Philosophy as Quest
Notes to the Introductory Philosophy Student
Jon Dorbolo

Part I

The word *philosophy* comes from ancient Greek; *philos* = love and *sophos* = wisdom. Philosophy has roots in an ancient idea of “the love of wisdom.” Of course, people have ever disagreed over what counts as wisdom. Due to such disagreements, philosophy is often considered a large-scale debate that has lasted for most of human history. It is not all differences, though; for every human culture has some activity that is recognizable as philosophy and shares some ideas with the philosophies of other cultures. Philosophy has given rise to political systems, legal processes, literary genres, scientific reasoning, and technical innovations.

Most important, philosophy is a personally relevant activity to every conscious being. I want to outline some of the history and character of Western philosophy, but my primary aim is to make clear the direct significance of philosophy to you, dear reader. I maintain that every living and aware human being has a stake in the philosophical enterprise. This is because every human being has a belief-system that mediates the perceptions, values, assumptions, and understandings that make up a unique individual. Many people never think about their own belief-system, but take it for granted as just given. People have the remarkable ability to reflect on themselves. Because of this, we can explore, evaluate, and even change our own belief-systems in a purposeful way. Through self-investigation we can increase our knowledge of ourselves. Self-knowledge is a form of wisdom, so the roots of philosophy as the love of wisdom comes to be the care for oneself.

Philosophy Today

In the last century philosophy became an institutionalized practice dominated by certified professionals. Every university has a philosophy department populated with scholars who write papers for specialized journals and books on advanced topics. These philosophers know a great deal about the history of ideas and often specialize in specific topics and writers. Reading and listening to people who have invested great effort into understanding a topic is very valuable. It is unrealistic to suppose that a ten-week course will result in specialized knowledge that comes even close to that of the experts. Yet, there is one topic that no one else has a greater claim to expertise than you do: your own belief-system. If a main goal of philosophy is to increase wisdom, and self-knowledge is necessary for wisdom, then your personal self-investigation is a critical element. Given this, the key philosophical question is: *how well do you know yourself?*

Philosophy and Origins

Perhaps people have had questions about the world and our place in it since there has been a
human species. It is not difficult to imagine some individuals even among the earliest of people
gazing into the night sky and wondering; How did I get here?; Where am I going?; What makes
the world the way it is?; What am I? Such an inquirer belongs in the tradition of the philosopher.

It is also easy to imagine people of all times avoiding such questions altogether. They can simply
focus all attention and energy on the immediate and local matters, such as; Where is my next
meal?; How can I get more pleasure?; How can I avoid pain?; What does my (habit, tradition,
society) tell me to do? Indeed, there are many instances where the philosophical urge to question
and investigate has put people in trouble, especially where the authorities do not allow such
questioning. Some readers of this essay may know what this is like from their own past; (i.e.
families or relationships where deviation from the norm is disallowed).

That humans have long pondered philosophical questions is obvious from the subject matter of
mythologies from cultures around the globe. All cultures have some ancient stories that provide an
explanation of sorts as to the creation of the world, how humans came to be, and how reality is
ordered. For millennia, such stories were handed down from generation to generation. Here are a
few of those traditional stories from around the world. You may find the similarities among them
interesting:

**Southern Chinese Creation**
The first living thing was P'an Ku. He evolved inside a gigantic cosmic egg, which contained all the
elements of the universe totally intermixed together. P'an Ku grew by about 10 feet each day. As he
grew he separated the earth and the Sky within the egg. At the same time he gradually separated the
many opposites in nature male and female, wet and dry, light and dark, wet and dry, Yin and Yang.
These were all originally totally commingled in the egg. While he grew he also created the first
humans. After 18,000 years the egg hatched and P'an Ku died from the effort of creation. From his
eyes the sun and moon appeared, from his sweat, rain and dew, from his voice, thunder, and from his
body all the natural features of the earth arose.

