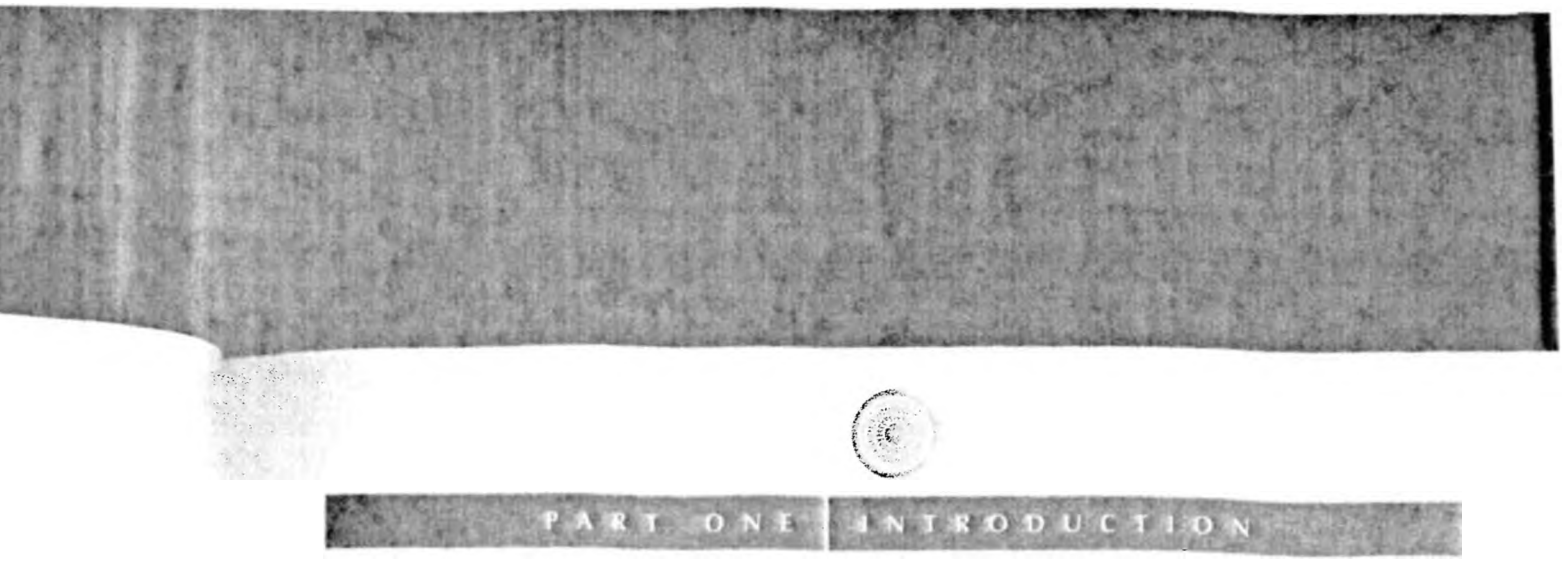

CHAPTER ONE

What Is Philosophy?

... those who are eager to learn because they wonder at things arc lovers of wisdom (philosophai).

ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter students should be able to:

- explain as clearly as possible their understanding of what philosophy is,
- name and distinguish the major branches of philosophy,
- define fbundationalism, constructivism, and state the differences,
- distinguish cognitive from moral relativism,
- distinguish ethnocentrism from ethnocentric imperialism,
- distinguish reading analytically from reading critically,
- identify Pythagoras, Sophists, Socrates, and Russell, and
- answer all the questions relating to the selections.

1.1 A DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY

Have you ever wondered about the purpose of life? Have you ever been curious about what you can reasonably believe? Have you ever marveled at the beauty of nature or been upset by suffering? Have you ever thought that life is unfair? Have you ever been puzzled about what you ought to do?

Perhaps you associate these kinds of questions with philosophy. If you do, why do you? What do you think is philosophical about these questions? When you hear the word *philosophy,* what do you think it means? Think about it awhile and write your answer.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 bc.e), who asserted that philosophy begins in wonder, was impressed by the ability of human beings to think. In fact, he defined humans as "rational animals.'' Aristotle maintained that philosophy arises from the human ability to reflect on experience, to wonder and be curious about what happens to us and to others.

Of course, wonder is not the sole cause of philosophizing. Sufficient leisure must be available to engage in reflection, and hence economic and cultural factors play an important role in promoting and influencing human curiosity. However, without the human capacity to wonder and be curious, it is doubtful that philosophical thinking would occur.

I hope this book will stimulate your natural ability to wonder, teach you something of the art of wondering, and help you learn how to live in wonder. Cultivating the art of wondering is important, Aristotle believed, because such an art leads us along the path toward wisdom.

