



# Philosophical Questions

*Classic and Contemporary Readings*

William F. Lawhead





# **Philosophical Questions:**

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## **Classical and Contemporary Readings**

**FIRST EDITION**

**WILLIAM F. LAWHEAD**

University of Mississippi



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## PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS: CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY READINGS

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# Preface

This textbook is an anthology of readings designed to be used in a standard introduction to philosophy course. It contains the typical range of topics that are usually covered in this sort of course. It includes not only the standard readings from classical philosophers, but selections from many contemporary writers as well. Each topic is framed in the form of a question and the readings are organized and titled as alternative answers to the question. Some anthologies are of the “sink and swim” variety. That is, they simply present the readings and have, at best, only cursory introductions, leaving it up to the reader to figure out how it all fits together. In contrast to this approach, my book is heavy on pedagogy. The introductions to the chapters and the readings structure the topic and provide guidance to the readers.

In choosing the selections for this anthology, I was guided by the following criteria: (1) Which readings would be most useful in an introduction to philosophy course? (2) How accessible or difficult is the selection for today’s average student? (3) How interesting is it? (4) Does it provide a good example of philosophical argumentation? (5) Does it effectively represent one of the main philosophical answers to the question at hand?

## THE SPECIFIC FORMAT OF EACH CHAPTER

Each chapter will contain the following elements.

**1. Introduction** Each chapter begins with an introduction by the editor that serves to accomplish the following goals: (1) Demonstrating the relevance of the topic, arousing the interest of the students, provoking intellectual curiosity, and motivating the students to seek more understanding of the issue at hand. (2) Setting out the main issues and terminology concerning the topic. (3) Providing a clear presentation of the positions and their central themes. (4) Providing a chart that compares the responses of each position to several key questions concerning the topic.

**2. Opening Narrative** The first reading of each chapter will be a fictional piece that introduces the topic in a provocative, tantalizing manner. Each fictional piece in the opening narratives will provoke more questions than it answers and will set the stage for the readings to follow.



*To Pam for her understanding and support*

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**3. Readings** Each reading will be preceded by a brief biography of the writer. Next, a brief overview of the reading will be offered. Finally, a series of *Reading Questions* will be provided to guide the reader through the selection. At the end of the reading will be *Questions for Reflection*. These will encourage the student to engage with the ideas just presented and will assist the reader in evaluating the ideas and considering their implications.

**4. Contemporary Application** Each chapter ends with a section titled *Contemporary Application*. In this section the philosophical issues discussed in the chapter appear within a broader interdisciplinary setting by means of pro and con positions on a contemporary problem. This demonstrates to the students that philosophy is relevant to issues that appear in current news magazines. The Contemporary Application topics are

Philosophy of Religion: Does religion conflict with science?

Theory of Knowledge: Does science give us objective knowledge about the world?

The Mind-Body Problem: Can computers think?

Freedom and Determinism: Can criminals be held morally responsible for their actions?

Ethics: Is abortion morally permissible?

Political Philosophy: Does the government have a right to protect us from ourselves?

## ADDITIONAL FEATURES

**Philosophy through Fiction** For a change of pace and to heighten student interest, several of the readings present philosophical ideas through short literary selections. I have found that in some anthologies that use fiction, the readings are *interesting, but I am* sometimes puzzled as to how they are supposed to fit into the discussion. In this book, however, the readers should find that the philosophical point of each selection is fairly obvious and that the literary pieces serve to advance the discussion. Rather than being philosophical mind candy, they contain meaty issues. As mentioned previously, fictional pieces are used in the *Opening Narrative* component to raise some of the issues that will be discussed by the philosophers. Furthermore, there are occasional literary selections sprinkled amidst the other readings. The fictional selections include

Edwin Abbott, *Flatland*

Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave"

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Daniel Dennett, "Where Am I?"

R. Buckminster Fuller, "What's a Man?"

Terry Bisson, "They're Made Out of Meat"

Jonathan Harrison, "The Case of Dr. Svengali"

Plato, "The Ring of Gyges"

Richard Taylor, "The Parable of the Man"

W. H. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen"

Of course, in many of the other philosophical essays a parable, story, or thought experiment plays a central role in the philosophical discussion.

