

InterQuest - Current Master



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# InterQuest: Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy is as old as the advent of human consciousness. Socrates (470-399 BCE) coined the word philosophy from the Greek *philos* (love) and *sophos* (wisdom) such that it literally means “the love of wisdom.” Understanding what Socrates meant by that takes quite a bit of study. What we know about Socrates mostly comes from Dialogs (books consisting of conversations) written by Plato. One of those dialogues, the *Symposium*, involves Socrates and several other characters debating over what “love” is. So we at least have to work our way through that dialogue in order to understand what “love of wisdom” may be. One for sure, Socrates considered his pursuit of the love of wisdom the most important thing in his life and he in fact gave his life for it. The Athenians demanded that Socrates either give up his practice of philosophy or be put to death.

Is there anything that you would give your life for rather than give it up? Is there anything so important that you are willing to devote your life to it? How you honestly answer those questions will indicate the beliefs and values that are central to who you are. They are part of your essential self.

We don't always know our essential selves. It is fully possible, perhaps normal, to get on in life by following the expectations and demands that others put on it. We may obey our parents, obey the laws, obey our desires, and look no further than that. A life of conventional obedience may be an honorable life. It certainly is what others expect of us. We all put a lot of effort into living up to those expectations.

Philosophers like Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Weil, and others have challenged conventional wisdom and asked us to look into ourselves. Is living up to the expectations of tradition and culture the same as living an

authentic life? Maybe so, maybe not. How, though, would you ever know until you take a deep and honest look at your essential self and what it requires?

It is within that realm of questioning that this course, InterQuest<sup>™</sup> Introduction to Philosophy, extends. My hope as a teacher is that the power of such inquiry will remain with you. Once opened, such potentials are never fully shut out.

There are many ways to continue that questioning. One of them involves writing your thoughts and saving them or sending them for future consideration. Another involves reading and discussing the ideas of philosophers, who are really just individuals who have the need to understand more that what is given by conventional culture. People who pursue the love of wisdom are seeking to become more conscious of themselves and the reality we find ourselves in.

To that end I offer you a keepsake of your study of philosophy in a ten short weeks in college. This is only an opening and a bare hint as to the depths of thought that can be gained by focus on your essential self. I hope that it serves you well over time. So long as I breathe and live I am pleased to hear from you and share in the dialog. Never hesitate to be in touch.

In good spirit,

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PART I  
(EDIT) TERM YEAR

This “Part” can hold chapters consisting of students’ work.



PART II  
INTERQUEST



# I. Philosophy as Quest

## Part I

The word philosophy comes from ancient Greek; *philos* = love and *sophos* = wisdom. Philosophy has roots in an ancient idea of “the love of wisdom.” Of course, people have ever disagreed over what counts as wisdom. Due to such disagreements, philosophy is often considered a large-scale debate that has lasted for most of human history. It is not all differences, though; for every human culture has some activity that is recognizable as philosophy and shares some ideas with the philosophies of other cultures. Philosophy has given rise to political systems, legal processes, literary genres, scientific reasoning, and technical innovations.

Most important, philosophy is a personally relevant activity to every conscious being. I want to outline some of the history and character of Western philosophy, but my primary aim is to make clear the direct significance of philosophy to you, dear reader. I maintain that every living and aware human being has a stake in the philosophical enterprise. This is because every human being has a belief-system that mediates the perceptions, values, assumptions, and understandings that make up a unique individual. Many people never think about their own belief-system, but take it for granted as just given. People have the remarkable ability to reflect on themselves. Because of this, we can explore, evaluate, and even change our own belief-systems in a purposeful way. Through self-investigation we can increase our knowledge of ourselves. Self knowledge is a form of wisdom, so the roots of philosophy as the love of wisdom comes to be the care for oneself.

## Philosophy Today

In the last century philosophy became an institutionalized practice dominated by certified professionals. Every university has a

philosophy department populated with scholars who write papers for specialized journals and books on advanced topics. These philosophers know a great deal about the history of ideas and often specialize in specific topics and writers. Reading and listening to people who have invested great effort into understanding a topic is very valuable. It is unrealistic to suppose that a ten-week course will result in specialized knowledge that comes even close to that of the experts. Yet, there is one topic that no one else has a greater claim to expertise than you do: your own belief-system. If a main goal of philosophy is to increase wisdom, and self-knowledge is necessary for wisdom, then your personal self-investigation is a critical element. Given this, the key philosophical question is: how well do you know yourself?

### Philosophy and Origins

Perhaps people have had questions about the world and our place in it since there has been a human species. It is not difficult to imagine some individuals even among the earliest of people gazing into the night sky and wondering; How did I get here?; Where am I going?; What makes the world the way it is?; What am I? Such an inquirer belongs in the tradition of the philosopher.

It is also easy to imagine people of all times avoiding such questions altogether. They can simply focus all attention and energy on the immediate and local matters, such as; Where is my next meal?; How can I get more pleasure?; How can I avoid pain?; What does my (habit, tradition, society) tell me to do? Indeed, there are many instances where the philosophical urge to question and investigate has put people in trouble, especially where the authorities do not allow such questioning. Some readers of this essay may know what this is like from their own past; (i.e. families or relationships where deviation from the norm is disallowed).

That humans have long pondered philosophical questions is obvious from the subject matter of mythologies from cultures around the

globe. All cultures have some ancient stories that provide an explanation of sorts as to the creation of the world, how humans came to be, and how reality is ordered. For millennia, such stories were handed down from generation to generation. Here are a few of those traditional stories from around the world. You may find the similarities among them interesting;

### Southern Chinese Creation

The first living thing was P'an Ku. He evolved inside a gigantic cosmic egg, which contained all the elements of the universe totally intermixed together. P'an Ku grew by about 10 feet each day. As he grew he separated the earth and the Sky within the egg. At the same time he gradually separated the many opposites in nature male and female, wet and dry, light and dark, wet and dry, Yin and Yang. These were all originally totally commingled in the egg. While he grew he also created the first humans. After 18,000 years the egg hatched and P'an Ku died from the effort of creation. From his eyes the sun and moon appeared, from his sweat, rain and dew, from his voice, thunder, and from his body all the natural features of the earth arose.

### Apache Creation

In the beginning nothing existed, no earth, no sky, no sun, no moon, only darkness was everywhere. Suddenly, from the darkness emerged a thin disc, one side yellow and the other side white, appearing suspended in midair. Within the disc sat a small bearded man, the Creator, the One Who Lives Above.

### Koori Creation

There was a time when everything was still. All the spirits of the earth were asleep, or almost all. The great Father of All Spirits was the only one awake. Gently he awoke the Sun Mother. As she opened her eyes, a warm ray of light spread out towards the sleeping earth. The Father of All Spirits said to the Sun Mother, "Mother, I have

work for you. Go down to the Earth and awake the sleeping spirits. Give them forms." The Sun Mother glided down to Earth, which was bare at the time and began to walk in all directions and everywhere she walked plants grew. After returning to the field where she had begun her work the Mother rested, well pleased with herself.

The Father of All Spirits came and saw her work, but instructed her to go into the caves and wake the spirits.

### Hebrew Creation

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Please note that being a story or a mythology does not imply that the content of the story is false. Many people believe that at least one of the traditional creation stories is a true and accurate description of how the world came to be. Some scholars of mythology believe that the similarities of traditional stories across distant cultures indicate either common origins of the various peoples or some events that were experienced globally (e.g. most traditions have a story about a great flood). Psychologist Carl Jung regarded the similarities of mythical stories as resulting from a collective unconscious in which all human conscious is connected to an integral source.

It is not necessary to deny the traditional stories in order to do philosophy. Rather, the difference is that philosophy encourages questioning and seeks explanations and evidence, even for that which seems obvious, while traditionalism maintains that believing a certain story and being able to tell it is all the explanation or evidence that is ever required.

Philosophy is an activity involving inquiry, methods of investigation, and openness to further question. While philosophers certainly do hold strong opinions and espouse doctrines, anything that counts as philosophy must go beyond the mere statement of opinion and claims to truth. Philosophy involves questioning, because a basic assumption of all philosophy is that we do not (yet?) know the full and ultimate truth of the universe. Philosophy begins from a position of admitted self-limitation: ignorance, uncertainty, unclarity, etc. and seeks to make the topics of concern further understood, better supported, more clear, etc. If self-knowledge is a philosophical pursuit, it follows that we are limited in regards to our knowledge of ourselves.

We all have traditional accounts about ourselves. Whether they come from our families, cultures, or experiences, these stories serve to establish our individual belief-systems as given and obvious. They are our own creation myths explaining the existence of our present belief systems. The philosophic impulse is to raise questions about one's own belief system. That impulse runs counter to the tradition of accepting everything just as it is, just because that is how it happens to be. If you do undertake a philosophic inquiry into your own belief-system, you may find that your belief-system resists being subject to inquiry at all. There may be parts of yourself that act in the role of an authoritarian overseer determined on protecting the traditional status quo. In many of us, that authoritarian side is strong and even ruthless.

Inquiring into the origins of your own belief system involves asking questions like; What exactly are my beliefs?; How did I get these beliefs?; Have my beliefs changed?; and How do my beliefs fit together? Now, when speaking of beliefs here, we are not concerned with all of the beliefs, thoughts, and ideas that you may hold, even though it may be that all are related in some way. Philosophical self-investigation typically looks for the core or most general beliefs within a belief system. For example, beliefs about what human nature is like (e.g. that people are basically selfish, or

good-seeking, or sinful, or divine, etc.); beliefs about the way that the human mind learns and changes (e.g. from experience, from reason, from divine revelation, etc.); beliefs about the order and nature of existence (e.g. God controls everything, chance controls everything, etc.); beliefs about good and evil (e.g. God determines all value; nature determines all value; individual humans determine all value; etc.); and so on. These sorts of belief are considered core because they are general enough to influence many specific instances of beliefs and judgements. For instance, the reaction that you have to an issue such as the ethics of cloning human beings will connect back ultimately to some of the core beliefs noted above. The philosophic investigation into our own belief systems looks to the general and core beliefs that transcend the individual instances of issues and opinions. It seems clear to me that if our core beliefs were to change, then many of our opinions, and convictions, and commitments would follow. I'd like to know whether this seems so to you as well.

Please begin your philosophic quest by asking of yourself;

What are my core beliefs?

How did I get these beliefs?

Have these beliefs ever changed?

How do I feel about the possibility that they could change? How do my core beliefs fit together into a system?

We shall come back to this line of inquiry. Think through and write down insights that you have in considering these matters.

Philosophy and Spirit

Philosophy and its concerns intersect with religion and spirituality. The questions that philosophers and religious thinkers raise are often the same, such as Does my life have a purpose?, What happens

after death?, What is the right thing to do?, and many more. Religious and spiritual thinkers address many purely philosophical topics. Philosophers may be religious and provide spiritual answers to key questions.

There are some regards in which philosophy and religion are typically distinct. Understand that these are general observations for which particular exceptions may be found. Still there are some regards in which the participants of religious systems and philosophical activities will distinguish themselves.

Religion is characteristically practiced in a community of shared beliefs. That community also shares rituals and practices, such as holidays and dietary guidelines. Religious communities are frequently hierarchical with holy authorities (e.g. priests, imams, leaders) and sacred locations (e.g. temples, churches, mosques, holy cities, sacred mountains, etc.) Religious beliefs are often revealed by divine agency (e.g. scripture, vision, calling) and the adherence to the beliefs is a matter of faith. Devotion matters in religious orders and deviation from the accepted beliefs is discouraged. The major world religions tend to be monistic in maintaining that devotion to the beliefs of the particular religious system requires a denial of other religious systems. Religious and spiritual people include some of the most intelligent and open-minded people on the planet. Still, the final justification for much religious belief is simple acceptance. For devout folks, the ultimate truth is a mystery that is beyond human comprehension. Thus, the continued effort to understand is not as important as is the disciplined practice of faith and tradition. [I hope that I have done some justice to religious and spiritual thought. My effort here is not to evaluate, and certainly not to diminish, religion. I aim only at providing some distinctions that allow us to better grasp the nature and direction of philosophical thought].

Philosophical ideas are sometimes grouped as systems and schools, but the effort is most associated with individual thinkers. Even

among communities of philosophers who adhere to common beliefs, there are seldom ritualistic practices required and monitored by authorities. Most significant, philosophical beliefs are subject to reason and demonstration. They are open to challenge and participating in philosophical work is characterized by making challenges to existing claims and seeking revisions. Philosophies are pluralistic and often very individualized. Acceptance and faith are not sufficient justification for belief in philosophy, as the mysterious nature of the universe is seen by philosophers as a challenge to be addressed by constant probing and questioning. You can tell when a religious topic is being treated philosophically when the emphasis is placed on clarity and evidence. Religious folks usually do not feel any need for a proof of God's existence or an analysis of the concept of an afterlife. Philosophers do not remain content to accept statements of belief without some such proofs and analyses.

Some characteristic differences between religious thought and philosophical thought.

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Religion	Philosophy
Ritualistic	Methodical
Hierarchical	Universal
Faith based	Reason based
Revealed	Demonstrated
Ineffable	Understanding
Miracles	Phenomena
Devout	Pluralistic
Acceptance	Wonder

---

Religion and philosophy do share an important realm of concerns. Both are approaches to providing accounts to how it is that human individuals relate to the rest of the world. Religions form systems in that they seek a comprehensive guide to how a human being is to think and act in the world. Religions provide conceptual blueprints that describe how the world (all of existence) works and what modes of living fit with that picture of reality (e.g. follow God's plan, obey the will of Allah, harmonize with the Tao, tread the eight-fold path, etc.)

Philosophy also serves to provide a conceptual picture of the world and how individuals fit into it. Philosophy is not usually viewed as a practical concern, but our philosophical ideas do influence how we experience the world and how to react to it. For instance, a person who deeply believes that human nature is primarily motivated by self-interest will respond to events in a different way from people who assume that altruistic (selfless) behavior is a prime motivator. Many examples of the relation of concept to experience and action can be mapped out for each person. Examining your own belief system involves an effort to describe the relations of your beliefs and the actions that are related to them. When making this effort ask yourself the following questions:

How do my core beliefs show themselves in my actions?

Am I able to make inferences about other people's core beliefs from their conduct?

What sorts of conduct would be in conflict with my core beliefs?

How would my actions change if my core beliefs changed?

Are there actions of mine that I cannot connect to beliefs that I know of?

## Philosophy and Art

Art is another area that overlaps with philosophical effort. Many genres of writing, film, theater, and the arts deal with themes and issues in common with philosophy. Literature and arts are sometimes a means of expression used by philosophers. Indeed, having brought it up, someone is now bound to assert that all literature, film, and art is philosophical (or else that all philosophy is artistic expression). That is a fine observation and there may be truth in it, yet the task at hand is to help delineate philosophy so that the fine readers of this essay may advance in your ability to identify philosophical expression wherever it occurs. For this purpose it is valuable to note that philosophy is characteristically a form of investigation that uses reasoning and argument to analyze ideas and assess claims. Artistic expression often emphasizes the quality of the expression and style. While many ideas may be effectively expressed via art, they eventually will be submitted to analysis and logical argument in order to perform as philosophical positions. Again the point is that philosophical approaches to thought are distinct from the expression of ideas and opinions. Philosophy requires demonstration and reasoning (even though this may not be given as argument).

Here are some suggested instances of artistic expressions of philosophical ideas.

### Novels

The Clouds, (419 B.C.E) [a play], Aristophanes

Candide, (1759), Francois Voltaire

The Brothers Karamozov, (1879), Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Under the Net, (1954), Iris Murdoch

The Wreckage of Agathon, (1970), John Gardner

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, (1974), Robert Pirsig

Sophie's World, (1994), Jostein Gaarder

The Cambridge Quintet, (1998), John L. Casti

Dialogic Film

My Dinner with Andre (1981)

Mindwalk (1991)

Waking Life (2001)

Expressive/Dramatic Film

Koyaanisqatsi (1983)

The Meaning of Life (1983)

Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989)

Groundhog Day (1993)

The Matrix (1999)

Music

"The Unanswered Question" (1908), Charles Ives

"A Love Supreme" (1964), John Coltrane "The Galaxy Song" (1983),  
Eric Idle

Painting

"The School of Athens" (1509), Raffaello Sanzio

"Melancholy" (1514), Albert Durer

"The Scream" (1893), Edvard Munch

“What Is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?” (1989), Dread Scott’s

Works and styles of art and philosophy are associated with individual innovators. The artistic movements (such as architecture) at any time of a culture is a product of past ideas and advancements. Like buildings and paintings, the belief system of an individual has historical background. Your beliefs have a history. Learning about the historical movements in philosophy is a way to develop a better understanding of your own beliefs. One way to accomplish this is to analyze your beliefs into the concepts and ideas that comprise them, then look for instances in the history of philosophy where those concepts and ideas are given substantial treatment. Your belief system is an architecture of concepts.

When investigating your belief system, consider the following:

What are some of the major concepts contained in your core beliefs?

Which philosophers have given major attention to those concepts?

How have those philosophers defined those concepts?

What philosophical issues deal with those concepts?

What are the main positions within those philosophical issues? How do my beliefs relate to these issues and positions?

Example:

“Whether good or bad, people usually get what they have coming to them.” Paraphrased to:

“The world is fundamentally just in that people eventually get what they deserve.”

Major Concepts: Just (justice)

Deserve (desert)

Plato, *The Republic* (350 BCE)

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1273)

David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

Melvin J. Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (1980)

Philosophical Issues:

What is justice?

Is it better to be just than unjust?

Is the Divine Justice of God consistent with the eternal punishment of hell?

Is the world fundamentally just?

Philosophy and Science

In the 21st century we pretty much take science for granted as a source of knowledge and an approach to problem solving. There are some challenges to the validity of science, such as the rejection by some religious people of evolutionary theory, but our daily lives are so permeated by the products of science and technology that its dominance is hard to deny. Within that set of cultural assumptions about science, it is interesting to recognize that the modern idea we know of as science and scientific thinking is fairly recent: less than

four centuries old. Far prior to and still in parallel to science has been the philosophical approach to understanding reality.

A main area of modern philosophy is the philosophy of science. One of the primary tasks of that area is to effectively describe and define what science is. That task is not complete and various issues about these matters are ongoing. Granting the existence of controversy, here is a common and simplified version of scientific method.

The essential elements of the scientific method are conventionally described as follows:

Observation

Hypothesis/Prediction

Experimentation/Testing

Conclusion and evaluation

Repetition

This is often called the hypothetico-deductive method (i.e, deducing the strongest hypothesis by testing against observation). This is not what all scientists do. It is an idealized version of scientific thought. Still, the roles of observation and experimental testing are central to any approach that is deemed scientific.

We may think of science as the success of a particular and old philosophical view: empiricism which regards observations through the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) as the most basic forms of evidence. To be scientific, reasoning has to base itself at some point in evidence that is observable through the senses, by different people under similar conditions. A scientific belief has to be supported by evidence that is observable, measurable, testable, and repeatable. Mathematics and logic are forms of reasoning from which general beliefs are drawn from particular observations.

Science is a historical outgrowth of philosophy and may well be considered a particular philosophical position. Science has replaced many of the concerns that philosophy more widely addressed. Still, philosophy continues to flourish even in the scientific age. This is because philosophy deals with issues at a level that science has no tools to address and because philosophical thought encompasses a broader range of forms of reasoning, analysis, evidence, and evaluation than science recognizes.

Philosophy almost always takes the meaning of concepts and ideas as a base concern. If we cannot get the meaning of our terms clear, then investigation and discussion is moot. Many of the issues of philosophy arise over differences in the analysis of meaning of a concept. A reaction by some folks is to simply stipulate the meaning of the term or draw from an authority such as a dictionary. These approaches are insufficient when we are dealing with issues such as justice, truth, good/evil, knowledge, and so on. The main difference is that a philosophical approach to the meaning of a concept is that strong reasoning must be provided as a support for one's analysis. To say "The dictionary says..." or "I'll just stipulate my meaning..." is not sufficient reason for a solid philosophical analysis.

Philosophical reasoning can take many forms. Logic (deduction and induction) is an ancient approach to reason. Reductive analysis (separating concepts into parts), analogy (structured comparison), example and counter-example, dialectical method, and deconstruction, are among the many methods of philosophical thinking. A study of the history of philosophy might lead to the conclusion that philosophy develops over time by the introduction of new methods of thinking. Science has variations of method as well, but the reliance on observation, testing, and repetition is generally a requirement for scientific thinking. Philosophy has a broader range and array of methods. Perhaps that is why there is a philosophy of science but no science of philosophy.

Some philosophers have attempted to position scientific thinking

as the measure of all philosophical thought. For instance, Logical Positivism is a popular 20th century philosophical movement which argues that only those statements that can be verified empirically (by observation) are meaningful, thus making a wide range of non-observable concerns by philosophers completely irrelevant. Traditional metaphysical issues of philosophy are rendered meaningless in the analysis of Logical Positivism. Of course, philosophy does continue as an activity, with metaphysics intact, and the controversy continues.

Clarifying the ideals of science helps to distinguish the activities of philosophy by contrast. Most important is the recognition that philosophy involves reasoned accounts of statements of belief. Opinion and belief alone, no matter how strongly held, will not suffice as philosophical unless some explicitly reasoned account (i.e. explanation, analysis, demonstration) is given for it. When thinking about your own belief system, take the following questions into account:

What are the basic concepts of my core beliefs?

What do I mean by those basic concepts?

What reasoning do I have for my core beliefs?

What are the possible counter-reasons or objections to my core beliefs?

### Philosophy and Culture

Philosophical traditions vary according to cultures and languages. The usual distinction is made between the Eastern Philosophy (e.g. China, Japan, India, Tibet) and Western Philosophy (e.g. Europe, Australia, USA). There are also distinguishing characteristics of Arabic Philosophy, African Philosophy, and Native American Philosophy, among others.

The styles and topics of the local philosophical tradition is part of what characterizes a culture. Even granting their unique aspects we can discern some common issues and topics among the different philosophic traditions. For instance, most cultures have some ethical considerations such as the nature of good and evil. Distinctions between illusion and reality are common philosophic themes, as well as conceptions of the relations of human beings to nature.

It would be an error to force a culture's intellectual tradition into a common mold in order to fit some pre-conceived notion of the philosophical. Rather, my aim here is to emphasize the vital relationship that philosophical ideas have to practical life. Certain approaches to ideas in the history of a people contribute to the character of their culture which shapes the way they think and act. Likewise, the philosophical ideas that reside in your own belief system have practical impacts on the way that you experience the world and react to it. By examining your own belief system you can gain understanding of how you relate to the world and why you tend to the choices and actions that you take. It is even possible to change some of your choices and actions by transforming aspects of your belief system. Change what you think/believe and you will change what you do and who you are. In this way philosophy offers a remarkable degree of personal power to those who take on the quest seriously. Please understand that I am not saying that there is a fixed agenda that is designed to change your beliefs in a certain direction. My agenda is not to change what you think, but to transform the ways in which you think. The result may be a strengthening of your existing beliefs or it may be a revision of them. However that goes, it is a matter of your personal freedom as a thinker who takes responsibility for your own mind. When considering your own beliefs ask these questions.

What are the practical implications of my beliefs?

Are there any habits or behaviors that I want to change?

What are the core beliefs that support and influence the habits or behaviors that I want to change?

How might other people's choices and actions be influenced by their beliefs?

### Areas of Philosophy

Since philosophy is so often about general and abstract concepts, there can really be a philosophy of any subject-matter that you can think of. There is (meaning – people study and write about) philosophy of sports, philosophy of law, philosophy of sex, philosophy of business, philosophy of engineering, philosophy of play, philosophy of television, philosophy of technology, and on and on. It is easy to start a philosophy of for any subject-matter or activity. Simply specify the activity, identify some of the core concepts of that activity (including a definition of the activity itself), form descriptions of how that activity is related to other activities, give an account of the values within that activity and how the standards of value are judged, provide a description of how you think the activity is changing and explain why you think so, and you have begun a fairly sophisticated philosophy of study. What the heck, you might get a book or article out of it. Philosophers expand the scope of philosophy this way all the time.

For instance, in 1978 Harvard philosopher Sissela Bok published *Lying: Moral Choice in Private and Public Life* (Vintage Books, USA). It is an excellent book on a topic that matters to everyone and it is written in a clear, non-technical style. Bok begins her book by noting how little has been written about lying in history. With a few notable exceptions, the topic has almost been ignored by philosophers and ethics writers. Since she was in the enviable position to have a grasp on a virtually untouched topic, Bok set out to define, analyze, and evaluate the phenomena of telling lies in pursuit of a practical guide to which lies are morally justifiable and which are not. A large body of publications followed in the

wake of Bok's book and academics may now represent themselves as specialists in the philosophy of deception (somewhat broader than lying per se).

You see, lying is not itself philosophy or a particularly philosophical matter. It is a rather ordinary occurrence and has been mostly ignored by philosophers for centuries. By addressing the concepts of lying (along with deception, and honesty, and so on) in their most general forms, Bok developed a philosophical stance towards the topic. A subject-matter or activity need not be especially philosophical in order to become a topic of philosophy. Philosophy has a lot to do with the manner in which we study and think about a topic.

Of the major traditional areas of philosophy, three stand out as primary:

Metaphysics: inquiry into the ultimate principles of reality.

Epistemology: inquiry into knowledge and the human mind.

Ethics: inquiry into values and principles of judgment and conduct.

In the remainder of this essay let us consider each of these areas briefly.

## Part II

Philosophy is frequently categorized into various fields depending on the main topic under consideration. The fields really do overlap and there is always some debate among philosophers over how the discipline should be organized. For the purpose of learning about philosophy for the first time, it is useful to consider the traditional fields and to sample the types of problems found in them. As you read this please do not assume that you must memorize all that is said here or understand all of the issues covered. This piece is an overview and may main objective is to acquaint you with the

kinds of problems that philosophers have typically deal with over the last three thousand years or so. Mostly I want to emphasize in each case the importance of reasoned thought as the philosophic mode of addressing topics. Philosophers are usually not satisfied with describing the world or relating a history, they seek to discover important truths. Among the truths that philosophers have long considered have to do with aspects of reality that are beyond common experience. Such aspects frequently fall under the philosophic field of metaphysics.

### Metaphysics

The word “metaphysics” originates with early commentators on Aristotle who wrote on a wide variety of topics, including a number of works collect under the title “physics” (from the Greek word *physikos* meaning nature). The *Physics* deals with movements of the planets, the laws of motion, the elements of the universe, and many other aspects of the physical world (do you see how that word stays with us as a core concept?) Aristotle’s *Physics* were regarded as the authoritative explanation of the natural world in Europe all the way to the 16th century. The movement away from Aristotelian authority, led by Descartes and Galileo, is the origin of modern science.

Aristotle also wrote works under the title *First Philosophy*. He regarded these matters as first,

not because they should be read or studied before others, but because they are logically prior to conceptually above others. The issues of *First Philosophy* concern questions such as What does it mean to exist? How is change possible? What is cause and effect? What is time? What is space? and others. These questions sound odd to some people if they suppose that such things just are and require no explanation. Aristotle says that he must; “suppose what is called wisdom is to deal with the first causes and the principles of things.” In other words, if we have a mistaken or illusory conception

of causality, then all observations about cause-effect in nature will be flawed. The principle of causality is more general and logically prior to our understanding of actual operations of causality in the world.

In the centuries after Aristotle, commentators called his First Philosophy *Metaphysica* which literally means “after the things of nature.” It is a bit confusing to have a philosophy that is both first and after. The after here means that the concerns are further removed from the senses and physical reality, they are matters of pure intellect, and perhaps harder to comprehend than matters that can be directly observed.

Since Aristotle many philosophers have sought to put first things first and much of philosophy became an enterprise of system building. Philosophers would start out with a set of principles that are general enough to direct all other ideas and claims. Some start by laying foundations for the idea of truth and how we can judge an idea true or false; then increasingly complex claims about the reality and the mind are built on those foundations. Some start by clarifying what it is to exist; then build from there to describe what can and cannot be in existence with increasing complexity.

One of the oldest metaphysical questions is concerned with the concept of existence and is common phrased; “Why is there something instead of nothing?” It is at such a point that some non-philosophers throw up their hands in exasperation exclaiming that what is just is and there is no use in asking such questions! But the philosophical urge is more subtle and powerful than such folks recognize. Metaphysicians usually agree on one principle; that something cannot come out of nothing. One thing can change to another and a thing can cease to exist. But it is hard (maybe impossible) to make sense of the notion that things that do exist come into being *ex nihilo*, or out of absolute nothingness. Indeed, it appears that the only intelligible option is that there has been something in existence for all eternity. That eternally existing

something is the ultimate source of all things. This is an metaphysical idea that is common to religion (God is eternal and the creator) and science (matter can neither be created nor destroyed). Well, such is the way some metaphysical thought operates with first principles.

