

A PHILOSOPHY PRIMER



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PREFACE

This philosophy primer is meant to serve as an introduction to the general *pursuit* of philosophy, rather than as an introduction to the discipline of philosophy itself. Thus, you'll find no discussion of philosophers or philosophical problems here. Instead, the aims are to identify and to explain some important guiding ideals for conducting any philosophical inquiry, along with highlighting some "good moves" to cultivate and "bad moves" to avoid in the service of pursuing philosophy well. This primer isn't exhaustive in its advice, but hopefully, it can help anyone new to philosophy with how to begin. Like any complex, challenging activity, philosophy requires mindful dedication for practitioners to improve. If you are beginning your studies in philosophy, may you apply yourself and hone your ability to think well about things that matter. And if you have already taken a serious dive into philosophy, may this primer provide some useful reminders.

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PREFACE



Philosofia (Italian, 15th Century)

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PHILOSOPHY: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Some fields of study have ready, easy answers if someone should ask what people in that field study. For instance, biologists study living organisms. Historians study people, processes, institutions, and events from the past. Economists study the production, distribution, consumption, and transfer of wealth. What do philosophers study? A satisfactory answer isn't nearly so easy or ready to come by for philosophy as it is for disciplines like biology, history, or economics.

At first glance, philosophers seem to study all sorts of things with no obvious common denominator to them. Just consider some traditional *branches* of academic philosophy: *ethicists* think about how human beings should live and what sorts of people they should be; *epistemologists* concern themselves with the ultimate grounds and meaning of knowledge; *metaphysicians* used to be united in seeking the “first principles” or fundamental “causes” of everything, but today, they might not even agree on the definition of “metaphysics.” Shifting from branches of philosophy to various *schools* of philosophical

thought—empiricism, rationalism, idealism, positivism, structuralism, materialism, skepticism, romanticism, existentialism, epicureanism, stoicism—seems no more promising for anyone looking for a ready, easy answer about what philosophy studies. Indeed, the sheer variety of *isms* renders the prospect of locating a common core dizzying.

However, instead of asking *what* philosophers study, we might consider a different question. We might ask *how* they go about studying *whatever* they might study. Perhaps there are characteristic approaches that philosophy invariably brings to bear on pursuing an understanding of the world, no matter what the given target might be. Guided by this basic idea of thinking about philosophy in terms of a *process*, this primer will attempt to sketch out some characteristic philosophical approaches—first, some basic guiding ideals or principles for doing philosophy, and then some philosophical “moves,” both sound ones to embrace, and unhelpful ones to avoid. Thus, the emphasis in this primer will be on philosophy as a *method of inquiry*—a method for constructing an illuminating understanding of human beings and their world.

Thinking a little about a different example of construction might be helpful for appreciating philosophy as it’s approached here. Imagine a carpenter who sets out to build a cabin, a satisfactory dwelling with walls, a floor, windows, a door, and a roof. Say that the carpenter has all the necessary building materials to construct a cabin. A competent carpenter must then follow some basic building rules with those raw materials: All the corners should be square, the floor should be level, and the walls should be plumb. Ignore these rules and your cabin won’t fit together properly, your windows and doors won’t work well, and your floor may slant terribly. A carpenter with the requisite knowledge and mastery of the rules also needs the right tools for the job,

along with the skills to use the tools properly: things like measuring tapes, hammers, saws, levels, planes, chisels, and drills.

In much the same way as a good carpenter, a good philosopher must follow some basic rules and adequately employ the appropriate tools for the job. This primer spells out some of these rules and tools, some of which you may readily recognize from everyday life, along with some that may be less familiar. For anyone new to philosophy, following these rules and using these tools requires diligent practice. With excellent carpenters, the rules and tools eventually become *second nature*, habits so deeply ingrained as to seem virtually automatic. However, such habits always require mindful, resolute cultivation. Used well, this primer can help you chart a thoughtful course toward developing good philosophical habits.



Joseph the Carpenter, Georges de La Tour, 1642.

SEVEN GUIDING IDEALS FOR PHILOSOPHY

No single rule or principle reigns supreme when it comes to doing philosophy well. Philosophy, like all complex activities, calls for fidelity to many important considerations, though it's worth noting that they can never be kept in mind all at once. Indeed, the guiding ideals identified here function best when they are so well-ingrained that one seldom *needs* to keep them consciously in mind, much less think about them all the time. In this regard, these ideals are not unlike the guiding principles for complex physical activities like throwing a ball or playing a violin. A baseball pitcher may make the task of pitching look easy, but many moving parts must move precisely in concert to produce a good throw. The hand wields the ball, and the arm ultimately hurls it, but the arms, legs, and torso must work together as a coordinated system for a good result. Likewise, a violinist must do many things at once to play well: move the bow in a parallel path between the bridge and the fingerboard, apply the correct amount of pressure on the bow hair, draw the bow at an appropriate speed, angle the bow properly from string to string, finger the notes with just the right

touch, and adjust the rhythm and dynamics to achieve the desired effects. No violinist can possibly think about all these disparate elements at once, but every violinist must be finely attuned to them, ready to attend to them as necessary if any should falter and require intentional oversight. In much the same way, all the guiding ideals below are important for philosophy; they work together in concert, and taken together, they constitute a crucial background for the practice of philosophy. Explicitly identifying and explaining them serves the purpose of embracing them intentionally. Without such intentionality, the working system might easily break down or function poorly, leaving the practitioner only dimly aware of problems, and with little idea about how to fix them. Once fully ingrained, these elements can operate along the lines of the stars to early seafaring navigators, always there to help find the way as needed, old friends that one can always depend upon.

Some of these guiding ideals are likely to come more easily to one person or another, and some are likely to be more relevant or important at various times. In addition to working in concert, some can be so closely related that discerning where one ends and the other begins can sometimes be difficult. And some may seem sufficiently self-evident to require little by way of explanation, while others may seem far less familiar or natural. Nevertheless, taken together, they can form a useful wish-list for the able pursuit of philosophy.

1 Charity

In everyday life, we invariably come across claims that seem sensible, or for that matter, obviously true. Likewise, we sometimes think straightaway that a claim makes little sense or simply isn't true. And at other times, we aren't

so sure about a claim, even if we may lean more in one direction than the other. Whatever our initial thoughts and feelings about a claim may be, to judge it fairly, we must always consider it **in its most plausible form**. The philosophical ideal of **charity** calls for giving a claim the **benefit of the doubt** and considering its most sensible version. Note that charity is especially important when we aren't sympathetic with a claim or idea in the first place. If we don't like or lean toward believing something, we may quickly dismiss it. Indeed, we may **jump to conclusions**, hasty ones that may be wrong. By suspending our disbelief, and by taking pains to consider ideas as a sympathetic listener (or at least as an impartial one), we better the odds that we won't overlook or downplay elements vital for giving any claim its fair due. We should consider all ideas judiciously, but of course, we are less apt to overlook the merits of those we like or agree with from the start. We naturally give favorites the benefit of any doubts. Charity encourages us to take a close and careful second look, to see to it that we don't overlook things, whether we are considering an idea that qualifies as a "friend" or a "foe."

The Key Idea: Be fair with ideas by considering them in their most plausible form so as not stack the deck against them.

2 Honesty

Charity guards against bias and hasty judgment, and **honesty** fits hand-in-glove with the charity. Many people are prone to **confirmation bias**, where they only seriously consider ideas that conveniently fit with their

existing beliefs and preferences. They effectively block out considerations that might upset their settled (comfortable) opinions. In other words, **they find what they wish to find**. An everyday example would be people only considering political ideas and opinions that agree with their own. Charity requires an honest rendering of any claim's merits, claims we find appealing *and* those we don't, along with requiring an honest acknowledgment of our pre-existing preferences for some claims over others. Without the latter, people may rig the inquiry the way they wish it to turn out. Honest inquirers must always be prepared for the possibility of "**bad news**" in the sense of honestly considered evidence challenging their preferred beliefs in ways that call for serious doubts, and perhaps abandonment. Philosophical honesty effectively discourages the powerful psychological proclivity to stack the deck in favor of favorite ideas, while stacking the deck against others.

The Key Idea: Take care to be honest in considering ideas, especially when you don't like or agree with them.

3 Grit

Honest, charitable inquirers who are fully intent on giving claims and ideas their due can still find it extremely difficult to make up their minds, despite their very best intentions. The word "philosophy" comes from two Greek words that together mean "love of wisdom," so by nature, philosophers wish *to know*. However, complex questions resist quick, easy, unequivocal answers. Philosophers spend little time on simple questions that give up their

answers easily, and yet, most people not only wish to *know*, but to know *quickly*. Progress with difficult questions requires **persistence** and **patience**, key components of intellectual **grit**. Grit—the steady, determined commitment to plug away at something for as long as it takes—prepares a philosopher for a *marathon* of thought, not just a *sprint* to a quick finish. Complicated issues often call for revisiting key assumptions, rethinking key concepts, and reimagining possible solutions, all of which can feel akin to “going in circles,” a stressful feeling for many people. Grit frames such “circles” as a requisite part of a philosophical inquiry, with each revolution hopefully offering the opportunity to dig a little bit deeper, the way a corkscrew turns its way into a cork. Most often, philosophical progress calls for slow, steady, careful devotion.

