

What is Philosophy?

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Introduction

This guide is meant to help people understand what philosophy looks like. I do not want to pretend that this guide describes everything about philosophy. It provides my own perspective about what philosophy is about, and not everyone will agree with me. But this work contains basic ideas that everyone interested in philosophy should consider.

My understanding of philosophy is one partly moral. Philosophy tells us how we *should* argue and how we can be free to think for ourselves to improve our lives.

This entire work is indebted to my philosophical education. Chapter 1 is almost entirely based upon lectures given by Professor Don Ciraulo for his Introduction to Philosophy class at West Valley College.

Several arguments are presented throughout this guide. I do not agree with all of the arguments presented, and the reader should also feel free to question them. What is important is to have examples of potentially persuasive arguments for us to consider on our own. It should also be noted that some of the arguments are also presented to have the opposite effect and help us understand what bad arguments look like.

Chapter 1: What is Philosophy?

You have probably heard the word “philosophy” used many times. People say things like, “That’s my philosophy,” “What’s your philosophy?” and “That’s your philosophy!” When used in this way, philosophy seems to mean little more than “opinion” or “perspective.” This is not what philosophy means in the classroom.

Philosophy is the quest for the best opinions possible and the best life possible. Everyone has an opinion, but we can’t just assume that our opinions are right. We should question our own beliefs and seek justifications for them.

Philosophy in the classroom is focused on good arguments. Good arguments require (1) an understanding of logic and (2) an understanding of justifications. In philosophy you are not allowed to believe whatever you want because you have to be able to justify your beliefs.

In everyday life, the word “argument” is often taken as a kind of confrontation. We “argue” with people when we have a “fight” with them. Arguments generally are disagreements and can relate to power struggles. The following is an example of how some people view arguments:

You: The new Star Wars movies weren’t very good.
Friend: Yes they were. They had great special effects.
You: No they weren’t. They had boring characters.
Friend: They were good movies.
You: No they weren’t!
Friend: Yes they were!

Fortunately, this is not what “argument” means in philosophy. Arguments in philosophy require “a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition”.¹ These kinds of arguments can indeed be heated and insulting. We could often describe philosophical arguments as being “adversarial.” Such intellectual arguments often require criticisms, which are

¹ This was the definition given in a Monty Python sketch found in both “Monty Python's Previous Record” and “Monty Python's Instant Record Collection”.

meant to be helpful to others (constructive criticism), but people rarely want to find out that they are wrong about their beliefs.

Insofar as a philosophy class has to do with arguments, it is not separate from any other kind of class. Many classes give you arguments to believe one thing or another, and it is often important for you to think of your own arguments. Many upper division classes will expect you to be able to write argumentative papers.

Chapter 2: Why Learn Philosophy?

It might be useful to consider what we can get out of learning philosophy. This can help us be receptive to making connections between everyday life and philosophy.

1. It can help you live a thoughtful life.
2. It can help you think clearly and critically.
3. It can help you understand arguments.
4. It can help you master argumentation to get what you want out of life.
5. It can help you understand how to justify your arguments.
6. It can help you avoid deception.

In addition, people who have devoted their life to philosophy have revolutionized the world. Socrates invented the dialectic method and developed the idea of moral virtue, Plato helped invent political science, Aristotle invented logic and helped invent empirical science, the Stoic philosophers invented propositional logic, and logicians invented computers. The list goes on and on. By devoting your life to philosophy, you can find out what people have already thought of and it can help you think of ideas that have never been thought of before.

Chapter 3: Good Arguments

In order to know what philosophy is, you must understand what arguments are. Philosophy can be very clear, easy to understand, and it can be used to show us what we have reason to believe.

I have prepared the following three good arguments for your amusement: (1) The Argument for Predictions, (2) the Argument for Coherence, and (3) the Argument for Criticism. I hope each of these arguments will be easy to understand and easy to agree with. Each argument will be organized into separate thoughts that are numbered one after another. The final thought is the conclusion of the argument.

(1) Argument for Predictions

1. A scientific theory will fail to predict future events unless (a) there is a coincidence or (b) the theory is accurate.
2. If a theory almost never fails to predict the future, then the success of the predictions are very unlikely to be from coincidence.
3. Therefore, scientific theories that never fail to predict the future are very likely to be accurate.²

Whenever we see that something has always been the case, we are often justified to believe that it will continue to be the case in the future. Whenever people drop rocks, the rocks fall from gravity. We expect that gravity will continue in the future. We can imagine that the law of gravity could “turn off,” but we have no reason to expect that to happen anytime soon.

