



PHILOSOPHY

A Christian Introduction

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Acknowledgments

The book you hold in your hands started with a simple vision to produce a clear, up-to-date, and comprehensive resource for Christians new to philosophy. Both of us teach or have taught in Christian settings (Jamie at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Paul formerly at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) and have a particular burden to help Christians think clearly about the things of God and the deep things of life. Like most professors, however, over the years we've watched our students struggle with the concepts covered in our introductory philosophy courses. Some students give up and never return, while others plod along, eventually finding their philosophical legs. There are two things that are discouraging about those who give up. First, we believe that philosophy is simply too important to give up on. Philosophy continues to play a vital role in our lives and in contemporary discussions on almost everything. As such, we need more students, not fewer, to engage in these philosophical discussions. And, since we inevitably philosophize about the important things of life, we may as well learn how to do it well. Second, we're not convinced that philosophy needs to be so difficult. Sure, there are a lot of philosophical issues that are difficult, but there are also a lot of issues that aren't that difficult. We suspect that a focus on clarity from those who write, speak, and teach about philosophy, coupled with a bit of persistence and grit from students, will help students advance in their philosophical abilities. This book is our best effort toward clarity in writing about philosophy.

Like any project of this nature, producing the manuscript has had its ups and downs. Sometimes writing is easy, but most of the time it is painfully difficult. Without the help and encouragement of the people who surround us, such a project would never come to fruition. So, needless to say, we are

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I

Introduction to Philosophy

This is a book on philosophy. It is reasonable to ask, in this introductory chapter, about philosophy's aim and subject matter. What is philosophy? There are two historically prominent starting points for answering this question. Some say philosophy begins with human beings' awareness of their mortality.¹ Human life is fleeting and finite. We come into being and then, after a brief time, pass away. Death cannot be avoided. We will die, and so will those we love. This realization, it can be argued, is a fitting starting point for philosophy. Our awareness of our mortality prompts us to ask questions about life's meaning and to seek solace, if not salvation, from the perils of death. Philosophy, as Plato (427–347 BC) claims in the *Phaedo*, trains us for death.² How exactly does philosophy train us for death? For Plato, philosophy prepares the soul, on release from its body, to be united with that which it most deeply longs for: knowledge and wisdom. Thus philosophy can free us from the fear of death and help us to live well.

Another historically prominent starting point for philosophy, also found in Plato, begins not with humans' awareness of their mortality but with their wonder at the surrounding world. By nature, humans want to know truth about the world and their place in it. This sense of wonder, Plato states in the *Theaetetus*, “is where philosophy begins and nowhere else.”³ Our innate

1. See, e.g., Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 2.

2. Plato, *Phaedo* 67e, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

3. Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d, in *Works*, 173.

curiosity leads us to ask questions of ultimate significance: What is the nature of reality? What is knowledge, and how can I find it? What sort of person ought I be? Does God exist? If God exists, what is God like? “Philosophy,” as the etymology of the word suggests (*philein*, “to love,” and *sophia*, “wisdom”) is the love of wisdom. Better, and more provocative, the philosopher is wisdom’s lover. Philosophers are those who “refuse to accept what is false, [they] hate it, and have a love for the truth.”⁴

Taking both of these historically prominent starting points into account, we shall understand philosophy as *the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom for the sake of flourishing*. This construal of philosophy views knowledge and wisdom as goods valuable in themselves *and* for what they bring.⁵ Against the contemporary impulse to value knowledge and wisdom only if it has some obvious noncognitive benefit (e.g., for building a boat, pulling a tooth, accessing the internet, etc.), our view is that they are intrinsically valuable, worthy pursuits in themselves. Against the contemporary impulse to shallowness and a lack of concern for personal character, our construal of philosophy highlights the goal of flourishing, or well-being, which includes the cultivation of intellectual and moral virtue. Moreover, it allows for the pursuit of flourishing for the individual as well as for others, including nonhuman animals. Thus understood, we think philosophy is intensely practical, contrary to popular perception (more below).

What Is Philosophy’s Relationship to Christianity?