David Hume, 18th century British philosopher, posed a serious challenge to the enterprise of metaphysics in its entirety. Hume viewed philosophy as the effort to explain why we have beliefs that we have. Note that this is a very different goal than that of previous philosophers who sought to explain reality in and of itself. Hume sought to explain the workings of the human mind. In doing so he concluded that statements about matters that are beyond human experience cannot be solved. In other words, the claims of metaphysics are unknowable by the human mind. Hume produced the most powerful form of skepticism – the view that human knowledge is severely limited – yet devised.

Immanuel Kant, 18th century German philosopher, addressed Hume's challenge and originated a remarkable revolution in philosophy by recasting metaphysics as being not about the ultimate principles of the universe, but rather about the general structure of our thought. Kant regarded concepts such as time, space, and causality as necessary conditions for the operation of the mind. We cannot suppose that these concepts stand for properties of the universe. Instead we see that we are mapping the general belief system of the human mind. In this way, all humans share some aspects of their belief system. After Kant, metaphysics became the project of mapping out the core conceptual belief system that makes thought and consciousness possible.

Kant sought to separate philosophical metaphysics based in the analysis of concepts from the open-ended speculations that some people make about the spiritual and supernatural. Much of what goes under the names metaphysics and metaphysical these days consists of accounts of spiritual realms populated by angels and the

souls of the formerly living, or else various theories about how the universe works according to occult or spiritual principles. Popular bookstores have metaphysical sections that offer books on divination, magic, hypnosis, synchronicity, past lives, and much more. This is not the metaphysics that traditional philosophers study. There is no reason why the topics and ideas of the spiritual and occult metaphysics should be ruled out of consideration. However, a brief perusal of the many popular books on contacting dead souls or bringing luck into your life will show that they are largely descriptive assertions and not reasoned inquiries. Philosophy, even when reaching beyond the veil of perception and imagination, always rests on the ability to demonstrate claims based in a well-developed method of reasoning.

### Epistemology

During 5th century BCE Greece there arose a movement of lecturer/teachers known as the Sophists. They traveled throughout the Greek city states giving demonstrations of their considerable intellectual abilities and offering to teach those abilities to others. Many of the Sophists espoused views of extreme relativism, holding as Protagoras did that “man is the measure of all things.” Socrates lived in Athens and distinguished himself from the Sophists, though he was eventually accused of being one. Socrates staunchly opposed relativism, giving powerful arguments in favor of objective standards of truth, good, justice, and beauty. What Socrates did claim is that he did not have knowledge of what those objective standards are. He met a lot of people who claimed to know many things (e.g. what was true, good, just, or beautiful), though they were never able to demonstrate with certainty what it is that they claimed to know. Socrates admitted his ignorance. He also asserted that it is better to accept one’s limitations and recognize ignorance than to live convinced that you have knowledge that you do not. In this way, Socrates made knowledge a central concern of philosophy. His greatest student Plato went on to develop that concern into a fundamental area of human thought: epistemology the inquiry into

what knowledge is, what the conditions for knowledge are, and how we might be able to determine whether a claim is known or not.

Plato made issues about knowledge the center of just about everything he wrote. He wrote mostly dialogues which read like plays or transcripts. Socrates is usually a main character in those dialogues. In the *Theatetus*, in which Socrates converses with a young man named Theatetus, the question What is Knowledge? is explicitly at the fore. Many theories are considered, including the relativistic view of Protagoras the Sophist. Characteristically the dialogue does not arrive at a final answer, but a definition of knowledge is produced that has currency to the present: Knowledge is justified, true, belief. In this definition we can see the method of philosophical analysis at work. Knowledge is treated as a complex concept that is made up of three main parts or aspects.

1. Knowledge is belief. So if we are to look for actual instances of knowledge we must start with what it is that people believe. Consider some of your own beliefs as a starting point.
1. Knowledge is true. This is an important addition. It is possible for anyone to believe something even though it is false. History shows that it is possible for most people to maintain a false belief. Have you ever believed something only to find out later that you were mistaken? Plato's point is that no matter how strongly you believe a claim that alone will not make it true. We have to check and test our beliefs to find out whether they are true. Not many people are willing to do this.
1. Knowledge is justified. Justification is important because one could have a true belief by sheer luck. To know something is to believe that it is true, to be correct that it is true, and to have strong reasons for believing that it is true. The reasoning that establishes the truth of the belief is its justification. When we ask someone; How do you know that? We are asking for justification of the belief. That is a fair question to ask of

yourself. You have some strong beliefs and you are confident that they are true. How do you know that they are? Only if you can answer that question with strong reason, maintained Plato, can you rightly say that your beliefs are knowledge.

Some philosophers took Socrates' claims of ignorance to be the most important of his discoveries. These philosophers formed a school of thought known as Skepticism. In various forms this is the idea that knowledge as defined by Plato is not possible. For certain areas of belief or perhaps belief altogether, we do not have the justification needed to qualify it as knowledge. The consequence of this view is that however strongly we believe something and however many people believe it, we can still be in error. The influence of skeptical ideas continues to be strong in the present day. A main project of philosophy since Socrates has been to escape the bounds of skepticism. Two of the major approaches that have developed over the millennia are Empiricism and Rationalism.

Empiricists hold that all knowledge must be based in sensory experience. Skeptics tend to be empiricists as they hold that the limits of sensory perception are the limits of possible knowledge. Still, many empiricists do advance theories of knowledge. Indeed, modern scientific method might be considered an empiricist theory of knowledge. John Locke was a 17th century empiricist who regarded the mind as completely empty at birth, he called it a *tabula rasa* (Latin for blank slate). Incoming information from the senses filled the mind with content such as ideas, thoughts, and beliefs.

Rationalism is characterized by philosophers who hold that there are forms of knowledge which belong to reason alone and have no dependence upon sense experience. Mathematics, geometry, and logic, are areas where pure reason results in knowledge. Some rationalists argue that empirical knowledge depends upon the knowledge that we gain from of reason. On this view, it is necessary for the mind to organize sensory experience into categories and according to principles. Without the pre-existing structure of

innate knowledge the incoming sensory information would be chaotic and without order. A contemporary philosopher who maintains a form of rationalism is Noam Chomsky. He began his career as a linguist arguing that there must be a pre-existing language structure in the brain in order for a baby to learn any language at all. If the mind were a tabula rasa at birth, then the structure of language would not take hold in any way that was useful for communication with others.

Empiricism and the associated fields of philosophy of mind and cognitive science have taken a new turn with the dawn of the information age. Computers provide a unique set of challenges in terms of modeling mental processes, re-thinking the characters of knowledge and information, and the pursuit of artificial intelligence. If we can design a machine that reasons, understands, and is self-aware, then those abilities will no longer be unique to the human species (if indeed it is so) and strong models of mental processing including knowledge will provide the explanation. On the other hand, a central problem in the quest for artificial intelligence is how to determine when to say that a machine is able to think. Volumes of philosophy are currently being written in the debate over thinking machines. Personally I believe that this problem is just the start of the issue, because when we do achieve a machine that can think it will probably turn out to be a skeptic (just kidding).

## Ethics

A recent area related to thinking machines is artificial morality. Some philosophers are creating programs with agents that react to one another. The agents can be endowed with simple principles, such as “always share” or “always steal” or “never share and never steal” and so on. The agents are also capable of self reproduction. Trials are run with various combinations of agents with various combinations of principles. The trial ends when the system becomes dominated by one character of agent or reaches a point

of equilibrium. From the outcomes of these trials the philosopher draws conclusions about the viability of a particular principle within a complex and competitive system. [If you care to know more about the fascinating cutting-edge area of artificial morality, see the bibliography at the end of this essay].

Principles are guides to action. That is why the behaviors of agents in an artificial morality trial allow us to draw inferences about the principles of the agents. We normally expect a person's actions to agree with their principles. Of course, the world has no shortage of hypocrites and self-deceivers. Ofttimes we see people who claim to hold certain principles even while they are acting in ways entirely contrary to those principles. In such cases I am tempted to say that the hypocrite only pretends to hold the principle s/he asserts while her/his actions reveal the real and hidden beliefs. I also realize that people are more complex than that. It is possible to really believe in a moral principle but to betray oneself (and others) by weakness of will and other inner forces. Some people live in a constant state of self-loathing because they perpetuate a cycle of promising to change through self-control then incrementally giving into contrary conduct (e.g. addiction, anger, violence, procrastination). In the public lives of politicians and celebrities we constantly witness people who conflict in what they profess to be and that they actually are. We might wonder whether there is any a principle that one may hold consistently in thought, word, and action. Such questioning will take us a long way into the study of values and the actions consistent with those values. That study is an area of philosophy traditionally called Ethics or sometimes Moral Philosophy.

### Divine Revelation

Every religion has guides and rules for conduct as a major part of its practice. The unique aspect that religious ethics brings to philosophy is the particular theory about how ethical ideas are acquired and justified. For some major religions moral truth is revealed to us (or some of us) directly by a divine authority, often

God. This revealed knowledge may be gained through direct contact with God as in prayer or a vision. For most worshipers, the divine law is communicated through sacred texts that were revealed to a prophet or leader. Long ago Moses climbed mount

Sinai to receive divine commandments directly from Yahweh then recorded in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Centuries later, Jesus's words and actions became the subject-matter of the Gospels, both orthodox and censored. The Koran was revealed to Muhammad by an angel gradually over a period of years until his death in 632 C.E. In 1823 the spirit of Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith in a dream and led him to the golden plates on which the Book of Mormon were etched in a secret language. In 1955 The Urantia Book, authored by celestial beings as a special revelation to our planet, was delivered by the beings to a Chicago physician who then formed the Urantia Foundation. Devout followers of these religions are serious in taking the moral guides in them as commands from a higher power. The main reason to do good on this theory is because God or the higher power commands it. According to divine command theory, things are morally good solely because of the divine authority's will and commands. A central idea running throughout accounts of divine revelation is that ultimate moral truth must be received from a higher authority and is never the province of the individual.

In one of his most widely read dialogues, Euthyphro, Plato raised the main question that must be addressed by any ethical theory of divine revelation. The difficult question that Plato raised was this;

Are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good because they are willed by God?

This dual question is problematic for Divine Command Theory because it points out seemingly inescapable contradictions that

arise from basing moral values solely on an authority (in what follows I refer to God as the ultimate divine authority, though for whatever religion involved the appropriate source of authority can be invoked).

On the one hand we might suppose that the first answer, an act is willed by god because it is morally good, to be consistent with a benevolent God. Yet saying so places the source of goodness as independent of God's will. If good acts are willed by God because they are morally good, then they must be good before and independent of God's willing them. They are good in and of themselves. This makes sense because we would hope that a benevolent God would only will the good. But this answer contradicts the Divine Command Theory which states that something is good only because God wills it. God's will does not make it good. Rather, it's being good is the reason why God wills it.

The other answer leads to a different difficulty. If something really is good only because God wills it and nothing has goodness independent of God's will, then devout statements such as "God is good" or "God's will is good" are rendered trivial. "God is good" will reduce to "God is God's will" and "God's will is good" will reduce to "God's will is God's will." That is to say, the complete identification of the value of goodness with God's will serves to remove the value altogether. It is only the will and command that matter and no concern with the goodness or rightness comes in. This sort of approach may still appeal to folks who regard obedience and submission as the primary virtues. Yet, the problems created by reason will not go away because of that. Unquestioning obedience always runs the risk of being obedient to the wrong power, especially if no other gauge to ethical value is available or allowed.

### Conscience

Many of us have the experience or at least idea of a kind of inner voice that warns us when we struggle with impulses to do wrong. It

may not be anything like a voice but just a pause or hesitation. Some people feel the pangs of the conscience long after a wrong has been done. Perhaps you know the experience of flashes of shame over a long past action that no one other than you even knows about. However it is described, the conscience seems to be an experience that has long attended human awareness of right and wrong.

The word “conscience” comes from the Latin *conscientia* meaning “knowledge within oneself” (*scientia* = knowledge). Paul used the concept in Acts 24:16; “I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.” The word conscience was brought into the English language by Joseph Butler in his *Fifteen Sermons upon Human Nature* (1726) in which he sought to ground human morality in the moderation of self-love by the authority of a divinely-produced conscience.

Since it is often conceived as provided by God, the conscience has a role in moral philosophy related to divine command theory. Unlike the traditional authority of scripture and the prophets, the conscience is a very personalized communication of divine ethics. Certainly one need not be religious to experience one’s conscience. Yet, the experience still seems like a source of guidance that is separate from the one’s desires, values, and struggles. My own experience with conscience is like a hunch or intuition; not so much an inner voice as a it like a motion on periphery of my awareness that catches my attention long enough to make a pause in my flow of thought. It is not that my conscience tells me what is right or wrong. Rather it signals me to hold off for a bit and reassess the situation. It in the second look that I see the values involved more clearly. If not for my cautionary conscience stepping in just the moment before I hit the send button, I’d have sent several email messages that I’d later regret. A reliable conscience is a valuable friend.

Psychology recognizes types of human individuals who appear not to have any conscience or moral sense at all. Called sociopaths and

psychopaths, such individuals seem to have no concept that causing harm to others is morally significant. Of course, many ordinary people also accept harm to others without any twinge of concern, so long as they are distant or different. We can all see the horrible suffering that wars cause. Still, many of us remain distant and passive observers of these tragedies. In the morning we see on the news that dozens of children were killed by our own military, then go on as if it mattered hardly at all. In war, peoples of different nations regard one another with the passive indifference that the psychopath regards his/her victims. Those who protest the immorality of war tend to be viewed as extremists or fools (if not traitors) by fellow citizens. Perhaps conscience has its limits as a moral guide after all.

### Moral skepticism

Some people consider the world and do not find any moral order in it whatever. For the moral skeptic, value judgements have no objective standard by which they can be measured. In some versions of moral skepticism (and there are many varieties) the sentences “that is wrong” or “that is good” are really no more than saying “I don’t like that” and “I like it.” The subjective emotion expression may show something about the person who says it, but that does not make it an observation about objective reality. Moral skeptics often depict cultural debates over moral matters as struggles for power, rather than searches for moral truth.

John Mackie was an 20th century US philosophers who wrote extensively about moral skepticism. One of his tasks was to give an explanation as to why people commonly believe that moral values have objective reality. He built on an observation by David Hume that humans possess a psychological tendency to grant an objective and external status to subjective experiences. For example, everyone can see that bad things happen in the world and that some people do great harm to others. Historically, people of all cultures attribute these misfortunes as due to some substantive agent of

evil. Many people believe in an objective self-directed Evil in the world. Many religions place the course of evil in a supernatural being such as a devil. Mackie explores the tendency of humans to personify their subjective experiences as independently existing beings.

One advantage of personifying evil is that we are able to assign moral responsibility to an outside force. This same tendency takes hold when a nation seeks justification to wage war. You can see this when an opposing nation comes to be identified as an individual, usually the leader, and the war is then described as a moral act being taken against the evil-doer. It is not clear how to assign moral blame to a whole nation. We know how to assign blame to an individual. Therefore, advocates for war always emphasize that the action is not being taken against the people of the nation but only the evil leader. Never mind the cold fact that the people in the war zone end up bearing the brunt of the suffering. The victorious nation always celebrates itself as righteous. Whether it is a sentient being or a human tendency, evil has subtle and deceptive ways of manifesting. I am convinced that evil perpetually needs our help to make it actual.

### Moral relativism

A common theory of ethics holds that all values are dependent upon something else for their existence. This sort of theory is broadly known as Moral Relativism. Unlike moral skepticism, moral relativists do assert the existence of good, evil, right, and wrong. What is unique to the relativist is that they see these values are being relative to some other condition or standard. Some relativists hold that the standard of values is the individual. Such folks are inclined to say that disputes over moral values cannot be resolved by reason or experience. The differences between the points of views of individuals may be so great that no common ground can be found.

One salient objection to this subjectivist form of relativism is to note that language is a shared activity and that despite difference in points of view, individuals are quite capable of discussing them. When shared aspects of language are taken into consideration it turns out that individual minds have far more in common than is recognized by the individual relativist.

Language is a shared activity, yet differences in languages are main parts of what hold separate cultures apart. Most of the people in the world have never been able to communicate in language (spoken or written) with most of the rest of the people in the world. The Tower of Babel story in Genesis is an account of the impact that cultural separation has upon us. Some ethical thinkers theorize that cultures are also separate in the values and morality that they hold in common. While every culture has systems of value judgement including morality, it appears that one culture may have an entirely different and incompatible value system from another. The problem raised by philosophers is whether there is any objective standard by which the diverse value systems may be judged? Cultural relativists argue that there are no standards of value that are external to cultural standards. That is, cultural standards are the basis of all morality, just as social standards are the basis of all law. In other words, morality is relative to culture. Note that cultural relativism explicitly denies that morality is relative to the individual's beliefs and values. Individuals belong to a culture and are subject to its moral standards.

One way to reject moral relativism is to demonstrate that there is a universal moral standard by which all beliefs and conduct can be judged. This view is known as moral absolutism. One way to argue for moral absolutism is to look for universal values that belong to all cultures. For instance, just about every culture that has produced a philosophic literature about ethics has discovered and endorsed the principle known in Western cultures as The Golden Rule. Chinese, Indian, and other expressions of this idea precede the Judeo/Christian texts so it is of no use to advocate a cultural priority

on that account. The Golden Rule has many formulations which equate to; treat other people in the manner in which you want to be treated. The Golden Rule is known in ethical theory as the Principle of Reciprocity (though that same name is used for other ideas in other disciplines). Basically it is the idea that we should act on our own principles with generality and consistency. So, if I do not want others to steal from me, then my principle includes the idea that stealing is wrong. If I am to hold that principle consistently, then I will hold myself to it as well and not steal from others. We use this principle all of the time, for instance to convince others that they are being unfair to us, for instance; “You wouldn’t like that if I did it to you!” One attractive feature of a universal value such as the Principle of Reciprocity is that it does not mandate or prohibit specific actions. Rather, it is a principle that governs other principles. Thus, it is possible for cultures to maintain local values while still being held to a common standard. This is a complex topic. Suffice it to say here that when we catch someone in an inconsistency, we normally draw the inference that something is wrong with their principles (i.e. an internal contradiction). I don’t have empirical evidence of it, but I do suspect that in

every culture hypocrisy is looked upon with disdain.

At many times in history some culture has regarded itself to be the living standard of all morality and truth. Some folks even today may say that they certainly can judge other cultures as substandard simply because they live in the greatest nation on earth. Being born in a particular location and being raised with a certain language and value system is more than enough for such people to consider themselves morally superior to others. This is not idle talk either, because those who live in the great culture (by their own estimation) often have the right to use force to subdue other people to their will. The argument for the right to force is often that being the greatest of cultures obligates one to use force to bring the lesser cultures in line with the correct value system. Numerous wars, persecutions, economic exploitations, and slavery have been

practiced according to this superiority theory. You can probably think of several in recent history and even at present.

Cultural relativists point out the historical consequences of the superiority theory as further evidence that values are culturally dependent. When one culture regards itself as a higher moral authority than others, then tolerance fails and oppression begins. Interestingly, this is exactly where a universal moral principle such as the Principle of Reciprocity has clear application. Imagine, for instance, that an single culture had the economic and military power to subdue any other. If that culture came to view itself as morally superior to others, then it may see itself as having the right to use force to bring change to others. That culture would not see its use of force as wrong, even if many tens of thousands died and suffered as a result. Having a self-image of moral superiority combined with the means to enforce it, such a culture may regard itself as the only culture that had the right to use overwhelming force. Rather than using military force as self-defense, that culture would use war as a means to enforce its will in the world. Of course, many cultures have done this throughout history and the prosecution of war without cause of legitimate self-defense is precisely the traditional idea of an unjust war. In response, the ethical philosopher who maintains that the Principle of Reciprocity is a universal, will argue that if one nation grants itself the right to wage war against those who have not attacked it, then we ought to endorse that right for all nations. Of course, no nation wants to do that. When a culture proclaims itself to be the sole possessor of the right to wage non-defensive war on the basis of its moral superiority to other cultures, we have a clear failure of the Principle of Reciprocity. Such a culture will be moving steadily towards another form of relativism; one far more radical and dangerous than cultural relativism. Of course, such an observation is based in part on claims about the consequences of both actions and principles. One of the great ethical theories of the modern age is strongly based on the matter of consequences.

## Consequentialism

One way to approach philosophical ethics is to recognize that an individual's actions may affect other people. All of our actions and perhaps even our beliefs and thoughts have consequences. A consequence is a change in the world that occurs as the result of some action. Often people speak of consequences of actions as if they were purely negative or involved with punishment (e.g. "You need to learn to accept the consequences of your own behavior.") In the ethical sense the concept of consequences is much broader and less fixed in terms of value judgment. The consequences of your actions may be to save lives (e.g. by giving money to Save the Children) or to make someone happy (e.g. by paying them a sincere compliment). Some actions cause death (e.g. drunk driving) or cause people mental pain (e.g. making a rude comment). Please note that these descriptions have not yet drawn any conclusion as to the value of these consequences or the actions that caused them. In philosophical ethics it is not sufficient to rest on conventional moral standards or gut feeling about value judgements. It may seem obvious to you that saving lives is good and causing death is bad. Moral philosophers do not rest at that sense of the obvious. They want to know and be able to say explicitly with sound reason what it is that makes an action good or bad.

A powerful class of ethical theory is called Consequentialism because it bases the moral value of actions and principles on the practical value of the consequences of those actions and principles. Many consequentialists look for natural values in the world. Pleasure and pain are natural values that are commonly referenced by consequentialists. Humans, like most living beings, naturally seek pleasure and avoid pain. Pleasure and pain are caused by conditions in our world. Our actions can cause changes in the world that lead to conditions that cause pain or cause pleasure. Thus, giving money to Save the Children leads to an alleviation of hunger in one or more kids. Hunger is a condition that causes intense pain, so reducing that pain has a positive value. Drunk

driving causes a large percentage of traffic accidents. Being in an accident is a condition that causes many sorts of pain to many people. Victims lose their health or lives, families lose their loved ones. One might argue that being drunk is pleasurable and driving home from the bar is more convenient and cheaper (hence more pleasurable) than taking a taxi. The consequentialist will take these values into account and weigh the difference. Is the amount of pleasure gained from a one night drunk equal to or greater than the amount of pain suffered by parents who lose their child in a car accident caused by the drunk driver? This is a matter that requires reasoned analysis, which the consequentialist philosopher will provide. If it turns out that the avoidable death of a child is more painful than the inconvenience of taking a taxi home, then the conclusion will follow that the actions of drunk driving are morally wrong and the principles (beliefs) that lead someone to drive drunk are unjustified. Such an analysis can be applied to almost any sort of action.

At this point you might want to point out that not all pain is to be avoided and not all pleasure is to be sought. The natural values of pain and pleasure are not that simple. Some philosophers have made the same point and have developed a version of consequentialism that takes the problem of the subjective values of pain and pleasure into account. This ethical theory is called

Utilitarianism. 19th century British philosopher John Stuart Mill was one of the originators of Utilitarian ethics. Mill provides a sophisticated analysis of pain and pleasure as subjective values. He notes that a rational being would seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in total over the whole period of a life. This requires accepting some pain if it is a means to attaining a greater pleasure. Thus, people who recognize the value of diet and exercise to health will limit the immediate pleasures of some foods and accept the minor pain of exercise in order to obtain the far greater

pleasure of lifelong health. Mill also recognized that not all forms of pleasure are the same. There are physical pleasures, emotional pleasures, intellectual pleasures, and even spiritual pleasures. The word “pleasure” connotes something transient and trivial to some people, but Mill intends that concept to cover a much larger area of human experience. On Mill’s expanded version, parents take pleasure in seeing their children thrive and thinkers take pleasure in learning something new. Pleasures of these sorts can reach a high point of human aspiration. Mill’s Utilitarianism recognizes that we may make a calculated choice of accepting sacrifice and discomfort in order to attain the highest and most sublime pleasures that nature and humanity have to offer.

The Utilitarian motto is; “The greatest good for the greatest number.” In order to make ethical choices we must weigh how the consequences will impact all those who will be affected. If the combined impact is on the side of the greatest good – which is the most pleasure – then the action and the principles informing it are morally justified. If the action will cause more harm than good on balance, then it is not justified, no matter how much pleasure and power it brings to the person who carries it out. Utilitarianism is a powerful theory and we can find many current examples where public policies are defended by greater good arguments.

### Ideal Values

Another approach to ethics is to develop a concept of the ideal condition of the individual person. If we can say what an ideal life for a person would be like, then we will be able to figure out what principles would produce that condition. 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant described ethics as the striving of the individual for their ideal condition – (as the contemporary commercial has appropriated); to be the best that one can be. Kant recognized that the essential quality to all ethical choice is freedom of the will. If a person is not free to choose, then they cannot have any ethical value one way or the other; if not free, we are mere

machines. Kant called the sort of freedom needed for moral choice “autonomy.”

Many people suppose that freedom consists in the absence of restrictions, such as “being able to do whatever I want.” This idea is known as the libertarian view of personal freedom. On this desire-based view of freedom, it would appear that morality and law are the enemies of freedom because they involve restrictions. Picturing freedom as a following desire and wants makes moral values purely subjective. Different people have different wants and desires. To impose a set of desires on anyone would be oppressive to their liberty. Some wants are held in common by many people, in which case competition arises and laws are created to mitigate the conflicts. Once again, complete freedom is shown to be unattainable unless one has only obscure desires in isolation from others.

The libertarian view misses a crucial point: we do not choose our wants and desires. The preferences, wants, and desires that you have as a person were largely given to you without any choice on your part. You inherited, learned, or acquired them along the way, probably in childhood. We might be able to cultivate a desire, given the right conditions. But even in that case we do not choose the conditions that determine which desires can be active in us. The type of freedom that follows from “doing whatever I want” is not really freedom at all. It is just the absence of restriction on one mechanical process among many. If your desires change (say due to hormonal alterations over time), then the conditions of your freedom change. However it goes, you do not have much choice in the matter.

Kant’s concept of autonomy seeks to define the exact conditions under which human beings can attain true freedom in which personal, conscious choice is the basis of action. Autonomy means self-governed. Kant recognized that freedom is not a matter of the absence of rules. Rather, freedom is the ability to choose our own

rules and to follow them no matter what outside pressures seek to influence us otherwise. Creating and following one's own moral principles is to be self-governed. It is the ultimate responsibility and loyalty to oneself. It is only in this self-directed autonomy, argues Kant, that genuine human freedom is possible.

If choosing one's own principles – guides to future choice and action – is necessary to personal freedom, what basis are we to choose these principles on? Kant points out that we must choose principles that are capable of being held and acted on under any conditions and with complete consistency. He is seeking to find the realm of choices in which the human individual may reach her/his highest potential, which coincides with perfect freedom. A principle that allows for practical application with complete consistency will be universal. It will be a principle that can be held under any conditions, including those conditions experienced by other people. As Kant puts it, such a condition is one that I am willing to “will as universal law” or accept as a general law of the universe. It will apply to everyone equally, under any conditions. It is not that we try to impose that principle on others, but that we hold to it as if it were a universal law, like the law of gravity.

In making the bold stipulation of universality, Kant finds that many common motives for action will not qualify as autonomous principles. For instance, someone may say “OK. I'll choose my main principle to be always doing what gives me the most pleasure.” A person who tries to live by this principle will find that they run into self-contradiction and cannot keep to it consistently. For example, accepting the loss of a momentary pleasure and may be necessary to seeking a greater and future pleasure. In other cases we can see that some pleasures run the risk of great future pain and loss. In order to live according to this principle have to choose among our pleasures, and the principle does not tell us how to make that choice at all. Perhaps you can see in this example a type of criticism that Kant is liable to have for Utilitarianism. In fact, Kant's ethics, known as Deontology, is direct challenge to all forms of consequentialism.

Kant maintains that the consequences of our actions are not the determinant of their moral value. Only our principled intention is well enough in our own power to count as the basis for moral value.

Kant's ethical theory is immensely influential on present thought. The movement to define and protect universal human rights, such as made in the Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, owes much to Kantian theory. In the present study and practice of ethics in the Western cultures, Kantian theory and Utilitarianism form the main guides to law and moral thought.

### Philosophy as Thinking about Thinking

In this essay we have briefly considered a number of philosophical topics, ideas, and theories. The purpose in presenting these to you has been primarily to give relevant examples of what philosophers are traditionally and currently occupied with. Some of these ideas may intersect with your own and as you continue the study of philosophy you will encounter these ideas again.

We must recognize that philosophy is so open and self-reflective an activity that it even takes itself as a subject of inquiry. One of the primary questions of philosophy is; "What is philosophy?" Throughout history different thinkers have given different answers to that question. In the Twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger posed an answer that continues to resonate today. He said; "Philosophy is thinking about thinking." In this we have the idea of a mind that regards itself. A consciousness that makes itself both subject and object. A human individual who is capable of investigating her/his own belief system. Heidegger provides an excellent conception of the activity of philosophy that is most useful for anyone who is entering the study of the philosophical for the first time.