Science uses this kind of justification in order to attempt to predict the future. Whenever a theory fails to predict the future, we have reason to be suspicious of that theory. If the law of gravity didn't always help us predict

² Karl Popper's “Science as Falsification” puts forth a similar argument, but he actually believes that we can never say a theory is accurate. Instead, he would just say we have reason to keep the theory as long as it hasn't been falsified. I disagree that science is about falsification because scientific theories always fail to predict certain events. These failures are called “anomalies” and Popper would consider them to be falsifications. Popper's article can be read at <www.stephenjyngould.org/ctrl/popper_falsification.html>.

that dropped rocks will fall, then we would question whether or not the law of gravity is true.

Anyone who disagrees with the Argument for Predictions would have a very hard time explaining our knowledge of science. The reason that Newtonian physics was rejected was because it failed to predict many events that happen, and Einstein's theory of relativity could predict almost all of those events. It is always possible that a false scientific theory could keep getting lucky to predict the future, but this doesn't happen very often.

Philosophical theories³ are not always used to predict the future. Instead, theories can be used to explain facts and speculate about what other facts we should accept. For example, John Stewart Mill's theory of utilitarianism explains why certain actions are good and others are bad; and we could also use utilitarianism to help us figure out what actions are good or bad that we wouldn't be sure about otherwise. It could attempt to tell us whether or not abortion should be legal.

(2) Argument for Coherence

1. An explanation compatible with all of your knowledge could be true.
2. An explanation incompatible with some of your knowledge is false.
3. Some explanations are incompatible with more of your knowledge than others.
4. Therefore, if all relevant explanations are incompatible with some of our knowledge, then the explanation compatible with the most knowledge is the best.

The Argument for Coherence shows us that it is possible to have a false explanation, but it can still be the best explanation available. The most coherent explanation is the explanation that is the most compatible with your other beliefs. Coherence is also called "logical consistency." A person who believes things that cannot be true at the same time is incoherent, or "logically inconsistent."

We can use the Argument for Coherence to show why science is not about falsification. We are not going to consider a scientific theory to be falsified until a better theory is introduced. This better theory should be

³ The word "theory" in philosophy is often synonymous with the word "hypothesis" or "speculation".

more coherent with the facts than the falsified one. Scientists might say, “This theory has fewer anomalies than the alternative.” The most coherent theory is accepted in science.

In philosophy, we also accept the most coherent theories. Theories will often be judged as being incompatible with “facts” we know from personal experience.

The Argument for Coherence could be judged as taking our beliefs too seriously. Perhaps we have little or no knowledge. Instead of worrying about knowledge, we could worry about our justified beliefs. Justified beliefs have evidence, but we might not claim to be absolutely certain that they are true.

The argument would be reformulated as the following:

1. An explanation compatible with all of your justified beliefs is probably accurate.
2. An explanation incompatible with some of your justified beliefs is probably inaccurate.
3. Some explanations are incompatible with more of your justified beliefs than others.
4. Therefore, if all relevant explanations are incompatible with some of our justified beliefs, then the explanation compatible with the most justified beliefs is the best.

(3) Argument for Criticism

1. Suppose there are people who will make the same mistake every day of their lives.
2. If they do not know that they are making a mistake, then they could not choose to stop making that mistake.
3. If they listened to criticisms of their behavior and attempted to criticize their own behavior, then they could have found out what mistake they are making.
4. Therefore, if they were open to criticism, they might have been able to choose to stop making that mistake.

This argument shows that criticisms help us improve our behavior. For example, you might not be willing to do things that your friends enjoy doing. This could be seen as unfair by your friends and could damage your relationships with them. If one of your friends tells you about this problem and you think they are being insulting, then you will probably continue the same rude behavior in the future.

Many people dislike criticism because it can be insulting. I do not pretend that criticisms aren't insulting. I have been insulted by perfectly good constructive criticism in the past. Criticism reveals our faults. We like to think we are smart and we want people to admire us. This can be especially true in a work environment. Bosses often do not like you to argue with them or to criticize them. Unfortunately, this is greatly irrational as shown by this argument. Many of us know from personal experience that bosses have good reason to listen to our criticisms. Some bosses do listen to our criticisms and concerns, and we often appreciate them for it.

