9TH EDITION

# The BIG QUESTIONS

## A Short Introduction to Philosophy

Robert Solomon | Kathleen Higgins

# The Big Questions

## A Short Introduction to Philosophy

*Ninth Edition*

ROBERT C. SOLOMON
*University of Texas at Austin*

KATHLEEN M. HIGGINS
*University of Texas at Austin*

WADSWORTH
CENGAGE Learning

Australia • Brazil • Japan • TPPUB • Mexico • Singapore • Spain • United Kingdom • United States

WADSWORTH
CENGAGE Learning®

**The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy, Ninth Edition**
**Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins**

Publisher/Executive Editor: Clark Baxter
Senior Sponsoring Editor: Joann Kozyrev
Senior Media Editor: Phil Lanza
Assistant Editor: Joshua Duncan
Editorial Assistant: Marri Straton
Market Development Manager: Joshua I. Adams
Brand Manager: Jennifer Levanduski
Marketing Communications Manager: Linda Yip
Senior Content Project Manager: Josh Allen
Art Director: Riezebos Holzbaur/Andrei Pasternak
Print Buyer: Sandee Milewski
Senior Rights Acquisitions Specialist: Mandy Groszko
Production Service: S4 Carlisle Publishing Services
Text Designer: Riezebos Holzbaur/Tim Heraldo
Copy Editor: S4Carlisle Publishing Services
Cover Designer: Riezebos Holzbaur/Tae Hatayama
Cover Image: paper background © shutterstock/R Studio, Brush stroke circle texture © shutterstock/optimarc
Compositor: S4Carlisle Publishing Services



Library of Congress Control Number: 2012950399

ISBN-13: 978-1-133-61064-9

ISBN-10: 1-133-61064-1

**Wadsworth, Cengage Learning**
10 Davis Drive
Belmont, CA 94002-3098
USA

Cengage Learning products are represented in Canada by Nelson Education, Ltd.

For your course and learning solutions, visit **academic.cengage.com**

Purchase any of our products at your local college store or at our preferred online store **www.ichapters.com**

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 17 16 15 14 13

*For our nieces and nephews,*

*Jem, Jesi, Danyal, Rachel, and Carrie Solomon,*
*Caitlin Higgins, Jeffrey and Matthew Cook,*
*Allison, Rachel, Daniel, Brett, and Marcus Felten,*
*Kevin and Emily Daily*

# Contents

# Preface

It was the fall of 1806, in the college town of Jena, in what we now call Germany. Most students and professors would have been getting ready for their classes, with mixed annoyance and anticipation. The professors would have been finishing up their summer research; the students would have been doing what students usually do at the end of the summer.

But this year school would not begin as usual.

Napoleon's troops were already approaching the city, and you could hear the cannon from the steps of the university library. French scouts were already in the town, walking around the university, stopping for a glass of wine in the student bars, and chatting casually with the local residents, many of whom were in sympathy with the new French ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

As the battle was about to begin, a young philosophy instructor named **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** was hastily finishing the book he was writing—a very difficult philosophy book with the forbidding title *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But "spirited" is what the book was, and it perfectly captured the tension, excitement, and anxiety of those perilous days. It was the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a new one. The book was a vision of consciousness caught in the midst of gigantic forces and looking for direction in a new and terrifyingly human world. It was an appeal for hope and thoughtful effort toward universal understanding and a belief in what was then innocently called the "perfectibility of humanity."

Transfer the situation to our own times—it was as if life in our society were about to change completely, with all our old habits and landmarks, our ideas about ourselves and the ways we live, replaced by something entirely new and largely unknown. We talk about "game changers" and "tipping points," but, in fact, most of what we consider drastic changes are mere shifts of emphasis, sometimes inconvenient advantages that accompany new and improved technologies and techniques. If so many of us can get so melodramatic about computers, smart phones, and the Internet, how would we react to a *real* change in our lives? Hegel and his students felt confident, even cheerful. Why? Because they had a *philosophy*. They had a vision of themselves and the future that allowed them to face the loss of their jobs, even the destruction of their society and the considerable chaos that would follow. Their ideas inspired them and made even the most threatening circumstances meaningful.

A class of our students who had been reading Hegel's philosophy were asked to characterize their own views of themselves and their times. The answers were

not inspiring. For many of them, the word *dull* seemed to summarize the world; others spoke of "crisis" and "despair." One said that life was "absurd" and another that it was "meaningless." When asked why, they answered that gasoline was expensive, that most of them weren't getting the job interviews they really wanted, and that television programs were bad. We agreed that these events were less than tragic, hardly "absurd," and didn't make life "meaningless." Everyone agreed that the specters of nuclear war and terrorism had put a damper on our optimism, but we also agreed that the likelihood of such catastrophes was debatable and that, in any case, we all had to live as best we could, even if under a shadow. But why, then, in these times of relative affluence and peace (compared to most of the world throughout most of history) were our answers so sour? What were we missing that Hegel and his students, confronting the most terrible battles ever known, seem to have had—something that made them so optimistic and fulfilled? Again, the answer is a philosophy.

