

What is Philosophy?¹

Socrates: But probably it's no easier, I imagine, to distinguish that kind of person than it is to distinguish gods. Certainly the genuine philosophers "who haunt our cities" [as Homer says]—by contrast to the fake ones—take on all sorts of different appearances just because of other people's ignorance. As philosophers look down from above at the lives of those below them, some people think they're worthless and other think they're everything in the world. Sometimes they take on the appearance of statesmen, and sometimes of sophists. Sometimes, too, they might give the impression that they're completely insane.

-- Plato, *Sophist*²

I. Introduction

What is philosophy? This is a question as old as the discipline itself, when people began to question received traditions and ask -- What is truth? What is the good? Why be moral? Of what is the world made? Is change real or illusory? What is the ideal form of government? How can we think logically? Can we ever have certitude? What can we know? How can we know?

As these people began to articulate and debate these questions, they tried to define the name, nature, format, and scope of this particular kind of discourse that they were practicing. How did this mode of questioning and explanation differ from other modes? What relevance does this have for one's life? Should one even engage in it, even over and against involvement in political life?

Many offered various answers and accounts, trying to show what exactly it was that philosophers "did," and why it was valuable. Plato, for example, tried to demonstrate how the practices and inquiries of his teacher, Socrates, were different from those of the rival Sophists.³ Aristotle, Plato's pupil, sought to put his own spin on what he thought philosophy was. Others in antiquity, such as Diogenes Laërtius⁴, offered their own descriptions of what philosophy was, and who practiced it. And so the conversation has continued—from antiquity through the medieval and early modern periods to the present day, these questions have not ceased. Philosophers still debate about the nature and practice of philosophy into the present day.

I have written this paper with two potential audiences in mind. The first group consists of general readers who may know nothing about philosophy. For them, I hope to offer a sense of the nature of philosophy, along with its origins, purpose, and value. The second group comprises students who may have a previous but brief exposure to philosophy in other fields, such as literature or politics. For them, I have a two-fold goal in mind: to show that philosophy is not merely a justification for some other end, such as politics, nor is it a purely subjective orientation or personal world-view, for which a justification is unnecessary.⁵

I will address five topics in this paper. First, I will offer a prolegomena to a definition of philosophy. Secondly, I will examine the various areas into which we can divide philosophy. Thirdly, I will outline how one might approach the study of philosophy.

Fourthly, I will look at how philosophy can be of great benefit and impact on the reader's life. Finally, I will offer my conclusions, along with a short bibliography of general resources, to pique the reader's interest, and invite them to enter into the philosophical conversation.

With this stated, let us turn now to an examination of the nature of philosophy.

II. Prolegomena to a Definition

Before answering the question of philosophy's height, depth, and competence, we must know how philosophizing is done. How do philosophers think? How do their thoughts emerge from the life they live and the philosophical, literary, scientific, religious, or theological traditions with which they have become familiar? What and how do they borrow from their predecessors? How do they converse with one another, teach their pupils, influence their audiences, develop and update their skills? How do some of them inaugurate revolutions, while others make themselves useful as teachers, interpreters, or editors?

-- A.T. Peperzak, *Thinking*⁶

So, then, what exactly is philosophy? This is a difficult question to answer, even for philosophers. Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask: what is philosophy like? I will attempt to answer this latter question in this section.

As historical background: philosophy is several millennia old. In the West, testimony indicates that philosophy originated in the 7th century BCE, in the Greek colonies in Ionia (i.e., the western coast of present-day Turkey.) During this time, reports state that Thales of Miletus, traditionally regarded as the first philosopher, offered a natural, rather than a supernatural, account of the world, using the natural science of his day. Thales, along with his contemporaries and their successors, sought to offer accounts of the world and humanity that challenged accounts based on the Homeric and Hesiodic mythologies of their time. This questioning has continued to the present time, in various forms.⁷

In spite of its long history and presence, there is the perception that philosophy is an esoteric and technical subject, of interest only to specialists and academics. However, the reality is that "philosophical" questions are often those that occur to many persons in their everyday lives. Far from being obscure and abstruse, philosophy touches on fundamental questions of human existence and the nature of the world in which persons live. The difference between ordinary questioning and philosophical questioning is, in part, that philosophy attempts to examine our ordinary questions in a more systematic and disciplined way.⁸

What then, are some of the characteristics of philosophy? I will suggest that there are four distinctive aspects of philosophy: wonder, engagement with its past, self-critique, and internal tensions, each of which we will look at in turn.

A. Philosophy begins in wonder.

Wonder is the root from which philosophy arises. In fact, both Plato and Aristotle argue that philosophy begins in ordinary wonder, when people look at the world around them,

and inquire about its origins and nature, and their place and functioning therein.⁹ As Pieper notes:

Philosophizing means distancing oneself, not from the things of everyday life, but from their common interpretations, from the prevailing valuations given these things. And this distancing takes place, not on the basis of any decision to stand out, to think “differently” from the many, but because, suddenly, the things have acquired a new physiognomy. It is just this state of affairs, that is, that the more profound physiognomy of the real becomes perceivable in the manipulate things of everyday life (and not in the realm of “essences,” distinct from the “everyday” or whatever one chooses to call it); that is, that the extraordinary, that which is no longer self-evident concerning these things opposes itself to our gaze, which is directed towards the things encountered in everyday experience—it is just this state of affairs that corresponds to that inner event in which one has always recognized, as constituting the origin of philosophy—wonder.¹⁰

What do I mean by “wonder”? Following Pieper, I will not equate “wonder” with “doubt,” despite a strong inclination in modern thought to do so. Rather,

[t]he meaning of wonder lies in the experience that the world is more profound, more commodious, more mysterious than it appears to our everyday understanding. The inner intentionality of wonder is fulfilled in the development of the sense of mystery. This inner directionality does not aim at raising doubt but at awakening the knowledge that Being as Being is incomprehensible and mysterious—that Being is itself a mystery in the authentic sense, not sheer impassibility, not absurdity, not even genuine obscurity. Mystery implies, rather, that a reality is for this reason incomprehensible, namely, that its light is unquenchable, unfathomable, inexhaustible. This is what the person in wonder actually experiences.¹¹

I would caution, though, that I do not mean to imply anything strange, mystical, or uncanny in my understanding of wonder. On the contrary, my understanding is more akin to Wittgenstein’s statement: “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.”¹² It is more akin to a child’s sense of the world, where everything is new and fresh, unencumbered with concepts and labels. Wonder is, in short, the realization that our ordinary understanding and sense of the world does not capture the totality of the reality of the world. Furthermore, wonder can embrace a religious dimension, but “religious” understood broadly: religious, not only in the sense that Pieper, coming out of the Thomistic tradition, articulates, but it also can embrace a general awe at the universe, such as Russell expresses.¹³

To sum up: philosophy begins in wonder. Wonder realizes that the ordinary bourgeois¹⁴ conceptions, ideas, and understandings that we have received, based on utility, expediency, and conformity, are not the totality of what is, nor do they capture the fullness and complexity of the world and all that is therein. Wonder questions, but it does not necessarily doubt or destroy. It may reject a bad, incomplete, naïve, or childish

version concept, idea or understanding, but only so that it may discover, even if only provisionally, a better version of that same concept, idea, or understanding. Thus, it is important to realize that philosophical wonder, *in questioning received views or traditions, is not necessarily inimical to, or destructive of, those views or traditions*, though to those obsessed with maintaining control and power over others, it may seem to be doing just that.¹⁵

B. Philosophy engages its past and history in present day debates.

Philosophy's engagement with its past, even in its contemporary discourse, is a different practice from other disciplines. Take chemistry and the theory of phlogiston, for example. In the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, scientists proposed that flammable objects emitted a substance called "phlogiston" as they burned, and was responsible for combustion and for rusting. As scientists conducted further empirical research, they challenged the hypothesis, and at the end of the eighteenth century Lavoisier definitively discredited it.¹⁶

No chemist today uses the phlogiston hypothesis to conduct research on combustion and oxidation. Philosophy, unlike empirical science, for the most part returns frequently to its past in order to continue its present-day inquiries.

However, we must qualify this statement. As Kaufman (2006) notes, certain areas of philosophical practice rooted in the modern paradigm see little purpose in looking at older parts of the tradition. Likewise, an analysis of philosophy's past can become more of an exercise in history than a continuation of the philosophical conversation.

Nonetheless, even with these qualifications, philosophy's engagement with its past can often lead to striking and profound insights and critiques¹⁷, insights and critiques that have application for its current practice, and beyond.

