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DISCOVERING THE PHILOSOPHER IN YOU

THE BIG QUESTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Colin McGinn
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Discovering the Philosopher in You:

The Big Questions in Philosophy

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Course Syllabus

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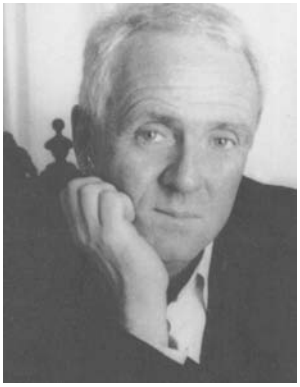


About Your Professor

Colin McGinn

Professor Colin McGinn was educated at Oxford University. He has written widely on philosophy and philosophers in such publications as *The New York Review of Books, London Review of Books, The New Republic,* and *The New York Times Book Review.* McGinn has written fourteen books, including *The Making of a Philosopher; The Mysterious Flame; The Character of Mind; Ethics, Evil and Fiction;* and the novel *The Space Trap.* He is currently a professor of philosophy at Rutgers University.

Introduction

Everyone has an inner philosopher—a voice within that asks, oh so insistently, philosophical questions. Everyone wants to know what the ultimate nature of the world is, what the self is, whether we have free will, how our minds relate to our bodies, whether we can really know anything, where ethical truth comes from, what the meaning of life is, and whether or not there is a God. This inner philosopher is related to the inner child, since the child too is prone to asking philosophical questions. But it is much better to have a disciplined guide through philosophy than simply to try to do all the thinking by yourself.

Professor Colin McGinn will act as your guide. He will cover all the main problems of philosophy, from logic to ethics, from the human mind to God, introducing you to how philosophers think and the theories they have come up with. The first four lectures focus on foundational questions that need to be clarified before we engage upon more applied discussions. We need to know what knowledge is, what truth is, and what logical reasoning is before we start discussing ethics, the mind, free will, and God. So let's start with the basics, then break into a run only when we have learned how to walk.

Lecture 1:
Skepticism: What Do You Really Know?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is William Irwin's (ed.) *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real.*

What Do You Really Know?

People don't always know what they think they know. They make mistakes. But how widespread could our mistakes be? Could we be wrong about everything?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

Could we be wrong about everything we know?

Is our reality not all we think?

Skepticism says that our knowledge is far more limited than we think. It goes back to the ancient Greeks, but René Descartes (1596–1650) was the consummate skeptic. Descartes wanted to know what could be doubted, what was less than certain. I think I know that I am sitting at a desk typing, but might this all be a dream, and I am really lying asleep in bed? After all, I am often convinced by my dreams. Or might I be a victim of the machines in *The Matrix*—hooked up to electrodes that work to convince me that I am a normally situated person? Maybe the whole external world is an illusion; can I prove it is not? Can I even be certain that I have a body? Maybe my whole body has been amputated, leaving only my brain, and I have a mere "phantom body."

Come to think of it, how do I know that other people have minds? Even if they have bodies, what shows that inside those bodies are minds like mine? Might other "people" simply be mindless automata? All I see is their external behavior, but mightn't that come from a mere machine? Maybe I am the only consciousness that exists, alone in the cosmos ("solipsism"). Or maybe they have minds but their minds are very different from mine; for example, they might see the world in different colors from me. How could I tell?

Then there is the future: how can I be sure it will resemble the past? Just because bread has always nourished me, does it necessarily follow that it always will? How do I know that the law of gravity will keep working the way it has? This is the problem of induction: how to justify inferences from the past to the future. (There is also the problem of how I know that the world didn't spring into existence fully formed five minutes ago.)

"All men by nature desire knowledge."

~Aristotle

But then is there nothing I can be certain of? Here Descartes had a brilliant idea: I can at least know for certain that I am doubting and thinking, and hence that I exist. "I think, therefore I am"; *cogito, ergo sum.* I can't know for certain that you exist,

or that the planet Earth does, but I can know that I do—and that I am a hinking thing. It may not be much, but it's something.

No one has ever really refuted the skeptic, which is disturbing. But why does it matter that we know much less than we thought? Why is knowledge valuable to us? I think the answer is that knowledge is what links us to the universe—it unifies world and self. Knowledge is what relieves the existential isolation of the solitary consciousness. If we don't know what we thought we did, we are much lonelier than we supposed, much more locked into our own private world. Our consciousness seems much more like a prison than a window onto the world outside of it. Thus the stakes are quite high.

RENÉ DESCARTES

In addition to being a preeminent philosopher, Descartes was an outstanding mathematician and scientist, inventing analytic geometry and the Cartesian coordinate system, which strongly influenced calculus. His 1637 works, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason in the Search for Truth in the Sciences* and *La Géometrie* are his most significant works in these areas; in *Discourse on the Method,* he also made contributions to the field of optics.

Descartes inspired generations of philosophers and also his peers. His ideas formed the base of the seventeenth- and eighteeenth-century European philosophical movement known as Continental Rationalism, which cited human reason as the source of knowledge. The rival philosophy of this Age of Reason era was British Empiricism, which held that all knowledge is acquired solely through the senses.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why have philosophers throughout the ages been so interested in the question of what we really know? Why not just take self-existence and the existence of the rest of the world for granted?
2. What is the problem of induction? Which elements of our experience can we be sure of, if any?

Suggested Reading

Irwin, William, ed. *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Popular Culture and Philosophy, Vol. 3. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. Donald A. Cress. New York: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999.

Websites to Visit

1. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* — www.utm.edu/research/iep
2. *The Philosophy Pages* offers information for students of the Western philosophical tradition, including *The Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names*; a survey of the history of Western philosophy; a timeline for intellectual figures; detailed discussion of several major philosophers; summary treatment of the elementary principles of logic; a generic study guide for students of philosophy; and links to other philosophy sites on the Internet — www.philosophypages.com

Lecture 2:
Knowledge: How Should Knowledge Be Analyzed?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Edmund Gettier's *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*

What Is Knowledge?

In the last lecture I considered what we know, if anything; but I didn't enquire too closely into the concept of knowledge itself. What is involved in knowing things? What composes knowledge? How should knowledge be analyzed? This breaks into two questions: what is necessary for possessing knowledge, and what is sufficient to count as a knower? We are seeking the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing.

CONSIDER THIS . . .

What composes knowledge?

Can you know something if it is not true?

The traditional answer is that knowledge is to be analyzed as true, justified belief: you can't know something unless that thing is true, you believe it, and you are justified in believing it (these are all necessary conditions for knowledge). You might think you know something and your belief turns out to be false, but you can't really know something unless your belief is true. This is evident just from examination of the concept itself—it is an "analytic" truth. And mere true belief is not sufficient for knowledge because you might have a true belief just by guessing, in which case you don't know. To know something you have to have the right to believe it.

This analysis brings in three very important concepts, which need to be discussed in their own right. First, belief: to believe something is to take it to be true, to be committed to its truth. It is a very important property of belief that they cannot be willed: you can't just decide to believe what you have no reason for believing. There is such a thing as wishful thinking, but it cannot take the form of a conscious effort to believe what you know to be false. Beliefs aim at objective truth; they are responsible to how things really are. They must fit the world.

"Whenever, therefore, people are deceived and form opinions wide of the truth, it is clear that the error has slid into their minds through the medium of certain resemblances to that truth."

~Socrates

The idea of justification is the idea of reasons for belief—reasons that entitle you to a belief. It is not a good reason for believing something that I wish were true; reasons have to consist of other things I take to be true. For example, my reason for believing that it is raining outside is the pitter-patter sound I hear on my roof. Beliefs must be

based on evidence if they are to count as knowledge. This is what we mean by rationality—basing one's beliefs on evidence, and being careful to evaluate the evidence correctly. Descartes' skeptical argument is in effect saying that our evidence is never enough for certainty.

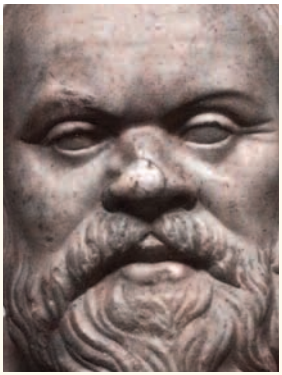
Are these three conditions sufficient for knowledge? Surprisingly, the answer is no. Suppose I am expecting my brother to visit at any moment. You tell me he has arrived at the door, but you are trying to deceive me into believing this. However, it just so happens that he arrived at the very moment of your attempted deception. In this case my belief is true (he has arrived), I believe it (because you told me), and I have a good reason to believe it (you are generally a very reliable informant). But I don't know he has arrived, because it was only an accident that I got it right. So knowledge requires in addition that my justified belief not be merely accidentally true.