**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** was born in Stuttgart in 1770. While he was a college student, he was enthusiastic about the French Revolution (1789–1795) and an admirer of Napoleon. Hegel was teaching at the University of Jena in 1806 when Napoleon marched in and took over the town, ending the 800-year-old Holy Roman Empire and initiating widespread reforms throughout the German states. It was in this atmosphere of international war and liberal hopes that Hegel formulated his philosophy, which centered on the notion of Spirit, by which he meant the unity of the world through human consciousness. His method was **dialectic**—that is, he tried to demonstrate how contradictory views can be reconciled and shown to be, in fact, different aspects of one underlying phenomenon—ultimately, of Spirit. Hegel is still considered one of the great synthesizers of human knowledge and values; his *Encyclopedia* (first published in 1817) is a short synthesis of the whole of human life, including logic, science, and psychology as well as philosophy, art, religion, metaphysics, and ethics. He died in 1831.

Philosophy, religion, and science have always been closely related. The emphasis shifts, but the point of these endeavors is the same: the importance of ideas and understanding, of making sense out of our world and seeing our lives in some larger, even cosmic, perspective. *Ideas* define our place in the universe and our relations with other people; ideas determine what is important and what is not important, what is fair and what is not fair, what is worth believing and what is not worth believing. Ideas give life meaning. Our minds need ideas the way our bodies need food. We are starved for visions, hungry for understanding. We are caught up in the routines of life, distracted occasionally by those activities we call "recreation" and "entertainment." What we have lost is the joy of thinking, the challenge of understanding, the inspirations as well as the consolations of philosophy.

Philosophy is simply *thinking hard* about life, about what we have learned, about our place in the world. Philosophy is, literally, the *love of wisdom*. It is the search for the larger picture, and this involves the demand for *knowledge*—the kind of knowledge that allows us to understand our lives and the world around us. It is, accordingly, the insistence on the importance of *values*, a refusal to get totally caught up in the details of life and simply go along with the crowd. Philosophy and wisdom define our place in the universe and give our lives meaning.

When undergraduates ask questions about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe, it is philosophy that ought to answer the questions. But thousands of students, not trained in hard thinking but starved for ideas and understanding, will retreat to the easier alternatives—pop philosophies of self-help, exotic religious practices, extremist politics. If the hard thinking of philosophy does not address the big questions, then perhaps these alternatives will. The difference between philosophy and the popular alternatives is ultimately one of quality—the quality of ideas, the thoroughness of understanding. Because we all live by our ideas anyway, the choice becomes not whether to do philosophy or not do philosophy, but whether to accept cheap and unchallenging substitutes or to try the real thing. The aim of this book is to give you an introduction—to the real thing.

## The Subject of Philosophy

Philosophy is sometimes treated as an extremely esoteric, abstract, and specialized subject that has little to do with any other subjects of study—or with the rest of our lives. This is simply untrue. Philosophy is nothing less than the attempt to understand who we are and what we think of ourselves. And that is just what the great philosophers of history, whom we study in philosophy courses, were doing: trying to understand themselves, their times, and their place in the world. They did this so brilliantly, in fact, that their attempts remain models for us. They help us formulate our own ideas and develop our own ways of clarifying what we believe.

Throughout this book, we have tried to introduce at least briefly many of the great philosophers throughout history. (Brief biographies are included in the chapters.) But philosophy is not primarily the study of *other* people's ideas. Philosophy is first of all the attempt to state clearly, and as convincingly and interestingly as possible, *your own* views. That is *doing* philosophy, not just reading about how someone else has done it.

This book is an attempt to help you do just that—to *do* philosophy, to state what you believe, using the great philosophers and the great ideas of the past as inspiration, as a guide to ways of putting together your own views, and to provoke the present alternatives that you may not have thought of on your own. The aim of the book—and at least one aim of the course you are taking—is to force you to think through your ideas, connect them, confront alternative views, and understand what you prefer and why you prefer it. Some students inevitably think that once they are speaking abstractly, it doesn't matter what they say. So they talk utter nonsense, they express ideas they have never thought about,

or they recite mere words—for example, the popular word *value*—without having any sense of what they as individuals believe to be true. A very bright student one year claimed that he did not exist. (He received a grade anyway.) Some students even feel that it doesn't matter if they contradict themselves—after all, "It's only ideas." But if we see the world through ideas, if they determine how we feel about ourselves and live our lives, then our ideas make all the difference. So it is urgent—as well as intellectually necessary—that you ask, at every turn, "Do I really believe that?" and, "Is that compatible with other things I believe?" Good philosophy, and *great* philosophy, depends on the seriousness and rigor with which such questions are asked. The aim of this book to help you ask them, to help you build for yourself a philosophical presentation of your own view of the world.