Philosophy, according to Plato, is “a gift from the gods to the mortal race whose value neither has been nor ever will be surpassed.”⁶ High praise indeed! For Plato, there is ultimately no conflict between philosophy and belief in God (or the gods). Philosophy leads the truth seeker, inevitably, to its divine source. Today the relationship between faith and philosophy, revelation and reason, is not always viewed in such a positive light (as we shall see in chap. 5). Contrary to Plato, the contemporary French philosopher Luc Ferry thinks philosophy is inherently atheistic. According to Ferry, the salvation that philosophy prompts us to seek “must proceed not from an Other—from some Being supposedly transcendent (meaning ‘exterior to and superior

4. Plato, *Republic* 485c, in *Works*, 1108.

5. In the *Republic*, Plato discusses three kinds of goods: things good in themselves, things good for what they bring, and things both good in themselves and good for what they bring. Plato argues that justice is good in the third sense. We argue that knowledge and wisdom are also good in this third sense (357b–358a).

6. Plato, *Timaieus* 47b, in *Works*, 1250.

to' ourselves)—but well and truly from within. Philosophy wants us to get ourselves out of trouble by utilizing our own resources, by means of reason alone, with boldness and assurance.”⁷

Philosophy, according to Ferry, leads to atheism for two reasons. First, the religious claim that we can overcome our mortality and be with our loved ones for eternity is too good to be true. Second, the goodness of God (expressed in this hope for eternity with loved ones) is hard to reconcile with the amount, distribution, and horrific nature of evil we find in this world.⁸ Thus we must find salvation from “within” by the use of unaided reason.

In reply, eternity with loved ones is indeed desirable. Its desirability, by itself, does not render it false, however. The relevant questions, then, have to do with whether the claims of religion are true. These, as we've seen, are philosophical questions. If, as we shall argue in this book, (1) there are good reasons to think that God exists (chap. 12), (2) evil is compatible with God's existence (chap. 13), and (3) the religion that God founded provides a means of eternal life (for this possibility, see chap. 15), then philosophy does not, contrary to Ferry's claim, lead to atheism. We follow a more ancient path in this book, a path well trodden by those who think there is no inherent conflict between the deliverances of philosophy and the deliverances of religion.

To be more specific, we think Christianity is both true and desirable. In other words, God does exist, and the religion God founded is Christianity. Moreover, in the Bible we learn that in Jesus Christ “are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3 NIV). All the truths discovered, all the good in good things, and all the beauty in beautiful things find their source in Jesus Christ. The pursuit of goodness, truth, and beauty, if faithfully followed, leads to Christ.

What then is the relationship between philosophy and Christianity? We reject “conflict” models such as Ferry's, which hold the truths of philosophy as incompatible with the truths of Christianity. We also reject “compartmental” models such that the truths of philosophy and the truths of Christianity never intersect. Christianity, as a religion, makes knowledge claims that intersect with the deliverances of philosophy. We endorse a “convergence” model such that Christianity and philosophy work in concert, converging on the truth. In other words, faith and reason work together to provide truth about God, the world, and ourselves (see chaps. 3 and 5 for more). It is in this way that we walk the well-traveled path of those such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine of Hippo,

7. Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought*, 10.

8. Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought*, 11.

Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, and others who think that philosophy and religion converge on the single supreme reality that is God.⁹

What Are the Main Areas of Philosophy?

We have specified the aim of philosophy, but what is its subject matter? For most disciplines the subject matter is fairly obvious. For example, the biologist studies living organisms; the historian, ancient events; the psychologist, the contours of the human mind; the mathematician, numbers; and the lawyer, laws. What does the philosopher study? Arriving at an answer to this question is complicated by the fact that philosophy has a subject matter of its own but also serves as a foundation for other disciplines. As a **first-order discipline**,¹⁰ philosophy studies the nature of belief, justification, knowledge, and truth (epistemology), the nature and structure of reality (metaphysics), the nature of God and religious belief (philosophy of religion), and the nature of the moral life, including human character and conduct (ethics). As a **second-order discipline**, philosophy studies the foundations of every area of human inquiry. So for each of the areas mentioned above—science, history, psychology, mathematics, law, and so on—there is a second-order philosophy of the area (i.e., philosophy of science, philosophy of history, philosophy of psychology, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of law). As a second-order discipline, philosophy helps to clarify and justify the concepts, assumptions, and principles that govern the particular domain of knowledge in question.

