

Philosophy is not just the preserve of brilliant but eccentric thinkers that it is popularly supposed to be. It is what everyone does when they're not busy dealing with their everyday business and get a chance simply to wonder what life and the universe are all about. We human beings are naturally inquisitive creatures, and can't help wondering about the world around us and our place in it. We're also equipped with a powerful intellectual capability, which allows us to reason as well as just wonder. Although we may not realize it, whenever we reason, we're thinking philosophically.

Philosophy is not so much about coming up with the answers to fundamental questions as it is about the process of trying to find these answers, using reasoning rather than accepting without question conventional views or traditional authority. The very first philosophers, in ancient Greece and China, were thinkers who were not satisfied with the established explanations provided by religion and custom, and sought answers which had rational justifications. And, just as we might share our views with friends and colleagues, they discussed their ideas with one another, and even set up

"schools" to teach not just the conclusions they had come to, but the way they had come to them. They encouraged their students to disagree and criticize ideas as a means of refining them and coming up with new and different ones. A popular misconception is that of the solitary philosopher arriving at his conclusions in isolation, but this is actually seldom the case. New ideas emerge through discussion and the examination, analysis, and criticism of other people's ideas.

Debate and dialogue

The archetypical philosopher in this respect was Socrates. He didn't leave any writings, or even

any big ideas as the conclusions of his thinking. Indeed, he prided himself on being the wisest of men because he knew he didn't know anything. His legacy lay in the tradition he established of debate and discussion, of questioning the assumptions of other people to gain deeper understanding and elicit fundamental truths. The writings of Socrates' pupil, Plato, are almost invariably in the form of dialogues, with Socrates as a major character. Many later philosophers also adopted the device of dialogues to present their ideas, giving arguments and counterarguments rather than a simple statement of their reasoning and conclusions.

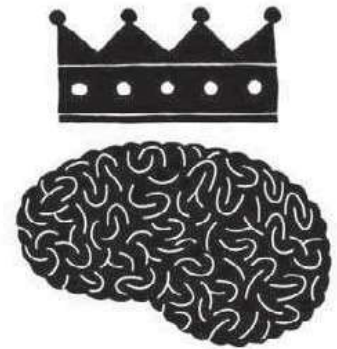
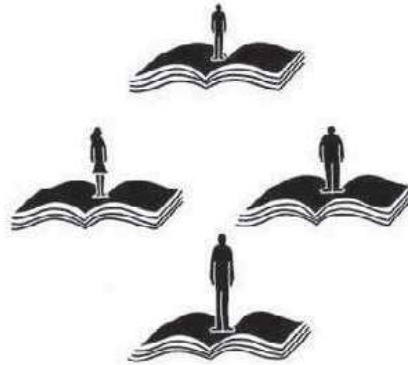
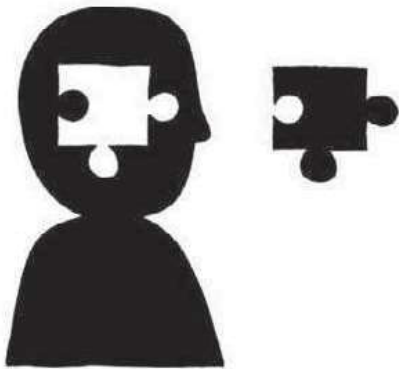
The philosopher who presents his ideas to the world is liable to be met with comments beginning "Yes, but ..." or "What if ..." rather than wholehearted acceptance. In fact, philosophers have fiercely disagreed with one another about almost every aspect of philosophy. Plato and his pupil Aristotle, for example, held diametrically opposed views on fundamental philosophical questions, and their different approaches have divided opinions among philosophers ever since. This has, in turn, provoked more discussion and prompted yet more fresh ideas.



Wonder is very much the affection of a philosopher; for there is no other beginning of philosophy than this.

Plato





But how can it be that these philosophical questions are still being discussed and debated? Why haven't thinkers come up with definitive answers? What are these "fundamental questions" that philosophers through the ages have wrestled with?

Existence and knowledge

When the first true philosophers appeared in ancient Greece some 2,500 years ago, it was the world around them that inspired their sense of wonder. They saw the Earth and all the different forms of life inhabiting it; the sun, moon, planets, and stars; and natural phenomena such as the weather, earthquakes, and eclipses. They sought explanations for all these things—not the traditional myths and legends about the gods, but something that would satisfy their curiosity and their intellect. The first question that occupied these early philosophers was "What is the universe made of?", which was soon expanded to become the wider question of "What is the nature of whatever it is that exists?"

