



HOW TO READ PHILOSOPHY

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren

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Children ask magnificent questions. “Why are people?” “What makes the cat tick?” “What’s the world’s first name?” “Did God have a reason for creating the earth?” Out of the mouths of babes comes, if not wisdom, at least the search for it. Philosophy, according to Aristotle, begins in wonder. It certainly begins in childhood, even if for most of us it stops there, too.

The child is a natural questioner. It is not the number of questions he asks but their character that distinguishes him from the adult. Adults do not lose the curiosity that seems to be a native human trait, but their curiosity deteriorates in quality. They want to know whether something is so, not why. But children’s questions are not limited to the sort that can be answered by an encyclopedia.

What happens between the nursery and college to turn the flow of questions off, or, rather, to turn it into the duller channels of adult curiosity about matters of fact? A mind not agitated by good questions cannot appreciate the significance of even the best answers. It is easy enough to learn the answers. But to develop actively in-

quisitive minds, alive with real questions, profound questions—that is another story.

Why should we have to try to develop such minds, when children are born with them? Somewhere along the line, adults must fail somehow to sustain the infant's curiosity at its original depth. School itself, perhaps, dulls the mind—by the dead weight of rote learning, much of which may be necessary. The failure is probably even more the parents' fault. We so often tell a child there is no answer, even when one is available, or demand that he ask no more questions. We thinly conceal our irritation when baffled by the apparently unanswerable query. All this discourages the child. He may get the impression that it is impolite to be too inquisitive. Human inquisitiveness is never killed; but it is soon debased to the sort of questions asked by most college students, who, like the adults they are soon to become, ask only for information.

We have no solution for this problem; we are certainly not so brash as to think we can tell you how to answer the profound and wondrous questions that children put. But we do want you to recognize that one of the most remarkable things about the great philosophical books is that they ask the same sort of profound questions that children ask. The ability to retain the child's view of the world, with at the same time a mature understanding of what it means to retain it, is extremely rare—and a person who has these qualities is likely to be able to contribute something really important to our thinking.

We are not required to think as children in order to understand existence. Children certainly do not, and cannot, understand it—if, indeed, anyone can. But we must be able to see as children see, to wonder as they wonder, to ask as they ask. The complexities of adult life get in the way of the truth. The great philosophers have always been able to clear away the complexities and see simple distinctions—simple once they are stated, vastly difficult before. If we are to follow them we too must be childishly simple in our questions—and maturely wise in our replies.

The Questions Philosophers Ask

What are these “childishly simple” questions that philosophers ask? When we write them down, they do not seem simple, because to answer them is so difficult. Nevertheless, they are initially simple in the sense of being basic or fundamental.

Take the following questions about *being or existence*, for example: What is the difference between existing and not existing? What is common to all the things that do exist, and what are the properties of everything that does exist? Are there different ways in which things can exist—different modes of being or existence? Do some things exist only in the mind or for the mind, whereas others exist outside the mind, and whether or not they are known to us, or even knowable by us? Does everything that exists exist physically, or are there some things that exist apart from material embodiment? Do all things change, or is there anything that is immutable? Does anything exist necessarily, or must we say that everything that does exist might not have existed? Is the realm of possible existence larger than the realm of what actually does exist?

These are typically the kind of questions that a philosopher asks when he is concerned to explore the nature of being itself and the realms of being. As questions, they are not difficult to state or understand, but they are enormously difficult to answer—so difficult, in fact, that there are philosophers, especially in recent times, who have held that they cannot be answered in any satisfactory manner.

Another set of philosophical questions concerns *change or becoming* rather than being. Of the things in our experience to which we would unhesitatingly attribute existence, we would also say that all of them are subject to change. They come into being and pass away; while in being, most of them move from one place to another; and many of them change in quantity or in quality: they become larger or smaller, heavier or lighter; or, like the ripening apple and the aging beefsteak, they change in color.

What is involved in any change? In every process of change, is there something that endures unchanged as well as some respect or aspect of that enduring thing which undergoes change? When you learn something that you did not know before, you have certainly changed with respect to the knowledge you have acquired, but you are also the same individual that you were before; if that were not the case, you could not be said to have changed through learning. Is this true of all change? For example, is it true of such remarkable changes as birth and death—of coming to be and passing away—or only of less fundamental changes, such as local motion, growth, or alteration in quality? How many different kinds of change are there? Do the same fundamental elements or conditions enter into all processes of change, and are the same causes operative in all? What do we mean by a cause of change? Are there different types of causes responsible for change? Are the causes of

change—of becoming—the same as the causes of being, or existence?

