

philosophy of life. A faulty philosophy of life—that is, one that comprises a great many false fundamental beliefs—can lead to a misspent or misdirected life, a life less meaningful than it could be. Philosophy is the most powerful instrument we have for evaluating the worth of our fundamental beliefs and for changing them for the better. Through philosophy we exert control over the trajectory of our lives, making major course corrections by reason and reflection.

The Greek philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE), one of Western civilization's great intellectual heroes, says, "An unexamined life is not worth living." To examine your life is to scrutinize the core ideas that shape it, and the deepest form of scrutiny is exercised through philosophy. This search for answers goes to the heart of the traditional conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom (the term *philosophy* is derived from Greek words meaning "love of wisdom"). With the attainment of wisdom, we come to understand the true nature of reality and how to apply that understanding to living a good life.

Philosophy's chief *theoretical* benefit is the same one that most other fields of inquiry pursue: understanding for its own sake. Even if philosophy had no practical applications at all, it would still hold great value for us. We want to know how the world works, what truths it hides, just for the sake of knowing. And philosophy obliges. Astronomers search the sky, physicists study subatomic particles, and archaeologists search for ancient ruins, all the while knowing that what they find may have no practical implications at all. We humans wonder, and that's often all the reason we need to search for answers. As the great philosopher Aristotle says, "For it is owing to their wonder that people both now begin and at first began to philosophize."

For many people, the quest for understanding through philosophy is a spiritual, transformative endeavor, an ennobling pursuit of truths at the core of life. Thus, several philosophers speak of philosophy as something that enriches or nurtures the soul or mind. Socrates, speaking to the jurors who condemned him for practicing philosophy on the streets of Athens, asked, "Are you not ashamed that, while you take care to acquire as much wealth as possible, with honor and glory as well, yet you take no care or thought for understanding or truth, or for the best possible state of your soul?" In a similar vein, the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE) said, "Let no young man delay the study of philosophy, and let no old man become weary of it; for it is never too early nor too late to care for the well-being of the soul." And in our own era, the philosopher Walter Kaufmann (1921–1980) declared, "Philosophy means liberation from the two dimensions of routine, soaring above the well known, seeing it in new perspectives, arousing wonder and the wish to fly."

Along with philosophical inquiry comes freedom. We begin our lives at a particular place and time, steeped in the ideas and values of a particular culture, fed ready-made beliefs that may or may not be true and that we may never think to question.



**Figure 1.1** Socrates (469–399 BCE).

.....  
2 Is it possible to lead a meaningful life without self-examination?

Philosophy is the highest music.  
—Plato

## 1.1 PHILOSOPHY: THE QUEST FOR UNDERSTANDING

Science gives us knowledge, but only philosophy can give us wisdom.

—Will Durant

The title of this text, *Philosophy Here and Now*, is meant to emphasize that philosophy is, well, here and now—that is, *relevant* and *current*. This means that philosophy, even with its ancient lineage and seemingly remote concerns, applies to your life and your times and your world. Philosophy achieves this immediacy by being many good things at once: it is enlightening, thought-provoking, life-changing, liberating, theoretical, and practical. The world is full of students and teachers who can attest to these claims. More importantly, you will find proof of them in the remainder of this text—and in the writings of the great philosophers, in your grasping what they say and the reasons they give for saying it, and in your own honest attempts to apply philosophy to your life.

*Philosophy* is the name that philosophers have given to both a discipline and a process. As a discipline, philosophy is one of the humanities, a field of study out of which several other fields have evolved—physics, biology, political science, and many others. As a process, philosophy is a penetrating mode of reflection for understanding life’s most important truths. This mode is what we may call the *philosophical method*—the systematic use of critical reasoning to try to find answers to fundamental questions about reality, morality, and knowledge. The method, however, is not a master key used exclusively by professional philosophers to unlock mysteries hidden from common folk. The philosophical method is the birth-right of every person, for we are all born with the capacity to reason, to question, to discover. For thousands of years, great minds like Aristotle, Plato, Confucius, Descartes, Aquinas, and Sartre have used it in their search for wisdom, and what they found has changed countless lives. But amateur philosophers like you have also used it—and continue to use it—to achieve life-altering understanding that would have eluded them otherwise.

### The Good of Philosophy

1 Suppose you had a fundamental belief that the mind, or soul, does not survive the death of the body. What other beliefs would this fundamental belief be likely to support?

Philosophy should be responsive to human experience and yet critical of the defective thinking it sometimes encounters.

—Martha Nussbaum

Philosophy is not just about ideas; it’s about *fundamental* ideas, those upon which other ideas depend. A fundamental belief logically supports other beliefs, and the more beliefs it supports the more fundamental it is. Your belief or disbelief in God, for example, might support a host of other beliefs about morality, life after death, heaven, hell, free will, science, evolution, prayer, abortion, miracles, homosexuality, and more. Thanks to your upbringing, your culture, your peers, and other influences, you already have a head full of fundamental beliefs, some of them true, some false. Whether true or false, they constitute the framework of your whole belief system, and as such they help you make sense of a wide range of important issues in life—issues concerning what exists and what doesn’t, what actions are right or wrong (or neither), and what kinds of things we can know and not know. Fundamental beliefs, therefore, make up your “philosophy of life,” which informs your thinking and guides your actions.

Perhaps now you can better appreciate philosophy’s greatest *practical* benefit: it gives us the intellectual wherewithal to improve our lives by improving our

philosophy of life. A faulty philosophy of life—that is, one that comprises a great many false fundamental beliefs—can lead to a misspent or misdirected life, a life less meaningful than it could be. Philosophy is the most powerful instrument we have for evaluating the worth of our fundamental beliefs and for changing them for the better. Through philosophy we exert control over the trajectory of our lives, making major course corrections by reason and reflection.

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**Figure 1.1** Socrates (469–399 BCE).

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2 Is it possible to lead a meaningful life without self-examination?

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—Plato



**Figure 1.2** Aristotle (384–322 BCE).

To teach how to live without certainty and yet without being paralysed by hesitation is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can do for those who study it.

—Bertrand Russell

**3** Has your thinking recently led you to reflect on philosophical questions? If so, how did the thought process begin, and what fundamental belief did you end up contemplating?

**Metaphysics** is the study of reality in the broadest sense, an inquiry into the elemental nature of the universe and the things in it.

If you passively accept such beliefs, then those beliefs are *not really yours*. If they are not really yours, and you let them guide your choices and actions, then they—not you—are in charge of your life. You thus forfeit your personal freedom. But philosophy helps us rise above this predicament, to transcend the narrow and obstructed standpoint from which we may view everything. It helps us sift our hand-me-down beliefs in the light of reason, look beyond the prejudices that blind us, and see what's real and true. By using the philosophical method, we may learn that some of our beliefs are on solid ground and some are not. In either case, through philosophy our beliefs become truly and authentically our own.

### Philosophical Terrain

Philosophy's sphere of interest is vast, encompassing fundamental beliefs drawn from many places. Philosophical questions can arise anywhere. Part of the reason for this is that ordinary beliefs that seem to have no connection with philosophy can become philosophical in short order. A physiologist may want to know how our brains work, but she ventures into the philosophical arena when she wonders whether the brain is the same thing as the mind—a question that science alone cannot answer. A lawyer studies how the death penalty

is administered in Texas, but he does philosophy when he considers whether capital punishment is ever morally permissible. A medical scientist wants to know how a human fetus develops, but she finds it difficult to avoid the philosophical query of what the moral status of the fetus is. An astrophysicist studies the Big Bang, the cataclysmic explosion thought to have brought the universe into being—but then asks whether the Big Bang shows that God caused the universe to exist. On CNN you see the horrors of war and famine, but then you find yourself grappling with whether they can be squared with the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God. Or you wonder what your moral obligations are to the poor and hungry of the world. Or you ponder whether government should help people in need or leave them to fend for themselves.

We can divide philosophy's subject matter into four main divisions, each of which is a branch of inquiry in its own right with many subcategories. Here's a brief rundown of these divisions and a sampling of the kinds of questions that each asks.

**Metaphysics** is the study of reality in the broadest sense, an inquiry into the elemental nature of the universe and the things in it. Though it must take into account the findings of science, metaphysics generally focuses on basic questions that science cannot address. Questions of interest: Does the world consist only of matter, or is it made up of other basic things, such as ideas or minds? Is there a spiritual, ideal realm that exists beyond the material world? Is the mind the same thing as the



## WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

### Your Philosophical Beliefs

Where do you stand on the fundamental issues in philosophy? Here is your chance to take inventory of your views. After you finish this course, take the survey again. You may be surprised at how your perspective has changed or become more nuanced. Answer with these numbers: 5 = true; 4 = probably true; 3 = neither probable nor improbable; 2 = probably false; 1 = false.

1. The God of traditional Western religions (an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good deity) exists. \_\_\_\_\_
2. This God does not exist. \_\_\_\_\_
3. The apparent design of the universe shows that it had an intelligent designer. \_\_\_\_\_
4. The theory of evolution is a better explanation of the apparent design of biological life than the theory of "intelligent design." \_\_\_\_\_
5. Right actions are those commanded by God; wrong actions are those forbidden by God. \_\_\_\_\_
6. God does not make actions right or wrong by commanding them to be so. \_\_\_\_\_
7. At least some moral norms or principles are objectively true or valid for everyone. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Moral standards are relative to what individuals or cultures believe. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Mind and body consist of two fundamentally different kinds of stuff—nonphysical stuff and physical stuff. \_\_\_\_\_
10. The mind, or soul, can exist without the body. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Our mental states are nothing but brain states (i.e., mind states are identical to brain states). \_\_\_\_\_
12. No one has free will. \_\_\_\_\_
13. Persons have free will (some of our actions are free). \_\_\_\_\_
14. Although our actions are determined, they can still be free (free will and determinism are not in conflict). \_\_\_\_\_
15. We can know some things about the external world. \_\_\_\_\_
16. We cannot know anything about the external world. \_\_\_\_\_
17. Truth about something depends on what a person or culture believes. \_\_\_\_\_
18. Libertarianism is the correct political theory. \_\_\_\_\_
19. Welfare liberalism is the correct moral theory. \_\_\_\_\_
20. Meaning in life comes from outside ourselves, from God or some other transcendent reality. \_\_\_\_\_
21. Meaning in life comes from within ourselves. \_\_\_\_\_

body? How are mind and body related? Do people have immortal souls? Do humans have free will, or are our actions determined by forces beyond our control? Can they be both free and determined? Does God exist? How can both a good God and evil exist simultaneously? What is the nature of causality? Can an effect ever precede its cause? What is the nature of time? Is time travel possible?

And what, Socrates, is the food of the soul? Surely, I said, knowledge is the food of the soul.

—Plato

### MAIN DIVISIONS OF PHILOSOPHY

DIVISION	QUESTIONS
Metaphysics	Does the world consist only of matter, or is it made up of other basic things, such as ideas or mind? Is there a spiritual, ideal realm that exists beyond the material world? Is the mind the same thing as the body? How are mind and body related? Do people have immortal souls? Do humans have free will, or are our actions determined by forces beyond our control? Can they be both free and determined? Does God exist? How can both a good God and evil exist simultaneously? What is the nature of causality? Can an effect ever precede its cause? What is the nature of time? Is time travel possible?
Epistemology	What is knowledge? What is truth? Is knowledge possible—can we ever know anything? Does knowledge require certainty? What are the sources of knowledge? Is experience a source of knowledge? Is mysticism or faith a source? Can we gain knowledge of the empirical world through reason alone? If we have knowledge, how much do we have? When are we justified in saying that we know something? Do we have good reasons to believe that the world exists independently of our minds? Or do our minds constitute reality?
Axiology	What makes an action right (or wrong)? What things are intrinsically good? What is the good life? What gives life meaning? What makes someone good (or bad)? What moral principles should guide our actions and choices? Which is the best moral theory? Is killing ever morally permissible? If so, why? Are moral standards objective or subjective? Is an action right merely because a culture endorses it? Does morality depend on God? What makes a society just?
Logic	What are the rules for drawing correct inferences? What are the nature and structure of deductive arguments? How can propositional or predicate logic be used to evaluate arguments? Upon what logical principles does reasoning depend? Does logic describe how the world is—or just how our minds work? Can conclusions reached through inductive logic be rationally justified?

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**Axiology** is the study of value, including both aesthetic value and moral value. **Ethics** is the study of moral value using the methods of philosophy.

**Axiology** is the study of value, including both aesthetic value and moral value. The study of moral value is known as **ethics**. Ethics involves inquiries into the nature of moral judgments, virtues, values, obligations, and theories. Questions of interest: What makes an action right (or wrong)? What things are intrinsically good? What is the good life? What gives life meaning? What makes someone good (or bad)? What moral principles should guide our actions and choices? Which is the best moral

theory? Is killing ever morally permissible? If so, why? Are moral standards objective or subjective? Is an action right merely because a culture endorses it? Does morality depend on God? What makes a society just?

**Logic** is the study of correct reasoning. Questions of interest: What are the rules for drawing correct inferences? What are the nature and structure of deductive arguments? How can propositional or predicate logic be used to evaluate arguments? Upon what logical principles does reasoning depend? Does logic describe how the world is—or just how our minds work? Can conclusions reached through inductive logic be rationally justified?

In addition to these divisions, there are subdivisions of philosophy whose job is to examine critically the assumptions and principles that underlie other fields. Thus we have the philosophy of science, the philosophy of law, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of history, the philosophy of language, and many others. When those laboring in a discipline begin questioning its most basic ideas—ideas that define its subject matter and principles of inquiry—philosophy, the most elemental mode of investigation, steps in.



**Figure 1.3** Plato, pointing upward toward the higher realm of ideas, and Aristotle, gesturing down toward the things of this earth.

### ESSAY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Section 1.1

1. What is the philosophical method? Who can make use of this approach to important questions? Can only philosophers use it? Have you used it? How?
2. What are some fundamental beliefs that are part of your philosophy of life? How do these beliefs influence your life?
3. What is philosophy's greatest practical benefit? Do you think studying philosophy could change your life goals or your fundamental beliefs? Why or why not?
4. How can philosophy enhance your personal freedom? What are some of your fundamental beliefs that you have never fully examined? What might be the result of never examining a fundamental belief?
5. Which of the four main divisions of philosophy interests you the most? Why? What philosophical questions listed in this section would you most want to have answers to?

