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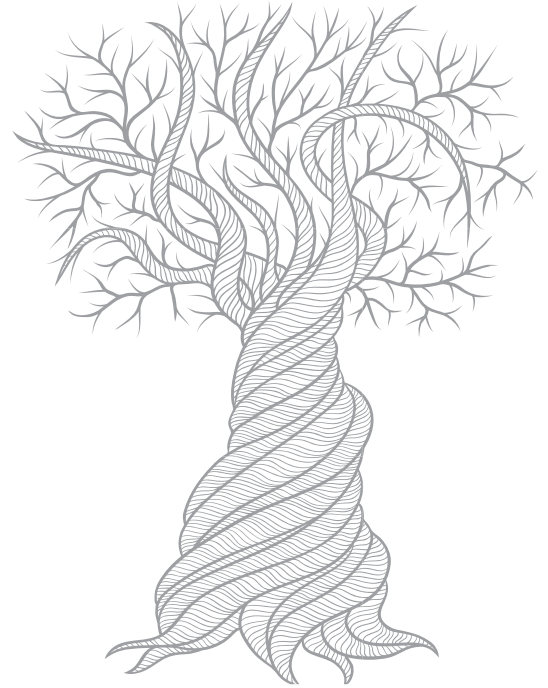
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1

Socrates and Plato



CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 1.1 Philosophy and Existential Questions
- 1.2 Socrates: The Examined Life and Socratic Wisdom
 - Box 1.1 Thinking Critically: *The Value of Self-Knowledge*
- 1.3 Socratic Wisdom and Dialectic
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- 1.8 The Allegory of the Cave and the Divided Line
- 1.9 Conclusion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define *existential question*.
- Describe basic forms of argumentation: induction and deduction.
- Discuss relativism and its drawbacks in the context of the Allegory of the Cave and the Divided Line from the Platonic dialogues.
- Distinguish ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics in reference to the ancient Greek ideals of the good, the true, and the real.
- Explain the relationship between Plato's notion of an apology and moral responsibility.

1.1 Philosophy and Existential Questions

Who are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here? These are the questions that students typically answer in icebreaker sessions at the beginning of every semester. When framed in this way, they are boring questions, the answers to which are so scripted and routine that they are hardly worth voicing: “My name is John Kaag. I come from Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. I’m here to take a class to get my three credits.” Excruciatingly. Boring.

Obviously, there are more meaningful ways to interpret these questions. In truth, they are some of the most interesting and difficult questions of adult life. They are the questions that keep us up at night and the ones that plague us in our darkest moments. They are **existential questions**. And our answers to them can determine how we live, and in some cases how—and for what causes—we are willing to die.

Existential questions concern the essence of what it means to exist as a human being. Questions of identity, origin, and purpose arise for human beings in ways that they do not for rocks and cats and dogs. Each of us, in our own time, gets to take a crack at these questions, and our lives are often judged on our ability to come up with good answers. Philosophy, since its very beginning, has focused on existential questions. This is not to say that philosophy is in the business of providing easy answers to life’s hardest questions; the goal is rather to supply the tools that we require to evaluate the answers.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle held that our initial attempts to answer existential questions are usually our worst. We typically respond to a question like *Why are you here?* by repeating some culturally accepted norm that we have inherited from our parents or teachers. Sometimes these answers are satisfactory, but often these commonly held opinions, or in Aristotle’s words **endoxa**, are not justifiable answers. The task of philosophers, according to Aristotle, is to go beyond these commonly held opinions and find answers that we can defend with *reasons*. In short, Aristotle is inviting us to cross-examine the day-to-day assumptions of our lives, the beliefs we take for granted, and to *think again* about existential questions that we usually think we have already answered.

Aristotle’s demand for us to *think again* can be traced to his teacher, Plato, and to Plato’s more famous teacher, Socrates. All three of these philosophers held that questioning of commonly held assumptions was the only way to achieve wisdom. On most days, we enact dozens of beliefs—in being a friend, a citizen, a professor—without giving these beliefs a second thought. But when we think again about these beliefs in hard and sustained ways, some of them strike us as wrong, or more immediately, wrong *for us*. Thinking again implicates us immediately and personally in the beliefs that quietly underpin our lives. It makes us consciously responsible for something that we often take for granted, namely our life. Thinking again is a power that we ignore at our own peril. This is where the work of **philosophy** comes in.

Philosophy comes from the Greek roots *philo* and *sophia*, meaning “love of wisdom.” The origins of this word are deeply interesting if we give these roots a little more thought. **Wisdom** in this case refers to a deep understanding about reality in reference to living a good life. It is the ability and willingness to think through the big questions of existence: What is the meaning of life? Why is life not a complete waste of

time? What is the nature of God? What is the best form of government? Why should one be moral? What is a mind and how is it connected to the body?

The ancients believed that pursuing answers to these questions was far from a merely theoretical activity. It had practical implications in the lives of individuals and their communities. According to these thinkers, the “love” that philosophers had for wisdom was of a unique sort: it was the kind of care that one friend has for another. To be a philosopher was to be a friend to wisdom. This sounds unexciting until we understand what it meant to be a friend in ancient Greece. It meant that one was willing to die for another. We can amend the old joke here that if a friend is someone who helps you move a sofa, and a best friend is someone who helps you move a body, then a philosophical friend is someone who will take a bullet for you.

Socrates was this sort of friend to wisdom.

1.2 Socrates: The Examined Life and Socratic Wisdom

Socrates (470–399 BCE), born in ancient Athens nearly five hundred years before the birth of Christ, is not the first philosopher in the Western intellectual tradition, but he is arguably the most famous, influential, and bewildering (**Figure 1.1**). Today we might think of a philosopher as being holed up in his or her study, writing late into the night. This was not Socrates. For starters, he didn’t leave us any philosophical writings. Not one. This fact leads to what bewildered scholars often refer to as the **Socratic problem**: the trouble of coming to know Socrates through secondhand accounts. These accounts principally come from three authors: the historian Xenophanes; the playwright Aristophanes; and Socrates’ philosophical protégé Plato.

Obviously, the Platonic dialogues, a set of writings that put Socrates in conversation with a variety of interlocutors from the ancient world, are the most philosophically interesting of the three accounts, but a word about Aristophanes’ portrayal seems very important. When Aristophanes poked fun at Socrates in his play *The Clouds*, everyone knew who Socrates was. This meant that Socrates had spent enough time engaged in conversation and argument with his fellow citizens that he was a household name. He wasn’t a bookworm or recluse, but rather a man who sought out reasoned debate with his fellow citizens. It’s hard to remember that philosophers once had a public voice and wide-ranging interests: politics, education, natural science, God and the soul, drama and poetry. Thinking through these issues, according to Socrates, doesn’t involve retreating from the real world or embracing a set of dogmatic beliefs, but rather finding creative and meaningful ways to live on the ground of human experience. To do this, Socrates embraced the motto from an inscription at Delphi: “Know thyself.”

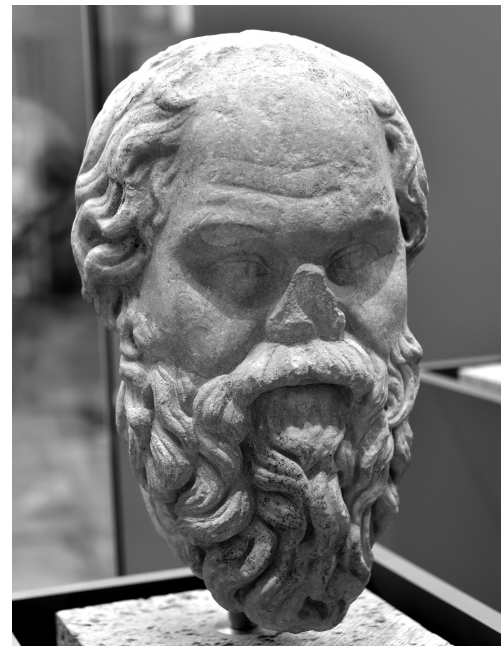


Figure 1.1 Bust of Socrates (Altes Museum). Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), CC BY-SA 4., via Wikimedia Commons.

Box 1.1 | Thinking Critically: *The Value of Self-Knowledge*

Before moving on to discuss Socratic wisdom and the Socratic method, a few questions need to be discussed:

What exactly is so painful about self-examination? What are some of the obstacles to knowing thyself? When you would rather not self-reflect, how do you feel about a “friend” who insists that you do?

Do you agree with Socrates’ claim that the unexamined life is not worth living? What if this quote is translated more literally: “The unexamined life is not suitable as a human life?”

What are the potential benefits of self-reflection? Where do you see self-reflection at work in our culture?