C. Philosophy self-critiques its method, practice, and worth.

A third feature of philosophical inquiry is that it is self-critiquing in a way that other disciplines are not. What do I mean by this? The reader might offer the rebuttal that empirical science is self-critiquing, and that this self-critique is part of how scientists conduct and further their research and inquiries.

In one sense, this rebuttal is accurate. Science and philosophy are self-critiquing. However, the difference in the critique is a profound one.

The self-critique of science involves looking at old data in light of new data and with new tools and techniques, questioning the set up and conduct of experiments, testing hypotheses, and the like. What empirical science does not critique is the scientific method: the process of generating hypotheses, testing these hypotheses, replicating results, and generating theories remains unchallenged in the practice of empirical science, even if it questions the data, experiments, and the like found in its practice.

Perhaps an example might clarify what I am trying to explain. When Bakker (1986) challenged what he called the “orthodoxy” surrounding theories about dinosaurs, he did so by using the scientific method to question the results and assumptions of earlier paleontologists, who had also used the scientific method. What Bakker critiqued, in short, was how earlier scientists had used the scientific method, and the conclusions drawn from the data obtained, not the method itself that underpins the conduct and definition of empirical science as we know it.

Philosophy, on the other hand, critiques its own method and essence. Even from its earliest days, philosophy has had something of an identity crisis, trying to determine what exactly it is, and how exactly to conduct itself. While the historical portrait that I paint below consists, admittedly, of broad brush strokes, it should give a sense of how philosophy has critiqued, and continues to critique, itself across the millennia.

As I noted above, one of the underlying themes of the Platonic dialogues is to further discussion on what exactly philosophical discourse is, and how it differs from other forms of discourse. Jaeger (1948) outlines how philosophers and its hagiographers in antiquity struggled to practice and present philosophy between the tensions of being faithful to both the *bios theoretikos* (the contemplative life) and the *bios politikos* (the engaged life, participating in the political life of the city-state that was at the heart of the Greek world.)

This identity crisis continues throughout the history of philosophy. Medieval philosophers in the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions tried to discover how faith and philosophy might work together, though not without a good deal of discomfort and pain.

In the early Modern period, Descartes questioned the Scholastic tradition in which he was trained, trying to set philosophy on a more scientific, mathematical, and epistemological model, one that was followed in large part in the subsequent tradition. (Indeed, much of the focus of philosophy in the modern era, even down to our own time, will be on questions of epistemology and the possibility and conditions of knowledge.) Vico (1709/1990), in turn, critiqued the Cartesian model and the modern conception of philosophy. Kant initiated his “Copernican revolution” in philosophy by demanding that the world conform to the human mind, not the human mind to the world. Many will grapple with Kant’s revolution throughout the late 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Another figure who casts a long shadow across the late 18th and early 19th centuries is Hegel. Hegel argued that he could “complete” philosophy and end its discourse. Though many found this Hegelian project compelling, others, like Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* (1843/1994) attacked it, as did Nietzsche.

In the twentieth century, Heidegger (1927/1962) called for a remembering of the question of Being against the traditional onto-theological metaphysics of Western philosophy. Wittgenstein likewise offered critiques of philosophy and philosophical practice in several works.¹⁸ Foucault (e.g., 1969/1972, 1977/1980) examined the power relations and structures behind discourse and knowledge, disputing the Enlightenment claims and

practices of rationality, objectivity, science, and philosophy. Kolakowski (1986/1990) and Toulmin (1990) offer broader perspectives on and objections to the assumptions that lie behind the philosophical methods and practices of post-Cartesian philosophy, and Western philosophy in general.

Finally, closer to our day, we find the debate continuing, with Kaufman (2006), Pieper (2006), Seigfried (2003), and Williams (2000) as but a few examples.¹⁹

To sum up: what we see from this historical overview is that what it means to philosophize, to be a philosopher, is constantly being called into question by the very process of philosophizing itself. This self-critique is part of what it means to philosophize; in turn, this critique is rooted in three related but separate tensions, which we will examine next.

D. There are three related, but separate, tensions that lie at the heart of philosophy.

It seems, to me, that three tensions lie at the heart of philosophy.²⁰

Tension 1: The tension between the ideal (the sage who knows) and the reality (the philosopher who seeks facing the limitations of human knowledge).

Etymologically, the word “philosophy” derives from classical Greek and means “love of wisdom.” Many philosophers in the ancient world held that the sage, the one who knew, was, at best, an ideal towards which the seeker, i.e., the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, strives, but never reaches.²¹

Does this mean that philosophy never discovers answers to its questions? No. Answers are found – then critiqued, reformulated, and challenged again – all part of a conversation that has been going on for two-and-a-half millennia, and continues to this day. At best, our answers to these questions are provisional.

The provisional nature of philosophical answers does not mean that all philosophy dissolves into skepticism, at least not in the ordinary sense of the word: that no certitude is possible, that there is no basis for judging the truth or validity of statements. Granted, there are strains of philosophy that do argue just this, but they do not represent the whole tradition. What the philosophical tradition encourages is a tolerance for ambiguity, ambivalence, nuance, and subtlety towards the world. This does not mean that one can never know anything, or that one must embrace relativism, only that simplistic black-and-white thinking is not one of the characteristics of philosophy.

Part of the reason why this tension is so problematic lies in its conflict with one of our cultural assumptions: “progress,” i.e., for a line of inquiry to have value, it must be ever progressing in an upward line towards a state of perfection leading to certitude. Progress tells us that we “must” have answers, ever clearer, ever more profound. If there is no “progress,” in this sense, then progress calls the value of the particular line of inquiry into question.²² This is, at best, a problematic assumption, and one that we should challenge.

What philosophy encourages (or should encourage) on the other hand, is *epistemic humility*. In simpler terms, it encourages us to be mindful of the limits of what we can know, and realistically ascertain how far we can successfully pursue answers to philosophical questions. Against the dogmatist, whether secular or religious, who “knows” with absolute certainty²³, the philosopher offers a humbler account, delimiting the limits of knowledge, but open to exploring what is available within these limits, and redefining the boundaries as necessary. Granted, there are extreme positions – yet, even radical positions, such as that of Sextus Empiricus or Montaigne²⁴, speak more of a humble awareness that we must be careful in what we claim what we know.

Perhaps Pieper summarizes epistemic humility best:

From its inception, philosophy has in no way understood itself to be a superior form of knowledge but rather has consciously regarded itself as a form of knowing self-abnegation. According to legend—by then an already ancient legend—the terms “philosophy” and “philosopher” were coined by Pythagoras—and that in marked contrast with the words *sophia* and *sophos*: no man [sic] is wise and knowing; wise and knowing is God alone. And for that reason man can at best deem himself a loving seeker of wisdom, a *philosophos*.²⁵

Epistemic humility, like knowledge itself, remains an ideal, and it would be naïve to suggest that all those who practice philosophy practice this virtue.²⁶ Yet it is an ideal worth striving for, not only in philosophy, but in one’s everyday life.

Tension 2: The tension between the contemplative and the engaged life

How “practical” and “engaged” must philosophy be? This question gets back to philosophy’s self-critique, and it is as old as the discipline itself.

As I have mentioned in several other places in this paper, Jaeger (1948) outlines the tension in philosophy between contemplative life and engaged political life in the classical era – during this time, philosophers tried to balance and honor both lives, but often without great success, as Jaeger notes.

Much of this lack of success is captured by the caricature of the absent-minded philosophy professor, with his head in the clouds – the well-known story of Thales falling into the ditch while observing the heavens is a classic example of this view.²⁷ Yet, Thales was not completely helpless; when he needed to, he could turn his philosophical knowledge to his advantage, as Aristotle relates:

There is the anecdote of Thales the Milesian and his financial scheme, which involves the principle of universal application, but is attributed to him on account of his reputation for wisdom. He was reproached for his poverty, which was supposed to show that philosophy was of no use. According to the story, he knew by his skill in the stars while it was yet winter that there would be a great harvest of olives in the coming year; so, having a little money, he gave deposits for the

use of all the olive-presses in Chios and Miletus, which he hired at a low price because no one bid against him. When the harvest-time came, and many were wanted all at once and of a sudden, he let them out at any rate which he pleased, and made a great quantity of money. Thus he showed the world that philosophers can easily be rich if they like, but that their ambition is of another sort²⁸

Still, caricatures aside, the uneasy relationship between philosophical practice and political engagement can turn deadly. Socrates was forced to commit suicide after being convicted of political crimes.²⁹ Plato tried to counsel Dionysius II on kingship—and Dionysius rewarded him by selling him into slavery when he challenged the king's tyranny. Aristotle had to flee Athens partly because of his association with Alexander the Great. Nero forced Seneca to commit suicide, when the latter fell out of favor with his former pupil. Boethius executed after falling afoul of Theodoric, the Ostrogoth king of Italy.