The Key Idea: Plug away on thorny problems persistently and patiently, keeping in mind that philosophy tends to be a marathon effort, not a quick sprint.

4 Accepting Uncertainty

The search for knowledge can face daunting obstacles, and uncertainty can sometimes prove to be intractable. Aside from questions being hard and complicated, some things can also be **ambiguous** or **vague**. For instance, if we announce that our journey begins at 6 o'clock, the departure time is ambiguous: We could mean 6 in the morning *or* 6 in the evening. If we say we'll get together “sometime,” the date is vague. Do we mean next *week*, next *month*, next *year*? Of course, these simple cases of ambiguity and vagueness are easily rectified: Let's begin our journey at 6

A.M., and let's meet next Tuesday. However, other instances of ambiguity and vagueness can be far more difficult to resolve, and sometimes ambiguity and vagueness can be *irresolvable* elements of complex philosophical quandaries. Without a doubt, philosophers should go as far as they possibly can in laying bare the things they seek to understand, but they also should accept the reality that **thoughtful uncertainty is always preferable to any contrived certainty** born of a desire to have an answer **just to have an answer**. Intellectual **humility** calls for comfort (or at least a measure of resignation) with the certainty that one doesn't know everything, along with an acceptance that some things may not be unknowable. Indeed, we do well to keep in mind that the more we know, the more we tend to realize how much there is to know and how little of it we know.

The Key Idea: Acknowledge that you don't know things, and learn to accept intractable uncertainty when necessary.

5 Clarity & Precision

Though uncertainty can ultimately prove intractable, **clarity** and **precision** are vital allies in the gritty quest to understand our complex world. Though clarity and precision are natural allies, they are not identical. If I ask for an apple, my request is clear, but if I specifically want a Honeycrisp apple, my request is imprecise. Since philosophers work with words to understand the world and to communicate their understanding, their words must be as clear and precise as possible. Ideally, they should avoid vague, ambiguous, and unnecessarily complex or specialized

concepts. So long as they can adequately capture the intended meaning, simpler concepts are preferable because they mitigate the likelihood of misunderstanding and mystification, where people use the same words, but understand them in different ways. Clarity and precision serve important purposes in *communicating* ideas, but they are just as important for *thinking* through things in an orderly way in the first place. Unclear and imprecise concepts and ideas result in unclear and imprecise thoughts. Good philosophers **say exactly what they mean**, and clarity and precision are important prerequisites for making good on this fundamental aim.

The Key Idea: Seek to think about and communicate ideas and concepts in their clearest, most precise form.

6 The Willingness to “Lose”

When people truly wish to know something, they often have significant difficulties accepting uncertainty. And just as a measure of comfort (or at least thoughtful resignation) with uncertainty is important for pursuing philosophy, so too is cultivating a **willingness to be proven wrong**. Confronted by a view contrary to our own, we can easily invest ourselves in prevailing over our adversary, rather than focusing on the *best* understanding of whatever we are striving to understand. Thus, a preoccupation with “winning arguments,” though psychologically understandable since most people do not enjoy *losing* them, can inhibit a philosophical inquiry by directing attention away from the *best understanding* in favor *being the best* (the winner). Ironically,

“losing” can ultimately be “winning” in philosophy; we benefit by being shown the error of our ways. Though philosophy can often seem adversarial by nature, with *this* argument clashing antagonistically with *that* argument in a winner-take-all fashion, we can also imagine philosophical conversation as a way of *joining up* with **interlocutors** (people who take part in a genuine dialogue or conversation) in a common cause of better understanding the world and ourselves. With this perspective, difficult as it can be to achieve in practice, we can see others as philosophical allies, rather than as adversaries to vanquish. Notice that many people are apt to identify philosophy with the idea of a “**debate**,” and debates are often winner-take-all contests where the whole point is victory. Indeed, successful debaters may be able to win *even if they know they have the weaker case*. At its best, philosophy pits ideas against another, but only in the service of understanding, not victory.

The Key Idea: Diligently seek the best understanding, even if it means that your view doesn't prevail.

7 Intrinsic Interest & Enjoyment

Philosophers seldom spend much time thinking about obvious things, and so long as they confront challenging problems, doing philosophy well is hard. *Complex issues, an honest and charitable mind, a tireless resolve to stick at questions that do not give up answers easily, the ever-present possibility of implacable uncertainty, the constant need for exacting clarity and precision*—such elements make for a difficult task. Without some **intrinsic interest** and **enjoyment** in

seeking a better understanding of the world, philosophical reflection can feel onerous, akin to people exercising because they know it's good for them, but not liking it very much. In this vein, consider the notion of “**curiosity**.” Curious people wish to **know**, and often, they wish to **know for its own sake**, not only to get something by knowing. Ideally, philosophers engage in reflection for the same reasons that people engage in activities like making music or spending time with friends—because they find meaning, value, and joy in these pursuits. Such engagement cannot be manufactured at will, and sometimes beginning philosophers must take care to cultivate it patiently, just as musicians must when they first take up an instrument, but those who stick at it usually come to love the practice philosophy.

The Key Idea: The practice of philosophy requires deep curiosity and the intrinsic enjoyment of wrestling with difficult, meaningful ideas.



Embodiment of these seven fundamental **habits of the heart and mind** can hardly guarantee success in any given philosophical inquiry, no more than cultivating excellent athletic or musical habits can guarantee success in a game, contest, or concert. Nonetheless, the absence of these basic building blocks can only hamper the pursuit of philosophy. These habits fight against intellectual weaknesses and vices that fundamentally undermine the pursuit of thoughtful answers to difficult questions of many kinds. They are certainly not the only good habits to cultivate, and their cultivation requires concerted effort and attention, but they are an excellent foundation for pursuing philosophy.



EIGHT GOOD PHILOSOPHICAL MOVES

Any craftsperson with sound habits needs the proper tools and skills to set to work making things. In much the same way, a philosopher with the sound habits described above needs to know and use some good “moves” to address hard questions in illuminating ways. The collection that follows is akin to trusty tools in a philosophical toolkit, tools to keep close at hand as need be. Every job calls for the right tool for the task at hand, so these philosophical tools require good judgment with respect to when and how they are used. Taken together, they equip a philosopher to tackle problems thoughtfully.

Keep in mind that beginning philosophers may be tempted to wonder whether philosophy might be **all questions and few answers**. The epigraph at the beginning of this Primer—*Philosophy begins in wonder*—could as well be *Philosophy begins with questions*. The road to a deeper appreciation of the world is paved with good questions, along with questions about those questions. Until we ask the right questions, we often have little idea that we don’t, so questions are the first

order of business for philosophy. The tools identified here help us to figure out the questions that need asking, and once asked to pursue thoughtful answers.

1 Ockham's Razor

This useful philosophical tool is named for **William of Ockham** (c. 1287-1347), a Franciscan friar and English scholastic philosopher. He believed that any given event might conceivably admit of multiple explanations, and his famous “**razor**” provides some basic guidance for choosing between multiple possibilities. For instance, consider two explanations for a result. Olympic marathon Athlete B finishes well behind Athlete A. Here are two explanations.

A. In a top-secret, sophisticated doping operation, infiltrators spiked B's nutrition and hydration with a drug designed to lower the body's hemoglobin count, effectively putting the athlete at a disadvantage. Standard urine testing during training and after the competition failed to detect the drug due to sophisticated masking agents.

B. Athlete B is slower than Athlete A.

Ockham's razor insists that unless there are compelling reasons to believe in the more complicated explanation, the simpler one is preferable. If we need to introduce more assumptions to explain a phenomenon, and if these assumptions are bigger and more questionable, then absent good reasons to embrace additional assumptions, the more straightforward explanation should prevail. In this footrace example, it's more likely that B is a slower

marathoner (at least for this one day), not the victim of sophisticated sabotage.

We make such “**inferences to the best explanation**” often in everyday life. For instance, if we find a bird on the ground next to a large window, we hypothesize that it flew into the window. If we see a group of people dressed in black, looking sad and holding each other, we infer that a loved one has died. These “best explanations” are *not* compelled as a matter of pure logic. Our hypotheses could be wrong. The bird might have been dropped by a cat, and the “mourners” might be practicing for a play. However, as in the case of the marathon, we hypothesize based on what seems like the best, simplest explanation for the facts.

Of course, sometimes things truly *are* more complex than they seem at first glance, so simplicity is only as good as its actual explanation of the facts. In other words, the simpler explanation isn’t *necessarily* the best one. Sometimes the more complex explanation may indeed be the best one, the one that best explains the facts, **but Ockham would insist that we need a good reason to multiply the complexity of any explanation.**

Notice that so-called “**conspiracy theories**” almost always appeal to more convoluted and contrived explanations for phenomena. Those who habitually incline toward them tend to see a world that is rarely or never what it seems to be, one where nefarious minds are pulling invisible strings and manipulating appearances to pull the wool over the eyes of unknowing fools. True enough, some people engage in conspiracies, and sometimes things are not as simple as they seem, but habitually assuming that conspiracies are ubiquitous or that nothing is ever as simple as it seems opens the door to a settled assumption of far-fetched complexity.