## 2. On Questions

One way to characterize philosophy is as the art of questioning. Few solutions may come from philosophy, but many of the most important questions have. The assumptions of an entire culture or generation can be altered by the posing of new questions.

Folks taking this introductory philosophy course sometimes tell me that “It is *all just opinion*.” That is an interesting claim, though I have to note that questions (genuine, serious questions) are not opinions. They have a different function in thought and culture than opinions do.

Questions are often not welcome. One way to deal with questions is by force of authority:

\*Many times I have witnessed young children asking questions which the attendant adults dismiss as irrelevant, silly, or worse.

\*History shows many situations in which asking certain questions is dangerous to the individual. For instance, authoritarian religious leaderships have often equated questions with doubt and then unbelief. In cases such as The Inquisition, questioning is dealt with by severe force.

\*Sometimes when people ask questions of their governments the reactions are strong. In some cases, when the questions probed too deeply or challenged too much, they are not acknowledged at all but rebuffed with accusations; such as “You are (anti-Soviet, anti-Turkish, anti-American, Enemy of the People, etc.)”

\*In interpersonal situations, among friends and family,

unwelcome questions (i.e. those which challenge the status quo) may be met with anger, ridicule, or denial.

\*Questioning ourselves to ourselves can be very difficult. Some thinkers have aptly described mechanisms of the human mind that resist change and challenge. It is not hard to test this on yourself by trying to seriously question your most basic and cherished beliefs in a sustained way. The defenses go up pretty fast – and they really are convincing when we are the ones putting them up. Here is one simple way to detect a defensive shield against some area of questioning in yourself: study some topics that are quite different from your usual interests or invest effort into understanding views that are opposed to your own. If you find yourself reacting with strong and involuntary emotion, especially with immediate and intense judgement of the topic's "worthlessness," "pointlessness," "stupidity," etc. – chances are you have identified a personal defense system that protects you against new thought and potential change. Self-knowledge of this sort is very valuable.

\*Even in education we can find questions to be unwelcome. In 3rd grade I recall learning what was then called "New Math." The teachers showed us the various symbols of operations including =, >, <. One symbol was called "less than or equal to." I asked; *"Since there is already an equal sign and a less than sign, what is the use of the 'less than or equal to' sign?"* The teacher was angered by this and told me; *"Stop asking stupid questions and just learn the lesson!"* Instead, I responded by refusing to learn any more lessons from her. At that moment I closed my mind to math altogether. Have paid the price for that defensive reaction my whole life.

I realize now that the teacher really did not understand my question. I meant it honestly. I suppose she thought I was smarting off (I was also known for asking unwelcome questions in catechism [i.e. religious doctrine] class). Even as I look back on this

experience, I think that my question made sense. I know now that there was a mistaken assumption in my question, but that did not make it a poor question (much less a *stupid* one).

The problem was that I was not asking a question that fell within the domain of assumptions. If I had asked a question that accepted and made use of the symbols, how to work within the system, the teacher would have likely been glad to show me what to do. My question, however, was about the givens. It challenged the reasoning for the system itself. If you want to get yelled at, shunned, ridiculed, fired, failed (*not in this class, though!*), etc., an excellent approach is to ask serious, intelligent questions about the assumptions of the given system.

When thinkers ask questions such as “*what is reality?*” and “*what is thinking?*” and “*what is language?*” and “*what is truth?*” they are asking to open the system itself to examination. They are calling our most basic givens into question. It is natural that some people will receive such questions as ridiculous, irrelevant, and a waste of time. Like my 3rd grade teacher, some folks are inclined to say; “*Stop asking stupid questions and just get on with it!*” To be fair, perhaps those folks have a point worth considering. Maybe some things are not meant to be questioned. Maybe it is impossible (nonsensical) to pose some sorts of questions. But see? Even by opening this possibility I am doing it again! I am inclined to take their thought seriously even if they dismiss mine as worthless.

What is your own experience with questions? What are your most important questions? How have those questions been received by others throughout your life? Do you have an idea about how questioning will influence your future?

It seems to me that a question is a form of openness. By asking a genuine, serious question, one presents oneself as incomplete and uncertain. There is a vulnerability in the true question and

an assumption that the universe remains open-ended in some respects.

I think that the idea of an open-ended universe populated by incomplete minds comes into conflict with some other ways of addressing reality. One common view (or my interpretation of that view) assumes that most of the important questions have already been answered and all that remains is filling out the details. Asking questions such as; “*What is truth?*” – “*What is reality?*” – “*What is Good?*” – or “*What is reason?*” are impertinent and silly from that perspective.

I believe that how we respond to such questions shows much about our assumptions concerning the structure of reality, the relationship of the individual and authority, and the limits of human possibility.

My plea is this: when you encounter a question that evokes intense reaction such that you are inclined to dismiss the value of the question entirely, consider the possibility that your interpretation of the question and associated ideas is incomplete. Maybe it is not, but this is always a hypothesis worth testing.

# 3. The Craft of Inquiry

[Field]The Craft of Inquiry

“All philosophy begins in wonder.”

--Aristotle.

## 1. QUESTIONS

Questions are a way of inviting communications from other people. We can seek to learn more about them, how they think, and why. We may also question a text, the world, and ourselves. Basically, any constructive question opens the way to a path of inquiry; thus a potential discussion. In this way we find questions to be an essential part of human creativity. Learning how to construct questions well is key to our intellectual development.

Try this Thought Experiment:

Imagine a world in which questions could not be asked. People could make all sort of claims, state their opinions, give descriptions, arguments, explanations, and expressions of all sorts. The only verbal form lacking was the form of a question.

What would that world be like? How would the communications between people change? Would any other limitations come along with the absence of questioning? How would people go about

finding out things they did not know? Would science be possible? Philosophy? Would purposeful change be possible?

Note that I follow the proposed thought experiment with a series of questions. That is just one of the functions of a thought experiment, to provide a context in which certain questions may be raised and discussed. Without the possibility of asking questions, the method of the thought experiment would be useless. I suspect we would lose a great deal of other intellectual abilities we take for granted as well. Constructive questions create openings and it is by exploring those openings that much of our intellect and knowledge develops.

## CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS

Here, already, I have pointed to a distinction. I specified that constructive questions have a key intellectual value. This implies a distinction from non-constructive questions. It is a main objective of *The Craft of Inquiry* is to make that distinction clear and provide you with some of the tools for using it. Let us lay this distinction out plainly.

CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS are questions that open fresh aspects of an issue. They create a basis for sustained and constructive discussion.

NON-CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS are designed to block inquiry and sustained discussion. They close (not resolve) an issue to further consideration by presenting a conceptual obstacle.

Any form of question can be constructive or non-constructive. What we need are criteria for judging the constructiveness of a

question. Three such criteria are proposed in this text: *The Craft of Inquiry*.

Next, let's consider some of the forms of questions we may encounter and raise in philosophic discussion.

## 2. QUESTION CONSTRUCTIONS

First let's consider some of the forms of questions we may ask (since our world is not limited in the way that the above thought experiment pictures.) We consider here five question forms that are important to philosophic inquiry:

Informative Questions

Interpretative Questions

Evaluative Questions

Speculative Questions

Combative Questions

Each of these five forms are considered in detail in the following pages. It is important to recognize and understand these different forms. In my experience as a college professor, students seldom ask certain questions that may help them better understand a reading or problem. Most all students will ask questions like;

“When is this assignment due?”

“Where can I get another syllabus?”

“How am I doing in this course?”

But the same students seldom ask questions like;

“What is the difference between reason and experience?”

“What does Plato mean by idea?”

“Is the concept of freewill consistent with the laws of physics?”

#### FORM & CONTENT

I claim there are crucial differences between these last three questions. They are different in form, not just in content. I'll try to explain this difference.

Consider the first set of questions from above:

“When is this assignment due?”

“Where can I get another syllabus?”

“How am I doing in this course?”

These are certainly different from one another. You could have the answer to one of them while not having the answers to the other two. Yet there is a parallel direction for all three of these. All three seek to gain some information about the course. They will be satisfied (answered) when the relevant information is gained. I want to say that these three questions all have the same form: they are

informative questions. What differs about them is the content which is determined by the specific information they are designed to get. Each of these questions will be relevantly answered when some item of information is provided. To wit:

“On next Wednesday.”

“From the Department office.”

“So far you have a passing grade.”

Each answer provides a specific item of information (a time, a place, a status) in response to the question. And the receipt of that information (in these cases at least) satisfies the question.

While these three questions have different content (i.e. the information they are seeking) they have the same form (i.e. they all seek information.) Consider now the second set of questions from above:

“What is the difference between reason and experience?”

“What does Plato mean by idea?”

“Is the concept of freewill consistent with the laws of physics?”

I claim that these three questions differ not only in content but also in form. They are designed for different purposes and open different kinds of inquiry. In the following pages, I examine these question forms and the criteria we may employ in judging their constructiveness.

We will study each of the five question forms in turn. First, let's

consider a subject matter about which these questions may be raised: the philosophical issue of Free-Will

### 3. INFORMATIVE QUESTIONS

Informative questions seek information about something. As answers we may accept facts, details, and descriptions. Asking someone what they believe is asking for a sort of information. Asking for their reasons is another. Here are some generic instances of questions of the informative form that one might ask of another person's beliefs.

What is the difference between x and y?

What do you believe about this issue?

Do you agree with this claim?

What do you think this claim implies?

What evidence do you think there is for this claim?

Here are some informative questions that might be asked of the author of Free-Will is an Illusion.”

In denying that we have any free-will, do you mean that no-one has the ability to decide whether or not to go to class in the morning?

Supposing that we are mechanisms, do you think there is something about being a mechanism that precludes having any free- will?

Do you agree with the French Philosopher Baron d'Holbach's statement; "Man's life is like a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant."

What implications do you think your view has for issues of individual responsibility for our actions?

What do you suppose accounts for the feeling and conviction most of us have that we are able to choose?

In all these examples, the kind of answers sought will provide additional information about the details and content of the person's belief. The answers may not explain what is meant or give reasons why. But we should be careful to recognize what sort of question is being asked and just what we can reasonably expect as an answer. A lot of confusion is created in the world simply by people not making the effort to find out what another person actually believes. Informative questions provide that opportunity. Once such information is received, we can dig deeper via interpretative questions, evaluative questions, and speculative questions.

A Key Point of This Page:

Informative questions seek information about something. As answers we may accept facts, details, and descriptions.

#### 4. INTERPRETATIVE QUESTIONS

Interpretative questions seek clarity about the content of someone's belief. When you ask an interpretive question, you are asking for an explanation. Of course, it is possible (and common) to try to

overload someone with demands for explanation as a way of attacking their view. To be constructive, interpretative questions must focus on significant aspects of a claim. They must be genuine efforts to find greater clarity. Attacking someone's view by a never ending chain of explanatory demands is a move towards confusion, not clarity. Here are some generic instances of interpretative questions:

What do you mean by this word?

Are you using this word the same way as it is used in the following example....”

Does this word and this other word mean the same thing in your statement?

Is the following example consistent with your claims....?

Is the following analysis of your argument a fair interpretation of what you mean?

Could I paraphrase your central claim as the following....?

Here are some interpretative questions that may be asked of the author of passage Free-Will is an Illusion.

You say; “The world is a mechanism set motion by random forces.” I’m not clear what you mean by “random forces.” Do you mean natural laws such as gravity?

Do you mean the same thing by “free-will” and “ultimate control”?

In what ways would a being with free-will be different from a mechanism?

Is it a fair interpretation of your view to say that “the future is fixed and pre-determined”?

The above examples are based in the claims given and seek further clarity of those claims. They set out to provide opportunities for others to explain their meaning in more depth. There is no guarantee that they will be able to do so. But a well constructed and honestly intended interpretative question leads to new levels of philosophic inquiry. With sufficient information and clarity we may further pursue the inquiry through evaluative questions, informative questions, and speculative questions.

A key point of this page:

Interpretative questions seek clarity about the content of someone’s belief. When you ask an interpretive question, you are asking for an explanation.

## 5. EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS

Evaluative questions ask for a value judgement about a claim or position. The value involved may a matter of truth, consistency, morality, aesthetics, reasoning, among others. Here are some generic instances of evaluative questions.

Is this claim true (false)?

This claim consistent with this other claim?

Is this action right (good)?

Is this a strong argument?

Is this a meaningful claim?

Note that in all these cases the answer will involve an value judgement about the related issue. It supprises some people to note that true/false, sound/unsound, meaningful/meaningless, consistent/inconsistence, clear/unclear, and so on are included as values. When people think of value judgements they often think exclusively of those involving moral values (e.g. good/bad.) Perhaps this is the reason that people often overlook the fact that the words “right” and “wrong” have a variety of uses and meanings. This fact will be further noted in *The Power of Analysis*. Also note that the above questions may ask for more than a simple affirmation of one’s judgement. Philosophically such questions are asked with an expectation that some reasoning will accompany the answer. This leads us to consider what ways we might show that our claim is true, consistent, meaningful, and so on.... It is possible to hold that we can never give any valuable evidence for any claim whatsoever (some people seem to claim just that.) But even that claim needs some reasoned support:

Just saying so doesn’t make it so

Here are some evaluative questions that may be asked of the author of *Free-Will is an Illusion*

Do you think that your view of non-freedom is consistent with individual moral responsibility?

Do you think the following claim is true; “Learning increases our ability to avoid past mistakes”?

Do you think the comparison between pebbles in a stream and humans in time and space is strong given the difference in complexity between them?

Do you think that any one action may be judged as better than any other?

All these examples ask for value judgements about some specific idea. Having the answers will give us more material to work with in the effort of inquiry into the issue. Notice that these are not meek or restrained questions. They seek to get at what the questioner regards as important and interesting in the other person’s view. but they are also honest attempts to do so. They are not asked simply as a tactical way to undermine the view of the other. That is what Combative questions do. We will consider that form shortly.

Key point of this page:

Evaluative questions ask for a value judgement about a claim or position. True/false, strong/weak, beautiful/ugly, good/bad, consistent/contradictory, sound/unsound, meaningful/meaningless, clear/unclear, are among the possible values one may ask to be judged.

## 6. SPECULATIVE QUESTIONS

Speculative questions seek to draw relationships between ideas or

situations. The general model of speculative questions is the “What if....?” type of question.

What if humans were incapable of asking questions?

Such a question opens the way to speculation about the possibilities. Such speculation (and the reasoning behind it) are part and parcel with philosophical activity. Please note that the “What if....?” model is only a conceptual model. Speculative questions need not be phrased that way at all. Here are some generic instances of speculative questions:

Suppose that the circumstances were like this, how would that affect your view?

Does your claim imply that....?

How does your claim work given the following example....?

Given that you (your claims) are right, does this other claim also follow?

Here is a speculative question that may be asked of the author of Free-Will is an Illusion.

Your view against Free-Will seems to depend on a certain notion of science: that everything that happens, happens in accordance with strict natural laws. But science changes. Suppose science discovers that not everything in nature is fixed and determined by a causal chain. How would your view of Free-Will (or the lack of it) accommodate that?”

If people do not have Free-Will to choose their actions, is it possible to hold anyone morally responsible for what they do?

It seems that your view renders all effort worthless. Is that so?

Speculative questions are usually detailed and directed toward a specific aspect of the issue. How they are answered can tell us much about how a person's beliefs are related to other beliefs and situations.

A Key Point of This Page:

Speculative questions seek to draw relationships between ideas or situations. Asking someone to respond to hypothetical cases or draw consequences from their claims are ways of invoking Speculative questions

## 7. CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONING

So far, we have considered instances of:

Informative Questions

Interpretative Questions

Evaluative Questions

Speculative Questions

Each of these is different in form and purpose. Each allows the

possibility of a genuine and satisfactory answer. Note here the key role of “possibility”. In distinguishing these question forms we are not saying that answers to such philosophical questions are available or even attainable. It is possible that some questions are forever beyond the human ability to answer. However, just saying that a question cannot be answered is not sufficient to show that. We need some explanation as to why a question is unanswerable, if we are to reasonably accept that claim.

The forms of the questions themselves point to the sort of inquiry that is being invoked. Even if we cannot give the answer, and even if the answer can never be found, we still have a notion of what form of answer would suffice.

To put it clear as I can:

When we recognize the form of question we are asking, we can specify the form of the answer we are looking for.

And that means....

We can more clearly understand what our philosophical activity is and how it relates to our lives.

I am suggesting here something that may seem pretty radical. The philosophy may well have less to do with the finding of answers, than with the forming of questions. And most important: with the recognition of the nature of our asking.

The reason I think this may be considered a radical suggestion,

is that philosophy is often measured by people in the way they measure the worth of a scientific or factual investigation. One surveys the history of philosophy (or the diversity of philosophies in any historical period) and it may appear we are dealing with an entirely non-constructive topic area. For thousands of years, people have been asking the same and similar questions. To date, few if any answers have been established. What, then, is the point?

My answer (to that preceding informative question) is; the point is in part to extend our questioning capacity and continually open new paths for constructive discussion. If constructive discussion came to an end, the state of human beings would be entirely different. In what ways I cannot be sure, but I am sure the difference would be profound. Just as much as if the thought experiment where the human capacity to ask questions disappeared became reality. We need constructive discussion and in order to sustain it we must be able to formulate and ponder constructive questions. You can probably tell that I do not consider this a trivial matter. Nor do I expect to settle it here or to merely convince you by saying so.

Consider then, a very different form of question: the Combative Question. In thinking about this form of question the values and meanings I have been ruminating about may deepen for you (maybe not.)

First, however, let's think about how we might distinguish constructive from non-constructive questions. I present next three constructive criteria for that purpose.

## 8. CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTION CRITERIA

Criteria are means by which we judge the value or status of something. In this case we want to be able to judge the constructiveness and non-constructiveness of questions. Recall what is meant here by these concepts:

Constructive questions are questions that open fresh aspects of an issue. They create a basis for sustained and constructive discussion.

Non-constructive questions block inquiry and sustained discussion. They close (not resolve) an issue to further consideration by presenting a conceptual obstacle.

Even given these definitions we need some method to tell when a question is constructive or not. We could simply wait and see how the question affects the discussion. But that method has two flaws. First, there are so many additional factors in the success of a discussion that we could never be sure whether it were the question creating the effect. Second, to promote successful discussion we want to be able to spot non-constructive questions before they enter the discourse. This requires a method of pre-judgement and sorting.

### THE CRITERIA

There is another way. We can derive our criteria from the purpose of questions and the nature of constructiveness. If the difference

between constructive and non-constructive questions is the furthering and blocking of discussion, then the constructive question must have three features:

### 1) Constructive Question must be Answerable

In constructing a productive question we ought to be able to say in advance what sort of answer will satisfy the question. Of course, we will not be able to say what the answer is, just what sort of answer we are seeking. If you raise a question and cannot tell yourself what sort of answer will do (what an answer here would be like), then you should be suspect of the quality of the question.

### 2) Constructive Question must be Open

The productive question allows for a variety of possible answers. Questions may be formulated so as to narrow the range of possible answers. They may even presume the answer in advance. Such an extreme case commits the fallacy of Complex Question, in which the answer is presumed in asking the question.

### 3) Constructive Question must be Relevant

Your questions should derive from the issue and material at hand. Sometimes we are tempted to import questions from assumptions we make about others and issues that seems related to us. A clear, respectful line of inquiry takes stock of what the other person says and directs questions to that. There is nothing wrong with changing the topic at times, but to do so abruptly and without acknowledgement can create great confusion.

So there they are. Dorbolo's three criteria for constructive questions. They are open to debate and certainly need to be refined. But I do believe they are both sensible and serviceable guides in practicing the Craft of Inquiry.

#### SOME EXAMPLES

Let's consider further by sampling how these criteria for constructive questions may be applied to some specific cases (which I have taken from other parts of this text.)

First let's evaluate some non-constructive questions by these criteria. Since the constructiveness of questions relies on the satisfaction of all three criteria, it only takes a failure in applying one of them to show a question to be weak. Consider the following three questions addressed to the position expressed in *Free-Will Is An Illusion*.

Who's to say whether humans have free-will or not?

The "Who's to say" question is one of the most popular retorts to philosophical ideas. Yet it is an odd question primarily because there really seems to be no answer whatever. What would count as an appropriate answer here? "I am."? "You are."? "Socrates is."? This really seems a primary case of a question that is asked primarily because it has no adequate answer. The implication of someone who asks this question (and it is usually presented as a challenge) is that "No-one is to say" and that there is no point in pursuing a line of inquiry in which no-one has any say. Consequently such a question can only be used to block discussion. this question fails the test of Answerability.

If we do not make our own choices, then who does?

This question seems to pose a challenge, but it really only makes a presumption. The question is formulated in such a way that only one type of response is possible. However answered, it will be implicitly granted that we do have “choices.” The issue is shifted from the matter of whether we have choice at all, to the matter of where that choice comes from. The difference is subtle but significant. This question fails the test of Openness.

Where is it written that the “universe is run by random forces”?

Another favorite in the combative questioner’s repertoire (have you ever heard this one?) Maybe that claim is written somewhere, maybe not (actually it is written in the passage under consideration.) Either way, it simply isn’t relevant. That someone did or did not write; “universe is run by random forces” gives it no more truth value than if it has or has been previously said or thought. Of course, this question is not really asking for a bibliographical citation, it is asking for a justification of the claim. But if that is what is wanted, then it is clearer to ask; “What reasons do you have for thinking that ‘universe is run by random forces?’” The where is it written.... question makes a kind of appeal to authority as if we had in the end to take some expert’s word on the matter. The author of the passage is presenting a position. The claim; “The universe is run by random forces” is part of that position. We do not need to look for additional authorities here, but rather should seek out the author’s meaning and reasoning for this claim. This question fails the test of Relevance.

## EVALUATING CONSTRUCTIVENESS

Now let's consider how to evaluate some questions that have a fair degree of constructiveness to them (at least in the present context.)

Supposing that we are mechanisms, as you say, do you think there is something about being a mechanism that precludes it from having Free- Will?

InformativeSpeculative

EvaluativeCombative

InterpretativeConstructive

This is an Informative Question because it is asking for more information about the position. Specifically, whether there is something about “mechanisms” that make them inherently unfree. The expected answer here will provide some information about the author's idea of a “mechanism”, so it is Answerable. There are many possible answers and none are presumed in the question, so the question is Open. The passage directly speaks of “mechanisms” and implies that they are not free, so the question is Relevant. This is a constructive informative question.

Do you mean the same thing by “free-will” and “ultimate control”?

This is an Interpretative Question that seeks to explore the relation of meanings of two parts of the passage. The possibility of answering here is clear, these mean the same or they don't. So the

question is Answerable. While “yes” and “no” are but two answers, the “no” answer is open to an additional variety of explanations saying how the two differ. The question is Open. Both notions “free-will” and “ultimate” control occur in key claims of the text, so the question is Relevant.

This is a constructive interpretative question.

Do you think that your view of non-freedom is consistent with individual moral responsibility?

This is a Evaluative Question asking the author to judge the consistency of the position with another idea. We can see from the question what sort of answer will be appropriate, so the question is Answerable. The answerer has at least two options for answers and perhaps more, so the question is Open. The relevance of this question must be judged by how connected the notions of “freedom” and “individual moral responsibility” are. Supposing there is a strong connection (and I think there is), this question will be judged Relevant. This is a constructive evaluative question.

Suppose science discovers that not everything in nature is fixed and determined by a causal chain. How would your view of Free-Will (or the lack of it) accommodate that?”

This is a Speculative Question. Potential answers to it have a wide range. It is Answerable. By the same token the range of possible answers shows that it is Open. And since the passage bases a lot on the idea that the universe is a mechanism with fixed laws, asking what would happen if that condition changed is Relevant. This is a constructive speculative question.

How the criteria for constructive questions are used in particular cases has a lot to do with the context of the position, question, and discussion. What is important to note here is that there is the distinct possibility of applying evaluative criteria for judging the constructiveness of a question. This possibility is key to the purposeful promotion of successful discussion. Now let's consider some common techniques for producing non-constructive questions in the form of Combative Questions.

## 9. COMBATIVE QUESTIONS

Combative questions are tactical uses of questioning to undermine another person's view. They are often deceptive in that they appear to be genuine requests, when in fact they are really intentional attacks on the view. Consider the three criteria for constructive questions.

Constructive Questions are:

- 1) Answerable
- 2) Open
- 3) Relevant

Combative questions can be evaluated by their failure to satisfy one or more of the three criteria for constructive questions (i.e. they are always un-constructive). Combative questions are typically questions for which no possible answer will be accepted; questions that already have the answer built into the asking; or questions that

are not relevantly connected to the issue and material at hand. All of the following are combative questions. Do you recognize the form from these generic instances?

\*Who asked you?

\*Who's to say that....?

\*How can you say that....?

\*Where is it written that....?

\*Where did you get such a crazy idea....?

The list can go on a long ways. Note that some of these instances may not be non-constructive combative questions under certain conditions. Sometimes it is entirely appropriate to challenge a person's right or authority to make certain claims. But in philosophic inquiry we are much more concerned with the claims themselves. To switch the subject to the individual's personality is usually to introduce an irrelevant issue. Consider how these may play out in relation to the Free-Will is an Illusion passage.

\*Who's to say what the universe is like?

\*How can you say that we have no free-will?

\*How can you prove that the world is controlled by "random forces"? Where did you ever get the idea that humans lack free-will?

\* By what right do you seek to rob people of their precious freedom?

\* Has it ever occurred to you that maybe you lack free-will but other people have it? \*How did you become such an expert on this topic?

\*If no one can choose one way or the other, why then are you bothering to write this at all?

\*If we do not make our own choices, then who does?

Get the picture? Each of the above examples departs in some degree from the criteria for constructive questions. The last one presumes that “someone” makes the choice and demands to know who that someone is. That is already positing an answer in advance of asking the question. Such a question is suspect and really doesn’t deserve a serious response.

The best defense against combative questions is to consciously practice *The Craft of Inquiry*. Pay attention to the questions you ask. Check in advance to see if you are clear in yourself on what sort of answer will satisfy your asking. Make sure the questions are open to a variety of possible responses. Focus on the issue and material at hand to judge the relevance of your line of questioning. The more able you are to ask productive questions of others, the more able you will be at detecting the flaws in combative questions that target you. In a contentious world such as ours, this is surely a valuable practical skill to acquire.

A key point of this page:

Combative questions are tactical uses of questioning to undermine another person’s view. You may determine whether a question is combative or not by checking whether it passes the tests of the three criteria for constructive questions. Combative questions are non-constructive. They purposely block discussion



# 4. Philosophical Analysis

Of any object that can be experienced or conceived of there are two fundamental questions that we may ask:

1. What does it do?
1. How does it work?

The first question is practical in that it seeks to know what effect the object has on the world. To know what an object does allows us to give it use and value. For instance, to know that poison oak can harm us allows us to avoid it (which is a use). To know that compound interest creates wealth gives us options for investing (which is a use). Note that we can know what something does without knowing how it works (i.e. what makes it do what it does). I suspect that this is our situation with most objects in the world. We value them for better or worse and use them without understanding what they really are; that is, how they work.

Every object in our experience is complex because they all consist of parts. Whether there are simple objects in existence – objects that have no parts – is an ancient question that is still at issue in philosophy and science. That an object is complex implies that it can be analyzed. This is true of anything that you think and speak of.

The idea of an object here needs some explaining. By object I mean whatever can be expressed in thoughts or words. Physical objects are one kind, but there are many other kinds. In the sense used here, a song, an idea, a belief, a perception, a sentence, a process, a goal, a mathematical equation, a nation, a family, a university course, and a university degree are all objects. All of these objects are complex in that they have parts that fit together in a way unique to that type of object.

Consider a university degree as an object. You may have thoughts about what degree may do for you, such as qualify you for a job. This makes the degree useful, which answers the first question as to what a university degree does. Of course you realize that a degree is not sufficient for getting a job. There are other significant factors (e.g., experience, resume, interview skills) that go into getting the job. Note that this means that getting a job is a larger complex of which a degree is one part, but an important part. I argue that the more you understand your degree, the better you are able to use it effectively.

To understand your degree use analysis. First, break it down into its parts. What are the parts of a university degree? Well, why does a degree help get a job? Because it certifies that the recipient has completed courses and requirements. So there – courses and requirements are parts that make up a degree. Listing all of the courses that went into your degree is a start. Yet a degree is not only a list of courses. Those courses must be related to one another to constitute a major. The requirements are rules for how the courses fit together to produce a complete major. At this point I suspect that you are thinking that the major courses are not the only parts of a degree. Great! If you are thinking that way, then you are using analysis.

The role of structure in an object is critical. The structure of an object is how the parts fit together to perform various functions. Even if you have not taken Anatomy and Physiology you know that your body consists of many parts (organs, tissues, cells) that combine to perform organic functions. If you want to understand how the body works, you must learn the major parts (anatomy) and how they are related (physiology). The total of the parts in their relations that produces a function is a complete analysis.