Getting to know yourself is sometimes rather painful (see Box 1.1). It involves being honest about your deepest motives and questioning the foundation for beliefs that give our lives structure. Indeed, this process is excruciating if you have just undergone a painful or embarrassing experience. Socrates lived at a unique moment in Athenian history, at a point when the golden age of Pericles had been eclipsed, and Athens had suffered a great defeat at the hands of the Spartans in the third Peloponnesian War. Socrates’ call to “know thyself” was, in this case, particularly irritating to many of his fellow Athenians. Self-examination was absolutely the last thing Athenians wanted to do in their spare time. Socrates demanded that citizens look carefully at themselves, at their culture, and at the education of their youth, and to ask two potentially disturbing existential questions: Who are we? And why are we here? To avoid this sort of self-reflection, according to Socrates, could have disastrous political and personal consequences. In his words, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

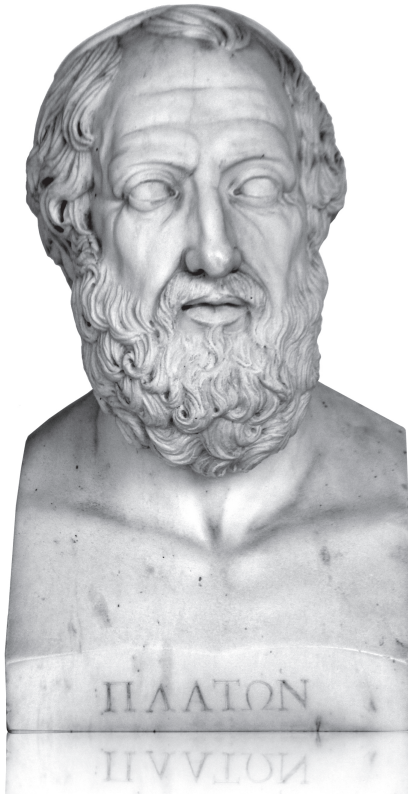


Figure 1.2 Bust of Plato (Altes Museum). Jean Housen, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

1.3 Socratic Wisdom and Dialectic

In his *Apology*, Plato (**Figure 1.2**) recounts the unique way that Socrates came to the activity of philosophy. Socrates’ friend Chaerephon visits the oracle at Delphi and is informed that Socrates is the wisest of all men. Most of us would be overjoyed to hear this news about ourselves, but Socrates isn’t. In fact, he doesn’t even believe the oracle. Self-examination has led Socrates to acknowledge the many things he *doesn’t* know. So he goes

in search of a person who is wiser than himself. This quest leads Socrates into conversation with the supposedly wise men and women of Athens (Plato's dialogues are meant to be renderings of these discussions). His discussions reveal something very interesting (and a little uncomfortable) about human nature: many supposedly wise people are not so wise; we actually know far less than we think we do. Socrates concludes that the oracle was, in fact, correct—he is the wisest of all men because he alone “knows that he doesn't know.” This acknowledgment of ignorance is called **Socratic wisdom**.

Socrates tells his interlocutors, or discussants, that his wisdom is really “nothing special” but just ordinary “human wisdom.” In a certain sense, he is right. Human beings, by their very nature, have definite limits to the knowledge they can possess. But this is often very difficult to admit, and so Socratic wisdom might be “nothing special,” but it is also very difficult to obtain. We see this clearly in the Platonic dialogue in which Socrates engages his fellow Athenians in a particular type of teaching. In each dialogue, a topic is chosen for discussion: the nature of love, the definition of justice, the advantages of being moral, the best way to organize a society. Socrates then solicits the commonly held opinions (remember the *endoxa*?) about this topic. For example, in Book I of *The Republic*, Socrates speaks to Thrasymachus, who expresses the commonly held position that “justice is the advantage of the stronger.”¹ Socrates sees real problems with this definition (like an obvious abuse of physical power) and asks a series of questions that encourages Thrasymachus to admit that there is (1) a difference between a just and an unjust ruler and (2) some guiding principle for being a just ruler that does not exclusively turn on the ruler's strength. This discussion is an instance of what is known as **dialectic**, or the **Socratic method** (**Figure 1.3**).

There are several distinctive features of dialectical inquiry that are worth mentioning.

First, the inquiry depends on the active engagement of the participants. Socrates is not some dry PowerPoint lecturer, but rather a teacher who gets right in his students' faces, who is willing to sting them with tough or even unanswerable questions (Socrates is a self-described “gadfly” who cares enough about his pupils to help them to ask and answer questions that they normally pointedly avoid).

Second, every instance of Socratic investigation presumes that each student can achieve deeper understanding. The dialectic helps students refine their thinking about a particular important matter by asking them to define the terms that they use in debate. More often than not, when we rethink these terms, we can see a more defensible definition or argument. Socrates understood this educational step as the process of *recognition*: coming to see a truth that is already somehow inside us.

Finally, the Socratic method is ongoing, iterative, and “negative.” There is no particular end to most of Socrates' investigations, and each stage of inquiry leads into deeper and more nuanced questions and answers. To say that Socrates' teaching style is “negative” is not to say that it is bad, evil, or pessimistic. Rather, it is “negative” in the sense that it can help us see what arguments and definitions *don't* work for particular reasons, but it rarely furnishes a definitive answer to the questions posed.

This is similar to what Socrates says in the *Apology* about the nature of *conscience*, the inner voice (or **daimon**) that tells Socrates *what not to do* but remains relatively silent about *what he should do*. In this sense, the conscience is also “negative.”²

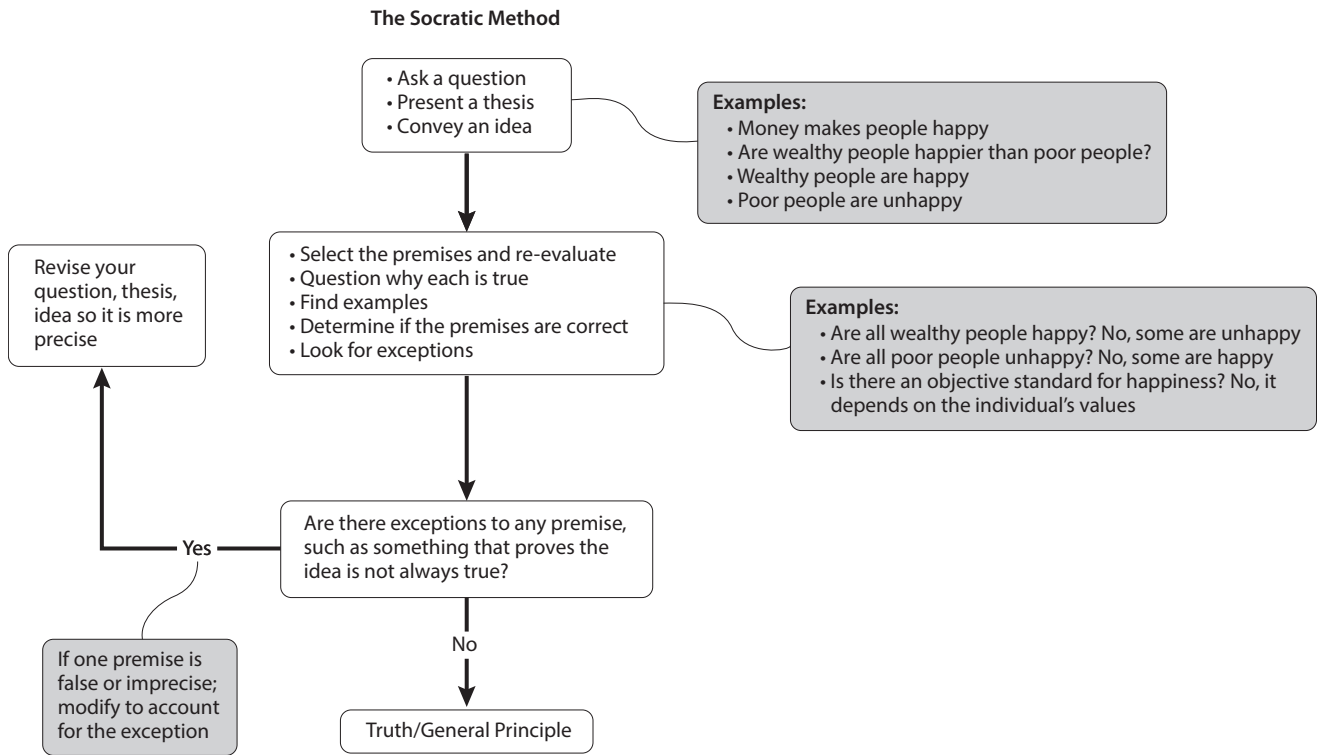


Figure 1.3 A flowchart of the Socratic method.

In considering Socratic wisdom, one might be tempted to confuse it with a position expressed by the twentieth-century playwright Samuel Beckett in his play *Waiting for Godot*.

In one scene of this absurd drama, Beckett's character blurts out a three-word sentence that is truly haunting if taken seriously: "Nothing is certain."³ Beckett's words imply that there is no wisdom worth pursuing, that there are no lasting, much less universal, truths worth investigating. This is *not* Socrates' position. If anything, it is the position of the **sophists** who frequented ancient Athens and who Socrates spent no small amount of time disputing.

