

PHILOSOPHY  
Theory and Practice  
Jacques P. Thiroux



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*PHILOSOPHY*  
*Theory*  
*and Practice*

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# *Preface*

This book is intended to combine philosophical theory and applications of it to students' everyday lives. For this reason, at the end of every chapter, with two exceptions, there are "Situations" that will encourage students to apply their philosophy to their relationships with others, to school, or to work. The two exceptions are Chapter 8, which has ethical cases scattered throughout the text, and the last chapter, which has a personal philosophy paper assignment. In addition, there are "Additional Questions and Activities for Study and Discussion" sections at the end of each chapter except the last.

Chapter 2, "Learning How to Philosophize," is relatively different from most introduction to philosophy texts in that it suggests how to read and write philosophy and take tests in it at the original source, secondary source, or personal view levels. This is in addition to discussing briefly what logical reasoning entails and how to spot and avoid the more common logical fallacies.

I have tried also to expand on what I feel are the more interesting and applicable areas of philosophy to students. There are three chapters on the nature of a human being; three on ethics; four on philosophy of religion, including brief, but fairly intense surveys on Western and Eastern religions and also nonreligious views; and three on knowledge, truth, belief, and perception.

I have included a final short chapter that encourages students to start establishing their own personal philosophy and world view and have given them detailed instructions on how to do this in a systematic and organized way. Most introduction texts have no such chapter.

I intend this book to be as flexible as possible for use by both the instructor and the student. Except for the first two chapters, which

## *Preface*

should be taught first and then used for reference when covering the various other areas, each part is fairly self-contained so that any one part could be taught before or after the others without too much difficulty. I do, however, liberally refer to other parts of the book (especially Part I) when dealing with any chapter so that students can see relationships, for example, between the existence of an Ultimate Reality (philosophy of religion) and how we can know this (epistemology).

I wish to thank the many students I have taught for helping me to solidify and organize the ideas and approaches to teaching philosophy in this book; also Lynne Radeleff, for doing most of the typing under lots of pressure, and everyone around me who had to put up with my labor pains while I was writing it.

J. P. T.

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*PART* **1**

*Introduction:  
What Philosophy Is  
and How to Do It*



# CHAPTER 1

## *What Philosophy Is and Does*

### **Philosophy Is Abstract and Theoretical— Some Misconceptions**

What is philosophy? Most people, if they have heard about philosophy at all, either get it confused with psychology or think of it as a highly abstract and theoretical activity practiced by a few college or university professors who have a lot of idle time and, of course, have nothing better to do. This view is characterized by the views of two contemporary comedians: Robin Williams, who made a record album entitled, “Reality—What a Concept!,” and Bill Cosby, who described philosophers as people who go around asking such questions as, “Why is there air?” Cosby goes on to say that every physical education major knows why there is air—to blow up volley balls, basketballs, and footballs. A third comedian, Steve Martin, whose comedy routines are based on the absurdities of life, says he got most of his ideas from studying existentialism, a twentieth-century philosophy that states, among other things, that reality is absurd and has no meaning unless human beings give it meaning.

#### **SOME FURTHER MISCONCEPTIONS**

If people have heard anything about philosophy or philosophers at all, they generally feel that

1. Philosophers are human beings who isolate themselves on mountain tops or in “ivory towers” and deign not to mingle with real people or the real world.

2. Philosophy is something one can do only if one is idle and highly intellectual.
3. Being philosophical means that one never gets excited or involved but always remains cool and detached, never complaining about setbacks or tragedies in life.
4. Philosophy is not a part of “real” life, and what philosophers used to do has largely been taken over by other fields, such as the physical and natural sciences, the social sciences, and mathematics.

Before specifically attempting to dispel some of these misconceptions, it would be beneficial to look at some historical background to reveal how, when, and where philosophy got started.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: HOW DID PHILOSOPHY BEGIN?

**ART AND RELIGION.** Formal and systematic philosophy did not come first in history because its greatest tools are oral and written language, and the origin of language is lost somewhere back in the mists of early time. What seem to have emerged first, however, are art—painting, sculpture, music—and religious practices, usually intertwined and intermixed. What have been found earliest, through archeology and other sciences, are things like cave paintings, sculptures of gods and goddesses, and ritualistic burial sites and graves. These, of course, were not evidences of early philosophy in any systematic sense, but they do indicate that human beings were attempting to cope with questions of life, survival, and death, as well as trying to understand their environment and what lay behind it.