Can there be a complete analysis of an object? Well, that's one of the controversial philosophical issues about knowledge and truth. A complete analysis would give us total knowledge of an object. At

least that is an analytic view of knowledge. Yet every object is in relations to other objects, creating larger complexes. For instance, even if you had a complete analysis of your own body, it remains the fact that your body is in multiple relations with other bodies and objects in the world. If we must include those objects and relations into a more complete analysis, then the practical task becomes much more difficult, moreover this seems to imply that only a total analysis of the entire universe will be complete.

Some philosophers have theorized that the idea of a total analysis of the entire existing universe is the precisely the idea of absolute knowledge. Perhaps we humans cannot attain absolute knowledge, but the idea of it gives us a direction for increasing knowledge. Indeed, in much theology, the idea of God is that which has absolute knowledge of all existence. This is called omniscience, or all knowing. Science operates with an precept that in principle everything in the universe is knowable. This is called intelligibility meaning that it is all capable of being understood. This precept does not imply that current humans are capable of understanding the entirety of the universe. The point is that every object in the universe operates according to general principles, the laws of nature. Humans may not be able to know everything, but everything is ultimately knowable in principle. If there is anything in existence that is not knowable, then it is outside of nature, which is supernatural and we are back to theology. The issue of whether the universe is reducible to parts or is an irreducible whole is one of the persistent and fundamental problems of metaphysics.

Whether or not the totality of the universe is intelligible, we may make good use of the method of analysis by limiting our scope. Knowledge and understanding have purposes and our methods may be suited to them.

Analysis is a method of examining a complex concept or thing by identifying its parts and the relations among those parts. A thorough analysis provides a definition or explanation of its object

by showing what it is made of (the parts) and its structure (how the parts fit together).

The word analysis comes from the Ancient Greek roots *ana* (up) and *lysis* (loosen), so it literally means to loosen up or to break up. In contemporary English we are more likely to say break it down which often means to make something clear by step by step, as in let me break it down for you. When we give this kind of explanation we are breaking the topic down into its parts and the relations of those parts to one another.

An analysis of an object results in a description. An accurate enough description defines and explains the object. Analysis is very valuable as a means of discovery. To study how an object works requires observing its parts by themselves and in relation. The effort of analysis frequently make us aware of parts and relations that we had not noticed before. The philosophical goal of self-knowledge is a process of discovery which is greatly aided by analysis. To analyze your own beliefs, values, and perspective promotes deeper awareness of who you are and how you work. You what you know about yourself to learn more about yourself. Learning more about yourself increased your consciousness, which opens the potential to make changes and choices about who you are.

Consider just a few examples of analysis as used in our current world.

Physics analysis: particle physics is conducted by literally breaking matter into smaller parts and examining the qualities of those parts. Physicists do this by smashing particles into one another so that they break apart into smaller particles and observing how they are alike and different from one another.

Chemical analysis: break down chemical processes and examine chemical reactions between elements of matter.

Market analysis: identify the consumers and suppliers of a product and how they interact in terms of supply and demand.

Psycho-analysis: identify the objects of a person's mind that interact to produce mental and behavioral effects.

Literary analysis: pick out the elements of a text (e.g. characters, word choices, symbols, plot, etc.) and how they connect to tell a story.

Philosophical analysis: also known as conceptual analysis this method takes concepts or ideas as its objects. Your thoughts are complexes of concepts. To understand a thought by conceptual analysis involves identifying the conceptual parts of that thought and relating them to produce a coherent description. Your perceptions are also complex and so can be analyzed.

For any of these kinds and other kinds of analysis there are three steps:

1. Suspend evaluative judgement.
1. Divide the object into its main parts (elements, ingredients, components, qualities).
1. Describe how the parts are related to one another and to the object as a whole.

Let's consider each of these briefly.

1. Suspend evaluative judgement: This is perhaps the most crucial point that I can make as a philosopher. Put analysis before evaluation. An evaluative attitude will always bias an analysis. This is why people across the political divides seem to operate with different facts. People commonly enter into a situation already knowing how they want it to turn out. If the evidence works in favor of the desired outcome, then it is

accepted and emphasized. If the evidence seems to work against the desired outcome, it is denied or changed. Our biases are difficult for us to detect, but we can adopt an attitude of suspended judgement. For instance, you have experienced a child who rejects new foods by asserting “I don’t like it!” In some cases this is before they have tasted it or even looked at it. The kid is in a defensive mind-set and responds with sheer evaluative judgement. In such a case they not only put evaluative judgement first, they don’t allow for analysis at all. They are not open to experience. I am confident that you can map this pattern onto other objects and behavior. When people put evaluation before analysis, they have concluded the “truth” before they consider the evidence.

Evaluative judgement and bias is a huge topic for philosophers and psychologists. You can study more about this by searching for different kinds of cognitive biases. A good place to start is Confirmation Bias. For our purposes, we may simply prescribe a mental attitude of suspended judgement in order to carry out an effective analysis. Note that we are not throwing out evaluation (e.g., true/false, better/worse, desirable/undesirable). We are putting evaluation into its proper place which is after analysis. In other words: Put analysis before evaluation.

1. Divide the object into its main parts: Depending on what kind of object you are analyzing, you will do this in different ways. For most objects you can get a start with observation and identifying the parts of your observation. The observation may be perceptual or conceptual. For instance, suppose that you are taken to one of the trendy restaurants where you eat your meal in total darkness. Your courses come one at a time. You wonder; “What am I eating?” because this place is so exclusive it does not have a menu and the wait staff does not tell you what is being served. While you cannot see anything, you have other means of observing. So you do analysis with the sensory

evidence that you do have; smell, taste, feel, sound. Some of the food objects are solid and others liquid; some soft and some firm; some smell pungent and others taste sweet; some are salty; and so on so that eventually you make inferences as to what is on your plate. With this evidence you are also able to decide what you like and what you don't like about the meal, because with analysis you can make grounded evaluative judgement. Of course you did so by putting analysis before evaluation.

1. Describe how the parts are related to one another and to the object as a whole: A list of parts does not make an object. You can have all of the parts of a ship, but until they are put together such that it can float and be navigated, it is not yet a ship.

This matter of parts and wholes is a deep philosophical problem itself, which we will not undertake here. You may be interested in an ancient version of the problem, so let's take a brief diversion here. Plutarch (46-120 CE) was a Greek writer from whom we have many of the biographies and historic of people in antiquity. In his work *Theseus* he wrote;

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their places, in so much that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

The issue raised here is about the relation of an object to its parts. If we replace one board on the ship, it seem intuitively correct to say that it is still the same ship. Yet if over time all of the boards and nails and ropes and sails of the ship are replaced with new ones, is

it still the same ship? That's the question which Plutarch says that philosophers were in dispute about.

Consider this issue in relation to your own body. The cells that constitute your own body are continually dying and being replaced, except for those in the cerebral cortex. So at some point in your life all of original cells have been replaced. In one sense you have a new body, but there are reasons to maintain that it is the same body with new parts. Just as with the Ship of Theseus, the problem of identity can be contested with respect to human bodies. It is an issue that philosophers have proposed solutions to and disputed throughout the millennia.

One point that seems important about this problem is that we cannot merely identify an object with its parts. Ships and bodies have parts, but those parts are organized in ways that make an object. Perhaps even if we replace all of the parts we can have the same object so long as the relations of the parts remain the same. That is why the parts of a ship strewn out unconnected on the ground do not constitute a ship. You have all the parts but are missing the form. That is to say, an analysis must identify both the parts, the relations between the parts, and the relations of the parts to the whole.

In your analysis of the unseen meal mentioned above you do more than identify the parts. You also form a description as to how they are related. For example, there is something soft and sweet on the plate and it has a firm, thin, and salty exterior around the middle. This is likely two parts put together to form a complex menu item. In this case you decide that it is melon wrapped in prosciutto. In this case you have determined that the object has to main parts (melon + prosciutto) and they are combined to make the contrasts between the flavors and textures work together. You can describe the entire meal in these terms – flavors and textures (parts) balanced against one another (relations). This is a type of analysis.

So we have set out three main steps in analysis:

1. Suspend evaluative judgement.
1. Divide the object into its main parts (elements, ingredients, components, qualities).
1. Describe how the parts are related to one another and to the object as a whole.

So far we have been considering examples of tangible objects that can be perceived. But what of objects that belong to the conceptual mind; such as concepts, ideas, meanings, argument, positions, and beliefs? Well, the key point is that the three steps of analysis still apply. We just use different means to make the distinctions and connections.

Take an ancient saying that is at least as old as Plutarch. The Latin is;

*De gustibus non est disputandum.*

Translated this means “taste cannot be disputed” or in the contemporary English idiom, “there is no accounting for taste.”<sup>1</sup> Consider how a philosopher may analyze this saying.

1. Suspend judgement. I’m not sure whether it is true that taste cannot be disputed, but I have noway to fairly judge that until I understand what this saying means.
1. The object is a sentence and so the parts are words. Those words express concepts, which is what philosophers are typically concerned with. So what have we got?

Taste cannot be disputed

Four words (five in Latin, but that is a matter for Linguists).

So what is meant here by taste? It could be the sensation of taste, like sweet or salty. In that case the saying means How something tastes to you is not disputable. Perhaps, but I think there is more to this saying. I think that taste is meant in a broader sense in include judgments of various kinds. In the sense that we may say that a person has good taste in clothing. Another sense is when we say that something is in bad taste, such as a joke used in an inappropriate setting. These uses of taste have to do with a person's discernment of what is fitting and appropriate. If that meaning is accurate, then the saying can be conceptually translated as;

An individual's discernment of what is fitting and appropriate cannot be disputed.

You see that what I have done there is to substituted my expanded meaning for the word.

3. Describe how the parts are related to one another and to the object as a whole. Now we may investigate how the concepts of taste and dispute are related in the saying. To dispute a claim is to disagree with it or deny it. Well, if that's all that dispute means here then the statement is rather silly. Of course someone can disagree with the taste of another. People do it all the time. Yet I think there is more to the meaning of dispute here and an important principle of reasoning, the Principle of Charity, requires that I give a claim the strongest interpretation that I can (i.e., most likely to be true). So I am led to look for a meaning of dispute that makes for a stronger claim of the whole.

Perhaps we should take cannot be disputed as a complex part unto itself, since the negation cannot be only makes sense in relation to an object. What might cannot be disputed mean? Not that people cannot disagree, because they can just by saying so. It may then be a claim about whether it is logical and reasonable to dispute taste. That is, is there is no reasoned basis for a disagreement, then disputing about it is unreasonable. For a matter to be disputable

requires that there is some truth that may be reached about it and that with sufficient evidence we can arrive at the truth of the matter, thus ending the dispute.

But is taste like that? We each have our own tastes in clothes, music, food, company, and so on. For me to dispute your taste in music is really just me asserting my taste over yours. We can do that, but can we do it with reasoned evidence? Perhaps individual taste is a fact about a person. It is not. an opinion or reasoned position, it is a feature of the individual like their age or height. It seems odd to maintain that we can dispute the age and height of other people. Whether you like it or not, that what they are. There is nothing to dispute because they cannot change that aspect of themselves. Maybe people can change their taste in music, but is that a matter of disputation?

Well, I expect that this is an open question.

What though about good and bad taste? We surely can and should dispute someone whose comments are inappropriate. For this I will step out of the frame of the saying and consider its context. You may have heard a saying that could be related to the one under consideration; *Si fueris Rômae, Rômânô vîvitô môre; si fueris alibî, vîvitô sîcut ibî*

Which translates as;

If you should be in Rome, live in the Roman manner; if you should be elsewhere, live as they do there.

and is attributed to St. Ambrose (340-397 CE). This saying has a contemporary version;

When in Rome do as the Romans.

I think that there is a meaningful relationship between the two sayings;

taste cannot be disputed

and

When in Rome do as the Romans.

The point they have in common is the idea that local customs and practices vary. What is good taste in one culture may be bad taste in another. Just as each individual has their own personal tastes. These tastes are facts about the cultures and people. They are not subject to dispute the way that beliefs and opinions are. If my interpretation is accurate then I may render the saying as equivalent to the following;

We cannot hold an individual's and culture's discernment of what is fitting and appropriate to the standards of reasoned argument.

So, you can see how this went. By breaking the statement into its component concepts and investigating the meaning of those concepts we result in expanded meanings, which are interpretations. By substituting the expanded meanings for the original words, we can test our interpretation against the original saying. Kind of like swapping new boards into the ship, we swap the original words out for our conceptual analysis. What do you think? Does my interpretation add any understanding to the original? Doing so is the point of conceptual analysis.

Two important points.

First, we have not said anything about whether the saying is true. Is taste disputable? Well, that's an open question, because after all we are still in suspension of judgement. We are doing analysis here not evaluation. Though once we have an analysis, then we can begin evaluating. The point is that in order for you and I to have a dialog about whether a claim is true or not, we need to agree on the meaning of the claim. Even if this is a provisional agreement (i.e., for the sake of argument), we need a common meaning of what we are examining or else our thinking goes off in completely different directions.<sup>2</sup> So a key lesson is: when you find yourself in dispute

with others, step back to examine the meanings of what is being said. Think about the meaning of your own words, especially those that form your beliefs and opinions. Analysis is a tool to create deeper understanding of yourself and others.

First, interpretations are disputable. I gave you my interpretation above and I gave a few reasons for it, but it remains open to question. Perhaps you see a flaw in my interpretation or have a stronger version. That is something that we can have reasoned disagreement about. But note that the issue in question is whether the interpretation is a strong equivalent to the original. That is a very different issue than whether the claim is true.

Is it true that we cannot hold an individual's and culture's discernment of what is fitting and appropriate to the standards of reasoned argument? I have my doubts about this claim. It seems to me that we can reasonably dispute individual tastes and cultural practices in some cases. Yet my sole concern here has been to explicate (look it up) a saying as an example of how conceptual analysis works. You can do the same. Try your hand at analysis with a saying from the Roman author Aulus Gellius (c. 125-180 CE);

*Philosophum non facit barba.*<sup>3</sup>

which translates to;

A beard does not make a philosopher.

Try applying the tools of analysis to this saying to see what you come up with.

Perhaps it is likewise a source of the saying clothes do not make the man.

# 5. The Science of Argument

[Field] If I had to settle for only one philosophical concept to be learned and practiced, it would be the

logical idea of “The Principle of Charity,” by which I mean;

“Interpreting the ideas and statements of others in their strongest form.”

Basically it comes down to how much credit you are willing to give to ideas and positions that

differ from your own. The ‘credit’ here has nothing to do with agreement or disagreement or

tolerance. It is about how you interpret thoughts. For anything that you make meaning of, you

are making an interpretation. There are two possible directions in interpreting:

1) You can interpret their ideas and positions as irrational, logically flawed, and lacking

evidence.

2) You can interpret their ideas and positions as rational, logically coherent, and based on

evidence.

Direction 2 is hard to do. Everyday life is full of contrasting and competing ideas. We live in a

world where emotion and volume are often substituted for reason. Interestingly, some people will

also loudly proclaim that they are the voice of reason and truth. There is a simple test for whether

someone is really as reasonable and factual as they claim to be: pay attention to how they

represent the views of their opponents. If they represent opposing positions as plausible, having

logical structure, and connecting to reality in important ways, then they are indeed preceding

rationally. They are employing the Principle of charity.

If they represent opposing positions as unintelligible, illogical, having no factual base or evidence

whatever, then you have a speaker who is promoting their own views by misrepresenting the ideas of others. I'll bet that you will also observe them attacking the intelligence and character of

people who hold opposing views (this later technique is called Ad Hominem).

Look, it is easy to defeat any statement, argument, or position. All

you need do is to interpret it in a weak and counter-factual form. Deliberately doing so is called in Logic “Strawman” because

you set up a false effigy of your opponent, which is easy to knock down. That may go over in

debates and quarrels, though one point remains clear: by defeating a Strawman you are guaranteed to have not refuted the other person’s actual position. Moreover, you have not clarified your own position in relation to the alternatives. When we select only the weakest versions of the positions opposing our own, we also lower our standards for our own thinking.

On the contrary, when we work to form strong interpretation of the thoughts of others, we raise

the standard of our own thinking thereby making our own positions stronger.

Here is a point that I want to be super clear about: The Principle of Charity is not the same as

“Relativism.” There are many types of Relativists and there are some who maintain that

‘everything that everyone believe is true (in some sense); no one is ever wrong or mistaken.’

That is not the position being promoted by The Principle of Charity.

Here is the difference:

Relativism involves conclusive evaluations. That an 'idea is true' and a 'position is correct' are both conclusive evaluations.

The Principle of Charity does not include conclusive evaluations. It is a matter of analysis. By

employing the Principle of charity I am working to represent all of the positions on an issue in

their strongest forms; their best light. I am looking for what is reasonable and plausible in a

position and idea. That is not the same as declaring it to be true, false, correct, or incorrect. On

the other hand, there are some plausible accounts of Relativism of different kinds and I cannot

rule them out (the sophisticated ones, anyway)!

What I personally think about differences in beliefs and points of view is this; The universe is

immensely complex, humans are incredibly complex. It would in fact be amazing to find a

position or belief held by anyone that is entirely devoid of truth. I do think that there are plenty of

false beliefs and incorrect positions. But I think they are not so because they are entirely and

wholly false or incorrect. There is always some truth (correspondence to reality) in any human

thought, statement, belief, position.

This is just me, but I have a hard time imagining what a 100% false thought would be like.

Falseness, Error, Deception, Untruth, etc. are all dependent in a way on truth. The logically

negative does not have a reality independent from the positive. So (if I am right) we can find

threads of truth in just about any idea or statement. That does not make their major meaning true,

it just makes them a mixture of truth and falsity.

If I am right about this, then political and sophistical efforts to make one's opponents out to be

100% wrong, false, evil, stupid, etc. are shown up to be unrealistic (uncharitable) versions of the

actual thoughts. Most of not only have beliefs and positions but perceive our own beliefs from

particular points of view. We seldom perceive the whole of our thought, but picture it selectively,

just as we do with the world around us.

This is one reason why it is so valuable to concentrate on the analysis of thoughts before we get

into the business of evaluating. After all, once we have evaluated a thought as false, we have

limited the analysis to only that which confirms our evaluation.

A Philosophical Skill:

Active listening – a communication technique which requires the listener to feed-back what they

understand the speaker to mean by restating key parts in their own words. Active listening has the

following stages:

1) Ask a question to get them started in tell you what they think (in this case on the issue).

2) Listen calmly and carefully, putting your inner critic to the side.

3) At a pause in their telling, tell them; “OK. Here is what I think you are saying, tell me if I have it right.”

4) Re-state their key ideas in paraphrase or different words but conveying the same

meaning.

5) If they respond that your feedback is not what they meant, then ask them to tell you

again and repeat steps 2, 3, & 4.

6) If they respond that your feedback is in fact what they meant, then ask them to go on.

Repeat the process until they agree that you have a fair and accurate account of their

thoughts.

Please note that successful Active Listening leads to understanding. It does not lead to agreement!

You can understand another person's thoughts without agreeing with them. This is an important

practical point because some common uses of the word "understanding" also imply some sort of

agreement or tolerance – as if to understand is to allow and accept or at least empathize with. In

logic and philosophy that is not the meaning of "understand."

Consider the following uses of "understand":

Do you understand the wave function of quantum physics?

I do not understand the Federal Tax Code which is why I consult an accountant.

Sometimes I do not understand why I feel the way that I do.

I do not understand what George Orwell meant when he wrote “Freedom is Slavery.”

After our conversation I have a better understanding of what your concept of God.

None of these, I think, imply empathy of agreement. What they do imply is that an understanding

of the sort indicated is likely to avoid conflicts that are based solely on misunderstanding. That

happens a lot.

Understanding is a function of analysis. Agreement is a function of evaluation. Put analysis

before evaluation. Doing this is what is meant by “The Principle of Charity” in philosophy.

Perhaps this point will be clearer if the claim is amended to state:  
Please note that successful

Active Listening leads to comprehension. To “comprehend” is to grasp the meaning of an idea

and to be able to explain that meaning through words and examples.

Try substituting comprehend for understand in the example sentences above (don't just think about or imagine doing this, actually do it as written or out loud). The way in which

these two words are synonymous is what I am pointing to as the objective of The Principle of

Charity.

This will come naturally to you as you practice active listening because that practice is all about

hearing and interpreting accurately. The accuracy is measured by whether or not the version that

you end up with is consistent with what the other person meant. If your version of what they

mean and their version of what they mean are in conflict, then you are not comprehending what

they mean. Active listening and The Principle of Charity can put our meanings in synch such that

disagreements that we have are about the actual ideas and not merely the symptom of

misunderstanding (mis-comprehension).

I think that I have already made one point clear, but I want to make sure to reinforce it. The Principle of Charity is not about being nice, or polite, or civil, or politically correct. It is about valuing truth over preference. Interpreting the claims and arguments of others in their strongest possible ways is driven by the effort to find the truth

in what they say. Even more powerful is the stance of taking your own thoughts and beliefs in their strongest possible interpretations. That can be a challenge because careful self-analysis of this sort can lead to you to find that some of what you take to be Truth is in fact partly true. That realization leads to self-revision.

Try using active listening every day while keeping the Principle of Charity in mind and I believe

that you will experience a transformation in some of your interpersonal communications.

# 6. Four of the Worst Arguments in the Word

In logic an argument is a set of statements that present evidence for a conclusion. By evidence is meant relevant support or justification. Such evidence gives us reasons to believe that a statement is true. This is not the same as proof, which is a much stricter concept than evidence. We can have good reasons to believe something based on evidence that falls short of proof.<sup>1</sup>

Have you encountered anyone who has emphatic opinions but is seldom able to give clear reasons for them? For many people the fact that they have an opinion is good enough reason to keep it. They don't want facts, evidence, and logic getting in the way. This does not mean that they cannot have an opinion or that their opinion is false. Most Americans seem to agree with the principle "Everyone has a right to their own opinion." Sure, but the right to have an opinion does not mean that the opinion is the right one. It is possible for people to have false beliefs and hold opinions that turn out not to be true. Indeed, the right to have your own opinion (and not be punished for having it) includes the right to have a false opinion. It does not mean that every belief is true just because someone believes it. Making that mistake is an equivocation on the word "right."

An argument can be analyzed and evaluated just as a calculation can, though not always with such precision. Analysis can show whether the evidence given is really relevant and sufficient to support the conclusion. The study of the analysis and evaluation of arguments is Logic. This short introduction involves Informal Logic which typically focuses on arguments in real life. One area of Informal Logic is the study of Fallacies: arguments that appear to give strong evidence but are logically flawed. Some fallacies are so popular

that they have their own categories. I think that you may recognize some of these from your own experience. These fallacies come in many variations and it sometimes takes careful analysis to find them out. I'll present five common fallacies and some ways to counter them. My hope is that you will look for ways that these deceptive arguments affect your thought and life, so that you may avoid such deceptions (especially if you are prone to make any such yourself). There are many useful materials in print and on the web about these fallacies and many others. I hope that you will research these further. This document is meant to introduce you to these ideas if you don't know them or to remind you of them if you do.

### 1. Post Hoc Ergo Prompter Hoc

Event A occurred, then event B occurred. Therefore, A caused B.

This fallacy does great harm in the world because the attribution of cause is how we confer responsibility. The Latin phrase means; "This after that, therefore this because of that." Another way to say this is; "A then B, therefore A causes B." Every causal belief or statement is an inference. As David Hume (1711-1776) noted, we do not observe the causation. What we observe are correlated events. From their relation in time, space, frequency, etc. we infer that the correlated occurrences are causally related. Our observations do allow us to make cogent causal inferences as we must to get around in the world. Yet we can also make completely uncogent causal inferences from observation and it can be hard for us to tell the difference. Here is a common, though not trivial, example;

You have had a cold for several days. Your friend comes down with a cold. He says; "Well, you gave me your cold." Let's analyze this.

A happened=You had a cold days ago (and still do).

B happened=He has a cold today.

---

His causal inference=your cold caused his cold (“you gave it to me”).

---

So what’s fallacious about this? Just that the evidence given is not strong enough to support the conclusion (inference). Two similar events happened in succession in time. It simply does not follow from that alone that they are causally related as claimed. It may be that they are causally related, but there are three other possibilities which have not been ruled out. Without additional evidence they are all as strong conclusions as the causal inference.

Third Cause: It may be that both of you caught the cold (i.e. transmitted the virus) from another person. Other causal factors are always possibilities that should be check. Often we find that a causal relation is far more complex than we realized (involving many interwoven causes and effects).

Reverse Cause: It may be that there is a causal relation between your and your friend’s colds,

only it goes the other way. Perhaps you caught the cold from her, but it just took longer for her symptoms to develop. This is instructive because it shows how we often rely on appearances for our inferences, whereas the underlying cause-effect may be very different.

Coincidence: It may be that you caught your cold from another person and you friend caught hers from yet another person all together. In that case there is no causal relation between your cold and hers. They may even be completely different viruses. It is natural to assume that similarity in appearances and proximity in time and space points to causation. That’s not enough evidence.

To be clear – I am not saying that it is fallacious to make causal inferences. I am saying that we should test our causal inferences

in order to improve the evidence. Just being aware of the potential for fallacious causal inference, and knowing what to look for (i.e. the above alternate hypotheses) can be enough to temper bad choices based on uncogent inferences.

### 1. Tu Quoque

A makes statement P as an allegation.

A is also guilty of statement P. Therefore, statement P is false (or the allegation is dismissed).

I am betting that you have direct experience with this fallacy. It is so pervasive and effective, you may not even agree with me that it is fallacious. I hope to persuade you otherwise. Tu Quoque (two quo quay) is Latin for “You Too.” The general form is to take any criticism, apply that same criticism to the person who made it, and assert the turn-around as a refutation of the criticism. This is very popular in domestic life:

Person A: Gosh, you just cut that person off in the other lane. That’s dangerous. Person B: You’re one to talk. You got a speeding ticket just last month.

Recognize the technique? It is used in all sorts of issues and takes many forms. Consider some common Tu Quoque retorts (admittedly without context to determine whether they are fallacious):

- Why blame me? Haven’t you ever made a mistake?
- Are you perfect? If not, get off my case.
- You do the same thing.
- That’s amusing coming from you.
- And what about you....?

- You are equally to blame.

Tu Quoque often appears to be an appeal to fairness or an objection to hypocrisy. Look closer through an analysis of the driver's argument above:

1: Statement A = Cutting off the driver was dangerous.

2: Statement B = You got a speeding ticket (i.e. you drive dangerously). 3: Conclusion = Cutting off the other driver was not dangerous.

The conclusion cannot follow from those premises. The big point is this: even if your critic is a guilty of the same thing and a totally hypocrite, it does not follow that their statement is false. It may well be that you are both dangerous drivers.

Do you recognize this fallacious tactic? Some people make an art of it in domestic life. They can dodge just about any criticism by turning the tables on their critics.

I have relatives whose political reasoning is just about summed in toto up by Tu Quoque. Any and every concern about their preferred party and positions can be deflected by retorting:

The other side does the same thing!

I am not exaggerating. That exact sentence is automatically tossed out at any political critique whatever (except when point favors their party and positions). As a child I first recognized the repetition of the technique. Later I found out about it's logical attributes. What I came to realize is that no matter what the "other side" does or is, it does not logically or morally justify what happens on this side.

Here is another way to see this point: when someone uses a Tu Quoque they are making an accusation. You or they did X and X is just as wrong. Notice what is implicit in that accusation; that

“X is wrong.” If it were not there would be no force in making the accusation. Consider what is lost in this. If “the other side is just as bad” then it is “just as bad as my side.” That is to say; “my side is bad.” Or to put more clearly, the original allegation is accurate.

In a way the Tu Quoque is worse than fallacious, it is a way to derail the addressing of flaws and falsehoods. It is a mechanism of self-denial. Tu Quoque acts as a sort of pseudo-logical blackmail. You cannot criticize me because then I will expose your flaws. The fact that some people actually accept Tu Quoque as a compelling argument shows how confused our reasoning and social discourse can become.

Since Tu Quoque operates by seeming to dismiss the right to a claim, we had better address a potential conflation with some well known moral maxims. We all know the Golden Rule; Do to others as you would have them do to you and Jesus’ maxim;

“And why behold you the mote that is in your brother’s eye, but consider not the beam that is in your own eye?”<sup>2</sup>

Matthew 7:3. American Standard Version. Cf. Luke 6:42

Neither of these is counseling us to commit Tu Quoque. The Golden Rule advises us to see the similarities between our own subjective experience and the experience of others. The point is to identify and empathize with others, not to excuse our own faults based on a judgement of someone else.