**Apache Creation**
In the beginning nothing existed, no earth, no sky, no sun, no moon, only darkness was everywhere.
Suddenly, from the darkness emerged a thin disc, one side yellow and the other side white, appearing
suspended in midair. Within the disc sat a small bearded man, the Creator, the One Who Lives
Above.

**Koori Creation**
There was a time when everything was still. All the spirits of the earth were asleep, or almost all. The
great Father of All Spirits was the only one awake. Gently he awoke the Sun Mother. As she opened
her eyes, a warm ray of light spread out towards the sleeping earth. The Father of All Spirits said to
the Sun Mother, "Mother, I have work for you. Go down to the Earth and awake the sleeping spirits.
Give them forms." The Sun Mother glided down to Earth, which was bare at the time and began to
walk in all directions and everywhere she walked plants grew. After returning to the field where she
had begun her work the Mother rested, well pleased with herself. The Father of All Spirits came and
saw her work, but instructed her to go into the caves and wake the spirits.
Hebrew Creation
In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Please note that being a story or a mythology does not imply that the content of the story is false. Many people believe that at least one of the traditional creation stories is a true and accurate description of how the world came to be. Some scholars of mythology believe that the similarities of traditional stories across distant cultures indicate either common origins of the various peoples or some events that were experienced globally (e.g. most traditions have a story about a great flood). Psychologist Carl Jung regarded the similarities of mythical stories as resulting from a collective unconscious in which all human conscious is connected to an integral source.

It is not necessary to deny the traditional stories in order to do philosophy. Rather, the difference is that philosophy encourages questioning and seeks explanations and evidence, even for that which seems obvious, while traditionalism maintains that believing a certain story and being able to tell it is all the explanation or evidence that is ever required.

Philosophy is an activity involving inquiry, methods of investigation, and openness to further question. While philosophers certainly do hold strong opinions and espouse doctrines, anything that counts as philosophy must go beyond the mere statement of opinion and claims to truth. Philosophy involves questioning, because a basic assumption of all philosophy is that we do not (yet?) know the full and ultimate truth of the universe. Philosophy begins from a position of admitted self-limitation: ignorance, uncertainty, unclarity, etc. and seeks to make the topics of concern further understood, better supported, more clear, etc. If self-knowledge is a philosophical pursuit, it follows that we are limited in regards to our knowledge of ourselves.

We all have traditional accounts about ourselves. Whether they come from our families, cultures, or experiences, these stories serve to establish our individual belief-systems as given and obvious. They are our own creation myths explaining the existence of our present belief-systems. The philosophic impulse is to raise questions about one’s own belief system. That impulse runs counter to the tradition of accepting everything just as it is, just because that is how it happens to be. If you do undertake a philosophic inquiry into your own belief-system, you may find that your belief-system resists being subject to inquiry at all. There may be parts of yourself that act in the role of an authoritarian overseer determined on protecting the traditional status quo. In many of us, that authoritarian side is strong and even ruthless.

Inquiring into the origins of your own belief system involves asking questions like; What exactly
are my beliefs?; How did I get these beliefs?; Have my beliefs changed?; and How do my beliefs fit together? Now, when speaking of beliefs here, we are not concerned with all of the beliefs, thoughts, and ideas that you may hold, even though it may be that all are related in some way. Philosophical self-investigation typically looks for the core or most general beliefs within a belief system. For example, beliefs about what human nature is like (e.g. that people are basically selfish, or good-seeking, or sinful, or divine, etc.); beliefs about the way that the human mind learns and changes (e.g. from experience, from reason, from divine revelation, etc.); beliefs about the order and nature of existence (e.g. God controls everything, chance controls everything, etc.); beliefs about good and evil (e.g. God determines all value; nature determines all value; individual humans determine all value; etc.); and so on. These sorts of belief are considered core because they are general enough to influence many specific instances of beliefs and judgements. For instance, the reaction that you have to an issue such as the ethics of cloning human beings will connect back ultimately to some of the core beliefs noted above. The philosophic investigation into our own belief systems looks to the general and core beliefs that transcend the individual instances of issues and opinions. It seems clear to me that if our core beliefs were to change, then many of our opinions, and convictions, and commitments would follow. I’d like to know whether this seems so to you as well.