The sophists were the ancient equivalent of modern-day law school professors who specialize in defense litigation. They traveled around the ancient world, versing their students in the art of **rhetoric**, the skill of persuasion. For them, persuasion had nothing to do with truth. To the sophist, there was no such thing as Truth, apart from one's ability to persuade another. And they would employ emotional and even deceptive ploys for the sake of persuasion. Socrates couldn't stand this sort of sophistry. Just because he didn't currently have the corner on the nature of Truth, Goodness, or Reality did not mean that these concepts were bankrupt or not worth investigating. Socrates also objected to the subtle **relativism** implied in the activity of the sophists.⁴ To fully understand the radical nature of Socrates' teaching, we have to get a better sense of his culture and the education that most Athenians of the time received (Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 | Historical Context: *Education in Ancient Athens*

Greek education and culture were dominated by religious mythology, expressed most pointedly in the Homeric poetry of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Homer, who lived three hundred years before Plato, developed a complex network of poems that described the way that the world—both human and natural—worked. And they worked, according to Homer, by virtue of divine intervention. To be clear, the Greek gods did not intervene in exclusively benevolent ways. Indeed, Homer depicts the gods and goddesses of Olympus as having human attributes, such as desire, jealousy, rage, and hubris (overweening confidence), and when the gods intervened in human affairs, bad things (earthquakes, storms, plagues) often happened. Humans lived, in large part, at the whim of the gods. The best that one could do was try to appease these divinities by way of sacrifice and homage. The teaching of Socrates stands in marked contrast to this sort of religious background. He asks each of us to take control of our lives, to become responsible for our actions and the world around us. He is not the first to do this—Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Protagoras (discussed in the next section) preceded him—but he is surely the most notable.*

The Socratic method of question and answer also ran against the methods of teaching that most Athenians were used to. The Homeric myths, which formed the basis of Athenian education, were passed from one generation to the next by oral tradition, by word of mouth from elders to the youth. Athenian students would attend recitations in which teachers would sing and perform the mythological stories that formed the basis of the Athenian worldview. In turn, the students would memorize these songs by reciting them in perfect repetition. No deviation from the basic structure of the stories was allowed, and very little critical analysis of these stories was encouraged. It was simple call-and-response. Perhaps this sounds like a strange way to learn, but perhaps you've had classes that only involve the exact memorization of lectures and slides. Ancient Greek education was a little like that. Obviously, Socratic dialogue was nothing like this. It was engaging and highly critical. And this is at least one reason that Socrates made so many enemies in Athens, enemies who would eventually conspire against him.

Questions:

1. What are the problems with a recitation style of teaching? What do students miss in basing learning on memorization?
2. What is the appropriate balance between memorization of facts and critical analysis?

*Richard Hunter. *Plato and the Traditions of Ancient Literature*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 58.

1.4 Relativism: Cultural and Individual

Relativists, like the sophists, held that all forms of human knowledge were simply a *matter of perspective*—a mere opinion based on the specific circumstance or character of a person. In the words of **Protagoras (Figure 1.4)** (481–411 BCE), arguably the most famous sophist of Socrates' era and the subject of his dialogue *Protagoras*, human beings “are the measure of all things.”⁵ Here, Protagoras is expressing a relativistic belief that remains powerful in our day and age: there is no such thing as absolute truth since everything is simply a matter of personal opinion. At first glance, relativism



Figure 1.4 Protagoras. Jusepe de Ribera, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

seems to have much to recommend it. Consider three questions: What is the best sort of music? Who is the most skilled baseball player? What is the most beautiful painting? The answers to these questions seem deeply personal and depend on the specific life histories of an answerer. Perhaps you were brought up playing the banjo in the hills of North Carolina; it would seem counterproductive, if not impossible, to argue against your appreciation of bluegrass music. Perhaps you—like me—have strong feelings about baseball and know, on the basis of feelings, that the Red Sox are amazing and the Yankees are rubbish. Perhaps you *just like* Picasso over the paintings of Van Gogh and Monet; your belief that Picasso is the best is simply a matter of preference. These cases are all instances of relativistic justification for belief.

Consider those three contemporary cases of relativism. Can you make a distinction between two different types of relativism in the examples given? Take the first case, the question of music and the belief that bluegrass is the best, made on the basis of a particular life history. In certain regions of Appalachia, bluegrass is a way of life—it is the only “good” form of music there is. Of course, a person living in this area could rebel against this musical trend, but many don’t, and they reflect the belief of their cultural surroundings. This is a classic case

of **cultural relativism**, a case where belief is justified by reference practices that vary from culture to culture.

Obviously, the fact that different cultures have different ideals and norms can lead to more serious debates than the one surrounding music. Should women have to be accompanied by men in public? Should their heads or entire bodies be covered outside the house? A relativist would hold that these questions can only be answered on the grounds of particular societal norms. In these cases, there is no single right answer. Our preferences, and therefore our beliefs, grow out of the particular settings we find ourselves in.

Turning to the case of preferring one painting to another, this preference is less a matter of cultural training and background and more a case of subjective (or purely personal) opinion. Maybe you just really like the way that Van Gogh uses yellow, simple as that. This is a form of **individual relativism**—which holds that, at the end of the day, beliefs are justified by reference to *purely* individual opinions. It is worth noting that the distinction between cultural and individual relativism is not hard and fast.

In the case of my baseball preferences, it could be the case that I moved to Boston and am not part of Red Sox Nation (in this instance, my love for the Sox would be a product of cultural conditioning), but I could also simply have a special and unique love of sox, especially red ones (this would be a case, an admittedly strange case, of individual relativism).

Socrates was an opponent of both cultural and individual relativism. Remember that Athenian education was still dominated by the mythical stories of Homer (**Figure 1.5**), stories that were meant to make sense of the natural and human realms.

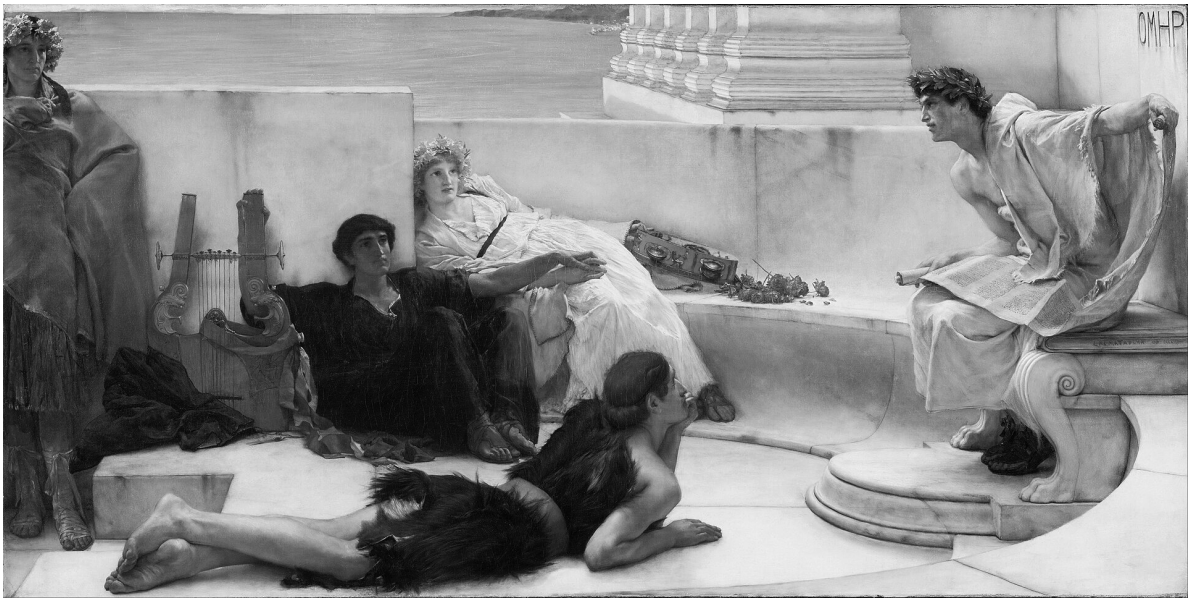


Figure 1.5 A reading from Homer. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Selection 1—*Euthyphro* [Socrates (S) to Euthyphro (E)]⁶

S: And what is piety, and what is impiety?

E: Piety is doing as I am doing; that is to say, prosecuting anyone who is guilty of murder, sacrilege, or of any similar crime—whether he be your father or mother, or whoever he may be—that makes no difference; and not to prosecute them is impiety. And please consider, Socrates, [my argument for the principle] that the impious, whoever he may be, ought not to go unpunished. For do not men regard Zeus as the best and most righteous of the gods? And yet they admit that he bound his father [Cronos] because he wickedly devoured his sons, and that he too had punished his own father [Uranus] for a similar reason, in a nameless manner. And yet when I proceed against my father, they are angry with me. So inconsistent are they in their way of talking when the gods are concerned, and when I am concerned.