Jesus is not urging us to ignore our faults. He is exhorting us to recognize our weaknesses and improve on them. Indeed, both are indicating and warning against a sort of inverted Tu Quoque which works like this: focus on the faults of others and you can all the easier ignore your own. Does that sound at all familiar from your experience? This really take us to an important issue. Consider how groups of people cast each other as negative. Such as high school cliques and communities with racial divisions. By promoting

a shared image of the other as flawed and negative we can gain a sense of belonging with our own group. You may have experienced this yourself. If not, read “Queen Bees and Wannabes” by Rosalind Wiseman and see “Mean Girls” a movie loosely based on Wiseman’s book. The premise is that we can create a sort of social cohesion by sharing an enemy. My hypothesis is that this operates by giving the group a mechanism to conceal or ignore individual faults, thus strengthening the social bond.

My theorizing can wait until another time (though I’d love to hear from you about these ideas). My point here is that concealing ones own faults (the beam in my eye) by exposing the faults of others (the mote in their eye) is just how Tu Quoque works. We cannot regard advise to look more closely and honestly at ourselves as providing any justification for Tu Quoque.

Research more – Fallacy Files: Tu Quoque

<http://www.fallacyfiles.org/tuquoque.html>

#### 1. ad Ignoratum

There is no evidence that statement P is false Therefore statement P is true.

On the face of it seems that no one could think that the lack of knowledge about something counts as evidence for it. You may then be surprised at how commonly and successfully variations of this fallacy occurs. The Latin means “To ignorance” as in “An appeal to ignorance.” We can find variations on this fallacy where someone cites the absence of a cognitive state or of evidence of any form. The form I a most attuned to goes something like this;

I cannot think of any other explanation; therefore statement P (i.e. the proposed explanation) must be true.

This can be phrased as a question;

What other explanation is there?

This and its many variations come down to the assumption that if I or we can only think of one explanation for some phenomenon, then that one explanation must be correct.

If this were the case, then the lower our creativity, the greater our knowledge of the world. That is not so. There are always alternate possible explanations for every phenomenon. Our inability to discern them is a feature of our mental character, not a feature of the phenomena at issue.

A powerful combination is to combine ad Ignoratum with the suppression of alternate ideas. This can happen in a relationship, in a culture, and through history. Galileo (1564-1642) published his arguments for the Copernican theory that the earth orbits the sun, his theory of the tides. Up to then the authorities had argued that there was no other explanation for the motion of sun and other celestial bodies other than that the earth sat in the center with the others revolving about us. When systematic creative thinkers found evidence for the alternate explanation, they were burned, as was Bruno, or arrested and forced to recant, as with Galileo. In other words, the received doctrine must be true because we cannot conceive of any alternative, and if anyone does conceive of another alternative they will be suppressed. Please note that the Suppressed

Evidence is separate fallacy from the ad Ignoratum. I just pointing out how effective these can be when used together.

Variations of ad Ignoratum include:

Incredulity: I cannot imagine not-P; therefore P is true.

Personal knowledge: I've never heard of P; therefore P is false.

Conspiracy: The lack of evidence for P demonstrates that it has been hidden from us.

Absence of Evidence: The lack of evidence for P demonstrates that P is false.

Here is an important distinction. The lack of evidence for an idea

does show one thing: that there is no logical support for believing that it is true. It is also that case that lack of evidence is not logical support that it is false. Lack of evidence only means that we do not know and that the alternatives remain open.

One notable exception: in US law there is a presumption of innocence. The burden of proof falls on the accuser (the State) and the defendant is not required to prove their innocence. However, we must be careful of the word meanings in this case. Legally innocent means that the person is found not guilty by reasonable doubt. Factually innocent means that they really did not do the crime. People who are not factually innocent can be found legally innocent because of the insufficiency of evidence which advances reasonable doubt. Presumption of innocence would be an *ad Ignoratum* only if it meant “Presumption of factual innocence.” It does not. The innocence involved is legal innocence.

1. *ad Verecundiam/ad Hominem*

Source A says that statement p is true.

Source A is a respectable person. Therefore, p is true. or

Source A says that statement p is true. Source A is a flawed person.

Therefore, statement p is false

The Latin phrases mean “to respect” and “to the person.” More fully “Appeal to respect” and “Appeal to the person.” I include these together because they are complementaries of one another. The first proceeds as if we should accept as true statements that are made by people whom we like or admire. The second proceeds as if we should reject as false statements that are made by people whom we dislike and despise.

The bottom line from a logical point of view is this: wonderful and

smart people can get it wrong; horrible and stupid people can get it right. There just is no logical relations between the character of an individual and the truth-value of the statements that they make. To judge otherwise is to presume grace or guilt by association.

The situation is far more complex than this, however, because matters of trust and expertise enter in. We certainly should consider such factors in our judgements. To do so, however, is to engage other forms of evidence and not just the character of the person who makes the statement. Let's consider some such cases where judgement about the individual may count as evidence for or against their statements.

Trust: We may well believe what a person says just because we trust them. This is not a fallacy. It is not a case of *ad Verecundiam*. Reasonable trust is based on what we know about someone including their track record of past statements. It is foolish to continue to trust someone who lies to us repeatedly. When someone shows themselves to be trustworthy, then we have reason to give privilege to their statements. Yet please note that we are not taking their statements as true simply because we feel trust. We are accumulating the evidence for trusting the person as evidence for the person's statements. Moreover, it would be odd to accept as true everything that the person said even if they are trustworthy. This is because some statements cannot depend for their truth on trustworthiness. If such a person made metaphysical, or religious, or predicative claims, trust would not be enough. Think of the person who you most admire and trust in the world. Now suppose that they told you what they thought the world would be like fifty years from now. Surely you would listen and consider what they said, but would it be reasonable to maintain that their thoughts must be true because you have so much trust in them? Relevance and scope matter a great deal.

Even trust based on your gut feel can be reasonable. Again, in such a case it is not the feeling of trust along, but also your confidence

in your intuition. That is something that you gain from experience. Intuitive trust, gut feel, involves a body of evidence beyond your feelings about the other person.

The situation with distrust is similar. Some people show themselves untrustworthy. It is foolishness to take their statements on trust. But why is that? Is it because you feel distrust for them? Or is it that you have reason to distrust them, such as their history of lying. Just as with trust, our reasons for distrust become part of the evidence for doubting a claim. Rejecting a statement based on reasonable distrust is not *ad Hominem*. Neither is it merely a rejection based on judgement of character.

Expertise: We do and should take experts at their word on matters relevant to their expertise. Still, someone does not become an expert merely because we admire them. They become experts by demonstrating their knowledge, keeping their expert opinion to their area of expertise, and by relying on evidence for their statements. When our physician tells that we need a kind of treatment it is reasonable to accept that (though the greater the consequences the better the case for seeking a second opinion). But it is not enough that we like and admire someone to make them our primary physician. The physician is an expert because they went to medical school, and have years of experience, and studied the literature on the condition, and interpreted the results of the right kinds of tests. Taken together this body of evidence gives confidence in the physicians judgement. Reliance on relevant expertise is not a case of *ad Verecundiam*.

What then is the issue with *ad Verecundiam* and *ad Hominem* arguments. It is when the sole or main evidence for a statement is based on a judgement of the person's character. Suppose that P is a factual statement.<sup>3</sup> Say for instance, "The economy is showing signs of improvement" or "Mobile phone safety has not been sufficiently tested." Would any of the following count as sufficient evidence for that statement?

He is a nice guy,...

She is beautiful,...

I like his poise,...

She is well-liked,...

He inspired confidence,...

She is so charismatic,...

His sense of humor really gets to me,...

She is an amazing singer,...

He is world famous,...

She is one of the worlds wealthiest people,...

A proud American,...

...therefore statement P is true

Would any of the following count as sufficient evidence against that statement?

What a jerk,...

Not attractive,...

Really weird,...

Nobody likes her,...

Boring!,...

He is a criminal,...

She belongs to the other political party,...

What a has been,...

Environmentalist whackjob,..

Conservative wingnut,...

Nazi,...

Socialist,...

...therefore statement P is false

Am I exaggerating here? Not at all. Talk radio, talk TV, blogs, political campaigns, as well as the full range of our social interactions reveal a vastly longer list of praise and condemnations that speak to the character of the person making the statement with no relevant evidence for or against the statement itself.

Please note that I am not saying that logical error of an ad Verecundiam is that it gives praise or that an ad Hominem is mean spirited. The logical error, the fallacy, is that the praise or condemnation are not relevant to the truth of the conclusion. It just does not follow that “The last ten years were the warmest on record” because the man who said so has nice teeth. It does not follow that the witness who turns states evidence and testifies against the crime boss is making false statement just because he himself is a convicted criminal. I am sure that you get this. But from all indications, people still give credence to or outright reject factual statements based on unrelated personal characteristics. The point is, step away from the situation mentally. Imagine the statement presented by someone else. Look for the reasons and evidence that belong to the statement.

Argument Clinic <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQFKtI6gn9Y>

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# 7. Informal Logic Bingo

## Informal Logic Bingo

Your Name:

Date:

L	O	G	I	C
Active Listening	Tu Quoque	Testing One's Own Claims	Ad Hominem	Argumentum ad Nauseum
Poisoning the Well	Equivocation	Ad Ignoratum	Relevant Question	Post Hoc Ergo Prompter Hoc
Reasoned Explanation	Strawman	Reasoned Argument	Infallibilism	Definition
"I am sick and tied of X"	Ad Populum	Onus Probandi	Argumentum ad Lapidem	Changing the Issue
Clarifying the Issue	Petio Principii	Counterfactual Conditional	Strawman	Principle of Charity

Instructions: Use the LOGIC bingo card when listening to communications between others people or you and others. These communications can be by any means – in person, video, internet forums, email, maybe Twitter, and others. If you do not encounter enough logically strong instances, then you can provide them in actual communication as your instances. Do not do the same with logically weak forms. If you are lacking in any of those, well just look harder! Fallacies are everywhere. You can rely on a memory of a

fallacy in personal experience in a pinch. Complete the LOGIC Bingo card by any five forms in a row: across, down or diagonal. Turn in your card for credit and with it provide a separate analysis of each of the forms that you identified, describing the instance and explaining how it is a genuine instance of that form.

### Logically Strong

Reasoned argument: at least one statement (premise) given in support of another related statement (conclusion).

Reasoned explanation: One or more statements (explanans) given as clarification of another related statement (explanandum).

Relevant question: An interrogative sentence that poses a line of inquiry into an issue. An effective relevant question can actually establish the issue of inquiry.

Relevant Definition: A clarification of what is meant by the use of a word or phrase.

Relevant Paraphrase: Restating a claim in different words for the sake of clarity.

Relevant example: A description of a situation that serves to clarify an issue, meaning, explanation

Clarifying the issue: Language used to seek agreement on what issue is under consideration in a particular communication. Note – lack of clarity about issues is one of the major causes of conflict.

Active listening: Listening to others in a way that actively seeks the genuine meaning of what they are saying.

Principle of Charity: Interpreting the arguments and positions of others in the logically strongest forms.

Testing one's own claims: Asking yourself what you accept as evidence for your thoughts and beliefs (i.e., claims). More important, asking yourself what you would accept as evidence against your thoughts and beliefs. Unwillingness to test one's own claims leads to a position of infallibilism.

### Logically Weak

Tu Quoque: Rejecting a claim or position by asserting or implying that the person or people that hold it are not consistent to it. This is the "You Too!" or "The other side is just as bad" fallacy.

Argumentum ad Hominem: Rejecting a claim or position based on the assertion of other claims that evaluate the person or people holding the claim, rather than weakness in the claim or position itself.

Poisoning the Well: Rejecting a claim or position based on asserted motives, interests, reputations, or discrediting facts about people holding the claim or position. It may be a type of Ad Hominem, but is so frequently used in political discourse that it merits its own status.

Argumentum ad Ignoratum: Accepting a claim or position based on the asserted (or perceived) lack of evidence against it. This is the "I can't think of any reason why not" or "I can't think of any other explanation" fallacy. Look carefully and you will find ad ignoratum implicit in many positions.

Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc: Event A occurred, then event B occurred, therefore, A caused B. The Latin means – This after that therefore this because of that.

Equivocation: Using different meanings of a word in an argument without recognizing the change in meanings.

Counterfactual Conditional: “If you don’t like X, then Y...”

Strawman: Interpreting the arguments and positions of others in their logically weakest forms.

Infallibilism: Unwillingness to test one’s own claims; a position that no possible evidence could count against your own thoughts and beliefs. Example: “There is no other explanation!” or “No reasonable person could disagree with me.”

Changing the issue: It may be more difficult to find a situation in which people in discussion stay on an issue at a sustained level. Do your best to identify a specific issue then watch as the debate flies all over.

“I am sick and tired of X” – OK, so does anything logically follow from that unfortunate condition? If not, what should we call this one; Argumentum ad Morbus (appeal to illness)?

Argumentum ad Populum: Accepting a claim or position based on popular support for it.

Onus probandi: Shifting the burden of proof.

Argumentum ad lapidem: Latin for – Appeal to the Stone. Rejecting a claim as absurd or ridiculous without demonstrating proof for its absurdity.

Petitio Principii: Asserting the conclusion of an argument as a premise in support of the conclusion. This is the actual fallacy of Begging the Question, a phrase that is commonly misused as meaning “raising the question.” Paraphrase is often used as a means to implement Petitio Principii.

Argumentum ad Nauseum: Asserting a claim repeatedly without providing additional support.

There is nothing illogical about repeating a claim

## 8. The Principal of Charity

[Field] If I had to settle for only one philosophical concept to be learned and practiced, it would be the

logical idea of “The Principle of Charity,” by which I mean;

“Interpreting the ideas and statements of others in their strongest form.”

Basically it comes down to how much credit you are willing to give to ideas and positions that

differ from your own. The ‘credit’ here has nothing to do with agreement or disagreement or

tolerance. It is about how you interpret thoughts. For anything that you make meaning of, you

are making an interpretation. There are two possible directions in interpreting:

1) You can interpret their ideas and positions as irrational, logically flawed, and lacking

evidence.

2) You can interpret their ideas and positions as rational, logically coherent, and based on

evidence.

Direction 2 is hard to do. Everyday life is full of contrasting and competing ideas. We live in a

world where emotion and volume are often substituted for reason. Interestingly, some people will

also loudly proclaim that they are the voice of reason and truth. There is a simple test for whether

someone is really as reasonable and factual as they claim to be: pay attention to how they

represent the views of their opponents. If they represent opposing positions as plausible, having

logical structure, and connecting to reality in important ways, then they are indeed preceding

rationally. They are employing the Principle of charity.

If they represent opposing positions as unintelligible, illogical, having no factual base or evidence

whatever, then you have a speaker who is promoting their own views by misrepresenting the ideas of others. I'll bet that you will also observe them attacking the intelligence and character of

people who hold opposing views (this later technique is called Ad Hominem).

Look, it is easy to defeat any statement, argument, or position. All

you need do is to interpret it in a weak and counter-factual form. Deliberately doing so is called in Logic “Strawman” because

you set up a false effigy of your opponent, which is easy to knock down. That may go over in

debates and quarrels, though one point remains clear: by defeating a Strawman you are guaranteed to have not refuted the other person’s actual position. Moreover, you have not clarified your own position in relation to the alternatives. When we select only the weakest versions of the positions opposing our own, we also lower our standards for our own thinking.

On the contrary, when we work to form strong interpretation of the thoughts of others, we raise

the standard of our own thinking thereby making our own positions stronger.

Here is a point that I want to be super clear about: The Principle of Charity is not the same as

“Relativism.” There are many types of Relativists and there are some who maintain that

‘everything that everyone believe is true (in some sense); no one is ever wrong or mistaken.’

That is not the position being promoted by The Principle of Charity.

Here is the difference:

Relativism involves conclusive evaluations. That an 'idea is true' and a 'position is correct' are both conclusive evaluations.

The Principle of Charity does not include conclusive evaluations. It is a matter of analysis. By

employing the Principle of charity I am working to represent all of the positions on an issue in

their strongest forms; their best light. I am looking for what is reasonable and plausible in a

position and idea. That is not the same as declaring it to be true, false, correct, or incorrect. On

the other hand, there are some plausible accounts of Relativism of different kinds and I cannot

rule them out (the sophisticated ones, anyway)!

What I personally think about differences in beliefs and points of view is this; The universe is

immensely complex, humans are incredibly complex. It would in fact be amazing to find a

position or belief held by anyone that is entirely devoid of truth. I do think that there are plenty of

false beliefs and incorrect positions. But I think they are not so because they are entirely and

wholly false or incorrect. There is always some truth (correspondence to reality) in any human

thought, statement, belief, position.

This is just me, but I have a hard time imagining what a 100% false thought would be like.

Falseness, Error, Deception, Untruth, etc. are all dependent in a way on truth. The logically

negative does not have a reality independent from the positive. So (if I am right) we can find

threads of truth in just about any idea or statement. That does not make their major meaning true,

it just makes them a mixture of truth and falsity.

If I am right about this, then political and sophistical efforts to make one's opponents out to be

100% wrong, false, evil, stupid, etc. are shown up to be unrealistic (uncharitable) versions of the

actual thoughts. Most of not only have beliefs and positions but perceive our own beliefs from

particular points of view. We seldom perceive the whole of our thought, but picture it selectively,

just as we do with the world around us.

This is one reason why it is so valuable to concentrate on the analysis of thoughts before we get

into the business of evaluating. After all, once we have evaluated a thought as false, we have

limited the analysis to only that which confirms our evaluation.

A Philosophical Skill:

Active listening – a communication technique which requires the listener to feed-back what they

understand the speaker to mean by restating key parts in their own words. Active listening has the

following stages:

1) Ask a question to get them started in tell you what they think (in this case on the issue).

2) Listen calmly and carefully, putting your inner critic to the side.

3) At a pause in their telling, tell them; “OK. Here is what I think you are saying, tell me if I have it right.”

4) Re-state their key ideas in paraphrase or different words but conveying the same

meaning.

5) If they respond that your feedback is not what they meant, then ask them to tell you

again and repeat steps 2, 3, & 4.

6) If they respond that your feedback is in fact what they meant, then ask them to go on.

Repeat the process until they agree that you have a fair and accurate account of their

thoughts.

Please note that successful Active Listening leads to understanding. It does not lead to agreement!

You can understand another person's thoughts without agreeing with them. This is an important

practical point because some common uses of the word "understanding" also imply some sort of

agreement or tolerance – as if to understand is to allow and accept or at least empathize with. In

logic and philosophy that is not the meaning of "understand."

Consider the following uses of "understand":

Do you understand the wave function of quantum physics?

I do not understand the Federal Tax Code which is why I consult an accountant.

Sometimes I do not understand why I feel the way that I do.

I do not understand what George Orwell meant when he wrote “Freedom is Slavery.”

After our conversation I have a better understanding of what your concept of God.

None of these, I think, imply empathy of agreement. What they do imply is that an understanding

of the sort indicated is likely to avoid conflicts that are based solely on misunderstanding. That

happens a lot.

Understanding is a function of analysis. Agreement is a function of evaluation. Put analysis

before evaluation. Doing this is what is meant by “The Principle of Charity” in philosophy.

Perhaps this point will be clearer if the claim is amended to state:  
Please note that successful

Active Listening leads to comprehension. To “comprehend” is to grasp the meaning of an idea

and to be able to explain that meaning through words and examples.

Try substituting comprehend for understand in the example sentences above (don't just think about or imagine doing this, actually do it as written or out loud). The way in which

these two words are synonymous is what I am pointing to as the objective of The Principle of

Charity.

This will come naturally to you as you practice active listening because that practice is all about

hearing and interpreting accurately. The accuracy is measured by whether or not the version that

you end up with is consistent with what the other person meant. If your version of what they

mean and their version of what they mean are in conflict, then you are not comprehending what

they mean. Active listening and The Principle of Charity can put our meanings in synch such that

disagreements that we have are about the actual ideas and not merely the symptom of

misunderstanding (mis-comprehension).

I think that I have already made one point clear, but I want to make sure to reinforce it. The Principle of Charity is not about being nice, or polite, or civil, or politically correct. It is about valuing truth over preference. Interpreting the claims and arguments of others in their strongest possible ways is driven by the effort to find the truth

in what they say. Even more powerful is the stance of taking your own thoughts and beliefs in their strongest possible interpretations. That can be a challenge because careful self-analysis of this sort can lead to you to find that some of what you take to be Truth is in fact partly true. That realization leads to self-revision.

Try using active listening every day while keeping the Principle of Charity in mind and I believe

that you will experience a transformation in some of your interpersonal communications.

# 9. The Dynamics of Discussion

[Field]The Craft of Inquiry

“All philosophy begins in wonder.”

--Aristotle.

## 1. QUESTIONS

Questions are a way of inviting communications from other people. We can seek to learn more about them, how they think, and why. We may also question a text, the world, and ourselves. Basically, any constructive question opens the way to a path of inquiry; thus a potential discussion. In this way we find questions to be an essential part of human creativity. Learning how to construct questions well is key to our intellectual development.

Try this Thought Experiment:

Imagine a world in which questions could not be asked. People could make all sort of claims, state their opinions, give descriptions, arguments, explanations, and expressions of all sorts. The only verbal form lacking was the form of a question.

What would that world be like? How would the communications

between people change? Would any other limitations come along with the absence of questioning? How would people go about finding out things they did not know? Would science be possible? Philosophy? Would purposeful change be possible?

Note that I follow the proposed thought experiment with a series of questions. That is just one of the functions of a thought experiment, to provide a context in which certain questions may be raised and discussed. Without the possibility of asking questions, the method of the thought experiment would be useless. I suspect we would lose a great deal of other intellectual abilities we take for granted as well. Constructive questions create openings and it is by exploring those openings that much of our intellect and knowledge develops.

## CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS

Here, already, I have pointed to a distinction. I specified that constructive questions have a key intellectual value. This implies a distinction from non-constructive questions. It is a main objective of *The Craft of Inquiry* is to make that distinction clear and provide you with some of the tools for using it. Let us lay this distinction out plainly.

CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS are questions that open fresh aspects of an issue. They create a basis for sustained and constructive discussion.

NON-CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS are designed to block inquiry and sustained discussion. They close (not resolve) an issue to further consideration by presenting a conceptual obstacle.

Any form of question can be constructive or non-constructive. What we need are criteria for judging the constructiveness of a question. Three such criteria are proposed in this text: *The Craft of Inquiry*.

Next, let's consider some of the forms of questions we may encounter and raise in philosophic discussion.

## 2. QUESTION CONSTRUCTIONS

First let's consider some of the forms of questions we may ask (since our world is not limited in the way that the above thought experiment pictures.) We consider here five question forms that are important to philosophic inquiry:

Informative Questions

Interpretative Questions

Evaluative Questions

Speculative Questions

Combative Questions

Each of these five forms are considered in detail in the following pages. It is important to recognize and understand these different forms. In my experience as a college professor, students seldom ask certain questions that may help them better understand a reading or problem. Most all students will ask questions like;

“When is this assignment due?”

“Where can I get another syllabus?”

“How am I doing in this course?”

But the same students seldom ask questions like;

“What is the difference between reason and experience?”

“What does Plato mean by idea?”

“Is the concept of freewill consistent with the laws of physics”?

#### FORM & CONTENT

I claim there are crucial differences between these last three questions. They are different in form, not just in content. I'll try to explain this difference.

Consider the first set of questions from above:

“When is this assignment due?”

“Where can I get another syllabus?”

“How am I doing in this course?”

These are certainly different from one another. You could have the answer to one of them while not having the answers to the other two. Yet there is a parallel direction for all three of these. All three seek to gain some information about the course. They will be

satisfied (answered) when the relevant information is gained. I want to say that these three questions all have the same form: they are informative questions. What differs about them is the content which is determined by the specific information they are designed to get. Each of these questions will be relevantly answered when some item of information is provided. To wit:

“On next Wednesday.”

“From the Department office.”

“So far you have a passing grade.”

Each answer provides a specific item of information (a time, a place, a status) in response to the question. And the receipt of that information (in these cases at least) satisfies the question.

While these three questions have different content (i.e. the information they are seeking) they have the same form (i.e. they all seek information.) Consider now the second set of questions from above:

“What is the difference between reason and experience?”

“What does Plato mean by idea?”

“Is the concept of freewill consistent with the laws of physics?”

I claim that these three questions differ not only in content but also in form. They are designed for different purposes and open different kinds of inquiry. In the following pages, I examine these question forms and the criteria we may employ in judging their constructiveness.

We will study each of the five question forms in turn. First, let's consider a subject matter about which these questions may be raised: the philosophical issue of Free-Will

### 3. INFORMATIVE QUESTIONS

Informative questions seek information about something. As answers we may accept facts, details, and descriptions. Asking someone what they believe is asking for a sort of information. Asking for their reasons is another. Here are some generic instances of questions of the informative form that one might ask of another person's beliefs.

What is the difference between x and y?

What do you believe about this issue?

Do you agree with this claim?

What do you think this claim implies?

What evidence do you think there is for this claim?

Here are some informative questions that might be asked of the author of Free-Will is an Illusion.”

In denying that we have any free-will, do you mean that no-one has the ability to decide whether or not to go to class in the morning?

Supposing that we are mechanisms, do you think there is something about being a mechanism that precludes having any free- will?

Do you agree with the French Philosopher Baron d'Holbach's statement; "Man's life is like a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant."

What implications do you think your view has for issues of individual responsibility for our actions?

What do you suppose accounts for the feeling and conviction most of us have that we are able to choose?

In all these examples, the kind of answers sought will provide additional information about the details and content of the person's belief. The answers may not explain what is meant or give reasons why. But we should be careful to recognize what sort of question is being asked and just what we can reasonably expect as an answer. A lot of confusion is created in the world simply by people not making the effort to find out what another person actually believes. Informative questions provide that opportunity. Once such information is received, we can dig deeper via interpretative questions, evaluative questions, and speculative questions.

A Key Point of This Page:

Informative questions seek information about something. As answers we may accept facts, details, and descriptions.

#### 4. INTERPRETATIVE QUESTIONS

Interpretative questions seek clarity about the content of someone's belief. When you ask an interpretive question, you are asking for an explanation. Of course, it is possible (and common) to try to

overload someone with demands for explanation as a way of attacking their view. To be constructive, interpretative questions must focus on significant aspects of a claim. They must be genuine efforts to find greater clarity. Attacking someone's view by a never ending chain of explanatory demands is a move towards confusion, not clarity. Here are some generic instances of interpretative questions:

What do you mean by this word?

Are you using this word the same way as it is used in the following example....”

Does this word and this other word mean the same thing in your statement?

Is the following example consistent with your claims....?

Is the following analysis of your argument a fair interpretation of what you mean?

Could I paraphrase your central claim as the following....?

Here are some interpretative questions that may be asked of the author of passage Free-Will is an Illusion.

You say; “The world is a mechanism set motion by random forces.” I’m not clear what you mean by “random forces.” Do you mean natural laws such as gravity?

Do you mean the same thing by “free-will” and “ultimate control”?

In what ways would a being with free-will be different from a mechanism?

Is it a fair interpretation of your view to say that “the future is fixed and pre-determined”?

The above examples are based in the claims given and seek further clarity of those claims. They set out to provide opportunities for others to explain their meaning in more depth. There is no guarantee that they will be able to do so. But a well constructed and honestly intended interpretative question leads to new levels of philosophic inquiry. With sufficient information and clarity we may further pursue the inquiry through evaluative questions, informative questions, and speculative questions.

A key point of this page:

Interpretative questions seek clarity about the content of someone’s belief. When you ask an interpretive question, you are asking for an explanation.

## 5. EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS

Evaluative questions ask for a value judgement about a claim or position. The value involved may a matter of truth, consistency, morality, aesthetics, reasoning, among others. Here are some generic instances of evaluative questions.

Is this claim true (false)?

This claim consistent with this other claim?

Is this action right (good)?

Is this a strong argument?

Is this a meaningful claim?

Note that in all these cases the answer will involve an value judgement about the related issue. It supprises some people to note that true/false, sound/unsound, meaningful/meaningless, consistent/inconsistence, clear/unclear, and so on are included as values. When people think of value judgements they often think exclusively of those involving moral values (e.g. good/bad.) Perhaps this is the reason that people often overlook the fact that the words “right” and “wrong” have a variety of uses and meanings. This fact will be further noted in *The Power of Analysis*. Also note that the above questions may ask for more than a simple affirmation of one’s judgement. Philosophically such questions are asked with an expectation that some reasoning will accompany the answer. This leads us to consider what ways we might show that our claim is true, consistent, meaningful, and so on.... It is possible to hold that we can never give any valuable evidence for any claim whatsoever (some people seem to claim just that.) But even that claim needs some reasoned support:

Just saying so doesn’t make it so

Here are some evaluative questions that may be asked of the author of *Free-Will is an Illusion*

Do you think that your view of non-freedom is consistent with individual moral responsibility?

Do you think the following claim is true; “Learning increases our ability to avoid past mistakes”?

