

ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

Thinking About Philosophy

FOURTH EDITION



Pearson

Nils Ch. Rauhut

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Nils Ch. Rauhut
Coastal Carolina University

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Preface

There are multiple effective ways to introduce beginning students to the study of philosophy. One can focus on classic texts, like Plato's *Republic* and Descartes' *Meditations*, or alternatively one can focus on critical thinking and argumentative writing and teach a problem-oriented course. My focus in this book is **active student learning**. I have tried to write a book that helps instructors get students involved in what happens in the classroom. The book is designed to make students talk, read, and think together with the instructor and the other students in the course. In order to achieve that goal, the book contains more than one hundred *Food for Thought* exercises that have grown out of my own teaching experience and which are designed to generate opportunities for genuine conversations among students and between students and instructors. The exercises are intended to be used during lectures and they therefore provide welcome breaks during which the students can get active and find out whether they indeed understand how to apply philosophical concepts correctly. The book is based on the belief that philosophy is foremost a conversation and a dialogue. Nothing is more detrimental to the practice of philosophy than silent and unresponsive students who listen to a never-ending instructor monologue. My hope is that the book will help students to discover that philosophy is about them and their beliefs just as much as it is about the arguments of famous philosophers.

New to this Edition

In this fourth edition of *Ultimate Questions: Thinking About Philosophy*, I have made several changes. First, I have added a new chapter "Should We Be Afraid of Death?" This chapter provides instructors with the opportunity to end the course by exploring a classical philosophical question that integrates several topics (e.g., personal identity, mind-body problem, the existence of God), which have been covered in separate chapters. I hope the new chapter provides a welcome synthesis and offers instructors new possibilities of how to structure a semester-long course. In addition, I have reworked and improved every prior chapter. In Chapter 5,

I have added a discussion of narrative identity. In Chapters 2 and 3, I have added a new and improved discussion of definitions as well as a new section on fake news and propositional attitudes. In Chapter 8, I have completely reworked the presentation of both utilitarianism as well as Kant's ethical theory. Finally, I have added ten multiple-choice questions at the end of each chapter that give students the opportunity to find out whether they are able to answer these questions correctly. I have found in my own teaching that beginning students not only enjoy answering multiple-choice questions, but that well-designed multiple-choice questions can have a beneficial effect on student learning. Beginning students are, in my experience, much more likely to ask questions in class when they have found out that they answered a multiple-choice question incorrectly. These questions in turn allow instructors to help students avoid common misconceptions and conceptual confusions. I hope that this new section of multiple-choice questions at the end of each chapter will have the same effect in other classrooms as well and lead to more frequent student questions in class.

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I would like to thank all those students at Coastal Carolina University who have given me opportunity to introduce them to philosophy over the past twenty years. The current edition is shaped and influenced by my interactions with them. I also would like to thank Dennis Earl, David Holiday, Eva Kort, Julinna Oxley, Ed Perez, Michael Ruse, Renee Smith, Cliff Sosis, Jonathan Trerise and Casey Woodling for many insightful discussions about teaching philosophy over the past years. Special thanks are due to my friend Gary Schmidt who provided the excellent translation of the Herman Hesse poem in Chapter 9. Last but not least, I would like to thank my wife Karin. Without her love and steady support this new edition would not have been possible.

Nils Ch. Rauhut
Myrtle Beach
August 2019

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Chapter 1

What Is Philosophy?



Learning Objectives

- 1.1 Explain the similarities and differences between mythology, religion, and philosophy.
- 1.2 Differentiate between scientific and philosophical questions.
- 1.3 Summarize the major fields of philosophy.

Making Sense of the World

- 1.1 Explain the similarities and differences between mythology, religion, and philosophy.

Although not everyone has an interest in physics, psychology, geography, or economics, most people have a pretty clear idea of what these academic disciplines are about. The same is not true for philosophy. It is quite common to meet educated people who have only a foggy idea of what philosophy is and what philosophers do. Let us therefore begin with a brief explanation of the nature and scope of philosophy.

