

What is Philosophy?

an introduction



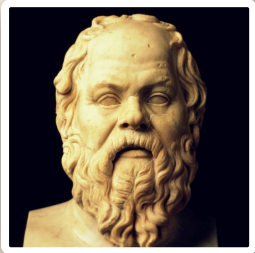
Jacques-Louis David "The Death of Socrates"

George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

What is philosophy?

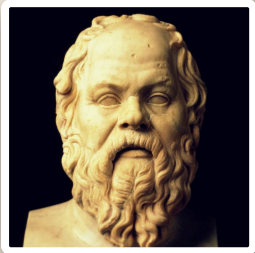
What is philosophy?



Socrates:
470-399 BCE

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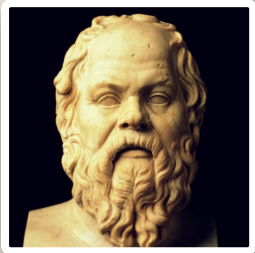
"The unexamined life is not worth living."



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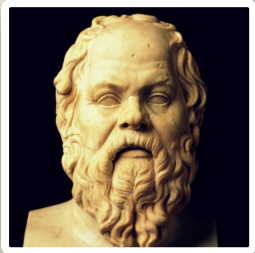


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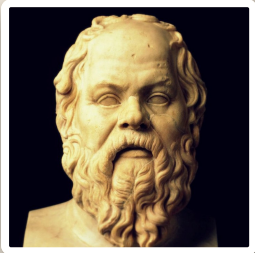


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Why did people find Socrates' questions so threatening that they killed an old man who would likely soon pass away anyway?

philo-sophia

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What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? Can one know things without being wise or the other way around?

philo-sophia



Science also seeks to understand reality, but it differs from philosophy in its method of evaluating its claims.

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- If you are wrong in science your predictions fail, or you accidentally blow up the lab.
- If you are wrong in philosophy, your principles and most general beliefs conflict with each other and so your mind is at odds with itself.
- Failure to clarify one's life philosophically may seem unimportant, yet for Socrates not doing so is to lead an "unexamined life" and miss out on what is most valuable and unique about being human.

philo-sophia



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- Philosophy seeks clarification and justification and asks how we might find meaning, even in a world where we are not at the center of things.

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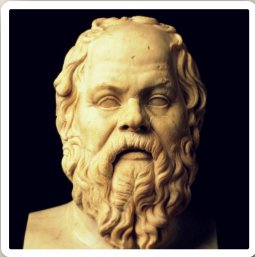


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- Philosophy seeks clarification and justification and asks how we might find meaning, even in a world where we are not at the center of things.
- Philosophy is fundamentally "humanistic" since it trusts our ability to figure things out, while religion often appeals to faith, emphasizing the limits of our ability to comprehend things.

Philosophical questions

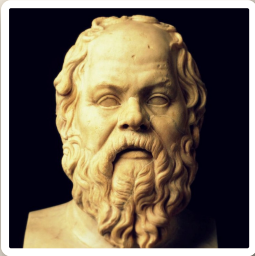
Philosophical questions



Socrates:
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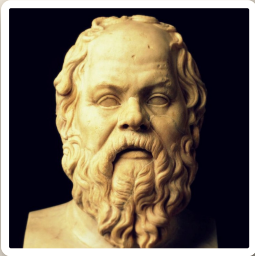
"How should I live my life? In pursuit of power and money or in pursuit of wisdom?"



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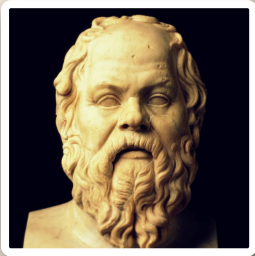


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- This is not a question about how we do in fact live but of how we *should* live.

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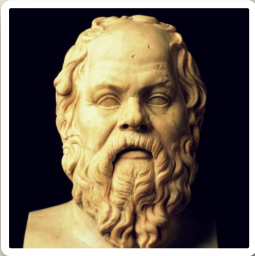


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- This is not a question about how we do in fact live but of how we *should* live.
- Such *normative* questions challenge us to give an account of ourselves, our values and our assumptions.
- Socrates' question is a question in the sub-field of philosophy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

*More value theory
questions...*



*More value theory
questions...*



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

*More value theory
questions...*



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- Can the ends ever justify the means, or should some things just never be done?

