

CHAPTER 1

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

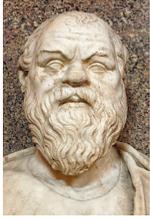
After successfully completing this chapter, you will be able to

- ▶ Describe various caricatures associated with philosophers
- ▶ Provide a general profile of the Western philosopher
- ▶ Define 'wisdom'
- ▶ Appreciate the practical value of philosophy
- ▶ Point to the therapeutic applications of philosophy
- ▶ Show how philosophy is relevant in a technological age
- ▶ Outline the internal boundaries of Western philosophy
- ▶ Describe some non-Western and spiritual approaches to philosophy
- ▶ List the historical periods of philosophy

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What thoughts come to mind when the subject of philosophy is raised? What images are evoked?
2. What do philosophers try to be like? What do they do?
3. What is meant by 'wisdom'? What good is it?
4. What practical value could philosophy possibly have? How is it relevant for us in the twenty-first century?
5. What constitutes the discipline of philosophy? What are its sub-disciplines?

Take It Personally



*“The unexamined life
is not worth living.”*
SOCRATES

As someone who has already experienced the joys of philosophy for many years, I’m excited about what’s in store for you as we embark together on our travels into the philosophical domain. This journey into the realm of philosophy promises to be one of the most rewarding explorations you will ever undertake. Although the philosophical landscape can sometimes be slippery and difficult to navigate, previous climbs to the tops of metaphysical mountain peaks reveal breathtaking horizons stretching across alternative realities and differing conceptions of the universe.

Our philosophical quest will be no trivial pursuit, but one of significant import. In fact, philosophy may turn out to be *the* most relevant, practical, and important course you will ever take in your lifetime! The questions and issues raised in this book will not disappear with fad and fashion. They will not become dated or obsolete like last year’s Internet meme. The philosopher’s tune is not like the musician’s one-hit wonder. Philosophy’s soothing and sometimes haunting eternal themes have echoed for centuries and will continue to play in our minds throughout our lives—quietly in good times, but with startling bombast in situations of calamity and disappointment.

We are embarking here on a very important task, my fellow journeyer, one that takes us down many difficult but previously traveled roads. Proceed with caution, then, respecting the twists and turns ahead. Your safe journey to philosophical enlightenment depends upon it. St. Teresa of Avila, a Christian mystical writer, prepares us for our journey to enlightenment, or what she calls heaven, with the following words:

Do not be frightened, [sons and] daughters, by the many things you need to consider in order to begin this divine journey which is the royal road to heaven. A great treasure is gained by traveling this road; no wonder we have to pay what seems to us a high price. The time will come when you will understand how trifling everything is next to so precious a reward.

To those who want to journey on this road and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from this water of life, I say that how they are to begin is very important—in fact, all important. They must have a great and very resolute determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don’t have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses.¹

Finding the “resolute determination to persevere” that St. Teresa talks about may not be easy, especially given the misguided preconceptions many people have regarding philosophy and those who engage in its practice. I suppose that as a philosopher, I could try to prove to you, using reason and logic alone, that philosophy does matter and that it should be important to you, whether you believe it or not. Because I have tried this strategy before—not surprisingly with something less than perfect success—I appreciate how opting for this approach is analogous to trying to get people to believe in a creator-God by simply offering them logical proofs for God’s existence. Anyone with deep religious convictions probably already knows that faith goes far beyond mere rational assent. Some might even argue that a genuine belief in God requires a personal encounter with the

Divine at some existential, heart-felt level, perhaps in a conversion experience. In this case, the experience of God serves as the proof.

In the same vein, let me suggest that an appreciation of the value of philosophy and its practical relevance to you will gradually unfold as we proceed through this text. I'll let your experience of philosophy be the judge of its ultimate worth, asking only that you not make up your mind in advance before sampling the many tasty philosophical delicacies that will be offered to you for your intellectual consumption along the way. The proof that philosophy is worthwhile will be in the philosophical food for thought you'll be invited to sample. I'm confident that you'll enjoy philosophy, for so much of it relates directly to your experience of everyday life.