This is the branch of philosophy we now call metaphysics. Although much of the original question has since been explained by modern science, related questions of

metaphysics such as "Why is there something rather than nothing?" are not so simply answered.

Because we, too, exist as a part of the universe, metaphysics also considers the nature of human existence and what it means to be a conscious being. How do we perceive the world around us, and do things exist independently of our perception? What is the relationship between our mind and body, and is there such a thing as an immortal soul? The area of metaphysics concerned with questions of existence, ontology, is a huge one and forms the basis for much of Western philosophy.

Once philosophers had started to put received wisdom to the test of rational examination, another fundamental question became obvious: "How can we know?" The study of the nature and limits of knowledge forms a second main branch of philosophy, epistemology.

At its heart is the question of how we acquire knowledge, how we come to know what we know; is some (or even all) knowledge innate, or do we learn everything from experience? Can we know something from reasoning alone? These questions are vital to philosophical thinking, as we need to be able to rely on our knowledge

in order to reason correctly. We also need to determine the scope and limits of our knowledge. Otherwise we cannot be sure that we actually do know what we think we know, and haven't somehow been "tricked" into believing it by our senses.

Logic and language

Reasoning relies on establishing the truth of statements, which can then be used to build up a train of thought leading to a conclusion. This might seem obvious to us now, but the idea of constructing a rational argument distinguished philosophy from the superstitious and religious explanations that had existed before the first philosophers. These thinkers had to devise a way of ensuring their ideas had validity. »

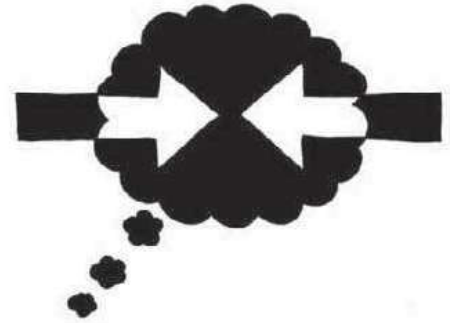


Superstition sets the whole world in flames; philosophy quenches them.

Voltaire



14 INTRODUCTION



What emerged from their thinking was logic, a technique of reasoning that was gradually refined over time. At first simply a useful tool for analyzing whether an argument held water, logic developed rules and conventions, and soon became a field of study in its own right, another branch of the expanding subject of philosophy.

Like so much of philosophy, logic has intimate connections with science, and mathematics in particular. The basic structure of a logical argument, starting from a premise and working through a series of steps to a conclusion, is the same as that of a mathematical proof. It's not surprising then that philosophers have often turned to mathematics for examples of self-evident, incontrovertible truths, nor that many of the greatest thinkers, from Pythagoras to René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz, were also accomplished mathematicians.

Although logic might seem to be the most exact and “scientific” branch of philosophy, a field where things are either right or wrong, a closer look at the subject shows that it is not so simple. Advances in mathematics in the 19th century called into question the rules of logic that had been laid down by Aristotle, but even in ancient times

Zeno of Elea's famous paradoxes reached absurd conclusions from apparently faultless arguments.

A large part of the problem is that philosophical logic, unlike mathematics, is expressed in words rather than numbers or symbols, and is subject to all the ambiguities and subtleties inherent in language. Constructing a reasoned argument involves using language carefully and accurately, examining our statements and arguments to make sure they mean what we think they mean; and when we study other people's arguments, we have to analyze not only the logical steps they take, but also the language they use, to see if their conclusions hold water. Out of this process came yet another field of philosophy that flourished in the 20th century, the philosophy of language, which examined terms and their meanings.

Morality, art, and politics

Because our language is imprecise, philosophers have attempted to clarify meanings in their search for answers to philosophical questions. The sort of questions that Socrates asked the citizens of Athens tried to get to the bottom of what they actually believed certain concepts to be. He would ask seemingly simple questions such as “What is

justice?” or “What is beauty?” not only to elicit meanings, but also to explore the concepts themselves. In discussions of this sort, Socrates challenged assumptions about the way we live our lives and the things we consider to be important.

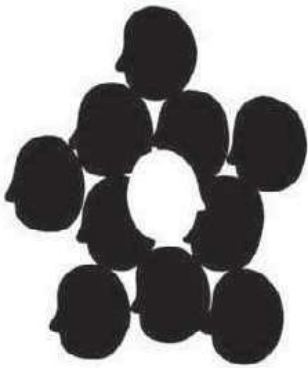
The examination of what it means to lead a “good” life, what concepts such as justice and happiness actually mean and how we can achieve them, and how we should behave, forms the basis for the branch of philosophy known as ethics (or moral philosophy); and the related branch stemming from the question of what constitutes beauty and art is known as aesthetics.



