

# Phi Lambda Phi: The Philosophy

Rahsaan Simon

August 2025

## Introduction: The Enlightenment

**Question:** What is the deepest you've ever explored a subject? What compelled you to explore that subject more thoroughly?

Not so long ago, a massive collection of ancient Greek manuscripts had been recovered and translated from Arabic (the language of their caretakers as they were hidden away) into a variety of European languages. The ideas within these manuscripts were astounding and compelling, but the most important idea that propagated through them was the pursuit of wisdom and truth above all, even in the most abstract territory.

Because of their widespread distribution and linguistic accessibility, many read these manuscripts and were heavily provoked by them, so much so that they began to call themselves the enlightened. They took the idea of knowledge to heart and began heavily questioning basically all other things they had taken to heart before. "Why is the sky blue?" "Is god real?" "Do I really have to pay taxes?" Two revolutions, one new country, one dead king, and several dead nobles later, we now enter the modern age.

Questioning things certainly does have a large impact and, at the same time, provokes a lot of scrutiny. The important thing to note here is that the process is certainly not new. For whatever topic you have dove deep on, someone has most certainly dug deeper, and for the levels they have dug to, someone else has dug even deeper. With that being said, because of its seemingly massive history, there must be a name for this sort of process, right? There is, and that is philosophy.

## Defining Philosophy

**Question:** Based on the bit of previous history, how would you define the subject of philosophy? Would you consider your answer to the previous question to be a proper bit of philosophizing?

The Greeks probably put it best when they mastered philosophy in the first place, opting to call it the "love of wisdom." Philosophy is all about exploring

the foundations of subjects themselves, often to the point that they can't be explored anymore, or that their explanation causes logical fallacies (i.e., an error of reasoning). It is literally the collection of as much knowledge as possible to the point where there is nothing more to know about a subject.

To a lot of people, philosophy can also be defined as your personal way of life; your judgment and the decisions you make on a daily basis. More specifically, this is the exploration of your life as a subject (critical reflection), in the hopes that you may learn something beneficial about yourself. Indeed, you should always "breathe your philosophy"; otherwise, you make it apparent that you either don't know or don't trust your judgment! This is what is normally meant by being enlightened, knowing yourself through and through.

## The Philosophical Process

**Question:** Recall the times you dug deep into a subject. How did you go about doing so? Did you have any specific method?

There are a lot of ways one can go about "philosophizing". The most common way, and the method first identified by the ancient Greek Socrates, after whom it is named, the "Socratic method", is to continuously ask questions about a subject until there are no more questions to ask. If you can respond fully and absolutely to a question, chances are you're not engaging in philosophy, but instead simply identifying the subject you are questioning.

The Socratic method helps to streamline philosophical discussion, especially among a group, while also helping to identify what is and is not philosophy. As you can imagine, it comes in handy.

## Bullet Run: Notable Philosophers and their Notable Achievements

- Socrates: Probably *the* philosopher of all time, Socrates is known for spreading the subject as a whole throughout ancient Greece, and for encouraging many at the time to think deeply about what they were told, this was to his untimely demise at the hands of a randomly assembled Athens tribunal and his subsequent execution (quite dramatic!)
- Plato: Socrates' most dedicated student, Plato is perhaps best known for writing all of his ideas down... Besides this, he was considered an admirable collaborator with Socrates, who both established the foundations of the subject as a whole.
- Rene Descartes: An epistemologist well known for his ideas on how belief and consciousness shape reality, he is famous for his declaration of a person's existence simply by their ability to perceive reality: "I think therefore I am."

- John Locke: Locke, one of the "enlightened", distributed key political ideas of self-governance and a right to the freedom of a person to do as they please, so long as it does not disturb someone else's freedom. If these sound familiar, they are the governing principles for the United States' constitution and law, respectively.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson: An avid metaphysician and aesthete, his essays worked to reshape how people thought about the world around them and their influence in it; his most famous ideas involved the idea that people should rely on their own intuition when encountering information and to escape conformity.
- Karl Marx: Universally a household name since the Cold War, he is best known for being the founder of communist thought, an idealistic attempt at generating universal economic peace through labor managed by a government.
- Friedrich Nietzsche: A centerpiece in modern ethics and aesthetics, Nietzsche's ideas are characterized by blatant criticism of the modern world and greater society. He believed most iconically in the renunciation of nihilism and the embrace of free will to take control of one's life for positive effects on oneself and others.
- Bertrand Russell: A logician, Russell is known for his concrete and almost mathematical takes on popular philosophical questions. He is famous for trying to complete the connection between the realm of mathematics and reasoning in attempting to prove that  $1 + 1 = 2$ , and thus solidifying mathematics as a philosophical construct.
- Harry Frankfurt: Frankfurt, an ethicist, is best known for popularizing and firmly establishing the idea that desires rule our every moment; that there is no action that we take which does not, in some way, benefit ourselves. He connected this idea to how we perceive the subject of ethics, and to our choices when we are encountered with ethical dilemmas.
- Martha Nussbaum: A feminist and patron of law, she is best known for her ideas on ethical fragility, i.e., the tendency for one's ethics to be swayed by external factors, or they're general impermanence, and for combating the distinction between sex and sexuality.

**Question:** Based on this list, which philosopher seems the most interesting to you? Explore, learn more about them, read their best literary works, and analyze the difference between their ideas and your own.