive argument. On the other hand, in a weak inductive argument the evidence does not provide enough support for rationally accepting the likelihood of the conclusion, as in this case:

Premise: Chili peppers upset his stomach.

Premise: They also upset his sister's stomach and his uncle's stomach.

Conclusion: Chili peppers must be inedible for humans.

Even assuming a lack of knowledge regarding the diversity of human diet, and recognizing that there might be a slight connection between the premises and conclusion, it is still obvious that this inductive inference is weak and not persuasive to a reasonable person. At the very least, making a general claim about what is inedible for all people based on the unpleasant but nonlethal experience of three family members is an extreme example of a standard type of inductive fallacy logicians label a hasty generalization.

In the two previous examples of induction the truth of the premises is not in question, but it is an issue in many other inductive arguments. Here is an example:

Premise: The death penalty is more effective than long-term imprisonment as a deterrent for murder.

Conclusion: Thus, more extensive use of the death penalty in the United States will lower the murder rate.

As formulated, and lacking other information regarding what makes murder rates go up or down in the United States, the conclusion does follow probably from the premise. But whether the premise itself is true remains controversial for many people who have studied the capital punishment debate. The evidence gathered by extensive research on the matter has not been conclusive, and yet the plausibility of the conclusion depends on the truth of that premise. This illustrates both that our assessments of arguments have to be tentative when we don't have enough relevant knowledge to tell whether the reasons used to support a claim are good ones, and that it is appropriate for us to remain unconvinced by any line of reasoning relying on questionable premises. So an inductive argument also has to meet two criteria to be considered a good argument: (1) We have to decide whether it is strong, while realizing that inductive strength is a matter of degrees and thus often more difficult to determine than deductive validity, and (2) its premises have to be true. When both of these conditions are present, it is often called a cogent argument (though the terminology varies among logicians), and when either condition is absent, it is an uncogent argument.

Value Judgments

The instances of deductive and inductive argumentation discussed so far are made up of all factual statements, that is, true or false claims about actual states of affairs.

But in many of the readings in this text, you will also find value judgments as premises and conclusions in arguments. After all, many of our most important beliefs in life are not so much about how things are, but about how they ought to be or not, or about what is desirable and undesirable, or good and bad; and we are compelled regularly, willingly or not, to justify them to ourselves and others. Here are two examples:

1. Self-destructive behavior is wrong because such behavior harms the community to which one belongs, and such harm is always wrong.
2. The stronger the emotional response on the part of the audience, the better the piece of music performed. The audience had a stronger emotional response to the second song in the set than to the first song, so the second song was better than the first.

The first argument is a justification of a moral belief, while the second argument is a defense of an aesthetic belief. Both are deductively valid, and both include factual statements and value statements that may need further argumentation. Also, in the first argument the conclusion is asserted first rather than last, with two premises following “because” in one long sentence; and in the second argument the conclusion (following “so”) is combined with the second premise in a longer sentence.

In everyday life as well as in philosophical writing, attempts at rational persuasion are often presented informally, and we must pay careful attention to what is being said in order to evaluate it. It isn’t always obvious which assertion is intended as the conclusion and which other assertions are being used as premises, especially when arguments are embedded in larger pieces of spoken or written discourse. The listener or reader can sometimes identify premises and conclusions by indicator words such as “because,” “since,” “so,” and “therefore.” Indicator words and phrases can also help us decide whether an argument is inductive or deductive. For example, “necessarily,” “certainly,” “absolutely,” or “it has to be the case that” usually signal deductive arguments, and “probably,” “likely,” “quite possibly,” or “it is reasonable to believe that” usually signal inductive arguments. In any case, even without memorizing the whole list of formal logical rules the way you might memorize all the formal grammar rules in a language, to critically analyze beliefs and to apply the standards of correct reasoning briefly summarized here requires at the very least a rational sensitivity to inferential thinking and how it can go astray.

Other Guidelines for Philosophical Analysis

In addition to using the rules of formal logic, philosophers typically follow at least three other guidelines that are related to their overall goals. First, an argument presented to persuade someone to accept a belief always must be made with honesty and integrity. It should not rely on fallacious inferences, verbal obscurity, attitudes of self-righteousness and bluster, or other tricks of persuasion to cover up the fact that it isn’t rationally convincing. Further, if the logical implications of a belief are not acceptable to the philosopher, the honorable thing to do is to give it up or to appropriately modify it rather than to ignore or gloss over the inconsistency. The aim in philosophical analysis is not to win the argument, after all, but to use argumentation as a vehicle for deciding which belief option is the most reasonable, defensible, and closest to the truth of the matter.

