

# An INVITATION to PHILOSOPHY

## QUESTIONING THE FUNDAMENTALS WE NORMALLY TAKE FOR GRANTED

**T**HE DAILY LIVES OF MOST of us are full of things that keep us busy and preoccupied. But every now and again we find ourselves drawing back and wondering what it is all about. And then, perhaps, we may start asking fundamental questions that normally we do not stop to ask.

This can happen with regard to any aspect of life. In politics, for example, people are all the time bandying around terms like “freedom”, “equality”, “social justice”, and so on. But every now and again somebody comes along who asks: “Yes, but what do we actually mean by freedom? And what do we mean by equality?” Such questioning can become challengingly awkward. The person may say: “Surely freedom and equality are in conflict with one another? If we’re all free to live our lives as we like, aren’t we bound to end up in a whole lot of different and very unequal situations? And isn’t that something that can be prevented only by government interference? If that’s true, then it’s no good us saying we’re in favour of freedom and equality and just leaving it at that. There’s an element of contradiction involved.” It is when people start to talk like this that they are beginning to think philosophically. In this case they are embarking on what is known as political philosophy.

People can subject any field of human activity to fundamental questioning like this – which is another way of saying that there can be a philosophy of anything.



REMBRANDT, *THE TWO PHILOSOPHERS* (1628)  
*Discussion, argument, debate, are crucial to philosophy, because everything that is said must lie open to question and criticism. So one might say it takes two to philosophize, and philosophy is a shared search for truth.*

# “PHILOSOPHY BEGINS IN

Lawyers are referring constantly to guilt and innocence, justice, a fair trial, and so on. But if one of them says: “When we talk about justice, do we mean the same as what the politicians mean when they talk about social justice, or are we talking about something different here?” he is beginning to do philosophy of law. The doctor who asks himself: “Is there ever such a thing as perfect

health – if not, what do we mean by cure?” is beginning to do philosophy of medicine. In every field of activity there is a philosophy of it that involves questioning its fundamental concepts, principles, and methods. So there is philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, philosophy of art, and so on. Nearly always, some of the best practitioners in each field are interested in its philosophy.

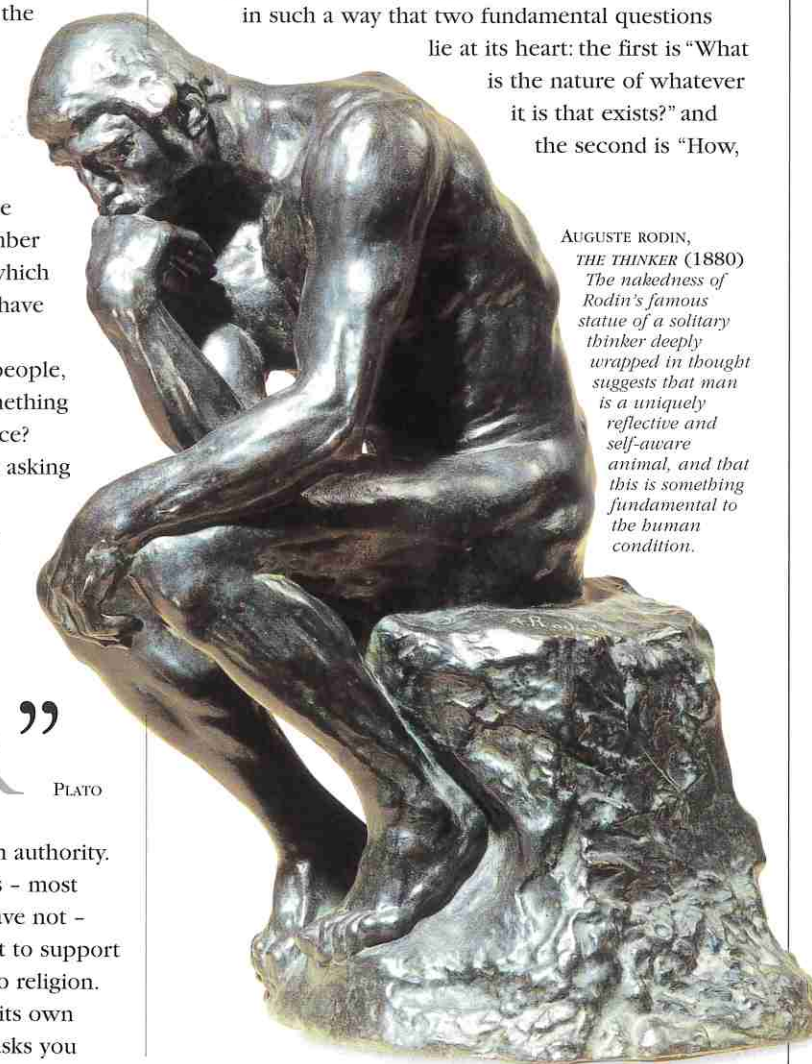
It is important to realize that when the political philosopher asks: “What is freedom?” he is not just asking for a definition of the word. If that were all he wanted he could look it up in the dictionary. His question goes far beyond that. He is seeking an altogether deeper understanding of the concept, and of how it actually functions in our thoughts and our lives, and of other ways in which it might also be used, and of the possible dangers of its use, and of how it does or could relate to other key political concepts such as equality. He is trying to clarify his mind and ours on a subject that has important practical implications for us and yet which bristles with difficulties.