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- 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 and limitations of knowledge.
- This is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called **epistemology** or **theory of knowledge**.

*More epistemological
questions...*

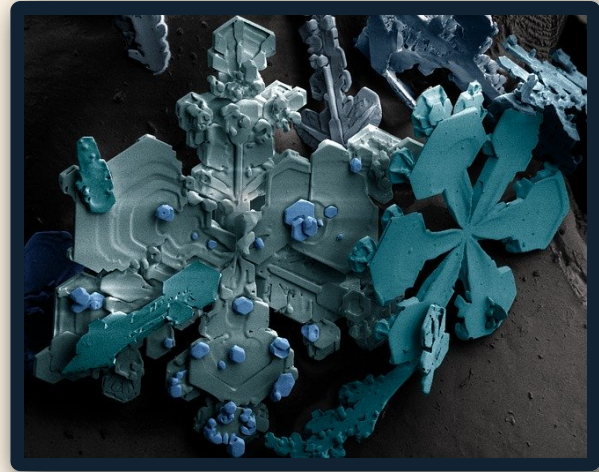


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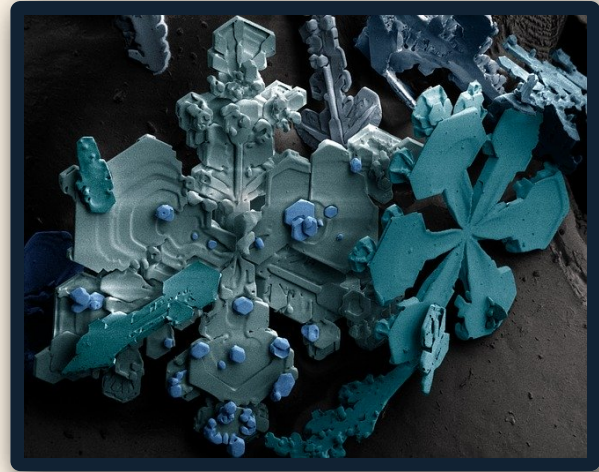
- How can we distinguish between appearances and reality?

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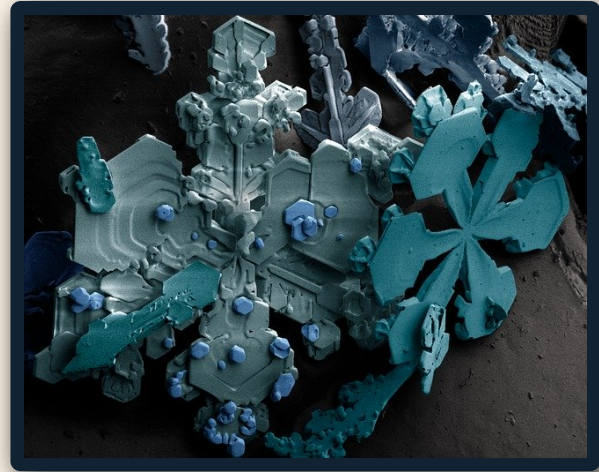
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- What is truth and is it singular or plural?

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 this.
- 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...*



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

*More metaphysical
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- What is the relationship between minds and brains, and can we build an artificial brain that actually has a mind?
- How is human freedom even possible in a world where everything that happens seems to be caused by external forces?
- Does God exist, and how might we be able to tell?

The philosopher's toolkit

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- Explicitly state our assumptions -- this can be a challenge since they *are* assumptions after all.
- Draw out their logical implications -- do these assumptions fit well with each other and do they clash with other ideas we have?
- Make lots of distinctions. (Philosophers have a bad reputation for "splitting hairs," but we think it is important to be precise in our use of language.)

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

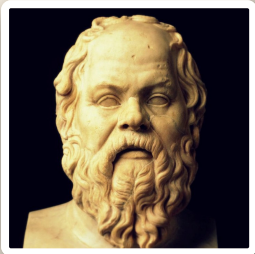
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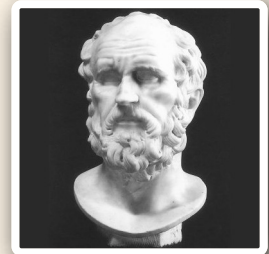
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- For Thrasymachus, might makes right in the sense that the powerful get to define what key ideas like "justice" really mean.
- Socrates, on the other hand highlights how true wisdom alone can guide us and so we must let logical reasoning lead the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

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

What is Justice anyway? It seems to me that Justice requires wisdom.