**Logic** is the study of correct reasoning.

There's a difference between a philosophy and a bumper sticker.

—Charles M. Schulz

## 1.2 SOCRATES AND THE EXAMINED LIFE

The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.

—Bertrand Russell

**4** Socrates says that a good man can never be harmed. What do you think he means by this?

The **Socratic method** is a question-and-answer dialogue in which propositions are methodically scrutinized to uncover the truth.

The chief benefit, which results from philosophy, arises in an indirect manner, and proceeds more from its secret, insensible influence, than from its immediate application.

—David Hume

There is no better way to understand and appreciate the philosophical quest for knowledge than to study the life and work of Socrates, one of philosophy's greatest practitioners and the most revered figure in its history. Socrates wrote no philosophy, but we know about his thinking and character through his famous pupil Plato, who portrayed him in several dialogues, or conversations (notably in *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, and *Apology*). For two and a half millennia Socrates has been inspiring generations by his devotion to philosophical inquiry, his relentless search for wisdom, and his determination to live according to his own high standards. As mentioned earlier, he famously said that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and he became the best example of someone living his life by that maxim. Thus, at a time when most philosophy was directed at cosmological speculations, he turned to critically examining people's basic concepts, common beliefs, and moral thinking.

For Socrates, an unexamined life is a tragedy because it results in grievous harm to the soul, a person's true self or essence. The soul is harmed by lack of knowledge—ignorance of one's own self and of the most important values in life (the good). But knowledge of these things is a mark of the soul's excellence. A clear sign that a person has an unhealthy soul is her exclusive pursuit of social status, wealth, power, and pleasure instead of the good of the soul. The good of the soul is attained only through an uncompromising search for what's true and real, through the wisdom to see what is most vital in life. Such insight comes from rational self-examination and critical questioning of facile assumptions and unsupported beliefs. To get to the truth, Socrates thought, we must go around the false certitudes of custom, tradition, and superstition and let reason be our guide. Thus he played the role of philosophical gadfly, an annoying pest to the people of Athens, prodding them to wake up and seek the wisdom within their grasp.

We know very little about Socrates' life. He spent all his days in Athens except for a term of military service in which he soldiered in the Peloponnesian War. He was married and had three sons. He spent much of his time roaming the streets of Athens, speaking with anyone who would listen. His habit was to ask people seemingly simple questions about their views on virtue, religion, justice, or the good, challenging them to think critically about their basic assumptions. This sort of question-and-answer dialogue in which propositions are methodically scrutinized to uncover the truth has become known as the **Socratic method**. Usually when Socrates used it in conversations, or dialogues, with his fellow Athenians, their views would be exposed as false or confused. The main point of the exercise for Socrates, however, was not to win arguments but to get closer to the truth. He thought people who pursued this noble aim as he did should not be embarrassed by being shown to be wrong; they should be delighted to be weaned from a false opinion. Nevertheless, the Socratic conversations often ended in the humiliation of eminent Athenians. They were enraged by Socrates, while many youths gravitated to him.

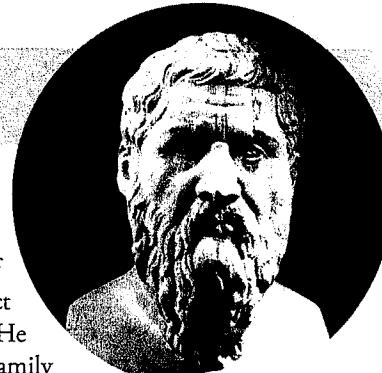
Eventually Socrates was arrested and charged with disrespecting the gods and corrupting the youth of the city. He was tried before five hundred jurors, a majority

## PHILOSOPHERS AT WORK

### Plato

No philosopher—with the possible exception of Aristotle—has had a deeper and more lasting effect on Western thought than Plato (c. 427–347 BCE). He was born in Athens into an influential aristocratic family and grew up during the perilous years of the Peloponnesian War, a struggle between Athens and the Peloponnesian states. He was a student and admirer of Socrates, who turned Plato's mind toward philosophy and the pursuit of wisdom. He was horrified by Socrates' execution in 399 for impiety and corruption of Athenian youth, so he left Athens and traveled widely, possibly to Sicily and Egypt. When he returned to Athens, he founded the Academy, a teaching college regarded as the first university, and devoted the rest of his life to teaching and writing philosophy. (The Academy endured for hundreds of years until it was abolished by the Eastern Roman emperor Justinian I.) The Academy's most renowned student was Aristotle, who entered the school at age seventeen and remained for twenty years.

Plato's thinking is embodied in his dialogues, twenty-five of which exist in their complete form. They were written during a span of fifty years and have been divided into three periods: early, middle, and late. The early dialogues include *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Meno*, and *Gorgias*. These early works portray Socrates as a brilliant and principled deflater of his contemporaries' bogus claims to knowledge. The middle dialogues include *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus*; the late ones consist of *Critias*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Laws*, and others.



**Figure 1.4** Plato  
(c. 427–347 BCE).

of whom voted to convict him. His sentence was death or exile; he chose death by poison rather than leave his beloved Athens. In his dialogues *Crito* and *Phaedo*, Plato recounts the events of the trial, including Socrates' address to the jurors. Socrates is portrayed as a man of brilliant intellect and unshakeable integrity who would not compromise his principles, even to escape death.

In one form or another, the Socratic method has been part of Western education for centuries. It is one of the ways that philosophy is done, a powerful procedure for applying critical thinking to many statements that seem out of reason's reach. As Socrates used it, the method typically would go like this: (1) someone poses a question about the meaning of a concept (for example, "What is justice?"); (2) Socrates' companion gives an answer; (3) Socrates raises questions about the answer, proving that the answer is inadequate; (4) to avoid the problems inherent in this answer, the companion offers a second answer; (5) steps (3) and (4) are repeated a



**Figure 1.5** *The Death of Socrates* by Jacques-Louis David.

number of times, ultimately revealing that the companion does not know what he thought he knew. To Socrates, this negative outcome is actually a kind of progress. False answers are eliminated, opinions are improved, and perhaps the truth is a little closer than before.

Let's watch Socrates in action. Here is his conversation with Thrasymachus, a teacher eager to demonstrate that Socrates is not as wise as people say he is. The question is "What is justice?" and Thrasymachus insists that justice is whatever is in the interest of the strongest—that is, might makes right.

Plato, *The Republic*

Listen, then, he [Thrasymachus] said; I proclaim that justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger. And now why do you not praise me? But of course you won't.

Let me first understand you, I [Socrates] replied. Justice, as you say, is the interest of the stronger. What, Thrasymachus, is the meaning of this? You can not mean to say that because Polydamas, the pancratiast [an athlete], is stronger than we are, and finds the *eating* of beef conducive to his bodily strength, that to eat beef is therefore equally for our good who are weaker than he is, and right and just for us?

That's abominable of you, Socrates; you take the words in the sense which is most damaging to the argument.

Not at all, my good sir, I said; I am trying to understand them; and I wish that you would be a little clearer.

Well, he said, have you never heard that forms of government differ; there are tyrannies, and there are democracies, and there are aristocracies?

Yes, I know.

And the government is the ruling power in each state?

Certainly.

And the different forms of government make laws democratical, aristocratical, tyrannical, with a view to their several interests; and these laws, which are made by them for their own interests, are the justice which they deliver to their subjects, and him who transgresses them they punish as a breaker of the law and unjust. And that is what I mean when I say that in all states there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government; and as the government must be supposed to have power, the only reasonable conclusion is, that everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the stronger.

Now I understand you, I said; and whether you are right or not I will try to discover. But let me remark, that in defining justice you have yourself used the word "interest" which you forbade me to use. It is true, however, that in your definition the words "of the stronger" are added.

A small addition, you must allow, he said.

Great or small, never mind about that: we must first inquire whether what you are saying is the truth. Now we are both agreed that justice is interest of some sort, but you go on to say "of the stronger"; about this addition I am not so sure, and must therefore consider further.

Proceed.

I will; and first tell me, Do you admit that it is just for subjects to obey their rulers? I do.

But are the rulers of states absolutely infallible, or are they sometimes liable to err? To be sure, he replied, they are liable to err.

Then in making their laws they may sometimes make them rightly, and sometimes not?

True.

When they make them rightly, they make them agreeably to their interest; when they are mistaken, contrary to their interest; you admit that?

Yes.

And the laws which they make must be obeyed by their subjects—and that is what you call justice?

Doubtless.

Then justice, according to your argument, is not only obedience to the interest of the stronger but the reverse?

What is that you are saying? he asked.

I am only repeating what you are saying, I believe. But let us consider: Have we not admitted that the rulers may be mistaken about their own interest in what they command, and also that to obey them is justice? Has not that been admitted?

Yes.

Then you must also have acknowledged justice not to be for the interest of the stronger, when the rulers unintentionally command things to be done which are to their own injury. For if, as you say, justice is the obedience which the subject renders to their commands, in that case, O wisest of men, is there any escape from the conclusion that the weaker are commanded to do, not what is for the interest, but what is for the injury of the stronger?<sup>1</sup>

Astonishment is the root of philosophy.

—Paul Tillich

5 Socrates never seems adversarial or combative in his dialogues. What effect do you think this approach has on those who enter into dialogue with him?

## PHILOSOPHY NOW

### Socrates Café

The Socratic method is alive and well in the twenty-first century—Christopher Phillips, author and educator, has seen to that. He has traveled from one end of the country to the other to facilitate philosophical discussions based on the Socratic method. These informal gatherings attract people of all ages from all sorts of backgrounds and life experiences. He calls the dialogues Socrates Cafés. They are held in coffeehouses, day care centers, senior centers, high schools, churches, and other places, and they have had a profound effect on him and on many people who have participated in such discussions. As Phillips says,

For a long time, I'd had a notion that the demise of a certain type of philosophy has been to the detriment of our society. It is a type of philosophy that Socrates and other philosophers practiced in Athens in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. A type that utilized a method of philosophical inquiry that "everyman" and "everywoman" could embrace and take for his or her own, and in the process rekindle the childlike—but by no means childish—sense of wonder. . . .

The Socratic method of questioning aims to help people gain a better understanding of themselves and their nature and their potential for excellence. At times, it can help people make more well-informed life choices, because they now are in a better position to know themselves, to comprehend who they are and what they want. It can also enable a thoughtful person to articulate and then apply his or her unique philosophy of life. This in turn will better equip a questioning soul to engage in the endless and noble pursuit of wisdom.—*Socrates Café* (2001)

Phillips is the author of several books including *Socrates Café* and *Six Questions of Socrates: A Modern-Day Journey of Discovery through World Philosophy*. He is also co-founder of the Society for Philosophical Inquiry ([www.philosopher.org](http://www.philosopher.org)), which supports the creation and development of Socrates Cafés around the world. He says there are now over six hundred Socrates Cafés worldwide.

Socrates Cafés usually begin with a question such as "What is sanity?" "When is life not worth living?" or "Is there such a thing as human nature?" The list of possible questions is long and varied. If you were to participate in a Socrates Café, what question would you most like to address?

Socrates uses his famous question-and-answer approach to prove that Thrasymachus's definition of justice is wrong. In particular, he applies a common form of argument called ***reductio ad absurdum***. (Other argument forms are discussed in the following section.) The basic idea behind it is if you assume that a set of statements

is true, and yet you can deduce a false or absurd statement from it, then the original set of statements as a whole must be false. So, in the preceding dialogue, Socrates says in effect, Let's assume that Thrasymachus is right that justice is whatever is in the interest of the powerful, and that people are just if they obey the laws made by the powerful. It is clear, however, that the powerful sometimes make mistakes and demand obedience to laws that are *not* in their best interest. So if Thrasymachus's definition of justice is correct, then it is right for people to do what is in the interest of the powerful, and it is also right to do what is *not* in the interest of the powerful. His idea of justice then leads to a logical contradiction and is therefore false.

***Reductio ad absurdum***  
is an argument form in which a set of statements to be proved false is assumed, and absurd or false statements are deduced from the set as a whole, showing that the original statement must be false.

#### ESSAY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Section 1.2

1. Could the execution of someone for saying unpopular things happen in this country? Why or why not? Are there countries in the world where such things happen regularly? Is the execution of someone for his or her offensive speech ever justified? Explain.
2. What do you think Socrates would think about modern consumer societies?
3. Socrates is often regarded as the noblest of the great philosophers. Is this opinion justified? Why or why not?
4. Write an imaginary Socratic dialogue between yourself and a friend. Imagine that your friend declares, "Everyone lies. No one ever tells the truth," and you want to show that those statements are false.
5. Write a Socratic dialogue between two fictional characters. Imagine that the opening statement is, "Courtesy to others is always a cynical attempt to serve your own interests. Respect for people has nothing to do with courtesy."

### 1.3 THINKING PHILOSOPHICALLY

As we have seen, to think philosophically is to bring your powers of critical reasoning to bear on fundamental questions. When you do this, you are usually clarifying the meaning of concepts, constructing and evaluating philosophical theories, or devising and evaluating logical arguments. This latter task constitutes the principal labor of philosophy. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and other great thinkers do not deliver their philosophical insights to us without argument, as if we are automatically to accept their views with no questions asked. Philosophers provide *reasons* for thinking their ideas are plausible—that is, they give us arguments. And if we believe what they say, it should be because there are good reasons for doing so. Likewise, if we expect intelligent people to accept *our* philosophical views, we must

argue our case. Since the philosophy we read will most likely contain arguments, our understanding of the text will hang on our ability to identify and understand those arguments.

## Reasons and Arguments

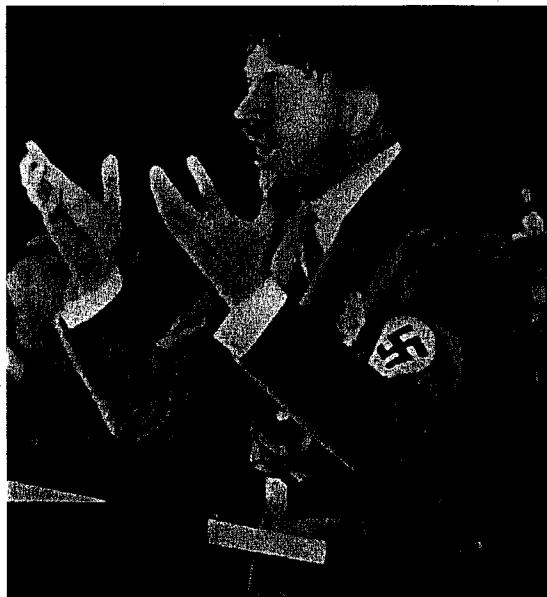
An **argument** is a statement coupled with other statements that are meant to support that statement. A **statement (claim)** is an assertion that something is or is not the case and is therefore the kind of utterance that is either true or false. A **conclusion** is the statement being supported. A **premise** is a statement supporting the conclusion.

