

LEARNING TO Philosophize

A P R I M E R



DEL KIERNAN-LEWIS

LEARNING TO PHILOSOPHIZE

A PRIMER

Del Kiernan-Lewis

MOREHOUSE COLLEGE



Wadsworth Publishing Company

I(T)P[®] An International Thomson Publishing Company

Belmont, CA • Albany, NY • Boston • Cincinnati • Johannesburg
London • Madrid • Melbourne • Mexico City • New York
Pacific Grove, CA • Scottsdale, AZ • Singapore • Tokyo • Toronto

Philosophy Editor: Peter Adams
Assistant Editor: Kerri Abdinoor
Editorial Assistant: Mindy Newfarmer
Marketing Manager: Dave Garrison
Project Editors: Heidi Marschner,
Michelle Provorny
Print Buyer: Stacey Weinberger

Permissions Editor: Bob Kauser
Copyeditor: Laura Larson
Cover Design: Stanton Design
Signing Representative: Sharon Stevens
Compositor: Scratchgravel Publishing
Services
Printer: Webcom

COPYRIGHT © 2000 by Wadsworth Publishing Company

A Division of International Thomson Publishing Inc.

ITP® The ITP logo is a registered trademark under license.

For permission to use material from this text, contact us:

web www.thomsonrights.com
fax 1-800-730-2215
phone 1-800-730-2214

Printed in Canada

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Wadsworth Publishing Company
10 Davis Drive
Belmont, CA 94002

International Thomson Publishing
Europe
Berkshire House
168-173 High Holborn
London, WC1V 7AA, United Kingdom

Nelson ITP, Australia
102 Dodds Street
South Melbourne
Victoria 3205 Australia

Nelson Canada
1120 Birchmount Road
Scarborough, Ontario
Canada M1K 5G4

International Thomson Editores
Seneca, 53
Colonia Polanco
11560 México D.F. México

International Thomson Publishing
Asia
60 Albert Street #15-01
Albert Complex
Singapore 189969

International Thomson Publishing
Japan
Hirakawa-cho Kyowa Building, 3F
2-2-1 Hirakawa-cho, Chiyoda-ku
Tokyo 102, Japan

International Thomson Publishing
Southern Africa
Building 18, Constantia Square
138 Sixteenth Road, P.O. Box 2459
Halfway House, 1685 South Africa

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kiernan-Lewis, Del.

Learning to philosophize : a primer / Del Kiernan-Lewis.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-534-50589-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Philosophy—Introductions. I. Title.

BD21.K46 1999

101—dc21

98-53732

www.wadsworth.com

wadsworth.com is the World Wide Web site for Wadsworth Publishing Company and is your direct source to dozens of online resources.

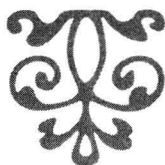
At *wadsworth.com* you can find out about supplements, demonstration software, and student resources. You can also send e-mail to many of our authors and preview new publications and exciting new technologies.

wadsworth.com

Changing the way the world learns®

To Susan

P R E F A C E



This book grew out of my conviction that too many students both begin and finish introductory courses in philosophy with an attitude aptly expressed in the responses “Who cares?” and “What’s the point?” There is a widespread view that philosophy and philosophical thinking are as far removed from the concerns of a typical college graduate as are, for example, pondering the origins of Chinese grammar or trying to imagine the mating habits of the checkerspot butterfly. Philosophy is thus conceived as the ultimate armchair luxury of academicians out of touch with the “real world.”

My aim in the opening chapters is to show that this appraisal of the philosophical enterprise makes no sense. Once one understands what philosophy is about, it becomes obvious that all of us—and not just contemporary philosophers or the great thinkers of history—have a stake in the answers to philosophical questions.

The remainder of the book is devoted to providing students with the basic conceptual and logical gear required to start philosophizing. The intent is to get students up to speed as well as provide the intellectual context for study and discussion of philosophical issues—inside and outside the classroom.

I am indebted to Robert Audi, Paul Griffiths, David Wilson, Brice Wachterhauser, Charles Taliaferro and John Maraldo for reading the completed manuscript and providing many suggestions. I am especially indebted to Robert Audi for invaluable aid and encouragement. He

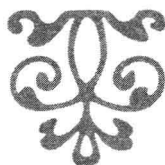
not only put me in touch with Peter Adams at Wadsworth but also provided many useful comments on two different drafts of the book. I am also indebted to my colleague, Anibal Bueno, for numerous conversations about topics in the book. Thank you to Peter Adams for a very helpful set of reviews from Francis J. Beckwith, Whittier College; Michael Connelly, Longview Community College; Eric Gampel, Cal State Chico; Max Hallman, Merced College; Sterling Harwood, University of Phoenix; Kate Mehuron, Eastern Michigan University; and Louis Pojman, US Military Academy at West Point.