**T**HIS ELUCIDATION OF CONCEPTS, though, fascinating as it is, is the mere surface of philosophy. The greatest philosophers have gone much deeper than that and questioned the most fundamental aspects of our existence and our experience. We human beings find ourselves in a world we had no say about entering. In its most obvious and basic features it consists of a framework of space and time – three dimensions of space and one dimension of time – inhabited by a large number of widely differing material objects, some of which are people like ourselves. And philosophers have raised questions like: “What is time?” and “Is everything that actually exists, including people, a material object and nothing more? Can something that is not a material object have real existence? If so, what is the nature of that existence?” In asking questions like this they are not just trying to achieve a deeper understanding of concepts. They are striving towards a fundamental understanding of whatever it is that exists, including ourselves. And they are trying to do this without making it a question of

for your rational assent, not for faith or obedience. Philosophy tries to see how far reason alone will take us.

Because philosophy is a quest for rational understanding of the most fundamental kind it raises important questions about the nature of understanding and hence of enquiry and knowledge. How are we to go about finding answers to all these questions of ours? Can we ever really know, in the sense of being sure of, anything? If so, what? And even if we do know, how will we be able to be sure that we know; in other words can we ever know that we know? Questions like this have themselves come to occupy a place near the centre of philosophy. Alongside questions about the world around us, the philosopher asks questions about the nature of human perception, experience, and understanding.

So, put at its most basic, philosophy has developed in such a way that two fundamental questions lie at its heart: the first is “What is the nature of whatever it is that exists?” and the second is “How,



AUGUSTE RODIN,  
*THE THINKER* (1880)  
*The nakedness of Rodin's famous statue of a solitary thinker deeply wrapped in thought suggests that man is a uniquely reflective and self-aware animal, and that this is something fundamental to the human condition.*

# WONDER”

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religious faith, or appealing to the say-so of an authority. They may as individuals have religious beliefs – most great philosophers have had, though some have not – yet as good philosophers they do not attempt to support their philosophical arguments with appeals to religion. A philosophical argument is one that carries its own credentials with it, in the form of reasons: it asks you

if at all, can we know?" Investigation into the first question, about what exists and the nature of existence, constitutes the branch of philosophy known as ontology. Investigation into the second question – about the nature of knowledge, and what, if anything, we can know – is called epistemology. It is the development of these two over the centuries – and of all the subsidiary questions that arise out of them – that constitute the mainstream of philosophy's history.

Into this mainstream flow all the important tributaries, such as moral and political philosophy, philosophy of science, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, and the rest. All these have their place in philosophy as a whole, but questions about what exists, and how we can know, are logically prior to questions raised in these other branches.

It may be that to some of our most important questions we shall never find the answers. But that is itself not something we can know in advance. So we

## “THE BUSINESS OF IS NOT TO GIVE RULES, BUT THE PRIVATE OF COMMON

shall want to mount assaults on all the problems that interest us. If in the course of doing so we discover good reasons to believe that a particular question is not susceptible of an answer we shall have to find a way of coming to terms with that. It is a conclusion which – like all other philosophical conclusions – we shall require good reasons for believing. We shall not be willing just to accept it on spec, or on faith, or because we have an intuition to that effect: we shall want to know why we should believe it to be true.