More ominous examples of the tension between philosophical practice and political engagement are 20th century philosophers who were involved with some of the most evil regimes that arose during this time. The case of Martin Heidegger is an obvious example, with his brief but profound involvement with the Nazi party in Germany.³⁰ Another example is Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini's court philosopher (Giovanni Gentile [2007]). A third example is Carl Schmitt, the jurist and legal scholar who provided some of the intellectual and legal framework for the Nazi party (Carl Schmitt [2007]).

Why do I list these men? I list them because I want to illustrate that the separation of philosophical practice, of philosophical questioning merely for the sake of questioning, is not necessarily a harmless enterprise performed by eccentrics. The failure to connect critical philosophical inquiry with political engagement can leave a person open to involvement with evil regimes and people. And, even if one does make the connection, there is no guarantee that philosophy will bring success or a good political regime about.

Must philosophy, then, be practical? My answer would be: yes and no.

Philosophy should be practical, in the sense that William James speaks of: "The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one."³¹ It should affect how we live our lives, but, being non-bourgeois, even challenging the bourgeois, it stands at odds with the everyday demands for "effectiveness" and "utility." We philosophize for its own sake, without need for it to be "practical" or "useful," as Russell argues in several places.³² And this can cause friction between the philosopher and the world in which she dwells.

Tension 3: The tension between the philosophical search for wisdom and the philosophical search for knowledge

Kaufman (2006) argues that there is a tension between an account of philosophy as the love of wisdom, and an account of philosophy as a search for knowledge; philosophy as a

“way of life” (Hadot [1995]) and philosophy as establishing certitude of knowledge. It is important for us to note that “wisdom” and “knowledge” are not synonyms – in fact, they are, in a way, opposites, as Kaufman contrasts:

The term ‘wisdom’ suggests a synthesis of intelligence and sound judgment. The wise person is one whose intelligence is prudentially applied to life, in *all* of its many, varying dimensions. ‘Prudence’, which means ‘good sense’, in addition to sound judgment, implies good *habits*, the development of which requires extensive, varied experience, and because wisdom is so intimately connected with experience, it cannot be understood in isolation from the common beliefs and practices, which constitute the *framework* within which one’s experience is interpreted. The wise person is *not* one who has adopted the ‘view from nowhere’—to employ an expression which aptly describes mainline philosophy’s preferred stance—for he cannot separate the questions ‘Is it true?’ ‘Is it good?’ and ‘Is it right?’ from the questions ‘What will be its impact on real people and real life?’ and ‘What will be its effect on that which is already in place?’ which require us to pay attention not only to current opinions and practices but to the opinions and practices of our predecessors.

In contrast with being intelligent or knowledgeable, for which one can imagine entirely general, abstract definitions, in terms of IQ or the number of justified, true beliefs one holds in a particular subject, what it is to be wise is much more ineffable, something that can be fully comprehended only in its particular instances; that is, in the context of a specific cultural and social framework. To be knowledgeable in physics or biology means the same thing, whether one is in New York or Bombay, but wisdom in such things as raising children, conducting business, or governing a state will mean entirely *different* things, depending upon the time, place, and people one is talking about.³³

The thrust of the remainder of Kaufman’s article is that the account of philosophy as love of wisdom is, today, the minority view in mainstream philosophy, especially in the Anglo-American tradition. Philosophy as a search for knowledge, rooted in Plato’s explorations of the conditions for and the possibility of knowledge, is the far more common view.³⁴

The reader might think, initially, that this distinction is but another minor quibble among specialists. However, in light of what we discussed above, about Heidegger, Gentile, and Schmitt, for example, the tension takes on a deeper urgency. It is all well and good to be examining what it is that one can know, and how this is common regardless of what culture or nation one belongs to. Yet, losing a sense of what it means to live well, a sense of wisdom, of losing a sense of identity with those persons around us, perhaps even losing a sense of what it means to be human may be not only tragic, but morally reprehensible as well.

E. Summary of Section II.

To summarize so far: in working towards articulating we have looked at four distinctive characteristics of what philosophy is like. Firstly, we saw that philosophy emerges out of a sense of wonder, a shift in perspective that changes not our location, but our perception of the world. Secondly, we saw that philosophy engages with its past in a way that is unlike other disciplines, such as the empirical sciences. Thirdly, I argued that philosophy engages in a critique of its essence and method. Finally, I presented three unresolved tensions that dwell at the heart of philosophy: the tension between the ideal of realized knowledge/wisdom and the reality of human ignorance and limits; the tension between philosophical speculation and practical life; and the tension between the mainline tradition of philosophy as a search for knowledge and the minority tradition of philosophy as a way of living well, and a love of wisdom.

With this examination out of the way, we are now ready to offer a provisional definition of philosophy.

F. Definition.

Given what I have stated above, we might offer the following as a prolegomena to a definition of what philosophy is like. In keeping in line with epistemic humility, I will say that this definition is, at best, provisional. We need to critique and refine it through philosophical conversation and analysis, and the reader should not take this as a finished product. So, with this in mind, I offer the following:

Philosophy is the perennial search for truth. It is born of wonder, engaged with its history, self-critiquing, and filled with pregnant tensions about the limits of human knowledge, the relation between philosophical speculation and practical life, and the relation of wisdom and knowledge.

What do you think, reader? Does this definition resonate with you? What am I missing? I invite you to join in the conversation with me and to [let me know](#) what you think.

Things that I have not included in this definition are the various areas into which we can divide philosophical inquiry and study. We might add, as an addendum to the definition, the following:

Furthermore, philosophy addresses questions of how to think (logic, epistemology, and philosophy of mind), how to act (ethics and political philosophy), and how the world is (metaphysics and philosophy of science), among many others.

What are these areas? Let us move to the next section and find out.

III. Areas of Specialization

As a discipline, philosophy examines a wide range of human experience and inquiry. This range includes the nature of the world, logic, language, thinking, science, morality,

political theory, law, religion, and aesthetics. Philosophy also studies historical periods, such as classical philosophy, medieval philosophy, early Modern philosophy, and the like.

Formally, we may divide the study of philosophy into many areas, both topical and historical.

A. Topical Areas.

Metaphysics. “Metaphysics” is a word loaded with connotations of being an esoteric and complicated subject.³⁵ Yet, the origins of the word are actually quite pedestrian: it simply refers to the location where the text we call the *Metaphysics* was placed in the Aristotelian corpus. The *Metaphysics* is simply *ta meta ta phūsika*, or, “that [subject matter] which comes after the *Physics*.”

Metaphysics, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word, is

[t]he branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things or reality, including questions about being, substance, time and space, causation, change, and identity (which are presupposed in the special sciences but do not belong to any one of them); theoretical philosophy as the ultimate science of being and knowing.³⁶

Metaphysics asks—*What am I? What makes me the same person even though I am different from what I was? Can there be two distinct things that are the same in every conceivable respect? What does it mean for one thing to be the cause of another?*

Philosophy of Mind. Philosophy of mind is related to psychology, in that it seeks to understand how the human mind works. Those interested in the philosophy of mind ask—*What is a mind? How is the mental different from the physical? How or in what sense can a biological process be a mental process?*

Epistemology. Epistemology complements the study of the philosophy of mind by exploring the possibilities, conditions, and limits of human knowledge. Epistemological questions include—*Does all our knowledge come from experience of the world? Are there truths that are in some sense prior to experience? Can we know anything for certain, or are we left only with skepticism?*

Philosophy of Science. Philosophy of science explores what it means to practice science, how this has changed over time, and issues of power and knowledge that are involved in scientific inquiry.³⁷ Philosophy of science asks—*How do scientific changes come about? Is science truly value-free and objective, or are there issues of power and control implicitly involved in its workings?*

Philosophy of Mathematics. Those interested in the philosophy of mathematics examine the nature of numbers and mathematical operations. This area might consider—*What is*

*the nature and ground of mathematical truths? Is there an inherent ambiguity in the algebraic variable?*³⁸

Ethics and Political Philosophy. Ethics and political philosophy address human functioning and interaction on a personal and social level. In this area, one explores questions like these—*Do we act freely? If we do not, are we morally responsible for our actions? How can moral responsibility be understood in relation to physical science or psychology? What roles do reason and passion play in human life? What relationship is there between an action's being right and its producing good consequences? What relationship, if any, is there between being happy and being morally worthy? What is the difference between just and unjust political institutions?*

Logic. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word, logic is

[t]he branch of philosophy that treats of the forms of thinking in general, and more especially of inference and of scientific method. (Prof. J. Cook Wilson.) Also, since the work of Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), a formal system using symbolic techniques and mathematical methods to establish truth-values in the physical sciences, in language, and in philosophical argument.³⁹

The formal study of logic has been an integral part of philosophy since the classical area, especially after Aristotle.⁴⁰ Furthermore, logic is the area of philosophy that most resembles a “science,” in the modern formal sense of the word. This resemblance stems from logic’s being verifiable according to method and processes that can be repeated again and again.