The word *philosophy* comes from a combination of two Greek words—*philos,* meaning "loving," and *sophia,* meaning "wisdom." Etymologically, philosophy means the love of wisdom. To love something is to desire it. So, for many Greeks, die philosopher was the one who desired wisdom. The word *philos* also refers, for the Greeks, to the special kind of love found in close friendship. Hence the philosopher could also be characterized as the "friend of wisdom."

The historical origin of a word, however, often does not help us very much when we are searching for an adequate definition today. The meanings of words change. Also, meanings derived etymologically are sometimes unclear. If the philosopher is the lover or friend of wisdom, then what is wisdom? About that, philosophers—-even Greek philosophers—disagree.

Philosophy in Western culture was bom in the sixth century bce among a group of thinkers called the Pre-Socratics. According to tradition, one of these thinkers, Pythagoras (about 570 bce), coined the word *philosophy.* Along with other Pre-Socratics, he was intensely interested in nature, in knowing how the universe or cosmic order developed, and in figuring out what things were made of. These thinkers disagreed about the stuff out of which things are made (some said earth, some .fir, others fire, still others water or some combination of these elements), but many of them did think that wisdom consisted of knowledge about nature. To love wisdom, as far as they were concerned, was to search for knowledge about the universe.

A century later, another group of thinkers in Athens offered their services as teachers to those who could afford them. They claimed to teach virtue. The Greek word for virtue *(arete)* means "excellence or power." So to possess virtue is to possess power. Wisdom, they taught, is the possession of virtue. It is to have certain powers or abilities, especially in the social and political realm, to influence people and be successful. Since these teachers claimed to possess this wisdom, they came to be called "Sophists" or "The Wise Ones." For them, philosophy is not a search for knowledge about the universe, nor a *search* for wisdom. Rather, philosophy is the *possession* of wisdom and hence the possession of virtue or excellence, especially in the social and political dimensions of life.

Socrates (470-399 bce) lived in Athens at the same time as the Sophists. He spent his days wandering around the marketplace, asking people questions about all kinds of things. He found himself perplexed by things other people claimed to know. For example, people claimed to know what knowledge, justice, virtue, and the right way to live are. The Sophists claimed to teach these things. However, under Socrates' relentless critical questioning, the definitions and grand theories that people held about these sorts of things collapsed.

The oracle at Delphi, a well-respected source of divine truth in the ancient world, said that Socrates was the wisest man in Athens. When word of this got to

Socrates, he was greatly puzzled. How could he, who knew next to nothing and spent his days asking others, be the wisest? What about the Sophists, the teachers of wisdom? Were not they the wisest? Socrates did believe he knew what virtue is; it is knowledge. But what is knowledge? He had to confess he did not know, so how could he be wise? And yet, he reasoned, the oracle of Delphi could not be lying. It was, after all, the voice of the god Apollo. But the oracle was tricky. You had to figure out what it meant.

Finally, Socrates understood. Wisdom, the oracle was telling him, is knowing that he did not know! Wisdom is the awareness of our ignorance, an awareness of the limitations of knowledge. Let the Sophists claim to be wise; the best Socrates could do was to claim he was a lover of wisdom. He lived his life in the pursuit of wisdom, as lovers live their lives in pursuit of the beloved". For him, philosophy was a critical examination of our pretensions to knowledge and the constant search for that final truth that always seems to be just beyond our grasp.

The Greeks were not the only ones to philosophize, for the pursuit of wisdom is common to all cultures. The Greeks were also not the only ones to disagree about the nature of wisdom. For example, in India some philosophers claimed that wisdom is coming to know one's true self as immortal. Yajnavalkya,[*1] a wise man described in early Indian literature called the *Upanishads,* tells his wife Maitreyi that wealth will not gain one immortality; only the true self or *atman,* as he called it, is immortal. However, other Indian philosophers disagreed. Wisdom, they said, did not consist in the knowledge of a true immortal self or *atman.* Quite the opposite is the case. Genuine wisdom consists in knowing that there is no such thing as an eternal self or *atman.*

Clearly there are different understandings of what wisdom is and hence there are different understandings of what philosophy is about. No single definition can possibly capture all the nuances of the art of wondering in every place and time in which it appears. This does not mean, however, that we can define philosophy any way we wish, and it does not mean that some definitions are not better than others. Let me offer my definition, which, I think, states something important about philosophizing and helps us distinguish it from other types of thinking: *Philosophy is the rational attempt to formulate, understand, and answer fundamental questions.*

Many people think that philosophy is a body of doctrines and that philosophers are people who have answers to difficult questions about the meaning of life. My definition stresses that (1) philosophy is an activity rather than a body of set teachings and (2) philosophers are as concerned with formulating and understanding questions as they are with finding answers.