Criticism is very important in philosophy. In order to be sure that we have good arguments, we must take criticisms seriously. If a criticism shows that our argument fails, then we have little reason to use it anymore. Most arguments that you write in a philosophy class are criticisms against other arguments.

Chapter 4: Philosophical Topics⁴

At one time “philosophy” referred to study of every kind of knowledge, including science and theology⁵. We no longer treat philosophy in this way, and philosophy is reserved for only certain topics of conversation.

Philosophy has been removed from science and theology. When you take a philosophy class, you don’t learn much about science or theology.⁶ Science is reserved for studies of the material world and empirical evidence, and theology has been reserved for studies of the supernatural that greatly lack evidence.

You can take a philosophy class to learn about logic (argument structure), ethics (morality), epistemology (knowledge), and metaphysics⁷ (reality).

Logic and mathematics are probably the most reliable forms of knowledge. If you do a math problem wrong, we can usually find out why it was wrong pretty easily. If you have a false theory about mathematics, we will eventually be able to find out that it is false.

Science is usually considered to be very reliable as well. We can’t always be sure when a scientific theory is right or not, but we know if it works well or not. Either a scientific theory is able to make risky predictions, or the predictions fail. Either we can use scientific theories to make technological achievements or we cannot.

It is much less obvious when a philosophical theory is inaccurate, but that does not mean that it’s impossible to find fault in such theories. Philosophy makes use of personal experience. Either a philosophical theory can usually work with your personal experience or not. We have a good reason to be

⁴ This section might be controversial. This section attempts to explain how we treat philosophy and why, but there is no official document that says any of this.

⁵ Theology is the speculative study of the supernatural. “Theos” actually refers to a personal God, so “theology” usually refers to religious speculations from theistic religions.

⁶ There will still be some philosophy involved with science and theology. How do we know when someone is mentally ill? The criteria we decide upon for mental illness has to be philosophically determined. There is no fact about a person that says, “I am mentally ill.”

⁷ It is not always clear if science gives metaphysical explanations or not. Philosophers get to talk about parts of reality that aren’t explained by science, such as the nature of the mind.

suspicious of a philosophical theory that conflicts with much of your personal experience.⁸

Philosophy classes will avoid “supernatural” objects as much as possible. When I say, “supernatural” I envision something that we cannot experience, and have little evidence for. It is almost impossible to find fault with a description of the supernatural. One person says God is omniscient (all-knowing), but another says that She is not. It is very difficult to know who is right about these questions.

⁸ Sometimes philosophy uses even less evidence, such as our intuitions. If a theory seems very wrong and people have a hard time believing it, then it would be found to be unintuitive. Intuition is usually not taken as seriously as other kinds of evidence.

Chapter 5: Sophists and Philosophers

Philosophy is a Greek word that means “love of wisdom”. It is derived from the word *philos*, the love of friends, and *sophia*, wisdom. Professor Don Ciraulo suggested that a better translation might be, “love of wisdom with friends.”

The word “philosophy” was originally used by Socrates who called himself a *philosopher* to distinguish himself from the sophists (wise men).⁹ Socrates did not say he was wise. Instead, he said he loved wisdom. The sophists were self-proclaimed wise men who taught people how to argue well, and the sophists often used questionable argumentative methods to trick people into agreeing with them. The sophists were much like politicians and lawyers today. They would often attempt to win arguments at any cost. The philosopher wishes to be honest, but the sophist often wishes to deceive.¹⁰

Many people like to believe they are right, but the philosopher does not. The philosopher wishes to know the truth rather than believe what is false. The philosopher likes to learn from others and takes an interest in how people criticize arguments. If an argument that concludes that “war is necessary” is successfully criticized by a good argument, the philosopher would no longer be sure if “war is necessary” or not.

Early philosophers were not sympathetic to sophistry and or unexamined opinions. People who wanted to prove that their beliefs were true were called “lovers of opinion,” or “*philodoxers*”¹¹.

Much of ancient philosophy was concerned with how to live life well. The emphasis current philosophy gives to arguments could be considered to be excessive. I agree with this position, but arguments are essential for some people to learn how to live life well. I hope that you will find out how to make use of arguments to think for yourself and improve your life.

⁹ Philosopher means “lover of wisdom.”

¹⁰ Some sophists seemed like pretty nice people, but they apparently did not live up to the philosophical vision that Socrates had.

¹¹ *Doxia* means “opinion” in ancient Greek.

