

# *Philosophy, science and skepticism*



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What would life be like...



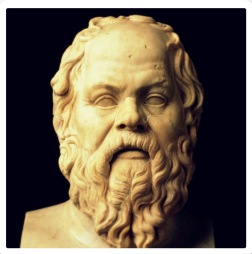
What would life be like...



...without cell phones?

# *philo-sophia*

"The unexamined life is not worth living."



Socrates  
470-399 BCE

- One of the founders of Western philosophy, Socrates spent his life encouraging others to critically examine their fundamental values and assumptions.
- He was executed for "corrupting the youth."

?

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

# *philo-sophia*

"The love of (*philos*) wisdom (*sophia*)"

- Seeks understanding of the nature of reality and the significance of our lives by critical examination of our **deepest and most general beliefs**.
- Draws out basic assumptions, asking questions with **the wonder of a child**.
- Subjects them to careful analysis with **the precision of a lawyer**.



*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.

- 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 is to lead an "unexamined life."

## *philo-sophia*



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

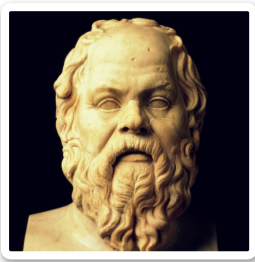
- Religion emerges from the spontaneous ways we make meaning in our lives, placing us at the center of life's drama.
- Philosophy seeks clarification and justification and asks how we might find meaning, even in a world where we are not at the center of things.
- Philosophy trusts our ability to figure things out, while religion often appeals to faith and human limitations.

Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?



# *Philosophical questions*

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



Socrates  
470-399 BCE

- 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*

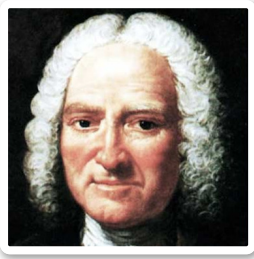
"What can I know with any degree of certainty, when my senses so often mislead me?"



Rene Descartes  
1596-1650

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

# *Philosophical questions*



Baron D'Holbach  
1723-1789

"Do we have free will or are we just cogs in a vast machine?"

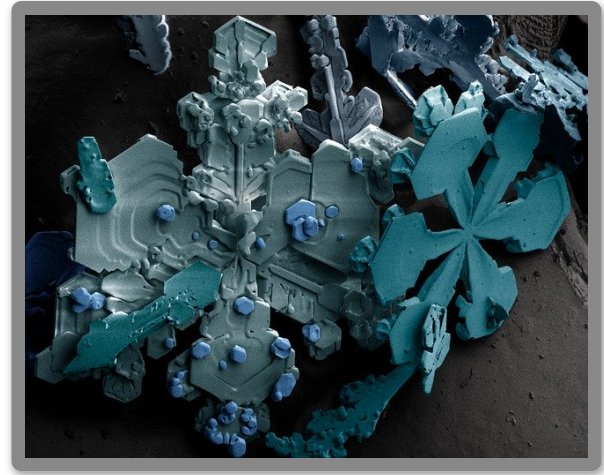
- Philosophical questions are often much more general than questions we normally encounter.
- Science seeks answers to particular questions about the regularities in the world of our experience and shrinks away from such general questions as this.
- This is a question in the sub-field of philosophy called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

*More value theory questions...*



- Is it ever wrong to pursue knowledge and is it sometimes just best *not* to know?
- Is science value neutral, with moral questions only relevant to the application of scientific findings?
- Is scientific knowledge public or private, and who should profit from new discoveries?
- What role should scientific findings play in social policy?

*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?

*More metaphysical questions...*



- 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 does order arise in the universe and what is the role of chance in the way things are?
- Are purposes built-in to things or imposed on them by us?

# *The philosopher's toolkit*



*Since philosophy asks us to examine all of our assumptions, there can be no fixed method for doing philosophy - historically speaking there have been many different approaches.*

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

- 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.)



## *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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