Please begin your philosophic quest by asking of yourself;

*What are my core beliefs?*
*How did I get these beliefs?*
*Have these beliefs ever changed?*
*How do I feel about the possibility that they could change?*
*How do my core beliefs fit together into a system?*

We shall come back to this line of inquiry. Think through and write down insights that you have in considering these matters.

**Philosophy and Spirit**

Philosophy and its concerns intersect with religion and spirituality. The questions that philosophers and religious thinkers raise are often the same, such as *Does my life have a purpose?*, *What happens after death?*, *What is the right thing to do?*, and many more. Religious and spiritual thinkers address many purely philosophical topics. Philosophers may be religious and provide spiritual answers to key questions.

There are some regards in which philosophy and religion are typically distinct. Understand that these are general observations for which particular exceptions may be found. Still there are some regards in which the participants of religious systems and philosophical activities will distinguish themselves.
Religion is characteristically practiced in a community of shared beliefs. That community also shares rituals and practices, such as holidays and dietary guidelines. Religious communities are frequently hierarchical with holy authorities (e.g. priests, imams, leaders) and sacred locations (e.g. temples, churches, mosques, holy cities, sacred mountains, etc.) Religious beliefs are often revealed by divine agency (e.g. scripture, vision, calling) and the adherence to the beliefs is a matter of faith. Devotion matters in religious orders and deviation from the accepted beliefs is discouraged. The major world religions tend to be monistic in maintaining that devotion to the beliefs of the particular religious system requires a denial of other religious systems. Religious and spiritual people include some of the most intelligent and open-minded people on the planet. Still, the final justification for much religious belief is simple acceptance. For devout folks, the ultimate truth is a mystery that is beyond human comprehension. Thus, the continued effort to understand is not as important as is the disciplined practice of faith and tradition. [I hope that I have done some justice to religious and spiritual thought. My effort here is not to evaluate, and certainly not to diminish, religion. I aim only at providing some distinctions that allow us to better grasp the nature and direction of philosophical thought].

Philosophical ideas are sometimes grouped as systems and schools, but the effort is most associated with individual thinkers. Even among communities of philosophers who adhere to common beliefs, there are seldom ritualistic practices required and monitored by authorities. Most significant, philosophical beliefs are subject to reason and demonstration. They are open to challenge and participating in philosophical work is characterized by making challenges to existing claims and seeking revisions. Philosophies are pluralistic and often very individualized. Acceptance and faith are not sufficient justification for belief in philosophy, as the mysterious nature of the universe is seen by philosophers as a challenge to be addressed by constant probing and questioning. You can tell when a religious topic is being treated philosophically when the emphasis is placed on clarity and evidence. Religious folks usually do not feel any need for a proof of God’s existence or an analysis of the concept of an afterlife. Philosophers do not remain content to accept statements of belief without some such proofs and analyses.

Some characteristic differences between religious thought and philosophical thought.

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Religion and philosophy do share an important realm of concerns. Both are approaches to providing accounts to how it is that human individuals relate to the rest of the world. Religions form systems in that they seek a comprehensive guide to how a human being is to think and act in the world. Religions provide conceptual blueprints that describe how the world (all of existence) works and what modes of living fit with that picture of reality (e.g. follow God’s plan, obey the will of Allah, harmonize with the Tao, tread the eight-fold path, etc.)