One way to clarify the nature of philosophy is to explore an imaginary scenario. Suppose that you are a member of a typical nomadic tribe living, say, four thousand years ago. Life is tough for your tribe; most of your time is spent hunting for food and shelter. However, there are also good days, especially during the summers when food is plentiful and temperatures are comfortable. Suppose that during one summer evening your fifteen-year-old daughter sits down next to you, points at the star-filled sky, and says, "I am amazed at the beauty of the sky. I have the feeling that this whole universe is an incredible place. But looking at these stars also makes me feel very small and insignificant. Tell me, do these stars care about us? Do they take an interest in what we do down here?" At this point you probably wish that your daughter would be more like the other teenage girls in your tribe, who worry only about who will ask them to dance at the next sacred hunting celebration. But since it is such a fine summer evening, you sit back and try to respond to her questions as well as you can.

In order to answer your daughter's questions, you need to provide what one might call a big-picture view of the universe, which always involves some kind of story that attempts to make sense of the world in which we live. There are several ways to tell such a story. A natural way is the use of mythology.¹ Every culture has developed powerful mythological stories to make sense of the world. In the Western world, one of the oldest surviving mythologies is Homer's *Iliad*. Homer's poem of the battle for Troy not only tells us something about history and cosmology but also explores the nature of the underworld and the world of the gods. Mythologies provide an effective way to understand the cosmos and the role we humans play within it. So in our imaginary scenario, you might tell your daughter a mythological story

Telling mythological stories is one way to make sense of the world in which we live.



SOURCE: Esteban De Armas/123RF.

similar to Homer's *Iliad* or Hesiod's *Theogony*. Aside from merely entertaining your daughter by the campfire, you would be instilling in her a sense of how the heavens came to be and what interest the gods take in our deeds and actions. It is, however, apparent that mythological stories leave something to be desired. Imagine that you have a critical-minded daughter. After listening politely to your mythological story, she might very well respond, "Wow, that was a great story, but how do you know that it is actually true?"

Food for Thought

It might seem as if mythology is a thing of the past. Who would base his or her understanding of the world on simple, powerful stories? Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear

that our understanding of the world is still shaped by invented stories. List some examples of how invented stories still influence and affect our understanding of the world.

At this point you have several options. You might either point to the long tradition of your tribe and try to convince your daughter that your tribe would not have survived for so long if these traditional stories were all bogus, or else you can try to provide additional support to show that the story you have told is true. There are several ways to offer such additional support. One way consists of the claim that one of your ancestors was very close to the gods (or God), and that a god revealed the truth of this story to him or her. When mythological stories are combined with divine revelations, mythology has a tendency to turn into religion.²

Religion is the second widely established means through which we can provide a big-picture view of the universe. Religion resembles mythology in that most religions contain stories that—at first glance—have the sound and look of mythological stories. However, religious stories, unlike mythologies, contain a reason that we should believe that they are true: divine revelation. Divine revelation can take very different forms. It might come as a dream, as it did for the Bible's Abraham; or it might come during meditations, as it did for the prophet Muhammad in the cave Hira; or it might consist of the discovery of holy texts, as occurred with the founder of the Mormon religion, Joseph Smith. No matter what form these divine revelations take, they offer a reason that religious stories are true.

Let us go back to our imaginary scenario. Suppose you defend your story with the claim that the gods revealed the story to some of your ancestors. Your daughter might respond to this defense as follows: “Oh, I do not doubt that our great ancestors were closer to the gods than we are now, but what makes me curious is this: I recently met a wandering medicine man from a tribe far away. He told me about the religious beliefs that have guided his tribe for centuries. Guess what? Their religious beliefs support completely different stories about the world and the gods. What reason do I have to believe our own religious stories, while I reject those of other tribes?”

This response shows that religion, as a method of understanding the world, is challenged by the fact that not all divine revelations are compatible. When different religious systems come into contact with one another, it becomes rather difficult to decide which revelation is more trustworthy. Although some individuals (especially if they have had religious experiences) may be convinced that a particular revelation is true while all others are misguided, not everybody can justify such strong convictions.

At this point philosophy enters the picture; it is a third major way of providing a big-picture view of reality. The word *philosophy* derives from the Greek words *philia* (“love”) and *sophia* (“wisdom”). Philosophy can therefore be understood as love of wisdom. But what does this mean? We can understand the nature of philosophy better if we clarify the relationship among philosophy, mythology, and religion. Philosophy is related to mythology insofar as philosophers also try to provide a comprehensive, big-picture view of reality. Philosophy resembles religion in that philosophers provide reasons that their picture of reality is true. However, philosophers never appeal to divine revelation or to tradition in order to show that their theories are true; instead, they appeal to the power of reason. In a broad sense, **philosophy** can therefore be understood as an attempt to develop a big-picture view of the universe with the help of reason.