Second, a position must be given a fair hearing and be adequately understood before it is rejected. We often tend to discount immediately an opinion that is different from our own or argued from an unfamiliar perspective. When analyzing a philosophical argument, however, you should start by giving the writer or speaker the benefit of the doubt. Assume that he or she is rational, sane, and making a good faith effort to communicate a relevant insight, regardless of how complex or imprecisely formulated its defense. Reading or listening sympathetically usually results in a more accurate critical assessment of the claims made. You may even find that as you come to better understand the author's perspective, you can identify reasons in support of the conclusions beyond those already presented.

Third, as noted earlier, critical analysis has its limits, and not all beliefs and assertions are worth arguing about. If, for example, a loved one is trying to describe to you how he or she is feeling, or a friend remarks on how beautiful the sunset was last evening, you almost certainly would be missing the point if you subjected such conversation to rigorous rational critique. Knowing just where those limits are in any particular case is not always easy, but if motivated by a spirit of mutual respect, intellectual diplomacy, and attentiveness to what is at stake, we will be more likely to deal with that situation in a productive and beneficial manner.

How to Read Philosophy

All the readings in this text include attempts at persuasiveness and inferential reasoning that are carried out in a variety of ways. As you will discover, reading philosophy is different from reading newspapers or popular novels. You cannot speed-read or skim philosophical writing, for example, and adequately make sense out of what is said and decide whether it is plausible.

In reading philosophy you must also be aware that philosophers generally operate with some unstated assumptions or implied premises as they develop their answers to philosophical questions. All writers have an audience in mind with whom they share a worldview, and they take for granted some common factual beliefs and shared values. However, what may be common knowledge to a writer in one context may be completely unfamiliar to readers from a different period of history or a different culture. For example, Confucius in ancient China and Plato in ancient Greece were addressing their contemporaries in their writings, not twentieth-century readers. Conversely, we make certain assumptions about our world that Confucius and Plato undoubtedly would have found very strange.

As you read the selections in this book, also keep in mind that not all the authors use the methods of academic philosophy, even though they all address widely recognized philosophical issues. Even though some of the voices are from different disciplines, or are not from any academic discipline at all, you can still read them from a philosophical point of view.

Five Steps for Successful Reading

Because so many different perspectives and discourse styles are represented in this text, a consistent approach is recommended for a more successful reading of each of the selections.

Step 1. Identify the specific philosophical issues addressed in the reading. The writings are organized into general categories and subcategories (such as “Metaphysics” and “Right and Wrong Conduct”), but each author has a unique agenda regarding one or more of these.

Step 2. For each philosophical question or controversy in the essay or excerpt, identify the answer (or answers) explicitly or implicitly offered by the author. In addition, look for possible answers formulated and subsequently rejected by the author in favor of other conclusions.

Step 3. For each position taken on an issue, try to identify the reasons given to justify it. This is fairly easy if authors make one or two obvious claims in defense of a position, but it is more difficult if they use long and complex lines of reasoning, entailing arguments within arguments. Especially in complex arguments, you will need to look for hidden premises and unstated assumptions and be willing to read creatively in an attempt to grasp the intended meaning of particular passages. You also may find it useful to remember the guideline of giving an argument a fair hearing and trying hard to understand it before you reject it.

Step 4. Once you have figured out the specific issue being addressed, the answers being offered, and the reasons given for those answers, the next step is to decide whether the reasons are convincing. To evaluate these reasons, you must determine whether the logical inferences they entail are good ones and whether the various kinds of human experience and grounding beliefs they rely on should be considered as evidence in their favor.

Step 5. Finally, since a recurring theme in this text will be how authors’ social and historical contexts influence the reader’s comprehension of what is said, try to answer the following question after the critical analysis of each selection: How would somebody with a background different from the author’s respond to the author’s conclusions? In other words, would it make any significant difference in the persuasiveness of an author’s claims if the reader lived in a different historical period or culture, in different economic conditions, or was of the other sex? If yes, then why? If not, why not?

How the Five Steps Work

To see how this recipe for reading works, let’s apply it first to a short passage (the eighth chapter) of the ancient Chinese classic the *Dao De Jing*, generally thought to be authored by Laozi, and the primary literary text associated with the philosophical and spiritual tradition of Daoism.¹

The best (man) is like water.
Water is good; it benefits all things and does not
compete with them.
It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain.
This is why it is so near to Tao.
[The best man] in his dwelling loves the earth.
In his heart, he loves what is profound.

1. See reading 45 of this anthology for this passage, along with other excerpts from the translation of the *Dao De Jing* by Wing-Tsit Chan. He uses the Wade-Giles system of transliteration, rendering the title as *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu. I have used the currently more accepted Pinyin system.