Another way to view logic is that it is structurally similar to mathematics. Whereas mathematics treats of numbers and proportions, logic, on the other hand, deals with arguments and propositions as they are given in language.

Finally, logic provides the structural underpinnings for conclusions in the other branches of philosophy.

Those interested in logic inquire—*what does it mean for a statement to be true, or to be valid? What sort of fallacies exist, and how can one avoid them?*

Philosophy of Religion. The University of Aberdeen, Department of Philosophy’s *Glossary of Technical Terms* defines philosophy of religion as “The branch of philosophy which discusses the nature and existence of God.” We could add to this definition that philosophy of religion also examines questions about the nature of religious belief and its relation to philosophy and human life in general.

Philosophers of religion consider—*“Does God exist? What sort of evidence could justify belief in God? If there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world? Is there life after death? Do we have souls? How could we know anything about God?”*⁴¹ We might also ask—*What sort of (human) beliefs qualify as “religious” beliefs? Can such*

beliefs have a philosophical grounding? What is the ethical, or metaphysical, value of such “religious” beliefs?

Aesthetics. Aesthetics looks broadly at art and artistic experience. Questions about aesthetics include: *What standards do we use when we assess a work of art? How do these standards compare with those used in other sorts of evaluation? What is the connection here with knowledge and morality?*⁴²

As noted in at the beginning of Section II., above, philosophical questions begin in questions a person might ask in their ordinary experience. After reading this list, one might, therefore, be surprised to discover that one has been practicing philosophy, in a sense, for some time before formally studying the discipline.

B. Historical Areas.

Historically, we might consider philosophy as falling into several periods. It is important to note that these areas are somewhat arbitrary 19th century divisions, which do not always divide neatly into discrete periods. Often, there is overlap between one period and another.

The Classical period. This period covers roughly from the 7th century BCE to approximately the 4th century CE. There is some overlap with the medieval period – St. Augustine of Hippo, regarded as an early medieval thinker, is a contemporary of the last of the classical philosophers, the Neo-Platonists, who were active during the late Roman Empire.

The Medieval period. The Medieval period runs from approximately the 4th century CE to about 1600. Some might split out the Renaissance as its own period (c. 1400-1600). It is also important to note that even early Modern thinkers like Descartes have roots in the medieval period.⁴³

The early Modern period. The boundaries of early modernity are somewhat fluid and debatable.⁴⁴ Scholars often use the year 1600 as a starting point, although some might argue that Montaigne should be included as an early Modern, though he lived prior to 1600. Others argue that modernity truly does not begin until the late 1800s, when Freud began publishing his first works on psychoanalysis. However, rather than bicker, I will suggest that the early Modern period runs roughly from 1600 to 1800.

After the early Modern period, the philosophical landscape begins to grow more complex. Kant will have a tremendous impact on philosophy in the Western tradition from the late 19th century onwards.⁴⁵ Furthermore, as Ferrier notes⁴⁶, Kant was, in a way, one of the founders of German Romanticism and Idealism, though he would not assign himself among their number. How is this so? This is because the generation that followed Kant was reacting and responding to the problems they found in his work. Figures such as Jacobi, Schelling, Novalis, Schlegel, and Fichte, along with their

contemporaries, were part of a major reaction to Kant, and this was a major development and period in the history of philosophy even before Hegel came along.

Following Kant and the post-Kantian Romantic reaction, Hegel and his heirs dominate 19th century philosophy in continental Europe. What was the Hegelian project? Certainly, I cannot give complete justice to someone as complex as Hegel in a few lines, but, the short answer is that Hegel attempted, in his writings, to offer a systematic philosophy of history, one in which the unfolding of Spirit (Geist). In the unfolding of Spirit, divisions that we encounter in the world (e.g., freedom and slavery, the temporal and the eternal) are overcome in syntheses as history progresses towards its conclusion: a time of freedom and perfection when the last division is overcome and humanity reaches its perfection.⁴⁷

Born in a time of revolution, when the old regimes were falling and a new dawn of human freedom and equality seemed imminent, and articulated in quasi-religious language, Hegel's philosophy exerted a tremendous influence on many across the Continent, especially those who were engaged in overcoming oppression, whether political, economic, or religious. This explains, in part, why it was so influential on Marx, "who applied its critical ideas about (progressive) history while stripping much of the (philosophical) Idealism from them."⁴⁸ (Indeed, the specter of Marx will haunt Europe, and the rest of the world, for many years until the late 20th century). This situation will hold until Nietzsche, coming at the end of the 19th century, puts the final nail in the coffin of the Hegelian project, effectively ending a philosophical debate that had raged for the previous seventy years. Nietzsche will deny that there is such a thing as historical progress along with notion of the "absolute," in Hegel's sense of the word, offering instead, among other things, the Übermensch and the Will to Power, notions that the Nazi party will twist to its own ends.⁴⁹

Hegel will not have as great an influence in the Anglo-American tradition after the mid-19th century.⁵⁰ A shift towards a more scientific model of inquiry and education will drive philosophy in the United Kingdom and the United States in a different direction from its Continental counterpart. The split will become so pronounced that, by the mid-20th century, philosophy as it is practiced in the Anglo-American tradition will find communication with philosophy in the Continental tradition difficult, if not impossible, and vice versa.⁵¹

Contemporary philosophical discourse is starting to break down the analytic-Continental divide; many of the barriers that existed throughout much of the 20th century are coming down, and people are speaking to each other across the divide. It remains to be seen how this exchange will unfold as the 21st century progresses.

C. Summary of Section III.

To summarize Section III: we can divide the study of philosophy into a number of areas and historical periods. Each of these provides a doorway into the larger discourse that is philosophy. We can see that philosophy addresses many questions about human life and

existence across the millennia. As noted earlier, philosophy studies these questions in a much more systematic fashion. We will look at the study of philosophy in our next section.

IV. The Study of Philosophy

How, then, does one study philosophy?

One way would be to focus on a particular question or set of questions, or on a particular figure, school, or period of history. Yet, over the long term, such a path would be counter-productive and limiting. No question, set of questions, figure, school, or period exists in isolation. Those who study philosophy must account for other questions, figures, schools, and periods in their inquiry.

For example, one might be interested in the topic of ethics. Yet, to offer a robust account of ethics, one will need to consider not only what it means to act rightly, but also questions of epistemology and philosophy of mind (e.g., how can one know what is good?), as well as metaphysics and phenomenology (e.g., what does it mean to be a human being with the particular kind of body that human beings have?) Furthermore, questions of ethics do not exist in a vacuum. What have other figures in the tradition said about the topic? Do they have views that seem promising in helping the would-be philosopher articulate their own account?

Given all of this, it should be clear the practice of philosophy cannot be limited in scope. It is necessary for the would-be philosopher to familiarize her- or himself with the concerns of several branches of philosophy, along with contemporary and historical treatments of these issues.

With the broad range of philosophy's subject matter, it should be clear that there is no one door opening onto philosophy. A would-be philosopher might ask with what topic, philosopher, or school she or he should begin with. The answer is that that will depend on the basis of their curiosity, on what has struck them as interesting.⁵²

What draws a person to philosophy? Very often people come to philosophy by questions about ethics, morality, or aesthetics. Others respond to the lure of philosophy by questions about mathematics or science. Still others might enter philosophy through an interest in a historical figure, such as Kant or Descartes, or through an encounter with a philosophical text, such as Plato's *Republic* or Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Nevertheless, regardless of which door a student might enter into philosophy, there are others doors to enter and explore, entries which a broad study of the discipline helps to facilitate.

In any event, it is generally best to start, as the old cliché says, at the beginning. This might be wrestling with a basic text, such as one of Plato's dialogues, or Descartes' *Meditations*. Or, one might try a historical survey, such as Russell's *History of Western*

Philosophy.⁵³ But, a person might begin with a more advanced text, if she or he has some prior knowledge of the subject matter.

Finally, the range and generality of philosophical concerns often makes it appropriate and fruitful, to combine the study of philosophy with that of other disciplines, such as mathematics, psychology, law, or bioethics. Philosophical study can help in understanding the basic assumptions that underlie many disciplines, many of which have roots in philosophy, e.g. psychology.

