THINKING PHILOSOPHICALLY

An Introduction to the Great Debates

David Roochnik

WILEY Blackwell

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John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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***Compete**: From the Latin com, "together," and petere, "strive for, seek."*

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Prologue

This book is largely about other books. Its list will include works by, among others, Plato, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Augustine. One of its purposes is to help you, the reader, learn a bit about what is usually called "the history of philosophy." This phrase, however, is potenially misleading, for it suggests that Plato and company are now in the dustbin and that their books should be studied only because once they were influential. On this view, you should read them in order to become a well educated person who understands something about how the present emerged from the past. Of course, this is true. It is impossible to understand Western culture without having some background in the history of philosophy. But education in this sense is not the primary objective of this book. Instead, my task is convince you that these thinkers are as alive today as they were back then. For even in the age of the super-smartphone they have something to say. Their works articulate philosophical worldviews, rigorously connected trains of thought, that forge answers to the same questions that press us hard today. Even in the twenty-first century, a time convinced of its unique achievement, it is possible to recognize in a Rousseau or Augustine a kindred spirit.

This book has not been written for scholars. My assumption is that when you get to Chapter 1 you may well be picking up Plato's *The Apology of Socrates* for the first time. But pick it up and read it thoroughly you should, at least if you wish to participate fully in the project on which we will soon embark. If you don't, then you won't be able to judge whether what I'm saying holds water or not.

My chapters will discuss short selections from several great works of philosophy. The authors we will read, however, have each produced a vast corpus, and so the picture I present of them will be severely truncated. Chapter 2, for example, will discuss only a few passages from Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. But he also wrote the *Social Contract*. At first blush, these two books seem to express very different views.

It is the task of the Rousseau scholar to explain how they fit together, but not mine. Instead, I will concentrate only on a small chunk of the *Discourse* and extract from it Rousseau's remarkable analysis of what it means to be a social being. The result will surely be an oversimplification (albeit, I hope, a responsible one). You are, of course, encouraged to read more of his work, and of the other philosophers we will study, and thereby fill out the picture on your own.

The chapters to follow will not be arranged chronologically. Instead, they will be organized around a series of questions that have generated intense debate over the centuries. Chapter 2, for example, will feature Rousseau going head to head against Aristotle, even though they lived two thousand years apart. I have two reasons for structuring the book in this manner. First, to show that the ideas it will put into play are not specific to the particular moment of history in which they were written. Instead, they are basic intellectual options and thus are living possibilities even today. To emphasize this, I will consistently use the present tense when speaking about writers who lived long ago. Second, my goal is to generate *philosophical competition* between divergent views. I will explain why, and what this means, in Chapter 1. Suffice it to say here that the purpose of this book is to invite readers to enter the fray. As the etymology of "competition" suggests, I hope that "together" (*com*) we will "seek" (*petere*) answers to questions that have inspired thinkers of the past and continue to inspire today.

With the exception of the first, each chapter in this book will pit two thinkers who disagree on a specific topic against one another. The first section of these chapters will state what the question at issue is, and suggest why it matters. The next two sections will each concentrate on a single book written by one of the two philosophers being discussed. The fourth and final section will offer some recommendations on how you might begin the process of resolving the dispute. It will sketch the kinds of conceptual steps that need to be taken in order to think through the issue in a serious way. It will present positive and negative aspects of both views in the hope that this will help you determine, even if just provisionally, where *you* might stand in the debate. This is important. You have a stake in the outcome of these debates, and only by realizing this, only by having some skin in the game, will you go full steam ahead in philosophical pursuit.

A final few words on mechanics. This book will contain a great deal of quoted material. Some of it will be dense and difficult. In order to assist you in identifying key ideas, I will highlight words, phrases, and sentences that are both clear and reflective of the author's intentions. Think of my quotations as ***pre-underlined*** texts.

All the books we will read were written by men. When I discuss them I will typically use the male pronoun or the word "man." I will do this only in order to reflect the authors' sensibility, for they themselves largely conceived of their enterprise in masculine terms. By contrast, when I am speaking in my own voice – in particular, when I'm giving examples (and there will be many) – I will do what comes most naturally to me: use male and female pronouns. In thinking about philosophy, and imagining concrete cases and scenarios to illustrate the abstract ideas I struggle to explain, it never occurs to me that I am speaking exclusively about or to men.

All quotations will be followed (in parentheses) by the page numbers of the works I have cited. The relevant bibliographic information on them is contained in the "Works Cited" section found at the end of the book. It will also refer you to alternative translations, including ones available online. Some brief notes are included, the main purpose of which is to provide suggestions for further reading, as well as some ancillary comments that might be helpful in grappling with the material. This book is an introduction – better yet, it is an invitation – and the notes are meant to provide a resource for your future studies.

Good luck.

