CHAPTER 1

What Is Philosophy?

1. Philosophy Is Everywhere

Many people think that philosophy is an esoteric subject. Admittedly, professional philosophers in universities do sometimes devote themselves to abstruse questions. We have colleagues who've devoted many years to figuring out exactly how "a" and "the" differ in meaning, and we have friends who stay up late at night discussing whether God could change the laws of logic.

But, in fact, philosophical questions often come up in everyday life. Think about the familiar question of whether it is okay to buy and eat meat. This is a philosophical question, and it quickly leads to others. As we'll see in chapter 15, some vegetarians argue that you should not buy meat because it is wrong to inflict pain on animals. Meat eaters might reply that it is okay to buy meat from humane farms or that it is okay to buy the meat of animals incapable of experiencing pain—oysters, for example.

Let's think about that last claim for a moment. How can we tell whether oysters experience pain? You might think that we can figure out whether oysters experience pain by investigating their nervous systems. But to do this, we'd have to understand the relation between conscious mental states (such as pain) and the nervous system—and this is a notoriously difficult philosophical problem. We'll discuss the topic in chapter 10.

Some Christians argue that it is okay to eat meat on the basis of certain passages from the book of Genesis, including this one:

> God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the Earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything."[1]

Of course, this argument won't convince vegetarians who aren't Jewish or Christian, and even some Jews and Christians question this approach to scripture.

In a few minutes of conversation, we've already come across some deep and important philosophical questions:

- Is it okay to eat meat?
- How is consciousness related to the nervous system?
- Does God exist?
- Is the Bible a good source of information about God's wishes?

These are not esoteric questions. You may not think about such questions every day, but everyone has to confront philosophical questions from time to time.

2. What Is a Philosophical Question?

It might strike you that the list of philosophical questions we present have little in common. Why are all these classified as *philosophical* questions? What *is* a philosophical question?

According to a popular story, when G. E. Moore (a prominent British philosopher of the early twentieth century) was asked what philosophy is, he simply pointed to his bookshelf and said that philosophy is "what all these books are about." We sympathize: it is far from easy to say what all the different philosophical questions have in common. But we will try to give you a more informative answer than Moore.

Part of the answer, we think, is that much of philosophy concerns "normative" questions—that is, questions about right and wrong, good and bad. This includes questions about how we should live ("Is it okay to eat meat?"), what constitutes good reasoning ("What are the limitations of the scientific method?"), and how society should be structured ("Should it be compulsory to vote?").

A list of philosophical questions

- Is it possible to travel backward in time?
- Is it good to be patriotic? What are the differences, if any, between patriotism and nationalism?
- Why does God permit so much suffering?
- What is the difference between *knowledge* and opinion?
- What is the scientific method? Can we use the scientific method in ethics?
- Could a digital computer have consciousness?
- God is sometimes said to be "all powerful." But what does that mean?
- How can we distinguish true experts from charlatans?
- Do you have a nonphysical soul, which will persist after your death?
- Do you have free will?
- What is art?
- When, if ever, is it okay to lie?
- Can we know anything for certain?
- In social science, to what extent should we assume that people make choices rationally?
- What limits are there, if any, to the right to free speech?
- Is it good to have faith? If so, what is faith?
- Who should be allowed to vote in elections?
- What are numbers?

Another part of the answer is that philosophers spend a lot of time questioning our most basic assumptions. For example, it is a central principle of Christian thought that God exists and that the Bible is a good source of information about him. Philosophers question these assumptions.

This last choice of example is perhaps misleading because it might suggest that philosophy is an antireligious activity. In fact, it is not only religious assumptions that are challenged by philosophers. Philosophers also scrutinize the basic assumptions of science, politics, art . . . everything. Which may explain why philosophy has sometimes been regarded as a subversive activity. Indeed, the ancient Greek thinker Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), who is sometimes regarded as the founder of the Western philosophical tradition, was condemned to death for "corrupting the youth." In a Socratic spirit, we hope that this book will corrupt you.

3. The Philosophical Method

Philosophers attempt to state their views *clearly* and *precisely*, and they give explicit *arguments* for their claims.