I must note one caveat: philosophy, by its nature, is a conversation, whether with interlocutors, through a series of papers or books, or with a text. Philosophers speak their ideas, which others then challenge, break down, refine, and perhaps even jettison. Philosophical conversation can be intense, sometimes even a “blood sport.”⁵⁴ It is an unfortunate reality that philosophical discourse can, at times, be uncharitable (at best) and cruel and vicious (at worst). Epistemic humility, developing a thick skin, and not taking challenges personally are virtues worth cultivating in one’s philosophical training.

We have covered a lot of ground so far in this paper. Yet, we have not answered two very important questions: *Why study philosophy?* *What is the value of doing so?* We turn now to our next section, in order to answer them.

V. The Value of Philosophy

It is the more necessary to consider this question [of the value of philosophy], in view of the fact that many men [sic], under the influence of science or of practical affairs, are inclined to doubt whether philosophy is anything better than innocent but useless trifling, hair-splitting distinctions, and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible.

-- Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*⁵⁵

Philosophy is not the concern of those who pass through Divinity and Greats, but of those who pass through birth and death. Nearly all the more awful and abstruse statements can be put in words of one syllable, from ‘A child is born’ to ‘A soul is damned.’ If the ordinary man [sic] may not discuss existence, why should he be asked to conduct it?

-- G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, “The Philosopher”⁵⁶

Morpheus: Welcome...to the desert of the real...

-- *The Matrix* (1999)⁵⁷

Why study philosophy? What value does it have? These are logical questions to ask, although there a good deal of bourgeois thinking behind them. It is important to separate out a desire for mere utility and practical benefit as we begin this section of the paper.

Philosophy is not a practical subject, in the sense that it will train one for a particular profession such law, medicine, or business. Philosophy will not help one make senior partner by 35, or cure cancer, or help one govern a nation – at least, not directly.

Indirectly, the matter is completely different. The skills developed by the study of philosophy are widely applicable to many jobs and careers. How so?

Philosophy, as a discipline, requires that its practitioners develop skill in reasoning and writing. In short, the study of philosophy develops the abilities to read texts closely; to analyze positions critically; to uncover tacit presuppositions; to construct cogent arguments; and to explain and argue in clear persuasive writing.

These skills are extremely useful, and applicable to many other disciplines and a variety of careers. Skills such as these are currently in high demand from employers in many fields, and one should not dismiss them lightly. Employers often look for those who can write well and "think outside the box," and students of philosophy are well-positioned to meet these requirements.

Nevertheless, the applicability of philosophical training goes far beyond the corporate world and business. Other areas where philosophical training is relevant include, but are not limited to: law, computer science, medicine, writing, art, publishing, and psychology.

Finally, philosophical training is of great benefit to those who are considering graduate study, whether in philosophy or in other disciplines. The analytical and writing skills that people develop in philosophical training are great assets for a graduate and professional academic career.

Thus, those who choose to study philosophy do not, in any way, jeopardize their chances for success in life, regardless of how one defines "success." The student of philosophy need not suffer jokes about their being unemployable.⁵⁸ The reality is that philosophical training can be of great use in a wide variety of professional and vocational settings, and beyond.

These are the practical benefits of studying philosophy. But these are not the only benefits.

For one thing, philosophy helps to develop tolerance: a tolerance for ambiguity, ambivalence, nuance, and subtlety. One comes to accept that the world does not exist entirely in black-and-white, that there are shades of color and of grey, that situations are often far more complex than they first appear to be. This does not condemn us to relativism or skepticism; far from it. Rather, we are humbled by our own ignorance and limited vision, and approach the world and others with greater tolerance and mercy.⁵⁹

Furthermore, we must remember that philosophy is part of the humanities, i.e., those fields of study that make us human, and one of the liberal arts, i.e., a subject befitting the study of a free person. It seeks to articulate and continue fundamental questions about what it means to be human and interact in the world.⁶⁰ And, we practice philosophy for its own sake: though it may help in practical matters, the value of philosophy is intrinsic to itself. We do not philosophize solely to justify some end extrinsic to philosophy.

Moreover, even though philosophy is concerned with how one views the world, it is *not*, as I stated in the [Introduction](#), a purely subjective orientation or personal world-view, for which a justification is unnecessary. Although there is a colloquial use of "philosophy"

that includes this connotation, this sense is not one that philosophy formally embraces. Indeed, philosophical wonder should shake one out of a purely subjective or personal world-view, disorient, and challenge a person to see if their views and beliefs are justified.⁶¹

Finally, philosophy is not for automata, or for robots. Philosophy asks us to engage in a study meant for human beings.⁶² We do not approach philosophy because we want to be force-fed ready-made answers, or to be told how to live. We do not approach philosophy to learn how to “fit in,” to be “just like everyone else,” to “keep the system going.”

We philosophize because we are human. We philosophize because we are not satisfied with simplistic answers, nor do we wish to be drones of the hive, merely reproducing local economic values, beliefs, and practices.⁶³ We philosophize because something shakes us out of our slumber, freed from the chains that keep us watching shadows and puppets moving before us on the wall of the Cave. We philosophize because something leads us to see the world with new eyes – they open on to the desert of the real, but only if to see it more clearly, that the desert really is not a desert: only our clouded vision made it so.

Perhaps Russell sums up best why one studies philosophy:

Thus, to sum up our discussion of the value of philosophy; Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind is also rendered great, and become capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.⁶⁴

VI. Conclusion

We have come far through the exploration of philosophy in this paper. My hope is that I have provided the general reader with a sense of the nature of philosophy, along with its origins, purpose, and value.

In this paper, I first examined four characteristics of philosophy: its origin in wonder; its engagement with its past; its self-critique; and its internal tensions. After doing this, I offered a provisional definition of philosophy:

Philosophy is the perennial search for truth. It is born of wonder, engaged with its history, self-critiquing, and filled with pregnant tensions about the limits of human knowledge, the relation between philosophical speculation and practical life, and the relation of wisdom and knowledge.

Then, I outlined the various areas into which we can divide philosophy. After that, I discussed how one might approach the study of philosophy. Finally, I looked at how philosophy can be of great benefit and impact on the reader's life, both practically and in itself.

For my intended audiences: I hope that, for the general reader who has no knowledge of philosophy, I have shown what philosophy is like, how a person practices it, as well as its value and worth. For the student who may have some cursory knowledge of the discipline, I have endeavored to show that philosophy is not merely a justification for an end outside of itself, nor is it a purely subjective orientation or personal world-view, for which a justification is unnecessary

I will close with an invitation to the reader, to join in the philosophical conversation. Wake up from sleep; step out of the Cave; take the red pill⁶⁵ and begin to see the world with fresh eyes, with cleared vision. Philosophy will change your life, opening one to a deeper appreciation and experience of the everyday world in which you live. And, it is not a serious and dour discipline. Philosophy can be a great deal of fun—entering into the philosophical conversation is like joining a club that has been having a rollicking good time for the last two-and-a-half millennia.

So, what will it be: the blue pill, or the red pill? Whichever pill you chose, your life will never be the same afterwards.

VII. For Further Reading

Below are listed general secondary resources that may be of interest and help in learning more about the history and practice of philosophy in the Western tradition.

This list is by no means complete or exhaustive. There is a multiplicity of perspectives represented in these materials, so I advise the reader to read broadly and critically as they begin.

Please contact [me](#), if you would like a more focused bibliography on a particular topic or figure.

General Resources

- [Blackwell Companions to Philosophy](#).
- [Cambridge Companions to Philosophy](#).
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IX. End Notes

¹ I have drawn the basic outline of this overview from an overview written by [Richard Heck](#) for the Harvard University [Department of Philosophy Web site](#), in its 2003-2007 version (which is no longer live.) However, in the subsequent revisions of this outline, I have altered much of the original outline to the point where it bears very little resemblance to Heck's outline, in terms of content, form, and structure. While the words are my own, for the most part, I have credited Heck where they are not. I would also like to thank and acknowledge Sean Ferrier for helpful comments and feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

² *Sophist*, 216c-d

³ Hyland (2004, 18-30) suggests that part of what is happening over the course of the dramatic action in the dialogues *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* is an ultimately unresolved discussion on what exactly constitutes philosophical method and discourse, as opposed to that of the sophist.

⁴ Diogenes Laërtius. (1980).

⁵ I have drawn much of the wording of this paragraph from Ferrier (S.G. Ferrier, personal communication, 27 February 2007.)

⁶ Peperzak (2006), ix. I discovered Peperzak's text after I had finished the first version of this paper. There seem to be several points of similarity between his presentation and mine – any such similarities, unless I have directly referred to his book, are purely coincidental.