1

An Introduction to Philosophy

What Makes Philosophers Tick?

Philosophy is a peculiar enterprise, a strange form of conversation that began in Ancient Greece some 2500 years ago and continues today. The purpose of this book is to invite you to join in. But what is it you might be getting into?

On the one hand, philosophers are anything but unique. Like scientists, scholars, and students of every sort they are energized by an experience, or even a feeling: that of being bowled over – by curiosity, interest, amazement, fascination, perplexity, or wonder. This in turn sparks them to ask questions, usually ones that begin with "why." Philosophers want answers to their questions; that is, they want to explain why things are the way they are. In short, like other intellectuals they are driven by the desire to know.

Astronomers are amazed by the planets, and want to know why they move as they do. Biologists are fascinated by the intricate mechanisms of living organisms and they try to figure out why they work as well as they do. Mathematicians are captivated by the complexity of formal relations, which inspires them to summon ever more intensely their capacity for analytical reasoning. Historians spend their days in archives because they wonder about the when, where, and why of the past. They too want to know.

Philosophers are also seized by wonder and strive to answer questions that they experience as urgent. But what they (we) wonder about is different from what triggers the astronomer, biologist, mathematician, or historian. Natural scientists are amazed by things like bacteria, plants, animals, rocks, or stars. They are interested in the world outside of themselves and

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so they turn to the microscope or telescope to see it better. Philosophers, by contrast, are amazed at, and so they scope, themselves. Mathematicians are dedicated to solving problems in algebra or geometry. For philosophers the very life they are leading is the problem. Historians study the past. Philosophers wonder why they have a past in the first place and what role, if any, it should play in their lives.

A line from Plato's dialogue the *Phaedrus* makes this point sharply. Socrates – who is the inspiration for this book – is walking in the countryside with a companion who asks him whether he believes the stories about Boreas, the god to whom the Greeks assigned responsibility for the cold north wind. His companion's question implies that a scientific account, a little lecture in meteorology, would be far better than a silly old myth. Socrates responds by saying that while he admires the work of the scientists who debunk such stories, he himself has no time for such pursuits. He explains why:

> The reason, my friend, is this. I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, ***to know myself***; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into extraneous matters before I have understood that. (*Phaedrus* 230a)[1]

The philosopher, at least according to Socrates, seeks ***self-knowledge*** rather than knowledge of the external world or of the mathematical structures that underlie it. But be careful. This does not mean that Socrates seeks to understand his uniquely personal self. He has no interest in probing the details of his childhood or learning how the traumatic events of his past made him into the person he became. Instead, his question is far more broad: What does it mean to be who I am; that is, a human being?

Another line, this one from the *Phaedo*, elaborates. Again, Socrates is contrasting himself with the natural scientists of his day. While he professes to admire their work, he describes himself as singularly unsuited for that kind of research. As he puts it, "I didn't have the nature" to study nature (96c). This statement implies that there are two senses of "nature." One is external: the world of wind, water, and stars. The second, to which Socrates devotes himself, is human nature, which somehow is different.

When I was in biology class as a kid in high school, I was struck by how eagerly other students were peering into their microscopes. They were amazed at all the little creatures that were swimming around in the drop of pond water that was on the slide. Me? I was more interested in why they were so interested … and why I was not.

The word "philosophy" is derived from two Greek words: *philia* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom). But to describe philosophy simply as "the love of

wisdom" is far too vague. After all, the biologist is also impelled by a love of wisdom – about living organisms – and the historian seeks wisdom about the past. What, then, distinguishes philosophers? Again: the wisdom for which they (we) strive concerns the nature and meaning of human life.

The biologist might object: "I too want to understand human life. After all, we are animals with hearts and lungs and, most interesting of all, with genes, those molecular stretches of DNA and RNA that contain the information responsible for building and maintaining our cells. Like all other organisms the human animal is subject to the laws of natural selection and so in studying fruit flies in my laboratory I'm actually studying myself."

Where Socrates sees difference – there is human nature and then there are insects, plants, and cells – the biologist envisions an undivided realm of living organisms. Richard Dawkins, the renowned evangelist for Darwin's theory of natural selection, makes this point forcefully:

> An octopus is nothing like a mouse, and both are quite different from an oak tree. Yet in their fundamental chemistry they are rather uniform, and in particular the replicators that they bear, the genes, are basically the same kind of molecule in all of ***us*** – from bacteria to elephants. (*The Selfish Gene*, p. 21)

Note the word I have highlighted. For Dawkins "us" refers not only to himself, you and me, but also to the octopus and oak tree. "We" are all one.