Formulating questions is very important. What we ask and how we ask it determine, in large part, where we look for answers and the kinds of answers we get. Progress in many fields consists, in part, of an ever-greater refinement of our questions and more precision and sophistication in our methods of interrogation. You will not get good answers if you do not ask the right questions.

For example, the title of this chapter is ᵘWhat Is Philosophy?" and at the beginning of the chapter I asked you to think about the meaning of the word philosophy and to write your answer. Review your answer. Now think about the question,

'For a pronunciation guide for Sanskrit, Chinese, and Arabic words see Appendix II. To facilitate reading, I have left out diacritical marks that indicate sounds in other languages that are not normally part of English.

"What is it to philosophize?" If I had formulated the question about your understanding of philosophy as a question about what it is to philosophize and asked you to answer it, would your answer have been any different? If so, how would it have been different?

Understanding what we are after when we ask questions is as important as formulating questions. Words are often ambiguous and vague; we must be as clear as possible about what they mean. If I ask, "What is the meaning of life?" what do I mean? What am I looking for? Is this the best way to put it? What might count as a helpful answer? Where should I look for an answer? Am I asking about the purpose of life? Is life the sort of thing that has a purpose? Or am I interested in what makes life worthwhile? Is the purpose of life (if there is one) the same as what makes life valuable or worthwhile?

The purpose of formulating and understanding questions as precisely as we can is to find answers, but often our answers lead to further questions. Why assume some answer is final? Or why assume all questions we can ask have answers? Also, what counts as an answer? How do I know when I have a good one? Consider this conversation:

Yolanda: What is the meaning of life?
José: What do you mean by that question?
Yolanda: I mean, what is the purpose of life?
José: Oh, that's easy; its purpose is survival and reproduction. That's what my biology textbook says.

Is Jose's answer a good one? Is it the sort of answer Yolanda is after? Can this question be answered with factual information, or is it about values? When Yolanda asks, "What is the meaning of life?" is she asking, "What makes life ultimately valuable?" And if she is asking that, then the answer José gives may well miss the mark (unless, of course, Yolanda thinks survival and reproduction are more valuable than ^anything else).

I said in my definition that philosophers are concerned with *fundamental* questions. The word *fundamental* means "basic" and has to do with what is primary. Fundamental questions are *radical* questions in the sense of pertaining to roots. They are the most basic questions we can ask. Therefore, they are often *abstract* questions that have to do with a wide area of human experience.

However, even though the sorts of questions that concern philosophers are abstract, they are about concepts we employ every day. We are constantly making judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, reality and fiction, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust. But what is good? By what norms can we distinguish right behavior from wrong? What is truth? How can I distinguish appearance from reality? Is beauty only in the eye of the beholder? What is justice, and is it ever possible to achieve it?

Some of the main branches of Western philosophy are distinguished by the kinds of fundamental questions they ask. Many philosophers have regarded "What is truly real?" as a fundamental question. Note the word *truly.* I did not ask, "What is real?" but "What is *truly* real?" In other words, I am assuming that not everything that appears to be real is real. Or, to put that another way, by asking, "What is truly real?" I am asking how we might distinguish appearance from reality. The branch of philosophy called **metaphysics** deals with this and related issues. One of its purposes,

some philosophers have claimed, is to develop a theory of reality or a theory of what is genuinely real. It is also concerned with what might be the most fundamental question we can think of: "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

What is knowledge and what is truth? These seem to be good candidates for fundamental questions because the concepts of knowledge and truth are basic to so much of our thinking, including all that we call science. The branch of Western philosophy known as **epistemology** concerns itself with the issues of knowledge and truth. Epistemologists search for a theory of what knowledge is and how it might be distinguished from opinion. They look for a definition of truth and wonder how we might correcdy distinguish truth from error.

Axiology, the third main branch of Western philosophy, has to do with the study of value and the distinction between value and fact. Traditionally, it is divided into two main subdivisions: aesthetics and ethics. **Aesthetics** deals with such questions as the following: Is beauty a matter of taste, or is it something objective? What standards should be used to judge artistic work? Can we define art? **Ethics** attempts to decide what values and principles we should use to judge human action as morally right or wrong. What is the greatest good? How should one live? Applied ethics applies these values and principles to such social concerns as human rights, racial justice, globalization, environmental ethics, and animal rights in order to determine what would be the morally right thing to do.

Fundamental questions are not only basic and abstract; they are also *universal* questions. They are the sorts of questions any thinking person might ask anywhere and at any time. They arise out of our capacity to wonder about ourselves and the world in which we live. They arise naturally, as it were, as we search for wisdom.

Although fundamental questions are universal, or nearly so, it should be noted that the way I have described the organization of the field of philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, axiology) is decidedly Western. Different societies organize knowledge in different ways. Also, what may seem fundamental in one society may seem far less important in another. For example, some Buddhist philosophers have been suspicious of intellectual speculation about metaphysical matters, especially questions like "Does God exist?" This question, so important to many people, excites little interest among these Buddhist drinkers.