The task of summarizing your views about the meaning of life and the nature of the universe in a single course may sound overwhelming. But no matter how crude your first efforts, this kind of integrative critical thinking—putting it all together—is essential to what you will be doing all through your life: trying to keep your priorities straight, to know who you are, and to be sure of what you believe. The purpose of this course, which may be your first introduction to philosophy, is to get you started. Once you begin to think about the *big questions,* you may well find, as many students and almost all professional philosophers have found, that it is one of the most rewarding and most accessible activities you will ever learn—you can do it almost anywhere, at any time, with anyone, and even alone. And if it seems difficult to begin (as it always does), that is because you are not used to thinking as a philosopher, because our ideas are inevitably more complex than we originally think they are, and because, once you begin thinking, there is no end to the number of things there are to think about. So consider this as a first attempt, an exploratory essay, a first difficult effort to express yourself and your positions—not just your views on this issue or that one, but your entire view of the world. Engaging in the activity of *doing* philosophy, even if it is only for the first time, is what makes philosophy so exciting and challenging.

The first chapter of the book consists of a set of preliminary questions to get you to state your opinions on some of the issues that make up virtually every philosophical viewpoint. Some of the questions you will find amusing; some of them are deadly serious. But between the two, the outlines of what you believe and don't believe should begin to become clear. Each succeeding chapter also begins with a set of preliminary questions. And again the point is to encourage you to reflect on and state your views on these subjects before we begin to develop the views that philosophers have argued. Each chapter includes a discussion of various alternative viewpoints, with brief passages from some of the great philosophers. Special terms, which probably are new to you but have become established in philosophy, are introduced as they are needed, as a way of helping you make distinctions and clarify your positions more precisely than our ordinary language allows. (A glossary containing most of these terms—which are boldface in the text—appears at the back of the book.) Each chapter ends with a set of concluding questions that will help you locate your own views among the alternatives of traditional philosophy. There is a bibliography at the end of each chapter containing

suggestions for further reading; you can explore those topics that interest or challenge you, because no textbook can substitute for original works.

## For the Instructor

This ninth edition is flexible for teaching a variety of individually structured courses in introductory philosophy at both the college and advanced high school levels. In this edition I have summarized the general layout of each chapter toward the beginning (usually within the first few paragraphs or at the end of the first section). There are three categories of boxed text: *Quotations/Excerpts* offer a wide variety of excerpts from key philosophical writings, as well as relevant popular sources. *Biographical* boxes provides a glimpse into the lives of many of the philosophers covered in the main text. *Informational* boxes set forth the beliefs of individuals and philosophical movements and point out links between philosophical theory and its application to societies worldwide. As in the eighth edition, my intention is for these to make such material available to those instructors who choose to use it but dispensable for those who do not.

In this edition I have split up the previous Chapter 10, "Philosophy, Sex, Race, and Culture." Chapter 10 is now exclusively about non-Western philosophy, and the coverage of African-American philosophy and feminist philosophy has mostly been shifted to Chapter 9 (the chapter on justice), except for the discussion of feminist ethics, which is now in Chapter 8 (the chapter on the good life). I have expanded discussion on a number of topics through the book, including Berkeley's arguments against material substance (Chapter 4); Descartes's argument for the existence of God and the external world (Chapter 5); feminist ethics (Chapter 8); and (to some extent) artistic censorship (Chapter 11). I have also included consideration of some topics that were not or were barely discussed in the previous edition: the nontraditional conceptions of God of Karl Rahner and Marcus Borg (Chapter 3); string theory (Chapter 4); Descartes's wax argument (Chapter 5); two of Derek Parfit's teleporter cases (Chapter 6); eliminative materialism (Chapter 6); Bejamin Libet's empirical basis for denying free will (Chapter 7); Harry Frankfurt's critique of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities as a basis for moral responsibility (Chapter 7); the trolley problem (Chapter 8); Plato's account of the Ring of Gyges and the question of piety in the *Euthyphro* (Chapter 8); the morality of patriotism and partiality more generally (Chapter 9); just war theory (Chapter 9); cosmopolitanism (Chapter 9); and contemporary art and debates over what makes something art (Chapter 11).