EDMUND L. GETTIER, III (1927–)

Dr. Gettier is an American philosopher whose 1963 paper, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" questioned the concept of knowledge as it was defined at that point by most of the world's philosophers. In the three-page paper, Gettier provides examples of beliefs that are true and justified, but that cannot be called knowledge. "Gettier (counter-) examples" show that in a given situation, certain elements of the situation which are considered to be true and justified are in fact misrepresentations.

The concept of knowledge provides a good example of conceptual analysis, where we have to think carefully and systematically about our concepts.

Next we have to talk about truth—the primary thing that beliefs are required to be if they are to add up to knowledge.



SOCRATES ASKING "WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?"

Socrates, who lived in ancient Athens, was the pioneer of Western philosophy. His student Plato recorded many of his ideas as conveyed through dialogues. In the Socratic dialogues, Socrates applies a dialectical method, called *elenchos,* to examine knowledge in the search for truth. The method, a process of logical reasoning, essentially entails asking the question, "What is it?" Socrates believed that acquiring knowledge depends on accepting one's own ignorance and seeing the essence of things as they really are. Further, in a true search for this essence, all forms would lead to the good, or knowledge of one's self and purpose in life. The Socratic method challenges interlocutors to examine widely held beliefs for inadequacies and inconsistencies. True knowledge, he believed, is equal to virtue and leads back to the good of one's self.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is needed for belief to be sufficient for knowledge?
2. What are the three necessary (and jointly sufficient) conditions for knowledge?

Suggested Reading

Gettier, Edmund L. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121–123. Transcribed into hypertext by Andrew Chrucky, 1997, available at http://www.ditext.com/gettier/gettier.html.

Other Books of Interest

Brickhouse, Thomas C., and Nicholas D. Smith. *Philosophy of Socrates*. New York: Westview Press, 1999.

Gelb, Michael J., and Ronald Gross. *Socrates Way: Seven Keys to Using Your Mind to the Utmost*. New York: Tarcher, 2002.

Sayre, Kenneth M. *Belief and Knowledge: Mapping the Cognitive Landscape*. Lanham, MD: Rowman-Littlefield Publishing Group, 1997.

Williams, Michael. *Groundless Belief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Xenophon. *Conversations of Socrates*. Trans. Hugh Tredennick. Ed. Robin Waterfield. New York: Penguin Classics, 1990.

Websites to Visit

Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy —
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis

Lecture 3:
Truth: What Is the Nature of Truth?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is William James's *The Will to Believe.*

What Is Truth?

There can be no knowledge without truth, but what exactly is truth? This is not the question of which things are true, but what truth itself is—what it means to call a belief true. There have been three traditional theories of truth: the coherence theory, the pragmatic theory, and the correspondence theory.

CONSIDER THIS . . .

What makes a belief true?

Is truth objective?

The coherence theory says that what makes a belief true is its consistency with other beliefs. A true belief is one that forms part of a consistent belief system—one that hangs together coherently with other beliefs. This theory would allow a belief to be true relative to my belief system but not true relative to yours: the belief fits together with my other beliefs, but it is out of sync with your body of beliefs. The trouble with this theory is that it leaves the world out: truth is said to be a function of internal relations between beliefs instead of the conformity of a belief with external reality. But surely I cannot make a belief true just by ensuring that it fits my other beliefs, since those beliefs might themselves be

WILLIAM JAMES AND THE PRAGMATIC THEORY

In his first major work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James asserted that thinking and knowledge are instruments of man's survival. His ideas helped move psychology from its anecdotal roots toward the natural sciences by stressing the need for empirical observations. James espoused the idea that an individual or person is a "stream of consciousness" and has free will.

Though his most famous work might be *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he is best remembered in philosophy as being a pragmatist. His 1907 work *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* expanded upon the ideas of the founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce. While Peirce first suggested that meaning and truth are related to the observable outcomes of actions, James spelled out a pragmatic theory of truth as being whatever is useful to believe.

In considering epistemology—the study of the origins, possibilities, nature, and extent of human knowledge—James wrote *Essays in Radical Empiricism,* which was published posthumously in 1912. In this work, James's use of empirical principles led him to defend the idea that mental and physical properties are the features of a single substance, but ultimately neither is mental or physical.

false—that is, not fit the way things are in the real world. There is obviously no contradiction in the idea of a whole body of beliefs being false though internally coherent—as with the Cartesian example of dreaming. Fictions, after all, hang together into coherent narratives, but they are not thereby true descriptions of reality.

The pragmatic theory says that truth is what it is useful to believe, what best contributes to satisfying our goals. If you have false beliefs you will not function effectively in action, so truth is the condition of getting along well in the world—ultimately, truth is what makes you happy. The trouble with this view is that true belief does not always make you happy, since reality is not always agreeable to us. Of course, truth is often useful, but isn't that because true belief reflects how things are in the real world, and it is useful to know how things are out there? But that isn't to say that truth is simply definable as what it is useful to believe. The pragmatic theory puts the cart before the horse: beliefs are useful because they are true; they are not true because they are useful.

That leaves us with the correspondence theory—that truth represents how things are in the world outside of us. This is surely the common-sense view, and I think it is basically the correct view. But we have to be careful how we state it: it is not that truth is some peculiar kind of isomorphism between belief and fact—a kind of logical mirroring. Rather, truth is a matter of the world being as your beliefs take it to be. To say that the belief that snow is white is true is just to say that snow is white—that is, what you are talking about has the properties you ascribe to it. This is sometimes called the "redundancy theory," because it declares that the word "true" is used merely to avoid repetition or prolixity. If I say "Everything the pope says is true," I merely express in shorthand what I could express by simply repeating everything the pope says in an agreeing tone of voice. In any case, truth is a matter of things being as people say they are—which is to bring the world into the picture. In short, truth is a matter of objects being as they are represented as being. It is reality that makes beliefs true or false.

"If a thousand old beliefs
were ruined in
our march to truth
we must still march on."
~Stopford Brooke

This implies that truth is "objective," in the sense that it depends on how things are independently of our minds. Of course, what we take to be true is dependent on our minds, but what is true is up to objective reality. When people use the phrase "true for me," they simply mean what they take to be true, which may well be different from what other people take to be true. But there is no sense in the idea of something really being true "for" one person and not for another. The whiteness of snow is a matter of how snow really is, not a matter of how this or that person takes it to be. Truth itself is not relative to believers. (Tolerance is not a matter of allowing that everyone believes the truth, no matter how much they disagree; it is having the policy of not persecuting people for their beliefs even when they are egregiously false. Flat-earthers should not be persecuted for their beliefs, despite the error of those beliefs—though they may be reasoned with.)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the problem with the coherence theory?
2. How is truth determined, according to the correspondence theory?
3. How does the pragmatic theory differ from the correspondence theory?

Suggested Reading

James, William. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Alcoff, Linda Martin. *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.

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Horwich, Paul, ed. *Theories of Truth*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1994.

Johnson, Lawrence E. *Focusing on Truth*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Newman, Andrew. *The Correspondence Theory of Truth: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Predication*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Rescher, Nicholas. *The Coherence Theory of Truth*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987.

Websites to Visit

1. Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the Correspondence Theory of Truth — www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/archives/sum2003/entries/truth-correspondence
2. Philosophy Online — www.philosophyonline.co.uk

Lecture 4:
Logic: What Is Valid Reasoning?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Graham Priest's *Logic: A Very Short Introduction.*

Is Our Reasoning Valid?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

What is valid reasoning?

Can a proposition be both true and untrue?

Beliefs are true or false; reasoning is valid or invalid. Obviously, it is important that your reasoning be valid, in philosophy and elsewhere. Valid reasoning is the kind in which the conclusion logically follows from the premises—as with "All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal." The conclusion could not be false given that the premises are true. Logicians seek to extract the general rules that govern such valid reasoning—in this case "All *F*s are *G*; *x* is an *F*; therefore, *x* is a *G*." In other words, if everything has a certain property, then any particular thing has it. You can see by reflecting on it that this cannot fail to be the case. You can also see that if a particular thing has a certain property then something has that property. These two principles of reasoning are usually called "universal instantiation" and "existential generalization"; they relate statements about particular things to statements that are general in scope. Logic attempts to state and codify all principles of valid reasoning.

I won't, in this lecture, go into the details of symbolic logic; what I want to emphasize is the inescapability of logic—its undeniability and its presence in everything we think and say. There are three traditional laws of logic: the law of identity, the law of excluded middle, and the law of non-contradiction. These laws tell us not only how we must reason but also how any conceivable world must be; there is nothing optional about them.

"We are born weak,
we need strength;
helpless, we need aid;
foolish, we need reason.
All that we lack at birth,
all that we need when
we come to man's estate,
is the gift of education."