Do you think the comparison between pebbles in a stream and humans in time and space is strong given the difference in complexity between them?

Do you think that any one action may be judged as better than any other?

All these examples ask for value judgements about some specific idea. Having the answers will give us more material to work with in the effort of inquiry into the issue. Notice that these are not meek or restrained questions. They seek to get at what the questioner regards as important and interesting in the other person’s view. but they are also honest attempts to do so. They are not asked simply as a tactical way to undermine the view of the other. That is what Combative questions do. We will consider that form shortly.

Key point of this page:

Evaluative questions ask for a value judgement about a claim or position. True/false, strong/weak, beautiful/ugly, good/bad, consistent/contradictory, sound/unsound, meaningful/meaningless, clear/unclear, are among the possible values one may ask to be judged.

## 6. SPECULATIVE QUESTIONS

Speculative questions seek to draw relationships between ideas or

situations. The general model of speculative questions is the “What if....?” type of question.

What if humans were incapable of asking questions?

Such a question opens the way to speculation about the possibilities. Such speculation (and the reasoning behind it) are part and parcel with philosophical activity. Please note that the “What if....?” model is only a conceptual model. Speculative questions need not be phrased that way at all. Here are some generic instances of speculative questions:

Suppose that the circumstances were like this, how would that affect your view?

Does your claim imply that....?

How does your claim work given the following example....?

Given that you (your claims) are right, does this other claim also follow?

Here is a speculative question that may be asked of the author of Free-Will is an Illusion.

Your view against Free-Will seems to depend on a certain notion of science: that everything that happens, happens in accordance with strict natural laws. But science changes. Suppose science discovers that not everything in nature is fixed and determined by a causal chain. How would your view of Free-Will (or the lack of it) accommodate that?”

If people do not have Free-Will to choose their actions, is it possible to hold anyone morally responsible for what they do?

It seems that your view renders all effort worthless. Is that so?

Speculative questions are usually detailed and directed toward a specific aspect of the issue. How they are answered can tell us much about how a person's beliefs are related to other beliefs and situations.

A Key Point of This Page:

Speculative questions seek to draw relationships between ideas or situations. Asking someone to respond to hypothetical cases or draw consequences from their claims are ways of invoking Speculative questions

## 7. CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONING

So far, we have considered instances of:

Informative Questions

Interpretative Questions

Evaluative Questions

Speculative Questions

Each of these is different in form and purpose. Each allows the

possibility of a genuine and satisfactory answer. Note here the key role of “possibility”. In distinguishing these question forms we are not saying that answers to such philosophical questions are available or even attainable. It is possible that some questions are forever beyond the human ability to answer. However, just saying that a question cannot be answered is not sufficient to show that. We need some explanation as to why a question is unanswerable, if we are to reasonably accept that claim.

The forms of the questions themselves point to the sort of inquiry that is being invoked. Even if we cannot give the answer, and even if the answer can never be found, we still have a notion of what form of answer would suffice.

To put it clear as I can:

When we recognize the form of question we are asking, we can specify the form of the answer we are looking for.

And that means....

We can more clearly understand what our philosophical activity is and how it relates to our lives.

I am suggesting here something that may seem pretty radical. The philosophy may well have less to do with the finding of answers, than with the forming of questions. And most important: with the recognition of the nature of our asking.

The reason I think this may be considered a radical suggestion,

is that philosophy is often measured by people in the way they measure the worth of a scientific or factual investigation. One surveys the history of philosophy (or the diversity of philosophies in any historical period) and it may appear we are dealing with an entirely non-constructive topic area. For thousands of years, people have been asking the same and similar questions. To date, few if any answers have been established. What, then, is the point?

My answer (to that preceding informative question) is; the point is in part to extend our questioning capacity and continually open new paths for constructive discussion. If constructive discussion came to an end, the state of human beings would be entirely different. In what ways I cannot be sure, but I am sure the difference would be profound. Just as much as if the thought experiment where the human capacity to ask questions disappeared became reality. We need constructive discussion and in order to sustain it we must be able to formulate and ponder constructive questions. You can probably tell that I do not consider this a trivial matter. Nor do I expect to settle it here or to merely convince you by saying so.

Consider then, a very different form of question: the Combative Question. In thinking about this form of question the values and meanings I have been ruminating about may deepen for you (maybe not.)

First, however, let's think about how we might distinguish constructive from non-constructive questions. I present next three constructive criteria for that purpose.

## 8. CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTION CRITERIA

Criteria are means by which we judge the value or status of something. In this case we want to be able to judge the constructiveness and non-constructiveness of questions. Recall what is meant here by these concepts:

Constructive questions are questions that open fresh aspects of an issue. They create a basis for sustained and constructive discussion.

Non-constructive questions block inquiry and sustained discussion. They close (not resolve) an issue to further consideration by presenting a conceptual obstacle.

Even given these definitions we need some method to tell when a question is constructive or not. We could simply wait and see how the question affects the discussion. But that method has two flaws. First, there are so many additional factors in the success of a discussion that we could never be sure whether it were the question creating the effect. Second, to promote successful discussion we want to be able to spot non-constructive questions before they enter the discourse. This requires a method of pre-judgement and sorting.

### THE CRITERIA

There is another way. We can derive our criteria from the purpose of questions and the nature of constructiveness. If the difference

between constructive and non-constructive questions is the furthering and blocking of discussion, then the constructive question must have three features:

### 1) Constructive Question must be Answerable

In constructing a productive question we ought to be able to say in advance what sort of answer will satisfy the question. Of course, we will not be able to say what the answer is, just what sort of answer we are seeking. If you raise a question and cannot tell yourself what sort of answer will do (what an answer here would be like), then you should be suspect of the quality of the question.

### 2) Constructive Question must be Open

The productive question allows for a variety of possible answers. Questions may be formulated so as to narrow the range of possible answers. They may even presume the answer in advance. Such an extreme case commits the fallacy of Complex Question, in which the answer is presumed in asking the question.

### 3) Constructive Question must be Relevant

Your questions should derive from the issue and material at hand. Sometimes we are tempted to import questions from assumptions we make about others and issues that seems related to us. A clear, respectful line of inquiry takes stock of what the other person says and directs questions to that. There is nothing wrong with changing the topic at times, but to do so abruptly and without acknowledgement can create great confusion.

So there they are. Dorbolo's three criteria for constructive questions. They are open to debate and certainly need to be refined. But I do believe they are both sensible and serviceable guides in practicing the Craft of Inquiry.

#### SOME EXAMPLES

Let's consider further by sampling how these criteria for constructive questions may be applied to some specific cases (which I have taken from other parts of this text.)

First let's evaluate some non-constructive questions by these criteria. Since the constructiveness of questions relies on the satisfaction of all three criteria, it only takes a failure in applying one of them to show a question to be weak. Consider the following three questions addressed to the position expressed in *Free-Will Is An Illusion*.

Who's to say whether humans have free-will or not?

The "Who's to say" question is one of the most popular retorts to philosophical ideas. Yet it is an odd question primarily because there really seems to be no answer whatever. What would count as an appropriate answer here? "I am.?" "You are.?" "Socrates is.?" This really seems a primary case of a question that is asked primarily because it has no adequate answer. The implication of someone who asks this question (and it is usually presented as a challenge) is that "No-one is to say" and that there is no point in pursuing a line of inquiry in which no-one has any say. Consequently such a question can only be used to block discussion. this question fails the test of Answerability.

If we do not make our own choices, then who does?

This question seems to pose a challenge, but it really only makes a presumption. The question is formulated in such a way that only one type of response is possible. However answered, it will be implicitly granted that we do have “choices.” The issue is shifted from the matter of whether we have choice at all, to the matter of where that choice comes from. The difference is subtle but significant. This question fails the test of Openess.

Where is it written that the “universe is run by random forces”?

Another favorite in the combative questioner’s repertoire (have you ever heard this one?) Maybe that claim is written somewhere, maybe not (actually it is written in the passage under consideration.) Either way, it simply isn’t relevant. That someone did or did not write; “universe is run by random forces” gives it no more truth value than if it has or has been previously said or thought. Of course, this question is not really asking for a bibliographical citation, it is asking for a justification of the claim. But if that is what is wanted, then it is clearer to ask; “What reasons do you have for thinking that ‘universe is run by random forces?’” The where is it written... question makes a kind of appeal to authority as if we had in the end to take some expert’s word on the matter. The author of the passage is presenting a position. The claim; “The universe is run by random forces” is part of that position. We do not need to look for additional authorities here, but rather should seek out the author’s meaning and reasoning for this claim. This question fails the test of Relevance.

## EVALUATING CONSTRUCTIVENESS

Now let's consider how to evaluate some questions that have a fair degree of constructiveness to them (at least in the present context.)

Supposing that we are mechanisms, as you say, do you think there is something about being a mechanism that precludes it from having Free- Will?

InformativeSpeculative

EvaluativeCombative

InterpretativeConstructive

This is an Informative Question because it is asking for more information about the position. Specifically, whether there is something about “mechanisms” that make them inherently unfree. The expected answer here will provide some information about the author's idea of a “mechanism”, so it is Answerable. There are many possible answers and none are presumed in the question, so the question is Open. The passage directly speaks of “mechanisms” and implies that they are not free, so the question is Relevant. This is a constructive informative question.

Do you mean the same thing by “free-will” and “ultimate control”?

This is an Interpretative Question that seeks to explore the relation of meanings of two parts of the passage. The possibility of answering here is clear, these mean the same or they don't. So the

question is Answerable. While “yes” and “no” are but two answers, the “no” answer is open to an additional variety of explanations saying how the two differ. The question is Open. Both notions “free-will” and “ultimate” control occur in key claims of the text, so the question is Relevant.

This is a constructive interpretative question.

Do you think that your view of non-freedom is consistent with individual moral responsibility?

This is a Evaluative Question asking the author to judge the consistency of the position with another idea. We can see from the question what sort of answer will be appropriate, so the question is Answerable. The answerer has at least two options for answers and perhaps more, so the question is Open. The relevance of this question must be judged by how connected the notions of “freedom” and “individual moral responsibility” are. Supposing there is a strong connection (and I think there is), this question will be judged Relevant. This is a constructive evaluative question.

Suppose science discovers that not everything in nature is fixed and determined by a causal chain. How would your view of Free-Will (or the lack of it) accommodate that?”

This is a Speculative Question. Potential answers to it have a wide range. It is Answerable. By the same token the range of possible answers shows that it is Open. And since the passage bases a lot on the idea that the universe is a mechanism with fixed laws, asking what would happen if that condition changed is Relevant. This is a constructive speculative question.

How the criteria for constructive questions are used in particular cases has a lot to do with the context of the position, question, and discussion. What is important to note here is that there is the distinct possibility of applying evaluative criteria for judging the constructiveness of a question. This possibility is key to the purposeful promotion of successful discussion. Now let's consider some common techniques for producing non-constructive questions in the form of Combative Questions.

## 9. COMBATIVE QUESTIONS

Combative questions are tactical uses of questioning to undermine another person's view. They are often deceptive in that they appear to be genuine requests, when in fact they are really intentional attacks on the view. Consider the three criteria for constructive questions.

Constructive Questions are:

- 1) Answerable
- 2) Open
- 3) Relevant

Combative questions can be evaluated by their failure to satisfy one or more of the three criteria for constructive questions (i.e. they are always un-constructive). Combative questions are typically questions for which no possible answer will be accepted; questions that already have the answer built into the asking; or questions that

are not relevantly connected to the issue and material at hand. All of the following are combative questions. Do you recognize the form from these generic instances?

\*Who asked you?

\*Who's to say that....?

\*How can you say that....?

\*Where is it written that....?

\*Where did you get such a crazy idea....?

The list can go on a long ways. Note that some of these instances may not be non-constructive combative questions under certain conditions. Sometimes it is entirely appropriate to challenge a person's right or authority to make certain claims. But in philosophic inquiry we are much more concerned with the claims themselves. To switch the subject to the individual's personality is usually to introduce an irrelevant issue. Consider how these may play out in relation to the Free-Will is an Illusion passage.

\*Who's to say what the universe is like?

\*How can you say that we have no free-will?

\*How can you prove that the world is controlled by "random forces"? Where did you ever get the idea that humans lack free-will?

\* By what right do you seek to rob people of their precious freedom?

\* Has it ever occurred to you that maybe you lack free-will but other people have it? \*How did you become such an expert on this topic?

\*If no one can choose one way or the other, why then are you bothering to write this at all?

\*If we do not make our own choices, then who does?

Get the picture? Each of the above examples departs in some degree from the criteria for constructive questions. The last one presumes that “someone” makes the choice and demands to know who that someone is. That is already positing an answer in advance of asking the question. Such a question is suspect and really doesn’t deserve a serious response.

The best defense against combative questions is to consciously practice *The Craft of Inquiry*. Pay attention to the questions you ask. Check in advance to see if you are clear in yourself on what sort of answer will satisfy your asking. Make sure the questions are open to a variety of possible responses. Focus on the issue and material at hand to judge the relevance of your line of questioning. The more able you are to ask productive questions of others, the more able you will be at detecting the flaws in combative questions that target you. In a contentious world such as ours, this is surely a valuable practical skill to acquire.

A key point of this page:

Combative questions are tactical uses of questioning to undermine another person’s view. You may determine whether a question is combative or not by checking whether it passes the tests of the three criteria for constructive questions. Combative questions are non-constructive. They purposely block discussion



# 10. Does Skepticism Make Sense?

My objective is to address the conceptions that most of you have about the philosophical problems that involve skepticism. It is not my goal to convince you that skeptics are right or to increase your own skepticism. I do want to convince you that philosophical skeptics are not fools or mere extremists, and that the issues posed by skepticism are important – not just to philosophers, but to anyone who thinks beyond convention. So, I am taking a position here, mostly for the purpose of demonstrating what is worth understanding about skepticism. Of course, I do not expect you to agree with me. You can refute the skeptics all you like. Let's just do so with a clearer understanding of the position. I am not intending to be harsh on anyone here. I am taking up a defense of the significance of skepticism to make a point

For the most part, the consensus among you is that skepticism does not make sense and is too extreme. I have addressed before the question as to whether being “extreme” makes a theory false. I see that many of you continue to use that principle – i.e. extreme claims cannot be true. I'd sure like to have that explained to me. Especially since some of the folks who regard skepticism as extreme, go on to assert some remarkably absolute (extreme?) positions. Again, I am not attacking your views or statements – but if we don't get clear on this point about skepticism, then not much of the rest of the term will make sense.

## What Is Knowledge?

The most important issue that skepticism brings to philosophy is the problem of clearly understanding what ‘knowledge’ is. This problem affects science, politics, ethics, and any area of life in which

certainty matters. There are differences between knowing and guessing. There are differences between knowing and believing. These differences can be critical. For example, the US is still fighting a war in which our leaders claimed to know with certainty that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. They said that the matter was certain beyond doubt. They turned out to be 100% incorrect. Please understand, I am not making a political point here. I am not discussing whether the war was right or wrong. I am saying that the war on Iraq has had significant consequences. And that the justification for starting the war was on the basis of certain knowledge claims; claims that turned out to be false. Therefore, the question as to what counts as knowledge – how and when we can rightly claim to have knowledge – has real-world consequences. It is not a purposeless and trivial concern of academics with too much time on their hands.

I hope that we can agree with this much philosophically – when a claim that someone makes turns out to be false (inaccurate, factually incorrect, mistaken, erroneous), then we can no longer say that the person had certain knowledge. We can only have knowledge of that which is true.

Example – during the invasion of Iraq an interviewer asked Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld why the military had not yet found WMDs (nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons) in Iraq. Rumsfeld answered that he not only knew that Iraq had these weapons, but he knew exactly where they were.

Since the weapons were not where he said they were, and in fact were never there at all, we can only say that Rumsfeld did not have the knowledge that he claimed. Perhaps he thought that he knew, but thinking that you know (i.e. believing) is not the same as knowing, especially when you turn out to be mistaken.

Here is what I think the example of the war on Iraq shows us. When we are certain that we know something, we stop looking

for evidence and verification. Shortly after 9-11-2001, US leaders expressed total certainty that they knew that Iraq had WMDs.[2] Consequently, they had no interest in further investigation and evidence. When contrary evidence was raised, they dismissed it immediately. When you are absolutely certain that you know something, you do not feel any need more evidence or even discussion; the case is closed. History is full of instances of people whose certainty turns out to be mistaken. In many of these cases, if they had held open some possibility of doubt, for instances by applying stronger standards of evidence, the situations may have turned out quite differently.

My main point: it is possible for a person to think that they know something when they actually do not. Knowledge is not purely subjective.

#### Perception Is Knowledge/reality

Some folks reject skepticism because they favor an epistemological theory about the relations of knowledge to the senses. This theory is summarized as; “Knowledge is perception.” This theory has a long history, starting with Protagoras (ca. 490– 420 BC) and in continual use up to the present. There are different versions of this theory, some more sophisticated than others (you can find a brief account of Protagoras’ theory in the Portraits section of the course site).

I suspect that what many people mean by “knowledge is perception” is that each of us has experiences and of those experiences, we are the best judge. So when I have an experience, I have direct access to (knowledge of) that phenomena. For example, I know when I have a headache because I am the one having it; I know what I believe, because it is my belief. Even if I am having a dream or hallucination, the experiences are still real ones, and so I know what I am experiencing (because the experiences are mine). I’ll call this the theory of subjective reality.

Another version of this view is presented by the claim “perception

is reality.” Again, this claim can be interpreted in several ways, with historical examples for the different interpretations. George Berkeley (1685-1753) provided the strongest interpretation and defense of this idea (you can find a brief account of Berkeley’s theory in the Portraits section of the course site). His theory of Idealism is a careful analysis and systematic argument. His famous aphorism summarizing Idealism is: *Esse est percipi*; Latin for “To be is to be perceived.” It is interesting to note how some contemporary theories in physics continue to intersect with Idealism (i.e. with respect to the role of observation).

I think that for many people, the claim “perception is reality” is another way of expressing the theory of subjective reality (explained above). It is a way of affirming that ‘my perceptions are real.’ Indeed they are. A perception is just as real and factual as anything else in existence, even if it only lasts a short time. It would be infuriating for someone to tell you that your perceptions and feelings are not genuine. Since you are the one having those experiences, you are the one to judge what they are and that they are. In this sense, saying that your perceptions are real is equivalent to saying that you are the one who knows what and that they are. The reality perception and knowledge of that reality are the same idea.

### Is Perception All That There Is?

A difficulty arises when some people use the theory of subjective reality as a general theory of all knowledge and all reality. It seems to me that when some people say “knowledge is perception” or “perception is reality” they are implying that the ONLY reality/knowledge is perception. If that is what someone is saying, then we need a very careful account of that theory.

I am not ruling it out, mind you. Protagoras and Berkeley are 2000 years apart and both seriously supported related theories. Solipsism is another related theory of importance.

What strikes me is how often the generalized version of the theory

of subjective reality is conjoined with a complaint that skepticism is “too extreme.” It seems to me that the assertions “my perceptions are the only reality” or “all knowledge is perceived by me” are more extreme than any skeptical theories that I know of (given that ‘extreme’ means something like ‘total’ or ‘absolute’; and recall that I don’t see any prima facie reason why ‘extreme’ theories are less likely true than ‘moderate’ alternatives).

The issue comes down to this: does there exist anything which is not perceived by you?

If you answer; “No. The only things that exist and all knowledge of them are in my perception (or consciousness).” That is not an impossible view to hold (e.g. Solipsism or Subjectivism), though it will take some pretty careful analysis and reasoning to maintain it effectively.

If you answer; “Yes. My perceptions are real, but they are not the only things that are real. Other people’s perceptions are real, even though I don’t perceive them, and there are things in the universe that I don’t have any clue about. Just because I don’t perceive something does not mean that it does not exist.” If this is closer to your view, then you have some in common with the metaphysical view called ‘Realism’ or ‘Objectivism’ (look them up).

Now, some folks argue that none of this makes any difference, which is why “reality is perception” is a completely adequate answer to the problems of epistemology. You may recognize this position when people say something like; “What difference does it make whether this is a dream or not. I perceive it and it is real to me. That’s all that matters. Perception is reality.” There are many variations. The common factor in this line of thought seems to be that if it makes no difference to me (because I perceive it to be so) then there is no relevant difference in reality. Thus the philosophers who have based arguments on such differences can be dismissed as irrelevant.

I have been arguing all along that these theories are different and

that there are significantly distinct practical implications that follow from them. Let's take a fairly simple case and see if we can find any differences among the conditions of perception.

Case 1: While in bed and asleep you dream that you won the lottery; a big one. It is a very vivid dream and very enjoyable.

Case 2: While at work and wide awake you check the lottery numbers and find out that you won the big prize. Happy day.

Question: What is the difference (if any) between these two cases?

Based on what some folks have argued with respect to perception and reality, I'd expect them to say that there are no important differences. In both cases you perceived that you won the lottery. Perception is reality, so both cases are equally real.

I suspect at this point that most people will say; "No, I'm not claiming that there are not differences between dreams and awake perceptions. After all, dreams take place entirely in your mind. Waking perceptions - at least true ones - take place both in the mind and in the world outside of the mind. I'm just saying that what takes place in the mind is real in its own right, not that all of reality takes place in my mind."

At this point, if you continue to maintain that "reality is perception" meaning that the only reality is what takes place in your mind, then I'll not try at all to refute you. You have a very interesting theory with important historical precedents. I'm interested now to know what your reasoning is and to learn more about these ideas. I urge you to not concern yourself with people who dismiss your view as 'extreme.' It is interesting to note that this view is very much connected to the theories of some skeptics who doubt the existence of an external world at all.

On the other hand, if your view includes the possibility of objects existing outside of your mind and even separate from your

perception, then you are closer to a realist or objectivist view. After all, it is possible that a person could win the lottery even though they never perceived that they did so; such as if they forgot that they had bought a ticket and never checked. Winning a lottery for real involves facts that happen in the world outside of the mind: what philosophers call ‘the external world.’

My main points: The claims “Perception is reality” and “knowledge is perception” are not as simple as they may seem. A bit of analysis shows that most people do not accept the implications of these claims taken as general theories. Most people intuitively accept the idea of an external world that exists independently of our minds and perceptions.

### Knowledge of the External World

If you accept the possibility of a world that exists independent of your mind and perceptions, then the question must arise: what is the relation between the internal world (mind dependent) and the external world (mind independent)? There are many ways in which the question about this relation leads to philosophical problems.

The problem appearance and reality: We might suppose that the relation between the internal and external world is direct and simple. That is, we perceive the objects in the external world exactly as they are. Information comes from objects into our senses which is processed into perception. So, the objects of the external world are exactly as they seem. But even though we commonly behave as though the external world fits our perceptions, we all know that appearances can be different from reality. Sometimes things appear to be very close when they are far away. The way things look or taste can change over time. There are many ways in which the way things appear can vary depending on the conditions. So, is it the objects that are changing with our perceptions following with accuracy or is it merely our perceptions that change? I think that people normally understand that our perceptions are not

strictly passive. That perception is variable in ways that the objects of perception need not be. If that is so, then appearance (perception) and reality (external world) are not perfectly matched. Indeed, they may be quite far apart. It is possible that our perceptions have more to do with the conditions of the human mind than with the properties of external objects.

The problem of error: If we never made any mistakes or misjudged the facts, then skepticism would have a hard time getting started. In the perfect world, our perception of reality and the objects of reality would be perfectly matched. Plainly this is not the case. Misperception, misjudgment, misinterpretation, and error of all sorts are basic to the human condition. This could not be so if our perceptions accurately matched the external world. This is the starting point for the most fundamental philosophical skepticism. If a significant portion of our perceptions (and conceptions) are not accurate matches to the external world, then the possibility of human knowledge is largely in doubt. Moreover, if we have no reliable way to tell which beliefs and perceptions are accurate, then knowledge is very much in doubt.

The problem of perspectives: I am not the only perceiver in existence (or else a radical Solipsism is correct). If there are other minds with their own perceptions, then everyone should perceive everything in agreement – supposing, that is, that our perception perfectly matches the external world. Well, one thing for sure is that few people see things all alike. Our perceptions of the world – of the very same objects – can vary radically from one another. How is this possible?

Two possible explanations are:

1. There are as many external worlds as there are perceivers. Each of them accurately perceives their own world that is independent of their mind. Each external world is different from the others to some extent.

1. Perception is variable according to individual conditions. A color blind person perceives the world differently than a full-color perceiving person. But that is because the information from the objects in the world is processed differently by the two people. The difference is in them, not in the world that they both apprehend. So then, which perspective is the correct one? Well, no perspective is because the external world is that which exists independent of particular perspectives. Yet, human beings necessarily perceive the world from a perspective. Therefore, our perception of the world must be qualitatively different from the external world. How then, can we ever know what the external world is like independent of any perspective?

There are many roads over many centuries to the skeptic's conclusions. I hope that my brief excursion has shown you ways in which the skeptic's reasoning is not ridiculous or irrelevant as some of you may have thought. In part, the philosophical skeptics' issue comes down to this: can we say what the external world is like based on our internal experiences?

Here are two possible answers:

I see things exactly as they are. What exists for me is just how it is. I am never mistaken in this. Everything I think and perceive is that which I know with certainty. My perception is knowledge of reality, and that is all there is.

None of us see things exactly as they are. Each person has their own perspective, just as a single person's perspectives may change; none of these perspectives are accurately matched to the objects on the world. Everything that I think and perceive is subject to error. In some cases we can detect the error, in others not. My perception gives rise to beliefs, which may or may not accord with the truth. We can match some of our beliefs with reality to a high degree of probability, but never with 100% certainty.

One of these derives from the theory of subjective reality. The other is an expression of a type of philosophical skepticism. Perhaps neither suits your own thinking. What reasons can you give for rejecting or modifying either of them?

#### References

[1]. Secretary Rumsfeld Remarks on ABC “This Week with George Stephanopoulos.” March 30, 2003. <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2185>

[2]. The Center for Public Integrity documents over 900 public statements from the Bush Administration about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and links with al Qaeda. Those statements have all been shown to be false. Center for Public Integrity. 2008. The War Card.

<http://projects.publicintegrity.org/WarCard/>

## II. Some Forms of Skepticism

In this essay my effort is to clarify some of the main forms of skepticism and consider their implications.

**Phyrronian:** This ancient form of skepticism takes some pretty radical forms in denying our certainty of opinions formed from either the senses or from reason – or from both together. This is a type of skepticism that many people reject as “extreme” or “inconsequential.” Perhaps it is extreme, but even so it is difficult to explain the contradictions raised by Phyrronian skeptics. In effect some people seem to be saying; “I don’t have reasons to show why the skeptics are wrong, but their view seems extreme to me, and I prefer moderate views, so I’ll reject it.” To this the Phyrronian skeptic will answer; “Quite so. Selecting opinions based on feelings or preferences or guesses is all we can really do. Let’s just not call this ‘Knowledge.’ It is not.”

Look, though, to what Sextus Empiricus does with skepticism. He finds in it a way to calm the troubled mind, which he says is always created by dogmatism (holding firm to opinions that are not really knowledge.” In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus provides many techniques which can be used to defuse the strength of our judgements. By adopting a skeptical attitude towards matters of our own judgement we can relieve the tensions that judgements creates in our own minds and cultivate an inner tranquility, and personal happiness.

This method is also effective in relationships between people. Think of situations in which you experience tensions with others. Chances are that the conflict is based upon strong and opposing judgements. You believe that you are aright, they believe that they are right, neither of you is willing to give way. But what if both achieve a sense of inner skepticism at the same time? Then both will relinquish some judgement and the conflict will ease.

Consider larger conflicts in the world, between factions and

nations. Is not self-certainty a constant companion of conflict? When a nation builds towards war, one of the major efforts of war promoters is stamp out doubt. They say that to question and raise doubts is to side with the enemy and to betray our own soldiers. They say that the time for argument and deliberation is over, and now is the time for unity in judgement and action. Those who continue to question are branded as extremists, cowards, and unpatriotic. This is always part of the creation of war. Resolve in judgement is necessary to conflict. Sextus councils the opposite: the dissolution of conflict through the cultivation of doubt and the suspension of judgement.

Thus, I do not agree that skepticism is inconsequential (i.e. does not make any difference), as some hold. The ancient form of skepticism is much more than an idle pastime of intellect, it is a component of an interesting and viable life philosophy, a way of living.

**Cartesian:** The works of Sextus Empiricus (and many other ancients) were unknown to the

European world until they were translated into European languages in the 16th century. Once rediscovered, Sextus' arguments led to major intellectual conflicts. The re-introduction of these ideas came at the same time that religious authority being challenged (e.g. Luther and the reformation) and the limits of human understanding were being transformed (e.g. the voyages revealing unknown parts of the world; Copernicus' revelation that the earth moved around the sun; and much more). The combined effects of these events and ideas led to what was known as "the skeptical crisis." In short, the crisis was the realization that without a firm foundation for our claims to knowledge, we lack the means to truth religion, science, society, and philosophy.