Such questions are asked by the philosopher who turns his attention from being to becoming and also tries to relate becoming to being. Once again, they are not difficult questions to state or understand, though they are extremely difficult to answer clearly and well. In any case, you can see how they begin with a childishly simple attitude toward the world and our experience of it.

Unfortunately, we do not have space to go into the whole range of questions more deeply. We can only list some other questions that philosophers ask and try to answer. There are questions not only about being and becoming, but also about necessity and contingency; about the material and the immaterial; about the physical and the non-physical; about freedom and indeterminacy; about the powers of the human mind; about the nature and extent of human knowledge; about the freedom of the will.

All these questions are speculative or theoretical in the sense of those terms that we have employed in distinguishing between the theoretical and practical realms. But philosophy, as you know, is not restricted to theoretical questions only.

Take *good and evil*, for instance. Children are much concerned with the difference between good and bad; their parents are likely to suffer if they make mistakes about it. But we do not stop wondering about the difference when we grow up. Is there a universally valid distinction between good and evil? Are there certain things that are always good, others that are always bad, whatever the circumstances? Or was Hamlet right when, echoing Montaigne, he said: “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”

Good and evil, of course, are not the same as right and wrong; the two pairs of terms seem to refer to different classes of things. In particular, even if we feel that whatever is right is good, we probably do not feel that whatever is wrong is evil. But how do we make this distinction precise?

“Good” is an important philosophical word, but it is an important word in our everyday vocabulary, too. Trying to say what it means is a heady exercise; it will involve you very deeply in philosophy before you know it. There are many things that are good, or, as we would prefer to say, there are many goods. Is it possible to order the goods? Are some more important than others? Do some depend

on others? Are there circumstances in which goods conflict, so that you have to choose one good at the expense of forgoing another?

Again, we do not have space to go more extensively into these questions. We can only list some other questions in the practical realm. There are questions not only about good and evil, right and wrong, and the order of goods, but also about duties and obligations; about virtues and vices; about happiness, life's purpose or goal; about justice and rights in the sphere of human relations and social interaction; about the state and its relation to the individual; about the good society, the just polity, and the just economy; about war and peace.

The two groups of questions that we have discussed determine or identify two main divisions of philosophy. The questions in the first group, the questions about being and becoming, have to do with what *is* or *happens* in the world. Such questions belong to the division of philosophy that is called theoretical or speculative. The questions in the second group, the questions concerning good and evil, or right and wrong, have to do with what *ought* to be done or sought, and they belong to the division of philosophy that is sometimes called practical, and is more accurately called normative. Books that tell you how to make something, such as a cookbook, or how to do something, such as a driver's manual, need not try to argue that you ought to become a good cook, or learn to drive a car well; they can assume that you want to make or do something and merely tell you how to succeed in your efforts. In contrast, books of normative philosophy concern themselves primarily with the goals all men *ought* to seek—goals such as leading a good life or instituting a good society—and, unlike cookbooks and driving manuals, they go no further than prescribing in the most universal terms the means that *ought* to be employed in order to achieve these goals.

The questions that philosophers ask also serve to distinguish subordinate branches of the two main divisions of philosophy. A work of speculative or theoretical philosophy is metaphysical if it is mainly concerned with questions about being or existence. It is a work in the philosophy of nature if it is concerned with becoming—with the nature and kinds of changes, their conditions and causes. If its primary concern is with knowledge—with questions about what is involved in our knowing anything, with the causes, extent, and limits of human knowledge, and with its certainties and uncertainties—then it is a work in epistemology, which is just another name for theory of knowledge. Turning from theoretical to normative philosophy, the main distinction is between questions

about the good life and what is right or wrong in the conduct of the individual, all of which fall within the sphere of ethics, and questions about the good society and the conduct of the individual in relation to the community—the sphere of politics or political philosophy.

Modern Philosophy and the Great Tradition

For the sake of brevity in what follows, let us call questions about what is and happens in the world, or about what men ought to do or seek, “first-order questions.” We should recognize, then, that there are also “second-order questions” that can be asked: questions about our first-order knowledge, questions about the content of our thinking when we try to answer first-order questions, questions about the ways in which we express such thoughts in language.

This distinction between first-order and second-order questions is useful, because it helps to explain what has happened to philosophy in recent years. The majority of professional philosophers at the present day no longer believe that first-order questions can be answered by philosophers. Most professional philosophers today devote their attention exclusively to second-order questions, very often to questions having to do with the language in which thought is expressed.