Ockham's *razor* "cuts out" the unnecessary complexities in favor of the simpler, more plausible explanation.

The Lesson: Everything else being equal, the simpler explanation that plausibly accounts for the facts is preferable.



Illustration of William of Ockham

2 “For the sake of the argument, assume...”

Sometimes we can be faced with many variables when confronted with a problem or deciding between alternatives, and we can easily be overwhelmed by the numerous possibilities. In such cases, we can't possibly figure it all out at once, and trying to do so can lead to making progress on nothing.

For instance, let's say we know that *somebody* ate the whole chocolate cake that was sitting in the kitchen last night. Most of us believe X ate it, just because by nature, he tends to be *that kind of cake-eating guy*. However, he was seen running around at the gym right about the time someone discovered the missing cake. Moreover, the cake had bright, multi-color

sprinkles on top, and everyone knows X hates sprinkles. Others were seen around the kitchen last night, and X insists that he had nothing to do with the missing cake.

In a situation like this one, we can imagine someone saying, “**For the sake of the argument, assume that X ate the cake.** In this case, how could X do so without being discovered, and how would he have handled the nasty sprinkle issue?” Basically, we can fix one or more elements as a **given**, and then we can do our best to figure out the possible implications if the givens are true. Note that this doesn’t necessarily mean they are true. We simply assume they are true for the moment so that we can test out the rest of the picture to see what seems plausible.

Anyone who has ever played a “detective” board game like *Clue* (“Colonel Mustard killed Professor Plum in the kitchen with a wrench...”) or anyone who has done geometrical proofs has engaged in this basic strategy. We can try on multiple assumptions in this way to figure out our best guess at the most plausible answer.

The Lesson: When faced with multiple possibilities, test out your hypotheses by temporarily granting some acknowledged assumptions for the sake of the inquiry.

3 Distinguish “Necessary & Sufficient Conditions”

Philosophers often find it useful to distinguish between so-called “necessary conditions” and “sufficient conditions.” A **necessary condition** means that some X

must be so for an event to occur or for something to be the case.

Example: One must be an American citizen to be elected president of the United States.

Thus, one must be an American citizen to be elected president, but notice that being a citizen is no guarantee of being elected. On the other hand, a **sufficient condition** means that some Y is guaranteed to produce an event or make something be the case.

Example: Walking in the rain without an umbrella gets a president wet.

Notice that walking in the rain without an umbrella isn't the only way for a president to get wet, so it's certainly not a necessary condition for getting wet. However, it is a sufficient condition. If you walk in the rain, you will necessarily get wet (rain necessarily gets a person wet, but rain isn't necessary for getting wet, since a bucket of water or other methods can do the trick).

A “**necessary and sufficient condition**” means that some Z must be so for an event to occur or for something to be the case, and if Z is so, then the event must occur or something must be the case.

Example: Winning 270 Electoral College votes is a necessary and sufficient condition for winning the American presidential election

Hence, without 270 electoral votes, one can't win the presidency, and if one gets 270 votes, one necessarily wins. This distinction between necessity and sufficiency can help in

conceptually sorting out possibilities. For instance, going back to the cake theft above, we know that access to the cake would be a necessary condition for stealing it, but access alone wouldn't be a sufficient condition. If we saw X in the kitchen around the time the cake went missing, this kind of circumstantial evidence wouldn't be enough to prove that X was the thief. Were we to conclude that it had to be X on these grounds, we'd be jumping to a faulty conclusion. Keeping these two conditions straight helps people fine-tune their thinking about things like evidence, correlation, and causation.

The Lesson: Take care to distinguish between something that must be so for something else to happen (a necessary condition) and something that, if it is so, must make something else happen (a sufficient condition).

4 Playing the Devil's Advocate

The term “**devil's advocate**” originated in the process of canonization within the Catholic Church. In 1587, Pope Sixtus V established the role of the “*advocatus diaboli*” (advocate of the devil) as a way of testing the fitness of any candidate for sainthood. The advocate was assigned the duty of finding any possible evidence why a candidate should not be made a saint. The basic idea was that if the advocate made a determined but unsuccessful attempt to find such unfitness on the part of the candidate (whether the unfitness be flaws of the candidate or natural explanations for supposed miracles in the candidate's name), the Church could be more confident about making that person a saint. An

unsuccessful attempt of this sort could never unequivocally rule out that such evidence might remain undiscovered, but a stronger case could be made for sainthood if such evidence were sought but never found, than if such evidence were never sought at all.

Today, we use the term as a way of testing ideas and claims, particularly ones for which we may have sympathy. We can think of the devil's advocate as **the other side of the ideal of charity coin**: Just as we should give ideas the benefit of the doubt in an effort to correct for possible shortsightedness or bias *against* them, so too we should assume a skeptical eye toward ideas, particularly those that *meet with our favor*. Both approaches are essentially exercises in **impartiality**, and they can require a certain level of **detachment** from our true beliefs, be it in the form of trying to imagine ourselves as a believer (when we aren't) or imagine ourselves as someone who doesn't believe (when we do).

The Lesson: Imagine the very best case against a claim as a way of testing it, particularly when you are sympathetic with it.



The Devil Speaks (*Paul Gauguin, 1893-1894*)

5 Beginning with “Intuitions”

The notion of “intuitions” has a long history in philosophy. From the 18th century until the early 20th century, some philosophers identified themselves as “intuitionists,” with some even positing “intuition” as a distinct human faculty. For our purposes, “**intuition**” means nothing more than something along the lines of “initial thoughts,” “a first guess,” or “first-glance impressions.” Every attempt to answer any philosophical question must obviously start *somewhere*, and our *intuitions* in the sense meant here are perfectly appropriate as a beginning point for philosophical thought and discussion.

Consider some classic philosophical questions, the sort you might come across in any introductory philosophy course. *Is free will real? Is beauty purely in the eye of the beholder? Is there more to happiness than just pleasure? Can we be sure that things are truly as they appear to us? Is it wrong to sacrifice the good of the few for the good of many?* Wise people duly attuned to the importance of clarity and precision might first ask what some of the terms in these questions mean, along with requesting additional details. After all, the concept of “happiness” isn’t nearly as straightforward as simpler concepts like “apple” or “horse,” so it would be sensible to figure out what we mean by “happiness.” Indeed, the first step in any reasonable conversation about happiness might be to agree on a working definition, one subject to possible revision as we go along. Likewise, if thinking about the possibility of “sacrificing the good” of the few for the many, we’d surely want some details about such sacrifices before offering an opinion. For instance, do we only mean *foregoing benefits* for a few, or might we consider *harming* some people for the sake of many? Assuming we have working definitions and adequate details, we can then

consider our intuitions, our first thoughts on the question, testing them to see if they can hold up under the weight of reflection and questioning. We can consider them in their most charitable form (**what might they have going for them?**) and subject them to fine scrutiny like a good devil's advocate (**what might be wrong with them?**), though not at the same time.

Philosophers mustn't grow so fond of their intuitions that they are unwilling to forsake them in the light of serious objections. Intuitions are only *first* thoughts, and to qualify as *considered opinions*, they must survive the "quality control" of sufficient reflection and questioning. Moreover, philosophers should exercise their imagination in a "What if I were to say..." way to identify alternate intuitions to test, as opposed to running straight for one and sticking with it. One can only test the ideas that make it to the table, and *more ideas* beat *fewer ideas* in this respect. Even if many or most of the ideas on the table have little to be said for them, figuring out how they are flawed is an important part of the philosophical inquiry. Understanding how one idea is inadequate is just as important as understanding why another is compelling.

The Lesson: Begin with your best guesses and then subject them to close scrutiny.

6 Using Hypotheticals

Starting with our intuitions and getting a number on the table for careful reflection is a sound strategy for philosophical inquiries, but these tasks are often easier said than done. A thorny question or problem can leave us with little idea about what to say at first glance. Our intuitions can

simply fail us in the sense that *we don't know what we think*. “**I have no idea**” is a common initial response to questions posed in a beginning philosophy class.

While we naturally think of **imagination** as vital to the creative arts, where we must *make things up* in a key sense, imagination is just as important for philosophy. We must usually **provoke** our intuitions, rather than simply draw on a reservoir of ready ones. One of the ways to do so is by imagining **hypotheticals** of the “Suppose we were to...” kind. For instance, say that we are thinking about this question: *Is it wrong to sacrifice the good of the few for the good of many?* We might provoke our intuitions with various hypothetical scenarios related to the general question.

- Suppose we were to send the runaway train toward the left-hand tracks, where only one worker is likely to be killed, rather than let it go toward the right-hand tracks, where a dozen workers are likely to perish.
- Suppose we were to refrain from very expensive life-saving medical procedures for a relatively small percentage of the population, and use our limited funds instead to improve the quality of life for the much larger general population.
- Suppose we were to discount many health and safety concerns for migrant farm workers to keep fresh produce both relatively cheap and plentiful for millions of consumers.
- Suppose we were to forego some expensive services and initiatives designed to serve the needs of people with disabilities, and use the savings to fund things that benefit a much larger percentage of the public.
- Suppose we were to tax “luxury” items, the kind that

only very wealthy people can likely afford, at very high rates as a way of collecting revenues to devote to less wealthy citizens.