Rene Descartes took on the skeptical crisis in a brilliant way. He followed the reasoning of the skeptic to its deepest conclusions (Book I of the Meditations is this process). When he had reached the point of total skepticism - complete absence of certainty - he turned skepticism back on itself by using doubt as a basis for

knowledge. At the point where skepticism led to nothing whatever but doubt, he found a basis for certitude; “the proposition, ‘I am, I exist,’ is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” Descartes builds upon this insight (the essence of necessity in doubt) to create a method of seeking knowledge by strategically applied doubt. This method is one of the logical foundations of the modern scientific method. You can see this is so when noting that scientific method operates by the testing and elimination of competing hypotheses. While we may never be able to provide sufficient evidence to remove all possible doubt (i.e. alternative explanations) for events in the world, we can with certainty rule out those explanations which conflict with the evidence and justify significant doubts. Note that our legal system seeks to follow a similar pattern and criterion (reasonable doubt).

Descartes was not a skeptic. His aim was to defeat skepticism and provide a method for the systematic pursuit of truth. Still, the skeptical arguments that he employed are so strong that one main effect of them remains. Descartes’ method for overcoming skepticism involved the employment of pure reason. He was out to undermine the commonly accepted view of his time Empiricism – the theory that all knowledge comes from our senses. We may say that when it comes to the senses, Descartes is a very strong skeptic.

It is this Cartesian skepticism of the senses that gives rise to the problem of the relation of the internal and external world. We may assume that there is universe full of real objects which correspond in some way to our senses. Descartes, however, argues effectively that our senses cannot be certain guides to that external world. A young child may take for granted that the world exactly is however it seem to her/him, but a mature thinker will recognize that the senses are full of error and distortion and specialization, such that the objective world is not at all perfectly reflected by our senses.

**Perspectival:** Now I will level with you concerning the role of skepticism in my own thought.

[Not, of course, because I want you to agree with me or pretend that you do!] The core of this idea is

presented in the first section of Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu;  
“The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao  
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.  
The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gateway to all understanding.”

I don't choose this verse because it is mysterious sounding. I choose it because it is one of the oldest known philosophical texts (circa 6th century BCE). The direct statement of the necessary limitation on human understanding from one of the first philosophical works, demonstrates the centrality and power of this idea.

Human beings possess an ability to interact with the world with a consciousness of that activity. Not only are we affected by reality and have an impact on it, but we are able to interact with our own thoughts and perceptions. We are self-aware. Self-awareness allows us to question our own perceptions and to change our own judgements (beliefs). The strength of this ability is not given without effort and many people seem satisfied with a basis role of passive reception and habitual belief. Indeed, it is not infrequent that people tell me that they were taught to “not think too much” or to “over-analyze.” I do not dismiss this position out of hand. Sextus Empiricus concludes something similar in promoting the suspension of judgment. However, I think a main difference is that people whose goal is to not think too much never go through a process of recognizing and defusing judgments. Rather than a position of tranquil suspension, such folks seem content to adopt their beliefs by convention and the rejection of questioning.

Lao Tzu recognized that language is the framework of the human condition. It is through language (“naming”) that thought,

judgement, awareness, and desire take place. To think of a thing, perceive it, make a judgement about it, and have an attitude towards it (desire), we have to separate that thing from the rest of reality. We make this separation happen through the application of concepts and categories (the thing is x and not y).

The ancient Hebrew book of Genesis provides a similar account; “Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.” (Genesis 2:19).

The “*naming*” in this account is not a trivial act. Just earlier in the narrative, Yahweh created the universe by separating light from darkness, the ferment from the waters, and the waters from each other. Yahweh does so by means of language; “God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis 1:3); “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” (Genesis 1:5).

In both Tao Te Ching and Genesis there is a beginning by separation (dividing; creating difference) and that separation is effected by naming (category and concept). Once the basis of human consciousness is in place, it is the human which completes the creation (separation). Adam names the living things which assigns them their place in the order of nature. As Lao Tzu says; “Naming is the origin of all particular things.” These primal and sophisticated accounts put thought (naming) in the essential role of defining the objects of perception. The world that we know (perceive and interact with) is a world formed by the structure and process of our own minds. That’s not to say that the world exists only in our mind (i.e. that there is not external world), but rather that the reality which is independent of our minds does not consist of the facts and objects that we perceive and conceive (i.e. name). [please note that I am working to be concise here, not complete, in my analysis.]

But hold on a second. How can reality be that different from the world that we experience and interact with. Does it not have to be real in order for us to take part in it?

Yes. Quite right. Therein lies one of the key concepts in this issue: “take part.” Human beings have a role in reality by interacting with some parts of it. Our perception and awareness proceed from a particular point-of-view; a perspective. Our perspective encompasses a part of reality, not the whole. Our perceptions and concepts inform us that reality is fragmented into parts that we can sort and count and classify and organize and manipulate and make judgements about and have preferences for and make evaluations of. That all comes with the logic of the human reality of named (thinkable) things. These things are separated in space and time, they are perceivable by different modes of sensation or deduction, they have different attributes with combine or resist in various ways. It is from this perspectival reality that we form our descriptions of the world, our beliefs about the world, our beliefs about ourselves, and our beliefs about others.

One point is clear about any perspectival reality in which we may take part: it is not the whole. That is, there is more to reality that our perspective is able to contain. It is axiomatic that the part cannot contain the whole. Moreover, the separated cannot encompass the unity; the complex cannot express the unity; the partial awareness cannot know the whole of reality. As Lao Tzu puts it from the beginning;

“The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao

The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.”

The word words “tao” and “Tao” here are used in a deliberate way to indicate the impossibility of the part containing the whole. People reading Lao Tzu often ask “what does he mean by “Tao?”” A good answer is – if we could tell that, then it would not be the Tao. That is, if naming is separation into parts, then to name the whole would be to treat it as a part. But the whole is not a part and so must transcend separation and naming.

I don’t think this is some weird mystical idea; I think it is common sense for those who think it through. Human experience and consciousness is always of parts. If there is a unified whole from

which the parts are separated out, it follows that human consciousness cannot possibly perceive or conceive the whole. What ever source makes our partial reality possible cannot be named or even thought. That is what Lao Tzu speaks of these matters in terms of negation. By better understanding what the Tao is not (“darkness within darkness”) we can better aware of what we are (“The gateway to all understanding”).

I think that the wisdom to be found in skepticism is the recognition of the limits of the human mind. It is also the recognition that the structure of the mind, as determined by its limits, is primary in the structure of the reality that humans can be aware of.

I am not convinced that modern skeptics have described the human situation very well. The denial that knowledge is possible depends upon the concept of “knowledge” is use. That is not a settled matter and skeptics have not done a credible job of explaining what genuine knowledge would be like. [It is a basic principle of mine that if anyone sets out to deny the existence, much less possibility, of something, they must at least give a clear explanation of what that thing would be like it did exist].

I am even less convinced that anyone has accurately measured the limits of human awareness. It is clear that our awareness has degrees and that we can purposely strengthen and increase it (or just as purposely divert and contain it). It is also true that human history holds a constant thread of resistance to expanding the limits of awareness. Since the beginning of written thought, and perhaps before, it is the task of the philosopher to question, explore, and seek to move our limits outward.

Now, please mentally review (or even reread) parts of the above essay that stand out for you. Then watch the Youtube video linked below:

Ultra      Deep      Field      Universe      (4:17      minutes)  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAVjF\\_7ensg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAVjF_7ensg)

Then consider the following observations on that video:

\*What seems to be darkness turns out to be filled with light (see Lao Tzu and Genesis above).

\*The narrator says that this is “the most important image ever taken.” Why is that?

\*Note how the story of the video moves from technology °science ° philosophy.

\*The narrator closes: *“There are over 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Simply saying that number doesn’t really mean much to use because it does not provide any context. Our brains have no way to put that into an meaningful perspective. When we look at this image, however, and think about the context in which it was made, and really understand what it means, we instantly gain the perspective and cannot help but to be forever changed by it.”*

Compare the following points from the video narrative with points from the essay and sources above (shown in parenthesis) related to skepticism.

*...simply saying – (naming)...*

*...meaningful perspective – (partial reality)...*

*...think about the context in which it was made – (created)...*

*...we instantly gain the perspective – (“you realize the mystery”)...*

*...forever changed – (our limits move outward)...*

*...any others?...*

Thanks for your patience and attention! I’m eager for all feedback that you can give on these ideas.

In good spirit,

Jon

**Notes**

Lao Tzu. Tao Te Ching. Translation by S. Mitchell. Tao Te Ching, HarperCollins. 1988.

Genesis. King James Version.

## 12. Wisdom Literature in Parallel

This is my own research, so if I got it wrong, it is my own error. Please let me know where you see mistakes questionable interpretations.

All religions are based in texts. Religious texts are sacred and claim unique authority. Some believers see sacred texts as directly authored by divinities or through prophets chosen by the divine. Others see sacred texts as crystalized compilations of human experience and yearning. The internal struggle of believers over whose god is real and which texts are true can be traced over the history of the last two melania and is active at this moment, the dawn of the 21st century.

I don't have a concise definition of religion. I do have a set of attributes that I think are true of religions in general (if you find any of these erroneous, please let me know).

?Religions always have central or sacred texts.

?Religions provide accounts of the creation of the world/universe.

?Religions give accounts of the origins of human beings.

?Religions offer a conception of what happens to us after we die.

?Religions give metaphysical descriptions of how the world/universe operates.

?Religions distinguish between the apparent world and the true hidden world.

?Religions tell us how we should go about seeking truth.

?Religions tell us what we should and should not do.

?Religions seek community and relationships between believers.

?Religions organize around extraordinary individuals who have revelations, messages, or insights for the rest of us.

- Religions do not always have a deity to be worshiped.
- Religions do not always involve punishments and rewards.
- Religions do not always seek to convert others.
  
- Religions always have some believers who reject violence and force on principle.
- Religions do not always claim to be “the only way.”

Lastly I note this very important fact: All religions are complex and diverse, both across the faiths and within any particular faith. Any attempt to simplify a religious idea, practice, or tradition within a single description is certainly oversimplified. The effective way to better understand other faiths is to talk with people of those faiths. You can almost always find people in your community who will answer questions; just ask to attend a service. Another way is to read from the sacred or central texts. From those works you can get a sense of the tone and direction of the thinking, even if you don't recognize all of the ideas.

I approach sacred texts with deep respect. Without revealing my own biases, let me maintain that

I approach sacred texts from Egyptian, Vedic, Taoist, Hebrew, Buddhist, Christian, Gnostic, Islamic, Native American, Mormon, Scientological, and others with rapt fascination. I know that this is not the same as being a believer. I cannot be a believer in all of the sacred texts because some of them are mutually exclusive concerning believer status. You might be a believer. I respect that, and I want to express my aim. I have no intent whatever to diminish

your faith. Indeed, if my teaching resulted in a loss of faith in anyone, I'd consider my efforts a failure.

My intent is to open avenues to thinking philosophically about religious concepts and texts. I am a philosopher. I look at religion philosophically. I read sacred texts philosophically. I think they have a great deal to tell us. I worry that conflicts over religion have obscured the knowledge and wisdom that sacred texts give to us. I worry that people who are committed to specific faiths may ignore the confirmation of other faiths. I worry that people who reject religion because of the contradictions they see in it, will lose contact with the wisdom that thousands of years of human experience proffer. With that in mind, I give to you a philosophically minded comparison of the wisdom traditions of some major religions.

## Values

“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Luke 16:13)

One way is to gain, the other is to nirvana; knowing this fact, students of Buddha should not take pleasure in being honored, but should practice detachment. (Dhammapada, 5.16)

Fame or integrity: which is more important? Money or happiness: which is more valuable? Success or failure: which is more destructive? If you look to others for fulfillment, you will never truly be fulfilled. If your happiness depends on money, you will never be happy with yourself. Be content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you. (Lao Tzu)

The mutual rivalry for piling up of worldly things diverts you, (Quran 102:1)

## Wealth

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Matthew 6.19)

Let the wise man do righteousness: A treasure that others can not share, which no thief can steal; a treasure which does not pass away. (Khuddakapatha 8.9)

Even gold and jade fill your hall;

You will not be able to keep them safe. (Tao Te Ching 77)

## Giving

For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land. (Deuteronomy 15.11)

If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. (Matthew 19.21)

From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. (Luke 6.30)

The avaricious do not go to heaven, the foolish do not extol charity. The wise one, however, rejoicing in charity, becomes happy in the beyond. (Dhammda 13.11)

You cannot attain to righteousness unless you spend (in charity) out of what you love." (Qu'ran 3.92)

They give food, out of love for Him (Allah), to the poor, the orphan,

and the slave, saying: We feed you only for Allah's pleasure – we desire from you neither reward nor thanks. (Qur'an 76.8,9)

Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love. (Lao Tzu)

Forgiveness

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your neighbor. Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19.18)

Keep to forgiveness, and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant. And if it should happen that a prompting from Satan stirs thee up to anger, seek refuge with Allah: behold, He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (Qur'an 42.43)

And vie with one another to attain to your Sustainer's forgiveness and to a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, which has been readied for the God-conscious who spend [in His way] in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and hold in check their anger, and pardon their fellow men because God loves the doers of good... (Qur'an 3.133-136)

And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. (Mark 11.25)

In those who harbor such thoughts: "He reviled me, he beat me, he overpowered me, he robbed me," anger is never stilled...Hatred never ceases by hatred in this world. Through loving kindness it comes to an end. This is an ancient Law. (A.P. Buddhadatta, trans. Dhammapadam: An Anthology of the Sayings of the Buddha. 2)

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts. And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of

his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the LORD's release.  
(Deuteronomy 15.1-2)

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22)

Marriage is three parts love and seven parts forgiveness of sins.  
(Tao Te Ching)

You shall keep relationship with one who cut it off from you, you shall give one who disappointed you, and you shall pardon one who oppressed you. (Fazle Karim, trans Al-Hadis, Vol. 1, No. 45) see Rye, p.26

Love

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.... If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. (Luke 6.27-30)

Repel (evil) with what is better. Then will he, between whom and thee was hatred, become as it were thy friend and intimate. And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint. (Qur'an 41.34-35)

Unbelievers

Whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go into its streets and say; Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest of you. (Luke 10.10-11)

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? (2 Corinthians 6.14-15)

The wise man does not befriend the faithless, the avaricious, and the slanderous, or the one who stirs up strife; the wise avoid the wicked. (Udanavarga 25.1)

O ye who believe! When ye meet the Unbelievers in hostile array, never turn your backs to them. (Qur'an 8:15)

### Truth

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (Matthew 13.31)

Do not underestimate good, thinking that it will not affect you. Dripping water can fill a pitcher, drop by drop; one who is wise is filled with good, even if it accumulates it little by little. (Dhammapada 9.7)

### Illumination

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche, and within it a lamp; the Lamp enclosed in Glass; the glass a brilliant star, lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive neither of the East nor of the West whose Oil is well-nigh luminous though fire scarce touched it. Light upon Light! God doth guide whom He will to His Light.

(Qur'an 24.35)

Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you rays with its light. (Luke 11.34-36)

As a man with eyes who carries a lamp sees all objects, so too with one who has heard the Moral

Law. He will become perfectly wise. (Udanavarga 22.4)

Evil

And not alike are the good and the evil. Repel (evil) with what is best,

When lo! He between whom and thee is enmity would be as if he were A warm friend. (Qur'an 41)

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (Matthew 5.43-44)

Hatreds do not cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth....Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good. Overcome the liar by truth. (Dhammapada 1.5, 17.3)

“What is evil? Killing is evil, lying is evil, slandering is evil, abuse is evil, gossip is evil: envy is evil, hatred is evil, to cling to false doctrine is evil; all these things are evil. And what is the root of evil? Desire is the root of evil, illusion is the root of evil.” Buddha

Hypocrisy

Thou shalt first bind up the wound of thy brother and correct the mistakes in thine own household before ye can see the sore on the body of your friend, or the error in the household of thy neighbour. Rastafarian. Book of Athlyi, 3.7

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out

of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. Matthew, 7.3-5.

The faults of others are easier to see than one's own; the faults of others are easily seen, for they are sifted like chaff, but one's own faults are hard to see. This is like the cheat who hides his dice and shows the dice of his opponent, calling attention to the other's shortcomings, continually thinking of accusing him. Udanavarga, 27.1.

Our beloved Prophet Muhammad (Peace and salutations be upon him) said, " Should you become eager to mention another's faults, recall your own. " (Ar-Rafi)

## 13. The Theory of Race

The contemporary examination of the concept “race” by philosophers causes significant disquiet. Most of us (me included) have these ideas and categories firmly in our conceptual system, which is reinforced everyday by our social perceptions. Many people deal with these difficulties in the topic by turning away from it. I appreciate your willingness to address it straight on. It is not my job to convince you of a position and I won’t try to, but I do want to help you understand why it is an important issue.

You may ask; “If race isn’t biological, why do we look different?”

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A category or set is defined by the common characteristics of its members. We cannot define a category or set solely by its members’ differences from other categories.

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Good question, but please note that the Theory of Race (i.e. that there are biologically distinct human groups) does not seek to explain why people look different. The Theory of Race is supposed to explain why some people look alike – at least within a single group. The biological theory of race (*Racial Naturalism*) posits that all and only the members of a racial group share some common traits that are biologically determined. This is about what makes people in a group alike. It is not

biologically determined that I look *different* from you. It is biologically determined that I look *similar* to my father. It is *similarity* (identities) not *difference* that the theory of race asserts.

If Racial Naturalism is correct, then we should be able to observe the common characteristics within a racial group. This is where the trouble begins, because as soon as we start measuring human characteristics accurately, science finds that there are no such common characteristics within the racial groups. Or, I should say, that is the claim of the contemporary critics of Racial Naturalism.

If that criticism is correct, then what is really going on? Why

do we perceive people as racially grouped if there are no genuine essential traits. My answer is this: we are not really perceiving commonalities when we see races, we are perceiving differences by comparison. On this view, it is not necessary that any people have a common skin pigment factor, it is only necessary that they are perceived them as “not white.”

Here is the key philosophical point: a category or set is defined by the common characteristics of its members. We cannot define a category or set solely by its members’ differences from other categories.

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It is similarity (identities) not difference that the theory of race asserts.

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It is as if we were to run a dog show by setting exclusive criteria categories such as “dogs that are not poodles” and “dogs that are not brown” and “dogs that do not have pointy ears.” That would be a confused and unsuccessful category system. Instead, dog shows function with categories of inclusive criteria. Dog pedigrees are carefully defined by committees and even a minor deviation from the prescribed range of measured criteria is sufficient to deny a dog a pedigree. Pedigree dog breeds do not really conform to a biological facts; rather pedigree dog breeds are constructed by excluding variations. That

is a human invention. The traits that make a breed are certainly biological. Yet, no one will argue that their dog must be a beagle “because it is smaller than a German Shepard” (i.e. it looks different). However, some people still argue that there must be biologically determined races of humans “because people look different.” My point: “looking different than” cannot be a criterion for inclusion in a set.

I believe that the everyday theory of race – the one that shapes our everyday perceptions operates on exclusive criteria categories; i.e. “people look different.” I doubt that we formed our ideas of race from pure observation, such as looking closely at people and seeing how similar some their skin pigmentations are. The test is

this: do groups of people really share a common (identical) skin pigmentation? It seems to me that these questions can be tested and answered empirically. Figure out a way to measure skin colors (I'm not sure how to do that or what will be measured), get ten people together, and check.

According to most contemporary anthropologists, you will find that within the common racial categories there is great variation in skin pigment.

“In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies within so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic “racial” groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within “racial” groups than between them. In neighboring populations there is much overlapping of genes and their phenotypic (physical) expressions. Throughout history whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species.” (1978, American Anthropological Association) [1]

That is the general consensus among contemporary anthropologists and geneticists. Try it for yourself. Is your own skin color (whatever that is) the same as that of other people in your racial group? Check and see. If you look critically, you will find that people within any racial people look different from one another. We all look different from one another. If I am right about that, how could “looking different from” constitute a category of sameness?

For that matter, is the color of your hand the same as the color of your thigh? Exactly? Are you only one color all over, or is reality more complex than that? Look and see.

So you may ask (again); “*If race isn’t biological, then why do we look different?*” Well, you have to ask that same question within the racial groups. “*Looking different*” turns out not to be an accurate basis for grouping people. “*Looking alike*” may be, but that is what science is having a hard time finding (or has found is not the case).

The huge philosophical question for me is: if the theory of race turns out to be objectively false, what accounts for why we really do perceive race in the world? Is it a perceptual illusion? Are our perceptions a function of our beliefs and learned concepts? Is it possible that we could, through conceptual investigation (i.e. philosophy) change how we perceive the world? That would change our reality. That’s a stunning thought. What does it look like to you?

In good spirit,

Jon

[1] American Anthropological Association Statement on “Race.”  
May 17, 1998.

<http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>

# 14. Enchiridion, Epictetus (c.55 – 135)

1. Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power. In our power are thought, impulse, will to get and will to avoid, and, in a word, everything which is our own doing. Things not in our power include the body, property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything which is not our own doing. Things in our power are by nature free, unhindered, untrammelled; things not in our power are weak, servile, subject to hindrance, dependent on others. Remember then that if you imagine that what is naturally slavish is free, and what is naturally another's is your own, you will be hampered, you will mourn, you will be put to confusion, you will blame gods and humans; but if you think that only your own belongs to you, and that what is another's is indeed another's, no one will ever put compulsion or hindrance on you, you will blame none, you will accuse none, you will do nothing against your will, no one will harm you, you will have no enemy, for no harm can touch you.

Aiming then at these high matters, you must remember that to attain them requires more than ordinary effort; you will have to give up some things entirely, and put off others for the moment. And if you would have these also—office and wealth—it may be that you will fail to get them, just because your desire is set on the former, and you will certainly fail to attain those things which alone bring freedom and happiness.

Make it your study then to confront every harsh impression with the words, 'You are but an impression, and not at all what you seem to be'. Then test it by those rules that you possess; and first by this—the chief test of all—'Is it concerned with what is in our power

or with what is not in our power?’ And if it is concerned with what is not in our power, be ready with the answer that it is nothing to you.

2. Remember that the will to get promises attainment of what you will, and the will to avoid promises escape from what you avoid; and he who fails to get what he wills is unfortunate, and he who does not escape what he wills to avoid is miserable. If then you try to avoid only what is unnatural in the region within your control, you will escape from all that you avoid; but if you try to avoid disease or death or poverty you will be miserable.

Therefore let your will to avoid have no concern with what is not in human’s power; direct it only to things in human’s power that are contrary to nature. But for the moment you must utterly remove the will to get; for if you will to get something not in human’s power you are bound to be unfortunate; while none of the things in human’s power that you could honorably will to get is yet within your reach. Impulse to act and not to act, these are your concern; yet exercise them gently and without strain, and provisionally.

3. When anything, from the meanest thing upwards, is attractive or serviceable or an object of affection, remember always to say to yourself, ‘What is its nature?’ If you are fond of a jug, say you are fond of a jug; then you will not be disturbed if it be broken. If you kiss your child or your wife, say to yourself that you are kissing a human being, for then if death strikes it you will not be disturbed.
4. When you are about to take something in hand, remind yourself what manner of thing it is. If you are going to bathe put before your mind what happens in the bath—water pouring over some, others being jostled, some reviling, others stealing; and you will set to work more securely if you say to yourself at once: ‘I want to bathe, and I want to keep my will in harmony with nature,’ and so in each thing you do; for in this way, if

anything turns up to hinder you in your bathing, you will be ready to say, 'I did not want only to bathe, but to keep my will in harmony with nature, and I shall not so keep it, if I lose my temper at what happens'.

5. What disturbs men's minds is not events but their judgements on events: For instance, death is nothing dreadful, or else Socrates would have thought it so. No, the only dreadful thing about it is men's judgement that it is dreadful. And so when we are hindered, or disturbed, or distressed, let us never lay the blame on others, but on ourselves, that is, on our own judgements. To accuse others for one's own misfortunes is a sign of want of education; to accuse oneself shows that one's education has begun; to accuse neither oneself nor others shows that one's education is complete.
6. Be not elated at an excellence which is not your own. If the horse in his pride were to say, 'I am handsome', we could bear with it. But when you say with pride, 'I have a handsome horse', know that the good horse is the ground of your pride. You ask then what you can call your own. The answer is—the way you deal with your impressions. Therefore when you deal with your impressions in accord with nature, then you may be proud indeed, for your pride will be in a good which is your own.
7. When you are on a voyage, and your ship is at anchorage, and you disembark to get freshwater, you may pick up a small shellfish or a truffle by the way, but you must keep your attention fixed on the ship, and keep looking towards it constantly, to see if the Helmsman calls you; and if he does, you have to leave everything, or be bundled on board with your legs tied like a sheep. So it is in life. If you have a dear wife or child given you, they are like the shellfish or the truffle, they are very well in their way. Only, if the Helmsman call, run back to your ship, leave all else, and do not look behind you. And if you are old, never go far from the ship, so that when you are called you may not fail to appear.
8. Ask not that events should happen as you will, but let your will

be that events should happen as they do, and you shall have peace.

9. Sickness is a hindrance to the body, but not to the will, unless the will consent. Lameness is a hindrance to the leg, but not to the will. Say this to yourself at each event that happens, for you shall find that though it hinders something else it will not hinder you.
10. When anything happens to you, always remember to turn to yourself and ask what faculty you have to deal with it. If you see a beautiful boy or a beautiful woman, you will find continence the faculty to exercise there; if trouble is laid on you, you will find endurance; if ribaldry, you will find patience. And if you train yourself in this habit your impressions will not carry you away.
11. Never say of anything, 'I lost it', but say, 'I gave it back'. Has your child died? It was given back. Has your wife died? She was given back. Has your estate been taken from you? Was not this also given back? But you say, 'He who took it from me is wicked'. What does it matter to you through whom the Giver asked it back? As long as He gives it you, take care of it, but not as your own; treat it as passers-by treat an inn.
12. If you wish to make progress, abandon reasonings of this sort: 'If I neglect my affairs I shall have nothing to live on'; 'If I do not punish my son, he will be wicked.' For it is better to die of hunger, so that you be free from pain and free from fear, than to live in plenty and be troubled in mind. It is better for your son to be wicked than for you to be miserable. m-2 Wherefore begin with little things. Is your drop of oil spilt? Is your sup of wine stolen? Say to yourself, 'This is the price paid for freedom from passion, this is the price of a quiet mind.' Nothing can be had without a price. When you call your slave-boy, reflect that he may not be able to hear you, and if he hears you, he may not be able to do anything you want. But he is not so well off that it rests with him to give you peace of mind.
13. If you wish to make progress, you must be content in external

matters to seem a fool and a simpleton; do not wish men to think you know anything, and if any should think you to be somebody, distrust yourself. For know that it is not easy to keep your will in accord with nature and at the same time keep outward things; if you attend to one you must needs neglect the other.

14. It is silly to want your children and your wife and your friends to live for ever, for that means that you want what is not in your control to be in your control, and what is not your own to be yours. In the same way if you want your servant to make no mistakes, you are a fool, for you want vice not to be vice but something different. But if you want not to be disappointed in your will to get, you can attain to that.

Exercise yourself then in what lies in your power. Each human's master is the other who has authority over what he wishes or does not wish, to secure the one or to take away the other. Let him then who wishes to be free not wish for anything or avoid anything that depends on others; or else he is bound to be a slave.

15. Remember that you must behave in life as you would at a banquet. A dish is handed round and comes to you; put out your hand and take it politely. It passes you; do not stop it. It has not reached you; do not be impatient to get it, but wait till your turn comes. Bear yourself thus towards children, wife, office, wealth, and one day you will be worthy to banquet with the gods. But if when they are set before you, you do not take them but despise them, then you shall not only share the gods' banquet, but shall share their rule. For by so doing Diogenes and Heraclitus and men like them were called divine and deserved the name.
16. When you someone shedding tears in sorrow for a child abroad or dead, or for loss of property, beware that you are not carried away by the impression that it is outward ills that make him miserable. Keep this thought by you: 'What distresses him

is not the event, for that does not distress another, but his judgement on the event.' Therefore do not hesitate to sympathize with him so far as words go, and if it so chance, even to groan with him; but take heed that you do not also groan in your inner being.