The discussion in each chapter is more or less self-contained, and the chapters can be used in just about any order. Some instructors prefer to start with the "God" chapter, for example, others with the more epistemological chapters on "Knowledge," "Truth," "Self," and "Freedom." The opening chapters, with their broad collection of both playful and serious philosophical questions and varied discussions of the "Meaning of Life," may be helpful in loosening up and relaxing nervous first-time students of philosophy and getting them to talk in a

more free-wheeling way than they do if they are immediately confronted with the great thinkers or the most intractable problems of philosophy. So, too, the opening questions can help get students to think about the issues on their own before diving into the text. To motivate students to write and think about philosophical questions, to get them used to *interacting* with the text and arguments, we would encourage students to write their own responses and comments directly in the margins of book. The closing questions of each chapter, by the way, also serve as potential exam questions or questions to prompt classroom discussion.

Kathleen M. Higgins

## Acknowledgments

I thank all those readers, both students and colleagues, who responded kindly and critically to my earlier text, *Introducing Philosophy* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977; Seventh Edition, 2000). The present text is a fresh attempt to reach an audience not as well addressed by that book, and I am indebted to all who pointed out the need for the new book and helped me develop and refine it.

I especially thank all those people who taught me the joys and skills of philosophy, and how to teach it. First of all, there is my father, Charles M. Solomon, who always encouraged me. There is Robert Hanson, who first thrilled me with Parmenides and Heraclitus at Cheltenham High School, and Doris Yocum, who taught my first philosophy course. I learned so much about teaching philosophy from Elizabeth Flower, James Ross, Peter Hempel, and Frithjof Bergmann, and I continue to learn from great colleagues like Bob Kane, Stephen Phillips, and Paul Woodruff. I also thank Donette Moss, the late Winkie Conlon, and Shirley Hull for their much-needed care and attention. Thanks to Jon Solomon for his advice on exotic matters in the book. Thanks, too, to Stephen Waters, Mark Gilbertson, Victor Guarino, Michael Thomas, Thomas E. Moody, Stanley M. Browne, Ronald Duska, Albert B. Randall, Emrys Westacott, Gary Prince, Janet McCracken, Timothy Davis, Charlie Huenemann, George Matejka, Christopher Trogan, Butian Zhang, Mathias Bildhauer, Clancy Martin, Karen Mottola, Cleavis Headley, Dave Hilditch, George Matejka, and Erin Frank. Thanks also to David Tatom, Bill McLane, Steve Wainwright, and Worth Hawes.

Robert C. Solomon

In addition to the individuals mentioned above, I would like to thank the reviewers who assisted with the preparation of this edition: Mark Alfano, Michael Anker, Ryan Emerick, Chenyang Li, Kevin Maxwell, Susan Peterson, Michael Rooney, Corine Sutherland, and Chris Weigel. I would also like to thank Sarah Canright, Markus Weidler, and Alex Neill for their help. In particular, thanks to Joann Kosyrev, DaisukeYasutake, Howard Voeks, Mohanarengan Dilli, Joshua Duncan, Mandy Groszko, Kristine Janssens, Patricia Steele, and Marri Straton

for their help in the preparation of this edition. Special thanks to Vivekananthan Sekar for doing the index and to Jill Hernandez for preparing the eBank Instructor's Manual.

Kathleen M. Higgins

## About the Authors

Robert C. Solomon (1942–2007) was internationally renowned as a teacher and lecturer in philosophy. He was Quincy Lee Centennial Professor and Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and over the course of his career taught at numerous institutions, including Princeton University, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Auckland, and the University of California, in addition to the University of Texas. He authored over forty books, including *Introducing Philosophy, A Short History of Philosophy* (with Kathleen M. Higgins); *The Passions; In the Spirit of Hegel; About Love; Above the Bottom Line* (4th ed., with Clancy Martin); *Ethics and Excellence; The Joy of Philosophy; True to Our Feelings;* and was coeditor of *Twenty Questions* (5th ed., with Lee Bowie and Meredith Michaels) and *Since Socrates* (with Clancy Martin).