Let us go back to our imaginary situation. What would it mean to explain the cosmos to your daughter with the help of reason? Well, you might say something along the following lines:

“You have asked me, among other things, whether stars take an interest in what we are doing. In order to answer this question, we need to clarify the nature of stars. I believe that stars are balls of fire. You might not believe me, but here is the reason I think this is a plausible idea. Look at this campfire. It is a source of light. I have walked through many dark nights, and I can tell you that whenever I have seen light, it had something to do with fire. Consider lightning, for example. It causes trees to burn and is also a kind of fire. So it seems to me that wherever there is light, there must be fire. Since stars are a source of light, they too must be a kind of fire. Moreover, since fire does not seem to be able to perceive anything, I do not believe that stars are aware of what we are doing.”

What you have just done is use an argument to defend your belief that stars are not aware of our actions. This is a key element in philosophy. Philosophers not only try to explain the world with the help of claims and stories but also try to defend their claims with the help of arguments. We start to philosophize when we present arguments in defense of our big-picture view of reality.³

Although our understanding of philosophy is still incomplete, it is already possible to point to four key elements of philosophical reflections. First, in order to philosophize, we need to know more about arguments. We need to know how to construct arguments and how to evaluate them. We will do this in the next chapter. Second, the hypothetical situation that I described here illustrates that philosophy emerges as a response to persistent questioning. If your daughter had not been so reluctant to accept traditional



stories, there would not have been any reason to present arguments in defense of your beliefs. Philosophy therefore comes most easily to us when we are in a critical state of mind, questioning whether our standard picture of the universe is really accurate. As long as we are absolutely convinced that our beliefs about the world are correct, we feel little need to justify them with the help of arguments. However, many people encounter situations in their lives when they begin to question their beliefs and convictions. It is during these times that philosophy emerges most naturally.

Food for Thought

Philosophy emerges most naturally in situations when we question whether our ordinary beliefs about the world are really true. The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) described in his *Confessions* how he started to question everything in his life:

So I lived; but five years ago something very strange began to happen to me. At first I experienced moments of perplexity and arrest of life, as though I did not know what to do or how to live; and I felt lost and became dejected. But this passed and I went on

living as before. Then these moments of perplexity began to recur oftener and oftener, and always in the same form. They were always expressed by the questions: What is it for? What does it lead to?⁴

In normal everyday life we tend not to be as reflective and critical as Tolstoy was when he wrote his *Confessions*. However, it has been suggested that we all become self-doubting and perplexed at certain points in our lives. Is that true? If yes, what kinds of experiences or situations typically undermine our confidence that we understand the world correctly?

Third, doing philosophy is a social activity. It requires that we present our ideas and arguments to other people and that we are willing to listen to what others have to say about our claims. Philosophy thus requires courage as well as empathy. You will discover quickly that an argument that sounds brilliant to you might strike others as problematic. Being a good philosopher involves listening to the questions others have and modifying our ideas in light of these questions. The British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) wrote that a person does not deserve to be confident in his opinions unless “he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him.”⁵ What is important to realize in this context is that somebody who questions your ideas does not—in normal circumstances—aim to attack you as a person. Anyone who thinks in that way becomes defensive and brings a quick end to all philosophical dialogue. Philosophy flourishes when people feel comfortable to question each other in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect.

Food for Thought

Philosophy thrives when we can question each other’s beliefs in a cooperative and safe environment in which it is possible to test and evaluate ideas without creating hostility and resentment. Creating such an environment is far from

easy. Clarify in your own mind what you can do to help create such an environment in this classroom. Are there also some things which we should avoid doing? Compare your thoughts with your neighbor and the rest of the class.