Philosophy also serves to provide a conceptual picture of the world and how individuals fit into it. Philosophy is not usually viewed as a practical concern, but our philosophical ideas do influence how we experience the world and how to react to it. For instance, a person who deeply believes that human nature is primarily motivated by self-interest will respond to events in a different way from people who assume that altruistic (selfless) behavior is a prime motivator. Many examples of the relation of concept to experience and action can be mapped out for each person. Examining your own belief system involves an effort to describe the relations of your beliefs and the actions that are related to them. When making this effort ask yourself the following questions:

- How do my core beliefs show themselves in my actions?
- Am I able to make inferences about other people’s core beliefs from their conduct?
- What sorts of conduct would be in conflict with my core beliefs?
- How would my actions change if my core beliefs changed?
- Are there actions of mine that I cannot connect to beliefs that I know of?

**Philosophy and Art**

Art is another area that overlaps with philosophical effort. Many genres of writing, film, theater, and the arts deal with themes and issues in common with philosophy. Literature and arts are sometimes a means of expression used by philosophers. Indeed, having brought it up, someone is now bound to assert that all literature, film, and art is philosophical (or else that all philosophy is artistic expression). That is a fine observation and there may be truth in it, yet the task at hand is to help delineate philosophy so that the fine readers of this essay may advance in your ability to
identify philosophical expression wherever it occurs. For this purpose it is valuable to note that philosophy is characteristically a form of investigation that uses reasoning and argument to analyze ideas and assess claims. Artistic expression often emphasizes the quality of the expression and style. While many ideas may be effectively expressed via art, they eventually will be submitted to analysis and logical argument in order to perform as philosophical positions. Again the point is that philosophical approaches to thought are distinct from the expression of ideas and opinions. Philosophy requires demonstration and reasoning (even though this may not be given as argument).

Here are some suggested instances of artistic expressions of philosophical ideas.

**Novels**
The Clouds, (419 B.C.E) [a play], Aristophanes
Candide, (1759), Francois Voltaire
The Brothers Karamozov, (1879), Fyodor Dostoyevsky
Under the Net, (1954), Iris Murdoch
The Wreckage of Agathon, (1970), John Gardner
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, (1974), Robert Pirsig
Sophie’s World, (1994), Jostein Gaarder

**Dialogic Film**
My Dinner with Andre (1981)
Mindwalk (1991)
Waking Life (2001)

**Expressive/Dramatic Film**
Koyaanisqatsi (1983)
The Meaning of Life (1983)
Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989)
Groundhog Day (1993)
The Matrix (1999)

**Music**
“The Unanswered Question” (1908), Charles Ives
“A Love Supreme” (1964), John Coltrane
“The Galaxy Song” (1983), Eric Idle
“The View” ??

**Painting**
Works and styles of art and philosophy are associated with individual innovators. The artistic movements (such as architecture) at any time of a culture is a product of past ideas and advancements. Like buildings and paintings, the belief system of an individual has historical background. Your beliefs have a history. Learning about the historical movements in philosophy is a way to develop a better understanding of your own beliefs. One way to accomplish this is to analyze your beliefs into the concepts and ideas that comprise them, then look for instances in the history of philosophy where those concepts and ideas are given substantial treatment. Your belief system is an architecture of concepts.

When investigating your belief system, consider the following:

- What are some of the major concepts contained in your core beliefs?
- Which philosophers have given major attention to those concepts?
- How have those philosophers defined those concepts?
- What philosophical issues deal with those concepts?
- What are the main positions within those philosophical issues?
- How do my beliefs relate to these issues and positions?

**Philosophy and Science**

In the 21st century we pretty much take science for granted as a source of knowledge and an approach to problem solving. There are some challenges to the validity of science, such as the rejection by some religious people of evolutionary theory, but our daily lives are so permeated by the products of science and technology that its dominance is hard to deny. Within that set of cultural assumptions about science, it is interesting to recognize that the modern idea we know of as science and scientific thinking is fairly recent: less than four centuries old. Far prior to and still in parallel to science has been the philosophical approach to understanding reality.