Chapter 6: Virtues of Philosophy

Practicing good philosophy requires us to learn the virtues of (1) appropriate skepticism and (2) appropriate open-mindedness. These virtues are extremely related, and could be said to be part of the “philosophical spirit.” They may be the most important virtues in the world, but they have no official names.

Appropriate Skepticism

Skepticism is the tendency to disbelieve, or doubt. A skeptical person will not easily be convinced to believe something. A person who is completely unskeptical would be gullible and would believe everything they hear. A person who is completely skeptical would disbelieve absolutely everything. Appropriate skepticism requires a balance between these two extremes. We should not only be skeptical of the beliefs of others, but also of our own beliefs.

In order for us to take criticism seriously, we must have appropriate skepticism. This will allow us to doubt ourselves and consider the possibility that the criticism could be given for a good reason. I have already given an argument that tells us why it is a good idea to take criticism seriously in section 1.1.

Without fairly appropriate skepticism, we may become unwilling to practice philosophy. If we don't think any beliefs could be true, then there may be no point to practice philosophy. The belief, “philosophy matters” would be rejected. The opposite can also happen. If we believe everything we hear, then philosophy would be completely unnecessary because it would be attempting to give someone evidence for a belief when none is required.

Appropriate Open-Mindedness

Open-Mindedness is the tendency to believe, or the tendency to take ideas seriously. An open-minded person will be willing to consider what other people have to say. A person who is completely open-minded would be

gullible, but a person who is completely closed-minded would become dogmatic or completely skeptical.

Open-mindedness is also important in order for us to take criticism seriously. Without an open mind, we will not be able to take any criticisms as having a serious possibility of being correct. Instead, we would think that we already know the truth. People who already know the truth don't have any reason to listen to anyone else.

It is not possible for anyone to practice philosophy who is extremely open-minded or closed-minded. People who are gullible don't need good arguments in order to believe what they hear, and people who are closed-minded don't have any reason to listen to other people because they already know not to trust anyone's opinion.

Open-mindedness is related to skepticism in at least three ways. One, a person who is open-minded about the fact that *beliefs could be false* would also be skeptical of beliefs in general. Two, people who completely lack skepticism will be too open-minded because they will believe everything they hear. Three, a person who is too closed-minded because they will not believe anything they hear is overly skeptical.

Dogma

People who lack these philosophical virtues tend to be dogmatic. People who are dogmatic are very open-minded to the fact that they know the truth, but they are very closed-minded to the fact that anyone who disagrees with them might know the truth. Dogmatic people have no use for philosophy because they think they already know the truth. Such people are not necessarily terrible human beings. Sometimes they luck out and seem to "know the truth" pretty well.

Fanaticism

The greatest danger of lacking the philosophical virtues is becoming fanatical. People who are dogmatic and are willing to harm others for their

beliefs are fanatical. People who are fanatical think they can justify oppressing others, or even killing others for a “greater good.” Sometimes even philosophers will agree that harming others can be a good idea, but only in the most extreme of circumstances.

Chapter 7: Is Philosophy Oppressive?

A common concern about philosophy is that philosophy might be oppressive. We tend to be highly repelled by authority figures because of our history dealing with tyrants and slavery. People might fear that philosophy gives some people too much authority to oppress others. Philosophers want to tell you what to believe, which could be oppressive. The fact of the matter is that philosophy is no more oppressive than medical science. Some people find medical science to be oppressive, but that is only because it is sometimes abused. We can see that philosophy is not meant to be oppressive when we know the difference between what is authoritarian and what is authoritative.

The word “authoritarian” refers to power or rule. Those who have power can oppress others by using that power. A king could be an authoritarian ruler. A king can abuse his power by telling people what they must believe. No justification is required for the beliefs that kings demand. We have good reason to worry about authoritarian power, because such rulers require little justification for their actions.

The word “authoritative” refers to expertise. Those who have the most experience in a field are authoritative. Philosophers spend their time and energy to figure out how to help us live better lives. They offer justified advice that we usually don’t take, and we are certainly not forced to take it. This is analogous to medical professionals. It is usually a great idea to take medical advice from doctors because of their expertise. The same goes for philosophers. Philosophers strive at not being oppressive because it requires us to be *honest*. If philosophers were oppressive, then they could freely try to deceive us and make use of the same argumentative tricks that the sophists made use of.