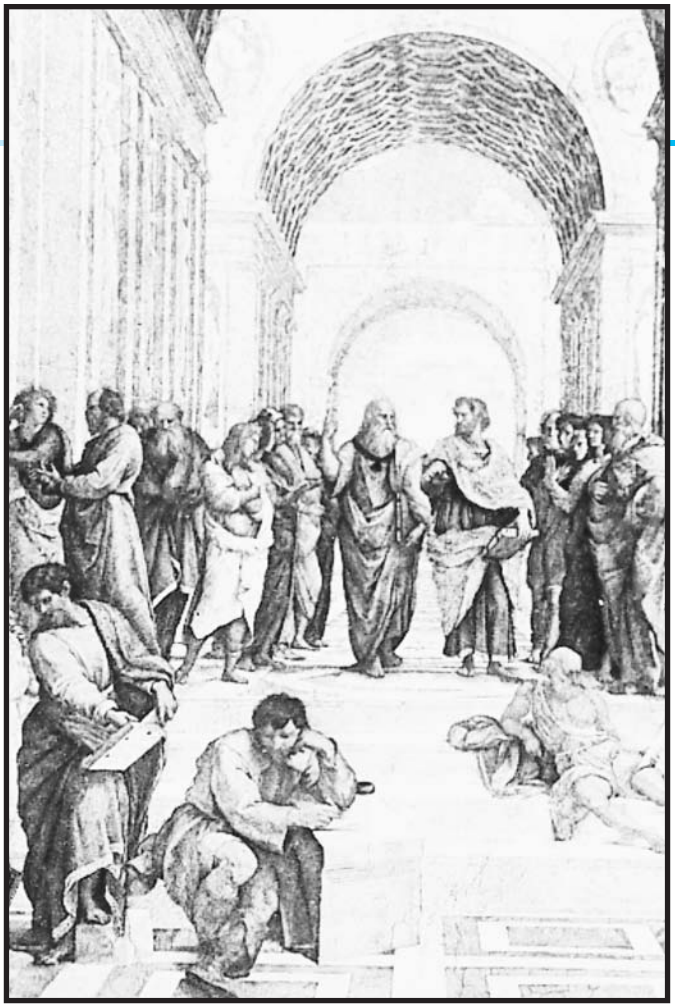
Kathleen M. Higgins is professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin. She received her Ph.D. from Yale University, and has taught at the University of Auckland and the University of California, Riverside, in addition to the University of Texas. She is author of several books, including *Nietzsche's "Zarathustra"; The Music of Our Lives; What Nietzsche Really Said* (with Robert C. Solomon); *Comic Relief; A Short History of Philosophy* (with Robert C. Solomon); *A Passion for Wisdom* (with Robert C. Solomon); and *The Music between Us: Is Music the Universal Language?* She has edited or coedited numerous books, including *Aesthetics in Perspective*, and *Thirteen Questions in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (2nd ed., with Lee Bowie and Meredith Michaels).

Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) (369?–286?, fl. 350–300 BCE)
Mencius (Mengzi) (371–289)
Aristotle (384–322)
Plato (427–347)
Socrates (ca. 469 or 470–399)
Mozi (Mo Tzu) (ca. 470–ca. 391)
Heraclitus (536–480)
Sunzi (Sun Tzu) (544–496)
Confucius (551–479)
Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) (563–483)
Laozi (Lao-Tzu) (570–490)
Pythagoras (ca. 570–490)
Thales (ca. 624–546)
Homer (ca. 750–700 (dates uncertain))
Zoroaster (628?–551?)
Moses (fl.* 1220–1200? (Jewish trad. 1393–1273))
Hindu Vedas (ca. 1500)
Abraham (ca. 1900 BCE)

Jesus Christ (ca. 5 BCE–30 CE)
St. Paul (ca. 10 CE–ca. 65 CE)
St. Augustine (354–430)
Muhammad (ca. 570–632)
St. Anselm (ca. 1033–1109)
Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)
Martin Luther (1483–1546)
Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)
René Descartes (1596–1650)
Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)
Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677)
John Locke (1632–1704)
Isaac Newton (1642–1727)
Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716)
Bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752)
David Hume (1711–1776)
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)
Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)
Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)
Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)
John Stuart Mill (1806–1873)
Harriet Taylor (1807–1858)
Charles Darwin (1809–1882)
Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)
Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)
Frederick Douglass (1817–1895)
Karl Marx (1818–1883)
William James (1842–1910)
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)
John Dewey (1859–1952)
Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)
Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)
Albert Einstein (1879–1955)
Paul Tillich (1886–1965)
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951)
Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)
Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000)
Karl Rahner (1904–1984)
Ayn Rand (1905–1982)
Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)
Nelson Goodman (1906–1998)

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986)
Albert Camus (1913–1960)
Benjamin Libet (1916–2007)
John Rawls (1921–2002)
Malcolm X (1925–1965)
Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968)
Sara Ruddick (1935–2011)
Robert Nozick (1938–2002)
Steve (Stephen Bantu) Biko (1946–1977)

*The abbreviation "fl." means "flourished." From the Latin *floruit*, "he (or she) flourished," indicating the central period of a person's career.



Raphael Sanzio, *The School of Athens,* fresco, detail 1509–1511.
Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Rome.
© Scala/Art Resource, New York.