Finally, the hypothetical conversation with your fifteen-year-old daughter also shows that philosophy has a tendency to lead to a plurality of different answers. I can defend my claim that stars are balls of fire with the help of an argument, but there are also arguments in defense of the claim that stars are unchanging, perfect entities. For

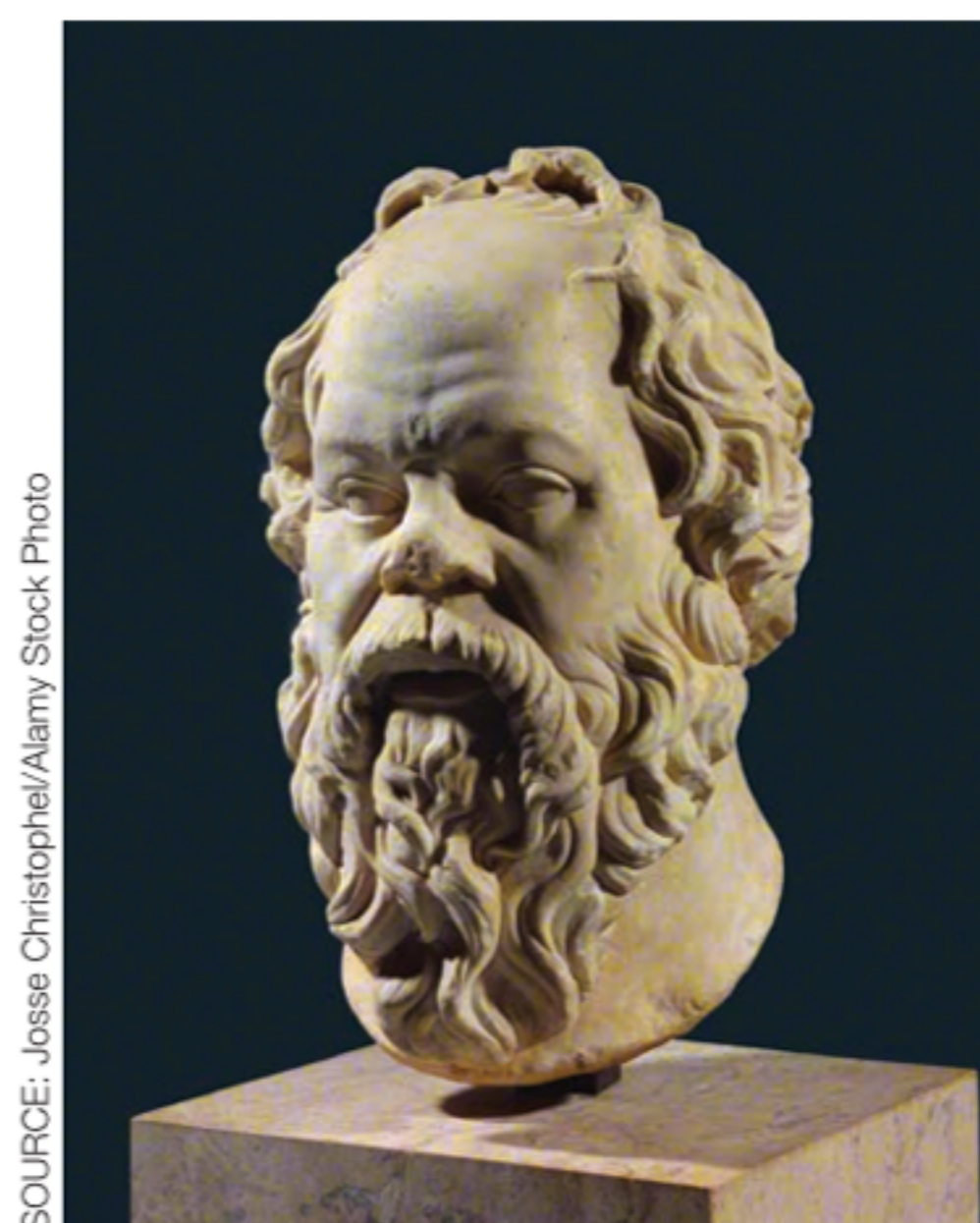
most complex questions there are different answers that appear—at least for a while—equally reasonable. There are, of course, also some thoroughly misguided answers that one can show to be quite unreasonable. Although philosophy has the goal of producing one truthful picture of the universe, in practice it generates many different accounts of the world, which stand in opposition to each other. It often takes hundreds of years before some arguments are recognized to be mistaken. Progress in philosophy is a slow process; those of us who like immediate results and absolute certainty tend to be annoyed by philosophical reflection. However, studying questions that lead to opposing answers has the benefit of showing us new possibilities. The philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) wrote in this context:

Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they might be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never traveled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.⁶

Philosophy introduces us to multiple ways of seeing the world, thus enriching our perspective but at the same time exposing us to risks. Once we are able to see many different points of view, we are in danger of losing a firm orientation. Ideas that are central to the way in which we live our lives can suddenly appear to be shallow conjectures. For this reason, philosophy is often accused of being subversive. Is it then beneficial to pursue philosophy and to risk undermining the most fundamental beliefs that shape our lives? This question cannot be answered universally. Studying philosophy can lead us to new knowledge and to a new outlook on life. But reflecting on the most fundamental questions in life can also result in perpetual doubt—or a reconfirmation of what we have believed since childhood. What the study of philosophy will do to you and your beliefs is not clear until you have practiced it on your own. The following pages give you an opportunity to do just that.

Food for Thought

The Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE) was famous for wandering the streets of Athens, questioning people until they admitted that they did not know as much as they thought they knew. As you might imagine, this upset many Athenians—especially those in influential positions. They considered Socrates' questioning to be a danger to the city and eventually brought charges against him. In 399 BCE Socrates was condemned to death for corrupting young people and undermining the traditional religious beliefs of the city. Plato's *Apology* purportedly presents Socrates' famous defense speech, in which Socrates claimed that his questioning was beneficial to the Athenians and that they should have rewarded him instead of condemning him. Socrates claimed that it is better to be aware of one's ignorance than to go on believing dubious and unjustified ideas. He concluded that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Do you agree with Socrates? Is questioning one's beliefs a good thing, even if one ends up being perplexed?



SOURCE: Josse Christopher/Alamy Stock Photo

The Relationship Between Science and Philosophy

1.2 Differentiate between scientific and philosophical questions.

In the last section, we defined philosophy as an attempt to explain the world with the help of reason. Some of you may find this definition puzzling. If philosophy is an attempt to explain the world with the help of reason, how then does philosophy differ from science? Scientists obviously also use reason when they explain the features of this world.

It is important to realize that what we call science was initially a part of philosophy. Aristotle (384–322 BCE), one of the greatest philosophers of antiquity, was a very influential physicist and biologist. Physics was historically described as natural philosophy. It is only during the last several hundred years that we distinguish more sharply among the various academic disciplines. Philosophy has given birth to natural science, psychology, sociology, and linguistics. In today's world we seem to learn most of the things that we can reasonably claim about the universe not from philosophers, but from physicists, astronomers, biologists, or psychologists. Consider the example from the previous section: What is the nature of stars? In order to answer this question we would turn to an astrophysicist, not a philosopher.

This raises a crucial question: If philosophy has prepared the grounds for modern science, and if modern science currently is our best tool to explain the universe with the help of reason, what role does philosophy play in the world today? Can philosophy tell us something about the world beyond what the sciences tell us? Would we lose anything if we closed all philosophy departments and directed the money saved into the various science departments?

In order to answer this question, we need to know a bit more about scientific disciplines such as physics or chemistry. Each scientific discipline deals with a specific subject matter. A physicist can tell you why you see lightning before you hear the thunder, but a physicist cannot explain to you whether going to law school will make you happy. Similarly, economists can explain the macroeconomic consequences of a low savings rate but cannot explain to you why your cholesterol level is so high. Thus, each scientific discipline deals with only a part of reality, but not with the whole. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) wrote: “[E]ven when all possible scientific problems have been answered, the problems of life have not been put to rest.”⁷

Let me illustrate this with an example. I have always been curious as to whether or not I have a soul. Souls, if they exist, are entities that we cannot see, measure, or weigh. Souls are not like rocks, fingernails, or other physical objects. Since science obtains information about the world predominantly by measurements and experimentation, science can tell us a lot about rocks, clouds, and planets. However, science has a much harder time telling us about souls or a possible afterlife. Finding the answer to the question of whether we have souls requires not only observations and experiments but also a good deal of conceptual analysis; that is, we need to clarify what we mean by the term *soul* before we can make any progress in determining whether souls exist. Analyzing and clarifying complex concepts is an integral part of philosophy; it often involves testing definitions and analyzing hypothetical situations. The question of whether we have souls is therefore a good example of a philosophical question, which involves conceptual analysis and requires more than observations and experimentation.