Several philosophers deserve special mention for their influence on what I have written. I am indebted to Paul Helm's book on belief policies and Richard Foley's work on rationality, as I am to all of Robert Audi's work in epistemology. Special acknowledgment is also due to Paul Griffiths, William Wainwright, William Rowe, and David Wilson, whose work and friendship have continually exemplified the pleasure and worth of learning—and continuing—to philosophize.

A final acknowledgment is due to my wife, Susan Kiernan-Lewis. Her love and friendship are the icing on the cake of a philosophical life.

D.K.L.

C O N T E N T S



1	What Is Philosophizing?	3
	Metaphysics and the Nature of Things	5
	Understanding, Evaluation, and Theorizing	7
	The Context of Philosophizing	9
	Are Any Answers Correct?	12
2	The Pervasiveness of Philosophical Views	15
	Philosophy Is Everywhere	19
3	Philosophical Questions	23
4	Assertion, Belief, and Truth	29
	Believing and Intellectual Commitment	31
	Objective Reality	33
	The Definition of Truth	34
	Subjectivism and Conventionalism	36
	Degrees of Belief	40
5	On Concepts	43
	Sufficient and Necessary Conditions	45
	Conceptual Distinctions	51

6 Making Truth Your Aim	57
Life-Orienting Beliefs	61
Taking Your Worldview Seriously	62
7 Living Up to Your Own Intellectual Standards	67
Belief Policies	68
Subjective Rationality	72
Objective Rationality	74
Selecting Belief Policies	76
8 Arguments	79
Deductive Arguments	80
Reductio Arguments	82
Inductive Arguments	83
Using Inductive and Deductive Arguments	85
Arguments to the Best Explanation	91
What Makes a Good Explanation?	92
9 The Sources of Belief	97
Memory	97
Perception	99
Introspection	100
Reason	100
Testimony	102
Other Possible Sources	104
A Final Word	105
10 Flaws and Fallacies	107
Self-Stultification	108
The Epistemic Double Standard	112

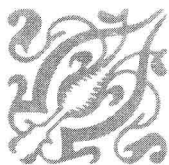
Contents

Circular Arguments	114
False Generalization and False Dilemma	115
Philosophizing Belief Policies	117
11 Reasons, Judgment, and Trust	119
Having and Giving Reasons	120
Philosophizing and Rational Judgment	122
Understanding Philosophical Disagreements	124
Why Philosophizing Can't Be a Spectator Sport	126
Index	129

LEARNING TO PHILOSOPHIZE

A PRIMER





What Is Philosophizing?

IF YOU ARE LIKE MOST STUDENTS TAKING A FIRST COURSE IN PHILOSOPHY, you're probably a little puzzled about what you've signed up for and what, exactly, you're going to be studying. This makes a "philosophy" course a special case, for you certainly don't have the same sort of puzzlement when you sign up for a course in, say, biology or computer science. You *know* what you're in for, because you have a pretty clear idea of the subject matter—that is, of what biology and computer science are *about*. But what's philosophy about?

I'll return to that question shortly, but first I want to point out to you that philosophy as an academic discipline is not like most of the other disciplines you can major in

at a college or university. Let's suppose that by "biologists" and "historians" we mean persons who have had extensive training—a Ph.D. or the equivalent—in their field. Now, in each of these cases, we can cite innumerable statements that are universally accepted by anyone in each field. For example:

- Biologists say that DNA has a lot to do with inheritance, that mammals suckle their young, and that insects were around long before toads.
- Historians say that the Pyramids were built long before the Eiffel Tower, that Germany lost in World War II, and that Confucius was not a Native American.
- Physicists say that the positively charged hydrogen ion is a proton, that nothing travels faster than the speed of light, and that a molecule of uranium is heavier than a carbon molecule.

