

What is Philosophy?

an introduction



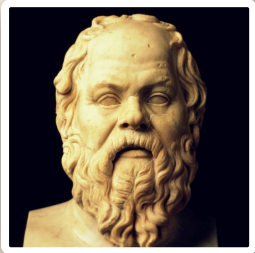
George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

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What is philosophy?

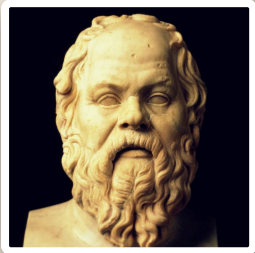
What is philosophy?



Socrates:
470-399 BCE

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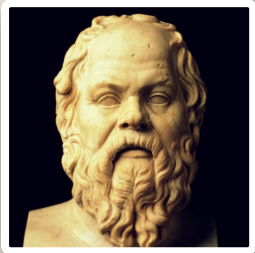
"The unexamined life is not worth living."



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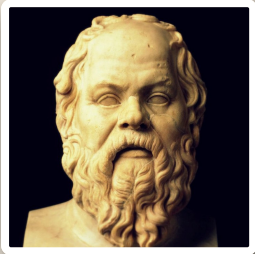


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- One of the founders of Western philosophy, Socrates spent his life encouraging others to critically examine their fundamental values and assumptions.

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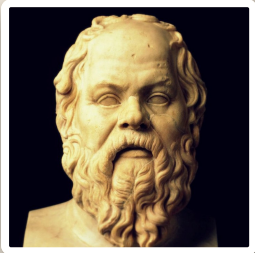


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Why did people find Socrates' questions so threatening that they killed an old man who would likely soon pass away anyway?

philo-sophia

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- Philosophy seeks understanding of the nature of reality and the significance of our lives by applying critical reasoning to our deepest and most general beliefs.
- It draws out basic assumptions, by asking questions with all of the wonder of children.
- And it subjects them to careful analysis with all of the precision of a lawyer.

philo-sophia



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- If you are wrong in science your predictions fail, or you blow up the lab.
- If you are wrong in philosophy, your principles and most general beliefs conflict with each other and your mind is at odds with itself.
- Failure to clarify one's life philosophically may seem unimportant, yet for Socrates such an un-examined life misses what is most valuable about being human.

philo-sophia



***Religion** addresses the significance of our lives, but it differs from philosophy in how it proceeds.*

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- Religion emerges from the spontaneous ways we make meaning in our lives. It often embraces mythical and magical thinking which places us at the center of life's drama.

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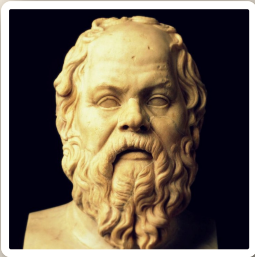


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- Religion emerges from the spontaneous ways we make meaning in our lives. It often embraces mythical and magical thinking which places us at the center of life's drama.
- Philosophy seeks clarification and justification and asks how we might find meaning in a world even where it might not be all about us.

Philosophical questions

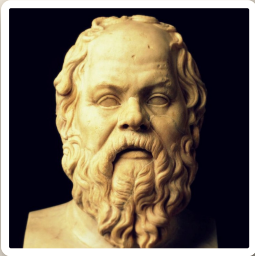
Philosophical questions



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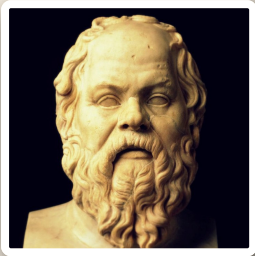
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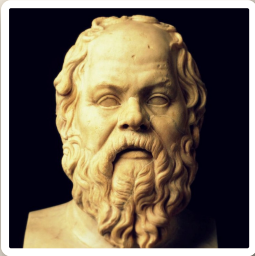


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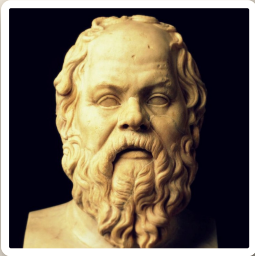


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- This is not a question about how we do in fact live but of how we *should* live.
- Such *normative* questions challenge us to give an account of ourselves, our values and our assumptions.
- Socrates' question is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called **value theory** or **axiology**.

*More value theory
questions...*



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- Is morality in the eye of the beholder or are some things *really* right or wrong?

*More value theory
questions...*



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- What would a just society look like and how might we get there from here?
- What is the value of art and should artists care about who their work might offend?

Philosophical questions



Rene Descartes:
1596-1650

Philosophical questions

"What can I know with any degree of certainty, when my senses so often mislead me?"



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- Answering it requires clarifying the nature of knowledge and its varieties.
- This is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called **epistemology** or **theory of knowledge**.

*More epistemological
questions...*



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- How can we distinguish between appearances and reality?

*More epistemological
questions...*



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More epistemological questions...