As you might have guessed, the term *argument* does not refer to heated disagreements or emotional squabbles. An **argument** is a group of statements in which one of them is meant to be supported by the others. A **statement (or claim)** is an assertion that something is or is not the case and is therefore the kind of utterance that is either true or false. In an argument, the statement being supported is the **conclusion**, and the statements supporting the conclusion are the **premises**. The premises are meant to provide reasons for believing that the conclusion is true. A good argument gives us good reasons for accepting a conclusion; a bad argument fails to provide good reasons. In philosophy—and in any other kind of rational inquiry—accepting a conclusion (statement) without good reasons is an elementary mistake in reasoning. Believing a statement without good reasons is a recipe for error; believing a statement for good reasons increases your chances of uncovering the truth.

When we do philosophy, then, we are likely at some point to be grappling with arguments—we are trying to either (1) devise an argument to support a statement or (2) evaluate an argument to see if there really are good reasons for accepting its conclusion.

Note that *argument* in the sense used here is not synonymous with *persuasion*. An argument provides us with reasons for accepting a claim; it is an attempted “proof” for an assertion. But persuasion does not necessarily involve giving any reasons at all for accepting a claim. To persuade is to influence people’s opinions, which can be accomplished by offering a good argument but also by misleading with logical fallacies, exploiting emotions and prejudices, dazzling with rhetorical gimmicks, hiding or distorting the facts, threatening or coercing people—the list is long. Good arguments prove something whether or not they persuade. Persuasive ploys can change minds but do not necessarily prove anything.

Now consider these two simple arguments:



**Figure 1.6** Hitler was a master persuader, relying not on good arguments but on emotional rhetoric. How many people today would be persuaded by a contemporary politician with Hitler's rhetorical talents?

### Argument 1

It's wrong to take the life of an innocent person.  
Abortion takes the life of an innocent person.  
Therefore abortion is wrong.

### Argument 2

God does not exist. After all, most college students believe that that is the case.

## PHILOSOPHY LAB

Do you live an examined life? The following statements express some fundamental beliefs—beliefs that countless people have but may never have thought much about. Read each statement and select the ones that you sincerely believe. Then try to recall if you have ever seriously questioned these beliefs. (Passing thoughts and idle reveries do not count.) Be honest. This little experiment could be very revealing—and helpful as you think about your life and values.

1. God exists and watches over me.
2. God sometimes answers prayers.
3. There is a heaven.
4. I have both a body and an immortal soul.
5. My emotions are not under my control; they just happen.
6. It is wrong to criticize other cultures.
7. It is wrong to judge other people's actions.
8. The moral principles that I was raised to believe are the right ones.
9. Political conservatives are wrong about most issues.
10. Political liberals are wrong about most issues.
11. I make free choices; all my decisions are up to me.
12. I can come to know some things by faith alone.
13. My emotions are my best guide to what is morally right or wrong.
14. People are basically bad.
15. People are basically good.

In Argument 1, the conclusion is “abortion is wrong,” and it is backed by two premises: “It’s wrong to take the life of an innocent person” and “Abortion takes the life of an innocent person.” In Argument 2, the conclusion is “God does not exist,” which is supported by the premise “After all, most college students believe that that is the case.” Despite the differences between these two passages (differences in content, the number of premises, and the order of their parts), they are both arguments because they exemplify basic argument structure: a conclusion supported by at least one premise.

Though the components of an argument seem clear enough, people often fail to distinguish between arguments and strong statements that contain no arguments at all. Suppose we change Argument 1 into this:

Abortion is wrong. I can’t believe how many people think it’s morally okay. The world is insane.

Now there is no argument, just an expression of exasperation or anger. There are no statements giving us reasons to believe a conclusion. What we have are some unsupported assertions that may merely *appear* to make a case. If we ignore the

Philosophy asks the simple question, what is it all about?

—Alfred North Whitehead

distinction between genuine arguments and nonargumentative material, critical reasoning is undone.

The simplest way to locate an argument is to *find its conclusion first, then its premises*. Zeroing in on conclusions and premises can be a lot easier if you keep an eye out for *indicator words*. Indicator words often tag along with arguments and indicate that a conclusion or premise may be nearby.

Here are a few conclusion indicator words:

consequently	as a result
thus	hence
therefore	so
it follows that	which means that

Here are some premise indicator words:

in view of the fact	assuming that
because	since
due to the fact that	for
inasmuch as	given that

Just remember that indicator words do not *guarantee* the presence of conclusions and premises. They are simply telltale signs.

Assuming we can recognize an argument when we see it, how can we tell if it is a good one? Fortunately, the general criteria for judging the merits of an argument are simple and clear. A good argument—one that gives us good reasons for believing a claim—must have (1) solid logic and (2) true premises. Requirement (1) means that the conclusion should follow logically from the premises, that there must be a proper logical connection between the supporting statements and the statement supported. Requirement (2) says that what the premises assert must in fact be the case. An argument that fails in either respect is a bad argument.

There are two basic kinds of arguments—deductive and inductive—and our two requirements hold for both of them, even though the logical connections in each type are distinct. **Deductive arguments** are intended to give *logically conclusive* support to their conclusions so that if the premises are true, the conclusion absolutely must be true. Argument 1 is a deductive argument and is therefore supposed to be constructed so that if the two premises are true, its conclusion cannot possibly be false. Here it is with its structure laid bare:

### Argument 1

1. It's wrong to take the life of an innocent person.
2. Abortion takes the life of an innocent person.
3. Therefore, abortion is wrong.

Do you see that, given the form or structure of this argument, if the premises are true, then the conclusion *has to be true*? It would be very strange—illogical, in fact—to agree that the two premises are true but that the conclusion is false.

One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes . . . and the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.  
—Eleanor Roosevelt

**6** Recall some statements that you have heard or read in which strong assertions were made but no argument was presented. Did the assertions prove anything? What was your reaction at the time? Were you persuaded or impressed by them?

A deductive argument is an argument intended to give logically conclusive support to its conclusion.

Now look at this one:

### Argument 3

1. All dogs are mammals.
2. Rex is a dog.
3. Therefore, Rex is a mammal.

Again, there is no way for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false. The deductive form of the argument guarantees this.

So a deductive argument is intended to have this sort of airtight structure. If it actually does have this structure, it is said to be *valid*. Argument 1 is deductive because it is intended to provide logically conclusive support to its conclusion. It is valid because, as a matter of fact, it does offer this kind of support. A deductive argument that fails to provide conclusive support to its conclusion is said to be *invalid*. In such an argument, it is possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. Argument 3 is intended to have a deductive form, and because it actually does have this form, the argument is also valid.

An elementary fact about deductive arguments is that their validity (or lack thereof) is a *separate issue* from the truth of the premises. Validity is a structural matter, depending on how an argument is put together. Truth concerns the nature of the claims made in the premises and conclusion. A deductive argument is supposed to be built so that if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true—but in a particular case, the premises might *not* be true. A valid argument can have true or false premises and a true or false conclusion. (By definition, of course, it cannot have true premises and a false conclusion.) In any case, being invalid or having false premises dooms a deductive argument.

**Inductive arguments** are supposed to give *probable* support to their conclusions. Unlike deductive arguments, they are not designed to support their conclusions decisively. They can establish only that, if their premises are true, their conclusions are probably true (more likely to be true than not). Argument 2 is an inductive argument meant to demonstrate the probable truth that “God does not exist.” Like all inductive arguments (and unlike deductive ones), it can have true premises and a false conclusion. So it’s possible for the sole premise—“After all, most college students believe that that is the case”—to be true while the conclusion is false.

If inductive arguments succeed in lending probable support to their conclusions, they are said to be *strong*. Strong arguments are such that if their premises are true, their conclusions are probably true. If they fail to provide this probable support, they are termed *weak*. Argument 2 is a weak argument because its premise, even if true, does not show that more likely than not God does not exist. What college students (or any other group) believe about God does not constitute good evidence for or against God’s existence.

But consider this inductive argument:

### Argument 4

1. Eighty-five percent of the students at this university are Republicans.
2. Sonia is a student at this university.
3. Therefore, Sonia is probably a Republican.

Philosophy, when superficially studied, excites doubt; when thoroughly explored, it dispels it.

—Francis Bacon

An **inductive argument** is an argument intended to give probable support to its conclusion.

This argument is strong. If its premises are true, its conclusion is likely to be true. If 85 percent of the university's students are Republicans, and Sonia is a university student, she is more likely than not to be a Republican too.

When a valid (deductive) argument has true premises, it is a good argument. A good deductive argument is said to be *sound*. Argument 1 is valid, but we cannot say whether it is sound until we determine the truth of the premises. Argument 3 is valid, and if its premises are true, it is sound. When a strong (inductive) argument has true premises, it is also a good argument. A good inductive argument is said to be *cogent*. Argument 2 is weak, so there is no way it can be cogent. Argument 4 is strong, and if its premises are true, it is cogent.

Checking the validity or strength of an argument is often a plain, commonsense undertaking. Using our natural reasoning ability, we can examine how the premises are linked to the conclusion and can see quickly whether the conclusion follows from the premises. We are most likely to make an easy job of it when the arguments are simple. Many times, however, we need some help, and help is available in the form of methods and guidelines for evaluating arguments.

Having a familiarity with common argument patterns, or forms, is especially useful when assessing the validity of deductive arguments. We are likely to encounter these forms again and again. Here is a prime example:

### Argument 5

1. If the surgeon operates, then the patient will be cured.
2. The surgeon is operating.
3. Therefore, the patient will be cured.

Philosophy is like trying to open a safe with a combination lock: each little adjustment of the dials seems to achieve nothing, only when everything is in place does the door open.  
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

This argument form contains a *conditional* premise—that is, a premise consisting of a conditional, or if-then, statement (actually a compound statement composed of two constituent statements). Premise 1 is a conditional statement. A conditional statement has two parts: the part beginning with *if* (called the *antecedent*), and the part beginning with *then* (known as the *consequent*). So the antecedent of Premise 1 is "If the surgeon operates," and the consequent is "then the patient will be cured."

The best way to appreciate the structure of such an argument (or any deductive argument, for that matter) is to translate it into traditional argument symbols in which each statement is symbolized by a letter. Here is the symbolization for Argument 5:

1. If  $p$ , then  $q$ .
2.  $p$ .
3. Therefore,  $q$ .

We can see that  $p$  represents "the surgeon operates," and  $q$  represents "the patient will be cured." But notice that we can use this same symbolized argument form to represent countless other arguments—arguments with different statements but having the same basic structure.

It just so happens that the underlying argument form for Argument 5 is extremely common—common enough to have a name, *modus ponens* (or affirming the antecedent). The truly useful fact about *modus ponens* is that any argument having this form is valid. We can plug any statements we want into the formula and the

result will be a valid argument, a circumstance in which if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

An equally prevalent argument form is *modus tollens* (or denying the consequent). For example:

#### **Argument 6**

1. If the dose is low, then the healing is slow.
2. The healing is not slow.
3. Therefore, the dose is not low.
  
1. If  $p$ , then  $q$ .
2. Not  $q$ .
3. Therefore, not  $p$ .

*Modus tollens* is also a valid form, and any argument using this form must also be valid.

There are also common argument forms that are invalid. Here are two of them:

#### **Argument 7 (Affirming the Consequent)**

1. If the mind is an immaterial substance, then ESP is real.
2. ESP is real.
3. Therefore, the mind is an immaterial substance.
  
1. If  $p$ , then  $q$ .
2.  $q$ .
3. Therefore,  $p$ .

#### **Argument 8 (Denying the Antecedent)**

1. If morality is relative to persons (that is, if moral rightness or wrongness depends on what people believe), then moral disagreement between persons would be nearly impossible.
2. But morality is not relative to persons.
3. Therefore, moral disagreement between persons is not nearly impossible.
  
1. If  $p$ , then  $q$ .
2. Not  $p$ .
3. Therefore, not  $q$ .

The advantage of being able to recognize these and other common argument forms is that you can use that skill to readily determine the validity of many deductive arguments. You know, for example, that any argument having the same form as *modus ponens* or *modus tollens* must be valid, and any argument in one of the common invalid forms must be invalid.

Inductive arguments also have distinctive forms, and being familiar with the forms can help you evaluate the arguments. In *enumerative induction*, we arrive at a generalization about an entire group of things after observing just some members of the group. Consider these:

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7 Before reading this chapter, would you have found any of the invalid argument forms persuasive? Why or why not?

The essence of philosophy is that a man should so live that his happiness shall depend as little as possible on external things.  
—Epicetus

### Argument 9

Every formatted disk I have bought from the computer store is defective.

Therefore, all formatted disks sold at the computer store are probably defective.

### Argument 10

All the hawks in this wildlife sanctuary that I have observed have had red tails.

Therefore, all the hawks in this sanctuary probably have red tails.

### Argument 11

Sixty percent of the Bostonians I have interviewed in various parts of the city are pro-choice.

Therefore, 60 percent of all Bostonians are probably pro-choice.

As you can see, enumerative induction has this form:

*X percent of the observed members of group A have property P.*

*Therefore, X percent of all members of group A probably have property P.*

The observed members of the group are simply a sample of the entire group. So based on what we know about this sample, we can generalize to all the members. But how do we know whether such an argument is strong? Everything depends on the sample. If the sample is large enough and representative enough, we can safely assume that our generalization drawn from the sample is probably an accurate reflection of the whole group of members. A sample is representative of an entire group only if each member of the group has an equal chance of being included in the sample. In general, the larger the sample, the greater the probability that it accurately reflects the nature of the group as a whole. Often common sense tells us when a sample is too small.

