

What is Philosophy?

an introduction



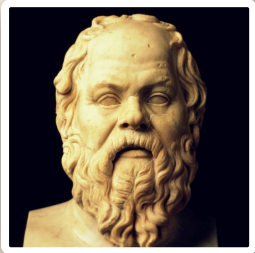
George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

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What is philosophy?

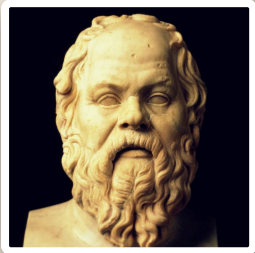
What is philosophy?



Socrates:
470-399 BCE

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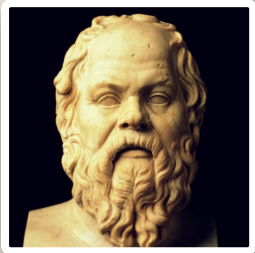
"The unexamined life is not worth living."



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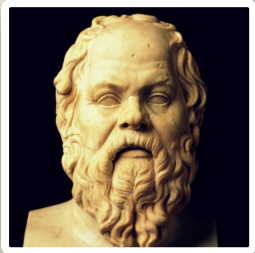


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- One of the founders of Western philosophy, Socrates spent his life encouraging others to critically examine their fundamental values and assumptions.

What is philosophy?

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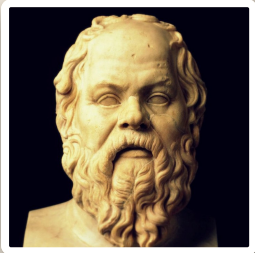


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Why did people find Socrates' questions so threatening that they killed an old man who would likely soon pass away anyway?

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



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 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.

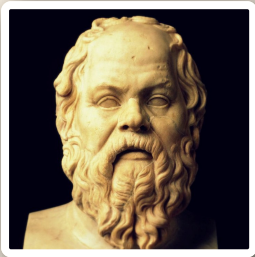
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- Religion emerges from the spontaneous ways we make meaning in our lives. It often embraces mythical and magical thinking which places us at the center of life's drama.
- Philosophy seeks clarification and justification and asks how we might find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

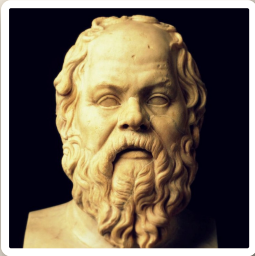
Philosophical questions



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Philosophical questions

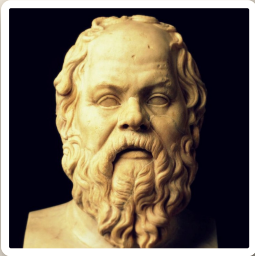
"How should I live my life? In pursuit of power and money or in pursuit of wisdom?"



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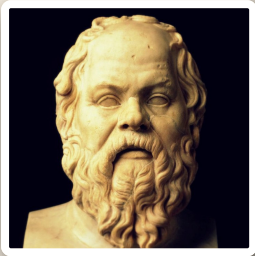


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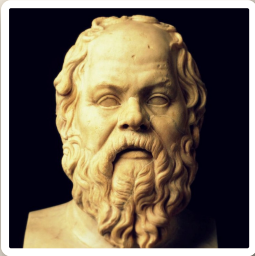


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- This is not a question about how we do in fact live but of how we *should* live.
- Such *normative* questions challenge us to give an account of ourselves, our values and our assumptions.
- Socrates' question is a question in the sub-field of philosophy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

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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- Descartes asked this question at the beginning of the Scientific Revolution when old certainties were revealed to be based on false assumptions.
- 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**.

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.

The philosopher's toolkit

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

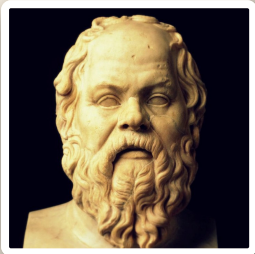
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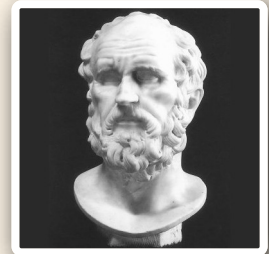
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- For Thrasymachus, might makes right in the sense that the powerful get to define what key ideas like "justice" really mean.
- Socrates, on the other hand highlights how true wisdom alone can guide us and so we must let logic lead the way.

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

What is Justice?



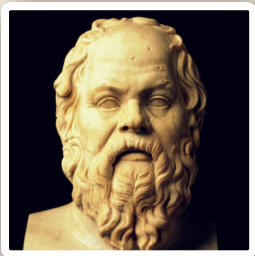
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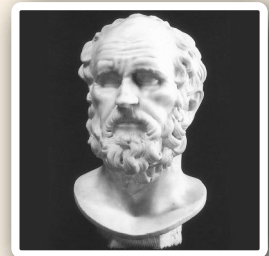
Thrasymachus:
4th century BCE

Socrates and Thrasymachus debate justice

Whatever the powerful say it is?



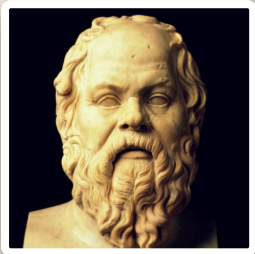
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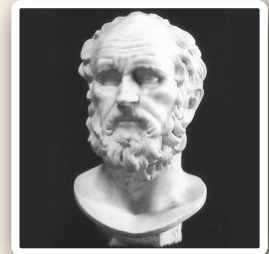
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So you say that might makes right? But even the powerful makes mistakes, right?



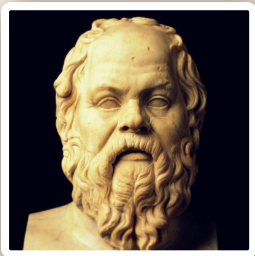
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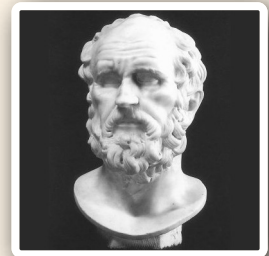
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Yes and what are you getting at?



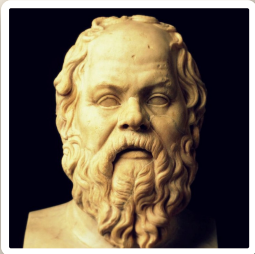
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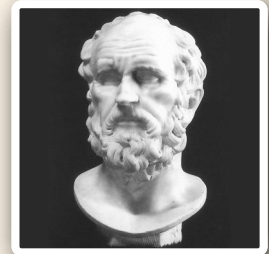
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Well even the powerful rely on something more powerful than them, what is truly in their best interests.



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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

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