Judicious hypothetical questions and scenarios can make abstract questions more concrete, and coming up with different ones can often offer alternate routes to more developed thoughts. Of course, hypotheticals are no magic wand. Simply multiplying the number of hypothetical questions doesn't guarantee that we have anything to say about any of them. Moreover, we may find that our intuitions about a collection of related hypotheticals vary in ways that suggest **conflicting intuitions**. When this happens, we can be tempted to regard the introduction of additional questions and scenarios as unhelpful because they may make us feel *less* certain about what we should think. We naturally want to be *more* confident, not less. However, such conflicts are best seen as a helpful invitation for further reflection. If we pose two hypotheticals that seem to be related, and if our responses vary significantly, then we should pause to consider whether the hypotheticals are not so related as we thought, or else we must look to see which response suffers and how it misses the mark. This kind of uncertainty can be a useful way station on the road to a *warranted* sense of confidence. Questions without answers can be stressful, but finding good answers usually starts with identifying good questions.

The Lesson: Imagine lots of hypothetical examples as a good way of testing your intuitions.

7 Using Analogies

Sometimes we don't know what to think about an idea or claim, particularly if it involves something relatively unfamiliar or something we haven't thought very much about. For instance, suppose someone asks us whether we think a policy or decision is unfair, and because we haven't been in that specific situation and haven't had to live with such a policy or decision, we're at a loss to say much when asked what we think. But suppose the thought occurs to us that the general idea or principle at work in the case we are asked about seems at least something like something else we know well. In this case, an apt **analogy** can often illuminate the unfamiliar. Perhaps I've never suffered the consequences of policy X, but maybe I've suffered the consequences of policy Y, and on inspection, X and Y may seem similar enough to spur my thoughts on X. Connecting the unfamiliar or less certain with the more familiar or more certain by way of a **"This is like..." comparison** can be an excellent way to bridge a gap in experience and thought.

Of course, not every analogy works. We may be tempted to think "This is like...", only to realize on closer inspection that the two cases may bear sufficient surface similarities to warrant the attempt to compare them, but they are dissimilar enough that the analogy fails. Even imperfect analogies can often be useful, provided we carefully put our minds to why the analogy doesn't quite work. A failed comparison may conceivably lead to a better understanding of the two different things that are unsuccessfully compared.

Notice that a good analogy can be instructive when it points out the *genuine similarities* between A and B, while also highlighting our *different thoughts* about A and B. Perhaps we think

differently about A and B, but the apt analogy alerts us to the fact that our thoughts about A and B should presumably hang together, not diverge. This acknowledgment of inconsistency in our thinking can spur a deeper understanding of the things we compare and our own reasoning.

More generally, analogies are often useful intellectual exercises with ideas and claims because they test our basic understanding of the general point behind a concrete, specific example. If we truly understand the principle at work in example A, then reproducing that principle in a different example (or at least understanding it in a different example) should not only be relatively straightforward, but the ability to do so can enhance our chances of successfully explaining and illustrating ideas to others. One example may not resonate with our listeners, but if we can capture the same idea with different ones, listeners may appreciate the point. They may not *get* example A, but they may *get* example B or C.

The Lesson: Use analogies as a way of understanding and explaining the key ideas at work in a question or issue.

8 Facts, Clarity/Precision, Sound Reasoning

When it comes to tracking the way the world truly is, philosophers must have their **facts** right, they must employ appropriate **concepts** that do justice to the facts, and they must engage in **sound reasoning** about the facts. What do we mean by “facts”? We can only know some things through **empirical observations**. For instance, the world record for the men’s mile is 3:43.13, and the record for women

is 4:12.33. For these records to be established, these runners had to run around a track, and officials had to observe the results. Here are some other empirical facts: Water is two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen; Jupiter is larger than the Earth; the human heart has four chambers; Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States; the Boston Red Sox won a championship in 1918, and they did not win one again until 2004. We could never know any of these facts simply by engaging in introspection or by thinking diligently about ideas in the abstract. We can only know these things by tracking the truth about them with empirical observations of the world.

Philosophers don't usually spend so much of their time tracking, collecting, and disseminating empirical facts they've discovered on their own. For the most part, they rely on the trusted expertise and word of others who are in the business of doing these three things. For this reason, someone suffering from a debilitating muscular malady would surely do best to visit a *medical* doctor, not a *Doctor of Philosophy*. However, suppose the medical community witnessed a rash of muscular maladies that left them wondering whether they were dealing with a *disease*, rather than *injuries*. Whether doctors referred to the problem as a "disease" or an "injury," the physical nature of the problem would remain the same. The empirical facts would be whatever they are, independent of what doctors might think of them or how they might describe them. A physical malady doesn't change just by being classified as a disease, rather than an injury. However, making clear and precise distinctions between the **concept** of a "disease" and an "injury" might ultimately impact how medical doctors and scientists track the truth about the facts. Philosophers *are* in the business of clear and precise concepts, so at least indirectly, they can influence the tracking of the

facts by helping trackers with concepts that do justice to the details.

Aside from carefully considering concepts, philosophers are also in the business of **sound reasoning**, including reasoning about empirical facts. Having empirical facts in hand doesn't guarantee logical inferences from those facts, whether the inferences are **deductive** or **inductive**.

- **Example of a Deductive Inference:** If $A = B$ and $B = C$, then $A = C$ (Assuming the truth of these premises, the conclusion must be true.)
- **Example of an Inductive Inference:** If vaccine A's human trials did not harm any test subjects, then the vaccine is safe for the public (The premise could be true, the conclusion could turn out to be false, but the inference could still be a reasonable one as a prediction, depending on the sample size and the testing population.)

Notice that even though philosophers aren't the primary collectors and disseminators of empirical facts, they must appeal to them carefully in making cases and critiquing the cases for claims that others make.

These three responsibilities—**mastering the relevant facts, employing appropriate concepts, engaging in sound reasoning**—are usually parts of one philosophical endeavor, so while making or critiquing a case for a claim, philosophers may not separate them out consciously, no more than an athlete or musician consciously unpacks the disparate elements of physical motions. However, a clear awareness of these discrete elements serves the important purpose of diagnosing possible flaws and weaknesses in a case for some claim. *Are the purported facts wrong, incomplete, or*

misleading? Are the concepts in play ill-chosen, unclear, or imprecise? Does the reasoning suffer in serious ways?

When it comes to the idea of reasoning “suffering,” there are many ways to go awry. In this vein, think about walking a tightrope. There are many ways to fall off—lean too far left, too far right, too far back, too far forward. The range of motion that keeps a walker *on* the rope—the straight and narrow path—is far smaller than the range of moves that can send a walker flying off. In this light, let’s switch from thinking about good moves to thinking about bad ones.

The Lesson: Get your facts right, use clear concepts that do them justice, and engage in sound reasoning.



Gunder Hägg sets the mile record at 4:06.2 in 1942.

EIGHTEEN FAULTY PHILOSOPHICAL MOVES

B *ad philosophy* doesn't have just one root cause. For instance, people can go at philosophy with a terrible attitude that poisons the process from the very beginning. Or they can mean well, but they can be thoroughly muddled in their thinking. And then again, they can mean well, and they can be clear and precise enough, but they can pay far too little attention to all-important details that leave their pursuit of philosophical insights badly wanting. Though the ways of going awry are many, at least some flaws and mistakes can be straightforward enough to avoid and to correct if we are vigilant. A sincere, diligent interest in correction and avoidance can often suffice for protection against many serious philosophical ills. However, salutary habits of the heart and mind that head bad philosophy off at the pass invariably require persistent, intentional cultivation, and bad habits are seldom amenable to simply being switched off at will, the way we cavalierly flip a light switch. Good philosophers must keep a sharp eye out for all sorts of pitfalls as they cultivate good habits and work against bad ones. The following collection of flaws and fallacies (a mistake in

reasoning) is a good start with respect to what not to do. They outnumber the good moves above, but their relative number is a function of the fact that there are more ways to go wrong than there are to get things right.

A **d Hominem Appeals**

People sometimes respond to opposing claims by attacking the person making the claim, rather than by addressing its content. An “**ad hominem**” attack (from Latin, meaning “to the man”) irrelevantly directs things (usually a slight) at the person, rather than to the person’s ideas. Consider these examples.

- “X is definitely wrong about climate change. After all, he’s Irish.”
- “I’d respond to your stupid question if you weren’t such an idiot.”
- “This lawyer is too ugly to have a good case against the defendant.”

With all these statements, the speaker ignores the substance (climate change, a question, a legal case) and attacks the opponent’s credibility instead. In two of the three, the attack is entirely irrelevant to the matter at hand. Irish nationality has no bearing on knowledge of climate change, and physical appearance is likewise irrelevant to forming a cogent legal defense. In the case of statement B, we might conceivably fill in the details in such a way that it doesn’t fit the spirit of an ad hominem attack. For instance, suppose a participant at a highly sophisticated physics conference poses questions and raises objections, but suppose this participant knows virtually nothing about physics. At some point, an exasperated physi-

cist might refuse to answer the question because so doing seems like a waste of time with a “know-nothing” for everyone involved. This blunt response might still be rude, but it wouldn’t necessarily be a case of illegitimately directing attention away from the substance if the topic is obviously well beyond the understanding of the participant (moreover, it might not even be so rude if the participant wears out a welcome and refuses to take a hint from the true scientists, thereby inviting a blunt response).