O philosophy, life's guide!
O searcher-out of virtue
and expeller of vices!
What could we and every
age of men have been
without thee?

Cicero





From considering ethical questions about our individual lives, it is a natural step to start thinking about the sort of society we would like to live in—how it should be governed, the rights and responsibilities of its citizens, and so on. Political philosophy, the last of the major branches of philosophy, deals with these ideas, and philosophers have come up with models of how they believe society should be organized, ranging from Plato's *Republic* to Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*.

Religion: East and West

The various branches of philosophy are not only interlinked, but overlap considerably, and it is sometimes difficult to say in which area a particular idea falls. Philosophy also encroaches on many completely different subjects, including the sciences, history, and the arts. With its beginnings in questioning the dogmas of religion and superstition, philosophy also examines religion itself, specifically asking questions such as “Does god exist?” and “Do we have an immortal soul?” These are questions that have their roots in metaphysics, but they have implications in ethics too. For example, some philosophers have asked whether our morality comes from god or whether it is a purely

human construct—and this in turn has raised the whole debate as to what extent humanity has free will.

In the Eastern philosophies that evolved in China and India (particularly Daoism and Buddhism) the lines between philosophy and religion are less clear, at least to Western ways of thinking. This marks one of the major differences between Western and Eastern philosophies. Although Eastern philosophies are not generally a result of divine revelation or religious dogma, they are often intricately linked with what we would consider matters of faith. Even though philosophical reasoning is frequently used to justify faith in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic world, faith and belief

form an integral part of Eastern philosophy that has no parallel in the West. Eastern and Western philosophy also differ in their starting points. Where the ancient Greeks posed metaphysical questions, the first Chinese philosophers considered these adequately dealt with by religion, and instead concerned themselves with moral and political philosophy.

Following the reasoning

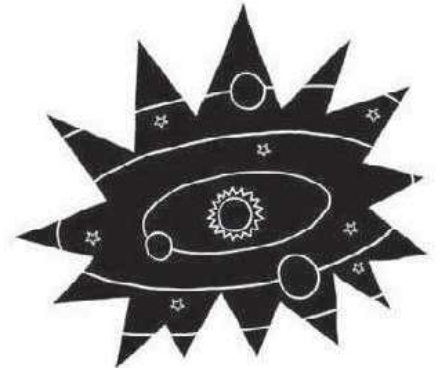
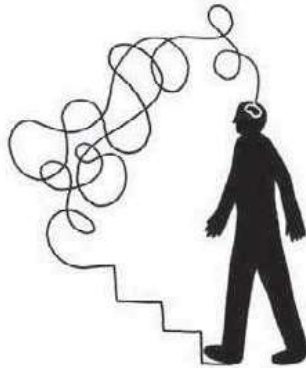
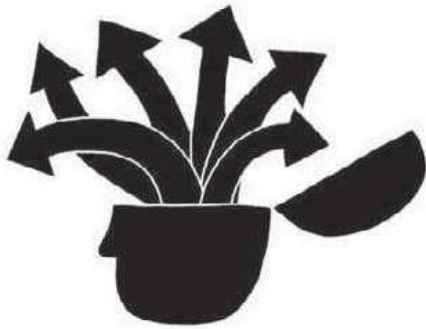
Philosophy has provided us with some of the most important and influential ideas in history. What this book presents is a collection of ideas from the best-known philosophers, encapsulated in well known quotes and pithy summaries of their ideas. Perhaps the best-known quotation in philosophy is Descartes' “cogito, ergo sum” (often translated from the Latin as “I think, therefore I am”). It ranks as one of the most important ideas in the history of philosophy, and is widely considered a turning point in thinking, leading us into the modern era. On its own however, the quotation doesn't mean much. It is the conclusion of a line of argument about the nature of certainty, and only when we examine the reasoning leading to it does the idea begin to make sense. And »



There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

William Shakespeare





it's only when we see where Descartes took the idea—what the consequences of that conclusion are—that we see its importance.

Many of the ideas in this book may seem puzzling at first glance. Some may appear self-evident, others paradoxical or flying in the face of common sense. They might even appear to prove Bertrand Russell's flippant remark that "the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it." So why are these ideas important?

Systems of thought

Sometimes the theories presented in this book were the first of their kind to appear in the history of thought. While their conclusions may seem obvious to us now, in hindsight, they were startlingly new in their time, and despite their apparent simplicity, they may make us reexamine things that we take for granted. The theories presented here that seem to be paradoxes and counter-intuitive statements are the ideas that really call into question our assumptions about ourselves and the world—and they also make us think in new ways about how we see things. There are many

ideas here that raise issues that philosophers still puzzle over. Some ideas may relate to other thoughts and theories in different fields of the same philosopher's thinking, or have come from an analysis or criticism of another philosopher's work. These latter ideas form part of a line of reasoning that may extend over several generations or even centuries, or be the central idea of a particular "school" of philosophy.