**T**HIS INSISTENCE ON REASONS is one of the hallmarks of philosophy. It distinguishes philosophy from, for example, both religion and the arts. In religion, reasons are appealed to sometimes, but also faith, revelation, ritual, and obedience have indispensable roles, and reason can never take a person the whole way. The creative artist, like the philosopher, is fully committed to a truth-seeking activity, trying to see below the surface of things and acquire a deeper understanding of human experience; however, he publishes, or publicly presents, his insights in a different form from the philosopher, a form that relies on direct perception and intuition rather than on rational argument.

A different sort of frontier runs between philosophy and the sciences. Again, the scientist like the philosopher and the creative artist, is engaged in truth-seeking enquiry, trying to make new discoveries about the world and the nature of our experience of it, and to make sense of these, and to publish his findings. And he, like the philosopher, is much concerned to be able to provide rational backing for everything he says. In his case the key difference from the philosopher is that the scientist

form. They enrich one another, and a fully rounded human being will find himself becoming naturally interested in all three. This book tells the story of one of them, philosophy. Like the other two, it is among the most fascinating and valuable things that civilization has produced. And, like the others, its future is likely to be richer than its past.

## PHILOSOPHY TO ANALYSE JUDGEMENTS REASON”

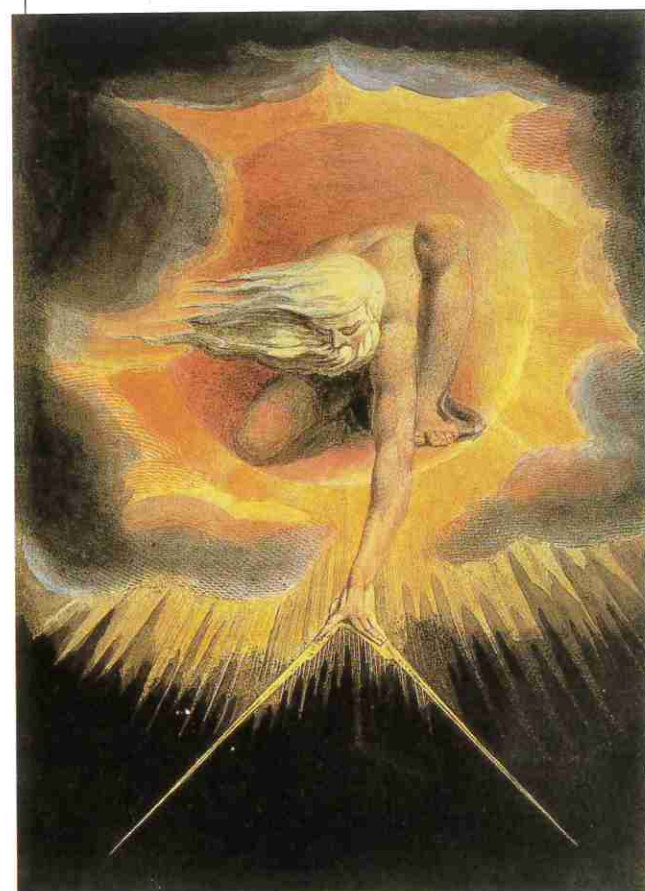
IMMANUEL KANT

is concerned with questions that can be decided by experiment or observation. And there are no experiments or observations that will tell us whether or not time had a beginning, or what “rights” are. Questions like that, which are amenable to rational enquiry but not amenable to the methods of science, are typical of the questions that get bequeathed to philosophers.

**I**T IS ESSENTIAL TO REALIZE that philosophy, science, and art are not at odds with one another. They have much more in common than appears at first sight. In fact, as we shall see in this book, it was out of philosophy that science was born. It is the same world that philosophy, science, and art are all exploring. All three confront the mystery of the world's existence, and our existence as human beings, and try to achieve a deeper understanding of it. All three make perpetual use of both inspiration and criticism. And all three make their findings public so that they can be shared. But because they use different methods, and follow different paths, they may sometimes appeal to different temperaments. Yet they share the goal of exploring human knowledge and experience, and trying to bring what is hidden to light, and organize their findings into publicly articulate



SALVADOR DALÍ,  
HOMAGE TO NEWTON (1969)  
Man has the ability not only to explore space outside himself but to relate his discoveries to his own inner spaces of thought and feeling. Here the sciences, philosophy, and the arts may meet and fructify one another.



WILLIAM BLAKE, THE ANCIENT OF DAYS (1794)  
Regularity is found at every level in the known universe, from the very biggest to the very smallest, and usually in forms that can be expressed in mathematical equations. It is as if the universe itself embodies rationality. It is as if, somebody once said: "God is a mathematician."