We do not know how many formatted disks from the computer store are in the sample mentioned in Argument 9. But if the number is several dozen and the disks were bought over a period of weeks or months, the sample is probably sufficiently large and representative. If so, the argument is strong. Likewise, in Argument 10 we don't know the size of the sample or how it was obtained. But if the sample was taken from all the likely spots in the sanctuary where hawks live, and if several hawks were observed in each location, the sample is probably adequate—and the argument is strong. In Argument 11, if the sample consists of a handful of Bostonians interviewed on a few street corners, the sample is definitely inadequate and the argument is weak. But if the sample consists of several hundred people, and if every member of the whole group has an equal chance of being included in the sample, then the sample would be good enough to allow us to accurately generalize about the whole

## VALID AND INVALID ARGUMENT FORMS

### VALID ARGUMENT FORMS

Affirming the Antecedent  
(*Modus Ponens*)

If  $p$ , then  $q$ .

$p$ .

Therefore,  $q$ .

Example:

If Spot barks, a burglar is in the house.

Spot is barking.

Therefore, a burglar is in the house.

Denying the Consequent  
(*Modus Tollens*)

If  $p$ , then  $q$ .

Not  $q$ .

Therefore, not  $p$ .

Example:

If Spot barks, a burglar is in the house.

A burglar is not in the house.

Therefore, Spot is not barking.

### INVALID ARGUMENT FORMS

Affirming the Consequent

If  $p$ , then  $q$ .

$q$ .

Therefore,  $p$ .

Example:

If the cat is on the mat, she is asleep.

She is asleep.

Therefore, she is on the mat.

Denying the Antecedent

If  $p$ , then  $q$ .

Not  $p$ .

Therefore, not  $q$ .

Example:

If the cat is on the mat, she is asleep.

She is not on the mat.

Therefore, she is not asleep.

population. Typically, selecting such a sample of a large population is done by professional polling organizations.

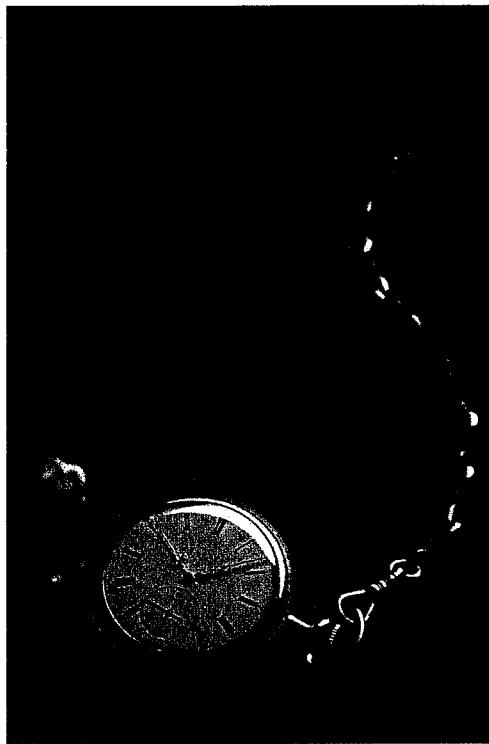
In the argument form known as *analogical induction* (or argument by analogy), we reason in this fashion: Two or more things are similar in several ways; therefore, they are probably similar in one further way. Consider this argument:

### Argument 12

Humans can walk upright, use simple tools, learn new skills, and devise deductive arguments.

Chimpanzees can walk upright, use simple tools, and learn new skills.

Therefore, chimpanzees can probably devise deductive arguments.



**Figure 1.7** How much is a watch like the universe? Everything depends on the relevant similarities and differences.

The object of studying philosophy is to know one's own mind, not other people's.

—Dean Inge

This argument says that because chimpanzees are similar to humans in several respects, they probably are similar to humans in one further respect.

Here's an argument by analogy that has become a classic in philosophy:

### Argument 13

A watch is a complex mechanism with many parts that seem arranged to achieve a specific purpose—a purpose chosen by the watch's designer.

In similar fashion, the universe is a complex mechanism with many parts that seem arranged to achieve a specific purpose.

Therefore, the universe must also have a designer.

We can represent the form of an argument by analogy in this way:

X has properties P<sub>1</sub>, P<sub>2</sub>, P<sub>3</sub>, plus the property P<sub>4</sub>.

Y has properties P<sub>1</sub>, P<sub>2</sub>, and P<sub>3</sub>.

Therefore, Y probably has property P<sub>4</sub>.

The strength of an analogical induction depends on the relevant similarities between the two things compared. The more relevant similarities there are, the greater the probability that the conclusion is true. In Argument 12, several similarities are noted. But there are some unmentioned dissimilarities. The brain of a chimpanzee is smaller and more primitive than that of a human, a difference that probably inhibits higher intellectual functions such as logical argument. Argument 12, then, is weak. A common response to Argument 13 is that the argument is weak because although the universe resembles a watch in some ways, in other ways it does not resemble a watch. Specifically, the universe also resembles a living thing.

The third type of inductive argument is known as *inference to the best explanation* (or abduction), a kind of reasoning that we all use daily and that is at the heart of scientific investigations. Recall that an argument gives us reasons for believing *that* something is the case. An *explanation*, on the other hand, states *how* or *why* something is the case. It attempts to clarify or elucidate, not offer proof. For example:

1. Megan definitely understood the material, for she could answer every question on the test.
2. Megan understood the material because she has a good memory.

Sentence 1 is an argument. The conclusion is "Megan definitely understood the material," and the reason (premise) given for believing that the conclusion is true is "for she could answer every question on the test." Sentence 2, though, is an explanation. It does not try to present reasons for believing something; it has nothing to

prove. Instead, it tries to show why something is the way it is (why Megan understood the material). Sentence 2 assumes that Megan understood the material then tries to explain why. Such explanations play a crucial role in inference to the best explanation.

In inference to the best explanation, we begin with premises about a phenomenon or state of affairs to be explained. Then we reason from those premises to an explanation for that state of affairs. We try to produce not just any old explanation, but the best explanation among several possibilities. The best explanation is the one most likely to be true. The conclusion of the argument is that the preferred explanation is indeed probably true. For example:

#### **Argument 14**

Tariq flunked his philosophy course.

The best explanation for his failure is that he didn't read the material.

Therefore, he probably didn't read the material.

#### **Argument 15**

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the defendant was found with the murder weapon in his hand, blood on his clothes, and the victim's wallet in his pocket. We have an eyewitness putting the defendant at the scene of the crime. The best explanation for all these facts is that the defendant committed the murder. There can be very little doubt—he's guilty.

Here's the form of inference to the best explanation:

Phenomenon *Q*.

*E* provides the best explanation for *Q*.

Therefore, it is probable that *E* is true.

In any argument of this pattern, if the explanation given is really the best, then the argument is inductively strong. If the explanation is not the best, the argument is inductively weak. If the premises of the strong argument are true, then the argument is cogent. If the argument is cogent, then we have good reason to believe that the conclusion is true.

The biggest challenge in using inference to the best explanation is determining which explanation is the best. Sometimes this feat is easy. If our car has a flat tire, we may quickly uncover the best explanation for such a state of affairs. If we see a nail sticking out of the flat and there is no obvious evidence of tampering or of any other extraordinary cause (that is, there are no good alternative explanations), we may safely conclude that the best explanation is that a nail punctured the tire.

In more complicated situations, we may need to do what scientists do to evaluate explanations, or theories—use special criteria to sort through the possibilities. Scientists call these standards the *criteria of adequacy*. Despite this fancy name, these criteria are basically just common sense, standards that you have probably used yourself.

The true function of philosophy is to educate us in the principles of reasoning and not to put an end to further reasoning by the introduction of fixed conclusions.

—George Henry Lewes

One of these criteria is called *conservatism*. This criterion says that, all things being equal, the best explanation or theory is the one that fits best with what is already known or established. For example, if a friend of yours says—in all seriousness—that she can fly to the moon without using any kind of rocket or spaceship, you probably wouldn’t believe her (and might even think that she needed psychiatric help). Your reasons for doubting her would probably rest on the criterion of conservatism—that what she says conflicts with everything science knows about spaceflight, human anatomy, aerodynamics, laws of nature, and much more. It is logically possible that she really can fly to the moon, but her claim’s lack of conservatism (the fact that it conflicts with so much of what we already know about the world) casts serious doubt on it.

Here is another useful criterion for judging the worth of explanations: *simplicity*. Other things being equal, the best explanation is the one that is the simplest—that is, the one that rests on the fewest assumptions. The theory making the fewest assumptions is less likely to be false because there are fewer ways for it to go wrong. In the example about the flat tire, one possible (but strange) explanation is that space aliens punctured the tire. You probably wouldn’t put much credence in this explanation because you would have to assume too many unknown entities and processes—namely, space aliens who have come from who-knows-where using who-knows-what methods to move about and puncture your tires. The nail-in-the-tire theory is much simpler (it assumes no unknown entities or processes) and is therefore much more likely to be true.

When you are carefully reading an argument (whether in an essay or some other context), you will be just as interested in whether the premises are true as in whether the conclusion follows from the premises. If the writer is conscientious, he or she will try to ensure that each premise is either well supported or in no need of support (because the premise is obvious or agreed to by all parties). The needed support will come from the citing of examples, statistics, research, expert opinion, and other kinds of evidence or reasons. This arrangement means that each premise of the primary argument may be a conclusion supported in turn by premises citing evidence or reasons. In any case, you as the reader will have to evaluate carefully the truth of all premises and the support behind them.

## Reading Philosophy

Unfortunately, arguments in philosophical essays rarely come neatly labeled so you can find and evaluate them. You have to do that work yourself, a task that requires careful reading and thinking. The process can be challenging because in the real world, arguments can be simple or complex, clearly stated or perplexing, and apparent or hidden. This is true for philosophical essays as well as for any other kind of writing that contains arguments. In some philosophical prose, the relationship between the conclusion (or conclusions) and the premises can be complicated, and even good arguments can be surrounded by material irrelevant to the arguments at hand. The remedy for these difficulties is instructive examples and plenty of practice, some of which you can get in this chapter.

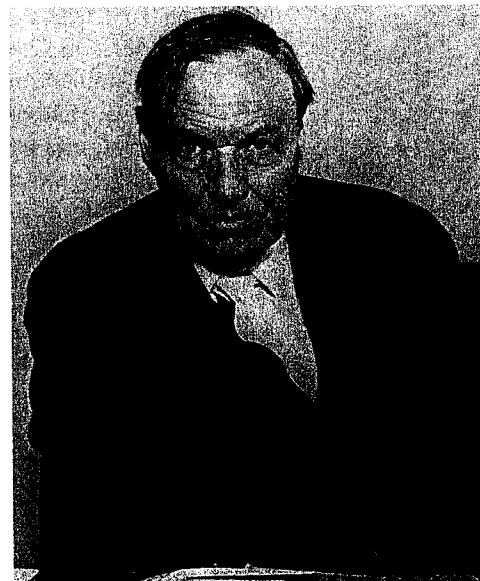
Let’s begin by identifying and analyzing the argument in the following passage. The issue is whether humans have free will or are compelled by forces beyond their

control to act as they do (a topic we take up in Chapter 5). The statements are numbered for ease of reference.

- (1) The famous trial lawyer Clarence Darrow (1857–1938) made a name for himself by using the “determinism defense” to get his clients acquitted of serious crimes.
- (2) The crux of this approach is the idea that humans are not really responsible for anything they do because they cannot choose freely—they are “determined,” predestined, if you will, by nature (or God) to be the way they are.
- (3) So in a sense, Darrow says, humans are like wind-up toys with no control over any action or decision.
- (4) They have no free will.
- (5) Remember that Darrow was a renowned agnostic who was skeptical of all religious claims.
- (6) But Darrow is wrong about human free will for two reasons.
- (7) First, in our everyday moral life, our own commonsense experience suggests that sometimes people are free to make moral decisions.
- (8) We should not abandon what our commonsense experience tells us without good reason—and
- (9) Darrow has given us no good reason.
- (10) Second, Darrow’s determinism is not confirmed by science, as he claims—but actually conflicts with science.
- (11) Modern science says that there are many things (at the subatomic level of matter) that are not determined at all:
- (12) they just happen.

Indicator words are scarce in this argument, unless you count the words “first” and “second” as signifying premises. But the conclusion is not hard to find; it’s Statement 6: “Darrow is wrong about human free will for two reasons.” Locating the conclusion enables us to see that some statements (Statements 1 through 4) are neither conclusion nor premises; they are just background information on Darrow’s views. Most argumentative essays contain some supplemental information like this. Statement 5 is irrelevant to the argument; Darrow’s agnosticism has no logical connection to the premises or conclusion. Statement 12 is just a rewording of Statement 11. After this elimination process, only the following premises and conclusion (Statement 6) remain:

- (6) But Darrow is wrong about human free will for two reasons.
- (7) First, in our everyday moral life, our own commonsense experience suggests that sometimes people are free to make moral decisions.
- (8) We should not abandon what our commonsense experience tells us without good reason.
- (9) Darrow has given us no good reason.
- (10) Darrow’s determinism is not confirmed by science, as he claims—but actually conflicts with science.
- (11) Modern science says that there are many things (at the subatomic level) that are not determined at all.



**Figure 1.8** Clarence Darrow (1857–1938).

Philosophy is a kind of journey, ever learning yet never arriving at the ideal perfection of truth.

—Albert Pike

Statements 7 through 11 are the premises. They are all meant to provide support to Statement 6, but their support is of unequal weight. Statement 10 gives independent support to the conclusion without the help of any other premises, so it is an *independent* premise. We can say the same thing about Statement 11; it too is an independent premise. But notice that Statements 7, 8, and 9 are *dependent* premises supporting the conclusion. That is, taken separately, they are weak, but together they constitute a plausible reason for accepting Statement 6. Statement 10 directly supports the conclusion, and in turn is supported by Premise 11.

Now take a look at this passage:

(1) As the Islamic clerics cling to power in Iran, students there are agitating for greater freedom and less suppression of views that the clerics dislike. (2) Even though ultimate power in Iran rests with the mullahs, it is not at all certain where the nation is headed. Here's a radical suggestion: (3) the Islamic republic in Iran will fall within the

## PHILOSOPHERS AT WORK

### Hypatia

Hypatia (c. 370–415) was the greatest philosopher of her day. She lived in the Greek city of Alexandria, which in the fourth century was the intellectual epicenter of the world, excelling in scientific and philosophical learning. It also was the home of the famed Library, which contained thousands of scholarly manuscripts drawn from the best thinkers of ancient times, including the works of Plato and Aristotle. In this rich environment, Hypatia achieved fame as a Neoplatonist philosophy teacher, an astronomer, and a mathematician. At around age twenty-five or thirty she became the director of the school of the renowned philosopher Plotinus—a very high honor, since women were traditionally not appointed to such offices. Another indication of her sterling reputation was that she was appointed by a Christian government even though she was known to be a pagan.