That is all to the good, for it is never harmful to be critical. The trouble is the wholesale giving up of first-order philosophical questions, which are the ones that are most likely to interest lay readers. In fact, philosophy today, like contemporary science or mathematics, is no longer being written for lay readers. Second-order questions are, almost by definition, ones of narrow appeal; and professional philosophers, like scientists, are not interested in the views of anyone but other experts.

This makes modern philosophy very hard to read for nonphilosophers—as difficult, indeed, as science for non-scientists. We cannot in this book give you any advice about how to read modern philosophy as long as it is concerned exclusively with second-order questions. However, there are philosophical books that you can read, and that we believe you should read. These books ask the kinds of questions that we have called first-order ones. It is not accidental that they were also written primarily for a lay audience rather than exclusively for other philosophers.

Up to about 1930, or perhaps even a little later, philosophical books were written for the general reader. Philosophers hoped to be read by their peers, but they also wanted to be read by ordinary, intelligent men and women. Since the questions that they asked and tried to answer were of concern to everyone, they thought that everyone should know what they thought.

All of the great classical works in philosophy, from Plato onward, were written from this point of view. These books are accessible to the lay reader; you can succeed in reading them if you wish to. Everything that we have to say in this chapter is intended to help you do that.

On Philosophical Method

It is important to understand what philosophical method consists in—at least insofar as philosophy is conceived as asking and trying to answer *first-order questions*. Suppose that you are a philosopher who is troubled by one of the childishly simple questions we have mentioned—the question, for instance, about the properties of everything that exists, or the question about the nature and causes of change. How do you proceed?

If your question were scientific, you would know that to answer it you would have to perform some kind of special research, either by way of developing an experiment to test your answer, or by way of observing a wide range of phenomena. If your question were historical, you would know that you would also have to perform research, although of a different kind. But there is no experiment that will tell you what all existing things have in common, precisely in respect to having existence. There are no special kinds of phenomena that you can observe, no documents that you can seek out and read, in order to find out what change is or why things change. All you can do is reflect upon the question. There is, in short, nothing to do but think.

You are not thinking in a total vacuum, of course. Philosophy, when it is good, is not “pure” speculation—thinking divorced from experience. Ideas cannot be put together just anyway. There are stringent tests of the validity of answers to philosophical questions. But such tests are based on common experience alone—on the experience that you already have because you are a human being, not a philosopher. You are as well acquainted through common experience with the phenomena of change as anybody else; everything in the world about you manifests mutability. As far as the mere

experience of change goes, you are in as good a position to think about its nature and causes as the greatest philosophers. What distinguishes them is that they thought about it extremely well: they formulated the most penetrating questions that could be asked about it, and they undertook to develop carefully and clearly worked-out answers. By what means? Not by investigation. Not by having or trying to get more experience than the rest of us have. Rather, by thinking more profoundly about the experience than the rest of us have.

Understanding this is not enough. We must also realize that not all of the questions that philosophers have asked and tried to answer are truly philosophical. They themselves were not always aware of this, and their ignorance or mistake in this crucial respect can cause unperceptive readers considerable difficulty. To avoid such difficulties, it is necessary to be able to distinguish the truly philosophical questions from the other questions that a philosopher may deal with, but that he should have waived and left for later scientific investigation to answer. The philosopher was misled by failing to see that such questions can be answered by scientific investigation, though he probably could not have known this at the time of his writing.

An example of this is the question that ancient philosophers asked about the difference between the matter of terrestrial and celestial bodies. To their observation, unaided by telescopes, it appeared to be the case that the heavenly bodies changed only in place; they did not appear to come into being or to pass away, like plants and animals; nor did they appear to change in size or quality. Because celestial bodies were subject to one kind of change only—local motion—whereas all terrestrial bodies change in other respects as well, the ancients concluded that they had to be composed of a different kind of matter. They did not surmise, nor could they probably have surmised, that with the invention of the telescope, the heavenly bodies would give us knowledge of their mutability beyond anything we can know through common experience. Hence they took as a question that they thought it proper for philosophers to answer one that should have been reserved for later scientific investigation. Such investigation began with Galileo's use of the telescope and his discovery of the moons of Jupiter; this led to the revolutionary assertion by Kepler that the matter of the heavenly bodies is exactly the same as the matter of bodies on earth; and this in turn laid the groundwork for Newton's formulation of a celestial mechanics in which the same laws of motion apply without qualification to all bodies wherever they are in the physical universe.