**Interdisciplinary Implications** While most of the essays are by philosophers, the *Contemporary Application* sections and other readings also include the philosophical views of scientists and other professionals. This reinforces the point that philosophy is not a narrow, esoteric, optional enterprise; instead philosophical issues are relevant to all the disciplines. These interdisciplinary selections include a biologist (Richard Dawkins), two physicists (Paul Davies, Steven Weinberg), a psychologist/computer scientist (Christopher Evans), a psychologist (B. F. Skinner), a trial lawyer (Clarence Darrow), an anthropologist (Ruth Benedict), a public policy specialist (James Q. Wilson), and a psychiatrist (Thomas Szasz).

## SUGGESTED WAYS TO USE THIS BOOK

Probably no one will want to cover all the topics in this book in one semester. Even within a particular chapter, it may not be possible to cover all the readings. Furthermore, some instructors may wish to present the topics in a different order from the way they are organized in this book. None of this is a problem, however, for the book allows for maximum flexibility. The chapters and readings in this anthology are relatively independent and may be used in whatever order fits the needs of a particular course.

As mentioned earlier, each reading begins with *Reading Questions*. These guide the reader to the important landmarks in the essay and draw attention to key arguments and points. The student may want to write out the answers to these questions to have a handy summary of the selection's contents. Each selection is followed by *Questions for Reflection*. These questions require more than simply summarizing the content of the passage; they ask the reader to reflect upon, evaluate, and apply the ideas in the reading. The instructor may wish to use these as topics for class discussions or short papers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before the book went from inspiration to execution, the initial outline passed through a number of reviewers. I appreciate the comments of the following reviewers:

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Finally, this book is dedicated to my wife Pam who gave me loving support while I worked on it and patiently waited for its completion.

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# Questions about Philosophy

## WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A few years ago, after having spent a long day at an out-of-town philosophy conference, I stopped off to visit Walter, a friend of my wife's family. Walter is an engaging person and a successful, no-nonsense businessman. His greeting to me was "So, Bill, you've been attending a philosophy conference? You need to sit down, relax, and have a drink. You've been cooped up with weirdos all day." I mentally added that remark to my growing list of people's conceptions (or misconceptions) of philosophy. (Since I am a philosopher who was mingling with others of my profession at the conference, I also wondered what Walter's remark indicated about his conception of me.) In contrast, some misconceptions about philosophy are more flattering. Frequently, when I first make someone's acquaintance and they discover that I teach philosophy at a university, they exclaim "Oh . . . Philosophy is so profound and mysterious!" in a tone of voice that suggests that philosophers live on a plane far above ordinary mortals.

The problem with both of these reactions is that they imply that philosophy is an isolated, optional enterprise, reserved only for those who are either socially challenged or intellectually elite. The reason why this view of philosophy is off the mark is that everyone (in one sense of the word) is a philosopher. What I mean by this is that throughout the course of our humdrum, daily lives we are continually confronting philosophical questions and embracing philosophical conclusions.

To illustrate this last point, let's consider a toddler noticing her image in a mirror for the first time. She is intrigued by the little child she sees. She waves to her and the other child waves back. She jumps and the other girl jumps. Eventually, the child makes a breakthrough discovery, as the thought occurs to her that "The other child is me!" "But how can that be?" she thinks. "I am here and she is there!" In experiences such as these, the child encounters her first, basic philosophical problem: How do I distinguish appearance from reality? Furthermore, her fascinating encounter with the mirror teaches her that she can experience herself both as a subject and as an object. As a subject, she is immersed within the world as a subjective center of consciousness. But she can also stand back and view herself as an object to study and understand. One of the mysteries little children eventually begin to wrestle with is the relationship between me and my experiences on the one hand, and that which is not me on the other. In this way, the child begins to make critical judgments about what reality is like and what the self is like. Most importantly, she begins to realize that everything is not as it seems, that her

beliefs can be mistaken, that she needs to work hard to sort out what she should believe from what she should not. When she reaches this stage in life, she will realize that answering these sorts of questions constitutes a lifelong agenda. She may also find that others have asked these questions before and that fellow questioners, both past and present, can help her in her task.