She taught the works of the “pagan” philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, and students came from far-flung places for the privilege of being her students. She also is thought to have written three commentaries on noted mathematical treatises.

In 415, Cyril, the Bishop of Alexandria, arranged for Hypatia’s brutal murder at the hands of a Christian mob. She was pulled from her chariot, hauled to a church, stripped naked, and skinned alive with oyster shells. Cyril, on the other hand, was later canonized.



**Figure 1.9** Hypatia (c. 370–415).

next five years. Why do I say this? (4) Because the majority of Iranians are in favor of democratic reforms, (5) and no regime can stand for very long when citizens are demanding access to the political process. (6) Also, Iran today is a mirror image of the Soviet Union before it broke apart—there's widespread dissatisfaction and dissent at a time when the regime seems to be trying to hold the people's loyalty. (7) Every nation that has taken such a path has imploded within five years. (8) Finally, the old Iranian trick of gaining support for the government by fomenting hatred of America will not work anymore (9) because Iran is now trying to be friends with the United States.

The conclusion is Statement 3, and the premises are Statements 4 through 9. The first two statements are extraneous. Statements 4 and 5 are dependent premises and so are Statements 6 and 7. Statements 8 and 9 constitute an argument that gives support to the passage's main conclusion (Statement 3). Statement 8 is the conclusion; Statement 9, the premise. Notice also that the sentence "Why do I say this?" is not a statement.

So remember: When you read a philosophical essay, you are not simply trying to glean some facts from it as you might if you were reading a science text or technical report. Neither are you following a storyline as if you were reading a mystery novel (though philosophy papers sometimes contain their share of mysteries). In most cases, you are tracing the steps in an argument, trying to see what conclusion the writer wants to prove and whether she succeeds in proving it. Along the way, you may encounter several premises with their accompanying analyses, clarifications, explanations, and examples. You may even run into a whole chain of arguments. In the end, if you have read well and the writer has written well, you are left not with a new set of data or a story ending, but a realization—maybe even a revelation—that a conclusion is, or is not, worthy of belief.

The best way to learn how to read philosophy well is to read philosophy often. You will probably get plenty of chances to do that in your current philosophy course. Having a few rules to guide you in your reading, however, may help shorten the learning curve. As you read, keep the following in mind.

**1. Approach the text with an open mind.** If you are studying philosophy for the first time, you are likely—at least at first—to find a good bit of the material difficult, strange, or exasperating, sometimes all three at once. That's normal. Philosophy is an exploration of the rugged frontiers of our knowledge of fundamental things, so much of this new territory is likely to seem daunting or unfamiliar. There's also an excellent chance that your first visits to this terrain will be vexing, perhaps even infuriating, because you may sometimes disagree with what you read.

There is no shame in experiencing any of these reactions. They come with the territory. But if you are to make any headway in philosophy, you need to try your best to counteract these attitudes and feelings. Remember, philosophy at its best is a fair-minded, fearless search for truth. Anything that interferes with this noble quest must be overcome and cast aside.

Avoid making a judgment about an essay's ideas or arguments until you fully understand them and have fairly considered them. Make sure you are not reading with

.....  
**8** Suppose you are presented with written material containing statements and arguments that strike you as irreverent or unorthodox. Would you be able to read such a text with an open mind? Can you recall a case in which did just that?

Small amounts of philosophy lead to atheism, but larger amounts bring us back to God.

—Francis Bacon

the intent to prove the conclusions false (or true). Be open to the possibility that the essay could give you good reasons to change your mind about something.

Try to maintain a neutral attitude toward the writer, presuming neither that she is right nor wrong, neither sinner nor saint. Don't assume that everything a renowned philosopher says must be true, and don't presuppose that everything a philosopher you dislike says must be false. Give the writer the same attention and respect that you would give a friend who is discussing a serious issue with you.

If you are reading the work of a famous philosopher and you find yourself thinking that his or her ideas are obviously silly or ridiculous, think again. The odds are good that you are misunderstanding what you read. It is wiser to assume that the text offers something of value (even if you disagree with it) and that you need to read more carefully.

**2. Read actively and critically.** Philosophical reading is intense. It cannot be rushed. It cannot be crammed. It cannot be done while your mind is on automatic pilot.

Philosophical reading is *active* reading. Instead of reading just to get through a piece of writing, you must take your time and ask yourself what key terms and passages mean, how the argument is structured, what the central thesis is, where the premises are, how certain key ideas are related, whether the main conclusion conflicts with propositions you know are true, even how the material compares with other philosophical writing on the same subject.

Philosophical reading is also *critical* reading. In critical reading, you ask not just what something means but whether a statement is true and if the reasoning is solid. You ask if the conclusion really follows from the premises, whether the premises are true, if the analysis of a term really makes sense, if an argument has been overlooked, if an analogy is weak, whether there are counterexamples to key claims, and whether the claims agree with other things you have good reason to believe.

**3. Identify the conclusion first, then the premises.** When you first begin reading philosophical texts, they may seem to you like dark thickets of propositions into which you may not enter without losing your way. But your situation is really not that bad. In argumentative writing (the kind you are most likely to encounter in philosophy), you can depend on there being, well, an argument, a conclusion backed by premises. There could, of course, be several arguments that support the main argument, and the arguments could be complex, but these sets of conclusion-plus-premises will all serve as recognizable guideposts. If you want to penetrate the thicket, then, you must first identify the argument (or arguments). And the key to doing that is to find the conclusion first, then look for the premises.

When you find the main conclusion, you thereby identify the main point of the essay, and you then have the number-one clue to the function of all the rest of the text. Once you uncover the point that the writer is trying to prove, finding the supporting premises becomes much easier. And when you isolate the premises, locating the text that explains and amplifies the premises gets easier too. Therefore, the first—and most important—question you can ask about a philosophical essay is, “What claim is the writer trying to prove?”

**4. Outline, paraphrase, or summarize the argument.** Understanding an essay's argument is so important that testing whether you really "get it" is crucial. You can test your grasp of the argument by outlining, paraphrasing, or summarizing it. If you can lay out an argument's premises and conclusion in an outline, or if you can accurately paraphrase or summarize the argument, you probably have a pretty good understanding of it. Very often students who think they comprehend an argument are surprised to see that they cannot devise an adequate outline or summary of it. Such failures suggest that, although outlining, paraphrasing, or summarizing may seem to some to be unnecessary, they are not—at least not to those who are new to philosophy.

**5. Evaluate the argument and formulate a tentative judgment.** When you read philosophy, understanding it is just the first step. You also must do something that many beginners find both difficult and alien: you must make an informed judgment about what you read. Simply reiterating what the writer has said will not do. Your judgment is what matters here. Mainly, this judgment is your evaluation of the argument presented by the writer—an assessment of (1) whether the conclusion follows from the premises and (2) whether the premises are true. Only when the answer to both of these questions is yes can you say that the conclusion of the argument is worthy of acceptance. This kind of evaluation is precisely what your instructor expects when she asks you to critique an argumentative essay in philosophy.

### Fallacious Reasoning

You can become more proficient in reading and writing philosophy if you know how to identify fallacies when you see them. **Fallacies** are common but bad arguments. They are defective arguments that appear so often in writing and speech that philosophers have given them names and offered instructions on how to recognize and avoid them.

Many fallacies are not just failed arguments—they are also deceptively plausible appeals. They can easily appear sound or cogent, misleading the reader. Their potential for slipperiness is another good reason to study fallacies. The best way to avoid being taken in by them is to study them until you can consistently pick them out of any random selection of prose. Here are some of the more prevalent ones.

#### Straw Man

The **straw man** fallacy is the misrepresentation of a person's views so they can be more easily attacked or dismissed. Let's say you argue that the war in Afghanistan is too costly in lives and money, and your opponent replies this way:

My adversary argues that the war in Afghanistan is much too difficult for the United States, and that we ought to, in effect, cut and run while we can. But why must we take the coward's way out?

Thus, your point has been distorted, made to look more extreme or radical than it really is; it is now an easy target. The notion that we ought to "cut and run"

A **fallacy** is a common but bad argument.

This is patently absurd; but whoever wishes to become a philosopher must learn not to be frightened by absurdities.  
—Bertrand Russell

The **straw man** is the fallacy of misrepresenting a person's views so they can be more easily attacked or dismissed.

## PHILOSOPHY NOW

### Philosophy in the News

Very often, behind the headlines we see every day there lurks a deeper philosophical issue. And when people reflect on the stories, they frequently find themselves pondering fundamental questions and beliefs. Philosophy is hard to avoid. Here is a sampling of possible headlines paired with the philosophical questions they raise.

Tea Party Rejects Entitlement and Welfare Programs	Is libertarianism a viable political theory?
Man Claims Out-of-Body Experience	Can the mind (soul) exist independently of the body?
Residents Demand Death Penalty for Child Killer	Is capital punishment ever morally permissible?
Christopher Hitchens Book Says “God Is Not Great”	Does God exist? Does religion do more harm than good?
Japan Tsunami Kills Thousands	Does natural evil show that there is no God?
Scientists Say “Big Bang” Uncaused	Is Aquinas’s first-cause argument doomed?
Attorneys Say Hormones Caused Woman to Kill	Do we have free will? Are all our actions caused by factors beyond our control?
Stem Cell Research Banned	Is the fetus a person with full moral rights from the moment of conception?
China Says It Must Be Judged by Chinese Morality	Is morality relative to cultures? Does “human rights” apply only to the West?

Are most perennial debates in politics really about fundamental philosophical issues that are never discussed? Could these issues be resolved if people, in good faith, applied the Socratic method?

or “take the coward’s way out” *does not follow* from the statement that the war in Afghanistan is too costly.

The straw man kind of distortion, of course, proves nothing, though many people fall for it every day. This fallacy is probably the most common type of fallacious reasoning used in politics. It is also popular in many other kinds of argumentation—including student philosophy papers.



**Figure 1.10** Politics is rife with fallacies—especially straw man, appeal to the person, and slippery slope. What fallacies in politics have you heard or read lately?

### Appeal to the Person

Closely related to the straw man fallacy is **appeal to the person** (also known as the *ad hominem* fallacy). Appeal to the person is the rejecting of a statement on the grounds that it comes from a particular person, not because the statement, or claim, itself is false or dubious. For example:

You can safely discard anything that Susan has to say about government. She's a dyed-in-the-wool socialist.

Johnson argues that our current welfare system is defective. But don't listen to him—he's a conservative.

Ad hominem arguments often creep into student philosophy papers. Part of the reason is that some appeals to the person are not so obvious. For example:

Swinburne's cosmological argument is a serious attempt to show that God is the best explanation for the existence of the universe. However, he is a well-known theist, and this fact raises some doubts about the strength of his case.

Dennett argues from the materialist standpoint, so he begins with a bias that we need to take into account.

Some of the strongest arguments against the death penalty come from a few people who are actually on death row. They obviously have a vested interest in showing that capital punishment is morally wrong. We therefore are forced to take their arguments—however convincing—with a grain of salt.

**Appeal to the person** is the fallacy of rejecting a statement on the grounds that it comes from a particular person, not because the statement, or claim, itself is false or dubious.

Each of these arguments is defective because it asks us to reject or resist a claim solely because of a person's character, background, or circumstances—things that are generally irrelevant to the truth of claims. A statement must stand or fall *on its own merits*. The personal characteristics of the person espousing the view do not necessarily have a bearing on its truth. Only if we can show that someone's dubious traits somehow make the claim dubious are we justified in rejecting the claim because of a person's personal characteristics. Such a circumstance is rare.

### **Appeal to Popularity**

**Appeal to popularity** is the fallacy of arguing that a claim must be true not because it is backed by good reasons, but simply because many people believe it.

The **appeal to popularity** (or appeal to the masses) is another extremely common fallacy. It is arguing that a claim must be true not because it is backed by good reasons, but simply because many people believe it. The idea is that, somehow, there is truth in numbers. For example:

Of course there's a God. Everyone believes that.

Seventy percent of Americans believe that the president's tax cuts are good for the economy. So don't try to tell me the tax cuts aren't good for the economy.

Most people believe that Jones is guilty, so he's guilty.

In each of these arguments, the conclusion is thought to be true merely because it is believed by an impressive number of people. The number of people who believe a claim, however, is irrelevant to the claim's truth. What really matters is how much support the claim has from good reasons. Large groups of people have been—and are—wrong about many things. Many people once believed that Earth is flat, mermaids are real, and human sacrifices help crops grow. They were wrong.

Remember, however, that the number of people who accept a claim *can* be relevant to its truth if the people happen to be experts. Twenty professional astronomers who predict an eclipse are more reliable than one hundred nonexperts who swear that no such eclipse will occur.

### **Genetic Fallacy**

**Genetic fallacy** is the fallacy of arguing that a statement can be judged true or false based on its source.

A ploy like the appeal to the person is the **genetic fallacy**—arguing that a statement can be judged true or false based on its source. In an appeal to the person, someone's character or circumstance is thought to tell the tale. In the genetic fallacy, the truth of a statement is supposed to depend on origins other than an individual—organizations, political platforms, groups, schools of thought, even exceptional states of mind (like dreams and intuitions). Look:

That new military reform idea has gotta be bunk. It comes from a liberal think tank.

At the city council meeting Hernando said that he had a plan to curb the number of car crashes on Highway 19. But you can bet that whatever it is, it's half-baked—he said the plan came to him when he was stoned on marijuana.

The U.S. Senate is considering a proposal to reform affirmative action, but you know their ideas must be ridiculous. What do they know about the rights of the disadvantaged? They're a bunch of rich, white guys.

### Equivocation

The fallacy of **equivocation** is assigning two different meanings to the same significant word in an argument. The word is used in one sense in a premise and in a different sense in another place in the argument. The switch in meaning can deceive the reader and disrupt the argument, rendering it invalid or weaker than it would be otherwise. Here's a classic example:

Only man is rational.

No woman is a man.

Therefore, no woman is rational.

And one other:

You are a bad writer.

If you are a bad writer, then you are a bad boy.

Therefore, you are a bad boy.