This book is primarily concerned with philosophy as a first-order discipline. In addition to epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, we've included one second-order discipline, the philosophy of religion, in the mix. Our reason for including this second-order discipline is twofold. First, since God, understood as the supreme reality, is its primary subject matter, philosophy of religion is synoptic in vision, pulling together truths discovered in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics that might appear as disparate threads when shorn from a theistic foundation. Second, philosophy is concerned with ultimate questions about meaning, purpose, truth, goodness, beauty, justice, love, eternity, and more. These questions, for many, find answers within a religious framework. Thus it is only fitting to include a section that explores the rationality and justification for religion and religious belief.

9. For more on the relationship between Christianity and philosophy, see Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, eds., *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

10. Terms shown in bold are included in the glossary at the back of this book.

In this introduction to philosophy, our aim is to provide an opinionated survey of each subarea of investigation and then point the reader in the direction of a distinctly Christian approach, without necessarily arguing for our own particular view on the topic at hand. In this way we hope to arm the reader with the necessary conceptual framework from which to continue to develop more fine-grained positions on key philosophical topics.

What Are Philosophy's Chief Activities?

How does one do philosophy? What are its chief activities? The philosopher is one who seeks justification for beliefs, clarity for concepts, and unity of worldview. Let's consider each of these activities in greater detail.

Beliefs matter. As J. P. Moreland puts it, beliefs “are the rails upon which our lives run.”¹¹ Given their importance, it makes sense that we want our beliefs to match reality. We want true beliefs. A good indicator of true belief is *justification*: if our beliefs are justified, then we have reason to think they correspond to reality. The philosopher seeks justification for his beliefs by using logic and arguments.¹² Logic is the study of how we *ought* to think, including the principles of thought that govern the relationship among sentences. Three foundational laws of logic that govern thought are as follows:

1. The law of identity: “Whatever is, is.”
2. The law of noncontradiction: “Nothing can both be and not be.”
3. The law of excluded middle: “Everything must either be or not be.”¹³

Given these laws of logic, if Clark Kent is identical to Superman, then they are one and the same person (according to the law of identity); it is necessarily false that Jesus is and is not divine (law of noncontradiction); and either humans are mortal or humans are not mortal (law of excluded middle).

Logical laws help us to evaluate sentences as well as the relationships among sentences. Of particular interest are **arguments**: sets of sentences consisting of premises that lead, by one or more rules of inference, to a conclusion. Arguments can take various forms. Two basic kinds of arguments are

11. J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 2012), 86.

12. Things are not quite so simple, as we shall discuss in chaps. 2 and 3. Some beliefs are basic, justified in virtue of the relevant experience.

13. Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72.

deductive arguments, where the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion (e.g., *modus ponens*, *modus tollens*, disjunctive syllogism, etc.), and **inductive arguments**, where the truth of the premises renders the conclusion probably true (e.g., the argument from analogy, inference to the best explanation, inductive inference).¹⁴ By submitting beliefs to the laws of thought as well as arguments and counterarguments, the philosopher seeks to root out false beliefs and justify true ones.

Next, analyzing concepts to determine their meaning is essential to good philosophical reasoning. Consider the concept “chair.” What does this concept mean? One way to answer our question is to provide a definition of “chair.” To offer a definition of a concept *F* is to specify what *F* is, so a definition of “chair” would specify what a chair is. Easy enough, right? As students quickly find out, providing an adequate definition of things, even ordinary things such as chairs, is not easy. Let’s try. A chair, as a first pass, is “something people sit on.” To assess our definition, it is helpful to see if we can provide counterexamples of things that satisfy our definition but don’t count (or obviously count) as chairs. Counterexamples to our first definition of “chair” are easy to come by: stumps and toilets are things people sit on, yet we don’t usually think of them as chairs. We could refine our definition of chair to rule out stumps and toilets (“things people sit on that are designed and don’t have plumbing attached to them”), but it might turn out, as it does in this case, that the resultant definition is still too broad (e.g., this definition doesn’t rule out stools and couches). Some things, such as chairs, might be best defined ostensively, by pointing at them and saying, “That, and things like that, are chairs.” In any case, in order to avoid talking past one another or committing fallacies of equivocation, it is important to define our terms and concepts. Conceptual analysis leads to deeper understanding and greater precision in our language.