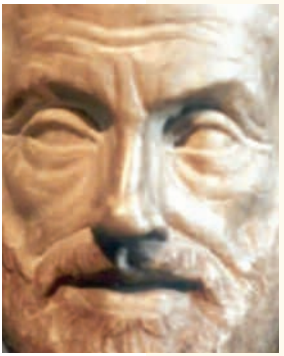
~Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The law of identity says that everything is identical to itself, so that you can never deny the identity of a thing with itself. This may seem trivial and obvious, and it should seem that way. What is not trivial is that it constitutes a principle that cannot conceivably be rejected—it sets a limit to thought: a thing that is not identical to itself is unthinkable. Associated with this law is what is called "Leibniz's law": things that are identical must have all their properties in common. If *a* is *b,* then *a* and *b* must

share all their properties; for if there was one property *a* had that *b* lacked, that would suffice to show that they are not really one and the same.

The law of excluded middle says that everything either has a given property or lacks that property; for example, everything is either red or not red, a man or not a man. There is no middle ground between being a certain way and not being that way. Or, every proposition is either true or not true. This, again, should appear trivial, but undeniable (I will have to say something here about vagueness). One of the important consequences of this principle is that everything has or lacks a given property whether or not we can find out which of these alternatives holds. Reality is one way or another irrespective of our ability to discover which it is (this is often called "realism").

The law of noncontradiction states that nothing can both have a property and lack it; nothing can be both red and not red at the same time. Reality cannot ever exemplify contradictory properties; a proposition cannot be both true and false; nothing can both be and not be. The whole idea of rationality depends on the law of noncontradiction, since we can only reason from a true belief if that belief cannot also be false.



ARISTOTLE: LOGICAL FORMULA OR SYLLOGISM

The history of logic in West-ern philosophical thought began with the Greek philosopher Aristotle in the fourth century. Aristotle first developed the *syllogism,* the core logical argument form consisting of three propositions: two premises and a conclusion. His purpose was to establish the conditions under which a deductive inference is valid or invalid. A valid conclusion can only come from premises that are logically connected to one another.

Most syllogisms are *categorical,* meaning that they have categorical propositions as premises and conclusions. For example: All humans are mortal (every *h* is *m*); every philosopher is human (every *p* is *h*); therefore, every philosopher is mortal (every *p* is *m*). The *hypothetical* syllogism, *modus ponens,* is characterized by a conditional first premise: If *p* then *q;* it continues: *p,* therefore *q.* The *disjunctive* syllogism, *modus tollens,* begins with a statement of alternatives: either *p* or *q;* it continues, not *q,* therefore *p.*

I stress this because many people these days lazily suppose that everything is up for grabs, everything is revisable, negotiable. Not so the laws of logic; they are the bedrock of all thought. They are immune from skeptical doubt.

"If you follow reason far enough it always leads to conclusions that are contrary to reason."

~Samuel Butler

Probably the most important logical rule of inference is known as "modus ponens," which says that if you know that *p,* and you know that *p* implies *q,* then you can deduce that *q.* That is, you are entitled to infer the consequences of what you know to be true. We use this principle all the time when we reason.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is the law of identity significant in philosophical thought?
2. Why does the law of the excluded middle seem difficult to reconcile with modern thinking?
3. What does the law of noncontradiction say about reality?

Suggested Reading

Priest, Graham. *Logic: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Berloquin, Pierre. *100 Games of Logic*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1999.

Copi, Irving M., and Carl Cohen. *Introduction to Logic*. New York: Prentice Hall Professional Technical Reference, 2002.

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Websites to Visit

1. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Aristotle — www.utm.edu/research/iep/a/aristotl.htm
2. Philosophy Resources on the Internet — www.epistemelinks.com/Main/MainPers.aspx

Lecture 5:
Knowledge and Experience:
Where Does Knowledge Come From?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing.*

CONSIDER THIS . . .

How do we acquire knowledge?

Which types of knowledge can not be acquired through experience?

Where Does Knowledge Originate?

Now that we have introduced some basic concepts—belief, truth, justification, knowledge, and rationality—we can begin to apply these concepts in considering some big philosophical questions. The first such question I shall discuss is "Where does our knowledge come from?"—a question in epistemology (the theory of knowledge).

The empiricist position, championed by John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume, maintains that all knowledge derives from sense experience: we see, touch, hear, taste and smell the external world, and then we extract all our concepts and knowledge from this sensory perception. There is no other source of knowledge than the deliverances of sense; it is our only route to truth. The rationalists agree that some knowledge is so derived but insist that not all knowledge is based on experience; in particular, knowledge of logic, mathematics, and philosophy itself is not so based. Instead we possess another faculty—the faculty of "pure reason"—that enables us to know a range of truths without recourse to experience. Thus we can "just see" that two plus two equals four simply by understanding what these concepts are; we don't need to observe a bunch of pairs of things and then learn by experience that whenever you have two of these pairs you always have four objects. In the same way, I may need observation to discover that bachelors are less happy than married people, but I don't need any observations to convince me that bachelors are always unmarried—that is true by definition.

This kind of knowledge is traditionally labeled "a priori" and is contrasted with the "a posteriori" knowledge that issues from sense experience. One of the big questions of the last three hundred years of philosophy has been what the nature of this a priori knowledge is—how it works, what its scope is, and whether it is really possible.

"We receive three educations, one from our parents, one from our schoolmasters, and one from the world. The third contradicts all that the first two teach us."

~Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu

It is important to see that there is *a priori* knowledge, and to appreciate the difficulties that are raised by it. We do have a special faculty of rational insight that cannot be reduced to sensory knowledge; indeed, you were using that faculty when you earlier understood the necessity of logical laws. Knowledge of logic is independent of, and prior to, all experience, in the sense that your ability to know logical laws depends upon a faculty of rational intuition—so not all justification is empirical justification. Among other things, this shows that empirical science is not the only kind of knowledge there is.

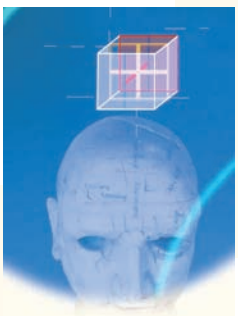
This issue intersects with the nature/nurture debate—what is innately present and what must be picked up from the environment. Rationalists regard some knowledge as having an innate basis, while empiricists deny this. Are we just a "blank slate" at birth, waiting for experience to make its mark, or do we enter the world already knowing certain things? However, this question is not quite the same as the question about *a priori* knowledge, which concerns the kind of justification appropriate to a given type of knowledge.

LOCKE, BERKELEY, HUME

John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume are the three founders of modern empiricism. Locke led the movement with his famous work, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which he rejected the rationalist notion that the truth of the universe could be resolved through rational thought. Instead, he argued, true knowledge could only be acquired through experience.

George Berkeley followed in Locke's footsteps, but unlike him, did not believe that objects external to the mind actually exist. He argued that objects exist only as collections of sense-data (information obtained through one's senses). Berkeley's famous philosophical works include *An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision* (1709) and *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710).

Also building upon Locke's ideas, David Hume reached the conclusion that beyond what is acquired through experience, it is not possible to determine the real nature, meaning, and structure of things. He further concluded that humans are sentimental, not reasonable, creatures. His book, *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), was not well received when first published, but is now considered important.



DESCARTES, LEIBNIZ

Rationalism has long been a rival of empiricism. It holds that rather than acquiring knowledge through the senses, humans have the capacity to reason—a faculty enabling them to reach both general and certain truths beyond the limits of sense perception.

Leibniz later expounded upon Descartes' theory to say that the universe is one large context in which each occurrence can be seen in relation to all others. Since, he maintained, the universe was designed according to a divine plan, it is the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz's logic also made a unique distinction between necessary propositions that he called "truths of reason," whose principle is the law of noncontradiction, and contingent propositions, or "truths of fact," based on the principle of sufficient reason. Sufficient reason is rooted in the divine intellect.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is problematic about *a priori* knowledge?
2. Is there a difference between *a priori* knowledge and ethical knowledge?

Suggested Reading

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Reprint. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Bonjour, Laurence. *In Defense of Pure Reason: A Rationalist Account of* a priori *Justification*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Cottingham, John G. *Rationalists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Woolhouse, Roger S. *The Empiricists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Websites to Visit

1. The Philosophy Pages — www.philosophypages.com
2. The European Graduate School, Gottfried Leibniz page — www.egs.edu/resources/gottfriedleibniz.html

Lecture 6:
The Basis of Ethics:
What Makes Something Right or Wrong?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Plato's *The Euthyphro.*

Is There a Difference Between Ethics and Morality?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

Do you believe morality is situational?

Is morality as objective as mathematics?