On the whole, apart from the confusions that may result, the misinformation or lack of information about scientific matters that mars the work of the classical philosophers is irrelevant. The reason is that it is philosophical questions, not scientific or historical ones, that we are interested in when we read a philosophical work. And, at the risk of repeating ourselves, we must emphasize that there is no other way than thinking to answer such questions. If we could build a telescope or microscope to examine the properties of existence, we should do so, of course. But no such instruments are possible.

We do not want to give the impression that it is only philosophers who make mistakes of the sort we are discussing here. Suppose a scientist becomes troubled by the question about the kind of life a man ought to lead. This is a question in normative philosophy, and the only way to answer it is by thinking about it. But the scientist may not realize that, and instead suppose that some kind of experiment or research will give him an answer. He may decide to ask 1,000 persons what kind of life they would like to lead, and base his answer to the question on their answers. But it should be obvious that his answer, in that case, would be as irrelevant as Aristotle's speculations about the matter of the celestial bodies.

On Philosophical Styles

Although there is only one philosophical method, there are at least five styles of exposition that have been employed by the great philosophers of the Western tradition. The student or reader of philosophy should be able to distinguish between them and know the advantages and disadvantages of each.

1. THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE: The first philosophical style of exposition, first in time if not in effectiveness, is the one adopted by Plato in his *Dialogues*. The style is conversational, even colloquial; a number of men discuss a subject with Socrates (or, in the later dialogues, with a speaker known as The Athenian Stranger); often, after a certain amount of fumbling, Socrates embarks on a series of questions and comments that help to elucidate the subject. In the hands of a master like Plato, this style is heuristic, that is, it allows the reader, indeed leads him, to discover things for himself. When the style is enriched by the high drama—some would say the high comedy—of the story of Socrates, it becomes enormously powerful.

“A master like Plato,” we said—but there is no one “like” Plato. Other philosophers have attempted dialogues—for example, Cicero and Berkeley—but with little success. Their dialogues are flat, dull, almost unreadable. It is a measure of the greatness of Plato that he was able to write philosophical dialogues that, for wit, charm, and profundity are the equal of any books ever produced by anyone, on any subject. Yet it may be a sign of the inappropriateness of this style of philosophizing that no one except Plato has ever been able to handle it effectively.

That Plato did so, goes without saying. All Western philosophy, Whitehead once remarked, is but “a footnote to Plato”; and the later Greeks themselves had a saying: “Everywhere I go in my head, I meet Plato coming back.” Those statements, however, should not be misunderstood. Plato himself had apparently no philosophical system, no doctrine—unless it was that there is no doctrine, that we should simply keep talking. And asking questions. For Plato, and Socrates before him, did indeed manage to raise most of the important questions that subsequent philosophers have felt it necessary to deal with,

2. THE PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISE OR ESSAY: Aristotle was Plato’s best pupil; he studied under him for twenty years. He is said to have also written dialogues, but none of these survives entirely. What does survive are curiously difficult essays or treatises on a number of different subjects. Aristotle was obviously a clear thinker, but the difficulty of the surviving works has led scholars to suggest that they were originally notes for lectures or books—either Aristotle’s own notes, or notes taken down by a student who heard the master speak. We may never know the truth of the matter, but in any event the Aristotelian treatise was a new style in philosophy.

The subjects covered by Aristotle in his treatises, and the various styles adopted by him in presenting his findings, also helped to establish the branches and approaches of philosophy in the succeeding centuries. There are, first of all, the so-called popular works—mostly dialogues, of which only fragments have come down to us. Then there are the documentary collections. The major one that we know about was a collection of 158 separate constitutions of Greek states. Only one of these survives, the constitution of Athens, which was recovered from a papyrus in 1890. Finally, there are the major treatises, some of which, like the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, or the *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Poetics*, are purely philosophical works, theoretical or normative; some of which, like the book *On the Soul*, are mixtures of philosophical theory and early scientific investiga-

tion; and some of which, like the biological treatises, are mainly scientific works in the field of natural history.

Immanuel Kant, although he was probably more influenced by Plato in a philosophical sense, adopted Aristotle's style of exposition. His treatises are finished works of art, unlike Aristotle's in this respect. They state the main problem first, go through the subject matter in a thorough and businesslike way, and treat special problems by the way or at the last. The clarity of both Kant and Aristotle may be said to consist in the order that they impose on a subject. We see a philosophical beginning, middle, and end. We also, particularly in the case of Aristotle, are provided with accounts of the views and objections of others, both philosophers and ordinary men. Thus, in one sense the style of the treatise is similar to the style of the dialogue. But the element of drama is missing from the Kantian or Aristotelian treatise; a philosophical view is developed through straightforward exposition rather than through the conflict of positions and opinions, as in Plato.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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