S: May not this be the reason, Euthyphro, why I am charged with impiety—that I cannot away

with these stories about the gods? And therefore I suppose that people think me wrong. But, as you who are well informed about them approve of them, I cannot do better than assent to your superior wisdom. What else can I say, confessing as I do, that I know nothing about them? Tell me, for the love of Zeus, whether you really believe that they are true.

E: Yes, Socrates; and things more wonderful still, of which the world is in ignorance.

S: And do you really believe that the gods, fought with one another, and had dire quarrels, battles, and the like, as the poets say, and as you may see represented in the works of great artists? The temples are full of them; and notably the robe of Athene, which is carried up to the Acropolis at the great Panathenaea, is embroidered with them. Are all these tales of the gods true, Euthyphro?

E: Yes, Socrates; and, as I was saying, I can tell you, if you would like to hear them, many

other things about the gods which would quite amaze you.

S: I dare say; and you shall tell me them at some other time when I have leisure. But just at present I would rather hear from you a more precise answer, which you have not as yet given, my friend, to the question, What is “piety”? When asked, you only replied, Doing as you do, charging your father with murder.

E: And what I said was true, Socrates.

S: No doubt, Euthyphro; but you would admit that there are many other pious acts?

E: There are.

S: Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all pious things to be pious. Do you not recollect that there was one idea which made the impious impious, and the pious pious?

E: I remember.

S: Tell me what is the nature of this idea, and then I shall have a standard to which I may look, and by which I may measure actions, whether yours or those of any one else, and then I shall be able to say that such and such an action is pious, such another impious.

Question:

1. Having read Euthyphro’s claim, can you explain how he is reflecting a relativistic position?
2. Additionally, can you think of three potential objections to relativism?

Students were supposed to accept, without question, the ideas of their popular culture. What was Good, True, and Real for an Athenian was simply a reflection of long-standing and widely accepted tales of gods and human beings. As we can see from the brief excerpt in Selection 1 below, Socrates explicitly questioned the cultural assumptions of Athens, specifically the way that Athenians, like Euthyphro, assumed that ideals like justice and goodness were bound to the existence and treatment of the gods. Here, Socrates (S) asks Euthyphro (E) to define a general concept of *piety* (what today might be considered the quality of being upstanding or righteous).

Many sophists supported the cultural relativism reflected in Euthyphro’s discussion about the gods and justice. Protagoras, for example, suggested that the best that one could do in pursuit of truth or goodness was to abide by the teachings of one’s surrounding society. In Socrates’ rebuttal to Euthyphro, he suggests that such relativism is inadequate because of the fact that different cultural norms might conflict (the gods disagree). Socrates is in search of a general or universal definition of piety, a definition that can apply in all cases. Ancient Athens was defined by cult practices in which people would choose to worship a variety of mythological figures. Additionally, each person could conceivably worship gods that, according to Greek myth, did not always get along nicely. Socrates forced Euthyphro to acknowledge this fact, to acknowledge that his cultural relativism implied a contradiction between competing societal norms.

Some sophists avoided this criticism by holding an even harder line than Protagoras, which came close to individual relativism: that there was no better or worse way of achieving the true or the good. No one opinion was better than the next. These sophists stood against the conventions of Athens, but they didn’t do so because they believed in something higher, more noble, or more enduring. Socrates was unique in rejecting both of these forms of relativism: he accepted neither the rote memorization of Homeric poems nor the extreme relativist’s wholesale dismissal of truth.

1.5 The Good, the True, and the Real

Socrates believed that the point of human life—the answer to the existential question, Why are you here?—is intimately related to these three related ideals: the good, the true, and the real. Socrates believed that the key to right conduct, the apprehension of truth, and an understanding of ultimate reality were interdependent. One could not, for example, act rightly on the behalf of false or feigned ideals. A philosopher had to be equally a lover of the good, the true, and the real—and this love helped structure a just society. Over the course of two millennia, philosophers have continued this love affair with wisdom, but they have begun to separate the three ideals that Socrates once held together. They have become the basis of three of the principal subdisciplines of philosophy:

1. **Ethics**: What is it to possess a good moral character? What is it to live a good life? What duties do we have to ourselves and others? What is virtue? How should we think about justice and fairness? These are the questions of ethics. **Ethics** comes from the Greek word *ethos* and is usually described as the study of right conduct. *Ethos* has two important connotations that we ought to remember. On the one hand, it refers to practices and actions that are “right” for a given society. There is an ethos of every culture—a French ethos to appreciate fine cheese, an American ethos to enjoy good apple pie and to have a proclivity for baseball.

2. **Epistemology**: What do you know? And how do you know it? These are the central questions of **epistemology**, a field of philosophy that stems from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning “knowledge.” Epistemology isn’t just interested in gaining knowledge; it also studies how knowledge is possible in the first place. Referred to as “the theory of knowledge,” epistemology explores the origin and justification of belief, the difference between opinion and truth, and the limits of human knowledge.

3. **Metaphysics**: *Physis* (pronounced foo-sis) is the Greek word meaning “nature.” *Meta-* is a prefix meaning “beyond.” So **metaphysics** is the study of realities beyond the natural realm. Traditionally, it has been described as the exploration of ultimate reality. What is the world made out of? What is the nature of God? Is there an after-life? What is the character of the soul? These are the traditional questions of metaphysics that can be traced back to ancients like Socrates and Plato.

A final subfield of philosophy should be mentioned in relation to our story of Socrates and the Platonic dialogues. All of the Platonic dialogues are geared toward the remaking of Athenian society. Sparta had just humiliated the Athenians in the final Peloponnesian War, revealing the shortcomings of a society that was widely regarded as the crown jewel of the ancient world: democratically ruled, intellectually and technologically sophisticated, and above all, wealthy. But there was, according to Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*, more to a well-adjusted society. Socrates’ simultaneous investigation of ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics had as its final objective the reformation of a society, its political system and social practices. The final subdiscipline of contemporary philosophy—**social and political philosophy**—reflects this desire. This field of philosophy is concerned with the justification and origin of political authority, the proper execution of state power, the relationship between citizens and their

leaders, the nature and danger of oppression (which bears on the topics of ethnicity, gender, disability, economic inequalities), and the relationship between the state and basic public welfare.

As you take additional classes in philosophy, you will discover that there are even more subfields of the discipline. Ethics is the study of *axiology* (the study of values), but there are other types of values (like judgments of taste and beauty), and these are discussed in a field known as **aesthetics**, or the study of artistic taste and beauty. Those philosophers especially interested in the formal structure of correct argumentation study **logic**. And over the last century, the discipline of philosophy has been broken up by a growing number of “philosophies of ____.” Today, there is philosophy of race, philosophy of gender, philosophy of religion, philosophy of sport, philosophy of physics, philosophy of popular culture, philosophy of mathematics. You get the point. Contemporary philosophers have applied age-old lessons about argumentation and reasoning to every aspect of our world.

1.6 Justification and Argument

To this point, a lot has been said about philosophical “argument.” Perhaps you envision the screaming matches that take place between two children over a new toy. And philosophy does sometimes devolve into this sort of bickering. But it shouldn’t. In Socrates’ time, philosophical argument, at its best, was carried on by two or more individuals who pursued a satisfying answer to a difficult, often existential, question. To get to the definition of “argument,” it is helpful to think about what we mean by a “satisfactory answer.” What makes a good answer good and a bad answer not so good? Socrates believed that good answers were those that had proper justification. Justification is the process of showing something to be reasonable by giving evidence. A philosophical argument, along these lines, has two parts: the *premises*, or supporting claims or evidence, and the conclusion, or statement that one can draw from these premises.

It is worth noting that while all compelling philosophical arguments have the capacity to persuade another person, not all acts of persuasion are genuine philosophical arguments. I remember, quite vividly, being persuaded to hand over my lunch money to a bruiser who I will refer to as Max Fisticuffs. But Fisticuffs was sitting on me at the time, pummeling me, so the persuasion was not philosophical but merely forced. Similarly, liars and charismatic leaders can persuade us, but they do so only by deception or emotional appeals. Again: this is not philosophy. Socrates made this clear in Plato’s dialogue the *Theaetetus*, when he argued with Protagoras, the relativist, that truth was not simply a matter of using the correct words to convince another (rhetoric or *orthoepeia*) but that the words had to be placed in statements (premises) that actually supported a conclusion in a particular way. Premises can support a conclusion in a variety of ways, but for our purposes, we will stick to what are known as deductive and inductive support.

Deductive arguments are those types of arguments in which the premises have a certain *logical* relationship to the conclusion, such that they *necessarily* lead to it. If the supporting claims of such an argument are true, the conclusion cannot, under any circumstances, be false. The rock-solid nature of deductive arguments can be seen

in the very simple example below. Please note that statements 1 and 2 are the premises of the argument, and statement 3 is the necessary conclusion.

Argument A

1. All philosophy professors like reading Plato.
2. Damien is a philosophy professor.
3. Therefore, Damien likes reading Plato.