The first argument equivocates on the word *man*. In the first premise, *man* means humankind; in the second, male. Thus, the argument seems to prove that women are not rational. You can see the trick better if you assign the same meaning to both instances of *man*. Like this:

Only humans are rational.

No woman is a human.

Therefore, no woman is rational.

In the second argument, the equivocal term is *bad*. In the first premise, *bad* means incompetent; in the second, immoral.

### Appeal to Ignorance

As its name implies, this fallacy tries to prove something by appealing to what we *don't* know. The **appeal to ignorance** is arguing that either (1) a claim is true because it hasn't been proven false or (2) a claim is false because it hasn't been proven true. For example:

Try as they may, scientists have never been able to disprove the existence of an afterlife. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that there is in fact an afterlife.

Super Green Algae can cure cancer. No scientific study has ever shown that it does not work.

No one has ever shown that ESP (extrasensory perception) is real.

Therefore, it does not exist.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

—William Shakespeare

**Equivocation** is the fallacy of assigning two different meanings to the same significant word in an argument.

**Appeal to ignorance** is the fallacy of arguing that either (1) a claim is true because it hasn't been proven false or (2) a claim is false because it hasn't been proven true.

There is no evidence that people on welfare are hardworking and responsible. Therefore, they are not hardworking and responsible.

The first two arguments try to prove a claim by pointing out that it hasn't been proven false. The second two try to prove that a claim is false because it hasn't been proven true. Both kinds of arguments are bogus because they assume that a lack of evidence proves something. A lack of evidence, however, can prove nothing. Being ignorant of the facts does not enlighten us.

Notice that if a lack of evidence could prove something, then you could prove just about anything you wanted. You could reason, for instance, that since no one can prove that horses *can't* fly, horses must be able to fly. Since no one can disprove that you possess supernatural powers, you must possess supernatural powers.

### False Dilemma

**False dilemma** is the fallacy of arguing erroneously that since there are only two alternatives to choose from and one of them is unacceptable, the other one must be true.

Philosophy is at once the most sublime and the most trivial of human pursuits.  
—William James

**Begging the question** is the fallacy of trying to prove a conclusion by using that very same conclusion as support.

In a dilemma, you are forced to choose between two unattractive possibilities. The fallacy of **false dilemma** is arguing erroneously that since there are only two alternatives to choose from and one of them is unacceptable, the other one must be true. Consider these:

You have to listen to reason. Either you must sell your car to pay your rent, or your landlord will throw you out on the street. You obviously aren't going to sell your car, so you will be evicted.

You have to face the hard facts about the war on drugs. Either we must spend billions of dollars to increase military and law enforcement operations against drug cartels, or we must legalize all drugs. We obviously are not going to legalize all drugs, so we have to spend billions on anti-cartel operations.

The first argument says that there are only two choices to consider: either sell your car or get evicted, and since you will not sell your car, you will get evicted. This argument is fallacious because (presumably) the first premise is false—there seem to be more than just two alternatives here. You could get a job, borrow money from a friend, or sell your DVD player and TV. If the argument seems convincing, it is because other possibilities are excluded.

The second argument asserts that there are only two ways to go: spend billions to attack drug cartels or legalize all drugs. Since we won't legalize all drugs, we must therefore spend billions to assault the cartels. The first (either/or) premise, however, is false; there are at least three other options. The billions could be spent to reduce and prevent drug use, drug producers could be given monetary incentives to switch to non-drug businesses, or only some drugs could be legalized.

### Begging the Question

The fallacy of **begging the question** is trying to prove a conclusion by using that very same conclusion as support. It is arguing in a circle. This way of trying to prove something says, in effect, "X is true because X is true." Few people would fall for this

fallacy in such a simple form, but more subtle kinds can be beguiling. For example, here's the classic instance of begging the question:

The Bible says that God exists.

The Bible is true because God wrote it.

Therefore, God exists.

The conclusion here ("God exists") is supported by premises that assume that very conclusion.

Here's another one:

All citizens have the right to a fair trial because those whom the state is obliged to protect and give consideration are automatically due judicial criminal proceedings that are equitable by any reasonable standard.

This passage may at first seem like a good argument, but it isn't. It reduces to this unimpressive assertion: "All citizens have the right to a fair trial because all citizens have the right to a fair trial." The conclusion is "All citizens have the right to a fair trial," but that's more or less what the premise says. The premise—"those whom the state is obliged to protect and give consideration are automatically due judicial criminal proceedings that are equitable by any reasonable standard"—is equivalent to "All citizens have the right to a fair trial."

When circular reasoning is subtle, it can ensnare even its own creators. The fallacy can easily sneak into an argument if the premise and conclusion say the same thing but say it in different, complicated ways.

### Slippery Slope

The metaphor behind this fallacy suggests the danger of stepping on a dicey incline, losing your footing, and sliding to disaster. The fallacy of **slippery slope**, then, is arguing erroneously that a particular action should not be taken because it will lead inevitably to other actions resulting in some dire outcome. The key word here is *erroneously*. A slippery slope scenario becomes fallacious when there is no reason to believe that the chain of events predicted will ever happen. For example:

This trend toward gay marriage must be stopped. If gay marriage is permitted, then traditional marriage between a man and a woman will be debased and devalued, which will lead to an increase in divorces. And higher divorce rates can only harm our children.

**Slippery slope** is the fallacy of arguing erroneously that a particular action should not be taken because it will lead inevitably to other actions resulting in some dire outcome.

This argument is fallacious because there are no reasons for believing that gay marriage will ultimately result in the chain of events described. If good reasons could be given, the argument might be salvaged.

### Composition

Sometimes what is true about the parts of a thing is also true of the whole—and sometimes not. The fallacy of **composition** is arguing erroneously that what can be said of the parts can also be said of the whole. Consider:

**Composition** is the fallacy of arguing erroneously that what can be said of the parts can also be said of the whole.

Philosophy should quicken life, not deaden it.

—Susan Glaspell

Each piece of wood that makes up this house is lightweight. Therefore, the whole house is lightweight.

Each soldier in the platoon is proficient. Therefore, the platoon as a whole is proficient.

The monthly payments on this car are low. Hence, the cost of the car is low.

Just remember, sometimes the whole does have the same properties as the parts. If each part of the rocket is made of steel, the whole rocket is made of steel.

### Division

**Division** is the fallacy of arguing erroneously that what can be said of the whole can be said of the parts.

If you turn the fallacy of composition upside down, you get the fallacy of **division**—arguing erroneously that what can be said of the parts can be said of the whole:

The house is heavy. Therefore, every part of the house is heavy.

The platoon is very effective. Therefore, every member of the platoon is effective.

That herd of elephants eats an enormous amount of food each day. Therefore, each elephant in the herd eats an enormous amount of food each day.

### ESSAY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Section 1.3

1. What is the difference between an argument and an explanation? What is the difference between an argument and a set of accusations? or expressions of outrage?
2. How is reading philosophy different from, say, reading a physics text? or reading a novel?
3. Think about the political commentators you've read or listened to. What fallacies have they been guilty of using?
4. The straw man fallacy is rampant in political debates. Give an example of such a tactic being used by commentators or politicians, or make up an example of your own.
5. Devise an argument in favor of the proposition that people should (or should not) be punished as Socrates was for speaking their minds.

## Review Notes

### 1.1 PHILOSOPHY: THE QUEST FOR UNDERSTANDING

- Studying philosophy has both practical and theoretical benefits. To some, the pursuit of knowledge through philosophy is a spiritual quest.
- Taking an inventory of your philosophical beliefs at the beginning of this course will help you gauge your progress as you study.
- The four main divisions of philosophy are metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and logic. There are also subdivisions of philosophy that examine basic issues found in other fields.

### 1.2 SOCRATES AND THE EXAMINED LIFE

- For Socrates, an unexamined life is a tragedy because it results in grievous harm to the soul, a person's true self or essence. The soul is harmed by lack of knowledge—ignorance of one's own self and of the most important values in life (the good).
- The Socratic method is a question-and-answer dialogue in which propositions are methodically scrutinized to uncover the truth. Usually when Socrates used it in conversations with his fellow Athenians, their views would be exposed as false or confused. The main point of the exercise for Socrates, however, was not to win arguments, but to get closer to the truth.
- Socrates says, in effect, Let's assume that Thrasymachus is right that justice is whatever is in the interest of the powerful, and that people are just if they obey the laws made by the powerful. But the powerful sometimes make mistakes and demand obedience to laws that are *not* in their best interest. So if Thrasymachus's definition of justice is correct, then it is right for people to do what is in the interest of the powerful, and it is also right to do what is *not* in the interest of the powerful. His idea of justice then leads to a logical contradiction.
- The basic idea behind *reductio ad absurdum* is if you assume that a set of statements is true, and yet you can deduce a false or absurd statement from it, then the original set of statements as a whole must be false.

### 1.3 THINKING PHILOSOPHICALLY

- An argument is a group of statements in which one of them is meant to be supported by the others. A statement (or claim) is an assertion that something is or is not the case and is therefore the kind of utterance that is either true or false. In an argument, the statement being supported is the conclusion, and the statements supporting the conclusion are the premises.
- A good argument must have (1) solid logic and (2) true premises. Requirement (1) means that the conclusion should follow logically from the premises. Requirement (2) says that what the premises assert must in fact be the case.

- A deductive argument is intended to give logically conclusive support to its conclusion. An inductive argument is intended to give probable support to its conclusion. A deductive argument with the proper structure is said to be valid; a deductive argument that fails to have this structure is said to be invalid. If inductive arguments succeed in lending probable support to their conclusions, they are said to be strong. If they fail to provide this probable support, they are termed weak. When a valid (deductive) argument has true premises, it is said to be sound. When a strong (inductive) argument has true premises, it is said to be cogent. In inference to the best explanation, we begin with premises about a phenomenon or state of affairs to be explained. Then we reason from those premises to an explanation for that state of affairs. We try to produce not just any explanation, but the best explanation among several possibilities. The best explanation is the one most likely to be true.
- The guidelines for reading philosophy are: (1) Approach the text with an open mind; (2) read actively and critically; (3) identify the conclusion first, then the premises; (4) outline, paraphrase, or summarize the argument; and (5) evaluate the argument and formulate a tentative judgment.

### WRITING TO UNDERSTAND: ARGUING YOUR OWN VIEWS

Chapter 1

1. Do you believe, as Thrasymachus did, that might makes right, that morality is not about objective right and wrong but about who has the most power? Devise an argument to support your belief.
2. Choose one of your fundamental beliefs that you have not thought much about and write an argument defending it or rejecting it.
3. Socrates said to his jurors, “Are you not ashamed that, while you take care to acquire as much wealth as possible, with honor and glory as well, yet you take no care or thought for understanding or truth, or for the best possible state of your soul?” Do you agree with this attitude? Why or why not?
4. What is the difference between the way philosophy approaches important questions and the way that religion does?
5. Argue the case for using (or not using) the Socratic method in education.

## Key Terms

**appeal to ignorance** The fallacy of arguing that either (1) a claim is true because it hasn't been proven false or (2) a claim is false because it hasn't been proven true. (33)

**appeal to popularity** The fallacy of arguing that a claim must be true not because it is backed by good reasons, but simply because many people believe it. (32)

**appeal to the person** The fallacy of rejecting a statement on the grounds that it comes from a particular person, not because the statement, or claim, itself is false or dubious. (31)

**argument** A statement coupled with other statements that are meant to support that statement. (14)

**axiology** The study of value, including both aesthetic value and moral value. (6)

**begging the question** The fallacy of trying to prove a conclusion by using that very same conclusion as support. (34)

**composition** The fallacy of arguing erroneously that what can be said of the parts can also be said of the whole. (35)

**conclusion** In an argument, the statement being supported. (14)

**deductive argument** An argument intended to give logically conclusive support to its conclusion. (16)

**division** The fallacy of arguing erroneously that what can be said of the whole can be said of the parts. (36)

**epistemology** The study of knowledge. (6)

**equivocation** The fallacy of assigning two different meanings to the same significant word in an argument. (33)

**ethics (moral philosophy)** The study of morality using the methods of philosophy. (6)

**fallacy** A common but bad argument. (29)

**false dilemma** The fallacy of arguing erroneously that since there are only two alternatives to choose from, and one of them is unacceptable, the other one must be true. (34)

**genetic fallacy** The fallacy of arguing that a statement can be judged true or false based on its source. (32)

**inductive argument** An argument intended to give probable support to its conclusion. (17)

**logic** The study of correct reasoning. (7)

**metaphysics** The study of reality, an inquiry into the fundamental nature of the universe and the things in it. (4)

**premise** In an argument, a statement supporting the conclusion. (14)

**reductio ad absurdum** An argument of this form: If you assume that a set of statements is true, and yet you can deduce a false or absurd statement from it, then the original set of statements as a whole must be false. (12)

**slippery slope** The fallacy of arguing erroneously that a particular action should not be taken because it will lead inevitably to other actions resulting in some dire outcome. (35)

**Socratic method** Question-and-answer dialogue in which propositions are methodically scrutinized to uncover the truth. (8)

**statement (claim)** An assertion that something is or is not the case and is therefore the kind of utterance that is either true or false. (14)

**straw man** The fallacy of misrepresenting a person's views so they can be more easily attacked or dismissed. (29)

### Argument Exercises

(Answers in Appendix A)

#### Exercise 1.1

For each of the passages that follow, indicate whether it constitutes an argument. For each argument, specify both the conclusion and the premises.

1. Faster-than-light travel is not possible. It would violate a law of nature.
2. You have neglected your duty on several occasions, and you have been absent from work too many times. Therefore, you are not fit to serve in your current capacity.
3. Racial profiling is not an issue for white people, but it is an issue for blacks.
4. The flu epidemic on the East Coast is real. Government health officials say so. And I personally have read at least a dozen news stories that characterize the situation as a “flu epidemic.”
5. Communism is bunk. Only naïve, impressionable pinheads believe that stuff.
6. Current-day Christians use violence to spread their right-to-life message.  
These Christians, often referred to as the religious right, are well known for violent demonstrations against Planned Parenthood and other abortion clinics. Doctors and other personnel are threatened with death, clinics have been bombed, there have even been cases of doctors being murdered.—Letter to the editor, *Arizona Daily Wildcat*
7. I am writing about the cost of concert tickets. I am outraged at how much ticket prices are increasing every year. A few years ago, one could attend a popular concert for a decent price. Now some musicians are asking as much as \$200 to \$300.—Letter to the editor, *Buffalo News*
8. Homeland security is a cruel charade for unborn children. Some 4,000 per day are killed in their mother’s womb by abortion. This American holocaust was legalized by the Supreme Court in an exercise of raw judicial power.—Letter to the editor, *Buffalo News*
9. Witches are real. They are mentioned in the Bible. There are many people today who claim to be witches. And historical records reveal that there were witches in Salem.
10. Stretched upon the dark silk night, bracelets of city lights glisten brightly.