To illustrate this point, let me ask this: Have you ever wondered what you should do with your life or what sort of person you should strive to become? If so, then you may find some helpful direction in Chapter 3, where we cover different philosophies of life. You may also find guidance in Chapter 5, dealing with ethics, where character and virtue are discussed.

Further, do people who dress or act like everyone else bother you for some unknown reason? You might find some deep insights on this matter in sections of the book dealing with Marxist alienation and Nietzsche's slave morality. How about your annoyance when it comes to all the fighting you witness on television talk shows? Is it bothersome that people just seem to be filibustering or screaming their opinions at each other without really listening and without actually putting forward any reasoned arguments in a legitimate debate? Well then, have a look at Chapter 2, where you learn to distinguish between unfounded opinions and valid arguments, and discover what's better about the latter. You needn't be one of the screaming opinionators. Learn how to put your own proper arguments together, displaying if not the wisdom of Socrates, then at least his humility.

And what about an afterlife? Is this all there is, or is there another reality beyond the material realm of sensory experience? Check out Plato in the metaphysics chapter, for example, to discover what he says about the spaceless, timeless realm of forms. Further, does God exist? Read about St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas, who provide what they take to be proofs that there is indeed a God. You might also wish to consider those proofs in light of what atheistic philosophers say. Maybe religion is just an "opium of the people," as Karl Marx charges, or perhaps God is nothing more than a psychological invention of fearful and neurotic individuals? You'll get the opportunity to think about such things later in the text.

Lastly, are you completely convinced that socialism is bad, that American capitalist democracy is unconditionally good, or that economic globalization should be encouraged or discouraged? Are there moral consequences at stake? Is it possible that human rights are being violated? If so, then what constitutes a violation of rights? What is justice? What is the individual's proper relation to the state? You can read more about rights and justice in the final chapter on political philosophy to find out. In the process, you can become a more intelligent, critically-minded rational citizen.

The point, as you can plainly see by the questions just raised, is that philosophical concerns are an inextricable part of life. You can make vain efforts to ignore them in your daily living, but in the end they cannot be escaped. It's highly unfortunate, therefore, that so much confusion surrounds the nature and purpose of philosophy. If we properly understood philosophy and used it to our advantage, much in life could be improved.



KNOW THYSELF

My Preconceptions about Philosophy

AIM

The purpose of this self-diagnostic is to help you develop an awareness of your preconceptions about philosophy. Just as attitudes like anger or suspicion can interfere with productive dialogue, so too can uncritically accepted misunderstandings of philosophy interfere with proper learning and application. In order to be fully open to

the experience of philosophy, any prejudgments about it should first be exposed and then critically examined.

INSTRUCTIONS

Below are ten statements pertaining to philosophy. Indicate which are true (T) and which are false (F).

1. T F The vast majority of philosophers today are hermits and monks, either living in monasteries, caves, deserts, or mountainside retreats.
2. T F If you are a philosopher, you must be an atheist, since reason necessarily contradicts faith.
3. T F Philosophy is essentially useless and outdated, serving no practical purpose.
4. T F Most philosophers are either unemployed, driving cabs, or working in the gig economy.
5. T F Few women study or teach philosophy today.
6. T F In order to be a philosopher, you must have a beard, smoke a pipe, and wear elbow patches on your jacket.
7. T F Philosophers are rarely grounded in reality; usually living impractical lives with their heads in the clouds.
8. T F Philosophers are a dysfunctional bunch because they are hypercritical and like to argue about everything.
9. T F Philosophers, by profession, are always wise individuals.
10. T F Practically speaking, the study of philosophy will most likely get you nowhere.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

All of the preceding statements about philosophy and philosophers are *false*. To the extent you agreed with any of them, you may have fallen prey to some popular, uncritically held misconceptions of who philosophers are, what philosophers do and what philosophy is all

about. Not to fear, however, for the rest of this chapter will dispel any of your misguided preconceptions and help you to gain a clearer, more accurate understanding of philosophers and philosophical inquiry.