Deductive arguments are meant to possess this sort of ironclad character. If statements 1 and 2 are true, then 3 must be true. In the case of Plato and Damien above, the argument is *valid*; the conclusion follows logically from the premises. Compare this example with the following one:

Argument B

1. Some philosophy professors like reading Plato.
2. Damien is a philosophy professor.
3. Therefore, Damien likes reading Plato.

What is the difference between Argument A and Argument B? The only change is the word *all* to the word *some*, but it makes a world of difference. In Argument B, there is no necessary relationship between the premises and the conclusion. In fact, Damien could be one of those odd philosophy professors who don't like to read Plato—since statement 1 makes it clear that such professors do exist—so there is no absolute way of knowing that statement 3 is true. In the case of Argument B, we would say that the deductive argument is therefore invalid.

Finally, a word about the truth of premises in a deductive argument. **Validity** of an argument speaks only to the logical relationship between the premises and the conclusion. It says nothing about the truth of the premises. Take the following deductive argument:

Argument C

1. All childhood bullies eventually commit crimes and are imprisoned by the age of 30.
2. Max Fisticuffs, who is now 32, was once a childhood bully.
3. Therefore, Max is behind bars.

If the premises are true, it is necessarily the case that the conclusion in statement 3 follows from them. But notice that there's a problem with one of Argument C's premises, the same problem that you might have observed in the premises of Argument A. *It is not the case, empirically speaking, that all childhood bullies are eventually imprisoned.* In fact, Max is now an ethics professor at a local university and one of my best friends. He's never done jail time. This argument is unsound, meaning that at least one of its premises is not true. When a deductive argument is valid and all of its premises are true, we call that argument **sound**.

The Box 1.3 exercise about the limits of deduction brings us to the second principal kind of philosophical argument: induction. In many cases, the conclusions that we reach

Box 1.3 | Thinking Critically: *The Limits of Deduction*

Exercise: Deductive arguments have their virtues: they are logically necessary, meaning their conclusions follow in an absolute way. But many of the “truths” that we hold are not justified in this airtight fashion. Can you give some examples of truths you hold that are not valid or sound in a deductive way? How do you know them? Next, write out four arguments that reflect the three types of deductive arguments in reference to soundness and validity.

in a philosophical debate are not necessarily true, but there may still be good reason to believe in them. **Inductive arguments** are meant to provide probable support to a conclusion; in other words, if the premises of a strong inductive argument are true, the conclusion is likely to follow. Here is a good example of a strong inductive argument:

Argument D

1. In Britain 76 percent of professional philosophers are male.
2. Terry is a professional philosopher, working in Britain.
3. Despite the ambiguous name, Terry is probably male.

This is what is known as a strong inductive argument since the chances that Terry is female, all things being equal, are relatively low (24 percent). Unfortunately (for a number of reasons that will be discussed at the end of the text), this premise is, in fact, true and therefore lends ample support to the conclusion that Terry is probably a male. When the premises of a deductive argument are true, we can say that the argument is sound. In the case of a strong inductive argument that possesses true premises, we can claim that the argument is cogent. In instances of weak inductive arguments, one produces a conclusion that overgeneralizes a premise, as in the following example:

Argument E

1. In Britain 16 percent of professional philosophers are blond.
2. Terry is a professional philosopher, working in Britain.
3. Terry is probably blond.

In this case, the chances that Terry is actually blond are not at all good, and therefore the inductive argument is weak.

This discussion of philosophical argumentation might seem rather dull. At first glance, it seems to have very little to do with the meaningful existential questions that philosophy is supposed to attend to. But think again. We would, I suspect, like to think that the answers that we give to life’s most important questions are not taken as simply a matter of memorization or blind faith. We would like our answers to have support, to be justified in a particular way. This is where the discussion of argumentation comes in. When Aristotle suggests that we critically examine the endoxa (or commonly held beliefs of our lives), he is asking us, at once, to interrogate, or question, the premises that quietly underpin them. Here, he is taking his cue from Plato and

Socrates in arguing that to *know* that a statement is true, one must not only believe in it, but also be able to furnish a satisfactory argument that supports it. In other words, for a belief to be genuinely true, it needs to be a **justified true belief**. Justified true belief will be discussed at length later in the text.

1.7 The Virtue of Argument and Apology

To make this discussion of philosophical justification and argument more concrete, we can return to our discussion of the Platonic dialogues. Plato's *Apology*, the dialogue that describes the trial and verdict of Socrates, is the story of a man who is asked to give an account (an *apologia*) of his life (**Figure 1.6**). The matter of justification is of life-and-death importance for Socrates. He is forced to give justification for his actions, for the curious and disturbing way that he has spent his later years. He does so through dialogues that are jam-packed with both inductive and deductive arguments.

Socrates was seventy when he was charged by a group of fellow Athenians with corrupting the youth. He'd dedicated much of his last decade to engaging the leaders

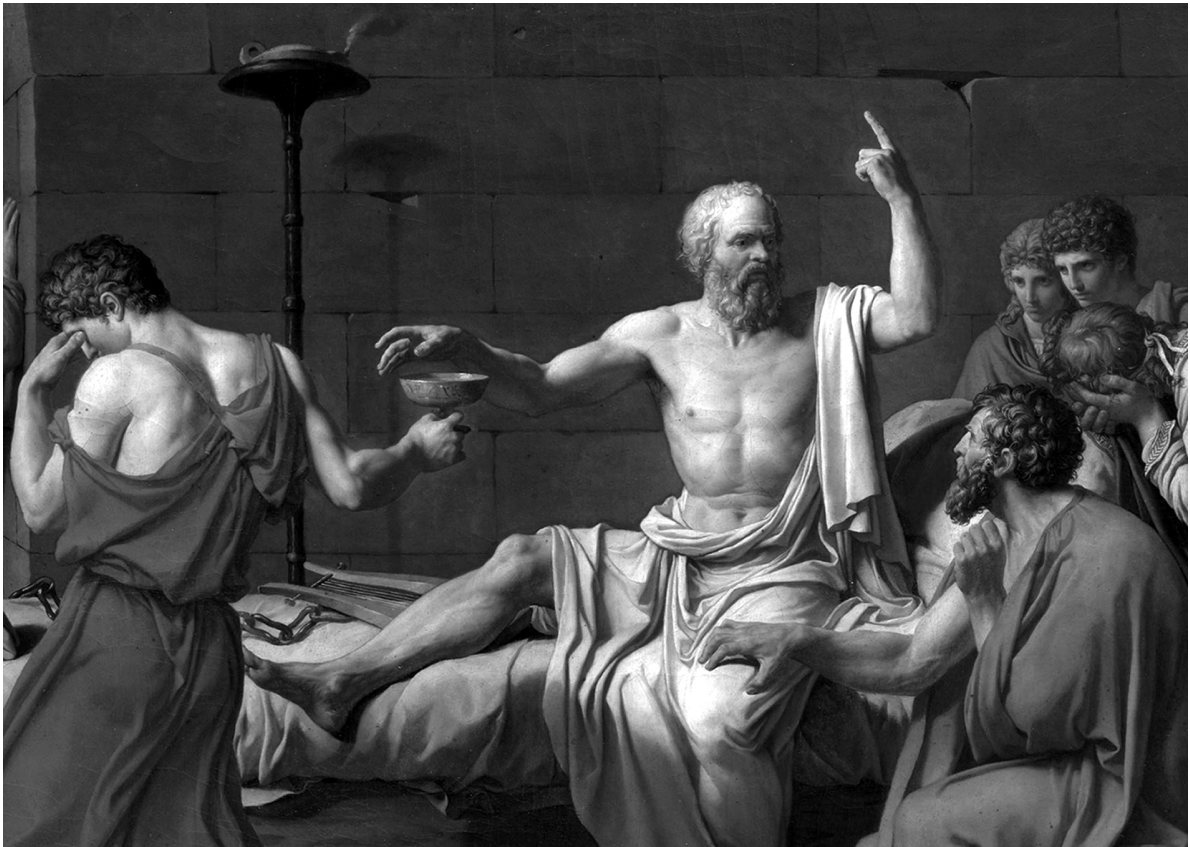


Figure 1.6 The death of Socrates. Jacques-Louis David, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

of his city in philosophical discussion, demanding that they provide detailed arguments for the beliefs that they held most dear. To the extent that his dialectic challenged many of the assumptions of his society, Socrates was viewed as a corruptor. So which assumptions did he challenge? First, he suggested that Athenian democracy had been reduced to a sort of mob rule, a type of government that was run by the will of the *demos*, or people. He held that an ideal Republic would, instead, be governed by a “**philosopher-king**” who was an expert in philosophical judgment. Second, he challenged the persistent belief that the worst thing in life was death; Socrates disagreed, arguing that living a wicked or meaningless life was worse than death. Third, Socrates maintained that life was to be determined not by our immediate basic needs or desires, but rather by enduring ideals that lasted well after we were dead and buried. Along these lines, he suggested that every human being had a soul and that our happy immortality depended on the education of the soul in this life (this was vastly different from the standard Greek conception of the afterlife that was neither good nor bad). Finally, as opposed to the mindless routine of everyday life, Socrates stated that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

Throughout the Platonic dialogues, Socrates gives coherent arguments for each of these positions. While we won’t have the chance to explore all of them in detail, I have

Selection 2—Apology [Socrates (S) to Meletus (M)]⁷

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

M: Yes, I do.