# Introduction
## Doing Philosophy

*The unexamined life is not worth living.*
— Socrates, fifth century BCE

*Know thyself!*
— Oracle at Delphi (Socrates' motto)

Philosophy is all about our beliefs and attitudes about ourselves and the world. Doing philosophy, therefore, is first of all the activity of stating, as clearly and as convincingly as possible, what we believe and what we believe in. This does not mean, however, that announcing one's allegiance to some grand-sounding ideas or, perhaps, some impressive word or "ism" is all that there is to philosophy. Philosophy is the development of these ideas, the attempt to work them out with all their implications and complications. It is the attempt to see their connections and compare them with other people's views—including the classic statements of the great philosophers of the past. It is the effort to appreciate the differences between one's own views and others' views, to be able to argue with someone who disagrees and resolve the difficulties that they may throw in your path. One of our students once suggested that she found it easy to list her main ideas on a single sheet of paper; what she found difficult was showing how they related to one another and how she might defend them against someone who disagreed with her. In effect, what she was saying was something like this: she would really enjoy playing quarterback with the football team, as long as she didn't have to co-operate with the other players—and then only until the other team came onto the field. But playing football is cooperating with your team and running against the team that is out to stop you; philosophy is the attempt to coordinate a number of different ideas into a single viewpoint and defending what you believe against those who are out to **refute** you. Indeed, a belief that can't be tied in with a great many other beliefs and that can't withstand criticism may not be worth believing at all.

Socrates was one of the greatest philosophers of all times, though he never recorded his philosophy in writing. (All that we know of him comes down to us from his student Plato and other philosophers.) Socrates was born in approximately 469 or 470 BCE and lived his whole long life in Athens. He had a spectacular gift for rhetoric and debating. He had a much-gossiped-about marriage, had several children, and lived in poverty most of his life. He based his philosophy on the need to "know yourself" and on living the "examined life," even though the height of wisdom, according to Socrates, was to know how thoroughly ignorant we are. Much of his work was dedicated to defining and living the ideals of wisdom, justice, and the good life. In 399 BCE he was placed on trial by the Athenians for "corrupting the youth" with his ideas. He was condemned to death, refused all opportunities to escape or have his sentence repealed, and accepted the cruel and unfair verdict with complete dignity and several brilliant speeches, dying as well as living for the ideas he defended.

## Beyond Buzzwords

To defend your ideas is quite different from insisting, no matter how self-righteously, on the mere sound of a word. To say that you believe in freedom, for instance, may make you feel proud and righteous, but this has nothing to do with philosophy or, for that matter, with freedom, unless you are willing to spell out exactly what it is you stand for, what it is that you believe, and why it is that this *freedom,* as you call it, is so desirable. But most students, as well as many professional philosophers, get caught up in such attractive, admirable words, which we can call "buzzwords." These sound as if they refer to something quite specific and concrete (like the word *dog*), but in fact they are among the most difficult words to understand, and they provide us with the hardest problems in philosophy. *Freedom* sounds as if it means breaking out of prison or being able to speak one's mind against a bad government policy; but when we try to say what it is that ties these two examples together, and many more besides, it soon becomes clear that we don't know exactly what we're talking about. Indeed, virtually everyone believes in freedom, but the question is *what* it is that they believe in. Similarly, many people use such words as *truth, reality, morality, love,* and even *God* as buzzwords, words that make us feel good just because we say them. But to express the beliefs these words supposedly represent is to do something more than merely say the words; it is also to say what they mean and what it is in the world (or out of it) to which we are referring. Buzzwords are like badges; we use them to identify ourselves. But it is equally important to know what the badges stand for.

The words *science* and *art* are examples of buzzwords that seem to be ways of identifying ourselves. How many dubious suggestions and simpleminded

advertisements cash in on the respectability of the word *scientific*? What outrageous behavior is sometimes condoned on the grounds that it is *artistic*? And in politics, what actions have not been justified in the name of *national security* or *self-determination*? Such buzzwords not only block our understanding of the true nature of our behavior, but they also can be an obstacle—rather than an aid—in philosophy. Philosophers are always making up new words, often by way of making critical distinctions. For example, the words *subjective* and *objective,* once useful philosophical terms, now have so many meanings and are so commonly abused that the words by themselves hardly mean anything at all. Would-be philosophers, including some of the more verbally fluent philosophy students, may think that they are doing philosophy when they merely string together long noodle chains of such impressive terms. But philosophical terms are useful only insofar as they stay tied down to the problems they are introduced to solve, and they retain the carefully defined meanings they carry. Buzzwords become not aids for thinking but rather *substitutes* for thinking, and long noodle chains of such terms, despite their complexity, are intellectually without nutritional value.

The abuse of buzzwords explains the importance of that overused introductory philosophical demand, "Define your terms." In fact, it is very difficult to define your terms, and most of the time, the definition emerges at the *end* of the thought process rather than at the beginning. You think you know quite well what you mean. But when certain philosophical terms enter our discussion, it is clear why this incessant demand has always been so important; many students seem to think that they have learned some philosophy just because they have learned a new and impressive word or two. But that's like believing that you have learned how to ski just because you have tried on the boots. The truth, however, is to be found in what you go on to do with them.