Before we proceed any further, you are invited to complete the preceding *Know Thyself* diagnostic. It will enable you to get a preliminary indication of how accurate or inaccurate your current understanding of philosophy is. In case you have developed any distorted views, the sections that follow the self-diagnostic should help to clarify the true nature and purpose of philosophy, its history, sub-disciplines, and approaches, as well as its personal and practical relevance. Let the experience of philosophy begin!

1.1 What Is a Philosopher?

Philosophy and Philosophers: Caricatures, Myths, and Realities

For first-time travelers into the philosophical domain, directions can be found by turning to the wisdom of the philosophical immortals, those whose ideas have stood the test of time and whose rational reflections have changed our conceptions of reality, human nature, truth, beauty, and goodness. Don't be discouraged by the anti-intellectual crowd or by defensive individuals fearful of embarking on the philosophical journey. They have opted for ignorance over illumination and have tended to trivialize the pursuit of wisdom by stereotyping and caricaturing those most actively engaged in it.

These caricatures and stereotypes portraying the philosopher's weird irrelevance are often amusingly perpetuated in popular culture by cartoonists, comedians, and Hollywood moviemakers. For instance, the term *philosopher* has come to evoke, in many minds, the stereotypic image of a bearded old man, a detached hermit who wanders the desert wilderness or dwells in a mountainside cave. Perhaps the term *philosopher* conjures up a mental picture of someone who works in an ivory tower, occupying a comfortable wingback chair in an oak-walled den or library. Of course, pipe in mouth and book in hand are mandatory, along with a distant pensive gaze. Still another image may be that of a sandaled and toga-clad ancient Greek making a nuisance of himself by asking unquestioned authorities unanswerable questions.

In spite of the stereotypes you may apply to **philosophers**, as revealed if you marked any of the statements above as T, you can rest assured that philosophers are not necessarily male, aged, toga-clad, or bearded. Their dwelling place is probably not a cave or desert, but a neighborhood apartment or house. Although lots of professional philosophers do, in fact, make a living today teaching at colleges and universities, many more lay-philosophers discuss philosophical issues at informal places such as pubs, parties, and family gatherings; still some others tend to be the quiet type who privately write down their ideas in journals and read books on their own.

In short, philosopher types are unpredictable. They are varied in appearance and may show up almost anywhere. For all you know, the student sitting next to you in class may, in fact, be a *philosopher-in-waiting* ready to come out at the first invitation. So, to all of you philosophers, I extend your long-awaited invitation to embark on the philosophical quest together. Let's all join in our efforts as we face the amazing adventure that awaits us!



THINKING ABOUT YOUR THINKING

Do you think of yourself as a philosopher? Why or why not? While answering these questions, consider what idea of a philosopher you have in mind. Describe the qualities and characteristics that belong to that idea. Where did your idea of a philosopher come from?

The Philosopher's Profile

If it's erroneous to see philosophers as hermits, cave dwellers, or toga-clad renegades, then we're still left wondering who or what a philosopher is. Throughout this book, we will examine a variety of different philosophies, and I will introduce you to different noteworthy philosophers who support them. For the moment, however, let me give you a rough sketch of the Western philosopher's psychological profile.



“I have said that the love of study is the passion most necessary to our happiness. It is an unfailing resource against misfortunes, it is an inexhaustible source of pleasure.”