⁷ It is important to note that Thales' approach to knowledge is akin to what we know as empirical science today. As Pellegrin (2000), 434, notes, "Philosophy itself actually started out as physics. No one has yet seriously challenged the idea, which comes to us directly from the ancients themselves, that with the so-called Milesian school in the 7th century B.C.E a new way of considering the universe appeared, namely, philosophy." We see this immediately with Thales. Rather than citing Homer or Hesiod, testimony indicates that Thales relied on a method of empirical observation to draw his conclusions – see, for example, the story on [page 8](#) of this paper. And he was not alone in using empirical observation in antiquity; e.g., James & Thorpe (1995) present a popular account of figures such as Hiero of Alexandria, among others. Furthermore, devices like the Antikythera mechanism (Freeth et al., 2006) belie the 19th century myth that empirical science arose only in 17th century, with the previous centuries being times of benighted superstition. Finally, Graham (2006, reviewed by Austin [2007]) presents the Ionians "as progenitors of the tradition in natural science to which we ourselves belong" (Austin [2007]).

Thus, what the reader should take away from this discussion: there is a long-standing connection between philosophy and science. In fact, one might say that science is, in a way, derived from philosophy, though we cannot collapse them into each other. (Thanks to Sean Ferrier for reminding me of this.)

Also, while these early natural scientists challenged religious traditions and accounts, they were not necessarily anti-religious or atheists, though there seem to have been a few exceptions to this. (Keep in mind, though, we are trying to piece together the thought of these early philosophers from fragments and testimonia written centuries after the fact; therefore, our understanding of their thought must be provisional, at best.) Thales, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Xenophanes all use religious language and metaphor in their accounts (the reader can find their writings in Kirk, Raven, & Schofield [1983]). Thus, even when "scientific," philosophy is not necessarily inimical to religious thought and belief, though it may challenge bad presentations of that thought and belief.

⁸ While I have not taken this verbatim from Heck's original version, it bears enough similarities such that it needs crediting.

⁹ *Theaetetus*, 155d; *Metaphysics*, I,2 982^b10-25

¹⁰ Pieper (2006a), 56. One might argue that taking a different perspective on the world while not trying to think "differently" from the many, in Pieper's sense, is more appropriate for discussions about epistemology and ontology. It may be less applicable to political philosophy, where "thinking differently" from others, or trying to do so for its own sake, is more valuable. (I would like to thank Sean Ferrier for bringing this to my attention.)

Reflecting upon this, I am inclined to agree with it. Political philosophy and questioning may indeed require that one think differently from others. I would say that this illustrates one of the inherent tensions in philosophy, that between philosophical reflection for its own sake and political engagement, about which I will have more to say in [Section II.D, Tension 2](#).

However, in Pieper's defense: after reading some of his other essays in this anthology, my sense is that he is trying to argue against a long-standing, and elitist, view of The Philosopher vs. The Mob. One proponent of this view is Heidegger. As Arendt (1968), ix wrote:

There is no escape, according to Heidegger, from the "incomprehensible triviality" of this common everyday world except by withdrawal from it into that solitude which philosophers since Parmenides and Plato have opposed to the political realm...In our context, the point is that the sarcastic, perverse-sounding statement, *Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles* ("The light of the public obscures everything"), went to the very heart of the matter and actually was no more than the most succinct summing up of existing conditions.

This view is not, from what I can gather from his writings, what Pieper intends. One does not practice philosophy over and against the Mob, to gain superiority over it, or to stand apart from it in sullen self-exaltation. Rather, Pieper is inviting all who read his essays to participate, to join in, the philosophical conversation as a natural outgrowth of the wonder they experience in their quotidian existence.

¹¹ Pieper (2006a), 59-60. Ferrier (S.G. Ferrier, personal communication 27 February 2007) pointed out to me that Pieper’s description of wonder might sound Heideggerian, to a Continental philosopher, or religious, to a layperson or to an analytic philosopher. It is hard to escape either claim. Heidegger’s shadow, for better or for worse, is long, and Pieper, a contemporary, does not escape his influence. Still, Pieper does actively challenge Heidegger in other places; see, for example, Pieper (2006b) and Pieper (2006c). Furthermore, he comes out of a Thomistic background and tradition, which does not view philosophy and the religious as being at odds with each other. Indeed, for many centuries, philosophy and religion were not as rigidly separated as they are in many parts of the contemporary philosophical discourse. How well this model sits with the reader will depend on how s/he views the interaction of religion and philosophy – please see footnote 11 (below) for a further discussion of the issue.

¹² Wittgenstein (1969), 6.44; 149; the German reads: “Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern daß sie ist” (148).

¹³ Russell (1912/1990), 161. The relationship of philosophy and religion is, historically, contentious, and they have often existed in an uneasy truce.

St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in claiming that faith and philosophy could not contradict each other, was making a radical claim in his day, one that did not sit well with many of his contemporaries, who viewed Aquinas as a dangerous radical. (See Kerr [2002], 10-16, for a brief overview). Some, like Kierkegaard (1843/1994) and Unamuno (1921/1954), see a gulf between faith and philosophy that we cannot bridge. Others, like Pope John Paul II (1998), who agree with St. Thomas Aquinas, think that there is no gulf:

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves (cf. *Ex* 33:18; *Ps* 27:8-9; 63:2-3; *Jn* 14:8; *1 Jn* 3:2).

There is also the debate on whether there is such a thing as “religious philosophy,” of whatever kind: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or otherwise, as opposed to philosophy as it is practiced in the modern era. Heidegger believed that philosophy, by its very nature, had to be atheistic (please see Hemming [2002] for a more detailed analysis of Heidegger’s position.) Many in the analytic tradition would view “religious philosophy” as being based on propositions that are not empirically verifiable, and thus, meaningless. From the religious side, Pieper debates whether there can be such a thing as a purely secular philosophy, challenging Heidegger and Jaspers; see Pieper (2006c) for challenges to Heidegger and Jaspers, and Pieper (2006d) for the question of a purely secular philosophy.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the matter, but, suffice it to say that I will continue to argue that philosophy and religion are not necessarily incompatible, but neither, by the same token, must philosophy be religious. I realize that I am going against many in the modern philosophical tradition in stating these two provisions, but will stand my ground on this. I will also argue that a “religious” perspective can include something other than an adherence to a particular creed or belief system – Russell’s [final paragraph](#) in *The Problems of Philosophy* would be a good example.

In short, we need not abandon Pieper’s understanding of wonder simply because he takes a “religious” perspective, nor should we say that an atheist or non-religious philosopher is incapable of a sense of wonder, and thus unable to philosophize.

¹⁴ What do I mean by “bourgeois”? Following Pieper (2006a), I define the “bourgeois” is the ordinary world that most people experience: opaque, useful, self-evident, governed by the immediate necessities of life, the customary, conformist. The bourgeois mentality does not wonder, because it is incapable of stepping back from the “common interpretations” and “prevailing valuations” given to the world, things, and people.

In discussing this paper, Ferrier (S.G. Ferrier, personal communication, 27 February 2007) reminded me that the use of the term “bourgeois” to describe the mindset I am describing is problematic. There are too many Marxist connotations to the word, e.g., the fact that the term denotes a specific historically local

demographic: the merchant and middle-classes of Europe from the 17th through the 19th or 20th century. Can we even say that this class, as well as its manners and mores still exists? Can we truly extrapolate the term to other contemporary non-Western nations and cultures? As Ferrier noted, “To some extent, the call to break out of ‘bourgeois’ thinking simply seems like a call to break out of mainstream European thinking. Which is all well and good, but it doesn’t add anything rhetorically.”

These are excellent points, and I agree that, in using the word “bourgeois,” I am bringing in a word loaded with Marxist and historical connotations. I am not certain how we can entirely avoid these. I also agree that, in a way, I am calling for a break out of “mainstream European thinking.” Yet, I am calling for something more: what I am inviting the reader to do is to step out of their ordinary, everyday thinking (i.e., the “bourgeois”), and to see the world from a different perspective. This invitation is not dependent on historical context or milieu.

Arendt (1968), viii, might offer a more contemporary-sounding account of the sort of world-view that I am arguing that wonder challenges. When describing the doublespeak of 20th century political regimes, she writes:

...when catastrophe overtook everything and everybody, it was covered up not by realities but by the highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns. When we think of dark times and of people living and moving in them, we have to take this camouflage, emanating from and spread by “the establishment”—or “the system,” as it was then called—also into account. If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men [*sic*] by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when the light is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government,” by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality.

I would argue that this obfuscating, hollow language justifying evil political actions and regimes that Arendt outlines here is part of the “bourgeois” mindset and world from which wonder arouses us from our slumber.