- How can we distinguish between appearances and reality?
- What counts as evidence, proof, or disproof and how does logical reasoning work?
- What is science and how do we distinguish it from pretenders to science?
- What is truth and is it singular or plural?

Philosophical questions



Martin
Heidegger:
1889-1976

Philosophical questions

"Why is there something and not just nothing at all?"



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- Philosophical questions are often much more general than questions we normally encounter.
- Science seeks answers to particular questions about the regularities in the world of our experience and shrinks away from such general questions as being unanswerable.
- This is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called **metaphysics** or **ontology** which seeks an account of the basic nature of reality.

*More metaphysical
questions...*



*More metaphysical
questions...*



- What sorts of things exist -- only matter, or minds/souls/disembodied spirits as well?

*More metaphysical
questions...*



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- What sorts of things exist -- only matter, or minds/souls/disembodied spirits as well?
- What is the relationship between minds and brains, and can we build an artificial brain that actually has a mind?
- How is freedom even possible in a world where everything that happens seems to have a cause outside of itself?
- Does God exist? This question is related to epistemological questions about religion (How can we know for sure?), and value theory questions (What does it matter?) as well.

The philosopher's toolkit

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Over time, however, certain useful principles have been developed.

- Explicitly state our assumptions -- this can be a challenge since they *are* assumptions.
- Draw out their logical implications -- do theses fit well with each other or do they clash with other ideas we have?
- Make lots of distinctions. (Also the reason for the bad reputation of philosophers! Splitting hairs, or distinguishing real differences? It can be hard to tell.)

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

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- As an example of how philosophical analysis proceeds, consider the following dialogue between Socrates and Thrasymachus, a contemporary of Socrates who held that philosophical questioning was irrelevant.

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

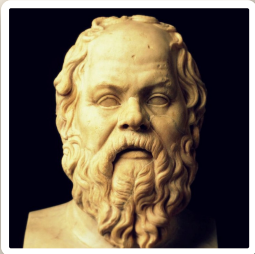
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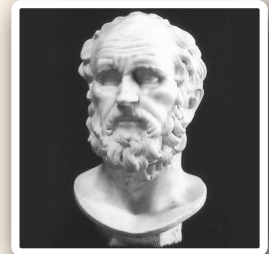
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- For Thrasymachus, might makes right in the sense that the powerful get to define what key ideas like "justice" really mean.
- Socrates, on the other hand highlights how true wisdom alone can guide us and so we must let logic lead the way.

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

What is Justice?



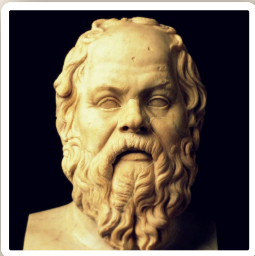
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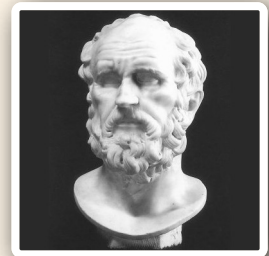
Thrasymachus:
4th century BCE

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

Whatever the powerful say it is?



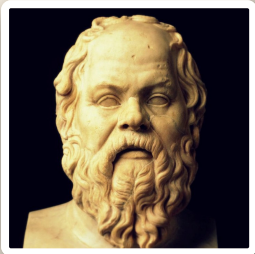
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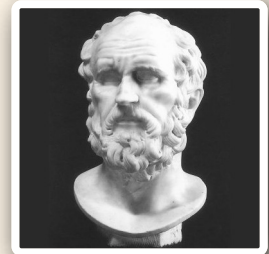
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So you say that might makes right? But even the powerful makes mistakes, right?



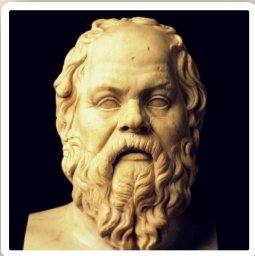
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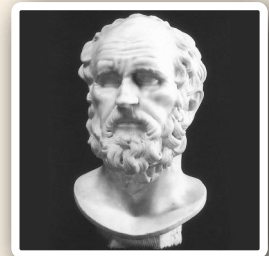
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Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

Yes and what are you getting at?



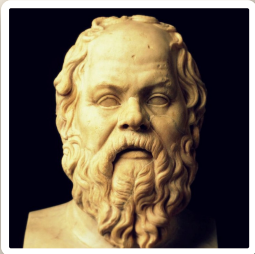
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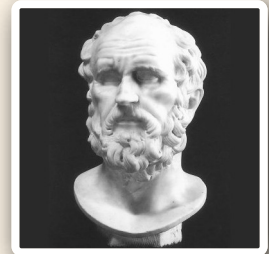
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Well even the powerful rely on something more powerful than them, what is truly in their best interests.



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Thrasymachus:
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Find out more

Socrates on self-confidence and questioning others about their values. A great video outlining the motivation for doing philosophy in the first place.



Credits

Built with:

Rstudio

xarignan html presentation framework

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editorial suggestions and comments: requires a (free) GitHub account.