Philosophical questions are “open” in the sense that we cannot easily predict what would constitute satisfactory answers. No scientific procedure can produce a quick answer to a philosophical question. Moreover, philosophical questions

often deal with foundational matters that are not addressed within any science. Mathematicians, for example, can tell us lots of things about numbers. They can prove, for instance, that there are infinitely many prime numbers or that the square root of two is an irrational number. However, mathematicians very rarely address the fundamental question of what kind of things numbers actually are. Are numbers abstract entities that exist on their own, independent of any human cognition, or are numbers dependent on our minds? These kinds of foundational questions are left for philosophers to investigate, and they form an integral part of the philosophy of mathematics. What is interesting to note is that every science involves foundational questions that are not directly addressed by the science itself. We thus can speak of a philosophy of biology, a philosophy of physics, or a philosophy of science in general. Philosophy offers a home for foundational questions that fall outside the scope of ordinary scientific investigations.

It is worthwhile to stress that the line between philosophy and science is not fixed. Some philosophical questions have eventually turned into scientific questions once the appropriate scientific methodology was developed. For example, the question “Is there life on Mars?” is now clearly a scientific question, but it used to be a philosophical one. Similarly, the question “Are computers able to think?” is currently a philosophical question, but it might turn into a scientific question for cognitive scientists. This understanding clarifies why scientific investigations can have an important impact on philosophy. Although science by itself cannot answer philosophical questions, it can help philosophers to see open questions in a new light. Philosophers are, therefore, obligated to pay close attention to scientific results. However, most classical philosophical questions, like the question of whether God exists, appear to be such that it is difficult to imagine (in principle) that they can be answered with the help of any scientific procedure.

Food for Thought

Contemporary thinkers are divided whether science has anything useful to say about the existence of God. The scientist Stephen Jay Gould thinks that all “questions of ultimate meaning and moral value” are beyond the reach of science.⁸ The scientist Richard Dawkins, on the other hand, disagrees. In his book *The God Delusion* he writes: “The existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other . . . God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe,

discoverable in principle if not in practice.”⁹ According to Dawkins, science shows us that the existence of God is highly unlikely, whereas Gould comes to the conclusion that the existence of God is beyond the realm of science. What position in this dispute looks more plausible to you? Please note that the question whether Richard Dawkins or Stephen Jay Gould is correct in their views on science is clearly a philosophical question that cannot be answered by science.

Since philosophy deals with open questions that cannot be answered quickly and which often invite controversy, some people are wary of doing philosophy at all; they have the feeling that philosophers do not get anywhere, since they have been exploring some of the same open questions for thousands of years without arriving at final answers. This is not a silly complaint, but before one concludes that philosophy is inherently a fruitless and frustrating activity, it is worthwhile to keep the following considerations in mind: Although it is probably impossible to answer open questions so that every reasonable person agrees with a given answer, it is very well possible to answer such questions satisfactorily in light of your experiences and observations of the world.

Food for Thought

Take a look at the following questions, and decide whether they are predominantly scientific or philosophical questions. Keep in mind that some questions might have scientific as well as philosophical components.

1. How many chromosomes does a human being have?
2. Is it morally permissible to remove chromosomes from an embryo?
3. What is the meaning of life?
4. What happens inside a black hole?
5. What caused the extinction of the dinosaurs?
6. Is the temperature on Earth increasing?
7. Is homosexual love unnatural?
8. Did extraterrestrials visit Earth in the past?
9. Are quarks the smallest particles in the universe?
10. Can we know that there are particles that are too small to be observed?
11. What caused the universe to exist?
12. Would it be a good thing to live forever?
13. When will the sun go supernova?