It should also be noted that each of the three main branches of Western philosophy deals with important distinctions that all of us learn to make based on the standards our society teaches us. Hence, metaphysics is concerned with the distinction between *appearance and reality,* epistemology with the distinction between *knowledge and opinion,* and axiology with the distinction between *fact and value.* One important question is whether we can discover criteria that are universal and not merely relative to our own particular time in history and our own particular cultural view for making these distinctions. Fundamental and abstract questions about reality, knowledge, and value—and the distinctions these questions imply—may be universal in the sense that most cultures have developed intellectual traditions concerned with these issues. However, the concrete way the questions are asked, understood, and answered varies a great deal from one tradition to another.

For example, Plato (428-348 bce) made the distinction between knowledge and opinion, at least in part, by claiming that *opinion* has to do with beliefs about the world, which are based on our sensations, but *knowledge* has to do with the reality we discover through our reason. For him, logic and mathematics constituted

examples of knowledge, but information about physical objects based on sensation did not. Under the influence of physical science, many people today would be inclined to say almost the opposite of what Plato said. For instance, many of my students have maintained that knowledge is what empirical science provides, and opinion is a product of abstract speculation like philosophy.

As twenty-first century students living in a highly technological and pluralistic society, we live in a very different world from the ancient Greeks or Indians. Yet we, like them, wonder about life and ask basic questions about what is real, what is true, what is good, and what is beautifiil. This is not to say that there are not vast differences among philosophies and ways of doing philosophy. There are. You are about to experience something of this variety firsthand as you read different philosophers from different cultures and different eras.

In sum, I think philosophy is the activity of rationally attempting to formulate, understand, and answer fundamental questions. I have discussed most of the parts of that definition except the word *rational.* Why must it be a rational attempt? And what is it to be rational, anyway? If we cannot agree on what rationality is, how can we know what constitutes a rational attempt to formulate and answer basic questions?

1.2 WHAT IS RATIONALITY?

This fimdamental question is one of the most hotly debated issues in philosophy today. I cannot hope to settle the puzzles about rationality here, but I can give you some idea about what the issues are, describe some of the different views, and offer a tew thoughts of my own.

William James (1842-1910), an important American philosopher, said that "'philosophy is the unusually stubborn attempt to think clearly." Now *thinking* is a word with a much broader meaning than the word *rational.* To be rational is to think, but all thinking is not necessarily rational thinking. James does add the qualification "clearly." That narrows the field somewhat. But what is clear thinking, and how do we know it when we see it?

Consider this passage from a Chinese philosopher named Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu)[2] who lived about 350 b c e.

> Suppose you and I have had an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don't know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he decide? Shall

[2]There are two methods in wide use today for romanticizing (translating into a Lahn-based alphabetical system) Chinese words. One is called *Wade-Giles* and the other *Pinyin.* The first time a word or name is introduced, I have used the Pinyin spelling and provided the Wade-Giles spelling in parentheses. See the pronunciation guide for Chinese words in Appendix II. The quotation is from *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings,* translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 43).

> we get someone who agrees with both of us? But if he already agrees with both of us, how shall he decide? Obviously, then, neither you nor I nor anyone else can know the answer. Shall we wait for still another person?

Zhuangzi wonders how we might decide who is right and who is wrong. You and I are not in a good position to make such a decision, at least not an objective one, because the fact that we are arguing shows that we disagree. According to Zhuangzi, bringing in a third party to settle the dispute does not help because he or she may not know what we are arguing about, may agree with both of us (which will not settle anything), or may disagree with you or with me or with both of us. What was a two-person argument will now become a three-person argument.

Zhuangzi is wondering how we might proceed to settle an argument. What procedures do we have that will eventuate in agreement? Should we appeal to authority? Perhaps some divine revelation? A long standing tradition? Common sense? Force? Rationality? You might be tempted to say that we should settle it by applying rational standards. If we follow that course, then we can decide which argument is the most rational. Are there, however, objective and universal standards of rationality? Is rationality something entirely subjective or, at the very least, relative to particular historical periods and cultural communities?

Fundamental disagreements about the nature of rationality are very difficult to settle because in initially proceeding to approach the topic we have already made assumptions about what a rational way to proceed is. *Rationality* has to do with the way we proceed to investigate matters, settle disputes, evaluate evidence, and assess people's behaviors, practices, and beliefs. If we could get agreement about the standards of rationality, then the only tiling left to argue about would be whether or not these standards were fairly and accurately applied. But how do we proceed if we cannot agree on the standards themselves?