We should explain what we mean when we say that philosophers attempt to state their views clearly and precisely. In 1948, philosophers Frederick Coppleston and Bertrand Russell debated the existence of God. Their discussion began like this:

> COPPLESTON: As we are going to discuss the existence of God, it might perhaps be as well to come to some provisional agreement as to what we understand by the term "God." I presume that we mean a supreme personal Being—distinct from the world and Creator of the world. Would you agree—provisionally at least—to accept this statement as the meaning of the term "God"?
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> RUSSELL: Yes, I accept this definition.
>
> COPPLESTON: Well, my position is the affirmative position that such a Being actually exists, and that His existence can be proved philosophically. Perhaps you would tell me if your position is that of agnosticism or of atheism. I mean, would you say that the non-existence of God can be proved?
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> RUSSELL: No, I should not say that: my position is agnostic.[2]

Notice that the two philosophers aren't content just to say that Coppleston believes God exists while Russell doesn't. They articulate their disagreement more precisely than that. They agree on what they mean by "God," and they clarify that Coppleston believes God's existence "can be proved philosophically," while Russell's position is agnostic—that is, Russell doesn't believe God exists, but he doesn't think that God's nonexistence can be proven.[3] What do we mean when we say that philosophers attempt to give explicit arguments for their claims? We will talk about arguments and how to evaluate them in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that philosophers don't like to defend their views merely by appeal to authority or tradition. As we've said, one of the goals of philosophy is to scrutinize received wisdoms; it defeats the point of the exercise to assume that the existing authorities have figured it all out already.

This is not to say that appeals to authority are always fallacious. On the contrary, it is often perfectly appropriate to gather information from experts. Our point is that, in a philosophical context, our goal is to present arguments for our views without simply leaning upon existing authorities.

For example, suppose that you're thinking about how the state should be structured. You might find it helpful to read through classics like *The Federalist Papers*; however, in philosophical work you're expected to present arguments for your claims, and "Hamilton said so" or "Madison said so" won't cut it.

It is perhaps for this reason that philosophers don't usually get involved in the interpretation of sacred texts. This is part of what separates philosophy from theology and religious studies.

4. Philosophy and Science

It is sometimes suggested that philosophy is not needed anymore, because science has taken over. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow don't mince their words:

> How does the universe behave? What is the nature of reality? Where did all this come from? Did the universe need a creator? . . . Traditionally these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.[4]

Hawking and Mlodinow are right about one thing: it is important when thinking about philosophical questions to keep up-to-date with relevant work in the sciences. It would be a big mistake, for example, to write about which animals can experience pain without drawing upon the work of psychologists, zoologists, neuroscientists, and so on. But it won't surprise you to learn that we reject Hawking's claim that philosophy is dead. Our reason is simple: there are many philosophical questions currently unaddressed in the scientific literature. No matter how much time you spend reading zoology and neuroscience journals, you won't find an answer to the question of whether it's morally okay to eat fish. Psychology and computer science journals won't tell you whether it's possible for a digital computer to be conscious. Psychology journals contain important discoveries about human decision-making, but the question of whether we have free will is left unanswered.

In saying this, we don't mean to imply that philosophical questions can't ultimately be answered using scientific methods. Many philosophers have made it their goal to find ways of applying scientific methods in new domains, and we applaud these efforts. All we're saying is that there are many philosophical questions which are *currently* outside the scope of the sciences as they are usually delimited.

5. Why Bother?

Students in their first philosophy class (especially those for whom the class is compulsory!) often ask why they should bother with philosophy. Our answer is that philosophy is inevitable. We all have to think about how to live, and so we are forced to think about normative questions at one time or another. What's more, we now live in pluralist societies; that is, we live with people whose worldviews differ greatly from our own. When we meet such people and try to understand our differences, we are forced to discuss our basic assumptions—and this is philosophy.

So even though philosophical questions don't come up every day, we're all forced to confront them sometimes. We hope this book helps you to think about philosophical questions and to reach your own conclusions.

And even if you *aren't* able to reach your own conclusions, we think you can benefit from the time spent thinking the issues through. In such cases, philosophy shows you something important about the limitations of your knowledge. What's more, even if you can't find the right answer to a philosophical question, you may still be able to achieve a deeper understanding of other people's views about the topic. And the better we understand each other's views, the better we understand each other.

Discussion Question

1. Look at the list of philosophical questions with a friend. Do the two of you disagree about the answer to a question? If you find a disagreement, can you articulate it precisely? Then, how well can you give an argument supporting your view?

Notes

1. Gen. 9:1–3 (NRSV).
2. You may be able to find parts of this discussion online. For a full transcript, look in Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 125–152.
3. Russell and Coppleston could perhaps have been still more precise about their disagreement. Their claim that God is "supreme" is, we think, slightly obscure. We suspect that when Coppleston says that God is "supreme," he meant that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly morally good—but it's hard to be completely sure.
4. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 1.