

DOING PHILOSOPHY

*An Introduction through
Thought Experiments*

S E C O N D E D I T I O N



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An Introduction through Thought Experiments

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Preface

Teaching an introductory philosophy course is one of the most difficult tasks a philosophy instructor faces. Because philosophy isn't usually taught in secondary schools, most entering college students have no idea what philosophy is or why they should be studying it. Any notions they do have about philosophy generally have little to do with the practice of professional philosophers. To help students understand the nature and purpose of philosophical inquiry, *Doing Philosophy: An Introduction through Thought Experiments* explains how philosophical problems arise and why searching for solutions is important.

It is essential for beginning students to read primary sources, but if that is all they are exposed to, the instructor must bear the burden of interpreting, explaining, and providing context for the selections. This burden can be a heavy one, for most articles in introductory anthologies were written for professional philosophers. After reading a number of these articles, students are often left with the impression that philosophy is a collection of incompatible views on a number of unrelated subjects. To pass the course, they end up memorizing who said what and do not develop the critical thinking skills often considered the most important benefit of studying philosophy. By exploring the interrelationships among philosophical problems and by providing a framework for evaluating their solutions, *Doing Philosophy* overcomes the problem of fragmentation encountered in smorgasbord approaches to philosophy.

One can know a great deal about what philosophers have said without knowing what philosophy is because philosophy is as much an activity as it is a body of knowledge. So knowing how philosophers arrive at their conclusions is at least as important as knowing what conclusions they've arrived at. This text acquaints students with both the process and product of philosophical inquiry by focusing on one of the most widely used philosophical techniques: the method of thought experiment or counterexample. Thought experiments test philosophical theories by determining whether they hold in all possible situations. They make the abstract concrete and highlight important issues in a way that no amount of exegesis can. By encouraging students to evaluate and perform thought experiments, *Doing Philosophy* fosters active learning and creative thinking.

Good critical thinkers are adept at testing claims by asking the question "What if . . . ?" and following the answer through to its logical conclusion. Thought experiments are particularly useful in testing philosophical theories because they often reveal hidden assumptions and unexpected conceptual complications. Given the central role that thought experiments have played in philosophical inquiry, there is reason to believe that knowing classic thought experiments is as important to understanding philosophy as knowing classical

physical experiments is to understanding science. By tracing the historical and logical development of thinking on a number of classic philosophical problems, we hope to provide students with a solid grounding in the discipline and prepare them for more advanced study.

In order to give instructors maximum flexibility in designing their course, the text is divided into self-contained chapters, each of which explores a philosophical problem. The introduction to each chapter explains the problem, defines some key concepts, and identifies the intellectual objectives students should try to achieve as they read the chapter. Classic arguments and thought experiments are highlighted in the text, and numerous “thought probes” or leading questions are placed throughout to encourage students to think more deeply about the material covered. Various boxes and quotations are also included which relate the material to recent discoveries or broader cultural issues. Each section concludes with study and discussion questions. Classic and contemporary readings are included at the end of each chapter so that students can see some of the more important theories and thought experiments in context. Each set of readings contains a piece of fiction—an extended thought experiment—which raises many of the questions dealt with in the chapter. The goal throughout is not only to present students with the best philosophical thinking on each topic but to challenge them to examine their own philosophical beliefs. Only through active engagement with the issues can real philosophical understanding arise.

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