People are very defensive about their “right to their own opinion.” Some people think, “I’m an American and I can believe whatever I want, and you can’t tell me anything different!” This is certainly true, and philosophers do not argue against it. A person who thinks this could also refuse medical advice from a doctor, but they would usually be foolish to do so. The right to “believe whatever you want” can be abused and turn into “the right to be

stupid.” I strongly support the right to be stupid as well, but it doesn’t sound as exciting when put in those words.

Chapter 8: Dialectic

Dialectic is sometimes referred to as a Socratic method of having a philosophical discussion. One person tries to justify a position and the other continually attempts to challenge the justification that is introduced. This is analogous to a bigger kind of dialectic—the philosophical progress throughout history.

Philosophy is not just a matter of opinion. Philosophy requires justifications. Once we read what philosophers have to say, we can use their ideas for ourselves and develop them even further. Philosophy not only uses justification, but it requires us to have an understanding of a topic's history in order to assure that our justification is considerate of objections and criticism.

Dialectic Example 1: Gravity

This kind of progress has also been found in science. At one time, the fact that objects fall was explained by Aristotelian teleological physics.¹² Aristotle said that objects fall because they had a goal of reaching the center of the universe. Eventually, we decided that objects that fall should be explained in terms of Newtonian physics, which said that objects fall from gravity (or the gravitational pull of mass). Newtonian physics was also found to be inadequate, and now we explain why objects fall in terms of Einstein's theory of relativity. Objects are now said to fall because of warped space. (Don't ask me how that works.)

Has science made progress? Yes. Do you think science has already figured out everything about gravity? Probably not. This kind of intellectual progress is certainly not a matter of opinion. Either a theory works best or it doesn't. Once we find out that a theory fails to explain certain anomalies, we reject it and adopt a new theory that *makes some use of all the theories of the past*, but attempts to describe the universe in even better terms.

We could model gravitational scientific progress with the following chart:

¹² "Teleology" refers to a view that relates to goals. Physicists do not currently want to explain why anything happens in terms of goals.

A₃ not-A₃
A₂ not-A₂
A₁ not-A₁

A₁: Aristotelian Physics
A₂: Newtonian Physics
A₃: Einstein's Theory of Relativity

At any given time there is at least one theory, which are the A₁, A₂, and A₃ symbols; and there is a set of criticisms, challenges, and objections to that theory, which is the not-A₁, not-A₂, and not-A₃.

I want to suggest that the progress in science can be shown in the upward direction seen on the chart. The older views are seen near the bottom because newer views build on top of the older views and take those views into consideration.

A₁ is our starting point, and stands for Aristotelian physics. A₁ was found to be flawed (not-A₁) and a new theory is suggested, A₂ (Newtonian physics), which makes much use of Aristotelian philosophy.¹³ Then A₂ was found to inadequately deal with many anomalies (not-A₂) and it was replaced by A₃ (Einstein's Theory of Relativity), which also makes use of a great deal of Newtonian physics.

We can now speculate that we will probably replace scientific theories that explain gravity many more times in the future. Einstein's theory already has anomalies that it might not be able to explain (not-A₃).¹⁴

¹³ Not only did Aristotle observe that objects fall, but he had a suggestion similar to inertia, Newton's first law of motion.

¹⁴ Right now we use questionable theories of dark matter and dark energy to explain many astronomical anomalies.

Dialectic

<p>We start with an argument or theory, such as Aristotle's teleology.</p> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">A_1</p>	<p>Then we are introduced with counter-evidence that disproves the argument or theory ($\text{not-}A_1$).</p> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">$A_1 \text{ not-}A_1$</p>	<p>Then a better argument or theory is developed (A_2).</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;"> A_2 \wedge $A_1 \text{ not-}A_1$ </div>
<p>Then that argument or theory is disproven.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;"> $A_2 \text{ not-}A_2$ \wedge $A_1 \text{ not-}A_1$ </div>	<p>Then an even better argument or theory is introduced.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;"> A_3 \wedge $A_2 \text{ not-}A_2$ \wedge $A_1 \text{ not-}A_1$ </div>	<p>Then that argument or theory is disproven, etc.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;"> $A_3 \text{ not-}A_3$ \wedge $A_2 \text{ not-}A_2$ \wedge $A_1 \text{ not-}A_1$ </div>

Dialectic Example 2: Freedom

How does dialectic relate to current philosophical issues? I will introduce a simple example where we can easily understand the ideas in question. Imagine two people having a discussion, Charlie and Xena. Charlie finds that freedom is important, so we should not oppress people with unjustified laws. Xena will find weaknesses in Charlie's speculations and offer criticisms.