17. Remember that you are an actor in a play, and the Playwright chooses the manner of it: if he wants it short, it is short; if long, it is long. If he wants you to act a poor person you must act the part with all your powers; and so if your part be a cripple or a magistrate or a plain person. For your business is to act the character that is given you and act it well; the choice of the cast is Another's.
18. When a raven croaks with evil omen, let not the impression carry you away, but straightway distinguish in your own mind and say, 'These portents mean nothing to me; but only to my bit of a body or my bit of property or name, or my children or my wife. But for me all omens are favorable if I will, for, whatever the issue may be, it is in my power to profit therefrom.'
19. You can be invincible, if you never enter on a contest where victory is not in your power. Beware then that when you see someone raised to honor or great power or high repute you do not let your impression carry you away. For if the reality of good lies in what is in our power, there is no room for envy or jealousy. And you will not wish to be praetor, or prefect or consul, but to be free; and there is but one way to freedom—to despise what is not in our power.
20. Remember that foul words or blows in themselves are no outrage, but your judgement that they are so. So when any one makes you angry, know that it is your own thought that has angered you. Wherefore make it your first endeavor not to let your impressions carry you away. For if once you gain time and delay, you will find it easier to control yourself.
21. Keep before your eyes from day to day death and exile and all things that seem terrible, but death most of all, and then you

will never set your thoughts on what is low and will never desire anything beyond measure.

22. If you set your desire on philosophy you must at once prepare to meet with ridicule and the jeers of many who will say, 'Here he is again, turned philosopher. Where has he got these proud looks?' Nay, put on no proud looks, but hold fast to what seems best to you, in confidence that God has set you at this post. And remember that if you abide where you are, those who first laugh at you will one day admire you, and that if you give way to them, you will get doubly laughed at.
23. If it ever happen to you to be diverted to things outside, so that you desire to please another, know that you have lost your life's plan. Be content then always to be a philosopher; if you wish to be regarded as one too, show yourself that you are one and you will be able to achieve it.
24. Let not reflections such as these afflict you: 'I shall live without honor, and never be of any account'; for if lack of honor is an evil, no one but yourself can involve you in evil any more than in shame. Is it your business to get office or to be invited to an entertainment?

Certainly not.

Where then is the dishonor you talk of? How can you be 'of no account anywhere', when you ought to count for something in those matters only which are in your power, where you may achieve the highest worth? 'But my friends,' you say, 'will lack assistance.'

What do you mean by 'lack assistance'? They will not have cash from you and you will not make them Roman citizens. Who told you that to do these things is in our power, and not dependent upon others? Who can give to another what is not his to give?

'Get them then,' says he, 'that we may have them.'

If I can get them and keep my self-respect, honor, magnanimity, show the way and I will get them. But if you call on me to lose the good things that are mine, in order that you may win things that are not good, look how unfair and thoughtless you are. And which

do you really prefer? Money, or a faithful, modest friend? Therefore help me rather to keep these qualities, and do not expect from me actions which will make me lose them.

'But my country,' says he, 'will lack assistance, so far as lies in me.'

Once more I ask, What assistance do you mean? It will not owe colonnades or baths to you. What of that? It does not owe shoes to the blacksmith or arms to the shoemaker; it is sufficient if each person fulfils his own function. Would you do it no good if you secured to it another faithful and modest citizen?

'Yes.'

Well, then, you would not be useless to it.

'What place then shall I have in the city?'

Whatever place you can hold while you keep your character for honor and self-respect. But if you are going to lose these qualities in trying to benefit your city, what benefit, I ask, would you have done her when you attain to the perfection of being lost to shame and honor?

25. Has some one had precedence of you at an entertainment or a levée or been called in before you to give advice? If these things are good you ought to be glad that he got them; if they are evil, do not be angry that you did not get them yourself. Remember that if you want to get what is not in your power, you cannot earn the same reward as others unless you act as they do. How is it possible for one who does not haunt the great person's door to have equal shares with one who does, or one who does not go in his train equality with one who does; or one who does not praise him with one who does? You will be unjust then and insatiable if you wish to get these privileges for nothing, without paying their price. What is the price of a lettuce? An obol perhaps. If then a person pays his obol and gets his lettuces, and you do not pay and do not get them, do not think you are defrauded. For as he has the lettuces so you have the obol you did not give. The same principle holds good too in conduct. You were not invited to some one's

entertainment? Because you did not give the host the price for which he sells his dinner. He sells it for compliments, he sells it for attentions. Pay him the price then, if it is to your profit. But if you wish to get the one and yet not give up the other, nothing can satisfy you in your folly.

What! you say, you have nothing instead of the dinner?

Nay, you have this, you have not praised the person you did not want to praise, you have not had to bear with the insults of his doorstep.

26. It is in our power to discover the will of Nature from those matters on which we have no difference of opinion. For instance, when another person's slave has broken the wine-cup we are very ready to say at once, 'Such things must happen.' Know then that when your own cup is broken, you ought to behave in the same way as when your neighbor's was broken. Apply the same principle to higher matters. Is another's child or wife dead? Not one of us but would say, 'Such is the lot of person'; but when one's own dies, straightway one cries, 'Alas! miserable am I'. But we ought to remember what our feelings are when we hear it of another.
27. As a mark is not set up for men to miss it, so there is nothing intrinsically evil in the world.
28. If any one trusted your body to the first person he met, you would be indignant, but yet you trust your mind to the chance corner, and allow it to be disturbed and confounded if he revile you; are you not ashamed to do so?
29. In everything you do consider what comes first and what follows, and so approach it.

Otherwise you will come to it with a good heart at first because you have not reflected on any of the consequences, and afterwards, when difficulties have appeared, you will desist to your shame. Do you wish to win at Olympia? So do I, by the gods, for it is a fine thing.

But consider the first steps to it, and the consequences, and so lay your hand to the work. You must submit to discipline, eat to order, touch no sweets, train under compulsion, at a fixed hour, in heat and cold, drink no cold water, nor wine, except by order; you must hand yourself over completely to your trainer as you would to a physician, and then when the contest comes you must risk getting hacked, and sometimes dislocate your hand, twist your ankle, swallow plenty of sand, sometimes get a flogging, and with all this suffer defeat. When you have considered all this well, then enter on the athlete's course, if you still wish it. If you act without thought you will be behaving like children, who one day play at wrestlers, another day at gladiators, now sound the trumpet, and next strut the stage. Like them you will be now an athlete, now a gladiator, then orator, then philosopher, but nothing with all your soul. Like an ape, you imitate every sight you see, and one thing after another takes your fancy. When you undertake a thing you do it casually and halfheartedly, instead of considering it and looking at it all round. In the same way some people, when they see a philosopher and hear a person speaking like Euphrates (and indeed who can speak as he can? ), wish to be philosophers themselves.

Human, consider first what it is you are undertaking; then look at your own powers and see if you can bear it. Do you want to compete in the pentathlon or in wrestling? Look to your arms, your thighs, see what your loins are like. For different men are born for different tasks. Do you suppose that if you do this you can live as you do now—eat and drink as you do now, indulge desire and discontent just as before? Nay, you must sit up late, work hard, abandon your own people, be looked down on by a mere slave, be ridiculed by those who meet you, get the worst of it in everything—in honor, in office, in justice, in every possible thing. This is what you have to consider: whether you are willing to pay this price for peace of mind, freedom, tranquillity. If not, do not come near; do not be, like the children, first a philosopher, then a tax-collector, then an orator, then one of Caesar's procurators. These callings do not agree. You must be one person, good or bad; you must develop either your

Governing Principle, or your outward endowments; you must study either your inner person, or outward things—in a word, you must choose between the position of a philosopher and that of a mere outsider.

30. Appropriate acts are in general measured by the relations they are concerned with. 'He is your father.' This means you are called on to take care of him, give way to him in all things, bear with him if he reviles or strikes you.

'But he is a bad father.'

Well, have you any natural claim to a good father? No, only to a father.

'My brother wrongs me.'

Be careful then to maintain the relation you hold to him, and do not consider what he does, but what you must do if your purpose is to keep in accord with nature. For no one shall harm you, without your consent; you will only be harmed, when you think you are harmed. You will only discover what is proper to expect from neighbor, citizen, or praetor, if you get into the habit of looking at the relations implied by each.

31. For piety towards the gods know that the most important thing is this: to have right opinions about them—that they exist, and that they govern the universe well and justly—and to have set yourself to obey them, and to give way to all that happens, following events with a free will, in the belief that they are fulfilled by the highest mind. For thus you will never blame the gods, nor accuse them of neglecting you. But this you cannot achieve, unless you apply your conception of good and evil to those things only which are in our power, and not to those which are out of our power. For if you apply your notion of good or evil to the latter, then, as soon as you fail to get what you will to get or fail to avoid what you will to avoid, you will be bound to blame and hate those you hold responsible. For every

living creature has a natural tendency to avoid and shun what seems harmful and all that causes it, and to pursue and admire what is helpful and all that causes it. It is not possible then for one who thinks he is harmed to take pleasure in what he thinks is the author of the harm, any more than to take pleasure in the harm itself. That is why a father is reviled by his son, when he does not give his son a share of what the son regards as good things; thus Polynices and Eteocles were set at enmity with one another by thinking that a king's throne was a good thing. That is why the farmer, and the sailor, and the merchant, and those who lose wife or children revile the gods. For others' religion is bound up with their interest. Therefore he who makes it his concern rightly to direct his will to get and his will to avoid, is thereby making piety his concern. But it is proper on each occasion to make libation and sacrifice and to offer first-fruits according to the custom of our fathers, with purity and not in slovenly or careless fashion, without meanness and without extravagance.

32. When you make use of prophecy remember that while you know not what the issue will be, but are come to learn it from the prophet, you do know before you come what manner of thing it is, if you are really a philosopher. For if the event is not in our control, it cannot be either good or evil. Therefore do not bring with you to the prophet the will to get or the will to avoid, and do not approach him with trembling, but with your mind made up, that the whole issue is indifferent and does not affect you and that, whatever it be, it will be in your power to make good use of it, and no one shall hinder this. With confidence then approach the gods as counsellors, and further, when the counsel is given you, remember whose counsel it is, and whom you will be disregarding if you disobey. And consult the oracle, as Socrates thought others should, only when the whole question turns upon the issue of events, and neither reason nor any art of humanity provides opportunities for discovering what lies before you. Therefore, when it is your

duty to risk your life with friend or country, do not ask the oracle whether you should risk your life. For if the prophet warns you that the sacrifice is unfavorable, though it is plain that this means death or exile or injury to some part of your body, yet reason requires that even at this cost you must stand by your friend and share your country's danger. Wherefore pay heed to the greater prophet, Pythian Apollo, who cast out of his temple the person who did not help his friend when he was being killed.

33. Lay down for yourself from the first a definite stamp and style of conduct, which you will maintain when you are alone and also in the society of others. Be silent for the most part, or, if you speak, say only what is necessary and in a few words. Talk, but rarely, if occasion calls you, but do not talk of ordinary things—of gladiators, or horse-races, or athletes, or of meats or drinks—these are topics that arise everywhere—but above all do not talk about others in blame or compliment or comparison. If you can, turn the conversation of your company by your talk to some fitting subject; but if you should chance to be isolated among strangers, be silent. Do not laugh much, nor at many things, nor without restraint.

Refuse to take oaths, altogether if that be possible, but if not, as far as circumstances allow.

Refuse the entertainments of strangers and the vulgar. m-5 But if occasion arise to accept them, then strain every nerve to avoid lapsing into the state of the vulgar. For know that, if your comrade have a stain on him, he that associates with him must needs share the stain, even though he be clean in himself.

For your body take just so much as your bare need requires, such as food, drink, clothing, house, servants, but cut down all that tends to luxury and outward show.

Avoid impurity to the utmost of your power before marriage, and if you indulge your passion, let it be done lawfully. But do not be offensive or censorious to those who indulge it, and do not be

always bringing up your own chastity. If some one tells you that so and so speaks ill of you, do not defend yourself against what he says, but answer, 'He did not know my other faults, or he would not have mentioned these alone.'

It is not necessary for the most part to go to the games; but if you should have occasion to go, show that your first concern is for yourself; that is, wish that only to happen which does happen, and him only to win who does win, for so you will suffer no hindrance. But refrain entirely from applause, or ridicule, or prolonged excitement. And when you go away do not talk much of what happened there, except so far as it tends to your improvement. For to talk about it implies that the spectacle excited your wonder.

Do not go lightly or casually to hear lectures; but if you do go, maintain your gravity and dignity and do not make yourself offensive. When you are going to meet any one, and particularly someone of reputed eminence, set before your mind the thought, 'What would Socrates or Zeno have done?' and you will not fail to make proper use of the occasion.

When you go to visit some great person, prepare your mind by thinking that you will not find him in, that you will be shut out, that the doors will be slammed in your face, that he will pay no heed to you. And if in spite of all this you find it fitting for you to go, go and bear what happens and never say to yourself, 'It was not worth all this'; for that shows a vulgar mind and one at odds with outward things.

In your conversation avoid frequent and disproportionate mention of your own doings or adventures; for other people do not take the same pleasure in hearing what has happened to you as you take in recounting your adventures.

Avoid raising other's laughter; for it is a habit that easily slips into vulgarity, and it may well suffice to lessen your neighbor's respect.

It is dangerous too to lapse into foul language; when anything of the kind occurs, rebuke the offender, if the occasion allow, and if not, make it plain to him by your silence, or a blush or a frown, that you are angry at his words.

34. When you imagine some pleasure, beware that it does not carry you away, like other imaginations. Wait a while, and give yourself pause. Next remember two things: how long you will enjoy the pleasure, and also how long you will afterwards repent and revile yourself. And set on the other side the joy and self-satisfaction you will feel if you refrain. And if the moment seems come to realize it, take heed that you be not overcome by the winning sweetness and attraction of it; set in the other scale the thought how much better is the consciousness of having vanquished it. 35

When you do a thing because you have determined that it ought to be done, never avoid being seen doing it, even if the opinion of the multitude is going to condemn you. For if your action is wrong, then avoid doing it altogether, but if it is right, why do you fear those who will rebuke you wrongly?

36. The phrases, 'It is day' and 'It is night', mean a great deal if taken separately, but have no meaning if combined. In the same way, to choose the larger portion at a banquet may be worth while for your body, but if you want to maintain social decencies it is worthless. Therefore, when you are at meat with another, remember not only to consider the value of what is set before you for the body, but also to maintain your self-respect before your host.
37. If you try to act a part beyond your powers, you not only disgrace yourself in it, but you neglect the part which you could have filled with success.
38. As in walking you take care not to tread on a nail or to twist your foot, so take care that you do not harm your Governing Principle. And if we guard this in everything we do, we shall set to work more securely.
39. Everyone's body is a measure for his property, as the foot is the measure for his shoe. If you stick to this limit, you will keep the right measure; if you go beyond it, you are bound to be carried

away down a precipice in the end; just as with the shoe, if you once go beyond the foot, your shoe puts on gilding, and soon purple and embroidery. For when once you go beyond the measure there is no limit.

40. Women from fourteen years upwards are called 'madam' by humans. Wherefore, when they see that the only advantage they have got is to be marriageable, they begin to make themselves smart and to set all their hopes on this. We must take pains then to make them understand that they are really honored for nothing but a modest and decorous life.
41. It is a sign of a dull mind to dwell upon the cares of the body, to prolong exercise, eating, drinking, and other bodily functions. These things are to be done by the way; all your attention must be given to the mind.
42. When someone speaks evil or does evil to you, remember that he does or says it because he thinks it is fitting for him. It is not possible for him to follow what seems good to you, but only what seems good to him, so that, if his opinion is wrong, he suffers, in that he is the victim of deception. In the same way, if a composite judgement which is true is thought to be false, it is not the judgement that suffers, but the person who is deluded about it. If you act on this principle you will be gentle to him who reviles you, saying to yourself on each occasion, 'He thought it right.'
43. Everything has two handles, one by which you can carry it, the other by which you cannot. If your brother wrongs you, do not take it by that handle, the handle of his wrong, for you cannot carry it by that, but rather by the other handle—that he is a brother, brought up with you, and then you will take it by the handle that you can carry by.
44. It is illogical to reason thus, 'I am richer than you, therefore I am superior to you', 'I am more eloquent than you, therefore I am superior to you.' It is more logical to reason, 'I am richer than you, therefore my property is superior to yours', 'I am more eloquent than you, therefore my speech is superior to

- yours.' You are something more than property or speech.
45. If a person wash quickly, do not say that he washes badly, but that he washes quickly. If a person drink much wine, do not say that he drinks badly, but that he drinks much. For till you have decided what judgement prompts him, how do you know that he acts badly? If you do as I say, you will assent to your apprehensive impressions and to none other.
  46. On no occasion call yourself a philosopher, nor talk at large of your principles among the multitude, but act on your principles. For instance, at a banquet do not say how one ought to eat, but eat as you ought. Remember that Socrates had so completely got rid of the thought of display that when humans came and wanted an introduction to philosophers he took them to be introduced; so patient of neglect was he. And if a discussion arise among the multitude on some principle, keep silent for the most part; for you are in great danger of blurting out some undigested thought. And when someone says to you, 'You know nothing', and you do not let it provoke you, then know that you are really on the right road. For sheep do not bring grass to their shepherds and show them how much they have eaten, but they digest their fodder and then produce it in the form of wool and milk. Do the same yourself; instead of displaying your principles to the multitude, show them the results of the principles you have digested.
  47. When you have adopted the simple life, do not pride yourself upon it, and if you are a water-drinker do not say on every occasion, 'I am a water-drinker.' And if you ever want to train laboriously, keep it to yourself and do not make a show of it. Do not embrace statues. If you are very thirsty take a good draught of cold water, and rinse you mouth and tell no one.
  48. The ignorant person's position and character is this: he never looks to himself for benefit or harm, but to the world outside him. The philosopher's position and character is that he always look to himself for benefit and harm.

The signs of one who is making progress are: he blames none, praises none, complains of none, accuses none, never speaks of himself as if he were somebody, or as if he knew anything. And if any one compliments him he laughs in himself at his compliment; and if one blames him, he makes no defense. He goes about like a convalescent, careful not to disturb his constitution on its road to recovery, until it has got firm hold. He has got rid of the will to get, and his will to avoid is directed no longer to what is beyond our power but only to what is in our power and contrary to nature. In all things he exercises his will without strain. If humans regard him as foolish or ignorant he pays no heed. In one word, he keeps watch and guard on himself as his own enemy, lying in wait for him.

# 15. Stoic Self-Analysis Exercise

Assignment: Write a 250-500 word paper in which you analyze your experiences and outcomes in performing the activity described below (see part 9 for the paper specifics).

Before performing this exercise read the provided selection from the *Enchiridion* by Epictetus.

## Steps

1. Take a quiet moment with yourself to be calm and reflective.
2. Think of a situation, object, or person which when you encounter it is accompanied by anxiety, anger, fear, or disgust.
3. Form an image or picture in your mind of the situation, object, or person. Note any change in your feelings, thoughts, or body states as you form that picture.
4. Perform an analysis of your reactions to that situation, object, or thing.
  1. What feelings do you have when encountering it?
  2. What thoughts do you have when encountering it?
  3. What physical sensations do you have when encountering it?
  4. What desires or urges do you have when encountering it?
  5. What actions may you take when encountering it?
  6. Write out your analysis in detail.
5. Perform an assessment of your relations to that situation, object, or thing.
  1. What aspects of that situation, person, or thing do you control or have power to change?
  2. Be very specific in explaining your control/power.
  3. What aspects of that situation, person, or thing do you not control or not have power to change?

4. Be very specific in explaining your absence of control/power.
5. Write out your analysis in detail.
6. Perform an assessment of your reactions to that situation, object, or thing.
  1. What aspects of your reactions to that situation, person, or thing do you control or have power to change?
  2. Be specific in explaining your control/power.
  3. What aspects of your reactions to situation, person, or thing do you not control or not have power to change?
  4. Be specific in explaining your absence of control/power.
  5. Write out your analysis in detail.
7. Take another quiet moment with yourself to be calm and reflective.
8. Again form an image or picture in your mind of the situation, object, or person. Attribute to it all of the reactions that you *can* control and have power to change. You can do this by imagining those aspects of it or by saying aloud statements of what you *can* change in it.
9. In your imagination willfully change each of the reactions that you *can* change. Do this by affirmative assertions such as; *I will feel X instead of Y; I will think P instead of Q; I will do A instead of B; and so on* (where Y, Q, B are the reactions that you noted in part 3 and X, P, A are alternate reactions that you put in their place).

For example, suppose that you are frightened by bees such that if a bee flies near you jump up and yell and feel threatened. In this case, after you perform the analysis and assessment steps listed above, you will vividly imagine a bee and in your imagination make the following changes: *Instead of jumping I will calmly walk away; instead of yelling I will calmly tell the bee that I am not a threat; instead of feeling threatened I will feel strong enough that the bee will leave me alone.*

I imagine someone at this point saying “I’d just swat the bee and

kill it” or “I’d shoo it away.” Those are possibilities, but please note that these are powers that you would have put in part 4 above. If you have that power, then being afraid and jumpy makes little sense. Be careful not to change the case with a fantasy. If the thing you are thinking of really makes you angry, afraid, anxious or disgusted, then you cannot affect it by imagining powers over it. Focus on *your reactions* in this part of the exercise.

Keep working on changing that image. You may find it effective to redo this part of the activity several times over some days. Pay attention to the thing in your image to discern whether any of its qualities and any of your immediate responses to it change.

The next time that you encounter that situation, object, or person – recall your revised image of it.

Note whether any of your feelings, thoughts, urges, desires, or actions concerning it have changed.

9. Perform this exercise over several days or a week. Write a 250-500 word analysis of your experience in this exercise. You may disclose the personal specifics (i.e. the thing and your reactions) or not as you please. Either way the purpose is to explain how you conducted the exercise with an emphasis as to whether you experienced any changes. Close the piece with your thoughts about the value of the Stoic theory of human agency and your thoughts about the value that theory and this method may have in your life.

Send part 9 to your futureself (via [futureme.com](http://futureme.com)) 10 years, 20 years, and 30 years in the future (or if your are 50 years or older – 10, 15, and 20 years). You may want to include these exercise directions in case your futureself wants to use them again.

### **Postscript**

Now, in the example with the bee I chose more or less positive reactions as alternatives. You do not have to copy me. You may choose whatever alternative reactions seem appropriate. Herein lies the major point that I think that Epictetus is making. *You are free to*

*choose your reactions. Don't let that which you cannot control choose your reactions for you.* Please read that those last sentence again carefully (and aloud, really). Write it out on a blank sheet of paper. Many of us live our lives (or parts of them) allowing that which we cannot control choosing for us that which we can control. In our relationships, for instance, we spend more effort trying to change the other person than improving ourselves.

The Stoics teach us to focus our attention and energy on that which we *do have* power over. It seems to me that even if we do have power over parts of the external world, it still makes sense to primarily focus on improving our inner lives. Imagine that you had one magical wish to obtain anything that you desire. That would be temporary power over the entire world! What then would matter most? I say what would matter most is *what it is that you desire*. But do you have power over your own desires or do they have power over you? Epictetus says that you *do have* the power to change your desires and also your thoughts, feelings, emotions, fears, anxieties, among other reactions. Therein lies the key to all power. How much investment do you make to improve them? You are working hard as a student to improve your knowledge and skill. How much effort are you willing to put into improving your inner life?

# 16. One Hundred Year Thought Experiment

Not long ago I had a conversation with someone about meaning in life. They presented a view that I believe I have run into many times in various forms. I call it the “100 Year Thought Experiment.” Here is how they put the point;

“Philosophers may worry about the meaning of it all, but we have to be honest and ask – will any of this matter 100 years from now? I’ll be dead and so will everyone I know. 100 years from then hardly any of us will be remembered at all. Even if our Facebook profiles are still around, they won’t really mean any more to the future people than do old black and white portraits mean to us now. It is more than that. If nothing survives and is only temporary, then what meaning does any of it have? If the sun were to randomly explode tomorrow, the entire human race would disappear as if we had never been here. What difference would any of our plans, aspirations, ideals, worries, desires, and plots make to the universe then? If someone can show that anything has lasting value, then we can say that there is objective meaning. Otherwise (and I think it is rather obvious that nothing has lasting value – on Earth anyway) what we call “meaning” is just a subjective feeling.”

Here is the reply that I gave;

You raise a very interesting thought experiment. Here is how I understand it (note: what principle is in use here?). Please tell me whether I have it in the way that you mean it:

Imagine the world 100 years (or 1000) from now. To do this it is useful to think of the world a century or millennium ago. There must be lots and lots of people with plans and ambitions and worries in that distant past. Most of them are entirely unknown to us. We have no awareness of them or means to think about them (except just to imagine). Since those plans, hopes, and fears do not exist

now – they do not have any value now. [have I got this pretty close so far?].

It is the same for most of us living now and the future. A century or millennium from now, what seems important and significant to us (you and I) will most likely be completely lost to time. What does any of it matter if it all eventually reduces to nothing?

If I have a version of your view accurately (please tell me if I do not), this involves a sort of comparative argument. The small and short-lived loses value when subsumed in the large and vast. This is related, I think, to your idea that "If the sun were to randomly explode tomorrow, the entire human race would disappear as if we had never been here." I have two thoughts about this:

1. It seems to me that the question "what does it matter?" has to be answered within the context of the person or event as IT IS in existence. If something has value in the present, then the passage of time will not change that. In other words, my answer to "what will it matter 1000 years from now?" is that we do not need to be valuable to the future in order to be valuable in the present. What this really raises is an important issue as to what value is. That remains an open question here. I am not certain that my actions do have any value, but I am certain that IF they do, then the passage of time won't negate that.

Some examples: If a joke is funny now, the fact that people 100 years from now don't get it won't change the fact that it is funny now. If a sunset is beautiful this evening, it does not become unbeautiful in a billion years when the sun is gone. If love is real, then it does not become unreal just because it comes to an end. If it matters what kind of person we choose to be, then it does not become meaningless just because we die.

2. The wisdom of your point seems to me to be in inviting us to reflect on how we value and judge our present conditions. Asking the "100 years from now" question does not (in my view)

demonstrate that value is absent in the present. It does, however, call into question the degree of importance that we often place on our present concerns. In our daily lives we can build up a tremendous degree of self-importance. As is the meaning of all things revolves around our momentary desires.

I observe some remarkable incongruities in this. David Hume (1711-1776) observed “Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.” (An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, 1751) I did not include his whole quote here, but there is an interesting point in this. It sounds odd to think that a person would care more about a scratched finger than for the whole world. After all, if the world is destroyed, then don't we die too?

Well, that's part of Hume's point. The passions (emotions) and desires are not rational. They are neither reasonable nor unreasonable. Hume argues that our passions and desires, which form such a major basis of our choices and beliefs, are more the results of habits than by reason.

Hume's point here is deep and is part of a larger argument. In this context I want to note the actuality of his observation. For instance, I suppose that most people around us are somewhat aware that the world contains some real horrors. Millions of children die of hunger every year. War results in more casualties among non-combatants than among combatants. It would cost less to cut malaria deaths in half than the Pfizer drug company profits each year from Viagra.

Someone may dispute these claims and so on. OK. My point is that there is plenty of preventable suffering in the world. Still, acknowledging this fact causes minor disturbance in most of us. Compare this to the intensity of outrage you have witnessed in drivers who did not get the parking space or lane change they wanted immediately. The examples proliferate. Or at least please tell me if you see it differently. Just about every day I see someone totally lose their temper over an incredibly insignificant event. At

the same time we remain nonplused by flat out atrocities and absurdities. --

'The life support system of the entire planet is changing'; "Well, we will see."

'People at a wedding were obliterated by a drone missile'; "Collateral damage happens"

'11 million children die from preventable causes each year'; "We can't take care of everyone."

'That car did not move immediately when the light turned green';  
OMG! ARE YOU KIDDING ME!?!? HOOOOOONK. GET A CLUE!!!  
IDIOT!"

Am I exaggerating here? Well, maybe but not by much. You can tell me from your own experience. It is at those points that it may be useful for them to ask "what will this matter 100 years from now?" In this context the idea is an invitation to compare and weigh passionate attachments in terms of scale. Even here I am not suggesting that a missed parking spot is absent of value; just that on the big picture, it is hard to rate it as the highest value. When people express more outrage over parking than they do over the lives of children, something is out of whack.

On the other hand my analysis is based on an analysis of value, which is wholly different from the view that there is no genuine value (i.e. nihilism). Still, I hope that my analysis opens some options.

Does anything matter when 100 years from now it may not even exist in reality or memory? It all depends upon whether anything really does matter now. If so, if anything now has real value and meaning, then it will have had that value 100 years from now and 1 million years from now.

What is real does not become unreal just because time passes and change happens.

What do you think?

**Activity:**

1. Develop the two positions presented in the above essay in your

own words and examples. Roughly those are:

- (1) that in 100 years none of this will matter.
  - (2) that the value that exists now does not cease to exist now even if it will change with the passage of time.
2. Explain your version of these positions to two people, one whom you know well and one whom you do not know well. Ascertain from them whether they have encountered these views before and what they think of them.
3. Write up your results for submission including:
- – Your experience in conversing with the person that you know well and their reaction to the ideas that you presented.
  - – Your experience in conversing with the person that you do not know well and their reaction to the ideas that you presented.
  - – Your own thoughts on the 100 Year Thought Experiment.