Ad hominem attacks offend against the spirit of philosophical inquiry by skirting all meaningful conversation about the **substance** of ideas. This bad move is often obvious (like the cases above), but it needn’t be. We can imagine instances where people *subtly* dismiss someone’s opinion purely because of characteristics that have nothing to do with what the speaker says. Perhaps the person doesn’t look or sound “smart.” Maybe the person comes with a convenient label (liberal, conservative, commie, atheist, believer, geezer, young, boomer, hippie, yuppie, rich, poor, crazy) that warrants ignoring or even privately ridiculing the person. To avoid this move, we must do our best to listen to people charitably, while honestly combatting impatient inclinations to reach our conclusions prematurely by pre-judging people.

The Lesson: Stick to the relevant issues without attacking opponents personally.

Strawpersons

Considering the merits of an adversary’s position fairly may sound like a straightforward affair, but doing so isn’t always as easy it sounds. For instance, to obtain

an edge by casting a poor light on an opponent's position, we can be tempted to substitute a misrepresentative claim for an opponent's actual position. Consider these examples.

Citizen X: "Vast inequality undermines a democratic society. We must do something to combat this serious malady."

Citizen Y: "Ah, you want everyone to be equal in every way. But the socialist vision won't work. Human beings just aren't equal. It's ridiculous to think they are."



Parent: "Sweetie, you can't go out to play until you clean your room."

Child: "You never want me to have any fun, and you don't care whether I have any friends. You want me to be unpopular and lonely. What kind of parent are you? You're supposed to love me."



Politician A: "Our police officers should carry *Naloxone* while on duty so they can save lives by reversing opioid overdoses on the street."

Politician B: "Unlike you, I don't wish to condone the abuse of illegal narcotics. I don't believe in aiding and abetting illegal activities."

Citizen Y, the Child, and Politician B fancifully create what you might call a "**strawperson**," effectively conjuring an easier-to-defeat opponent, much like a feeble adversary made

of straw. This fallacious philosophical move can often be a calculated one, where people try to score points against opponents by purposely attributing a weak or unattractive position to them. Again, a debater might be able to win with a sneaky move like this, so long as the judges or audience don't notice it for what it is. Conceivably, the move can also stem from a genuine misunderstanding. The former, intentionally attacking a strawperson, is nothing less than a form of cheating when it comes to philosophy, while the latter is most often the result of poor listening that leads to rashly jumping to conclusions. The simple antidote for purposely attributing false positions to others is to be honest and to play fairly, and the best antidote for avoiding misunderstandings that lead to unfairly representing the views of others is to listen carefully, patiently, and charitably. Indeed, charity calls for listening to what someone says, rather than imputing to them what you wish to hear so you can dismiss the view or score a victory.

The Lesson: Don't impute inaccurate positions to opponents.



Scarecrow by W. W. Denslow, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

False Equivalences

A **false equivalence** is a fallacy where we claim that two things are equivalent, when they truly aren't. For this move to have any plausibility, the two things that are compared must at least bear *some* similarity, and the falsity rests in the similarity being incapable of sustaining the claim that the two things are equivalent. While good **analogies** are a vital philosophical tool, not every analogy is a good one. Consider these bad ones.

- Evolution and Creationism both offer hypotheses about the origin of humanity, so both should be taught in school as possible explanations of how human beings came to be.
- Oppressive regimes like X kill many innocent people. But so-called “good” countries like Y do little or nothing to stop them from killing innocents, so Y has blood on its hands, just like X.
- The white supremacists who marched on Z engaged in violence, but so did counter-protesters, so both sides are essentially the same, with some very fine people on both sides, and some bad apples amongst them.

These examples obviously depend upon key similarities: Evolution and Creationism both share the goal of explaining how humans came to be; when it comes to death, both action and inaction lead to the same result for victims; undeniably, violence is violence, whether it comes at the hands of one group or a different one. However, for all their similarities, these statements ignore key differences. Evolution provides a

science-based explanation, not a *faith-based* one. Oppressive regimes *purposefully* kill innocent people, and presumably, nations that fail to prevent such deaths do not *intend* them. White supremacists engage in violence *in the name of white supremacy*, while counter-protesters do so to *combat bigotry*. Perhaps “good” countries should do far more to help innocent people, and maybe counter-protesters err by fighting with white supremacists. But even if “good” countries and counter-protesters are blameworthy to some degree, or even to a significant degree, they are not automatically equivalent to oppressive regimes and white supremacist groups. Points of comparison can be similar in some ways, and different in others, and provided the latter are significant, the claim that they are equivalent is misleading at best, and most often, patently false.

People often engage in this kind of fallacy in everyday life, sometimes unwittingly, and sometimes in desperation to throw the burden back at critics or opponents. The cure for the former is clearer, more precise thought, the kind that goes beyond highlighting the **convenient similarities** to likewise notice the **key differences**. In the heat of debate or disagreement, we can be quick to grasp at anything that seems to advance our position. When people knowingly engage in false equivalences, they intentionally muddy the waters with the hope that others will not notice and articulate the important differences. The details are often crucial for philosophy—the critical difference between getting things right and not getting them at all.

The Lesson: Do your best to make sure that your comparisons are genuinely equivalent.

False dilemmas

People sometimes make sensible “either/or” claims that allow for just two, mutually exclusive possibilities. For instance, these statements describe mutually exclusive outcomes where one or the other must happen.

- “Either your team will win the baseball game, or my team will win (provided we are playing each other).”
- “Either you will pass your chemistry exam, or you won’t.”
- “Someday you’ll visit Tasmania, or then again, you won’t.”

However, other either/or claims can be deeply misleading, illegitimately suggesting that there are only two viable alternatives when other plausible possibilities exist. These examples below all create what we call a “**false dilemma**.”

- “If you aren’t my friend, you’re my enemy.”
- “Either you support the war, or you are against the troops.”
- “If you don’t want to have coffee with me, you must not like me.”

We can easily imagine possibilities beyond the two described in each of these statements. Thus, you might not be my friend, but then again, you might not be my enemy. You can be strongly opposed to a war, but you can still care deeply about the troops fighting that ill-conceived war. You might like me a great deal, but you might just be too busy to have coffee. The culprit with some false dilemmas can be a lack of imagination. Thus, we may think of A and B as distinct possi-

bilities, but we may overlook other plausible ones, not because we have some vested interest in ignoring or hiding them, but just because we don't happen to think about them. Though a good philosophical imagination cannot be manufactured by sheer will, slowing down to consider intentionally whether two things are the only possibilities (or the most likely) is our best defense against slipping into a false dilemma.

As for people intentionally creating false dilemmas, notice that this strategy is usually a matter of trying to manipulate people by posing an unpalatable choice against a more palatable one that the speaker favors. If our only other options are to be an enemy, not to support our troops, or to testify to not liking someone, then we may reluctantly choose to call ourselves a friend, to support the war, or to have coffee. When faced by a false dilemma, we should take care to identify other viable possibilities. A false dilemma effectively manufactures an either/or choice.

The Lesson: Don't misrepresent questions or issues by illegitimately making them into an "either/or."

Red Herrings

A **red herring** diverts attention from the issue at hand by introducing something that is minimally relevant or only superficially similar. Consider these examples.

Employee A: "Our boss is so bad and unfair to us. The way he treats us makes me so mad. Something needs to be done about him."

Employee B: “Look, our problems are first-world problems. People are starving and dying the world over. Our problems are small potatoes.”



Student: We need a bigger say in how institutional dollars are spent on campus. The school never consults adequately with students about what they want in their facilities and services. We need a meaningful voice.

Administrator: I can assure you that the people running this institution are very smart professionals with years of experience making tough decisions about the infrastructure of a college campus.



Reporter: “Mr. President, what would you say to all the citizens who are suffering terribly and frightened about what may happen in the future?”

President: “I’d say your news network never gets anything right. You and your kind constantly lie to the public. I love this country.”

Red herrings can be benign in the sense that a speaker doesn’t *intentionally* seek to derail the conversation by parrying a question or statement. Sometimes our minds can simply take off running toward irrelevant issues, and in some cases, the issues can be perfectly sensible in their own right. Thus, with the first example, Employee A would surely agree that the workplace problems in question pale in comparison with the challenges of those struggling to survive. However, the relative importance of the workplace issues is *beside the point* that

Employee A is trying to make, and by shifting the conversation toward death and starvation, Employee B effectively stops the conversation with Employee A.

The third example likewise stops the conversation, but it does so by way of a nonsensical response. Even if it's true that the reporter's network never gets anything correct and constantly lies, the president simply ignores the question and testifies irrelevantly to loving the country. Assuming this response isn't a straightforward case of badly muddled listening and thinking (being asked one thing, but hearing and then answering a completely different question), this move skirts meaningful discussion. In the extreme, red herrings can render a conversation absurd (akin to answering a question about what time a train departs with "I think it's purple"). To work effectively as a rhetorical sleight of hand, red herrings must be subtle enough not to attract the immediate attention of absurdity. The best cure for red herrings in conversation is to identify them as an unhelpful distraction, and then to steer the conversation back to the relevant question or issue.