Perhaps I am using “bourgeois” more for rhetorical effect than philosophical accuracy. Perhaps a better word exists that describes the perspective that wonder asks us to leave behind. Still, as I noted in my reply to Ferrier, “when it comes to describing the narrow-minded, smug, conformist philistinism that philosophy wakes us up from, ‘bourgeois’ works pretty well.” So, for lack of a better word, my use of “bourgeois” stands, for the time being.

¹⁵ That philosophical questioning, or questioning in general, inevitably leads to doubt and rejection of older ways is a contentious issue. This is especially true in these times of conformity, and renewed calls for doctrinal and ideological purity on the part of political parties, religious institutions, and the like. And there is a part of the philosophical tradition that does seek to break with tradition and begin anew, as Kaufman (2006, 132ff) points out.

To those obsessed with control, like Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor (Dostoyevsky [1880/1990]), any questioning, or person who encourages questioning, will be subversive and needing to be silenced or eliminated.

But, make no mistake: philosophy, though it may not necessarily be destructive, *is* subversive, in a way that, say, psychoanalysis, is not. Freud might question the hypocrisy and illusions found in sexual mores, sexual practice, and religion, e.g., *Civilization and its Discontents*, or *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (Freud [1930/2005], [1940/1969]). Yet, in the end, the aim of psychoanalysis is to reduce neurotic suffering to common suffering. The critique only points out societal illusions and hypocrisy; it does not offer any program or hope for change. All it does is urge people to resign themselves to the status quo, to their suffering, and to their place. Psychoanalysis cannot escape its bourgeois matrix, even as it critiques it. (This is something that Marcuse [1974] comments on in his critique of the “revisionist” neo-Freudian psychologies of the late 20th century.)

Philosophy, on the other hand, rooted in wonder, is disorienting, and shakes a person's world to its foundations, and those close to the one who wonders may receive him poorly. Questioning may lead to the replacement of old views with new views. The Allegory of the Cave, in Plato's *Republic*, offers a poignant metaphor about the philosophical journey, how a person's perspective on and awareness of the world shifts, and how this shift is received (*Republic* VII, 514a-517c). The Wachowski brothers' film, *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski [1999]) is a contemporary portrayal of the journey.

¹⁶ I have drawn this summary from Phlogiston. (2007).

¹⁷ Seigfried (2003), for example, uses insights from the original Pragmatists, combined with feminist insights and critiques, to argue that contemporary philosophical discourse needs to include many more voices in its chorus, voices from groups and people such as women, African-Americans, and Latinos whom the practitioners of philosophic discourse have excluded from the conversation.

¹⁸ Biletzki & Matar (2006).

¹⁹ Each of these papers represents a different perspective and tradition within the larger umbrella of philosophical discourse and practice, and is worth reading to get a sense of the polyphony of that discourse and practice.

²⁰ One thing that we must note from the outset: *simply because a tension exists, does not mean that we must remove or resolve it*. Tension generates energy, energy that one can use creatively. Thus, we must resist the temptation to remove or resolve these tensions, even in the face of the mechanistic model of the universe and the human person so beloved of modern thought.

²¹ The Stoics are a good example of exponents of this view. Please see Hankinson (2003) for a more detailed examination of Stoic epistemology and how this influences the account of the Sage in Stoic thought.

²² This is a *massive* cultural assumption, deriving in part from Hegel. Please see Redding (2006) for a discussion of Hegel's notion of progress and the unfolding of Spirit. It is also an integral part of the bourgeois mentality, which I have explained above in end note 14. Another root is what O'Shea (1990) calls, in another context, the Cartesian neurosis for certainty: we, the heirs of Descartes, are haunted by an almost pathological need for its knowledge to be completely certain, with no doubt or ambiguity.

²³ It has been my experience that fanatics and dogmatists, whether secular or religious, share a rigid belief in the rightness of their world-view. The situation is such that no one can be question or challenge their paradigm. If anyone be foolish enough to challenge their world-view, the believer condemns his antagonist to Hell (if religious) or as an ignorant barbarian/would-be terrorist (if secular).

An interesting exploration of the "in-between" and provisional nature of human knowledge, critiquing the absolutist views of religious and secular dogmatists, can be found in Vernon (2007).

²⁴ Sextus Empiricus (1990); Montaigne (1575-1580/2003). Toulmin (1990) offers a fascinating look at Montaigne's skepticism, and how we might recover its spirit and practice as a complement to the modern project's quest for objectivity and certitude.

²⁵ Pieper (2006a), 64.

²⁶ The reader can find a humorous, albeit vulgar, parody that exemplifies a lack of epistemic humility in *The Onion* (2005).

²⁷ Diogenes Laërtius (1980), I. 34; 35.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259^a1-20. Diogenes Laërtius gives a more condensed version of the story; please see Diogenes Laërtius (1980), I. 26; 27.

²⁹ We need to set some context for why the Athenians put Socrates to death.

Firstly, there was his involvement with the pro-Spartan oligarchy, the Thirty Tyrants, who took control of Athens after its defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War and eliminated some of their opponents. Socrates was not responsible for ordering anyone put to death, but his association with the Thirty did not win him any friends after the overthrow of the oligarchs and the restoration of democracy.

Secondly, there was his association with Alcibiades, the brilliant but troubled Athenian general. Alcibiades was a popular figure, but self-control was not one of his strong points. Among other things, he was accused of parodying the sacred and secret Eleusian mysteries at a party, as well as desecrating the sacred Herms before leaving on the disastrous Sicilian campaign. Recalled to Athens, Alcibiades defected to Sparta, whom he subsequently betrayed before joining the hated Persians. As with the Thirty, Socrates was guilty by association—the perception being that his teaching and example did nothing to persuade his protégé to amend his life for the better.

Thirdly, there were questions of how the Socratic method was different from that of the Sophists. The Sophists were teachers of rhetoric who managed to grow wealthy from plying their trade by teaching the sons of citizens the art of public speaking (the path to success in classical Athens.) However, the Sophists, being foreigners (i.e., non-Athenian Greeks), could not directly participate in the democratic functioning of the Athenian state. Nevertheless, through their pupils and wealth, they exerted a great deal of indirect influence on the political process. Moreover, their questioning of traditional morality and religion were threats to the stability of the state. Given Socrates' own questioning of morality, religion, and the like, it was hard to see, for many, how exactly Socrates was different from a Sophist.

Finally, we need to understand that the Greek conception of the citizen was not ours: a Greek citizen was first a citizen of his *polis* (city-state) and a participant in its political life, and only secondarily an individual, and even then not in the modern, atomic understanding of the individual. The notion of atomic individuals creating a social contract to form a government would have been alien to the Greek mindset. Thus, Socrates' questions, while *prima facie* harmless and perhaps a little irritating, in reality challenged many of the foundations of the Athenian state. For this reason, they are not as innocent as they might initially seem, because they called into question the legitimacy of the government of the *polis*, upon whom the citizens depended for survival.

All of these, perhaps coupled with Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates in *The Clouds* (Aristophanes [1974]), helped to turn the tide of sentiment against Socrates. For these reasons, Socrates was put to death for corrupting the youth of Athens and teaching impiety and atheism.

³⁰ Farías (1989). For an alternative take that, in my view, whitewashes Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party and his anti-Semitism, please see Safranski (1998).

The case of Heidegger is a difficult one, and the tradition is still assessing it to this day. On the one hand, one cannot simply dismiss his involvement with the National Socialist party, his treatment of Jewish colleagues, his ambiguous post-war half-apology, and retreat into contemplative solitude and political disengagement as being irrelevant to understanding his project or in judging his contributions to the philosophical tradition. On the other hand, one cannot use these facts to reject his project out of hand.

³¹ James (1907/1981), 27.

³² Russell (1912/1990), 153-161; Russell (1954).

³³ Kaufman (2006), 130.

³⁴ I might challenge Kaufman's interpretations of Plato. I agree that a good part of Plato's project is concerned with epistemological problems, and the possibility and conditions of knowledge. But, this is not the *sole* concern of the dialogues. There is also a good deal of exploration as to the nature of living well.

I would argue that we cannot sharply delineate the interplay of knowledge and wisdom in the classical period in the manner that Kaufman presents. It is only in the modern period that epistemology becomes the dominant focus of philosophy in the Western tradition, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

³⁵ In the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, we must add another connotation to “metaphysics”: meaninglessness. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* entry, definition 1 d. states that the word “metaphysics” is “[u]sed by logical positivists and some other linguistic philosophers for: any proposition or set of propositions of a speculative nature, considered to be meaningless because not empirically verifiable” (Metaphysics [2007]). This is not a sense of the word “metaphysics” that I am using here.