Picture Zhaungzi's imaginary arguers debating the nature of rationality. Not only would they and some third party find an acceptable settlement of the dispute difficult to obtain, but they would not even know how to go about reaching a setdement. What would count as a rational solution to their disagreement if the very nature of rationality is itself the subject of the disagreement? With Zhaungzi we might ask, with more than a mere hint of futility, "Shall we wait for still another person?"

To avoid the futility of endless disagreements, some philosophers maintain that there must be objective and universal standards of rationality. This position on the question of rationality is called **foundationalism.** Generally (there are many different varieties of foundationalism), foundationalists hold that we can decide what is rational by appealing to principles that are undeniable to any rational person. For example, if I maintain that my belief about extraterrestrials visiting Peru is rational, I, according to this view, should be able to present good reasons in support of my belief. The reasons I present will be good ones insofar as they ultimately rest on. a set of ideas that are *self-evidently true* for any person who can properly understand them.

What are these foundational principles? Many philosophers have maintained that they are the basic laws of logic and the rules and procedures deducible from those laws. Aristotle, for example, claims that the **law of noncontradiction** (a statement cannot be both true and false) stands at the foundation of all rational reasoning.

You cannot rationally assert *p* (where *p* stands for any statement) *and not-p.* If you claim *p* is true, you cannot also claim it is false and be rational. Furthermore, he argues, anyone who denies this law and who is prepared to defend that denial will be unable to advance her or his argument without relying on the very law supposedly rejected.

It would appear that people who argue that the law of noncontradiction is false are either perverse or irrational. Indeed, their own statement denying the law of noncontradiction could not be both true and false: it would have to be true but if could not be, because denying the law of noncontradiction means that it would have to be true and false at the same time. You would probably agree with me. However, you might quickly point out that being logical and correcdy applying the laws of logic are, at best, necessary conditions of rationality. These are not sufficient. We can imagine someone applying logical procedures and arriving at the most absurd conclusions. If I were clever enough, I could justify my belief in extraterrestrials visiting Peru without violating any logical laws, but is that enough for you to conclude that my belief is rational?

So it would seem we need some fundamental principles, besides the laws of logic, in order to know both the necessary and sufficient conditions of rationality.[3] And here is where the fight really breaks out among foundationalists. Some (usually called *rationalists)* claim that these foundational principles of rationality amount to "clear and distinct ideas" that are innate in the human mind or can be discovered by a careful and critical analysis of our beliefs. Others (usually called *empiricists)* argue that immediate sense impressions form the foundations of rational beliefs. You will encounter something of this debate between rationalists and empiricists as you read this book, so I will not belabor the point here. I only wish you to understand that much philosophical energy has been expended in a search for the foundational principles of rational belief. If we can find such principles, then we will have agreed-upon procedures for sifting through the many different answers to metaphysical questions (What is real?), epistemological questions (What is knowledge?), and axiological questions (What is value?) and settling on those that prove the most rational.

I think you can see the attractiveness of the foundationalist position, especially if you have ever been in one of those arguments where someone keeps asking you, "How do you know that?" At first you are patient and display your reasons. But she or he persists. "How do you know those are good reasons?" You explain why. Again, "Well, how can you be so sure?" About now your blood pressure is rising because you are beginning to see an infinite, bottomless abyss opening up. This could go on forever! But have no fear. Foundationalism can ride to your rescue because foundationalism maintains that regress is not infinite, the pit is not bottomless, and there is a sure foundation of first principles that your questioner will recognize to be rational. There is a way, according to foundationalists, of settling Zhaungzi's imaginary dispute.

However, the foundation you reach on your descent may turn out to be a ledge that gives way under your weight. Why? Because all the philosophical energy that has been spent on the search for foundational principles has ended in disagreement.

'Something can be sufficient without being necessary and vice versa. A rock hitting a window is sufficient to break it, but not necessary because a baseball might do as well. Milk is necessary to make yogurt, but not sufficient.

Thus, many philosophers have declared the modern search for fundamental rational principles bankrupt. Welcome to the postmodern age of *anti-foundationalism.*

Just as there are many varieties of foundationalism, there are also many varieties of anti-foundationalism. In order to remove the negative connotations of the "anti," let us call the critics of foundationalism **constructivists** because many of them maintain that rationality is a social construction.

Some constructivists point to the failure of agreement among foundationalists as proof that the search for objective, universal, self-evident, rational principles is fruitless. Others argue that the so-called self-evident, objective, universal, ahistorical, transcultural foundations of rationality have been shown again and again to be little more than the elevation of the prejudices of an elite class, or of males, or of white culture, or of Western civilization to the honorific tide of "self-evident rational principles." What is alleged to be "rational" turns out, after careful critical analysis, to be what Anglo-American European white males value! Foundationalism, this line of criticism maintains, is merely a variety of ethnocentric imperialism disguised with the mask of rationality.