The Lesson: Don't derail the conversation with irrelevant points.

P *ost Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc*

When one event closely follows another, we can be tempted to conclude that the earlier event must have caused the later one. A *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy (from Latin, meaning "after this, therefore because of this") involves an illegitimate assertion of **causation** (A *made* B happen) based on nothing more than *at-first-glance* **correla-**

tion (where A and B seem to be related in *some* way). The following examples mistake correlation for causation.

- “I ate at Panera, and now I’m sick, so Panera’s food made me sick.”
- “Children with bigger feet are obviously better mathematicians.”
- “He had a bad diet, so that’s surely why he got cancer.”

The first and third examples leap to premature conclusions, imputing questionable causal connections between food and illness. Without some additional evidence to suggest a causal relation between the two, we only know that one thing was followed by another, not that the first thing caused the second thing. The second example overlooks a vital detail: The math skills of children tend to improve with greater experience and further brain development as they age, so while children with very small feet may tend to be lesser mathematicians, their younger age and greater inexperience are the likelier explanations for their deficiencies, not foot size.

The examples above might give the impression that discerning the difference between correlation and causation is always straightforward, but this isn’t so. Imagine a real-life scenario where a depressed employee performs poorly at work. Depression might well be the cause of poor performance, but then again, depression might be an effect instead. Indeed, causation could conceivably go in *both* directions: Depression might significantly hurt performance, and poor performance might deepen depression. Moreover, some other factor might further complicate the picture. Poor health, relationship problems, a crisis of confidence, or a lack of identifi-

cation with one's work might either contribute to the problems or initiate them. Perhaps the most important thing to remember when making claims about causal relationships is the need for caution. Philosophy thrives on careful, measured conjectures in the cause of tracking the way things truly are.

The Lesson: Don't jump to conclusions by mistaking correlation for causation.

Begging the Question

“**Begging the question**” is a phrase often used as if it means *inviting* a question, as in “*begging for* a question to be asked and answered.” However, the traditional meaning of the phrase refers to **assuming the truth of something that we should be proving**. We can think of it as a case of “**circular reasoning**” (where people begin with what they wish to end with, essentially completing a circle). Here are some examples.

- A. “How do I know that X is the greatest player? Well, nobody's better than her, so obviously, she's the best.”
- B. “I know you must be guilty because otherwise you wouldn't be denying the crime so vehemently.”
- C. “I know without a shadow of a doubt that the Bible is the word of God because God says so, right there in the Bible.”

In these examples, no true evidence is offered for these claims. Essentially, the speaker simply restates the claim. For instance, if X is the greatest player, then it will obviously be

true that nobody is better than X, but anybody making this claim needs to provide **evidence** that nobody is better than X, not simply state that this is the case. Likewise, if denying a crime and admitting a crime both implicate a suspect in a crime, then guilt is essentially taken as a given. And if the Bible's word is taken as proof for the Bible being the word of God, then the idea is something along the lines of "A is so because A is so." This kind of appeal to *self-evidence* can't reasonably suffice as genuine evidence.

Begging the question is essentially a form of avoiding the issue or question, like many bad moves in philosophy. As in all such cases, the antidote is to steer the inquiry back to the proper question, though instances of begging the question can vary with respect to how easy they are to spot, so care and vigilance are crucial for noticing when an interlocutor jumps the track to a different question or issue, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

The Lesson: Don't assume what you are supposed to prove.

Whataboutism (*Tu Quoque* Fallacy)

"Whataboutism" is a sub-species of an **ad hominem** move. The fallacy is also known by its Latin name, the ***tu quoque* fallacy**, meaning "you also." Essentially, it's a version of a childhood mantra used to defend against name-calling on the playground: "I'm like the rubber, and you're like the glue: It bounces off me, and it sticks on you." Some other everyday sayings also capture the spirit of whataboutism: "Look who's talking" and "That's the pot calling the kettle black." Here are some examples.

Country A: “We denounce B’s systematic violations of fundamental human rights with respect to its minority population.”

Country B: “A shouldn’t point any fingers. What about your own horrible record of genocide? You should take a hard look at yourself first.”



Spouse A: “I’m worried about your health. I think you need to cut back on sweets and alcohol for your own good. You’ll feel much better if you lose some weight. I’ll help you.”

Spouse B: “What are you talking about? You can’t even fit into your clothes. I’ve noticed. You munch on chips and junk all the time. *You* should talk.”



Friend A: “I think you should apologize to C for that comment you made at dinner. I know you meant to be funny, but it wasn’t. You hurt C’s feelings.”

Friend B: “How about that time you made D cry? You’re the last person who should be talking to people about hurting people’s feelings.”

For a whataboutism retort to make any sense, there must be some truth to the implication of **hypocrisy**. In the above example, if Country A has a spotless human rights record, then Country B’s response is simply an outright lie. Likewise, if Spouse B has a very healthy diet and isn’t overweight, and if Friend B never made D cry and never hurts others’ feelings, then

attempts to turn things back on them by way of whataboutism are futile. Whataboutism's (often considerable) rhetorical power rests in silencing an interlocutor by way of the charge in question also being true of the speaker, at least to some degree.

Like so many bad moves in philosophy, whataboutism diverts attention from the real issue. The issue of someone's **standing** (their **right** to say something) in pointing out a problem or flaw is **conceptually distinct** from the purported flaw or problem. The fact that I might be guilty of the same thing, or even worse, does nothing to change the facts about your guilt. Because we naturally look askance at hypocrisy, we can be sorely tempted to dismiss charges from "sinners," but we must be careful not to lose sight of the substance of charges, even if they come from people who "**live in glass houses**" (and therefore "**shouldn't throw stones**," as the saying goes).

The Lesson: Don't direct attention away from an issue by accusing others of the same thing or worse.

Slippery Slopes

With a **slippery slope** claim, a possibility is rejected on the assumption that a choice or event will lead to an inevitable chain reaction that proves undesirable. Consider these examples.

- "If I fail this test, I'll be disappointed. If I'm disappointed, I'll probably drink heavily to drown my sorrows. If I drink heavily, I'll eventually progress to hard drugs. Once I'm on hard drugs, my life is

basically over. So, my life literally depends on this test.”

- “If I allow this employee to be two minutes late today without some significant penalty, the employee will surely be five minutes late next time. Soon, my employees will come and go as they please. At that point, it will be chaos, and my business probably won’t survive. Therefore, if I’m to save my livelihood, I need to impose a hefty punishment on this employee.”
- “If we allow patients to choose *passive* euthanasia by foregoing food and water, we’ll soon allow *active* euthanasia, where we kill people, not simply allow them to die. And from there, it won’t be long until we allow involuntary euthanasia in both passive and active forms.”

With these examples, it’s easy to see how one thing doesn’t likely lead to another, much less *necessarily* lead to it. The purported dangers are hyperbolic. Of course, in real life, some slopes truly can be very slippery. If I am an alcoholic, just one drink might conceivably send me careening into eventual oblivion. Likewise, if my army fires missiles at your army, calling a halt to the war might be very difficult. However, unless there is some good reason to believe that one thing will lead to another worse thing in a reliable or invariable fashion, we cannot reasonably *assume* the snowball effect that slippery slope arguments assume.

People can advance slippery slopes intentionally as a way of using hyperbole, but people can also innocently let their fears get the better of them by not stopping to think carefully about whether the *possible* is at all *probable*. When slippery slope arguments are effective, they capitalize on our fears of

undesirable outcomes. For such arguments to have any plausibility, the predicted outcomes must be genuinely undesirable, so the key with slippery slope claims is careful consideration of the claim's evidence.

The Lesson: Don't illegitimately assume that one thing will automatically lead to something far worse.



Mrs. Louis' tobogganing group, *Montreal, QC, 1861*
(*Notman & Sandbam*)

Magical Thinking
Magical thinking involves the belief that one event brings about another event (or that something will happen) without being able to identify any plausible causal link. Small children often think this way. They may believe in **impossible** or purely **imaginary** things (for instance, believing that a unicorn will appear on their doorstep in the morning), or they may believe in possible

things, but without any reasonable grounds for believing that the possible will actually come true (for instance, believing that a cute puppy will suddenly appear on their doorstep in the morning). While adults aren't apt to believe in the former, they can wittingly or unwittingly believe in the latter in a bout of "wishful thinking." In fact, they can sometimes go beyond simply believing in something *in the absence of credible evidence*; they may believe in something *in the face of reasonable evidence to the contrary*. As the coronavirus spread around the world in 2020, people advanced all sorts of purported protections against COVID-19.

- White handkerchiefs
- Volcanic ash
- Cocaine
- Saltwater
- Cow dung and urine
- Methanol
- Vodka and saunas
- Burning herbs
- Bear bile

Based primarily on "gut feelings," some American government officials championed an arthritis medicine sometimes used to combat malaria (hydroxychloroquine) as a drug to prevent COVID-19, even after the scientific community expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the drug and issued warnings about potentially lethal side-effects. Suffice it to say that in the absence of evidence of effectiveness, advocating the use of a drug with potentially deadly effects based on a subjective "feeling" counts as magical thinking.