ÉMILIE DU CHÂTELET

Our first clue about the philosopher's identity comes from the origins of the word **philosophy** itself. Etymologically, the word ‘philosophy’ derives from the Greek words ‘*philos*’, meaning love, and ‘*sophia*’, meaning the exercise of one's intelligence in practical affairs. However, as historian-philosopher John Passmore explains, most English-speaking philosophers have chosen to translate *sophia* more narrowly as wisdom.² Consequently, we often speak of philosophy as the love of wisdom and philosophers as *lovers of wisdom*. But having said this, we still don't know what the typical philosopher is like as a person or what the ideal philosopher should be like.

Recognizing that philosophers are not clones of one another and that they express a variety of styles and orientations, permit me, nonetheless, at the risk of making my own gross generalizations, to describe them in the following fashion. I believe many philosophers, but certainly not all, would accept my depiction of them. To begin with, professionally trained philosophers aspire to be **reasonable** individuals. In fact, reason is the primary tool used in conducting their work. It is their *modus operandi* or way of operating. I'm not suggesting that all philosophers can be described as rationalists or that reason is necessarily given primacy of place for all of them—only that philosophers tend to take a rational approach to life and human inquiry.

By using this rational approach, philosophers seek to make sense of themselves, others, and the world. Using reason, they aim to arrive at clear understandings of things by reducing vagueness and ambiguity as much as possible. If philosophers didn't, or couldn't, make sense to each other—that is, if their use of language were so imprecise and their reasoning so scattered that nobody could figure out what they were saying—then philosophical discourse would be impossible. Even “non-rational” existentialist philosophers (see Chapter 3) and feminist critics of rational morality (see Chapter 5) must still use language and rational thought to express their objections to the supremacy of pure rationality. Paradoxically, then, reason must be used to criticize its own applications.

The remarks just made point to the critical function of philosophers. Philosophers, as a group, tend to be **critically minded**. They choose to adopt a questioning attitude toward most things, accepting little on authority or blind faith. Philosophers are typically curious, frequently asking “Why?” and demanding *rational justifications* for the positions people take on issues and for the actions they perform. The ancient philosopher Socrates asked many questions and called himself a “gadfly”³—literally a kind of fly that attacks cattle, but figuratively a person who irritates everybody with annoying questions and criticisms.

Good philosophers who are also good people try to minimize the irritation, and although most philosophers are not as irritating as Socrates, they do bug us sometimes, due to a kind of positive addiction manifested as an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and understanding. Their questions just never seem to end. Don't get me wrong; the critical mindedness of philosophers is not intended to be unproductively confrontational or dangerously subversive, but rather to reflect caution and a desire for clarity and precision in thought.

Unlike people who are critical simply for the sake of opposition, philosophers are critical with a legitimate purpose. They do not want unfounded assumptions to go unchallenged. They do not want unsubstantiated or unverified factual claims to pass notice; nor do they wish illogical conclusions to follow from invalid reasoning. Philosophers are not only lovers of wisdom but also **seekers of truth**.

As seekers of truth, philosophers make efforts to be *open-minded*. They are prepared to entertain propositions that, at first glance, may seem disturbing, counter-intuitive, or wrong. Philosophers also raise basic questions about reality, truth, beauty, and goodness. Is the material world all there is? Does beauty exist in things themselves, or does it exist only in the eye of the beholder? Are morality and knowledge merely matters of opinion, or can the truth or falsity of moral and factual beliefs be objectively determined?

Philosophers are willing to inquire into what many of us might accept unreflectively as *self-evident* truths. For instance, you might loudly declare your firm conviction in a classroom debate that all human beings are created equal. But how do you know this for sure? Did a supreme being create humans and then bestow equality upon them, or have they evolved according to evolutionary laws of nature?; and if they evolved, then how does that make them equal? If, as equals, we all have the same rights, then what is a right? Do we share all rights or only basic rights? What then is a basic right? Which rights do we not share? Do some of us have rights that others don't? Can rights be taken away once they are given to us? Are rights earned, or are they somehow inherent in our being? How big or broad is a right? Is it ever justifiable to violate somebody's rights? Why or why not?