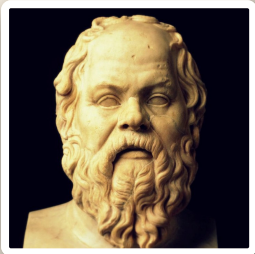
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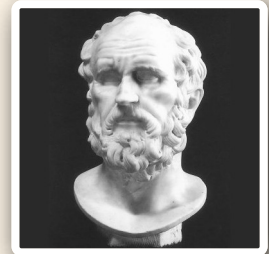
Thrasymachus:
4th century BCE

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

Nonsense. Justice is defined as whatever people with power say it is. Might makes right!



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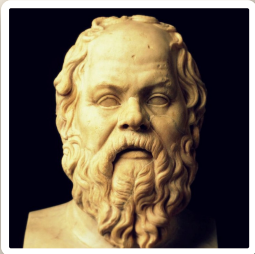


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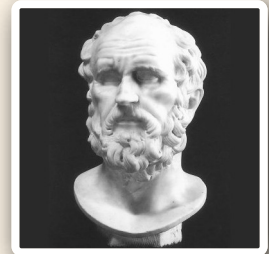


Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

But can't powerful people be mistaken about what is in their own best interests?



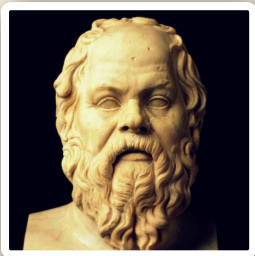
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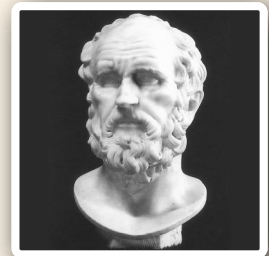
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Yes and what are you getting at?



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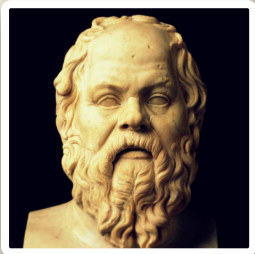


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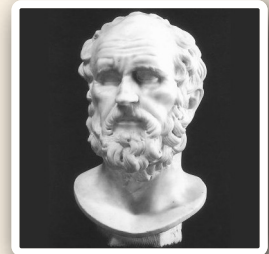


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Well if powerful people can be wrong about what they want and need, how can they figure out what is best for them?

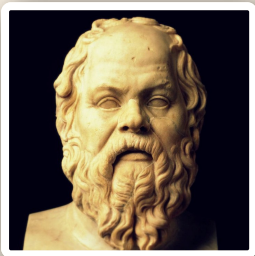


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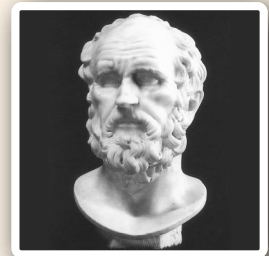
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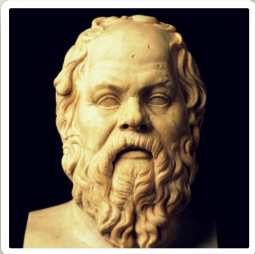
I don't know.



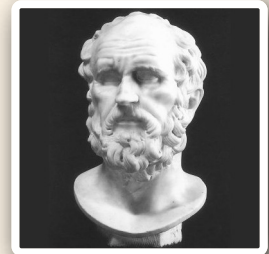
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By discovering the truth and letting *it* be their guide! So might doesn't really make right after all.



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- So we may as well figure out what is really true and that is what philosophy is all about.
- Reality does have the last word after all...

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.

What is Philosophy?: The Crash Course is a series of short, entertaining and informative videos produced by the Green brothers John and Hank. Here Hank Green gives his take on what philosophy is.

How to Argue: the second video in the Crash Course Philosophy series outlines the basics of philosophical reasoning and argumentation.



Rembrandt "Anatomy Lesson"

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