In what sense is this child's puzzlement about her image in the mirror the beginnings of her own philosophical journey, as I have suggested? Well, first of all, the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) once wrote that all philosophy begins with a sense of wonder. For the child, wondering is easy, for there is so little she understands. Her experiences are not filtered through acquired beliefs or taken-for-granted assumptions that have been accumulating for years. Hence, if Aristotle is right, to be a philosopher we must look at the world in a new way. We must get a fresh perspective on it and recapture a childlike sense of wonder about it. But while wonder is a prelude to philosophy, philosophy is more than just looking at the world. It is a matter of thinking about the world and human experience, drawing conclusions from those thoughts, and (most importantly) justifying those conclusions (both to others and to ourselves).

The word *philosophy* comes from a Greek word that literally means the love of wisdom. To love something does not mean that we possess it, but that our life is focused on it. Socrates, another famous Greek philosopher, said that the philosopher was one who had a passion for wisdom and who was intoxicated by this love. This makes quite a contrast with the image of the philosopher as being cold and analytical—sort of a walking and talking computer. On the contrary, the cognitive and the emotional are combined in philosophy. I do not rationally deliberate about those issues in life that are utterly trivial. When I pick up my copy of the daily campus newspaper, for example, I don't stand there and reason about which copy to grab. On the other hand, those issues that are most important to us are such things as our religious commitments (or lack of them), our moral values, our political commitments, our career, or (perhaps) who we will share our lives with. Unlike the trivial task of choosing a newspaper, our choices concerning our deepest loves, convictions, and commitments are those issues that demand our deepest thought and most thorough rational reflection. Philosophy, in part, is the search for that kind of wisdom that will inform the beliefs and values that enter into these crucial decisions.

If, as I have claimed, we are all engaged in the activity of philosophy and have been for most of our lives, then what is the point of opening up this book to study philosophy? The point is that philosophy, as with any other activity, can be done at various levels and with various degrees of success. There is a difference between a novice banging out "Chopsticks" on the piano and the efforts of a dedicated musician who continually practices and challenges himself in order to achieve his maximum level of performance. Similarly, for most people, running is a natural activity, but if an athlete wants to become an accomplished competitor on the racetrack, she has to work hard at it. To apply these examples to philosophy, as we grow up we naturally acquire a set of philosophical beliefs that influence our thinking and guide our lives. However, as with the musician and the athlete, there is a big difference between entertaining and embracing philosophical ideas in a haphazard, taken-for-granted manner and facing the challenge of engaging with philosophy in a self-conscious, careful, disciplined way.

The problem is that too often we acquire our beliefs the way we catch a cold. All kinds of ideas are floating around in our culture; they are part of the intellectual air that

we breath. These ideas may be about God, the nature of reality, the value of science, human nature, moral values, or politics. The assumptions of our society also include ideas about what sorts of beliefs are acceptable, plausible, dangerous, or absurd. We passively absorb these ideas the way we do the cold virus. The cold once belonged to someone else and now it is our cold. But we were not aware that we were breathing it in and usually do not know where we acquired it. Similarly, we breathe in ideas that are in our cultural environment, but do not do so consciously and have never examined them, even though they are now a part of us.

While it is true that we are all philosophers in the sense that we have philosophical beliefs and assumptions, in the fullest sense of the word *philosophy* we have not truly engaged with philosophy until we attempt to evaluate and justify our basic beliefs in a careful, deliberate, and objective manner. In order to get a feel for how one does this, we need to examine three essential components of philosophy: questions, answers, and reasons.

## QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND REASONS

### Questions

This book is organized around questions, because that is one of the main things that philosophers do—ask questions. Before we discuss the distinctive nature of philosophical questions, think about why asking questions (in general) is important. First, *questioning is practical*. We can lose many things in life and still survive. But what if a brain disorder caused you to lose your ability to ask questions—either of yourself or of others? Can you imagine how deeply impaired you would be? By asking questions we are able to effectively deal with the world.