**THE GREAT ORAL TRADITIONS.** Most ancient cultures evolved from great oral traditions. While written documents or books were not available until quite late in history, there is abundant evidence that the Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew cultures flourished long before anything much was written down. It’s hard to know how these traditions were passed on from generation to generation, but there is some evidence, given how the written down parts of these traditions (for example, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, the Old Testament of the Bible) are composed, that they were maintained in stories, myths, legends, and fables that could be easily transmitted at ceremonies and gatherings by word of mouth. They could also be acted out in pageants, rituals, and, later, in dramas.<sup>1</sup> Even though these works did not systematically philosophize, they did attempt to answer human questions about the nature of the world and human beings, to prescribe codes of behavior and conduct, and to teach the customs and mores of a particular group of people.

For example, if the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are studied carefully, one can find an untold number of references on how to treat strangers hospitably and what constituted the important values and proper conduct of the Greeks of the time. There are also references to gods and goddesses that were attempts to explain various events in nature. For instance, Achilles' great strength and bravery—greater than most men of the time—was explained by saying that Achilles was actually half divine and half human, the product of a “mixed marriage” between divine and human persons. So it can be seen that even before formal philosophy as such, human beings were philosophizing, that is, asking questions about themselves and the world around them and seeking and proposing answers to those questions.

THE BEGINNINGS OF PHILOSOPHY—THE PRE-SOCRATICS. Formal philosophy is thought to have begun with Thales in the late sixth century B.C., and it is quite interesting to note that the early philosophers up to Socrates were really rudimentary scientists, for they were concerned with the world around them and with nature, and they put forth theories concerning the building blocks of the world and themselves. Some of them thought that one or more of the four elements—air, earth, fire, water—were the basic building blocks; others thought that there were special unseen “substances” that provided the basis for everything in “reality.” For example, Democritus, who was actually later than the pre-Socratics, was an atomist; that is, he believed that reality was composed of atoms (from the Greek *atomon*, meaning “indivisible”)—small unseen but indivisible units that were in constant motion—and the space or void in which they could move. To think that merely from observing the world around them and reasoning from their observations without the benefit of any technology whatsoever that philosophers could come up with theories that are still valid today is astounding. Many people, I'm sure, feel that the atomic theory began with the great physicists and mathematicians of the twentieth century, but, as one can see, it began with the early philosophers of Greece.

THE TURNING POINT—SOCRATES AND PLATO. A great turning point in philosophy's development came with the advent of Socrates (470–399 B.C.) and his most famous pupil, Plato (428 or 427 to 348 or 347 B.C.). Socrates, who never wrote anything, so far as anyone knows, emphasized the inner life of the human being rather than the external world around him. His greatest concern was not with what the building blocks of nature were, but what constituted truth, beauty, justice, and goodness. In other words, he was concerned with a human being's awareness of himself, his life, his values, and his reasoning and attainment of wisdom, not with those things outside of him. Plato, who

wrote many dialogues, using his teacher as the major character, dealt with ethics, politics, psychology, sociology, mathematics, and science (to some extent). With Plato, actually, the first great philosophical system or complete world view was presented. In his famous *Republic*, Plato not only attempted to show how the individual human being should develop himself or herself, but also he attempted to show how to set up the perfect social and political society through reasoning. To do this, he presented a view of an ultimate reality beyond the natural world, integrated it with human psychology and sociology, and put forth a world view in which the individual and society were connected so intimately that society, to Plato, was merely the “individual writ large.”<sup>2</sup> Even as the individual, to Plato, should be controlled and governed by his reasoning mind, so society should be governed by its “mind,” the philosopher-king or wise ruler.

**ARISTOTLE—THE SYNTHESIS.** Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), Plato’s star pupil, followed in his teacher’s footsteps, but also brought a concern for the external world and nature back into the picture, blending it with the philosophy that dealt with the nature of a human being. As a matter of fact, Aristotle was history’s first great marine biologist and research scientist. He also was concerned with creating a complete world view—writing of nature, the supernatural, and poetics (the meaning of literature) as well as ethics and politics—again emphasizing the philosophical concern with developing the “perfect” or “ideal” human being who would “reason well for a complete life.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, as we look at the earliest history of philosophy and philosophers, we find that although these men thought deeply and abstractly, they also applied their thoughts to real life and real-life situations, thereby blending the theoretical and abstract with the practical and the applicable. This trend does not stop with the Greeks, but continues down through the ages to the present. For example, Marcus Aurelius (121–180 A.D.) was a Roman emperor and statesman in addition to being an important Stoic philosopher; Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was a priest, teacher, writer, and theologian; René Descartes (1596–1650) was a mathematician, music theorist, and optician; John Locke (1632–1704) was involved with chemistry, physics, and eventually became a physician; David Hume (1711–1776) was an historian, librarian, and politician; and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) were mathematicians.

