

# Introduction to Philosophy

## What is Philosophy?

### The Examined Life

“Philosophy” is a Greek word meaning love of wisdom. As a discipline, philosophy took its distinctive form in Athens, Greece about 2500 years ago with the activities of one great individual, Socrates. While Socrates didn’t write anything, we know a lot about him primarily from dialogues written by Plato, one of his inspired students and the second of the great Greek philosophers.

Plato tells us that Socrates, like most Greeks, didn’t think that living in itself was that important. What was important was living a good life. Their heroes like Achilles died young, but lived brightly. From an early age, Greeks cared about how to distinguish themselves in this life. Socrates was no different. He didn’t want to merely live, he wanted to live well. But unlike his fellow Greeks, Socrates was unsure what it was to live a good life. Should he devote his life to pleasure, or to distinguishing himself on the battleground, or to gaining political power?

Socrates believed that knowledge, in particular, knowledge of how to live the best possible life was the most important thing to seek for a human. If we are ignorant of how to live well, then we risk gravely damaging ourselves and missing out on living a fulfilling, flourishing life. For this reason, Socrates claimed that the unexamined life was not worth living. Unwilling to live his life based on a mistake, he sought out those who claimed expertise about the good life. Socrates spent his time quizzing these apparent experts, testing them to see whether they really did know what they claimed to know. The experts failed these tests. They were often confused or unable to answer simple questions about the topics they claimed expertise in. For instance, they might claim to know which people were courageous, but yet be unable to clearly state what courage is. Questioning the establishment is dangerous and Socrates was ultimately executed, in part, for corrupting the youth of Athens by encouraging them to question the received wisdom of the time.

We might think of others who have been persecuted for holding controversial views. It’s not easy. In part, it’s not easy because most of us don’t want to

entertain the possibility that we are radically mistaken in how to live our lives, how to organize our societies, and mistaken in our thoughts about what we and the world we inhabit are really like. We'll be following in Socrates's footsteps over the next several weeks by putting under the microscope deeply held beliefs about the existence of life, the meaning and value of life, as well as beliefs about how to live an ethical life.

It's important to reflect on what you can expect to learn by taking a course in philosophy. One of Socrates' greatest legacies was his claim that he himself had no knowledge of the things he inquired into. This single claim has shaped the character of philosophy. Philosophy is not a body of knowledge, a list of facts that one can learn. Philosophy is first and foremost an activity, a set of skills that will allow you identify your beliefs, identify those that are wanting, and inquire in a mature, humble way into the most important facets of human life. Just as learning Karate, or dancing, or chess playing involves learning a skill, learning philosophy involves learning a set of skills. So, don't expect merely to learn some facts and theories in this course. Expect to learn how to reason well, clearly, and unemotionally about your most deep seated beliefs.

## The Allegory of the Cave

Learning philosophy is not easy. Many shy away from examining their deep convictions. For those who do not, the process is difficult, but rewarding. The effects of this education were famously described in 'The Republic', by Plato in his famous *Allegory of the Cave*. You will find an animated version of that allegory [here](#).

Plato describes a situation where a group of people have been born and raised in a cave. They live their lives shackled to the floor, their heads locked facing in one position. All they can see are shadows cast on the wall in front of them. Since they can't turn their heads, they cannot see the things the shadows are of. Imagine a baby that had only ever seen holograms. They would never think the holograms were anything but real.

Plato compares the state the cave dwellers are in to the position most of us are in our ordinary lives. You already have beliefs. You have beliefs about whether God does or doesn't exist. You have beliefs about what's moral, for instance, whether it's morally permissible to cheat on your partner. You have beliefs about what counts as a life well lived and about lives that fall short of that. For instance, you already have a belief as to whether a life devoted to taking drugs is a life well lived. Plato thinks that these beliefs have been formed passively, formed because we have been brought up in ways that rarely gave us pause to question their veracity.

Plato also tells us that some of the cave dwellers are honored and given prizes for the beliefs they have about the shadows. The person who picks out a shadow of a cat reliably and can distinguish it from shadows of a dog might be honored

for their great perceptual powers, the honor givers thinking that this ability is good and one we should all possess. In our lives too, we honor and reward people. We award someone a Nobel Peace Prize for work we consider valuable, or award a prize for artwork, or a prize for athleticism at the Olympics. In each case, we make assumptions about what is valuable, i.e., that art, or athleticism, or charity is valuable and to be prized.

Imagine what it would be like for a cave dweller to realize that the shadows were not real. Plato describes the process of being turned away from the shadow as a violent one, violent in two ways. First, being turned from the shadows will not happen by itself. It requires some external force or person to free the cave dweller's head and allow it turn. Second, it will be a painful experience. After all, a cave dweller who is proud of their ability to distinguish shadows of a cat from shadows of a dog will unlikely be happy to realize that their ability rests on a deep mistake.

The experience of learning philosophy is violent in both these ways. You will only stop to examine your beliefs, to be suspicious of your convictions, if someone like Socrates starts challenging you, or perhaps, if some life event forces you to take stock. Many people dislike this experience. If you have won prizes based on the belief that, say, athleticism is a good thing, then it can be disconcerting to acknowledge that, perhaps, athleticism is worthless.

Plato tells us that philosophy is difficult in a second way too. If you do wake up, if you are dragged from the cave, then you will initially be blinded by the sun. You will not immediately see the real things outside the cave which made the shadows. You will feel dizzy and grapple around worried by this new experience. Philosophy too has that effect on students. As you start questioning your beliefs, you will not immediately see the truth behind those beliefs (if there is any). Socrates spent over 50 years in this state, trying to identify the truth about the good life and being killed before he could complete his search. But just as the real things outside the cave start to slowly come into view as your eyes adjust, you will slowly make progress in philosophy, which you might compare to the process of escaping the cave and allowing yourself adjust to the sunlight.

Finally, Plato describes the process of descending back into the cave after your eyes adjusted and you have seen the real things outside. Returning, you will once again see the shadows, but you will now see them as shadows. Things in the cave will be very different for you now. You will look at what was prized and honored and find them wanting. Plato tells us that you will try help others to see the light, but that you will most likely experience much rejection and perhaps violence by the other cave dwellers.

As you develop as a philosopher, you will no longer unreflectively live your life. You will no longer just accept as true the claims of your family and society. You will see the things you formerly prized as less prize-worthy. You may try wake up others who have not turned to philosophy, and, perhaps, you will be met with resistance. Our first great philosopher, Socrates, tried to turn the cave

dwellers of his time, the Athenians, away from the shadows towards the light. For that, he was cruelly executed. But his legacy lives on with each of you who are deciding to bravely question your beliefs. If he has taught us anything, it is that philosophy is the process of waking up. It will not teach you the answers to life's mysteries, but it will teach you how to search out those answers for yourselves.