Note that in the abstract, pursuing hunches and gut feelings can be perfectly reasonable. Tracking causal connections can

be extraordinarily difficult, and good scientists can have hunches worth pursuing without being able to pinpoint the roots of the hunch. However, in such cases, their confidence in their hunches should be indexed to the existing evidence and the stakes. It's one thing to pursue a hunch with low risks in the absence of evidence, and quite another thing to pursue a hunch with high risks in the face of contrary evidence. In its worst form, magical thinking makes empirical evidence entirely subservient to whatever one wishes to be so. In other words, *X is or will be* because I *want* it to be.

We should also note that causal explanations run along a continuum, along with our everyday knowledge of those explanations. We believe in all sorts of things without having any intimate knowledge of their causal pathways. For many people driving automobiles, using cell phones, taking prescription drugs, or turning on a lamp, these things might as well be magic. We know that they work as they do, but we may know little or nothing about the causal innards of these mechanisms. In these cases, we don't think of such people as succumbing to magical thinking just because they don't know "how stuff works" and simply trust that others do. They believe that causal pathways account for these phenomena, as distinct from these things happening *magically*.

Religious faith can complicate the idea of magical thinking. For instance, those who believe in **miracles** believe that God can intercede in the world to influence events in ways that defy any natural causal explanation. Obviously, those who do not believe in God do not believe in miracles in the sense of events that can't be explained by natural causes. They may be incapable of providing any explanation for a given phenomenon, and they can believe that an explanation for a phenomenon is likely to always be beyond us, but they will insist that events are governed by natural causes. Thus, they

will almost surely reject a claim like the one Jesus makes about faith in the Gospel of Matthew (17:20).

Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

If this Gospel claim is meant literally (moving an actual mountain by way of faith), non-believers are likely to see it as a case of magical thinking. Believers, on the other hand, may insist that God is not bound by such natural laws, even if the universe is bound by them *except* for those rare instances when God so chooses to intercede.

The Lesson: You need a plausible causal explanation for claiming that something will happen.



The York Magician Transforming a Foot-Boy to a Captain (*Thomas Rowlandson*)

Confirmation Bias
When people are completely indifferent to the results of an inquiry, they are unlikely to *skew* the inquiry illegitimately toward one result over another. They

may make *mistakes* that affect the results, but without an incentive, they are less likely to slant things in favor of one conclusion over another from the start. However, in ordinary life, we can have all sorts of incentives for gravitating in one direction over another. For instance, we may not care so much about the conclusion itself, but we may wish an answer as quickly and easily as possible, so if we detect some evidence for A, it may quickly become our favorite. We may also prefer A because it's easier to reconcile with our other existing beliefs. If we were to settle on B rather than A, we might be forced to revisit our other settled beliefs, an unpalatable prospect. And we may prefer A simply because we incline in that direction, whether by conviction, preference, or both. When we have a decided stake in one conclusion over another, **confirmation bias** is always a threat to an inquiry.

With confirmation bias, **we basically find what we wish to find**. This can involve any number of things: exaggerating the strengths of a preferred result; minimizing the weaknesses of the preferred result; exaggerating the weakness of competing possibilities; minimizing the strength of the competition; only looking evidence that helps you. Essentially, we can “**cherry pick**” whatever serves us, and avoid whatever doesn't. When we engage in confirmation bias, we seldom do so intentionally, though we may work at turning a blind eye to how we conduct the inquiry. One of the reasons that scientists sometimes engage in **double-blind** studies, where neither the participants nor the experimenters know who is receiving which treatment, is to reduce the likelihood of bias. Even if scientists can be sure that they would never purposely cheat in favor of a preferred result, they can realize that their experiments can skew in subtle ways toward the results they desire if they do

not effectively blind themselves with a double-blind regimen.

Ultimately, we are all **partisans** in the sense of actively preferring to believe in some things rather than others, at least to some degree. In this sense, philosophy makes an extraordinary appeal to practitioners, asking them to go a great distance so far as being prepared to abandon favored ideas in the face of contrary evidence is concerned. **Philosophy doesn't aim to corroborate what we wish to be so; it aims to see the world as it is.** This is the sense in which good philosophers must always be prepared for the possibility of “bad news.” They must be willing to live with finding that the world isn't as they wish it to be, and worse still, that it is unlikely to ever be. Of course, there may well be distinct limits to how far any philosopher may be able to go in this direction. For instance, if reflection reveals that justice demands that you save two strangers instead of sparing a loved one, then despite honestly caring about justice, you might conceivably say “Alas, too bad for justice.” In other words, we may all have some beliefs, attachments, and commitments that are so deep—the kind that *constitute* us as a person—as not to be amenable to abandonment. While we should bear this possibility in mind and be duly careful about conjuring any fanciful vision of philosophy and philosophers in terms of some *detached fidelity to the truth and nothing but the truth*, so too we should recognize that at its best, philosophy strives to avoid confirmation bias in the service of tracking the facts about the world and us as they truly are, not simply as we might wish them to be.

The Lesson: Don't focus on evidence that confirms your existing beliefs, while excluding any evidence that might disconfirm them.

Appeals to Common Knowledge

At some point or other, we have all most likely thought, “*Everyone knows that.*” In fact, we rely on people sharing all sorts of **common knowledge** (*conventional wisdom*) and when we see people devoid of such knowledge, particularly with respect to basic elements of everyday life, we’re apt to think they lack the *common sense* that every adult should ordinarily have. The general idea of common knowledge, things that everyone knows—even if more accurately we mean “everyone *should* know, though *some* people don’t know”—is a relatively uncontroversial idea, something most people take for granted.

On the other hand, we have little trouble identifying examples of common knowledge from yesteryear that are now soundly rejected by reasonable people.

- The Earth is flat.
- The Sun revolves around the Earth.
- “Bleeding” a patient might restore the proper balance of “humours” for good health. (In 1799, George Washington was relieved of 40% of his blood in a 12-hour period as a treatment for a throat infection. He died. Though we cannot say whether the bleeding killed him, we can confidently say that it didn’t help.)
- Tour de France riders in the 1920s smoked cigarettes during the race (*riding their bikes*) to “open up” their lungs.



A Tour de France smoke.

Hence, we have ready examples where common knowledge was not only wrong, but laughably wrong, along with our anecdotal experiences that corroborate large swaths of common knowledge in everyday life. In this light, it only makes sense to regard appeals to common knowledge with a healthy degree of skepticism, though without simply rejecting such appeals out of hand as entirely baseless. Both parties—someone who suggests an idea that goes against common knowledge, and those who rely on common knowledge—have the burden of making the case for their beliefs, whether that case be for common knowledge being wrong, or for common knowledge being right. Absent a compelling case for some item of common knowledge, there is no good reason to see it as more than “common,” just like beliefs about the Earth being flat. The sheer weight of tradition in accepting an item of common knowledge as *knowledge* shouldn’t command any special loyalty.

The Lesson: Don’t automatically assume that people truly know everything they think they know.

Appeals to Authority

We quite reasonably trust the knowledge of experts frequently in everyday life. We leave bridge-building to engineers, surgery to surgeons, flying to pilots, and major car repairs to competent auto mechanics. The *Do-It-Yourself* route may be tempting when the task seems relatively straightforward and the stakes seem low enough, but otherwise, we leave all sorts of things to those who know better, and we gladly follow what they identify as the “best practices” for a given pursuit.

Deferring to the knowledge of more knowledgeable people makes sense. We have neither the time nor the ability to become experts in many things, much less everything, so in practice, we need to take the word of trustworthy experts. However, when philosophers make a case for something or engage in an inquiry, they must be careful not to **appeal to authority** in ways that command unquestioning **obedience** from interlocutors, the sort that effectively *ends* a conversation, as opposed to *advancing* it. For instance, we may have good reasons to believe that Philosopher X knows a great deal about Y, but if our explanation of why X’s view about Y is correct comes down to “Because X said so,” we are left with little to say. Likewise, if we insist that people must do Z because it’s the **best practice**, then unless we can explain what makes Z the best practice, then others must simply take our word. In some cases, the field of knowledge may be too specialized to do more than report that Z is considered the best practice by the relevant experts, but we should be careful not to seek illegitimate refuge from appeals to authority.

The Lesson: Don’t automatically assume that “experts” are necessarily correct.

Equivocation (Doublespeak)

Many terms and phrases are ambiguous. If we report that X is “cold,” we may mean that X is uncomfortable with the current temperature, or we may mean that X is psychologically distant and chilly. If we describe X as “distant,” we may mean that X is far away from our current location, or we may mean that X forsakes all psychological intimacy. To know how these words are meant, we need the requisite context. We greatly depend upon context in everyday life to understand others and to make ourselves understood.

Sometimes we can make claims that trade on the ambiguities of key terms or phrases in illegitimate ways, whether the move is intentional or unintentional. For instance, consider this claim.

“We all believe that I have the right to express my opinion, so therefore, nobody can deny that I’m in the right when I tell X what I truly believe, that X is a wretch.”