S: 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.

M: The laws.

S: 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.

M: The judges, Socrates, who are present in court.

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

M: Certainly they are . . .

S: I am very unfortunate if that is true. But suppose I ask you a question: Would you say that

this also holds true in the case of horses? Does one man do them harm and all the world good? Is not the exact opposite of this true? 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 any other animals? Yes, certainly. Whether you and Anytus say yes or no, that is no matter. Happy indeed would be the condition of youth if they had one corrupter only, and all the rest of the world were their improvers. And you, Meletus, have sufficiently shown that you never had a thought about the young: your carelessness is seen in your not caring about matters spoken of in this very indictment.

And now, Meletus, I must ask you another question: Which is better, to live among bad citizens, or among good ones? Answer, friend, I say; for that is a question which may be easily answered. Do not the good do their neighbors good, and the bad do them evil?

M: Certainly.

- S: And is there anyone who would rather be injured than benefited by those who live with him? Answer, my good friend; the law requires you to answer—does anyone like to be injured?
- S: Certainly not.
- M: And when you accuse me of corrupting and deteriorating the youth, do you allege that I corrupt them intentionally or unintentionally?
- S: Intentionally, I say.
- M: But you have just admitted that the good do their neighbors good, and the 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;—that is what you are saying, and of that you will never persuade me or any other human being. But either I do not corrupt them, or I corrupt them unintentionally, so that 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; whereas you hated to converse with me or teach me, but you indicted me in this court, which is a place not of instruction, but of punishment.

Questions:

1. This selection contains what is known as an **argument from analogy**, a type of inductive argument that makes a comparison between two cases—case X is sufficiently similar to another case, Y, such that conclusions drawn from X can apply to Y. Can you identify such an argument in the selection and explain, in your own words, how the argument works? Can you think of counterarguments against using such an analogy?
2. How does Socrates' argument against Meletus' position sound in the context of our modern democratic society?
3. What is Socrates' position on wrongdoing, punishment, and education? Compare this with our modern understanding of crime and punishment.

picked two selections for you to consider from the *Apology* that ought to prompt discussion. As you read these passages, try to map them onto the ways—just mentioned—that Socrates challenged Athenian norms. The first, Selection 2, is a dialogue between Socrates (S) and Meletus (M) on the education of the youth; the second, Selection 3, is a speech given by Socrates, addressed to his jury, on the worth of the reflective life. Having read the previous selection from the *Apology*, you should find one thing clear: philosophical reading is not like most of the other reading you are used to doing. The arguments presented are complex and often embedded in many paragraphs, the language is stilted and difficult, and the pacing is sometimes slow and tough. This means that you typically have to read and reread in a different way, especially if you intend on writing about the text in an expository essay. Expository essays explore ideas, themes, or texts in clear and concise ways and construct particular arguments regarding this exploration. Expository essays are the gold standard of evaluation in the humanities and social sciences and the form of scholarship that professional philosophers engage in most frequently. We will now explore how to write one. As introductory students, you are probably somewhat new to this genre of writing, so we will take it slow. The first step of an expository essay is called a close reading (see Box 1.4).

Box 1.4 | Writing Philosophically: *Exercise 1, Close Reading*

1. Put down that highlighter, and pick up a pencil or pen. As a student, I was what my philosophy professor called “a highlighter samurai”—I would highlight everything, as if to prove to myself that I had actually read it. The consequence of this approach was that I couldn’t remember why exactly I had highlighted the words. When everything is highlighted, nothing really stands out. So pick up a pencil and write in the margins of the text, or if you are using an e-book, please grab a notebook and take some reading notes.
2. Use the pencil to summarize Socrates’ arguments in your own words, underlining premises and casting them in ways that you can understand them better. Also look for tensions, contradictions, or questions that you might have for your teacher or the author (if you had the chance to meet him or her). Write those in the margins as well. Try to unpack (or explain in your own words) key terms that are particularly interesting; for this selection, I have **boldfaced** the words and phrases that I think are most important. But you will have to do this for future selections and explain your picks. This will take time, but it will be worth it when you go to form the analytic questions that will be the basis of your theses (discussed in the next chapter). Now you are ready to give this next selection a really close reading. You’ll be glad you did.

Selection 3—Apology [Socrates’ Speech]

I will begin at the beginning, and ask what the accusation is which has given rise to this slander of me, and which has encouraged Meletus to proceed against me. 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.” That is the nature of the accusation, and that is what you have seen yourselves in the comedy of Aristophanes; who has introduced a man whom he calls Socrates, going about and saying that he can walk in the 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 say anything disparaging of anyone who is a student of natural philosophy. I should be very sorry if Meletus could lay that to my charge. But the simple truth is, O Athenians, that I have nothing to do with these studies. 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 neighbors whether any of you have ever known me hold forth in few words or in many upon matters of this sort. . . . You hear their answer. And from what they say of this you will be able to judge of the truth of the rest.

As little foundation is there for the report that I am a teacher, and take money; that is no more true than the other. Although, if a man is able to teach, I *honor him for being paid*. There is Gorgias of Leontini, 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. There is actually a Parian philosopher residing in Athens, of whom I have heard; and I came to hear of him in this way:—I met a man who has spent a world of money on the Sophists, Callias the son of Hipponicus, and knowing that he had sons, I asked him: “Callias,” I said, “if your two sons were foals or calves, there would be no difficulty in finding someone to put over them; we should hire a

trainer of horses or a farmer probably who would improve and perfect them in their own proper virtue and excellence; but as they are human beings, whom are you thinking of placing over them? Is there anyone who understands human and political virtue? You must have thought about this as you have sons; is there anyone?" "There is," he said. "Who is he?" said I, "and of what country? and what does he charge?" "Evenus the Parian," he replied; "he is the man, and his charge is five minae." Happy is Evenus, I said to myself, if he really has this wisdom, and teaches at such a modest charge. Had I the same, I should have *been very proud and conceited; but the truth is that I have no knowledge of the kind.*

I dare say, Athenians, that someone among you will reply, "Why is this, Socrates, and what is the origin of these accusations of you: for there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All this great fame and talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men: tell us, then, why this is, as we should be sorry to judge hastily of you." Now I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will endeavor to explain to you the origin of this name of "wise," and of this evil fame. Please to attend then. And although some of you may think 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, such wisdom as is attainable 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, and will tell you about my wisdom—whether I have any, and of what sort—and that witness shall be the god of *Delphi*. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the 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 there was anyone 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 this story.

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 this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What 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 a long consideration, I at last 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 to 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 wiser still by himself; and I went and 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 philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him. . . .

When I left the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be 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 speak of this, but still I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. That showed me in an instant 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. And 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. . . . 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*—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 the oracle that I was better off as I was.

This investigation 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 in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an 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 my way, *obedient to the god*, and make inquisition into the wisdom of anyone, 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 this 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. . . . *I have concealed nothing, I have dissembled nothing. And yet I know that this plainness of speech makes them hate me, and what is their hatred but a proof that I am speaking the truth?*—this is the occasion and reason of their slander of me, as you will find out either in this or in any future inquiry.

I have said enough in my defence against the first class of my accusers; I turn to the second class, who are headed by Meletus. . . . What do they say? Something of this sort:—That Socrates is a doer of evil, and corrupter of the youth, and he does not believe in the gods of the state, and has other new divinities of his own. . . . He says that I am a doer of evil, who corrupts the youth; but I say, O men of Athens, that Meletus is a doer of evil, and the evil is that he makes a joke of a serious matter, and is too ready at bringing other 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 endeavor to prove. . . .

Someone will say: *Socrates, 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 this would be a disobedience to a divine command, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that the *greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue*, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and *that the life which is unexamined is not worth living—that you are still less likely to believe*. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. Moreover, I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any punishment. Had I money I might have proposed to give you what I had, and have been none the worse. But you see that I have none, and can only ask you to proportion the fine to my means.

Questions:

1. What is significant about Socrates not taking money for his teaching? How might this differ from the sophists, discussed earlier in this chapter? Do you respect Socrates more or less because he is poor? Why?

2. If you were brought to trial for corrupting the youth and knew that one of the sentences associated with a guilty verdict was the death penalty, would you shut up or accept exile? Why can't Socrates accept one of these two options?
3. Now that we have discussed philosophical argument, it might be interesting to examine Socrates' conclusion that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Could you reconstruct an argument that might support this conclusion?