**Exercise 1.2**

For each passage that follows, list the conclusion and premises.

1. There are those who maintain . . . that even if God is not required as the author of the moral law, he is nevertheless required as the enforcer of it, for without the threat of divine punishment, people will not act morally. But this position is [not plausible]. In the first place, as an empirical hypothesis about the psychology of human beings, it is questionable. There is no unambiguous evidence that theists are more moral than nontheists. Not only have psychological studies failed to find a significant correlation between frequency of religious worship and moral conduct, but convicted criminals are much [more] likely to be theists than atheists. Second, the threat of divine punishment cannot impose a moral obligation, for might does not make right. Threats extort; they do not create a moral duty.—*Free Inquiry*, Summer 1997
2. I love *Reason* [magazine], but [regarding a previous article by Nick Gillespie] I'm wondering if all the illegal drugs that Nick Gillespie used to take are finally getting to him. He has a right to speak out against President Bush, but when he refers to him as "the millionaire president who waited out the Vietnam War in the Texas Air National Guard," it reminds me of the garbage rhetoric that I might see if I were reading Ted Rall, or Susan Sontag, or one of the other hate-mongering, America-bashing, leftist whiners. That kind of ad hominem attack is not only disrespectful to a man who is doing a damned good job as commander-in-chief (with approval ratings of more than 80 percent); it detracts from the whole point of the article.—Letter to the editor, *Reason*, July 2002
3. The fifth way [of proving that God exists] is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that they achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.—Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*
4. The first thing that must occur to anyone studying moral subjectivism [the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the beliefs of an individual or group] seriously is that the view allows the possibility that an action can be both right and not right, or wrong and not wrong, etc. This possibility exists because, as we have seen, the subjectivist claims that the moral character of an action is determined by individual subjective states; and these states can vary from person to person, even when directed toward the same action on the same occasion. Hence one and the same action can evidently be determined to have—simultaneously—radically different moral characters. . . . [If] subjectivism . . . does generate such contradictory conclusions,

the position is certainly untenable.—Phillip Montague, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, June 1986

5. A Florida judge dismissed a lawsuit that accused the Vatican of hiding instances of sexual abuse by priests. The suit was thrown out because Florida's statute of limitations had run out on the case. I submit that the dismissal was proper and ethical considering the community stature and function of priests and the benefits that accrue to society in the aftermath of the decision. Let's consider community stature first. The community stature of priests must always be taken into account in these abuse cases. A priest is not just anybody; he performs a special role in society—namely, to provide spiritual guidance and to remind people that there is both a moral order and a divine order in the world. The priest's role is special because it helps to underpin and secure society itself. Anything that could undermine this role must be neutralized as soon as possible. Among those things that can weaken the priestly role are publicity, public debate, and legal actions. Abuse cases are better handled in private by those who are keenly aware of the importance of a positive public image of priests. And what of the benefits of curtailing the legal proceedings? The benefits to society of dismissing the legal case outweigh all the alleged disadvantages of continuing with public hearings. The primary benefit is the continued nurturing of the community's faith, without which the community would cease to function effectively.

### Exercise 1.3

In the following passages, identify any fallacies. Some passages may contain more than one fallacy.

1. The *New York Times* reported that one-third of Republican senators have been guilty of Senate ethics violations. But you know that's false—the *Times* is a notorious liberal rag.
2. Geraldo says that students who cheat on exams should not automatically be expelled from school. But it's ridiculous to insist that students should never be punished for cheating.
3. My sweater is blue. Therefore, the atoms that make up the sweater are blue.
4. Kelly says that many women who live in predominantly Muslim countries are discriminated against. But how the heck would she know? She's not a Muslim.
5. The study found that 80 percent of women who took the drug daily had no recurrence of breast cancer. But that doesn't mean anything. The study was funded in part by the company that makes the drug.
6. The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people actually desire it.—John Stuart Mill
7. Gremlins exist, that's for sure. No scientist has ever proved that they don't exist.

8. The former mayor was convicted of drug possession, and he spent time in jail.  
So you can safely ignore anything he has to say about legalizing drugs.
9. I believe that baby-carrying storks are real creatures. No one has ever proved  
that they don't exist.
10. Only man has morals. No woman is a man. Therefore, no woman has morals.

## NARRATIVE

## The Trial and Death of Socrates

Plato

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427–347 BCE) is one of the most influential thinkers of Western civilization. He was the student of Socrates, teacher of Aristotle, and timeless inspiration to all who sought wisdom through philosophy. In this narrative, one of his many dialogues, Plato relates Socrates' address to the jury at his famous trial for corrupting Athenian youth and disrespecting the gods.

How you, O Athenians, have been affected by my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that they almost made me forget who I was—so persuasively did they speak; and yet they have hardly uttered a word of truth. But of the many falsehoods told by them, there was one which quite amazed me—I mean when they said that you should be upon your guard and not allow yourselves to be deceived by the force of my eloquence. To say this, when they were certain to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and proved myself to be anything but a great speaker, did indeed appear to me most shameless—unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for if such is their meaning, I admit that I am eloquent. But in how different a way from theirs! Well, as I was saying, they have scarcely spoken the truth at all; but from me you shall hear the whole truth: not, however, delivered after their manner in a set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases. No, by heaven! but I shall use the words and arguments which occur to me at the moment; for I am confident in the justice of my cause: at my time of life I ought not to be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator—let no one expect it of me. And I must beg of you to grant me a favour: If I defend myself in my accustomed manner, and you hear me using the words which I have been in the habit of using in the [market], at the tables of the money-changers, or anywhere else, I would ask you not to be surprised, and not to interrupt me on this account. For I am more than seventy years of age, and appearing now for the first time in a court of law, I am quite a stranger to the language of the place; and therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a stranger, whom you would excuse if he spoke in his native tongue, and after the fashion of his country: Am I

making an unfair request of you? Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the truth of my words, and give heed to that: let the speaker speak truly and the judge decide justly. . . .

Well, then, I must make my defence, and endeavor to clear away in a short time, a slander which has lasted a long time. May I succeed, if to succeed be for my good and yours, or likely to avail me in my cause! The task is not an easy one; I quite understand the nature of it. And so leaving the event with God, in obedience to the law I will now make my defence.

I will begin at the beginning, and ask what is the accusation which has given rise to the slander of me, and in fact has encouraged Meletus to prefer this charge against me. Well, what do the slanderers say? They shall be my prosecutors, and I will sum up their words in an affidavit: 'Socrates is an evil-doer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause; and he teaches the aforesaid doctrines to others.' Such is the nature of the accusation: it is just what you have yourselves seen in the comedy of Aristophanes, who has introduced a man whom he calls Socrates, going about and saying that he walks in air, and talking a deal of nonsense concerning matters of which I do not pretend to know either much or little—not that I mean to speak disparagingly of any one who is a student of natural philosophy. I should be very sorry if Meletus could bring so grave a charge against me. But the simple truth is, O Athenians, that I have nothing to do with physical speculations. Very many of those here present are witnesses to the truth of this, and to them I appeal. Speak then, you who have heard me, and tell your neighbours whether any of you have ever known me hold forth in few words or in many upon such matters. . . . You hear their answer. And from what they say of this part of the charge you will be able to judge of the truth of the rest.

From Plato, *The Apology*, in *Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Oxford, 1896.

As little foundation is there for the report that I am a teacher, and take money; this accusation has no more truth in it than the other. Although, if a man were really able to instruct mankind, to receive money for giving instruction would, in my opinion, be an honour to him. There is Gorgias of Leontium, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis, who go the round of the cities, and are able to persuade the young men to leave their own citizens by whom they might be taught for nothing, and come to them whom they not only pay, but are thankful if they may be allowed to pay them. . . .

I dare say, Athenians, that some one among you will reply, 'Yes, Socrates, but what is the origin of these accusations which are brought against you; there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All these rumours and this talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men: tell us, then, what is the cause of them, for we should be sorry to judge hastily of you.' Now I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will endeavour to explain to you the reason why I am called wise and have such an evil fame. Please do attend then. And although some of you may think that I am joking, I declare that I will tell you the entire truth. Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come of a certain sort of wisdom which I possess. If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, wisdom such as may perhaps be attained by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe that I am wise; whereas the persons of whom I was speaking have a superhuman wisdom, which I may fail to describe, because I have it not myself; and he who says that I have, speaks falsely, and is taking away my character. And here, O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit; that witness shall be the God of Delphi—he will tell you about my wisdom, if I have any, and of what sort it is. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the recent exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether—as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether any one was wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered, that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself; but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of what I am saying.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of his riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What then can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god, and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After long consideration, I thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, 'Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest.' Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and still wiser by himself; and thereupon I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him.

Then I went to another who had still higher pretensions to wisdom, and my conclusion was exactly the same. Whereupon I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him. Then I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: But necessity was laid upon me,—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that others less esteemed were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the "Herculean" labours, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be instantly detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly,

I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to confess the truth, but I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them. The poets appeared to me to be much in the same case; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians.

At last I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things; and here I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets;—because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom; and therefore I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made answer to myself and to the oracle that I was better off as I was.

This inquisition has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies. And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go about the world, obedient to the god, and search and make enquiry into the wisdom of any one, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and my occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.

There is another thing: Young men of the richer classes, who have not much to do, come about me of their own accord; they like to hear the pretenders examined, and they often imitate me, and proceed to examine others; there are plenty of persons, as they quickly discover, who think that they know something, but really know little or nothing; and then those who are examined by them instead of being angry with themselves are angry with me: This confounded Socrates, they say, this villainous misleader of youth!—and then if somebody asks them, Why, what evil does he practise or teach? they do not know, and cannot tell; but in order that they may not appear to be at a loss, they repeat the ready-made charges which are used against all philosophers about teaching things up in the clouds and under the earth, and having no gods, and making the worse appear the better cause; for they do not like to confess that their pretence of knowledge has been detected—which is the truth; and as they are numerous and ambitious and energetic, and are drawn up in battle array and have persuasive tongues, they have filled your ears with their loud and inveterate calumnies. And this is the reason why my three accusers, Meletus and Anytus and Lycon, have set upon me; Meletus, who has a quarrel with me on behalf of the poets; Anytus, on behalf of the craftsmen and politicians; Lycon, on behalf of the rhetoricians: and as I said at the beginning, I cannot expect to get rid of such a mass of calumny all in a moment. And this, O men of Athens, is the truth and the whole truth; I have concealed nothing, I have dissembled nothing. And yet, I know that my plainness of speech makes them hate me, and what is their hatred but a proof that I am speaking the truth?—Hence has arisen the prejudice against me; and this is the reason of it, as you will find out either in this or in any future enquiry.

I have said enough in my defence against the first class of my accusers; I turn to the second class. They are headed by Meletus, that good man and true lover of his country, as he calls himself. . . . He says that I am a doer of evil, and corrupt the youth; but I say, O men of Athens, that Meletus is a doer of evil, in that he pretends to be in earnest when he is only in jest, and is so eager to bring men to trial from a pretended zeal and interest about matters in which he really never had the smallest interest. And the truth of this I will endeavour to prove to you.

Come hither, Meletus, and let me ask a question of you. You think a great deal about the improvement of youth?

Yes, I do.

Tell the judges, then, who is their improver; for you must know, as you have taken the pains to discover their corrupter, and are citing and accusing me before them. Speak, then, and tell the judges who their improver is.—Observe, Meletus, that you are silent, and have nothing to say. But is not this rather disgraceful, and a very considerable proof of what I was saying, that you have no interest in the matter? Speak up, friend, and tell us who their improver is.

The laws.

But that, my good sir, is not my meaning. I want to know who the person is, who, in the first place, knows the laws.

The judges, Socrates, who are present in court.

What, do you mean to say, Meletus, that they are able to instruct and improve youth?

Certainly they are.

What, all of them, or some only and not others?

All of them.

By the goddess Herè, that is good news! There are plenty of improvers, then. And what do you say of the audience—do they improve them?

Yes, they do.

And the senators?

Yes, the senators improve them.

But perhaps the members of the assembly corrupt them?—or do they too improve them?

They improve them.

Then every Athenian improves and elevates them; all with the exception of myself; and I alone am their corrupter? Is that what you affirm?

That is what I stoutly affirm.

I am very unfortunate if you are right. But suppose I ask you a question: How about horses? Does one man do them harm and all the world good? Is not the exact opposite the truth? One man is able to do them good, or at least not many—the trainer of horses, that is to say, does them good, and others who have to do with them rather injure them? Is not that true, Meletus, of horses, or of any other animals? Most assuredly it is; whether you and Anytus say yes or no. Happy indeed would be the condition of youth if they had one corrupter only, and all the rest of the world were their improvers. But you, Meletus, have sufficiently shown that you never had a thought about the young: your carelessness is seen in your not caring about the very things which you bring against me.

And now, Meletus, I will ask you another question—by Zeus I will: Which is better, to live among bad citizens,

or among good ones? Answer, friend, I say; the question is one which may be easily answered. Do not the good do their neighbours good, and the bad do them evil?

Certainly.

And is there any one who would rather be injured than benefited by those who live with him? Answer, my good friend, the law requires you to answer—does any one like to be injured?

Certainly not.

And when you accuse me of corrupting and deteriorating the youth, do you allege that I corrupt them intentionally or unintentionally?

Intentionally, I say.

But you have just admitted that the good do their neighbours good, and evil do them evil. Now, is that a truth which your superior wisdom has recognized thus early in life, and am I, at my age, in such darkness and ignorance as not to know that if a man with whom I have to live is corrupted by me, I am very likely to be harmed by him; and yet I corrupt him, and intentionally, too—so you say, although neither I nor any other human being is ever likely to be convinced by you. But either I do not corrupt them, or I corrupt them unintentionally; and on either view of the case you lie. If my offence is unintentional, the law has no cognizance of unintentional offences: you ought to have taken me privately, and warned and admonished me; for if I had been better advised, I should have left off doing what I only did unintentionally—no doubt I should; but you would have nothing to say to me and refused to teach me. And now you bring me up in this court, which is a place not of instruction, but of punishment.