Or consider what he says about natural selection: it is "the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence … of ***all*** life" (*The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 5). Even more extravagantly, he says this:

> Darwinism encompasses all of life – human, animal, plant, bacterial … extraterrestrial. It provides the only satisfying explanation for why we all exist, ***why we are the way that we are***. It is the bedrock on which rest all the disciplines known as the humanities. (*The Blind Watchmaker*, p. x)

Dawkins claims that the entire living world, including us (you and me), is of a single piece and that only Darwinism offers a satisfying explanation of "why we all exist." What is striking about this assertion is that it cannot itself be proven by the biological science he admires so greatly. For it is a totalizing claim that cannot possibly be verified by empirical evidence. No biologist, however assiduous, could actually study all of life. So, just as much as it is supported by his research, Dawkins's claim is also what initiates and shapes it. It tells him who he is as a thinker and as such is as much a presupposition as it is a conclusion.

This is not a criticism. Every science, like every proof, method, or research program, requires just such presuppositions. After all, you can't begin a search until you know what you're looking for, or an inquiry until you have a sense of what sort of answers you hope to find. But Dawkins's claim is so extravagant that we should at least raise the question: if he cannot prove that all living beings are essentially the same, that Darwinian natural selection is not just the bedrock of the humanities but the only satisfying explanation of why we all exist, then why should we believe him?

To paraphrase Dawkins, I too want to understand why I am the way I am. Part of who I am these days includes the fact that I ride a bicycle around the city of Boston. Why? Here are some scattershot answers.

I enjoy the convenience of using a bike rather than a car in a crowded city. It's easier and more efficient than struggling in traffic and trying to park. It gets me from door to door.

I enjoy the physical exertion a bicycle demands, which in a small city like Boston is typically not much. I'm probably healthier as a result of my many years on the bike.

When I'm on my bike, especially at night when I'm on the esplanade flanking the Charles River, I feel a bit like a kid doing something slightly dangerous and out of bounds. This is one of my favorite times to ride.

Because of my years of cycling around Boston I now have intimate knowledge of several neighborhoods in my city. I understand the traffic patterns at various intersections, which streets are crowded, which have bike lanes or give me a good view of the harbor. I know what kind of people to expect on the sidewalks, where the parks are, and the best routes to good restaurants that have outdoor seating and serve cold beer. I know what the town feels like in a visceral way.

When I'm in a car I typically have the windows closed and either the heat or the air-conditioning on, and I listen to the radio. I'm sealed off from the streets, ensconced in my own little world, and there's little chance of surprise. This is often quite pleasant and I still enjoy driving a great deal, especially on highways. But I prefer the bike in the city where chance interactions with cars, pedestrians, buildings, and other cyclists are the norm. On the bike I am plunged directly into the flow of public life. At the same time, I'm also more independent. I don't have to wait for a train or bus, don't have to worry about traffic. I can go door to door and do so when I want. Yes, sometimes it takes longer and it demands work from me. But that's a small price to pay.

My wife and I no longer own a car, although we do belong to a car-sharing service, which allows us to rent one for short periods. We're both delighted to be saving as much money as we are by not having a car.

According to one estimate, the average cost of maintaining a car in 2012 was nearly $8000 per year. (See http://www.autoblog.com/2012/05/04/average-cost-of-car-ownership-rises-to-8-946-per-year/.)

Because I can no longer simply jump into the car and go to the supermarket to buy a quart of milk, I've become more deliberate about my shopping. I need to plan routes carefully and, because I can carry so little on my bike, shop frequently. Because my transportation requires effort, I am more mindful of where and when I travel.

The best months for biking here in Boston are in the summer and early fall when the weather is warm and farmers' markets are scattered all over town. Since my wife and I have been on our bikes, the geography of our lives has shrunk dramatically. We don't go to the big-box stores on the highway in order to save money. Our shopping is almost exclusively local and we buy directly from the farmers, cheese-makers, and bakers who are selling their goods. We hand them cash instead of a credit card, and talk to them far more than we would to the minimum wage clerks at the supermarket who have no stake in the multinational corporation that has employed them. We also talk to the other customers, with whom we often feel something of a bond.

There's always some risk in riding a bike on a busy city street. I've narrowly missed serious accidents and many cyclists tell stories of being "doored" or otherwise hit by a car. But the little jolt of adrenaline that comes with competing against traffic on Commonwealth Avenue is part of the attraction. I'm alert and ready to turn quickly or clutch the brakes hard. Unlike most of my ordinary day, during which I'm preoccupied with my worries and responsibilities, when I'm on the bicycle my focus narrows. I'm more concentrated and attentive. It's both relaxing and energizing at the same time.

Like a car, a bicycle is a machine, a device that changes the direction or augments the magnitude of a force. But the force of a car is generated by burning an energy source external to the driver, while that of a bicycle is generated by the energy provided by the rider. On the bike I am responsible for making myself move and so it's more like an extension of my body than is a car – which is another reason why I feel more actively alive on the bike.