If *a priori* knowledge seems fundamentally unlike empirical knowledge, then even more so does ethical knowledge. How could we ever see an ethical fact? When I attribute goodness to an action or state of affairs, is there any sense in the idea that I might perceive this goodness, as I perceive the color of an object or its shape? Ethical properties are not ordinary "natural" properties of things, that you can see and touch; so what are they? Is it perhaps wrong to think of moral words as denoting properties of things at all? Maybe they have another function entirely; if so, what might it be?

One tradition, often called "emotivism," supposes that moral words serve merely to express emotions, rather than to describe external facts—like saying "Boo!" and "Hurrah!" Thus when I describe an action as good or right I am not attributing any real property to it; I am simply expressing my approval of it. There are no "moral facts" that might make an object of genuine moral knowledge; there are just moral feelings that we express in words. According to a similar view, moral language serves to prescribe courses of action rather than to describe facts: if I call something good I am simply saying that everyone ought to act that way, not ascribing some peculiar imperceptible property to it.

"But are not this struggle and even the mistakes one may make better, and do they not develop us more, than if we kept systematically away from emotions?"

~Vincent Van Gogh

On these views, moral statements are no more true or false than "Hurrah!" or "Love thy neighbor!"; indeed, they are not really genuine statements. They express emotions or prescribe actions, rather than state facts. On the opposing view ("moral realism"), ethics is best conceived as a branch of *a priori* knowledge: when I come to know that stealing is wrong my knowledge is based on a kind of direct intuition into the moral facts—just like my knowledge of mathematical and logical truth. I know just from the concept of stealing that stealing is wrong; and similarly for murder and rape. Like other kinds of *a priori* knowledge, ethi-

cal knowledge is not derived from experience—in the sense that my senses can detect the ethical properties of things.

The first type of view naturally leads to moral relativism, since there are no moral facts that have to be got right by every moral community; there is only emotion and its expression—and what excites a positive emotion in me might not in you. The second type of view allows that moral knowledge might be as robust and objective as logical and mathematical knowledge—I favor this view. That you should treat other people as you would wish to be treated yourself is a binding and universal moral principle. (I know that many of you will resist this kind of moral absolutism, but I want you to consider it carefully before rejecting it out of hand.)

"Our morality seems to be only a check on the ultimate domination of force, just as our politeness is a check on the impulse of every pig to put his feet in the trough."

~Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Some people think that morality can only be binding if God is at the root of it; without God it is a moral free-for-all. Thus the reason murder is wrong is just that God has commanded us not to murder—he decrees that it is wrong. The trouble with this position, as was pointed out by Plato over two thousand years ago, is that it gets things backwards: it is not that murder is wrong because God commands us not to murder; it is rather that God commands us not to murder because murder is wrong. God cannot simply by decree make murder wrong, any more than he can make it right; if he could morality would be arbitrary and pointless. Murder is wrong because of what it is, not because God has decided to declare it wrong. God is not the source of moral truth—though He may be responsible for rewards and punishments for your actions. But then, if God cannot be the logical basis of morality, there is no necessity for God to exist in order that morality has force: murder is still wrong even if there is no God.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the definition of moral relativism?
2. What makes morality binding if there is no God?

Suggested Reading

Plato. *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988.

Other Books of Interest

Devettere, Raymond J. *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. 1788. Trans. T.K. Abbott. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1996.

———. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. 1781. Trans. Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996.

Murdoch, Iris, and Allen Lane. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Websites to Visit

1. California State University at Sacramento's Matt McCormick's Philosophy site: article on Immanuel Kant written for the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy — www.csus.edu/indiv/m/mccormickm/kantbio.html
2. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Plato's Ethics: An Overview — www.setis.library.usyd.edu.au/stanford/entries/plato-ethics

Lecture 7:
Happiness and Right Action:
How Are Morality and Human Welfare Related?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism.*

What Is Right—or Wrong?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

How do we determine right from wrong?

Should a person's motivation be a factor in considering the righteousness of his or her actions?

We've talked about the status of moral language—what kind of thing a moral statement is—now we must talk about what makes something right or wrong. If I describe an act of stealing as wrong, what is it about the act that constitutes its being wrong? Why is stealing wrong? The answer to this that is easily the most popular in the modern age is known as utilitarianism, which says that acts are right or wrong in virtue of their consequences—specifically, how the act contributes to the happiness or well-being of people. Thus stealing is wrong because losing your stuff makes you unhappy. More precisely, an action is to be judged according to whether it produces "the greatest happiness for the greatest number." Faced with a choice between two actions, say, giving money to one charity rather than another, you should be guided simply and solely by how much well-being you will produce by your action—by the consequential utilities of your action.

According to utilitarianism, actions are not to be judged by criteria such as what it says in the Bible, or what laws happen to apply in your society, or even the kind of motive that leads to such actions—since the utilitarian precept may conflict with all of these. Human welfare is the end of morality, for the utilitarian, and that is the only test of rightness. This applies both at the

level of individual morality and public policy—whether to keep your promise to a friend as well as what kind of system of taxation is fair and right. Since the view regards each person's happiness as equal in importance to anyone else's, it clearly leads to an egalitarian and democratic vision of the morally right society. It is the amount of happiness that matters, not who has it. The way to ensure that the maximum welfare is secured is to give people a say in how goods are distributed, and maximizing happiness will involve regarding people as equal. The misery of the many can never be justified by the happiness of the few, still less by appeal to rules of action that ignore people's welfare. Thus utilitarianism has always been seen as politically progressive.

The utilitarian view downplays both motive and character in evaluating actions. So long as my acts have beneficial consequences, I can be as evil as I like and act from the most vicious of motives. Of course, such a character and motives will not generally lead to good results, but the point is that if they did then utilitarianism has no moral objection. On opposing views, acts can be judged by the character and motives of the agent, so that we can describe a bad act as having good consequences ("It was wicked of him to try to cheat you, but since it backfired on him the consequences were good"). For many moral philosophers this emphasis on consequences omits the idea of a virtuous character and a moral motive; at best these come in as a by-product of producing maximally beneficial consequences—as opposed to having an intrinsic value. It also makes no essential room for the idea of human rights; indeed, these may be overridden if the consequences are good enough.

The socially progressive nature of utilitarianism can be illustrated by the cases of slavery and animal exploitation. Slavery sacrificed the happiness of the many for the benefit of the few, so it was wrong from a utilitarian standpoint. Animal exploitation, for food, clothing, and so on, sacrifices the welfare of the many for the benefit of the few also, and thus has also been argued to be wrong: the cost in unhappiness to the animals outweighs whatever pleasures we derive from their use.

Utilitarianism does not always yield conclusions that are intuitively appealing. Consider a case in which we can improve the happiness of ten wicked men by torturing one innocent man. This naturally strikes us as unjust, because the innocent man does not deserve to be tortured to make ten bad men happy, even if it makes them very happy. But the utilitarian does not consider concepts like desert, but only the total amount of happiness created, no matter who deserves what. Thus simple utilitarianism needs to be supplemented by some rules about justice and desert; it cannot work as a complete moral theory.

"The essence of philosophy is that a man should so live that his happiness shall depend as little as possible on external things."

~Epictetus

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the connection between utilitarianism and democracy?
2. How can human rights be subordinated by utilitarianism?

Suggested Reading

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. 1863. Ed. George Sher. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Bentham, Jeffrey, and John Stuart Mill. *Classic Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*. Ed. John Troyer. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003.

Mill, John Stuart, and J.B. Schneewind. Intro. *Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, the Subjection of Women, and Utilitarianism*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Schneewind, J.B. *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Sidgwick, Henry. *The Methods of Ethics*. 1874. 7th ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981.

Smart, J.J.C., and Bernard Williams. *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Websites to Visit

1. Utilitarianism site — www.utilitarianism.com
2. John Stuart Mill site — www.jsmill.com

Lecture 8:
Morality and Blame: Are We Free?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Clifford Williams's *Free Will and Determinism: A Dialogue.*

CONSIDER THIS . . .

What is the definition of freedom?

Do we really have free will?

What Are Our Alternatives?

Morality and praise/blame go together: we are praised for right actions, blamed for wrong ones. However, if a person does something he can't help doing we don't praise or blame him for doing it—if, say, he was coerced or drugged or hypnotized. People can only be blamed for their actions if they do them freely. What is it to do something freely? It is to do something that was not your only option, over which you had a choice, where you could have done otherwise. A person can be blamed for something only if he really had an alternative, something else he could have done but chose not to. This is what we mean when we speak of free will—the presence of genuine alternatives.