Is wisdom worth dying for? For Socrates it is, but Plato does not articulate his rationale in any definitive way in the dialogues. At the end of the *Apology*, Socrates is condemned to death, forced to drink hemlock—the poisonous extract of a white root that has purple splotches (**Figure 1.7**). Death is not pleasant under any circumstances, but being poisoned, at least in this case, is about the worst: thirst, crippling muscle pain, an intolerable burning in the mouth and bowels, eventual kidney failure. It is a nasty way to go. But Socrates chooses this exit over abandoning philosophy or abandoning his country. And we are left with the disturbing question: Why?

At the end of Selection 3 from the *Apology*, I asked you to reconstruct an argument that might support the claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Obviously, the extreme framing of this claim is that death is better than an unexamined life, but



Figure 1.7 (A) Socrates drinking the extract from the hemlock root; Fondazione Cariplo, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. **(B) Hemlock plant;** William & Wilma Follette @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / USDA NRCS. 1992. **(C) Hemlock root;** Photo courtesy of Eric Anderson, Soybean Educator, Michigan State University Extension.

Box 1.5 | Thinking Critically: *Self-Examination and Moral Responsibility*

We usually think of a morally responsible person as one who follows all the rules and laws of a given society. Is there a problem with this thought? Socrates, for example, was condemned to death by a jury that consisted of his fellow Athenian citizens (all citizens could cast a vote in such court proceedings). It was determined that he had broken a number of laws. Does this mean that Socrates was morally irresponsible? Is there a difference between dutifully following the laws of a country and being responsible? These questions are extremely difficult and lead us to think about the relationship between moral responsibility and self-reflection. At the very least, it would seem that self-reflection is necessary to be responsible, in the sense of being the type of person that can be culpable (or blameworthy) when laws are broken. Additionally, reflection seems extremely important to know when laws are, in fact, unjust and don't fit with one's deepest moral feelings.

let's take a slightly more moderate version, namely that an unexamined life has no worth or existential meaning, for a human being. Meletus and the rest of the Athenians were asking Socrates to cease and desist from his philosophical investigations, to bring an immediate halt to his lessons of self-examination. If Socrates is right—that there is no meaning without self-examination—then he has good reason to refuse. But in what way could Socrates be right?

The answer, I am afraid, is not particularly easy to think through. It involves thinking about death and the meaning of life in ways that we often ignore, but I suspect that this is precisely what Plato and Socrates intended. In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue that describes the death of Socrates, Socrates argues that philosophers at their best are to spend their entire lives *preparing for death*. He seems to imply that at the end of a fragile, and relatively short, existence, one wants nothing more than the ability to say that one's life has been worth living. I think there is something to this. I watched my father die from esophageal cancer when he was fifty-six, and in his last days he wanted to know that his life had been worth something of significance. Maybe you can imagine your own death and experience a bit of the desire to give an explanation or account (an apologia) of your actions. Socrates suspects that we all want nothing more at the end than to say, "My life was worth living."

If Socrates is right about this, then the question arises, How does one give an adequate account of his or her life? Sure, there are many culturally sanctioned ways to derive meaning—have a family, make a load of money, start a company, become a rock star, fall in love, have a pet—but Socrates and Plato suggest that there is one intellectual process alone that grants the possibility of giving an apology of one's own. This intellectual process is self-reflection or self-examination. This may seem like a stretch, so let's examine the claim.

Imagine that you are born into a culture that values a particular way of life, for example, the type of life that is financially secure and involves particular kinds of family commitments. And imagine that a person—let's call her Tanya Habitude—has effectively gone through the motions to achieve this sort of life: she goes to school, gets the grades, learns to dominate job interviews, and cultivates the "right" sort of familial

responsibilities. To an onlooker, she looks like someone who has lived a meaningful life. But let's imagine that Tanya has been able to achieve these goals without self-examination. She has never explored the hidden premises of her belief structure; she has never looked at what was going on inside—inside herself—to see if she was indeed the type of person who endorsed these beliefs or this kind of life. Could Tanya, in this case, defend the claim “My life was worth living”? Socrates would say no. It is not that Tanya has pursued evil life projects, but rather that it is possible that these projects have never been her own in the first place.

If this scenario seems crazy, I would ask you to think about the last time you discovered that you have been living a life that you can no longer endorse. Maybe you have a boyfriend whom you fell out of love with long ago; perhaps you are pursuing a major that you have silently cursed since the first day of college. You make these discoveries in the process of self-reflection. When was the last time that you discovered that the beliefs that you hold have unsound or invalid premises, or that these beliefs, for any number of reasons, are just not right *for you*? Again, we make these realizations only in the process of self-examination. What is the most important word in the statement “My life was worth living”? Many students claim that it is the word *worth*, but I would argue that it is the word *my*. Without self-examination it is possible to live a life, perhaps even a meaningful one, but it is impossible to claim that life *as your own*. Self-examination allows us to “own up” to the life we have lived and not only to have “true belief” in general, but to have personally meaningful “justified true belief.”

1.8 The Allegory of the Cave and the Divided Line

Socrates' dramatic decision to face death rather than give up his life of self-examination was premised on the belief that something was more important, more real, more enduring, than physical life.

Plato believes that ultimate reality could be best understood as consisting in *two spheres*. The first of these spheres, the *sphere of becoming*, is grasped in our everyday experience of the world—our surroundings move and change, and our experience of them is continually shifting and illusory. The other realm of Plato's **dualism** is often referred to as the *sphere of being*, one in which we use our mind (not our senses) to grasp truths that are permanent and unchanging. In the *sphere of becoming* we only experience appearances; in the *sphere of being* we have the ability to understand ultimate realities.⁸

Both spheres are described by way of Plato's famous **Allegory of the Cave (Figure 1.8)** from his *Republic*. In this allegory, a group of prisoners are led into a cave and then chained next to one another, facing a single wall ahead of them. The room is dark, save for a flickering flame behind them. Something else is going on behind them: objects are being carried back and forth across the cave, and these objects cast wavering shadows on the wall that the prisoners face. The prisoners are not able to turn around to see the objects themselves but only experience the shadowy images on the wall. This is how Plato intends the allegory to work: we are the prisoners; the shadows on the wall are the experiences that we have of our perceptual world; we are trapped in a world of appearance that is illusory and deceptive.



(B) Schematic depiction of Allegory of the Cave

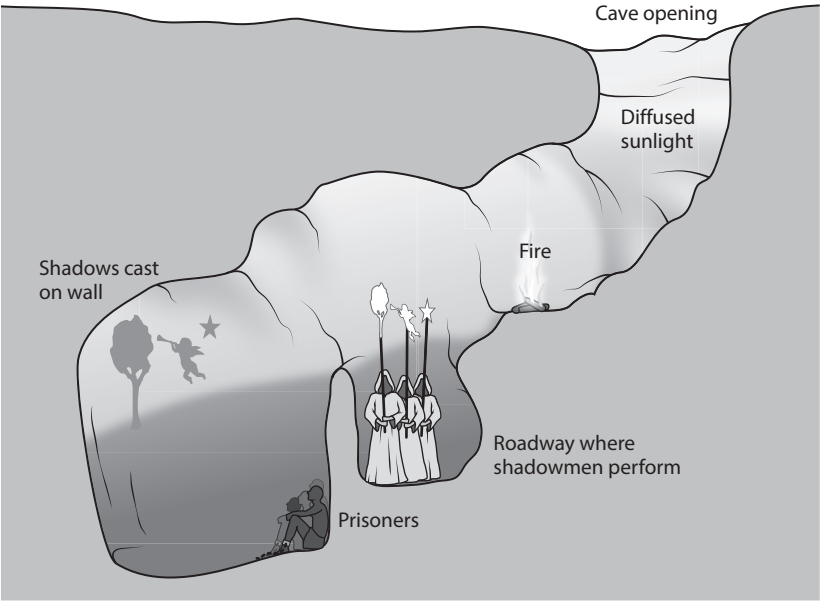


Figure 1.8 Allegory of the Cave. (A) Illustration; Jan Saenredam, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. **(B) Schematic depiction.**

But there is more to the story. Plato envisions a philosopher as being a prisoner who is somehow released from the cave. He or she comes to recognize that the images, the shadows on the wall, are not reality at all, that there is, in fact, a fire that casts misleading appearances. Now imagine, Plato asks us, that this philosopher makes the ascent out of the cave, toward daylight. When the prisoner finally emerges from the cave and stands beneath the sun, he or she is genuinely free and knows the difference between appearance and reality.⁹ Plato argues that the only way to make such an ascent is through the Socratic method. As one's eyes adjust to the light, a philosopher, eventually, is "able to reason" about the sun itself. The sun in this case is ideals—realer and more lasting than any tangible experience—such as the Good, the True, and the Real. What would it be like to make your way out of Plato's cave? Would it be pleasant? Would it be painful or heroic? Plato believes that it would be all of the above. The real heroism of the philosopher, however, is realized in the conclusion of the Allegory of the Cave: at the end of the story, the sun-bathed philosopher decides to venture back into the darkness in order to help others make the difficult climb to the truth. But this does not end well for the philosopher. The cave dwellers—those people still trapped in the world of appearance—often want nothing to do with the burning rays of Truth. Indeed, they try to kill anyone who tries to break free from their imprisonment. This is, we are to assume, the reason that Socrates meets his tragic end.