Charlie: We are not free unless we can do whatever we want. Freedom is extremely important, so we should not have laws oppress people by taking away their freedom.

Xena: So we should allow people to murder each other? Some people want to murder others, and that would be required for freedom. We need laws to protect people.

Charlie: Okay. We are not free unless we can do whatever we want *that doesn't hurt anyone*. We can still have laws make it illegal to hurt people.

Xena: If that is true, then we can't let people smoke cigarettes because it hurts people. We know that this would lead to a

lot of problems. We tried making alcohol illegal during prohibition and that turned out to be a bad idea.

Charlie: Right. Then we are not free unless we can do whatever we want that doesn't hurt anyone *other than ourselves*. We can still have laws that make it illegal to hurt others.

Xena: If that is true then we would have to legalize suicide. Perhaps that will not bother you but consider this. If you can't hurt anyone else, then people wouldn't be allowed to drive cars because car pollution and car accidents hurt people. Making cars illegal would lead to a lot of problems.

Charlie: I am perfectly happy legalizing suicide, but I can't accept that we would have to make cars illegal. I propose that we are not free unless we can do whatever we want that doesn't *intentionally* hurt others. When we drive cars, we don't hurt anyone on purpose. The people who get hurt are only hurt accidentally. We can still make it illegal to hurt people on purpose.

Xena: I don't see why it matters so much whether or not we hurt people on purpose or accidentally *once we know that we are hurting people*. Anyone who chooses to use cars is endangering the lives of others. Even if we don't drive cars to intentionally hurt others, we know people do get hurt. How many people must die before a course of action will be considered inappropriate? A million? We must avoid harming others as much as possible, even when people do it unintentionally.

Charlie: I will have to think more about this objection.

In order to map-out the dialectical progress of this conversation, we will say that Charlie is "A," and Xena is "not-A."

	A ₄	not-A ₄
	A ₃	not-A ₃
	A ₂	not-A ₂
A ₁		not-A ₁

We can show what position each of the symbols stand for:

- A₁: We are not free unless we can do whatever we want. We should not have laws because they oppress people.
- not-A₁: This idea of freedom would require us to legalize murder, which should never happen.
- A₂: We are not free unless we can do whatever we want *that doesn't hurt anyone*. We can still make it illegal to hurt people.
- not-A₂: This idea of freedom would justify outlawing cigarettes, but that would cause a lot of problems.
- A₃: We are not free unless we can do whatever we want that doesn't hurt anyone *other than ourselves*. We can make it illegal for people to hurt others.
- not-A₃: This conception of freedom would justify making cars illegal, but cars are important.
- A₄: I propose that we are not free unless we can do whatever we want that doesn't *intentionally* hurt others. We can still make it illegal to hurt others intentionally.
- not-A₄: One, whenever we drive cars we intentionally endanger people's lives because we know cars can hurt people. Two, unintentionally hurting others should be avoided as much as possible.

There are two important things to notice with dialectic. (1) People don't have to completely give up their position when faced with a criticism. Instead, they can add to their position. Charlie only changed one part of his point of view at a time. At one point he agrees that we should not be allowed to hurt anyone. At another point he modified his position to say that we should not be allowed to hurt anyone *except ourselves*. (2) Philosophical progress is greatly indebted to criticism. Charlie would not have noticed that his view of freedom was flawed until Xena challenged it.

We should be able to see that philosophy is just not a matter of opinion. Not only does philosophy require justifications, but it also requires us to understand our justifications in terms of a historical context. We must take into consideration arguments and objections given throughout history in order to give the best solution to a philosophical problem.

Chapter 9: The Search for Truth

Some people at this point might have assumed that philosophy is the quest for truth. This might be true, but philosophy requires nuance and we need to realize that philosophy might not always need to give us “the truth” to be important in our lives. Even if philosophy doesn't give us “the truth,” it still gives us better and more justified beliefs, which are often more accurate than other beliefs that aren't based on philosophical thought.

What is “truth?” Aristotle thought that *statements* are true when they correspond to reality. The statement “the cat is on the mat” is true if there is a real cat on a real mat. Aristotle's understanding of truth might seem to work well in science. Scientists want to describe reality as it exists and they try to model reality. A model that corresponds to reality well could be said to be “true.” We think scientific theories can sometimes describe reality almost exactly as it actually exists, which helps us know how to make functional computers, safe cars, and effective medicine.