³⁶ Metaphysics (2007).

³⁷ An excellent introduction to this field is Godfrey-Smith (2003).

³⁸ Fine (2003), for example, explores this ambiguity.

³⁹ Logic (2007).

⁴⁰ Bobzien (2006) offers an excellent overview of the development of logic in the classical era. A word of thanks goes to Sean Ferrier for reminding me of the long history and study of logic in philosophy. I have worked some of his comments into my account, because of their clarity.

⁴¹ Department of Philosophy, University of Aberdeen (2007). I have drawn the questions immediately after these from Sean Ferrier (S.G. Ferrier, personal communication, 27 February 2007), as well as some of the notions broadening the scope of what philosophy of religion covers.

One point that Ferrier raised was how exactly philosophy of religion differs from metaphysics, or from natural science, since there seems to be some overlap in their subjects. His question is a valid one, and the short answer is that the lines demarcating these branches are not always clear. Many of these subject areas are 19th century attempts to sort particular questions into discrete areas for consideration, which, being artificial, do not always separate out neatly. Furthermore, this gets to a point that I will discuss in [Section IV.](#), namely, that one cannot study a particular philosophical question or issue in isolation from other areas, questions, or figures.

⁴² I have taken a good number of the questions used under each heading verbatim from Heck’s original version.

⁴³ Descartes was educated in the late Scholastic tradition by his Jesuit professors, and many of his philosophical concerns and arguments are a reaction to this tradition. Also, there is a strong Augustinian strain in Descartes; those who are interested in getting a better understanding of his psychology and epistemology would do well to read St. Augustine of Hippo’s *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity* – a good modern translation is Augustine [1991]).

⁴⁴ Toulmin (1990) discusses some of the controversies around where to place the starting point of modernity.

⁴⁵ The secondary literature on Kant is vast, and far beyond the scope of this introduction. Several good introductory sources include: Beck (1969), Beiser (1986), Bird (2006), Guyer (1992), Guyer (2006), and Kuehn (2001).

⁴⁶ S.G. Ferrier (personal communication, 27 February 2007). I am grateful that Ferrier reminded me of Kant’s legacy in the Romantic movement of the early 19th century.

⁴⁷ See Redding (2006) for an overview of Hegel's thought. My account of Hegel's project is more along the lines of what Redding calls the "traditional 'metaphysical' view of Hegel's philosophy." The reader should note that there are other possible interpretations of Hegel. One such view is the "non-traditional or 'post-Kantian' view of Hegel" that Redding outlines.

⁴⁸ S.G. Ferrier (personal communication, 27 February 2007).

⁴⁹ Nietzsche's thought bears further study than the few sentences I grant him here. See, e.g., Wicks (2004) and Leiter (2004). And Kaufmann's presentation of Nietzsche (e.g., Kaufmann [1974]) has colored his reception in the United States, along with Kaufmann's incomplete translation of the Nietzschean corpus. (Schacht [1996], xiii, offers a comment on this).

⁵⁰ For an account of the shift in American thought that occurred in the mid-19th century, please see Menand (2002). This is not to say that Hegel and Hegelianism had *no* influence after the mid-19th century. As Redding (2006) notes:

In academic philosophy, Hegelian idealism underwent a revival in both Great Britain and the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In Britain, where philosophers such as T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley had developed metaphysical ideas which they related back to Hegel's thought, Hegel came to be one of the main targets of attack by the founders of the emerging "analytic" movement, Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. For Russell, the revolutionary innovations in logic starting in the last decades of the nineteenth century had destroyed Hegel's metaphysics by overturning the Aristotelian logic on which it was based, and in line with this dismissal, Hegel came to be seen within the analytic movement as an historical figure of little genuine philosophical interest.

⁵¹ Again, the demarcation between "analytic" and "Continental" philosophy is a somewhat arbitrary one, and one can turn it into a caricature of the actual situation. Leiter (2006) has a good synopsis of the difference between analytic and Continental philosophy. Beaney (2003) offers a more in-depth look at analytic philosophy, and an overview of the Continental tradition can be found in Cahill (2005). McCumber (2001) offers a history of the split between Continental and analytic philosophy as it arose in the United States, accounting for larger political and cultural reasons such as McCarthyism.

⁵² I have taken this sentence nearly verbatim from Heck's original version.

⁵³ Russell (2004).

⁵⁴ For the presentation of philosophy as a "blood sport," please see Swartz (1994).

⁵⁵ Russell (1912/1990), 153.

⁵⁶ Chesterton (1909/1989).

⁵⁷ Wachowski & Wachowski (1999).

⁵⁸ Jokes such as:

A graduate with an engineering degree asks: "How does it work?"

A graduate with an accounting degree asks: "How much does it cost?"

A graduate with a philosophy degree asks: "Would you like fries with your order, sir?"

Or, as Russell reported of his family's reaction to his interest in philosophy:

I was a solitary, shy, priggish youth. I had no experience of the social pleasures of boyhood and did not miss them. But I liked mathematics, and mathematics was suspect because it has no ethical content. I came also to disagree with the theological opinions of my family, and as I grew up I became increasingly interested in philosophy, of which they profoundly disapproved. Every time the subject came up they repeated with unfailing regularity, “What is mind? No matter. What is matter? Never mind.” After some fifty or sixty repetitions, this remark ceased to amuse me. (Russell [2001], 52-53).

⁵⁹ Why did the oracle at Delphi name Socrates the wisest of mortals? Because, unlike other people, he alone knew that he did not know anything; other people did not know anything, but thought that they did.

Socrates: “So, I withdrew and thought to myself: ‘I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.’”

– Plato, *Apology*, 21d

⁶⁰ My undergraduate mentor, M.W. Barnes, used to say that philosophy is just a set of questions that you get to play around with for forty, fifty, sixty years. Then, you pass them along to someone else, to continue the game.

⁶¹ A common theme that seems to be shared by many today is that a world-view or subjective stance is justified by sincerity and conviction alone, a view I will term *sincere subjectivity*. By this, I mean that if one feels passionately about a stance, and stands firm in holding it, unquestioningly, these feelings alone justifies holding it. There are no standards of right and wrong—assenting to the stance out of sincere (and unjustified) belief and conviction is sufficient to warrant holding on to the belief.

Prima facie, this is all well and good, and is one of the shibboleths of political correctness. Yet, consider the following example. By this standard, a white supremacist who is sincere in his belief is no more right or wrong than someone who is not a white supremacist. Furthermore, the white supremacist need not justify his position. Sincerity and conviction alone provides all the justification that he needs. Likewise, according to this view of sincere subjectivity, a man who sincerely believes that he is, by nature, superior to his wife and therefore justified in abusing her when she disagrees with him, needs no other justification, because his belief is sincere. These are not specious cases. One need only listen to talk radio programs, or watch reality or talk shows on television to hear and see how common instances of sincere subjectivity are.

These instances show why *a sincerely-held but unjustified world-view, or a purely subjective stance, is not philosophy, properly understood*. Sincere subjectivity does not fit the definition of philosophy that I articulated on [page 10](#): it does not arise out of search for truth, nor is it born from a sense of wonder. It does not engage with philosophy’s history, it is not self-critiquing, nor does it manifest internal tensions over the limits of human knowledge, the relation between philosophical speculation and practical life, and the relation of wisdom and knowledge. The sincere subjectivist “knows,” with all sincerity and conviction, that his “philosophy” is correct, and does not need to challenge it. In short, sincere subjectivity is merely unquestioned belief, or mere opinion, as Plato might term it. (Plato lists belief as the second-lowest rung on the Divided Line [*Republic* VI, 509d-511e]; it is above imagination, but below thought and understanding.)

For sincere subjectivity to become philosophy, a person must justify it with more than “Well, I feel with conviction that...” One must subject this view to a philosophical critique, see it from a different perspective, and bring it into the philosophical dialog for examination.

All this is not to say that sincerity, and the resulting conviction of one’s ideas, have no role to play in philosophy, far from it. What I am saying is that they cannot be the *sole* criteria by which to explore and judge philosophical questions and positions. Thus, the colloquial sense of philosophy as a subjective world-view or stance, a quasi-creed of belief, as it were, is one that I am rejecting here.

⁶² I draw this sentence from a comment made by Ferrier (S.G. Ferrier, personal communication, 27 February 2007), referring to a note on the syllabus of a colleague, Joseph Westfall.

⁶³ I have based the second half of this sentence on a thought by Ferrier (S.G. Ferrier, personal communication, 27 February 2007).

⁶⁴ Russell (1912/1990), 161.

⁶⁵ Wachowski & Wachowski (1999):

Morpheus: This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.