The Allegory of the Cave represents the path that Socrates took in his life as a philosopher, but it also gestures toward what is commonly referred to as Plato's **Theory of the Forms**. *Form* is a term that stems from the Greek word *eidos*, often translated as "idea."¹⁰ For Plato, however, *eidos* does not refer to any particular idea that you and I might have. Rather, Plato claimed that the Forms were essences or abstractions that exist independent of our particular thoughts or opinions about them. This might seem like a strange idea, but, he suggests in the *Meno*, anyone who has taken geometry in school has some idea about the reality of the Forms. Place two points on a chalkboard approximately a foot apart. Now, starting with your chalk on one of the points, trace a path around the other, making sure that the distance between the chalk and the second point remains constant. What have you drawn? A circle, obviously. But your circle on the board is not really a perfect circle, is it? It might look a bit like an oval, if we are being completely honest. But you know that it is still a circle, right? How do you know that?

Plato suggests that abstractions—like circularity, triangularity, and identity—are types of Forms that can be apprehended, or "gotten" by the mind, but are independent of our opinions about them and our ability to represent them in the physical world. In this sense, the Forms are independent of space and time, and they remain the enduring ideals that we are to pursue in rational investigation. These ideals, according to Plato, are not only geometrical and logical: there are also the Forms of virtue (the essence of wisdom, goodness, and beauty). These Forms are never *fully* expressed in the lives of particular people, but the Forms are reflected, to a greater or lesser extent, in the actions that we take in everyday life (just like circularity is reflected to a greater or lesser extent in the circles that we make on the chalkboard).

The most obscure or illusory region of our awareness is occupied by mere "images"—think of the faintest flickering shadows on our wall in the cave. Here we let the imagination run wild and conjure up all sorts of false opinions about what these images might represent. Take, for example, a photograph or video clip of Stephen



Figure 1.9 Stephen Colbert. Montclair Film, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Colbert (**Figure 1.9**). Obviously, the clips that we see of Colbert are not the *real* Colbert. Socrates encourages us to next consider the realm of perception where we actually encounter objects in the world. I saw Colbert, in the flesh, only once in the Musée d'Orsay, an art museum in Paris. He was quietly, intelligently, telling a boy (who I assumed was his son) about the art, and he was nothing like the image that I got from the *Colbert Report*. This was a more real version of Colbert. These first two levels of the Divided Line correspond to the sphere of becoming, where images and objects can change in varying degree, such that our knowledge of them is forever shifting. In other words, we are still in the deeper regions of the cave.

As we travel toward the sun, across the central partition of the Divided Line, we leave the *sphere of becoming* and enter the *sphere of being*. Extending the example of getting to “know” Colbert, we could ask what is Colbert’s general essence. The answer is pretty straightforward: he is a man, and more generally, a human being. Plato thinks that there is an *eidos* that defines being human, and we can reason about this in logical ways.

When I teach the Divided Line each year, some students comment that it is one of the more boring parts of Plato. The sphere of being seems so distant and ab-

stract. It is hard to care about Forms or think that they have bearing on our immediate lives. But they do, or so Plato would like to argue. Ask yourself the question that lies beneath the surface of the *Apology*: What is worth dying for? And why? This is not altogether different from the challenge that Socrates believes we face in giving a very good account of our life. (The question of what is worth dying for is pretty darn close to the question of what is worth living for, right?) So answer the question. It is a hard one.

If we stake our lives on appearances, like the false opinions and images in the lowest form of awareness, we will eventually discover that they are variable and illusory. Think about a person who spends his life worried about appearances and how sadly shallow this is. Now, if we stake our life on particular real people—like our siblings, parents, and loved ones—this is better, and more meaningful, but still not wholly satisfactory, at least according to Socrates. Many people derive personal meaning from their relationship with others, but these others, despite our love for them, will eventually die—their lives are transitory and fleeting.

This is not to bum a reader out, but rather to suggest that we are to look for other anchors of existential meaning. Plato looks to the realm of Forms for enduring ideas that might be worth living and dying for. He suggests that an *eidos* such as Goodness is timeless and one for which we might sacrifice our lives. This is not wholly different from the belief that it is noble to put your life on the line for transcendent ideals like Freedom and Justice. That is, after all, why we admire Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and, despite his “gadfly”-like disposition, Socrates.

1.9 Conclusion

Western philosophy arose, at first, as an attempt to help human beings through the business of living. This task included—and still includes—understanding the nature of reality, our relationship to each other and the world at large, the essence of beauty, and the quest for truth and certainty. Plato, following his teacher Socrates, held that being truly human involved all four of these aspects of philosophy, and only a life dedicated to philosophy, understood in this way, could be regarded as a full and beautiful life. What do you think? Have things changed in twenty-five hundred years? As we move forward in *Think Again*, try to keep Socrates' cultural context in mind: remember that Athenian democracy and its educational system stood opposed to particular Socratic insights and that it was a democracy—not an autocracy—that decided to put Socrates to death. What was Socrates' true crime? Was it that he just asked too many questions? Or was it rather that he was dedicated to the truth—to a metaphysical reality that endured—in a time when the people no longer believed in permanent truths?

Chapter Review

Summary

- Philosophy (the love of wisdom) stems from existential questions, meaning questions about the nature of human existence that confront us at various points through life. While philosophy doesn't always give definitive answers to these questions, it provides a method of inquiry that can help us formulate and justify our own answers.
- Socrates argued for the examined life because he saw intimate connections between self-examination and responsibility.
- Self-examination is never an isolated process, but rather one that is communal and social, embodied in the question-and-answer process of the Socratic method or dialectic.
- Socrates stood against the sophists and mythmakers (poets) of ancient Athens and, therefore, against relativism and unquestioned absolutism. His methods of teaching—the process of investigating the justification of beliefs—set him apart from his contemporaries.
- The positions that Euthyphro presents concerning the definition of piety reflect possible, but unsatisfactory, ways to justify belief. Most of his definitions presuppose either unreflective relativism or an argument from authority.
- *Validity* of arguments refers to the logical relationship between premises and the conclusion, while *soundness* refers to the truth claims associated with the premises of an argument. The premises of a cogent inductive argument do not necessitate the conclusion; they merely make it probable.
- The “wisdom of Socrates” is the awareness that one does not know—or the knowledge that knowledge is, in a very real way, limited and finite.

- The goal of Socrates, to pursue the Good, the True, and the Real, has become, in modern times, the separable pursuits of ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics.
- Socrates claimed that one of the primary goals of philosophy was to prepare for death, which amounts to giving an account of one's life and living well.
- The Allegory of the Cave, presented in the *Republic*, is one of the more important stories in the Platonic dialogue and presents the distinction, emphasized by Plato, between semblance and reality.
- The Theory of the Forms has, historically, been a part of the Platonic dialogues that has been discussed as establishing Plato as a metaphysical dualist.

Key Terms

existential questions	epistemology
endoxa	metaphysics
philosophy	social and political philosophy
wisdom	aesthetics
Socratic problem	logic
Socratic wisdom	deductive argument
Socratic method/dialectic	validity
<i>daimon</i>	soundness (sound)
sophists	inductive argument
rhetoric	justified true belief
relativism	philosopher-king
Protagoras	argument from analogy
cultural relativism	dualism
individual relativism	Allegory of the Cave
ethics	Theory of the Forms

Discussion Questions

1. What is the meaning of *philosophy*?
2. What is an existential question?
3. How does Aristotle describe the method of philosophy?
4. What are some of the endoxa of your contemporary life?
5. What is "Socratic wisdom," and what is its value in modern society?
6. What is the "problem of Socrates," the fact we get to know him only through other writer's accounts, and what sort of problem might it pose to understanding the trial and death of Socrates?
7. What are the two forms of relativism discussed, and what might some possible objections be to both types?
8. What does Protagoras mean when he says that human beings "are the measure of all things?"
9. What is the difference between deductive and inductive arguments?
10. How can an argument be valid and unsound?
11. What is the meaning of *apologia*, and how might self-examination help one fashion an adequate apology for one's own life?
12. Evaluate the claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

13. What is the relationship between epistemology and ethics? How are they related?
14. What is the difference between traditional metaphysical questions and contemporary ones?
15. What is the relationship between stereotypes and inductive reasoning?
16. Explain the Allegory of the Cave.
17. Explain the Divided Line, relating it carefully to Socrates' love of wisdom.
18. Why is a Form, or *eidos*, not simply an idea in the mind of you or me?
19. To what extent are our lives governed by the sphere of becoming?
20. Why might Socrates be accused of being antidemocratic?

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