Many constructivists argue that we are all so embedded in our cultures, our traditions, our religions, and our historical situations that we can never find some neutral point, some god's-eye view from which to pass judgment. Not one of our limited viewpoints is privileged. We are hopelessly culture-bound. There is no culturally neutral "third party," as Zhaungzi pointed out so clearly centuries ago, that can settle once and for all our important disputes. There are, of course, cultural procedures for settling disputes. However, it is a grave mistake to elevate such procedures to self-evident, universal marks of rationality.

Still other critics of foundationalism point out that foundationalism is fatally flawed because it is itself based on a contradiction. Foundationalism claims that a rational belief is one supported by good reasons. This means that before I accept your beliefs as rational, I should expect you to be able to display, if questioned, good reasons for such beliefs. If, after you have given me your good reasons, I persist and ask for more, sooner or later I shall have to be content with a belief whose truth is, you claim, "self-evident." So it turns out that good reasons rest on principles that we are asked to accept as self-evidently true and in need of no further support. Such principles would be irrational given the criterion initially assumed to be the hallmark of a rational belief—that is, a belief supported by good reasons.

Displaying the evidence and exploring the subtleties and shifts of argument between foundationalists and constructivists would take us too far afield. However, I should mention one major issue that this debate has engendered because it is particularly relevant to what this book is about. That is the issue of cognitive and ethical relativism. The foundationalists charge the constructivists with both **cognitive relativism** (the denial of universal truths) and **ethical relativism** (the denial of universally valid moral principles). They claim that if one denies the existence of transcultural, universal, objective standards of rationality, then what one is maintaining amounts to the view that there is no such thing as rationality; all there are, are *rationalities.* Eventually, this will lead the constructivist to assert moral relativism as well. One will be led down a slippery' slope resulting in the conclusion that any culture's values, any religious tradition, any morality, indeed any set of beliefs, is as good or as rational as anyone else's. How'ever, such relativism is self-defeating. If your view is no better or worse than my view, then all views are of equal merit.

Therefore, constructivists can have no justification to support their claim that fbundationalism is wrong. Foundationalists' views of rationality as universal and ahistorical are no more rational or any less rational than constructivists' views of rationalities as local and historical (see Table 1.1).

This is a powerful response to the constructivist critique of foundationalism. Few of us would argue with others if we thought that all views of morality or all views of truth were of equal worth. Yet we do argue. Few of us would be willing to maintain that programs of "ethnic cleansing," which lamentably characterize so much of human political practice, are as rational or moral as programs that aim at getting human beings to live in peace with one another.

We seem to be caught on the horns of a dilemma. We do not wish to opt for either ethnocentric imperialism or a kind of relativism that advocates "anything goes." Is there any other choice? Is títere a way out of this predicament? Much contemporary philosophy is presently concerned with finding a way out of this dilemma, a sort of middle ground that allows us to assert that some answers are better than others but stops short of imposing on others our own local views of what is rational and what is good.

One way to escape the horns of a dilemma is to make carefùl distinctions. There is a difference between ethnocentrism and ethnocentric *imperialism.* Perhaps it is impossible to totally escape an ethnocentric viewpoint, but we do not have to impose our views on others by presenting them as if they are the only true views.

Likewise some philosophers distinguish between different kinds of relativism. Not all relativism may be self-defeating, contrary to what some foundationalists believe. We must carefully distinguish between relativism in the *strong sense* (the claim there are no universally valid standards) and relativism in the *weak sense* (the claim that standards of rationality and morality are culturally diverse). It seems

TABLE 1.1

Foundationalism	**Constructivism**
Claim	*Claim*
One rationality that is universal and objective.	Many rationalities that are local and based on intersubjective agreement.
Argument	*Argument*
Beliefs are rational if supported by good reasons.	Rationality is conditioned by history and culture.
If an infinite regress of reasons is to be avoided, there must be a foundation of self-evident beliefs.	Vast amounts of historical, cultural, anthropological, and linguistic evidence support the above claim.
Such foundational beliefs are the laws of logic or clear and distinct ideas or beliefs evident to the senses.	
Critique of Constructivism	*Critique of Foundationalism*
Constructivism amounts to a self-refitting relativism.	Foundationalism cannot agree on what counts as foundational beliefe; hence they are not self-evident. Its definition of rational beliefs is contradictory, and its claims amount to ethnocentric imperialism.

'Only *internalist* versions of foundationalism hold foundational beliefs are self-evident. *Externalist* versions reject this view and, according to one type of extemalism, appeal to notions like reliability.

obvious that standards of rationality and morality are relative to historical and cultural conditions in the sense that they are related to such conditions (weak relativism). Standards of rationality do not float in some timeless, nonhuman space. However, concluding from this that all standards of rationality are of equal value or are equally true (the sort of self-defeating relativism the foundationalists charge the constructivists with) requires a big leap. It does not follow from the fact that there exist different understandings of rationality and morality that all understandings are of equal value, any more than it follows from the fact that there are different understandings of science that all of them are equally good or useful.