Many of the great philosophers formed integrated "systems" of philosophy with interconnecting ideas. For example, their opinions about how we acquire knowledge led to a particular metaphysical view of the universe and man's soul. This in turn has implications for what kind of life the philosopher believes we should lead and what type of society would be ideal. And in turn, this entire system of ideas has been the starting point for subsequent philosophers.

We must remember too that these ideas never quite become outdated. They still have much to tell us, even when their conclusions have been proved wrong by subsequent philosophers and scientists. In fact, many ideas that had been dismissed for centuries were later to be proved startlingly

prescient—the theories of the ancient Greek atomists for example. More importantly, these thinkers established the processes of philosophy, ways of thinking and organizing our thoughts. We must remember that these ideas are only a small part of a philosopher's thinking—usually the conclusion to a longer line of reasoning.

Science and society

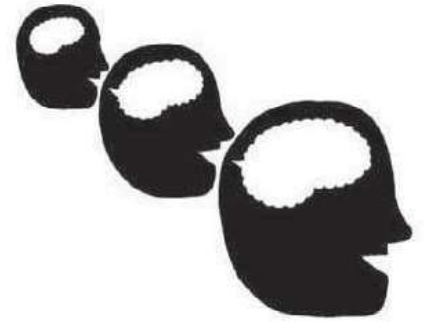
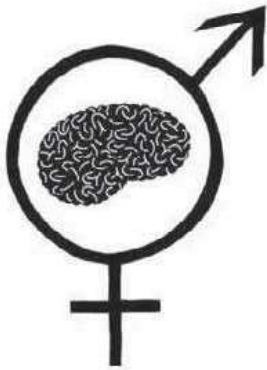
These ideas spread their influence beyond philosophy too. Some have spawned mainstream scientific, political, or artistic movements. Often the relationship between science and philosophy is a back-and-forth affair, with ideas from one informing the other. Indeed, there is a whole branch of philosophy that studies the thinking behind



Scepticism is the first step towards truth.

Denis Diderot





scientific methods and practices. The development of logical thinking affected how math evolved and became the basis for the scientific method, which relies on systematic observation to explain the world. Ideas about the nature of the self and consciousness have developed into the science of psychology.

The same is true of philosophy's relationship with society. Ethics of all sorts found adherents in political leaders throughout history, shaping the societies we live in today, and even prompting revolutions. The ethical decisions made in all kinds of professions have moral dimensions that are informed by the ideas of the great thinkers of philosophy.

Behind the ideas

The ideas in this book have come from people living in societies and cultures which have shaped those ideas. As we examine the ideas, we get a picture of certain national and regional characteristics, as well as a flavor of the times they lived in.

The philosophers presented here emerge as distinct personalities—some thinkers are optimistic, others pessimistic; some are meticulous and painstaking, others think in broad sweeps; some express themselves in clear, precise language, others in a poetic way,

and still more in dense, abstract language that takes time to unpick. If you read these ideas in the original texts, you will not only agree or disagree with the what they say, and follow the reasoning by which they reached their conclusions, but also get a feeling of what kind of person is behind it. You might, for example, warm to the witty and charming Hume, appreciating his beautifully clear prose, while not altogether feeling at home with what he has to say; or find Schopenhauer both persuasive and a delight to read, while getting the distinct feeling that he was not a particularly likeable man.

Above all these thinkers were (and still are) interesting and stimulating. The best were also great writers too, and reading their original writings can be as rewarding as reading literature; we can appreciate not just their literary style, but also their philosophical style, the way they present their arguments. As well as being thought-provoking, it can be as uplifting as great art, as elegant as a mathematical proof, and as witty as an after-dinner speaker.

Philosophy is not simply about ideas—it's a way of thinking. There are frequently no right or wrong answers, and different philosophers

often come to radically different conclusions in their investigations into questions that science cannot—and religion does not—explain.

Enjoying philosophy

If wonder and curiosity are human attributes, so too are the thrill of exploration and the joy of discovery. We can gain the same sort of “buzz” from philosophy that we might get from physical activity, and the same pleasure that we enjoy from an appreciating the arts. Above all, we gain the satisfaction of arriving at beliefs and ideas that are not handed down or forced upon us by society, teachers, religion, or even philosophers, but through our own individual reasoning. ■



The beginning of thought is in disagreement—not only with others but also with ourselves.

Eric Hoffer