We usually use the word “true” to refer to something quite modest and there could be degrees of truth. Accurate beliefs correspond to reality well and inaccurate beliefs don't. The belief that most people with eyes can see things seems accurate enough to be called “true.” However, the idea of “absolute truth” seems to require more than generalizations. Instead, something like theories that can model reality with absolute precision seems required. Philosophers would be thrilled to attain absolute truth, infallible certainty, and a complete understanding of reality because it would help them become more rational, ethical, and so on. However, this is probably too much to ask for and philosophy doesn't guarantee that we will ever attain absolute truth, infallible certainty, or a complete understanding of reality. Instead, philosophy merely *helps* us be more reasonable and ethical because it helps us attain justified beliefs and justified beliefs are more likely to be accurate than unjustified ones.

Philosophy might be able to help give us many accurate beliefs, but there's no guarantee that philosophy can help us model reality with absolute precision. Of course, the same thing is true of science—it attempts to model reality as well as possible, but it might never model reality with absolute

precision. At the same time I want to say that science and philosophy are still important.

We can't require that philosophy give us absolute truth or provide us with infallible methods of attaining knowledge just like we can't require that of science. Even if science fails to provide us with infallible certainty or absolute truth, it is still accurate enough to make several successful predictions necessary to provide us with functional computers, safe cars, and effective medicine. Even if philosophy fails to provide us with infallible certainty or absolute truth, it is still effective enough to help us attain justified beliefs, avoid dogmatism, avoid fanaticism, and live better lives. It helps us become more rational, ethical, appropriately open-minded, and appropriately skeptical.

Chapter 10: Philosophical Skepticism

There are two kinds of skepticism that I am concerned with: (1) The position that we cannot know the truth from philosophy, and (2) The position that philosophy doesn't accomplish anything. The second kind of skepticism is usually motivated from the first. If we don't find the truth from philosophy, then philosophy is a waste of time!

The first of these kinds of skepticism is not a problem. I have already explained why we don't need to know the truth to find great value in living a philosophical life. To expect to get the truth is more than we need. Science might have never given us the truth, but we have found it very useful nonetheless. It has given us the power to create televisions, cell phones, and space shuttles. The same goes for philosophy. Perhaps philosophy does not give us the truth, but it gives us the tools of living a better life—philosophers have developed a kind of technology for getting more out of life.

It may be that the reason that science and philosophy do not need to arrive at the truth is that we are still feeling out the universe and we are only discovering a small part of it at a time. It might be that at least some of our theories are accurate. Some theories might resemble the truth more than others without giving us the absolute truth.

Once we resolve the first kind of skepticism, it is hard to see why anyone would endorse the second kind of skepticism. Why would anyone think philosophy is a waste of time? My answer is that they are ignorant of philosophy and have never seen how philosophy makes a great use of common sense. It is not people “just making stuff up” in a haphazard way. Philosophy requires justifications. It is our ignorance of philosophy that makes it dangerous to argue with bosses, that makes us overly sensitive to criticism, and that makes us worried that justifying our opinion to others will be “too oppressive and intolerant.”

Philosophical skepticism is widespread in our society. You probably have a lot of experience with people who refuse to use philosophy. You may have tried to explain to someone your point of view, and then they replied, “That's your opinion!” This was, of course, meant to shut you up.

There are many common dismissive responses people give to stop philosophy, such as...

1. It is a matter of opinion.
2. That's a value judgment.
3. Who's to say?
4. Let's agree to disagree.
5. Truth is relative.

These dismissive responses should not be tolerated in a philosophical environment. They are clichés with little or no meaning just to end the conversation. It may be that in real life it is often important to try to stop philosophical conversation because so many people can't deal with the possibility that their beliefs may be wrong, or perhaps some people just feel the need for you to think they are smarter than they really are. I am not thrilled with this reality, but it is something that can be important to consider on occasion.

I will take a look at each of these clichés to show what they really mean.

It is a matter of opinion or "that's your opinion!" This is meant to suggest that there is no possible evidence or justification for the opinion. Instead of saying *why* a justification for an opinion fails, the person merely denies the possibility that it could succeed. In philosophy, opinions are uninteresting. Only justifications are interesting.

That's a value judgment. This is supposed to suggest that value judgments don't mean anything. Is that so? If it is, then no one could be justified to say, "It is wrong to torture babies for fun." The fact that an opinion is a value judgment doesn't invalidate it. It is true that many people disagree about certain value judgments, such as whether or not abortion should be legal, but that doesn't mean that value judgments shouldn't be given for such controversial topics.