However, you might argue that if there are no objective standards of rationality or, at the very least, if we must admit we do not know what they might be, then all we are left with are rationalities bound to historical conditions and local cultural communities, and we have no way of determining which are better. Perhaps you are right. However, I think that we do have some options. We can remain convinced that our community has the last word on the subject and all others are wrong. Or, as we encounter other communities and other cultures, we can listen to them (and they to us) and try to discover ways of settling our disputes *together*. We can expand our conversations, listen to other voices, and together with them ask, What is real? What is knowledge? What is good? As we listen, as we enter into a dialogue, yes, and even as we argue, our standards of rationality will grow and, although we may still disagree in the end, at least we can say we have understood.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a contemporary German philosopher, argues that truth is an understanding that occurs when there is a "fusion of horizons." Authentic conversation or dialogue occurs when we can recognize our own understanding as a horizon resulting from the perspective or bias we have acquired and when we are willing to risk our horizon in order to allow the horizon of the "other" to appear.

This book is an attempt to expand the philosophical dialogue. A wide variety of views will be heard—African American, Latino, Native American, feminist, and even Anglo-American European white males—and I hope these views will turn into meaningfùl voices of wisdom. We will not agree with all these voices, but we can learn from each, and we may discover wider areas of agreement than we thought possible.

My claim that agreement about what is rational can emerge out of dialogue and expanded cultural communication rests on the assumption that we can understand philosophical views held by people who live in times and places very different from our own and on the hope that learning about ourselves and others is a worthwhile enterprise. Some might argue that we can never understand what others who are very different from us are saying and that my hope is naive. I do not have the space to defend my assumption and my hope, but I do believe that good reasons can be given for them. In any case, we verili never find out if we do not try.

Recall that I characterized philosophy as a rational activity of formulating, understanding, and answering fundamental questions. This activity, I wish to stress, relies heavily on the logical skills of analyzing, criticizing, and developing arguments. It is, however, more than this. If the goal of philosophy is to formulate, understand, and answer fundamental questions on both an intellectual and a practical level, then we can determine how rational this activity is only by assessing how successfully this goal is achieved by all those who participate in this sort of activity. I do not believe we can rule out any of the profound thinking about fundamental problems that the many

peoples of the world have to offer by imposing some predetermined model of rationality. Hence, the very process of assessment is something we must learn as we go.

The Jains of India have a teaching called *syad-vada,* which might be translated as the "perhaps method." This teaching holds that 353 different viewpoints can be held on any question; hence, dogmatic closed-mindedness is inappropriate. To any perspective or any issue, the thoughtfill will reply, "Perhaps." This "method" is based on the assumption that no single philosophical view or system can say all there is to be said about reality. It does not mean we should remain silent, nor does it mean that everything that is said (however partial) is of equal worth.

There are times, I think, when we can be a bit more definite than "perhaps," but the flexibility and openness this method recommends is a virtue we all need to practice when we have no privileged viewpoint from which we might settle a matter once and for all. Not all answers are rational. Some are better than others. However, the range of rational responses may be far broader than we realize.

1.3 READING PHILOSOPHY

Reading philosophy is both exciting and rewarding. Philosophy provides intellectual stimulation: the pleasure of discovering new ideas, the fascination of following the thread of a provocative argument, the challenge of rethinking inherited beliefe. For these reasons, reading philosophy can be enjoyable, but often it is not easy. As the image of Alice in Wonderland, in the color plates, reminds us, sometimes, when we read philosophy, we feel like Alice, who remarked, "Somehow it fills my head with ideas—only I don't know exactly what they are."

Philosophical texts come in a wide variety of types, ranging from technical essays to dramatic dialogues. They come from différent cultures and different historical periods, and they are written in different languages. It is not easy to adjust to this variety. It takes practice to appreciate and understand ancient Greek dialogues, Buddhist fables, seventeenth-century French essays, and Chinese poetry.

Many of us are accustomed to reading secondary sources that explain the ideas of others. Textbooks digest what others say, explain what isn't clear, underline the important points, present summaries, and define technical words. Because much of our education has been centered on reading textbooks, not everyone is accustomed to wrestling with primary sources—the original texts and words—even in translation. If you are not used to digesting material on your own, explaining it to yourself, learning how to do your own summaries, and looking up words and references you do not understand, then at first you will find it difficult to read primary sources. Like anything else that is new, it will take some practice and some help from your instructor.

Voices of Wisdom is a combination of secondary' material (my introductions to each chapter and to each selection in the chapters) and primary material (selections from the writings of philosophers past and present). Reading the primary texts may, in some cases, prove a rather difficult task. You need to learn how to read analytically and critically.