It should be obvious, then, that philosophy is not out of the mainstream of life at all or reserved for rich, idle intellectuals, but rather the activity of vital, active men and women who are involved in life to the fullest. Therefore, I propose at the outset that philosophy and philosophizing are not merely abstract and unrelated to life but, at their

best, are a significant and meaningful blend of both theoretical reasoning and its application to life, which is why I have entitled this book *Philosophy: Theory and Practice*. I hope to prove this assumption as I continue this chapter and also as I approach specific issues and problems in each of the following chapters.

## What Philosophy Is—Speculation and Analysis

### SPECULATION

Philosophy begins in wonderment, in curiosity, in questioning—everything—and in speculating about answers to these questions. The word *speculation*, when used philosophically, means to consider a subject or an idea and to contemplate it profoundly. I suspect that this particular aspect of philosophy is the main reason that most people are attracted to philosophy or become philosophers in the first place. Since human beings are often curious—asking the what, why, how, where, and when questions—speculation is the most exciting and “fun” part of philosophy. One gets to ask all those “great questions” about the universe and oneself and to speculate about the answers.

In addition, at least part of the nature of some human beings has been the desire to transcend (to go beyond, to exceed) themselves and even their world. That is, even though human beings may function from day to day without concerning themselves with the underlying nature of the universe, religious questions, and other abstract concerns, they often have a desire to “stretch” themselves and their thoughts beyond everyday existence—they want to question and they want answers whenever they can get them. Anyone can speculate and everyone probably does from time to time. This is the easiest part of philosophy because all one needs is some imagination and the desire to raise questions about anything; however, there is a knack to selecting significant and meaningful questions, as we shall see later.

This part of philosophy is imaginative and creative, and we can just let our minds wander freely in thinking about everything, sort of brainstorming with ourselves or others about our speculations. This is the easier part of philosophizing, and, as I have stated, almost anyone can do it; however, often the difference between a superficial “dimestore” philosopher and the more serious and systematic philosopher is another aspect of philosophy called *analysis*.

### ANALYSIS

Most philosophers are not content merely to wonder or speculate about things but feel that they must also subject their imaginings, wonder-



ings, and speculations to rigorous analysis. It is not enough to ask questions about the universe and speculate about the answers; philosophers must also ask questions *about* their questions and about their answers, subjecting them to a process of analysis through logical reasoning. This is probably the major difference between just anyone's philosophizing and that of a more serious philosopher; the former is content to speculate about the universe and perhaps hold a belief that is untested, whereas the latter is not. For example, even though Socrates was perhaps one of the greatest speculative philosophers of all time, he was never merely content to hold a belief unquestioningly or without testing it through rigorous analysis. Again and again in Plato's dialogues, Socrates forces students and other would-be philosophers to question such easy and unquestioned beliefs as "justice" means "doing good to your friends and bad to your enemies" or that it means "might makes right" by forcing them to analyze carefully what such beliefs really mean and entail.<sup>4</sup>

Analysis involves taking a question, answer, belief, or theory and subjecting it to careful scrutiny, breaking it down into its parts, using would-be philosophers to question such easy and unquestioned beliefs as "justice" means "doing good to your friends and bad to your enemies" or that it means "might makes right" by forcing them to analyze carefully what such beliefs really mean and entail.<sup>4</sup>

Analysis involves taking a question, answer, belief, or theory and subjecting it to careful scrutiny, breaking it down into its parts, using physical evidence wherever it is available and also applying a rigorous form of reasoning, called *logic*. For example, many religious people hold the belief that if human beings do not believe in a supernatural being or follow one religion or another, there can be no meaning in their lives. They believe this no doubt because they feel that their lives were less meaningful before they became religious than after. There may be a difficulty, of course, in defining the word "meaningful" when used in this context, but even if we use the term broadly, we will find that these people are guilty of generalizing their own particular feelings about religion into "how everyone else must feel." An examination of the lives of various nonreligious people will probably reveal no more "meaning" or lack of it than will an examination of those who are religious. At the very least, such an examination will reveal one must be careful anytime he applies a particular assumption to *all* human beings. The real point is, however, that one should not hold such a belief without first examining evidence to support or refute it and without subjecting it to careful logical reasoning and analysis.