Finally, the philosopher’s task is to engage in a kind of system building in order to find unity in diversity. When we seek understanding, we begin, as Aristotle puts it, “from the things which are more knowable and clear to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature.”¹⁵ We want to know the objects of everyday experiences as they really are, not how they appear. We come to know a thing once “we are acquainted with its primary causes or first principles, and have carried our analysis as far as its elements.”¹⁶ Seeking this deeper knowledge of the world takes effort. We

14. For an excellent introduction to logic, see T. Ryan Byerly, *Introducing Logic and Critical Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

15. Aristotle, *Physics* 184a16–18, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1:315.

16. Aristotle, *Physics* 184a12–14, in *Works*, 1:315.

need a synoptic view of reality, a worldview, in which to unify the things of the world and our place in it. Many in the internet age substitute information for knowledge and wisdom. This is a mistake. Philosophic contemplation can free us, as Bertrand Russell describes, “[by enlarging] our interests as to include the whole outer world.”¹⁷ Russell continues:

In contemplation . . . we start from the not-Self [i.e., the World], and through its greatness the boundaries of Self are enlarged; through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share in infinity. . . . The mind which has become accustomed to the freedom and impartiality of philosophic contemplation will preserve something of the same freedom and impartiality in the world of action and emotion. It will view its purposes and desires as parts of the whole. . . . In this [enlargement of soul] consists man’s true freedom, and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears.¹⁸

Philosophy helps us to find a story that is alive and true. It pulls us out of ourselves and into a grander story. We think that philosophy’s system-building task can point the seeker to Jesus and the gospel. If, as we think, Christianity is true, this is to be expected, for in the Gospel of John we learn that Jesus is the “Logos” (John 1:1–3). Wisdom thus is personal, or better, found most fully in a person: Jesus Christ. In this way too, philosophy is understood as the handmaiden to theology.

What Is the Value of Philosophy for the Christian?

Philosophy suffers from an image problem.¹⁹ In our technologically driven, anti-intellectual culture, it is widely perceived that philosophy offers no this-worldly good and is therefore a waste of time. This pragmatic “I’m interested in learning only if I can see the benefit” mentality has made its way into the classroom too. Often, as philosophers teaching in a Christian context, we

17. Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, 158.

18. Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, 159, 160, 161.

19. This section was originally published as Paul M. Gould, “Three Reasons Why I Teach Philosophy at a Seminary,” *Theological Matters* (blog), November 8, 2016, <https://theologicalmatters.com/2016/11/08/three-reasons-why-i-teach-philosophy-at-a-seminary/>. The essay was later expanded and published (with the same title) in *Christian Research Journal* 40, no. 6 (2017): 58–59. Special thanks to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the editors of *Christian Research Journal* for permission to reproduce the essay here. The three reasons offered in this section are not original to me; rather, they are nicely set forth by two of my philosophical mentors from graduate school, J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig. For an expanded discussion of these themes, see the first chapter of Moreland and Craig’s monumental work, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

spend the first few classes trying to convince students, many of whom are future pastors, of the importance of philosophy.

As already stated, we think that learning philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge for the sake of flourishing, is an intrinsic good; it is something valuable in and of itself. But (tipping our hat to the pragmatist) it also has other benefits. What are some of the benefits of philosophy for the Christian? Here are three reasons—kingdom benefits—for helping Christians learn a little philosophy (these three reasons can be understood as some of the many fine-grained aspects to the “for the sake of flourishing” part of our definition of philosophy).

First, *philosophy is strategic for evangelism*. As Christians we are called to be faithful witnesses for Christ. We want every person on the face of the earth to ask and answer the question, “What do you make of Jesus Christ?” Unfortunately, in our day and age it can be difficult to get people to consider this question seriously. This is because Christianity is often viewed as implausible, undesirable, or both. Today it is difficult for the gospel message to receive a fair hearing. Philosophy can help! Philosophy helps us to understand the collective mind-set, value system, and emotional response patterns of culture. Christian philosophy can help to expose the false ideas that keep people from considering Christianity as a genuine option. Consider the words of the great Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen:

God usually exerts [his regenerative] power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favourable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.²⁰

God has given us minds, and he wants us to use them to help others see the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus and the gospel. He wants us to use philosophy (and theology and more besides) to show that Christianity is both true to the way the world is and true to the way the world ought to be.