The term “right” is used in two different senses in this example. The “right to express an opinion” refers to someone being at liberty to say whatever he or she wishes to say. If others prevent the person from speaking, they violate that person’s freedom of speech, a protected freedom. The second use of “right”—“I’m in the right...”—could either mean that it would be wrong (a dereliction of duty) not to tell X, or else that telling X is at least appropriate in the sense that there would be nothing wrong (inappropriate) with so doing. This **equivocation** with “right,” using the term in two different ways in different parts of the claim without any acknowledgement of the

important difference, serves an implausible claim in this case. Nobody seriously believes that we are under any obligation to say everything that we have the right to say, and most people believe that at least in some cases, one might be within one's rights to speak one's mind to others, but so doing might be wrong or bad in the sense of being cruel and unnecessary.

Language is far too subtle to eliminate all ambiguities. Moreover, ambiguity itself is no enemy. However, good philosophers should be attuned to ambiguities, and they must avoid equivocation, where they shift from one meaning to another without any sign or acknowledgment of doing so.

The Lesson: Be attuned to ambiguous terms, and don't use the same terms to mean different things when making a case for something, unless you must do so and your audience understands the differences.

E motional Appeals

Human beings can think through many things without caring much about the outcome, aside from wishing to track the truth about whatever they're pursuing. However, when it comes to all sorts of things, we care deeply about the answers. For instance, philosophers who think about a just society or a good human life aren't apt to feel detached from the inquiry, fully *content* with *whatever* the inquiry reveals (as distinct from being honestly prepared for the inquiry not turning out as they wish). Indeed, most philosophers who spend their time thinking about such things do so *because* they care. Thus, there is nothing odd or inappropriate about philosophers having powerful emotional

investments in the issues and questions they consider. We are human beings, not emotionless machines.

In some cases, an appeal to an audience's emotions can make good philosophical sense. For example, suppose one thinks, like David Hume (the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher), that sympathy is the ultimate foundation of all our moral judgments about how to live and what sorts of people to be. In this case, asking interlocutors to imagine themselves in the shoes of people who suffer, to try to see and experience the world as they do, is a philosophical exercise, as test of whether interlocutors feel the things that Hume believes we naturally feel when confronted with suffering, so long as we vividly imagine it.

In other cases, we may feel strongly about something long before we might be able to articulate our concerns or qualms about something. Indeed, our emotions may even correct for the *apparently* reasonable explanations we tell ourselves. For instance, perhaps I explain away some way in which I have seriously failed a friend, and but for my emotions nagging at me, I might get away with my rationalization. Our emotions can often be our best guide.

However, we can also make various emotional appeals that either illegitimately skew an inquiry or influence people in ways that are entirely extrinsic to philosophical inquiry. With the former, imagine that we are debating the merits of one possible public policy over another, and say that I vividly introduce the painful lot of one unfortunate child into the discussion. Faced by the concrete images of this child's suffering, the more abstract suffering of other children (say that we have no images of these other children) who might suffer from the other possible policy might easily recede from view. The hearts of my listeners might go out to this child, sympa-

thetic group as they are, and they might be emotionally swayed to embrace the lesser good in the sense of sparing one child, rather than sparing many. And if I am skillful with such emotional appeals, I might be able to manipulate the emotions of my listeners to great effect, and they might not even realize it.

With the latter, influencing listeners with emotional appeals extrinsic to the inquiry, I might appeal to many different emotions to sway my listeners. I might angrily bang my fist on the table, intimidating others to side with me (or else!). Or I might charm them into wishing to be my ally, just because I'm *so darn likeable*. Praise, approval, shame, ridicule, condescension, ostracism—I might use these or other ploys to manipulate my audience's emotions to bring them over to my side. By so doing, I leave philosophy aside and twist the arms of my audience by exploiting their emotions.

The Lesson: Don't disregard emotions, but recognize that they aren't infallible, and some emotional appeals can skew an inquiry.

Appeals to Ignorance

Sometimes we lack sufficient evidence to be able to reach a conclusion about something, and in the absence of such evidence, we can be sorely tempted to think that the **absence of evidence** is equivalent to **evidence for the absence** of reasons not to do X or conclude Y (especially if we desperately *want* to do X or to reach conclusion Y). Consider this example of two people standing on a rocky cliff, staring at an inviting pool of water below on a hot summer day that begs for a refreshing dip.

Person A: “Should we jump?”

Person B: “But we can’t see if there are any rocks under the water. We might jump and smash into something.”

Person A: “Well, so long as we can’t see any rocks, what are we waiting for?”

Obviously, the sheer fact that these two potential leapers into the unknown have no evidence of dangerous rocks lurking below the surface of the water doesn’t mean that they have any evidence that there is nothing to worry about. In this case, **ignorance** with respect to danger has no bearing whatsoever on whether such a leap would be dangerous.

The Lesson: Keep in mind that not having a sufficient reason not to do X doesn’t equate to having a sufficient reason to do X.

Appeals to Motive
Consumers sensibly consider the appeals of advertisers and salespeople with a grain of salt. After all, advertisers and salespeople wish to sell products. They are not impartial arbiters interested only in the best products being purchased, no matter *who* might produce and sell them. They have an incentive to cast their products in the best light, and even if they say nothing false, they’ll leave out the bad bits about their products and ignore the good bits about their competitors’ products. They have no interest in selling somebody else’s goods, and savvy consumers keep this fact in mind when they are considering a purchase.

In much the same way, when we listen to people make a case

for something beyond the consumer marketplace (say, in the marketplace of *ideas*), we may listen to *what* they say, but we may also wonder *why* they are saying what they're saying. Their **motives** may weigh heavily on our minds, and if we grow suspicious of their motives, we may reject what they say with something like "They are only saying X because..." In other words, their imputed motives may taint the **content** of what they say. If we come to believe that they have an "agenda," we may not "buy" the ideas they're "selling."

Though we are always wise to consider motives, notice that motive and content are conceptually distinct, and **an incentive to advance X doesn't necessarily mean that X is untrue**. For instance, we can safely assume that Politician A makes the impassioned case for X with the expectation that such a case will serve A's campaign for election. If we believe that Politician A says X only to get elected, then we may reasonably fear that once elected, A may abandon X or tepidly pursue the cause. Nonetheless, we should be careful not to conflate content and motive in such a way that the latter automatically disparages the former, especially because we can conceivably be wrong about motives, in which case, we might err twice if we automatically reject the content because of suspect motives.

The Lesson: Distinguish between (a) someone's motive for advancing a claim and (b) the content of the claim.

Hasty Generalizations

We quite sensibly hypothesize from specific cases to more general conclusions. For instance, if we

observe some number of X displaying Y characteristics, we may hypothesize that all X share those characteristics. However, the finer details and our sample size matter. We can be too quick to generalize. Consider these examples.

- “I asked my friends whether they thought misogyny is a problem in the United States, and they didn’t believe it is, so I think most Americans feel the same way.”
- “The people I see on Facebook seem to be enjoying their lives a great deal. They post lots of joyful pictures of themselves and they post upbeat messages. So, I’d say that most people are pretty happy.”
- “My colleagues didn’t seem to mind that I missed our recent department meeting, so they probably wouldn’t care if I skip the rest of our scheduled meetings this semester.”

The flaws in these conjectures are obvious: One’s friends may feel this way, but they may not be representative; people on Facebook may be trying to put on their best public face, one that may not accurately reflect their inner lives; one’s colleagues may have simply let the absence slide. Not all hasty generalizations are so obvious. The lesson to be learned from such generalizations is that we should always be careful about moving from a limited amount of evidence to general conclusions. Patience, persistence, precision—these should be ways of being for philosophers looking to understand, not simply make things up.

The Lesson: Don’t jump to conclusions by moving too hastily from specific examples to general claims.



PARTING THOUGHTS ON THE PRACTICE OF PHILOSOPHY

Once upon a time, people referred to philosophy as the “queen” or “mother” of “all sciences,” with the idea being that philosophy was fundamental to the pursuit of all knowledge since it asked the most basic questions about what it means to know anything. This unique history is reflected today by the fact that those who earn the Ph.D., our highest academic degree, receive a “Doctor of Philosophy” degree (from Latin, *Doctor Philosophiae*). As late as the 19th century, disciplines we now recognize as distinctly scientific would have been known as “natural philosophy.” Many fields of inquiry formerly understood as a part of philosophy gradually became their own distinct disciplines, and contemporary undergraduates studying subjects like astronomy, mathematics, biology, physics, and psychology are probably apt to think of philosophy as very far afield from their own studies. However, people with such interests once called philosophy their “home.”

One might be tempted to see these comments as nothing more than an interesting walk down philosophy’s “memory

lane,” but hopefully, this primer has painted a picture of the practice of philosophy that makes it relevant for anyone intent on thinking about *anything* carefully. The guiding ideals and the “moves” described in this primer do not belong exclusively to philosophy as an intellectual discipline set apart from others. Instead, this vision harkens back to philosophy as **foundational** in the sense anyone wishing to think through complex questions and issues can forsake these philosophical ideals and tools only at their own peril.

Whether you are an undergraduate pursuing the study of philosophy, or someone wondering what this thing called “philosophy” is all about, keep in mind that these ideals and tools, these philosophical **habits of heart and mind**, do not come cheaply. They require active cultivation, just like most meaningful things in life. May you work away devotedly at it, enjoying the exercise for its own sake, and likewise, savoring the insights you discover along the way.



The School of Athens, Raphael, c. 1509