It will be very clear to you, Athenians, as I was saying, that Meletus has no care at all, great or small, about the matter. But still I should like to know, Meletus, in what I am affirmed to corrupt the young. I suppose you mean, as I infer from your indictment, that I teach them not to acknowledge the gods which the state acknowledges, but some other new divinities or spiritual agencies in their stead. These are the lessons by which I corrupt the youth, as you say.

Yes, that I say emphatically.

Then, by the gods, Meletus, of whom we are speaking, tell me and the court, in somewhat plainer terms, what you mean! for I do not as yet understand whether you affirm that I teach other men to acknowledge some gods, and therefore that I do believe in gods, and am not an entire atheist—this you do not lay to my charge—but only you say that they are not the same

gods which the city recognizes—the charge is that they are different gods. Or, do you mean that I am an atheist simply, and a teacher of atheism?

I mean the latter—that you are a complete atheist.

What an extraordinary statement! Why do you think so, Meletus? Do you mean that I do not believe in the godhead of the sun or moon, like other men?

I assure you, judges, that he does not: for he says that the sun is stone, and the moon earth.

Friend Meletus, you think that you are accusing Anaxagoras: and you have but a bad opinion of the judges, if you fancy them illiterate to such a degree as not to know that these doctrines are found in the books of Anaxagoras the Clazomenian, which are full of them. And so, forsooth, the youth are said to be taught them by Socrates, when there are not infrequently exhibitions of them at the theatre (price of admission one drachma at the most); and they might pay their money, and laugh at Socrates if he pretends to father these extraordinary views. And so, Meletus, you really think that I do not believe in any god?

I swear by Zeus that you believe absolutely in none at all.

Nobody will believe you, Meletus, and I am pretty sure that you do not believe yourself. I cannot help thinking, men of Athens, that Meletus is reckless and impudent, and that he has written this indictment in a spirit of mere wantonness and youthful bravado. Has he not compounded a riddle, thinking to try me? He said to himself: I shall see whether the wise Socrates will discover my facetious contradiction, or whether I shall be able to deceive him and the rest of them. For he certainly does appear to me to contradict himself in the indictment as much as if he said that Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods, and yet of believing them—but this is not like a person who is in earnest.

I should like you, O men of Athens, to join me in examining what I conceive to be his inconsistency; and do you, Meletus, answer. And I must remind the audience of my request that they would not make a disturbance if I speak in my accustomed manner:

Did ever man, Meletus, believe in the existence of human things, and not of human beings? . . . I wish, men of Athens, that he would answer, and not be always trying to get up an interruption. Did ever any man believe in horsemanship, and not in horses? or in flute-playing, and not flute-players? No, my friend; I will answer to you and to the court, as you refuse to answer

for yourself. There is no man who ever did. But now please to answer the next question: Can a man believe in spiritual and divine agencies, and not in spirits or demigods?

He cannot.

How lucky I am to have extracted that answer, by the assistance of the court! But then you swear in the indictment that I teach and believe in divine or spiritual agencies (new or old, no matter for that); at any rate I believe in spiritual agencies—so you say and swear in the affidavit; and yet if I believe in divine beings, how can I help believing in spirits or demigods—must I not? To be sure I must; and therefore I may assume that your silence gives consent. Now what are spirits or demigod? are they not either gods or the sons of gods?

Certainly they are.

But this is what I call the facetious riddle invented by you: the demigods or spirits are gods, and you say first that I do not believe in gods, and then again that I do believe in gods; that is, if I believe in demigods. For if the demigods are the illegitimate sons of gods, whether by the nymphs or by any other mothers, of whom they are said to be the sons—what human being will ever believe that there are no gods if they are the sons of gods? You might as well affirm the existence of mules, and deny that of horses and asses. Such nonsense, Meletus, could only have been intended by you to make trial of me. You have put this into the indictment because you had nothing real of which to accuse me. But no one who has a particle of understanding will ever be convinced by you that the same men can believe in divine and superhuman things, and yet not believe that there are gods and demigods and heroes.

I have said enough in answer to the charge of Meletus: any elaborate defence is unnecessary; but I know only too well how many are the enmities which I have incurred, and this is what will be my destruction if I am destroyed—not Meletus, nor yet Anytus, but the envy and detraction of the world, which has been the death of many good men, and will probably be the death of many more; there is no danger of my being the last of them.

Some one will say: And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end? To him I may fairly answer: There you are mistaken: a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is

doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or of a bad. . . .

Strange, indeed, would be my conduct, O men of Athens, if I who, when I was ordered by the generals whom you chose to command me at Potidaea and Amphipolis and Delium, remained where they placed me, like any other man, facing death—if now, when, as I conceive and imagine, God orders me to fulfill the philosopher's mission of searching into myself and other men, I were to desert my post through fear of death, or any other fear; that would indeed be strange, and I might justly be arraigned in court for denying the existence of the gods, if I disobeyed the oracle because I was afraid of death, fancying that I was wise when I was not wise. For the fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretence of knowing the unknown; and no one knows whether death, which men in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good. Is not this ignorance of a disgraceful sort, the ignorance which is the conceit that man knows what he does not know? And in this respect only I believe myself to differ from men in general, and may perhaps claim to be wiser than they are—that whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know: but I do know that injustice and disobedience to a better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonourable, and I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil. And therefore if you let me go now, and are not convinced by Anytus, who said that since I had been prosecuted I must be put to death . . . —if you say to me, Socrates, this time we will not mind Anytus, and you shall be let off, but upon one condition, that you are not to enquire and speculate in this way any more, and that if you are caught doing so again you shall die—if this was the condition on which you let me go, I should reply: Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet and saying to him after my manner: You, my friend—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? And if the person with whom I am arguing, says: Yes, but I do care; then I do not leave him or let him go at once; but I proceed to interrogate and examine and cross-examine

him, and if I think that he has no virtue in him, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less. And I shall repeat the same words to every one whom I meet, young and old, citizen and alien, but especially to the citizens, inasmuch as they are my brethren. For know that this is the command of God; and I believe that no greater good has ever happened in the state than my service to the God. For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, I am a mischievous person. But if any one says that this is not my teaching, he is speaking an untruth. Wherefore, O men of Athens, I say to you, do as Anytus bids or not as Anytus bids, and either acquit me or not; but whichever you do, understand that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times. . . .

And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the God by condemning me, who am his gift to you. For if you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me. . . .

Now do you think that I could have remained alive all these years if I had taken part in public affairs, and had always maintained the cause of justice like an honest man, and had held it a paramount duty, as it is, to do so? Certainly not, Athenians, nor could any other man. But throughout my whole life, both in private and in public, whenever I have had to take part in public affairs, you will find I have always been the same and have never yielded unjustly to anyone; no, not to those whom my enemies falsely assert to have been my pupils. But I was never anyone's teacher. I have never withheld myself from anyone, young or old, who was anxious to hear me discuss while I was making my investigation; neither do I discuss for payment, and refuse to discuss

without payment. I am ready to ask questions of rich and poor alike, and if any man wishes to answer me, and then listen to what I have to say, he may. . . .

I believe in the gods as no one of my accusers believes in them: and to you and to God I commit my cause to be decided as is best for you and for me.

[The vote is taken and he is found guilty by 281 votes to 220.]

There are many reasons why I am not grieved, O men of Athens, at the vote of condemnation. I expected it, and am only surprised that the votes are so nearly equal; for I had thought that the majority against me would have been far larger; but now, had thirty votes gone over to the other side, I should have been acquitted. And I may say, I think, that I have escaped Meletus. I may say more; for without the assistance of Anytus and Lycon, any one may see that he would not have had a fifth part of the votes, as the law requires, in which case he would have incurred a fine of a thousand drachmae.

And so he proposes death as the penalty. And what shall I propose on my part, O men of Athens? Clearly that which is my due. And what is my due? What return shall be made to the man who has never had the wit to be idle during his whole life; but has been careless of what the many care for—wealth, and family interests, and military offices, and speaking in the assembly, and magistracies, and plots, and parties. Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to be a politician and live, I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to every one of you, thither I went, and sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests, and look to the state before he looks to the interests of the state; and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions. What shall be done to such an one? Doubtless some good thing, O men of Athens, if he has his reward; and the good should be of a kind suitable to him. What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, and who desires leisure that he may instruct you? There can be no reward so fitting as maintenance in the Prytaneum, O men of Athens, a reward which he deserves far more than the citizen who has won the prize at Olympia in the horse or chariot race, whether the chariots were drawn by two horses or by many. For I am in want, and he has enough; and he only gives you the appearance of happiness, and I give you the reality.

And if I am to estimate the penalty fairly, I should say that maintenance in the Prytaneum is the just return.

Perhaps you think that I am braving you in what I am saying now, as in what I said before about the tears and prayers. But this is not so. I speak rather because I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged any one, although I cannot convince you—the time has been too short; if there were a law at Athens, as there is in other cities, that a capital cause should not be decided in one day, then I believe that I should have convinced you. But I cannot in a moment refute great slanders; and, as I am convinced that I never wronged another, I will assuredly not wrong myself. I will not say of myself that I deserve any evil, or propose any penalty. Why should I? Because I am afraid of the penalty of death which Meletus proposes? When I do not know whether death is a good or an evil, why should I propose a penalty which would certainly be an evil? Shall I say imprisonment? And why should I live in prison, and be the slave of the magistrates of the year—of the Eleven? Or shall the penalty be a fine, and imprisonment until the fine is paid? There is the same objection. I should have to lie in prison, for money I have none, and cannot pay. And if I say exile (and this may possibly be the penalty which you will affix), I must indeed be blinded by the love of life, if I am so irrational as to expect that when you, who are my own citizens, cannot endure my discourses and words, and have found them so grievous and odious that you will have no more of them, others are likely to endure me. No indeed, men of Athens, that is not very likely. And what a life should I lead, at my age, wandering from city to city, ever changing my place of exile, and always being driven out! For I am quite sure that wherever I go, there, as here, the young men will flock to me; and if I drive them away, their elders will drive me out at their request; and if I let them come, their fathers and friends will drive me out for their sakes.

Some one will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that to do as you say would be a disobedience to the God, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that daily to discourse about virtue, and of those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still

less likely to believe me. Yet I say what is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. Also, I have never been accustomed to think that I deserve to suffer any harm. Had I money I might have estimated the offence at what I was able to pay, and not have been much the worse. But I have none, and therefore I must ask you to proportion the fine to my means. Well, perhaps I could afford a mina, and therefore I propose that penalty: Plato, Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus, my friends here, bid me say thirty minae, and they will be the sureties. Let thirty minae be the penalty; for which sum they will be ample security to you.

[2nd vote: The jury decides for the death penalty by a vote of 360 to 141.]

Not much time will be gained, O Athenians, in return for the evil name which you will get from the detractors of the city, who will say that you killed Socrates, a wise man; for they will call me wise, even although I am not wise, when they want to reproach you. If you had waited a little while, your desire would have been fulfilled in the course of nature. For I am far advanced in years, as you may perceive, and not far from death. . . .

The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death. I am old and move slowly, and the slower runner has overtaken me, and my accusers are keen and quick, and the faster runner, who is unrighteousness, has overtaken them. And now I depart hence condemned by you to suffer the penalty of death—they too go their ways condemned by the truth to suffer the penalty of villainy and wrong; and I must abide by my award—let them abide by theirs. I suppose that these things may be regarded as fated—and I think that they are well. . . .

Friends, who would have acquitted me, I would like also to talk with you about the thing which has come to pass, while the magistrates are busy, and before I go to the place at which I must die. Stay then a little, for we may as well talk with one another while there is time. You are my friends, and I should like to show you the meaning of this event which has happened to me. O my judges—for you I may truly call judges—I should like to tell you of a wonderful circumstance. Hitherto the divine faculty of which the internal oracle is the source has constantly been in the habit of opposing me even about trifles, if I was going to make a slip or error in any matter; and now as you see there has come upon me that which may be thought, and is generally believed to be, the last and worst evil. But the oracle made no sign of opposition, either when I was leaving

my house in the morning, or when I was on my way to the court, or while I was speaking, at anything which I was going to say; and yet I have often been stopped in the middle of a speech, but now in nothing I either said or did touching the matter in hand has the oracle opposed me. What do I take to be the explanation of this silence? I will tell you. It is an intimation that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error. For the customary sign would surely have opposed me had I been going to evil and not to good.

Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good; for one of two things—either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man, I will not say a private man, but even the great king will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. Now if death be of such a nature, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead abide, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. I myself, too, shall have a wonderful interest in there meeting and conversing with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and any other ancient hero who has suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What

would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions: assuredly not. For besides being happier than we are, they will be immortal, if what is said is true.

Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that the time had arrived when it was better for me to die and be released from trouble; wherefore the oracle gave no sign. For which reason, also, I am not angry with my condemners, or with my accusers; they have

done me no harm, although they did not mean to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them.

Still I have a favour to ask of them. When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing,—then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, both I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.

### Probing Questions

1. What does Socrates mean by “The unexamined life is not worth living”? How does this view relate to Socrates’ activity as the city’s intellectual gadfly? Socrates seems to think that many of his jurors lead unexamined lives. Why does he think this?
2. Socrates was executed because he dealt in offensive and dangerous ideas. Have there been others in history who have also suffered because society thought their ideas were unacceptable? Is a society ever justified in punishing people for expressing such ideas?
3. Socrates died for his principles. What ideas in your life would you be willing to die for?

### For Further Reading

Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 2005). A concise guide to hundreds of philosophy topics, with many of the entries being of substantial length.

Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). A good one-volume philosophy reference featuring many excellent articles on philosophical issues.

Norman Melchert, *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). An excellent introduction to the major philosophers and their works, with in-depth annotations of readings.

Brooke Moore and Richard Parker, *Critical Thinking*, 8th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007). A comprehensive and readable treatment of critical thinking skills.

Louis P. Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, eds., *Classics of Philosophy*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). The most comprehensive anthology of Western philosophy available.

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). A very readable classic work by an eminent philosopher. Focuses mostly on issues in epistemology.

Lewis Vaughn, *Great Philosophical Arguments: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). A text with readings organized by topic and by the standard arguments that have occupied thinkers throughout the centuries.

Lewis Vaughn, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). A student-friendly introduction to logic, critical thinking, and philosophical writing.