I'm usually scrupulous about obeying the same rules that apply to the cars. I stop at red lights. By doing so I let the cars around me know that I too belong on the road and so deserve their respect. I am telling them that I am an equal partner in the social contract they've made to obey the rules. As a result, I feel safer when I obey the law.

Because I no longer own a car I'm something of an outlier in my circle of friends. I've been on the margins before and it's a region where I feel at home. On the other hand, there are now so many cyclists on the road that

riding a bike is almost like being part of a movement. In taking to our bicycles we make a statement. In the last 60 years the automobile has decisively shaped the infrastructure, economy, and way of life in American cities and suburbs. By and large this has been a disaster. Instead of celebrating and affirming the importance of vibrant public space, and their own bodies, instead of living small and in the local, most Americans move from one large private place to another in their cars. Being on the bike makes me part of the city in a new and politically healthy way.

Being on a bike forces me to acknowledge my vulnerability; in particular, my incapacity to alter the weather. I enjoy the warm sunshine, but suffer when I get caught in an unexpected storm. The car, by contrast, affords me a predictably comfortable ride. But the bargain I've made seems to me a good one.

By riding a bike rather than driving a car I am responsible for a little less carbon being spewed into the atmosphere. If the predictions are correct, then global warming will cause people around the world a great deal of harm. I am doing my tiny bit to counteract this frightening process. Perhaps we all should.

A biologist like Richard Dawkins can surely explain much about what I have just described. He can teach me a great deal about how my muscles work as they propel the bicycle through space, or how my brain processes the visual stimuli flying past my eyes. He can supply me with an account of how the human organism has evolved such that it now receives positive feedback from physical exercise and motion. He would have something to say about the good feeling I have of being connected to my community, of being public, when I'm on my bike. He might argue that human animals have evolved such that they now have a natural desire to cooperate with one another, and that doing so has increased the survival prospects of the species.

A psychologist perhaps could explain why I relish being an outlier and reverting to an activity that was an important part of my childhood. Maybe I've retained some remnant of my adolescent rebellion. And the social scientists can supply data that would verify my hunch that riding bicycles contributes to the well-being of a city. Researchers in Copenhagen, for example, have calculated that some $30 million a year is saved by the reduction in air pollution, accidents, and wear and tear on the infrastructure that is due to the enormous number of people there who use bicycles instead of cars. (An extensive discussion of this can be found at http://www.forbes.com/sites/justingerdes/ 2012/01/23/copenhagens-green-sheen-its-not-just-about-the-bikes/.)

This statistic, whose accuracy I have no way of verifying, appeals to me. But neither it nor any other scientific account fully addresses the questions sparked by my own reflections on riding a bike.

What does it mean to feel more alive on the bicycle, when I'm powering a machine with my own muscles, than when I'm the passive beneficiary of the effortless motion of a fuel-burning car? Is being alive equivalent to the expression of power? In turn, is this equivalent to being physically active? If so, what would that say about my mind? Might I not be even more alive, more powerful, if I spent more time in my office thinking or working on my computer? Perhaps rather than augmenting my life I'm actually sacrificing precious time by giving so much of it to crude physical exertion instead of intellectual activity.

There are obvious health benefits to riding a bike. But what exactly is health? These days I feel pretty good. But is this fleeting sensation the best way to measure health? Perhaps a better assessment would be to methodically compare the life spans of cyclists to those of automobile drivers. The question would then become, am I tacking years onto my life by riding a bike? We won't know until I'm done, but I can ask this question now: is longer life equivalent to better life? Indeed, is good health something that can be measured quantitatively? Even more generally: is there a significant difference between merely staying alive and having a good life? If so, what is it?

In a similar vein: why deliberately put myself at some risk of injury by riding a bike rather than driving a car? Does the value of bike riding somehow trump the risks associated with it? This question leads to a more general one: is the value of any activity determined only by its future benefits? I'm saving money by not owning a car. Is having the extra cash what makes bike riding valuable? Or are some activities, even dangerous ones, valuable just because they are what they are? Are they good simply in and of themselves?

A related question: if we assess the value of our activities by their consequences and possible benefits, does this imply that our orientation to the future is paramount in our lives? We are animated by our plans, expectations, hopes, and worries. What, then, are we to make of our engagement with the present? Why can't we simply be here now? Perhaps we should try. Or is the attempt to be in the present finally a fool's errand? Perhaps the present is no more than a vanishing moment, a gateway between past and present with no duration of its own. If so, there is no "now" for us to be in at all. Whatever the answer, we are forced to reflect on the fact that we are irrevocably implicated in the flow of time from the future through the present and into the past. And to ask, what is the best and healthiest stance we can adopt to this overwhelming fact of our lives?

Why, since it's possible to protect ourselves from inclement weather inside of a car, might it be preferable for us willingly to put ourselves at