## Articulation and Argument: Two Crucial Features of Philosophy

Philosophy is, first of all, **reflection**. It is stepping back, listening to yourself and other people (including the great philosophers), and trying to understand and evaluate what it is that you hear, and what it is that you believe. To formulate your own philosophy is to say what it is that you believe as clearly and as thoroughly as possible. Often we believe that we believe something, but as soon as we try to write it down or explain it to a friend we find that what seemed so clear a moment ago has disappeared, as if it evaporated just as we were about to express it. Sometimes, too, we think we don't have any particular views on a subject, but once we begin to discuss the topic with a friend it turns out that we have very definite views, as soon as they are articulated. Articulation—spelling out our ideas in words and sentences—is the primary process of philosophy. Sitting down to write out your ideas is an excellent way to articulate them, but most people find that an even better way, and sometimes far more relaxed and enjoyable, is simply to discuss these ideas with other people—classmates, good friends, family—or

even, on occasion, a stranger with whom you happen to strike up a conversation. Indeed, talking with another person not only forces you to be clear and concrete in your articulation of your beliefs; it allows you—or forces you—to engage in a second essential feature of doing philosophy: arguing for your views. Articulating your opinions still leaves open the question whether they are worth believing, whether they are well thought out and can stand up to criticism from someone who disagrees with you. Arguments serve the purpose of testing our views; they are to philosophy what practice games are to sports—ways of seeing just how well you are prepared, how skilled you are, and, in philosophy, just how convincing your views really are.

### Primary Features of Philosophy

**Articulation**: putting your ideas in clear, concise, readily understandable language.

**Argument**: supporting your ideas with reasons from other ideas, principles, and observations to establish your conclusions and overcome objections.

**Analysis**: understanding an idea by distinguishing and clarifying its various components. For example, the idea of "murder" involves three component ideas: killing, wrongfulness, and intention.

**Synthesis**: gathering together different ideas into a single, unified vision. For example, the Pythagorean notion of the "harmony of the spheres" synthesizes mathematics, music, physics, and astronomy.

Articulating and arguing your opinions has another familiar benefit: stating and defending a view is a way of making it your own. Too many students, in reading and studying philosophy, look at the various statements and arguments of the great philosophers as if they were merely displays in some intellectual museum, curiously contradicting each other, but, in any case, having no real relevance to us. But once you have adopted a viewpoint, which most likely was defended at some time by one or more of the philosophical geniuses of history, it becomes very much your own as well. Indeed, doing philosophy almost always includes appealing to other philosophers in support of your own views, borrowing their arguments and examples as well as quoting them when they have striking things to say (with proper credit in a footnote, of course). It is by *doing* philosophy, articulating and arguing your views, instead of just reading about other people's philosophy books, that you make your own views genuinely your own, that is, by working with them, stating them publicly, defending them, and committing yourself to them. That is how the philosophies of the past become important to us and how our own half-baked, inarticulate, often borrowed, and typically undigested ideas start to become something more. Philosophy, through reflection

and by means of articulation and argument, allows us to analyze and critically examine our ideas, and to synthesize our vision of ourselves and the world, to put the pieces together in a single, unified, defensible vision. Such a synthesis is the ultimate aim of philosophical reflection, and scattered ideas and arguments are no more philosophy than a handful of unconnected words is a poem.

### The Fields of Philosophy

For convenience and in order to break the subject up into course-size sections, philosophy is usually divided into a number of fields. Ultimately, these are all interwoven, and it is difficult to pursue a question in any one field without soon finding yourself in the others, too. Yet philosophers, like most other scholars, tend to specialize, and you, too, may find your main interests focused in one of the following areas:

**Metaphysics**: the theory of reality and the ultimate nature of all things. The aim of metaphysics is a comprehensive view of the universe, an overall worldview. One part of metaphysics is a field sometimes called **ontology**, the study of "being," an attempt to list in order of priority the various sorts of entities that make up the universe.

**Ethics**: the study of good and bad, right and wrong, the search for the **good life**, and the defense of the principles and rules of morality. It is therefore sometimes called **moral philosophy**, although this is but a single part of the broad field of ethics.

**Epistemology**: the study of knowledge, including such questions as "What can we know?" and "How do we know anything?" and "What is truth?"

**Logic** (or **philosophical logic**): the study of the formal structures of **sound** thinking and good argumentation.

**Philosophy of religion** (or **philosophical theology**): the philosophical study of religion, the nature of religion, the nature of the divine, and the various reasons for believing (or not believing) in God's existence.

**Political** (or **sociopolitical**) **philosophy**: the study of the foundations and the nature of society and the state; an attempt to formulate a vision of the ideal society and implement ideas and reforms in our own society to better achieve this.