Second, *philosophy prepares us for ministry*. I (Paul) cannot tell you the number of times I’ve had students—usually a future pastor or even a PhD

20. J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 162, quoted in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 4.

student in theology or some aspect of Christian ministry—ask me why they should take logic. How would logic help them be better preachers or church leaders or students of the Bible? At first, when I was asked this question, I was dumbfounded. It seemed obvious to me that God wants us to be good thinkers, and logic is one of the tools that will help in that area. Now, when I’m asked to justify the necessity of taking logic, I simply invite them to “come and see.” Thankfully, I’ve found these same students become the most ardent defenders of the use and benefit of logic for preaching, ministry, and Bible study.

Contrast this posture of skepticism toward the value of philosophy in general, and logic in particular, with the posture of the preachers and pastors of an earlier age. Here is John Wesley, who in 1756 delivered a talk to first-year seminary students titled “An Address to Clergy”:

Am I a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? If not, I am not likely to go much farther when I stumble at the threshold. . . . Rather, have not my stupid indolence and laziness made me very ready to believe, what the little wits and pretty gentlemen affirm, “that logic is good for nothing”? It is good for this at least, . . . to make people talk less; by showing them both what is, and what is not, to the point; and how extremely hard to prove anything. Do I understand metaphysics; if not the depths of the Schoolmen, the subtleties of Scotus or Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science? Have I conquered so much of it, as to clear my apprehension and range my ideas under proper heads; so much as enable me to read with ease and pleasure, as well as profit, Dr. Henry Moore’s *Works*, Malbranche’s “Search after Truth,” and Dr. Clarke’s “Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God”?²¹

Our passion is to see God raise up a generation of pastor-scholars who take seriously God’s call to train the saints to “guard the good deposit [i.e., the gospel] entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:14 ESV).

Third, *philosophy plays a key role in our spiritual formation unto Christ*. Modern humans are hollow at the core. As a culture, we are largely what psychologists call empty selves: people who are passive, sensate, busy, hurried, and incapable of developing an interior life.²² But Christians are commanded to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2 NIV) and to love God with all our mind (Matt. 22:37–39). Part of this process is seeing

21. John Wesley, “An Address to Clergy,” delivered Feb. 6, 1756, reprinted in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 6:217–31, quoted in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 6.

22. Philip Cushman, “Why the Self Is Empty,” *American Psychologist* 45 (May 1990): 599–611.

Jesus for who he is: the fount of all wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). Jesus is beautiful, and we rightly worship him as such. But Jesus also is *brilliant*, the smartest person ever. As Dallas Willard presses, “Can we seriously imagine that Jesus could be *Lord* if he were not smart?”²³ The obvious answer is no! As followers of Jesus, we too are to cultivate moral *and* intellectual virtue.

God has given each of us a mind. He wants us to use it for his glory. He wants us to live life rightly related to reality and to God, to one another, ourselves, and our purpose. Philosophy can help in all these areas.

Conclusion

Have we convinced you of the value of philosophy? Do you see the benefit to learning philosophy as a Christian? If not, then we invite you to simply “come and see.” Walk the path of reason, meet fellow travelers along the way, and follow the path to its source: Christ, the Eternal Son, the Logos, the perfectly rational Creator and Sustainer of all.

23. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 94.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with philosophical questions about our knowledge. More specifically, epistemology deals with our knowing, believing, and attempts to be human beings who are rational about the things we claim to know. It is a branch of philosophy that you actually think about far more than you might realize. Most people might not be professional philosophers, but they do think of themselves as being rational beings (and employ philosophical methods in their attempts to do so), even if they don't realize this is what they are doing.

To see this, consider the kinds of philosophical questions we deal with in epistemology. We know all kinds of things. But what does it mean to “know” something as opposed to merely believe something? What, exactly, is the nature of knowledge? A quick example will illustrate the difference. Imagine that two people wake up the day after the last presidential election. One knows that Donald Trump won the electoral college vote, and the other merely believes it. How is it that one person knows it and the other merely believes it? Perhaps this is because the one who knows it stayed up until very late in the night to watch all the results come in and saw that Trump got the votes. The other became bored or frustrated, or perhaps fell fast asleep, never seeing the final results, yet did have a sense that Trump would win. As such, this person woke up the next morning with a belief that Trump was the new president-elect. So what's the difference between “knowing” and “believing”? Perhaps we could say that the one who knows has evidence, and the one who believes merely has a hunch. But then there are a series of follow-up

questions. Do “hunches” count for nothing? How much evidence is needed? What counts as evidence? Is evidence always required? And what about times when we have lots of evidence for an idea that still turns out to be wrong? Such are the philosophical questions about knowledge itself.