But there is an old and powerful argument that aims to show that we don't have such alternatives—that we are not free. Consider the sum total of factors operating to make you what you are: your heredity, your environment, all the forces that have ever operated on you. They give you your desires, your inclinations, your propensities. Now take your total state at any given time, both mental and physical, and consider a choice you are faced with, say, whether to have chocolate or vanilla ice cream. You think you could choose either, that it is entirely up to you, that your will is free. But aren't you determined to choose as you do by your total mental and physical state at that

time? Maybe you were born with a gene that favors chocolate over vanilla, maybe this was a habit inculcated early on by your parents, maybe it is just a quirk of your nervous system—whatever choice you made was determined to happen that way. After all, your choice will be expressed in a particular movement of your body—reaching left instead of right, say—and such bodily movements must have their causal source in the physical facts of your nervous system. They are not causeless, random, essentially unpredictable. If a scientist knew enough about your nervous system, he could predict what you would do. In which case you really had no choice; you could not have done otherwise.

This argument claims that determinism rules out freedom: since the state of the universe at a given time is uniquely determined by its state at the immediately preceding time, plus the laws of nature, everything happens of necessity, so that nothing could have been otherwise. And this is as true of a criminal's act as it is of a tree falling in the forest. Every event is simply the law-governed consequence of the state of nature, including human actions and choices. If so, praise and blame are irrational and should be abandoned. Empty the jails! No one is ever to blame for anything. Freedom is an illusion.

This is sufficiently disturbing that some thinkers have opted to deny determinism. Elementary particles are said to be radically indeterministic in their operations, so maybe they are the basis of free human actions. The trouble with this is that randomness does not free action make. The indeterminism of quanta does not make them free agents, so how can they be what make us free? And surely our actions do not issue from random processes, but follow from our psychological condition, particularly our desires.

Maybe, then, we should alter our conception of freedom: let's define it as doing what you want, rather than as what you have alternatives to. Then we can say that determinism is compatible with freedom, since freedom is simply being determined to act as you want or desire—it is causation by your wishes. But this omits the crucial element of "could have acted otherwise" and so doesn't really capture the notion of freedom we thought applied to human action. We still can't make sense of the idea of a number of equally available courses of action.

"Life is the sum

of all your choices."

~Albert Camus

As with so many philosophical questions, we are left in uncertainty and confusion. We start with a common-sense notion, subject it to logical scrutiny, and find that we cannot give a coherent and defensible account of it. Free will seems to dissolve into nothing. And yet we find it very hard to give it up. This is one of the great and perennial problems of philosophy.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Are we predetermined to act as we do?
2. Are freedom and determinism compatible concepts?

Suggested Reading

Williams, Clifford. *Free Will and Determinism: A Dialogue*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997.

Other Books of Interest

Jolley, Nicholas. *Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Logue, William. *Charles Renouvier, Philosopher of Liberty*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992.

Schmaltz, Tad M. *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Websites to Visit

1. The Catholic Encyclopedia — www.newadvent.org/cathen
2. School of Mathematics and Statistics, University of St. Andrews, Scotland: biography of Pierre Simon Laplace — www.gap.dcs.stand.ac.uk/~history/Mathematicians/Laplace.html

Lecture 9:
Mind and Body: How Are They Related?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Joseph Almog's *What Am I?: Descartes and the Mind-Body Problem.*

What Is the Dichotomy of Dualism and Materialism?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

How does the mind interact with the body?

Are the mind and the brain one and the same?

I said in the last lecture that your nervous system controls your actions—that is, underlying your mental states are states of your brain that cause your body to move when you act. We can picture mind and brain as running on two tracks: there is a thought in your mind and a state of your brain corresponding to it, both leading to an action. But how exactly are these two things related? In general, how are the various aspects of your consciousness—your sensations, feelings, thoughts, and desires—related to the neurons that compose your brain? There seem to be only two possible answers: they are different or they are the same—and both answers run into serious problems.

Dualism says that the mind is a different kind of entity from the body and brain; according to Descartes, the body is extended and spatial, while the mind is non-spatial. The two have different essences or natures—the essence of the mind being thought not extension (he might also have said consciousness is the essence of mind). Mind and body are yoked together during mortal life, but they can float apart at the point of death—thus allowing for the immortality of the soul. The soul is not a part of the body at all, unlike the brain.

Materialism says that mind and brain are really identical, despite surface appearances. The mind just is the brain, neither more nor less: thoughts and feelings are just neurons firing—bits of biochemistry. Granted we use different words to describe the mind, but these words are really labels for brain states. We use the word "water" to refer to a particular kind of familiar liquid, but this liquid is just as well described by the scientific term "H_20"—there aren't two things here, but one, differently labeled. The only dualism is that of words, not things.

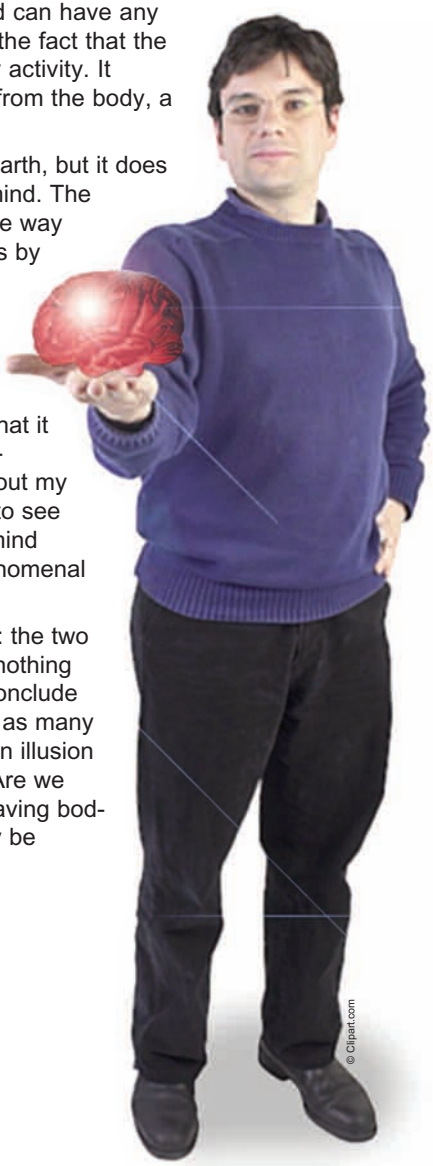
"The mind is like an iceberg, it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above water."

~Sigmund Freud

Dualism is tailored to the religious point of view; materialism suits the scientific outlook. Both views encounter difficulties. Dualism has the problem of explaining how mind and body interact, given their

different natures, as well as how mind can have any causal impact on the body in view of the fact that the brain is a sufficient cause of all bodily activity. It leaves the mind suspiciously remote from the body, a kind of dangling ethereal appendage.

Materialism is economical, down to earth, but it does too much violence to the concept of mind. The mind is not reducible to the brain in the way materialism suggests. We can see this by asking whether full knowledge of the brain would suffice for full knowledge of the mind: the answer is that it would give us no knowledge of the mind at all. I could know all about the brain of a bat and still not know what it is like to be a bat—to have bat experiences. A blind man could know all about my brain and still not know what it is like to see color. Materialism omits the way my mind feels—what philosophers call its "phenomenal character."



So, once again, we are left confused: the two main theories seem inadequate, and nothing else comes to mind. Are we then to conclude that the conscious mind is an illusion, as many philosophers have declared free will an illusion (not to speak of the external world)? Are we really unconscious zombies, mere heaving bodies? One hopes not. That would really be too much.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the limitations of Descartes' dualism?
2. What are the supporting tenets of materialism?

Suggested Reading

Almog, Joseph. *What Am I?: Descartes and the Mind-Body Problem*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Baker, Gordon, Katherine J. Morris, and J.J. Gadrey. *Descartes' Dualism*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Hawkins, David R. *Power vs. Force: The Hidden Determinants of Human Behavior*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2002.

Lovejoy, Arthur O. *The Revolt Against Dualism: An Inquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas*. Somerset, NJ: Transaction Publications, 1996.

Websites to Visit

1. Exhibition on René Descartes — www.serendip.brynmawr.edu/Mind/Table.html
2. "The Mysterious Matter of the Mind" by Arthur C. Custance, Ph.D. — www.custance.org/old/mind

Lecture 10:
Consciousness: Can the Mystery Be Solved?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Colin McGinn's *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World.*

Consider the Mystery of Consciousness

CONSIDER THIS . . .

How does the brain create consciousness?

Is it possible to know the consciousness of someone else?