This is not to say that trained biologists, historians, or physicists agree about *everything*: they don't and probably never will. Rather, virtually everyone in these fields accepts a large body of *noncontroversial information*. There is a long list of biological (or historical or mathematical) questions to which every trained biologist (or historian or mathematician) knows the answer. Knowing the answers is part of what it means to be educated in these fields. Therefore, when you take "Introduction to . . ." courses, you usually get an introduction to what your professors consider noncontroversial information to anyone, such as themselves, with a Ph.D. in the field. In most cases, you will learn the stock of standard noncontroversial answers to standard noncontroversial questions in the field; learning these answers is essentially learning What Biologists (or Historians or Physicists) Say. You will learn what those trained in the field regard as the noncontroversial "findings" of that intellectual enterprise.

Of course, you probably already know all of this, and it's because you do that you're likely to make the mistake

of thinking that there must be some long list of statements that begin with the words “Philosophers say. . . .” There must be, you may think, some stock of standard philosophical questions to which all educated philosophers know (or think they know) the correct standard answers and that you will be expected to learn these answers in an introductory course in philosophy.

Well, it isn’t so. Philosophy is not like that. First, there just are no *noncontroversial* answers to philosophical questions. (But don’t take this wrongly: this doesn’t mean there aren’t any *correct* answers. More on this at the end of the chapter.) For example, the question “What is philosophy?” is itself a philosophical question to which living and dead philosophers (professional and not) have given different answers. Even the question “What is a philosophical question?” is a philosophical question open to numerous answers.

Metaphysics and the Nature of Things

A good way to begin to get a handle on the nature of philosophical questions is to look at the questions central to an important branch of philosophy, the area known as “metaphysics.” You’re familiar with the distinction between the way things appear to be (for example, the way the surface of a road looks wet in the distance on a hot summer day) and the way things really are (the road is dry). Metaphysics attempts to get behind the appearances to find out the truth about the ultimate nature of things.

Although they aren’t usually very well thought out, most of us either consciously or unconsciously have answers to three “really big” questions that it is the task of metaphysics to answer:

1. What is ultimately real?

Here are some controversial answers:

- “There is just the physical universe studied by the natural sciences.”
- “There are only minds and their thoughts.”
- “There are immaterial spirits and material objects.”

2. Why does whatever is real exist?

Some answers:

- “There is no reason why the collection of all real items (which is just the physical universe) exists. It just does.”
- “God exists because his existence is necessary. Everything else exists because God chose to create it.”
- “The physical universe is an illusion generated by Atman, the ultimate transcendent reality. Atman has no cause and causes everything else.”

3. What is the place of human beings in the real?

Some familiar answers:

- “Human beings are merely complex constituents of the physical universe, accidental products—like frogs, trees, and all terrestrial species—of a mindless, purposeless evolutionary process.”
- “Human beings are a composite of a physical body and preexistent reincarnated soul, which remains trapped in the cycle of death and rebirth unless that soul achieves Nirvana.”
- “Human beings are rational, moral agents who survive the death of their bodies and whose purpose is to love and worship God forever.”

Most people don’t think these three philosophical questions aren’t worth pondering, or can’t be answered correctly (or incorrectly), or are just unanswerable. In fact, each of us carries around in our minds a kind of

mental map of The Way Things Are that serves to guide us in our thinking, planning, and acting and that, at least in part, provides answers to these three metaphysical questions. Isn't it worthwhile to consider whether your personal mental map is accurate? Isn't that the sort of thing a responsible person who is serious about life would do?

However, to deliberate about the answers to philosophical questions is to engage in philosophical reasoning. As philosophers like to say, it is "to do philosophy." Philosophy is best understood as this activity of philosophizing, and not as any set of widely accepted doctrines and beliefs. Moreover, for this activity to go beyond a frivolous diversion, there must be something to be got right.

Understanding, Evaluation, and Theorizing

The activity of philosophizing may be divided into three central subactivities. First, there is the attempt to *understand* both philosophical questions and the various answers to them. Second, there is the evaluation of reasons. And third, there is higher-level theorizing.

Prior to evaluating the reasons or evidence put forward by someone for their philosophical view, you must make sure that you understand what they are saying. Otherwise, you won't really know what is at issue. That's why philosophers traditionally have spent a lot of time and energy on questions of meaning.

Suppose I ask you whether the following statement is true: "Snafflejabobbles trillapifilate." Unfortunately, you can't answer the question until you understand what the statement means—that is, until you first understand what it is that I am saying (if anything). Now consider the question "Can a computer think?" To answer this question, you have to determine the meaning of our concept or