A main area of modern philosophy is the philosophy of science. One of the primary tasks of that area is to effectively describe and define what science is. That task is not complete and various issues about these matters are ongoing. Granting the existence of controversy, here is a common and simplified version of scientific method.

The essential elements of the scientific method are conventionally described as follows:

- Observation
- Hypothesis/Prediction
Experimentation/Testing
Conclusion and evaluation
Repetition
This is often called the hypothetico-deductive method (i.e., deducing the strongest hypothesis by testing against observation). This is not what all scientists do. It is an idealized version of scientific thought. Still, the roles of observation and experimental testing are central to any approach that is deemed scientific.

We may think of science as the success of a particular and old philosophical view: empiricism which regards observations through the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) as the most basic forms of evidence. To be scientific, reasoning has to base itself at some point in evidence that is observable through the senses, by different people under similar conditions. A scientific belief has to be supported by evidence that is observable, measurable, testable, and repeatable. Mathematics and logic are forms of reasoning from which general beliefs are drawn from particular observations.

Science is a historical outgrowth of philosophy and may well be considered a particular philosophical position. Science has replaced many of the concerns that philosophy more widely addressed. Still, philosophy continues to flourish even in the scientific age. This is because philosophy deals with issues at a level that science has no tools to address and because philosophical thought encompasses a broader range of forms of reasoning, analysis, evidence, and evaluation than science recognizes.

Philosophy almost always takes the meaning of concepts and ideas as a base concern. If we cannot get the meaning of our terms clear, then investigation and discussion is moot. Many of the issues of philosophy arise over differences in the analysis of meaning of a concept. A reaction by some folks is to simply stipulate the meaning of the term or draw from an authority such as a dictionary. These approaches are insufficient when we are dealing with issues such as justice, truth, good/evil, knowledge, and so on. The main difference is that a philosophical approach to the meaning of a concept is that strong reasoning must be provided as a support for one’s analysis. To say “The dictionary says...” or “I’ll just stipulate my meaning...” is not sufficient reason for a solid philosophical analysis.

Philosophical reasoning can take many forms. Logic (deduction and induction) is an ancient approach to reason. Reductive analysis (separating concepts into parts), analogy (structured comparison), example and counter-example, dialectical method, and deconstruction, are among the many methods of philosophical thinking. A study of the history of philosophy might lead to the conclusion that philosophy develops over time by the introduction of new methods of thinking. Science has variations of method as well, but the reliance on observation, testing, and repetition is generally a requirement for scientific thinking. Philosophy has a broader range and array of
methods. Perhaps that is why there is a philosophy of science but no science of philosophy.

Some philosophers have attempted to position scientific thinking as the measure of all philosophical thought. For instance, Logical Positivism is a popular 20th century philosophical movement which argues that only those statements that can be verified empirically (by observation) are meaningful, thus making a wide range of non-observable concerns by philosophers completely irrelevant. Traditional metaphysical issues of philosophy are rendered meaningless in the analysis of Logical Positivism. Of course, philosophy does continue as an activity, with metaphysics intact, and the controversy continues.

Clarifying the ideals of science helps to distinguish the activities of philosophy by contrast. Most important is the recognition that philosophy involves reasoned accounts of statements of belief. Opinion and belief alone, no matter how strongly held, will not suffice as philosophical unless some explicitly reasoned account (i.e. explanation, analysis, demonstration) is given for it. When thinking about your own belief system, take the following questions into account:

*What are the basic concepts of my core beliefs?*
*What do I mean by those basic concepts?*
*What reasoning do I have for my core beliefs?*
*What are the possible counter-reasons or objections to my core beliefs?*

**Philosophy and Culture**

Philosophical traditions vary according to cultures and languages. The usual distinction is made between the Eastern Philosophy (e.g. China, Japan, India, Tibet) and Western Philosophy (e.g. Europe, Australia, USA). There are also distinguishing characteristics of Arabic Philosophy, African Philosophy, and Native American Philosophy, among others.