Philosophy, unlike science, has a personal component. The purpose of philosophical activity is to clarify in your own mind, which solution to an open question seems most reasonable. This does not mean that you can assert whatever strikes your fancy. Philosophy, as we have seen, is not mythological fantasy; philosophers are committed to adopting the solution that appears most reasonable in light of the best arguments available. It is, however, quite possible that different rational persons answer the same open question differently, because they have different experiences or because they make different background assumptions. One person, for example, might come to the conclusion that near-death experiences are all hogwash and the product of wishful thinking, whereas another person, who actually has had an after-death experience, is convinced that we will continue to exist after we die. Both positions might appear to be the most reasonable in light of the best arguments available to these two thinkers. Thus, the point of your philosophical activity is, in part, to determine which solutions to open questions are the most reasonable in light of your own experiences and thoughts about the world. What is especially interesting in this context is that the answers we give to philosophical questions can change throughout our lives. As a six-year-old boy, I was certain that God was a white, bearded man who walked upon the clouds and who observed whether we followed his rules. As I got older, I didn't find this way of thinking about God satisfactory. My big-picture view of the universe began to change and this change prompted me to think differently about God. This process of adjusting my thinking never came to a stop. I have been revising my thinking about the nature of God in light of my overall lived experiences ever since.

Food for Thought

Have you ever changed your mind about a philosophical question in your life? If yes, what prompted you to think differently?

It will, of course, not always be possible for you to select one solution to an open question as the most reasonable. At certain points in our lives, we might realize that we do not know what to think about certain questions. You might conclude, for example, that you really do not know whether you are always responsible for all your actions or whether you will survive your death. But this, too, can constitute progress. Many students who start a philosophy class with the firm conviction that they know the answers to open questions later come to realize that their arguments weren't as convincing and reasonable as they initially thought. This awareness of the limits of our knowledge makes the world a more mysterious place. Perhaps mysteries are not only a key feature of good movies but also a key ingredient of a stimulating life.

Food for Thought

What Is Your Philosophy?

Engaging in philosophical activity frequently causes us to change our attitudes toward fundamental questions. In order to see whether your attitudes change during this class, it might be useful for you to record your positions at the beginning of the class. Answer the following questions with Yes, No, or I don't know, and discuss the questions with the rest of the class.

1. After bodily death a person continues to exist in a nonphysical form.
2. The ultimate goal in life is to live as pleurably as possible.
3. Democracy is the best form of government.
4. God exists.
5. I am now the same person that I was when I was five years old.
6. I am always responsible for my actions.
7. It is irrational to be afraid of one's death.
8. Ghosts exist.
9. One day there may be computers that understand Shakespeare better than I do right now.
10. It is wrong to impose the death penalty.
11. There are universal moral standards that apply to all human beings regardless of where they live.
12. The best way to treat depression is to inject chemicals into the brain.
13. If I had been born into a different environment, I might have become a professional killer.
14. It is impossible to know anything with absolute certainty.
15. The future is fixed; how one's life unfolds is a matter of destiny.
16. The life of a young child is more valuable than the life of a twenty-two-year-old college student.
17. If God does not exist, then there are no moral obligations, and no action is right or wrong.
18. It is impossible to be truly happy if one is an immoral person.
19. If we live forever then any activity will eventually get boring and pointless.

The Main Branches of Philosophy

1.3 Summarize the nature of the major fields of philosophy.

Traditionally, philosophical questions can be divided into five different fields of study: **metaphysics**, **epistemology**, **ethics**, **aesthetics**, and **logic**. It is useful to be familiar with these different areas of inquiry in order to obtain an overview of the major questions studied in philosophy.

Metaphysics is usually defined as the study of ultimate reality; however, this definition is not the most insightful. One way to get a better understanding of this field of study is to list everything that we think exists in the universe. Can you imagine making such a list? Most of us would probably start our lists with familiar things such as cars, trees, cats, and people we know. However, after a while, some of us would perhaps also include items like angels, souls, and God. If we compared our lists, certain questions would ultimately develop. For example, I could ask, "Do you really believe that angels exist in the world?" This is a typical metaphysical question. As we will see later on, philosophers frequently wonder whether souls, God, time, numbers, or colors really exist, and all of these questions are part of metaphysics. In addition, metaphysics is concerned with clarifying how various entities are related to each other. Many people have thought, for instance, that every event has a cause. But how is this compatible with freedom? If everything we do is caused by events in the past, how is it possible to be free? Clarifying the relationship between causality and freedom is part of the problem of free will, and this question, too, belongs to the field of metaphysics.

Epistemology, the study of knowledge, is important for philosophers because it sometimes happens that in the process of exploring a question, we come to the conclusion that we cannot possibly know what answer to a question is correct. Many people believe, for instance, that we can never know whether God exists or not. People who deny that we can know answers to certain questions are called **skeptics**. It is an important part of philosophy to determine under what conditions skepticism is a