**Aesthetics** (a subset of which is the **philosophy of art**): the study of the nature of art and the experiences we have when we enjoy the arts or take pleasure in nature, including an understanding of such concepts as "beauty" and "expression."

## Concepts and Conceptual Frameworks

The basic units of our philosophical projects and viewpoints are called **concepts**. Concepts give form to experience; they make articulation possible. But even before we try to articulate our views, concepts make it possible for us to recognize things in the world, to see and hear particular objects and particular people instead of one big blur of a world, like looking through a movie camera that is seriously out of focus. But in addition to defining the forms of our experience, concepts also tie our experience together. Concepts rarely occur in isolation; they virtually always tie together into a conceptual framework.

An example of a concept would be this: As children, we learn to identify certain creatures as dogs. We acquire the concept "dog." At first, we apply our new concept clumsily, calling a "dog" anything that has four legs, including cats, cows, and horses. Our parents correct us, however, and we learn to be more precise, distinguishing dogs first from cats, cows, and horses and then later from wolves, coyotes, and jackals. We then have the concept "dog"; we can recognize dogs; we can talk about dogs. We can think about and imagine dogs even when one is not actually around at the time, and we can say what we think about dogs in general. We can refine our concept, too, by learning to recognize the various breeds of dogs and learning to distinguish between dangerous dogs and friendly dogs. On certain occasions, therefore, the concept takes on an undeniably practical importance, for it is the concept that tells us how to act, when to run, and when to be friendly in turn. But the concept "dog" also becomes a part of our vision of the world—a world in which dogs are of some significance, a world divided into dogs and nondogs, a world in which we can contemplate, for example, the difference between a dog's life and our own. (One of the great movements in ancient philosophy was called **Cynicism** after the Greek word for "dog." The cynics acquired their name by living a life of austerity and poverty that, to their contemporaries, seemed little better than a "dog's life.")

Some concepts have very specific objects, like "dog." These specific concepts, derived from experience, are often called empirical concepts. We have already seen this word *empirical* referring to experience (for example, knowing the various breeds and behaviors of dogs). We will see it again and again; the root *empiri-* means having to do with experience. Through empirical concepts we make sense of the world, dividing it into recognizable pieces, learning how to deal with it, and developing our ability to talk about it, to understand and explain it, and to learn more and talk more about it. In addition to such specific concepts, we make use of a set of much more abstract concepts, whose objects are not so tangible or empirical and which cannot be so easily defined. These are *a priori* (Latin, "from the earlier") concepts, because they are conceptually *prior to* empirical concepts. One example is the concept of "number." However important numbers might be in our talk about our experience, the concepts of arithmetic are not empirical concepts. Mathematicians talk about the concept of an "irrational number," but there is nothing in our everyday experience that they can point to as an example of one. To understand this concept requires a good deal of knowledge about mathematics because this concept, like most concepts, can be defined only within a system of other abstract concepts.

### Types of Knowledge

**Empirical knowledge**: knowledge based on experience (whether your own experience or the observations and experiments of others), for example, "The temperature in Chicago today is 17°F."

**a priori knowledge**: knowledge that is independent of ("before") any particular experience, for example, "2 + 3 = 5" or "*A* + *B* = *B* + *A*."

The a priori concept of "number" raises problems far more difficult than the empirical concept of "dog," and it is with the most difficult concepts that philosophy is generally concerned. Because philosophical concepts are abstract, there may be far more room for disagreement about what they mean. For example, the concepts of a "good person" and the "good life" seem to mean very different things to different people and in different societies. So, too, the concept of "God" creates enormous difficulties, in fact so many difficulties that some religions refuse to define God at all, or even give him (and not always "him") a name. Within the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, there are very different conceptions of God, even within the Bible. When we begin to consider some of the other conceptions of God—for example, the Greek conception of Zeus and Apollo; the Hindu ideas of Vishnu and Shiva; or some modern conceptions of God as identical to the universe as a whole, or as a vital force, or as whatever a person takes to be his or her "ultimate concern in life"—you can see that simply agreeing on the word still leaves open the hardest questions: What is God like? What can we expect of God? What is involved in believing "in" God? What is our concept of God?

### Oxen Gods?

*The Ethiopians make their gods black-skinned and snub-nosed; the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and red hair. If oxen and horses had hands and could draw and make works of art as men do, then horses would draw their gods to look like horses, and oxen like oxen—each would make their bodies in the image of their own.*

— Xenophanes, circa 570–circa 475 BCE, Greek Asia Minor

The concept of "freedom" is particularly difficult. Some people think that freedom is being able to do whatever you want to do; others think that freedom makes sense only within the rules of your society. But it is not as if the word *freedom* already means one or the other; the word and its meaning are open to interpretation, and interpretation is the business of philosophy. This is not to say,