Second, *questioning is a unique feature of your humanity*. Ants have very complex societies with various social roles such as the queen, the workers, and the soldier ants. Because of this division of labor, their society is a simplified, miniature version of ours. However, we cannot imagine the worker ants thinking: “Why are we doing all the work, while the queen is living a life of luxury?” Instead, they blindly and instinctively carry out their activities. But humans do question the status quo and ponder questions about justice and morality. We stand back from our life and reflect on it. This is the mental version of what we do in a mirror. In both kinds of reflections we get a distance from ourselves so we can see ourselves objectively, put things in perspective, and make adjustments.

Third, *questions are crucial to the advancement of human thought*. The first philosopher in Western history we know anything about was Thales (roughly 624–545 B.C.). Thales looked at the world around him and asked, “What is the fundamental substance that underlies everything we find in the world?” His answer was “water.” He probably concluded water is the basic element because it covers most of the earth, it comes from the sky, it is found in the ground, and it can become a solid, liquid, or gas. While even his contemporaries did not think much of his answer, it started people thinking and raising questions about the ultimate nature of reality. Likewise, throughout history, it has been someone who asked a question no one had ever considered before who took human thought to the next level of sophistication.

Thus far, there is nothing that I have said that couldn't apply to any other intellectual activity. What is it that makes philosophy unique? Let's ask the question this way. Biologists study frogs, astronomers study stars, and economists study economic transactions. So, what do philosophers study? I think a good answer is that philosophy is unique in comparison to other areas of study not because it thinks about different things, but because it thinks about things differently. To be more specific, philosophers study and ask questions about the most basic concepts that underlie every other human endeavor. This feature of philosophy can be made clear by comparing the sorts of questions asked by different disciplines with the sorts of questions asked by the philosopher in eight different areas, corresponding to the eight chapters of this book.

1. The psychologist studies *how* people think and the *causes* of people's beliefs, whether their thinking is rational or irrational. But the philosopher studies how we *ought* to think if we are to be rational and seeks to clarify what are good *reasons* for holding a belief. The study of the principles for distinguishing correct from incorrect reasoning is the area of philosophy known as **logic**, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter under the heading, How Do I Decide What to Believe? Tools for Examining Arguments.

2. The astronomer studies the laws that govern the heavenly bodies such as the stars. However, the philosopher asks, Is the existence and nature of the universe self-explanatory or does it need an explanation or a divine creator that lies outside of it? How do we account for the order in the world that makes science possible? Is the evidence of design sufficient to prove a designer?

The meteorologist asks, What causes hurricanes? and the medical researcher asks, What causes childhood leukemia? On the other hand, the philosopher asks questions such as these: Is there any rational way to believe in a good, all-powerful God who permits the undeserved destruction of hurricanes or the suffering of innocent children? Or is the evidence of undeserved suffering an argument against such a God?

The sociologist studies the religious beliefs of various groups and the social needs these beliefs fulfill, without making any judgments about the truth or rationality of these beliefs. However, the philosopher asks, Is faith opposed to reason, compatible with reason, or supported by reason, or is faith something that necessarily goes beyond reason? These sorts of questions about the existence of God, the problem of evil, and the relationship of faith and reason constitute the area of philosophy known as **philosophy of religion** and will be discussed in Chapter 2: Questions about God, Faith, and Reason.

3. The historian seeks to increase our knowledge of the Civil War by gathering facts and determining which accounts of the events are the most true. The philosopher asks, What is knowledge? What is a fact? What is truth? How could we know that something is true or not? Is there objective truth or are all opinions relative? Fundamental questions about the nature and source of knowledge, the concept of truth, and the objectivity or relativity of our beliefs are the concern of the theory of knowledge or **epistemology**, which you will encounter in Chapter 3: Questions about Human Knowledge.

4. The physicist studies the ultimate constituents of physical reality such as atoms, quarks, or neutrinos. On the other hand, the philosopher asks, Is physical reality all that there is? The neurobiologist studies the activity of the brain, but the philosopher asks, Are all mental events really brain events or is the mind something separate from the brain? **Metaphysics** is the area of philosophy concerned with fundamental questions