There are plenty of other important epistemological questions. If, for example, we can identify what it means to “know” something, we might still wonder how we know those things. Do we know simply by way of rational reflection, as some suggest, or does knowledge require us to see, taste, touch, smell, or hear something? The possibilities represent the way two very different schools of thought have accounted for knowledge over the past few centuries. According to rationalists, for example, knowledge is primarily rooted in reason itself; on this view, we know those things we can demonstrate by rational argument. By contrast, empiricists have traditionally argued the opposite, that knowledge is primarily grounded in the different kinds of experiences that we have. On this view, roughly, we know something if it is evident to the senses. I know because I can see it or hear it, or because I have access to it by way of other sensory inputs.

In addition to these questions, and in response to the kinds of answers that philosophers give, there are also questions about whether our perceptions of the world (e.g., from sight, sound, or smell) properly reflect the world as it really is. So imagine that I have just brushed my teeth one morning and walk into the kitchen to eat breakfast with the family. I pick up the glass of milk that my wife poured for me and take a gulp. I cringe at the taste of the milk and declare to the family, “The milk has gone bad!” Of course, everyone at the table thinks I’m crazy because it tastes just fine to them. Here’s an example where our perception has gotten reality wrong. In this case it’s easy to say that this is not much of a worry since it is not an example of what normally happens. There is clearly some kind of polluting factor that caused the milk to taste funny (the lingering taste of toothpaste in my mouth). But then again, how do we know that this case is an exception to the rule and not what is happening all the time? How do we know that there aren’t always some polluting factors that cause us to mis-see or mis-taste the world we live in? What if those pollutants just aren’t evident to us? In response to these possibilities, however obscure and unrealistic they may seem, we are left with major philosophical questions about our perceptions.

Epistemology also deals with the related questions about truth itself. What does it mean to say that some statement or proposition is true? What is it that makes the statement true? Consider a proposition like “Vitamins are beneficial to our bodies.” Leaving aside the medical debates about the value of vitamins, for the sake of argument let’s grant that this is a true statement.

The question here is why. Why is it a true statement? What is it about the statement that makes it true? Is it true because it corresponds to the way the world really is? Is it true because it helps us in some way? Is it true because it is compatible with other things we think are true? Or is there some other thing that makes it true? Philosophers have debated questions like these for millennia, but especially for the past hundred years or so.

Another major set of philosophical questions that epistemology deals with are issues of certainty (or what we might call epistemic confidence) and skepticism. On the one hand, it seems plausible to doubt and question the vast majority of what we think we know. These doubts come from all directions and attack all sorts of beliefs that we hold. Not surprisingly, therefore, some philosophers in history have argued for epistemic skepticism, the idea that we really can't, or at least don't, have knowledge. Of course, they feel rather certain about this. But most other philosophers throughout history have rejected skepticism. The questions most philosophers ask have to do with the way we know things and the extent to which we can have epistemic confidence about truth and truth claims.

One final set of epistemological questions worth mentioning, though there are plenty of other issues we could mention, deals with questions about science and God. Because they have had extraordinary successes over the past few centuries, do the natural sciences hold a special privileged epistemic status? In other words, are the sciences able to establish a greater degree of epistemic confidence for what they say than theology, history, or some other discipline within the social sciences? Is a statement true simply because a scientist says so? Or, despite the sciences' extraordinary successes over the past few years, are there limitations to what the sciences can say to us and limits to their epistemic authority? On the flip side of that, how about religious knowledge? Is it possible to know things about God, or is theology lowered to the level of mere belief? If it is possible to know something about God, how are we supposed to get that knowledge? Does the Bible (or some other holy book) count as a proper source of knowledge? And what about nature itself? Can we derive any theological truth from the natural realm? These are all vitally important questions in the field known as religious epistemology.

Such are the questions that epistemology deals with. In this section, we explore some of these questions and offer a quick survey of historical and contemporary discussion on these matters. We trust that you will find them helpful as we explore an extremely important field of philosophy.