What exactly is consciousness? We should distinguish simple consciousness of things, such as awareness of the smell of a rose, from reflective self-consciousness, as when you say to yourself "I am smelling a rose." Simple consciousness can be possessed by animals and infants, but reflective consciousness calls for the use of sophisticated concepts. You can smell things without being able to use the concept of smelling or the concept of yourself. Sensation is a pre-conceptual matter. The essence of sensation lies in how it feels to you—what it is like to have it. If you have never experienced a particular type of sensation, you cannot know what type of sensation is in question—a blind man doesn't know what it is like to see, as we don't know what it is like to be a bat. This is known as the subjectivity of simple consciousness: what it is like for the subject herself.

There is also what is called the intentionality of consciousness—the fact that it is about something, directed at something. All consciousness is consciousness of: the rose I am smelling, the fire hydrant I am looking at, the traffic I am hearing. To be conscious is to be in a state that puts you into mental contact with things outside yourself (assuming those things to exist: see lecture one) with the objects of your consciousness. Thus thinking is also always about something; there is no sense in the idea of contentless thought. Consciousness always involves the apprehension of something that is not the conscious state itself.

We can also see that there is a special kind of transparency to consciousness, in the sense that one knows quite clearly and distinctly what state of consciousness one is in (recall Descartes' *Cogito*). If I am seeing a red cube, then I know very well that I have an experience that involves the appearance of a red cube; there is no room for error—I can't mistake an experience of a red cube for an experience of a blue sphere, say. I am in a position of special authority so far as concerns my current state of consciousness; no skeptic can shake my certainty about how things now seem to me.

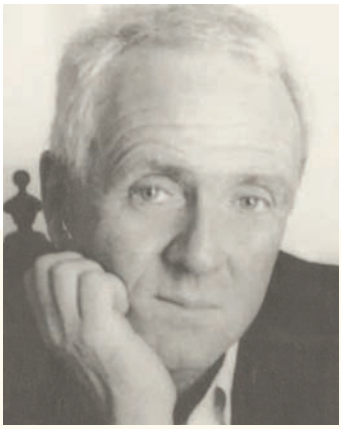
"The only way to give finality to the world is to give it consciousness."

~Miguel De Unamuno

But how is it possible for the brain to generate experiences with these three features of subjectivity, intentionality, and transparency? How could brain states constitute such experiences? Brain processes, such as neurons conducting electricity and absorbing chemicals, don't have these features: they are not known about only by experiencing them yourself (someone can simply describe them to you); they have no apparent intentionality (they are not of anything); and they are by no means transparent (you don't necessarily know that you are having them when you are). How then could brain states possibly explain the nature of conscious states?

Not that dualism helps here. The states of a supposed immaterial substance would also lack our three features—making the mind stuff more gaseous doesn't edge it any closer to the essence of consciousness.

I believe that the dependence of mind on brain is a deep mystery. There must be aspects of the brain of which we have no inkling, that enable the brain to produce something with our three features, but we have no conception of what these aspects might be like. It is as if there is a "missing link" here—something that would close the gap in our knowledge but remains elusive. But I think this shouldn't be all that surprising, given that we are finite evolved creatures with limited mental capacities. Not everything about the universe might be open to human understanding. The mystery of consciousness is really our intellectual limitations making themselves felt, I suspect. In any case, there is no good theory of consciousness around today, and no good ideas about how to go about producing one. Yet I don't doubt for a second that consciousness is as real as anything in the universe. Reality is not the same as human intelligibility.



COLIN McGINN

Dr. Colin McGinn's most famous work is *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (2000). In addressing the question concerning the nature of consciousness, he asserts his *Mysterian* position, that the human intellect is incapable of ever truly knowing the mystery of consciousness. The work strives to show, however, that in accepting this limitation, we are freer to explore other areas of human intelligence and cognitive abilities, such as dreams and introspection. His most recent book is *The Making of a Philosopher,* published in April 2003. It is both a personal memoir and a study of the great philosophical figures of the twentieth century.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How do the three types of consciousness differ?
2. What differentiates consciousness from other brain processes?

Suggested Reading

McGinn, Colin. *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*). 1927. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.

McGinn, Colin. *The Making of a Philosopher: My Journey Through Twentieth-Century Philosophy*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.

Moran, Dermot. *Phenomenology Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Searle, John R., Daniel C. Dennett, and David John Chalmers. *The Mystery of Consciousness*. New York: The New York Review of Books, Inc., 1997.

Sokolowski, Robert. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. New York: Cambridge, 2000.

Websites to Visit

1. Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind — www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict
2. Pratt School of Architecture, Phenomenology — www.pratt.edu/~arch543p/help/phenomenology.html

Lecture 11:
Mind and World: Are Objects Really as They Appear?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is John J. Ratey's *A User's Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain.*

Is Perception Consciousness?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

What is perception?

Do we really see objects? Or do we only see qualities of objects?

We just examined mind and brain, but what about the relation between mind and world—specifically perception and its objects? We see and touch objects—or so we think—but are the objects really as they appear to us? How close is appearance to reality? Do we see objects as they really are, or do they come to us disguised by the subjectivity we bring to the perceptual encounter? Is there a "veil of perception" behind which objects hide? Do we ever really see objects at all, as opposed to their representation in the mind? How much of what we call the world is a projection of the mind?

There is an old argument that aims to show that we do not perceive physical objects, called the "argument from illusion." Suppose I am seeing a straight stick in water that looks bent to me—a well-known visual illusion is occurring. Here we would say that there is an appearance of a bent stick—a bent stick is the apparent object of my seeing. But the stick in the water is straight, so the bent stick that appears to me and the straight stick in the water cannot be one and the same. Therefore what I am seeing is not the stick in the water but another stick altogether—the illusory one.

Suppose we now take the real stick away but ensure that I keep on seeing the bent stick—say, by stimulating the visual part of my brain so as to produce the original impression of a bent stick. Then certainly I am not seeing the straight stick—yet I am seeing something. Call this something a "sense-datum," so that we can say that I have a sense-datum of a bent stick. Now consider seeing a stick in the air where there is no illusion: am I not also then really seeing a sense-datum of a stick, not a real stick, since if the real stick were removed the sense-datum would still be present? In other words, don't I always really see sense-data and not physical objects? The appearances of objects can always be prized off the objects, so that I can see the appearances without the objects being there; but then don't I really see the appearances even when the

"What we see depends mainly on what we look for."

~John Lubbock

real objects are there? So runs the argument from illusion. Whether the argument is sound depends upon whether it is correct to say that the same thing is seen in both the illusory case and the normal (or "veridical") case.

Here is another argument: You normally think that things are colored and that you see their colors. But suppose that Martians see things in very different colors: what you see as red they see as green and vice versa. Are they simply wrong about the colors of things? Or is it that both humans and Martians see things as having the colors those things have for them? That is, isn't it that colors are "painted on" objects by the particular sensory responses you happen to have? If sugar tastes bitter to Martians, does it make sense to insist that they have it wrong because sugar is "really" sweet? No, better to say that some qualities of objects are "response-dependent"—they are a matter of the particular way we experience the world. Consider here the qualities of being disgusting or tasty or sexy or amusing or enjoyable or scary. But then many qualities of objects will depend on the mind that experiences them; they are not qualities things have in themselves, but only relative to a perceiver. So, again, perception does not always work to reveal how physical objects are objectively—that is, how they are independently of the perceiving consciousness. Objects are really tasteless and colorless, for example, but we invest them with these qualities by experiencing them in particular ways.

Qualities that things have in themselves are traditionally called "primary qualities," while those that depend upon the perceiving mind are called "secondary qualities." The former are objective, the latter subjective.

Thus the relation between perception and the world is not as simple as you might have thought—perception is not a simple mirror of what is out there anyway. But we shouldn't conclude that the objects of perception are completely "in the mind," because we do perceive a great many objective properties of things—their primary qualities of shape, size, number, and other such properties.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What does it mean to say an object has response-dependent qualities?
2. How does perception work?

Suggested Reading

Ratey, John J., M.D. *A User's Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain*. Reprint ed. New York: Vintage, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. 1936. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Incorporated, 1977.

Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt, 1999.

Keenan, Julian, Dean Falk, and Gordon G. Gallup. *The Face in the Mirror: The Search for the Origins of Consciousness*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.

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Websites to Visit

1. Abstract of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* — www.philosophypages.com/locke/k365.htm
2. *The Mirror Test* by Gordon G. Gallup, Jr., James R. Anderson, and Daniel J. Shillito — www.grimpeur.tamu.edu/~colin/TCA/Ch/Gallup/gallup-final.pdf

Lecture 12:
The Self: Who Am I?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Michel D. Ferrari and Robert J. Sternberg's (eds.) *Self-Awareness.*

Who Am "I"?

You thought you were puzzled earlier; you felt your conceptual foundations start to crumble. Now we pass to a really puzzling question, in which the very self is at stake. Descartes thought he had a proof that the self exists, since I cannot think without there being an "I" that does the thinking. But what is this "I"—what do we mean when we talk about the self? Particularly, what is involved in the persistence of the same self over time?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

What makes you "you"?