The styles and topics of the local philosophical tradition is part of what characterizes a culture. Even granting their unique aspects we can discern some common issues and topics among the different philosophic traditions. For instance, most cultures have some ethical considerations such as the nature of good and evil. Distinctions between illusion and reality are common philosophic themes, as well as conceptions of the relations of human beings to nature.

It would be an error to force a culture’s intellectual tradition into a common mold in order to fit some pre-conceived notion of the philosophical. Rather, my aim here is to emphasize the vital relationship that philosophical ideas have to practical life. Certain approaches to ideas in the history of a people contribute to the character of their culture which shapes the way they think and act. Likewise, the philosophical ideas that reside in your own belief system have practical impacts on the way that you experience the world and react to it. By examining your own belief system
you can gain understanding of how you relate to the world and why you tend to the choices and actions that you take. It is even possible to change some of your choices and actions by transforming aspects of your belief system. Change what you think/believe and you will change what you do and who you are. In this way philosophy offers a remarkable degree of personal power to those who take on the quest seriously. Please understand that I am not saying that there is a fixed agenda that is designed to change your beliefs in a certain direction. My agenda is not to change what you think, but to transform the ways in which you think. The result may be a strengthening of your existing beliefs or it may be a revision of them. However that goes, it is a matter of your personal freedom as a thinker who takes responsibility for your own mind. When considering your own beliefs ask these questions.

*What are the practical implications of my beliefs?*
*Are there any habits or behaviors that I want to change?*
*What are the core beliefs that support and influence the habits or behaviors that I want to change?*
*How might other people’s choices and actions be influenced by their beliefs?*

**Areas of Philosophy**

Since philosophy is so often about general and abstract concepts, there can really be a philosophy of any subject-matter that you can think of. There is (meaning - people study and write about) philosophy of sports, philosophy of law, philosophy of sex, philosophy of business, philosophy of engineering, philosophy of play, philosophy of television, philosophy of technology, and on and on. It is easy to start a *philosophy of* for any subject-matter or activity. Simply specify the activity, identify some of the core concepts of that activity (including a definition of the activity itself), form descriptions of how that activity is related to other activities, give an account of the values within that activity and how the standards of value are judged, provide a description of how you think the activity is changing and explain why you think so, and you have begun a fairly sophisticated *philosophy of* study. What the heck, you might get a book or article out of it. Philosophers expand the scope of philosophy this way all the time.

For instance, in 1978 Harvard philosopher Sissela Bok published *Lying: Moral Choice in Private and Public Life* (Vintage Books, USA). It is an excellent book on a topic that matters to everyone and it is written in a clear, non-technical style. Bok begins her book by noting how little has been written about lying in history. With a few notable exceptions, the topic has almost been ignored by philosophers and ethics writers. Since she was in the enviable position to have a grasp on a virtually untouched topic, Bok set out to define, analyze, and evaluate the phenomena of telling lies in pursuit of a practical guide to which lies are morally justifiable and which are not. A large body of publications followed in the wake of Bok’s book and academics may now represent themselves
as specialists in the philosophy of deception (somewhat broader than lying per se).

You see, lying is not itself philosophy or a particularly philosophical matter. It is a rather ordinary occurrence and has been mostly ignored by philosophers for centuries. By addressing the concepts of lying (along with deception, and honesty, and so on) in their most general forms, Bok developed a philosophical stance towards the topic. A subject-matter or activity need not be especially philosophical in order to become a topic of philosophy. Philosophy has a lot to do with the manner in which we study and think about a topic.

Of the major traditional areas of philosophy, four stand out as primary:

- **Metaphysics**: inquiry into the ultimate principles of reality.
- **Epistemology**: inquiry into knowledge and the human mind.
- **Ethics**: inquiry into values and principles of judgment and conduct.
- **Social Action**: inquiry into the human condition and possibilities for social change.

In the remainder of this essay let us consider each of these areas briefly.

-End of Part I-