Who's to say? This question is meant to imply that no one is to say. No one can know the truth about whatever you are arguing about. The person who asks, "Who's to say?" may also be tempted to ask, "What makes you so special? You think you can know anything? You think you are better than I

am?” These questions are meant to say that you are arrogant or pompous for making ambitious arguments. These questions are irrelevant to philosophy because *we are to say*. That’s who’s to say. Telling someone that they are arrogant to attempt to use philosophy is insulting, but that doesn’t invalidate a person’s philosophical arguments.

Let’s agree to disagree. This position is much more polite than the others, but it does not attempt to resolve the philosophical problem at hand. If people always “agreed to disagree,” then science would have never been thought of and we wouldn’t be enjoying our favorite TV shows.¹⁵

Truth is Relative. This is sometimes meant to mean the same thing as “it is a matter of opinion,” but it could also mean, “The truth depends on the person.” Philosophers have rarely been very happy with this possibility. How could truth depend on a person? It is either true or it isn’t. I will explain the problem of relativism in detail in the next section.

Philosophical Relativism

Philosophical relativism as I will present it is the view that truth is relative. This does not merely mean what is true for one person is not true for another. It also means the truth of reality is different for one person than another. A dismissive response that refers to philosophical relativism is, “That’s your reality!” The relativist believes that each person has a separate reality. It is often the case that philosophical relativism is meant to mean, “What is true for you is whatever you believe to be true.”¹⁶ If philosophical relativism is true, then philosophy would be a waste of time. There would be no expert opinions and everyone’s opinion would be equal.

If whatever you believe is true is true for you, then people who believe that abortion is immoral are right; but someone who believes that abortion is good is also right. If you are a Christian, then your religious beliefs are *true in your reality*; but if you are an atheist, then the religious beliefs of Christians will be *false in your reality*.

¹⁵ Television could not have been invented without science, and science is part of our philosophical history.

¹⁶ Someone might decide that something determines what is true other than beliefs, but what could that be? Reality? Reality cannot determine what is true for the relativist because each person has a separate reality.

There are some things that might be relative. If something is a “matter of taste,” it can be seen as relative.¹⁷ Chocolate tastes good to one person, but it might not to another. Is everything relative, like tastes? No. You can only make televisions if you use science. That fact is not going to be *true in someone’s reality*.

Many people accept philosophical relativism because it is “politically correct.”¹⁸ To say that truth is relative means that “everyone is right!” People can believe whatever they want. This point of view is intended to encourage tolerance. We might like to think everyone can follow a different religion, and it might be nice to think that every religion can be right.

Why Philosophical Relativism Is Wrong

Tolerance and political correctness will not be good reasons to endorse philosophical relativism because not everyone is tolerant. Anyone who isn’t tolerant or “believes that someone is wrong” will be right. The fact that “tolerance is good” is only true in some people’s realities. That means that because Hitler didn’t approve of tolerance, tolerance was bad in his reality.

We not only lack reasons to agree to philosophical relativism, but philosophical relativism cannot make logical sense. Consider the following argument against philosophical relativism.

Argument Against Philosophical Relativism

1. If relativism is right, then all truths can be different for each person.
2. So, the fact that “all truths are different for each person” can be false for some people.
3. Therefore, philosophical relativism cannot be true.

This argument makes it clear that relativism attempts to give us a truth, but if all truths are relative, then that truth is also relative. Anyone who denies the truth to relativism will be right. How can relativism be right if it is false in so many realities?

¹⁷ I still disagree that tastes give us relative truths. Chocolate really is good because it tastes good for some people. Something doesn’t have to be good for everyone to be good.

¹⁸ Something is politically correct if it is something that can be said or done without making anyone upset. This is often related to the media, such as making sure that kids’ television shows have various ethnic groups to assure that “no one is left out.”

There are many negative consequences to accepting philosophical relativism as well. Philosophy would be a waste of time. Relativists already know what is true because what is true in their reality is whatever they believe. Why should such a person practice philosophy? They already know all the truths concerning their own reality. All the arguments that I presented would only be true for some people, so we might as well trick people into accepting our arguments and stop listening to criticisms.

There will be many horrific positions if we accept relativism. Not only could we say that “we can create televisions without science”, but we could also agree that the statement “torturing babies for fun is good” is true in some people’s realities. We would also have to say that “murder is good,” “slavery is good,” and “racism is good” would all be true for some people’s realities.