Is the essence of "you" material or immaterial?

Three theories suggest themselves: the simple ego theory, the body/brain theory, and the mental connectedness theory. I will only be able to explore the beginnings of this topic in this lecture—but enough to get you puzzled and wanting to know more. The simple ego theory takes the self to be a kind of irreducible mental substance, an indivisible psychic unit, a kind of soul pellet. The self transcends the body and brain, and even the full range of mental states you have; it is not essentially connected even to what you call your personality. It is the bearer of all your attributes without being identifiable with any of them—the transcendent hook upon which everything else hangs. You have the same self-unit from birth to death, and it never changes in its intrinsic nature.

The trouble with this theory is that it is extravagant and hard to believe: what on earth is this simple ego hovering around the body and loosely related even to the mind? Can we say nothing about its nature, whence it comes from, where it goes? And why should it matter where it goes, since it seems so abstract and bloodless a thing? How can it be the me of which I am so fond?

The body/brain theory takes the self to just be the body—or an especially central part of the body, the brain. I refer to my brain when I say "I." So the self is a complex physical substance, not a simple nonphysical substance (shades of materialism and dualism here). This view is nicely naturalistic and down to earth, but there are problems. What if we were to replace all my memories and personality traits by putting a whole new set into my brain? The resulting person has a totally different mental profile from me now, but has my physical brain. Is that me?

"It is not easy to find happiness in ourselves, and it is not possible to find it elsewhere."

~Agnes Repplier

Apparently not. Suppose the new memories are taken from you and put into my brain, which is then transplanted into your body, while your brain has been pickled for future use: isn't the resulting person not me but you? The brain theory underestimates the role of the psychological attributes in fixing personal identity.

So let's try out the mental connectedness theory: there is no self as a bearer of mental states; there is just the series of mental states themselves. There are memories linking the present to the past; there are expectations for the future; there are persisting traits of character, but there is no self that has all of these. Talking of a continuous person is therefore misleading; a person is more like a stream than a solid object, a series of changing states. This sounds bracing and answers to something in our conception of what a person is, but it too runs into difficulties. What about interruptions to the stream? Does the person go out of existence if there is a break in the stream, as with dreamless sleep? Is amnesia a form of death? Can't I change my life dramatically and still survive, like Paul on the road to Damascus? How much continuity does there need to be for me to go on existing? Also, what about "fission cases," in which we envisage a splitting in the stream? Suppose we divide a person's brain in two and put each half in a new body? Are we to say there are now two of me, since both are mentally connected to me now? But how can I be two people? And when I say "I am a philosopher" what am I referring to with "I"—the whole series of my mental states, some segment of them, or what? Surely, I do have mental states—it is not that my mental states have no one to call their owner—and isn't that owner me? How can I be a chain of connected mental states? Perplexities abound and multiply.

On reflection, I don't know what I am. And neither do you. Maybe the self, too, is one of those deep mysteries I alluded to in lecture ten.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Is the true nature of the self a material or immaterial substance?
2. What is the theory of mental connectedness?

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

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Websites to Visit

1. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on David Hume — www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume
2. International Psychoanalytical Association — www.ipa.org.uk/site/cms

Lecture 13:
God: Can the Existence of God Be Proven?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species.*

Is There a God?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

Is there "proof" that God exists?

Must all events have a cause?

One of the things that got me into philosophy was wondering about the existence of God. Especially if you are a believer, you want to know whether God's existence can be rationally established. Is belief in God just something people are indoctrinated in or are there rational grounds for this belief? People used to believe in weather gods, gods of love, evil demons, fairies, and the like (some still do), but a rational person will want to know whether these are just fantasies or things that can be established on the basis of argument or observation.

There are three traditional arguments for the existence of God: the argument from design, the first-cause argument, and the ontological argument. I will consider these in turn.

The argument from design begins by pointing out that nature is a well-ordered system of intricately constructed entities—specifically, animals and plants are highly complex, well-designed objects. They exceed, in design intricacy, such human artifacts as watches, cars, and computers. In the case of these latter things there was a designer—an intelligence that planned and created these things. They certainly did not come about "by accident," as a result of the blind forces of nature; we made them. But then, isn't it equally implausible to suggest that animals came about without the help of a designer—a superior intelligence that planned and created them? They could scarcely have resulted from the chance operations of nature, acting without intention and foresight. If so, then this great designer must exist, and he is God.

The problem with this argument has a familiar name: Charles Darwin. The theory of evolution by natural selection shows that complex design can result from "blind forces," because it shows that over long time periods random mutations can be selected according to their fitness, thus producing an organism designed to survive in a given environment. In weeding out the badly designed organisms, natural selection produces the well-designed ones. This is a long story, and one for a biologist to tell fully, not a philosopher, but it is generally agreed that the old argument from design falters once Darwin's theory has been understood.

"I cannot imagine how the clockwork of the universe can exist without a clockmaker."

~Voltaire

The first-cause argument begins by assuming that every event has a cause, and then concludes that God must initiate the whole causal series. The problem with this argument is that if God can be admitted as the uncaused first cause, why is this privilege confined to Him? If He can exist without being caused, why cannot the physical universe? The question of what caused God cannot be evaded. If something, then He isn't the first cause; if nothing, then why can only God exist causelessly? Questions about the origins of all things are indeed deeply puzzling, but God doesn't remove the puzzles; He just raises them in a new form. In addition, merely being the first cause is not enough to establish the distinctive properties God is supposed to have—His omniscience and all-goodness, say. So we still have no proof of why a being with these qualities must exist.

The ontological argument says that since God is the most perfect being conceivable, He must exist—since not to exist would be a kind of imperfection. Hence the existence of God follows from the definition of God. This is a clever brain-teaser of an argument, but it seldom convinces anyone, even believers. It goes wrong by taking existence to be a kind of perfection or virtue, and by using the suspect notion of the "most perfect conceivable being" (does it make sense to speak of the most perfect conceivable dinner or mustache or musical performance?).

Against the existence of God we have the problem of evil: how can God allow evil to exist in the world given that He is meant to be all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful? Wouldn't you stop the suffering if only you could? If God always knows it is going on, and can stop it in an instant, and is morally perfect, why doesn't He step in and prevent the suffering? It is sometimes replied to this that evil is the result of human free will. But much suffering is not the result of immoral actions but of laws of nature, diseases, and accidents. How can God allow an innocent child to suffer from a congenital disease when He could so easily rectify matters?

Some believers admit that there are indeed no cogent arguments for the existence of God, and even good arguments against it, but that we must proceed on the basis of "faith." But to a skeptic this sounds like admitting there are no reasons for belief but wanting to believe anyway.

Finally, Pascal's wager: if there is even a small probability that God exists, we should believe in Him, because the rewards of heaven are so great and the torments of hell so terrible. We should believe because this is most likely to secure us future felicity. Here the problem is that the argument invites us to decide to believe, but as we saw in lecture two, belief cannot be willed. You can hardly tell yourself to believe what you have just convinced yourself is false. Could I decide to believe that two plus two equals five simply because it would pay me to have this belief?

Image of the Cone Nebula captured by the NASA Hubble Space Telescope, April 2002.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the ontological argument for God?
2. What is the primary objection to the first-cause argument?

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

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1. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Aristotle — www.utm.edu/research/iep/a/aristotl.htm
2. School of Mathematics and Statistics, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, biography of Blaise Pascal — www.gap.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/Mathematicians/Pascal.html

Lecture 14:
The Meaning of Life:
What Gives Human Life Value?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Evan Harris Walker's *Physics of Consciousness: The Quantum Mind and the Meaning of Life.*

What Is Meaningful Life?

CONSIDER THIS . . .

How do we find meaning in life?

What kind of life is worth living?

A meaningless life, we think, is not worth living. We want life to be not only free of suffering, but also to have some positive significance. But what gives life meaning? There are two sorts of answers: something that confers meaning on human life from the outside, and something that arises from inside human life. Many people feel that unless there is a God who created us and cares about us there cannot be any meaning in life; so if the existence of God comes to seem shaky, life is in danger of meaninglessness. I think this view is mistaken: life can still have meaning in a godless universe.

First let me make a logical point. It cannot be that no life can have meaning unless meaning is conferred upon it by some distinct supervisory being, since presumably God's life has meaning in itself. If it did not, then God would need another God to confer meaning on his life, and then that second God would need his God, and so on. It cannot be that a given life can have meaning only in virtue of a higher form of life that gives it meaning. Some life must have intrinsic meaning. But if God's life can have intrinsic meaning, in virtue of the kind of life it is, then why can't ours? Whatever gives God's life meaning might also apply to us, in suitably scaled-down form.