As you can tell from this line of questioning, philosophers don't take things for granted just because they make us feel good, because the majority holds a particular point of view, or because common sense dictates. Philosophers are like intellectual miners, digging deeply beneath the surface of life to find diamonds of truth that must be polished by the friction of argument and analysis before they can radiate their true brilliance.

A number of attitude adjustments necessary to conduct proper philosophical argument and debate are discussed in the next chapter on logic and philosophical method, but for now, suffice it to say that philosophers like to probe, analyze, reflect, consider alternatives, question authority, display healthy skepticism and doubt, while at the same time remaining objective, impartial, respectful of others, and cognizant of differing and divergent points of view. Certainly, the ideal Western rational philosopher can be described as detached and unbiased, someone who suspends judgment before all the philosophical facts are in, so to speak. As we travel along on our philosophical journey, you will get to know many different philosophers, as well as their ideas and methods, a little better, and you should begin to develop an appreciation of philosophers that is more elaborate than the thumb-nail sketch I have provided you here.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz⁴

Nun, poet, playwright, and defender of the humanities, **Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz** (1648–1695) is not standardly mentioned in philosophical circles. Perhaps that is because she does not fit the caricature of a philosopher! Arguably, however, her commitment to living a life of intellectual curiosity, thought, and expression makes her the portrait of a true philosopher.

Born in a small town near Mexico City, Juana showed signs of a great intellect from a very early age. Denied a formal education, she was largely self-taught from the books that she had access to in her grandfather's library. Although she later lamented the absence of teachers or fellow students in her youth, the intellectual independence and self-reliance that she cultivated as a child served her well.

When young Juana was sent to live with relatives in Mexico City, word of her intellectual talents spread, and by the time she was a teenager, she was welcomed into the court of the viceroy of New Spain and his wife. So impressed by her intelligence and learnedness, the viceroy arranged a formal debate between Juana and various theologians, biblical scholars, philosophers, mathematicians, historians, poets, and other intellectuals. In a brilliant and legendary performance, she answered their questions and replied to their arguments with ease.

At age 19, Juana left the court for the convent, becoming Sor (Sister) Juana. Given the options available to her, it was a decision based on faith as much as her repugnance of marriage and desire to pursue her studies. She had a comfortable life in the Convent of Santa Paula of the Order of San Jerónimo with private living quarters and her own library of books and collection scientific instruments. She spent time reading, studying, and writing, becoming an acclaimed and well-known



author of poetry and plays, which, despite her being a nun, were on secular topics.

Even though she lived as a cloistered nun, Sor Juana's life was far from limited to the convent. She kept active correspondence with intellectuals in Spain and Spanish America and hosted conversational gatherings with the political and intellectual elite of Mexico City. In one of those gatherings, Sor Juana gave an oral critique of a 40-year-old sermon by a famous Portuguese Jesuit preacher. Afterwards, she received a request for a written copy of her speech. She obliged and, without

her permission, her critique was published along with an admonishing letter addressed to Sor Juana and signed by Sor Filotea de la Cruz. The letter praised Sor Juana's intellectual talents but reprimanded her choice of secular, rather than sacred, subjects of study. The concern was not exactly that she was a woman engaging in intellectual activity but that the subject of her activity might make her less obedient and subordinate.

In truth, "Sor Filotea" was a pseudonym for the Bishop of Puebla, an occasional participant in the gatherings of intellectuals that Sor Juana hosted. In response, Sor Juana wrote a lengthy letter that begins with great deference to "Sor Filotea" but gives way to a spirited defense of an educated and examined life for women and, indeed, for anyone who seeks to understand the world. Challenging the view that philosophy is an exclusive activity reserved for only some, she offers this quotation from a poet: "one can philosophize very well and prepare supper."⁵

Eventually, under pressure and punishment, Sor Juana repented and renounced her intellectual pursuit of worldly knowledge. She spent the last two years of her life in complete silence.