The purpose of analytical reading is to find out what the text says and to understand it as best you can. To do so requires analysis on your part. To analyze something is to break it into parts or smaller units. Thus you need to distinguish main ideas from supporting ideas and to determine what the author is trying to accomplish.

Critical reading involves evaluation. Your evaluation may be positive, negative, or some mixture of the two. Criticism requires you to make the effort to think about the ideas, analogies, arguments, evidence, and metaphors presented in the text, as well as their implications and assumptions.

Here are some suggestions that will help you understand philosophical texts and develop critical analysis skills.

1. Read the material at least twice.
2. Read actively and with a purpose.
3. Read analytically and sympathetically.

   Here are some analytical questions that you can ask and answer as you read.

   - What is the thesis (the central idea or main point)?
   - What are the major points made in developing and supporting the thesis?
   - How are key terms defined?
   - What are the basic assumptions made by the author?
   - What are the important implications of the author's position?

4. Read critically.

   Here are some critical questions that will help you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the selections.

   - Is what is said clear? If not, how is it unclear?
   - Are adequate definitions given for important concepts? Can you think of counterexamples?
   - Are the arguments adequate to support the claims; for example, are the premises true? the assumptions dubious?
   - Do the implications of the text lead to absurd or false consequences?
   - /Are important aspects of the issue overlooked?
   - How well did the author accomplish her or his goal?

5. After you have finished, review what you have read.
6. It is a good idea to keep a "philosophical notebook" in which you record your notes on the readings.

Before each selection are reading questions that will help you to analyze the reading. After each selection are critical questions designed to help you evaluate the reading. You can keep the answers to these questions in your philosophical notebook. For more on reading philosophy, as well as thinking logically and writing philosophy, see Chapter 2.

1.4 DOES PHILOSOPHY BAKE BREAD?

"Why should I study philosophy?" That is a question I often hear my students ask. It may be a question you are asking. Today many people approach their education pragmatically. They ask, "How will learning this prepare me for a job?" The implication of such a question is that if it does not help me get a job, it is not worth studying. If philosophy bakes no bread, why study it?

In the first two sections you have read about how we might define philosophy and about some debates over the nature of rationality. What have you learned that

is of any importance? When you are interviewed for that first job upon graduation, do you think the interviewer might ask, "All right then, who do you think is right, die foundationalists or the constructivists?"

"Well," you might say, "I certainly don't think that the value of a field of study is completely exhausted by whether or not it leads to gainful employment. However, isn't it the case that philosophy, unlike science, never really settles anything? Philosophers just spin their wheels in endless debate."

It is true that uncertainty haunts the philosopher's study. Indeed, it is uncertainty that keeps the philosophical fires burning. If science could answer all our questions, if putting bread on the table were all there is to a happy life, if religion could provide all the answers we need, then I fear the philosopher in us would soon cease to exist. However, the philosophic wonder of which Aristotle spoke keeps our minds stirring largely because there are so many things about life that are uncertain.

There is an important sense, I think, in which we cannot help but philosophize. Life's circumstances and experiences compel us to think about things beyond our daily bread. If this line of reasoning is right, if we cannot help but philosophize, then should we not learn to do it well? One way of learning how to do it is to listen carefully to others who have philosophized from many different times and places. We can learn by example even when we disagree with the views of those from whom we learn.

If helping you get a job or answering with certainty the "big questions" is not the most important reason to study philosophy, it does not follow that philosophical study is totally without commercial value. I encourage you to visit the Web site of the American Philosophical Association (http://www.apaonline.org). There you will find all kinds of valuable information about philosophy and its study. Among other things you will find illustrations of both academic and nonacademic careers pursued by philosophy majors. These careers include educator, advertising executive, computer systems analyst, publisher, librarian, commodities broker, diplomat, attorney, TV producer, editor, minister, and so forth. The skills of critical thinking and clear expression that you can learn from the study of philosophy prove to be valuable in many different pursuits that do bake bread.

We continue with a Western example. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) is the author of the following selection. He explicitly addressed the issue of the value of philosophy in a book called *The Problems of Philosophy* published in 1912. What he has to say may surprise you. Whatever you may think about his claims, it is clear that the questions about the usefulness of philosophy are neither new nor unimportant.

As you read what Russell has to say, see if you can answer the following reading questions and identify the passages that support your answers. Discuss in class the questions you had difficulty answering and the ones that stimulated your own thinking about the value of philosophy.

© *READING* QUESTIONS

1. Where, according to Russell, is the value of philosophy to be found?
2. Why does Russell maintain that the "uncertainty of philosophy is more apparent than real"?
3. What does Russell mean when he asserts that the value of philosophy is to be sought in its "very uncertainty"?
4. According to Russell, what may be the chief value of philosophy?