Clearly, to find meaning in a life, we need to identify some values that confer meaning; so the question is what values to pursue. What values make life worthwhile? These need not be limited to ethical values, though no doubt ethical values should be included. Three main values have been championed by philosophers: pleasure, knowledge, and virtue. Some have held that pleasure is the only genuine value—this view is called "hedonism" (it is obviously closely allied to utilitarianism). We should seek as much pleasure as we can, even if this is at the expense of knowledge and virtue. One of the questions about hedonism is what to count as pleasure: do we mean sensory or bodily pleasure, as from food, drink, and sex, or do we also include the pleasures of the arts, of scientific discovery, of philosophy. If we mean the latter, then the hedonist may be able to include knowledge and virtue as values, since they too will have their distinctive types of pleasure.

"Philosophy is a state of fermentation, a process without final outcome."

~Esa Saarinen

A standard objection even to this broader kind of hedonism is that "it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied"—that is, superior knowledge and virtue sometimes bring a reduction of one's happiness, and yet we still value them. Also, don't we derive pleasure from knowledge and virtue because we value them, rather than their having value because they bring pleasure?

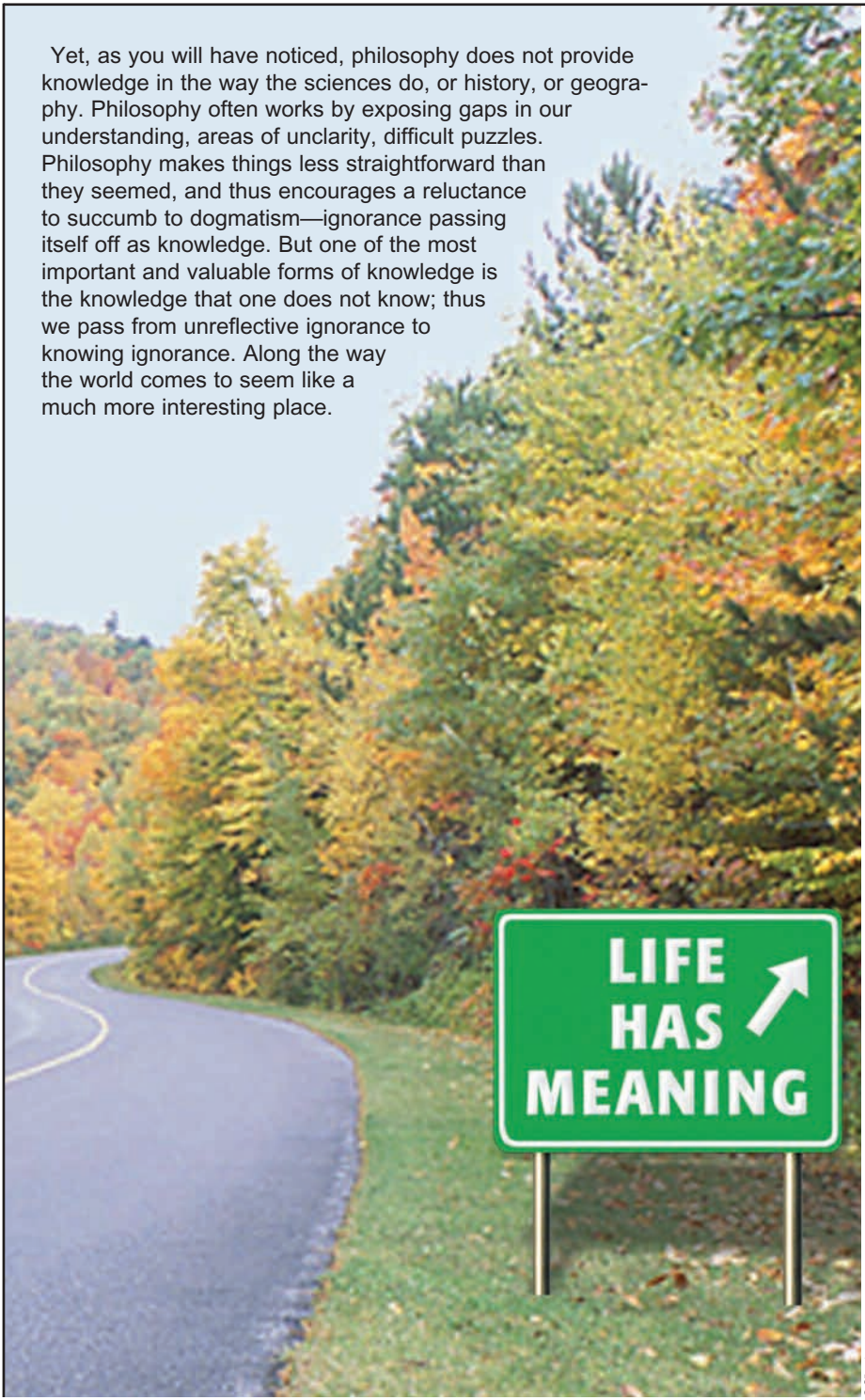
At the other extreme, we have the idea that only virtue matters: the self-denying stoic or ascetic is the man with most value in his life, avoiding pleasure and strictly following his demanding conscience. This kind of life is very difficult for most people and strikes us as too puritanical—surely pleasure is not a bad thing. The dried-out self-abnegator is not our ideal of a well-lived life.

Plato originated the idea that the search for knowledge is the highest value, so that a meaningful life is the life of knowledge—particularly philosophical knowledge, because this was of the highest things, what he called the Forms. Ignorance, for Plato, was something we must strive to overcome. We must seek to understand reality as it is, avoiding comforting myths and narrow perspectives. Our minds must be open to the universe, so that there can be a union between self and world. Hence education was supremely important to Plato: it is what makes life have value, because it promotes the growth of knowledge. And it is not that knowledge is valuable because it brings with it some other value, say the pleasures of knowing or mastery over the natural world or the ability to outsmart one's rivals; it is valuable in itself, intrinsically. It is simply a good thing to know.

I think the right thing to say here is that we don't have to choose. We can hold to each of these values, balancing them as best we can. They may indeed conflict, and we must decide in individual cases which to prefer, but a life lived by all three lights will contain as much meaning as we need. Pleasure is a good thing, so is knowledge, and so is moral virtue—and none of these reduce to the others. If I decide to go out for a pleasant walk I may end up learning less than if I stayed home to read, but pleasure has intrinsic value, which may outweigh the knowledge forgone. On the other side, I might devote all my energies to good works and neglect my education; then I will not have enough of the value of knowledge in my life. We must learn in life how to combine these three values into a harmonious whole.

As a rough rule of thumb—and we shouldn't expect anything more precise—each day should contain a bit of each. Certainly, one must conduct oneself ethically at all times, but some pleasure and some education are important ingredients of a valuable life. There is no shame in pursuing pleasure, and knowledge is not something only for the school years. You may decide to focus your life mainly on one of these values, letting the others take second place—as I have mainly focused my life on the pursuit of knowledge. There is no single rule for everybody; it depends on your particular talents and inclinations. But a life that wholly neglects any of these values will not be an ideally valuable life. By listening to these lectures you have chosen to focus on the value of knowledge for a while, and this is indeed part of what gives life meaning.

Yet, as you will have noticed, philosophy does not provide knowledge in the way the sciences do, or history, or geography. Philosophy often works by exposing gaps in our understanding, areas of unclarity, difficult puzzles. Philosophy makes things less straightforward than they seemed, and thus encourages a reluctance to succumb to dogmatism—ignorance passing itself off as knowledge. But one of the most important and valuable forms of knowledge is the knowledge that one does not know; thus we pass from unreflective ignorance to knowing ignorance. Along the way the world comes to seem like a much more interesting place.



FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What values do you believe make life worthwhile?
2. What is philosophy's greatest strength?

Suggested Reading

Walker, Evan Harris. *Physics of Consciousness: The Quantum Mind and the Meaning of Life*. Boulder, CO: Perseus Publishing, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4000 Year Quest for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: Random House, 1994.

Koen, Avraam. *Atoms, Pleasure, Virtue: The Philosophy of Epicurus*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1995.

O'Connor, Eugene, trans. *The Essential Epicurus: Letters, Principal Doctrines, Vatican Sayings, and Fragments*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993.

Websites to Visit

1. A leading content provider for neuroscience, consciousness, and general philosophy — www.mind-brain.com
2. Site contains links to websites with philosophical content — www.meta-religion.com/Directory/philosophy_links.htm

Suggested Readings:

Almog, Joseph. *What Am I?: Descartes and the Mind-Body Problem*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Reprint. New York: Penguin, 1991.

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These books are available online through www.modernscholar.com or by calling Recorded Books at 1-800-636-3399.