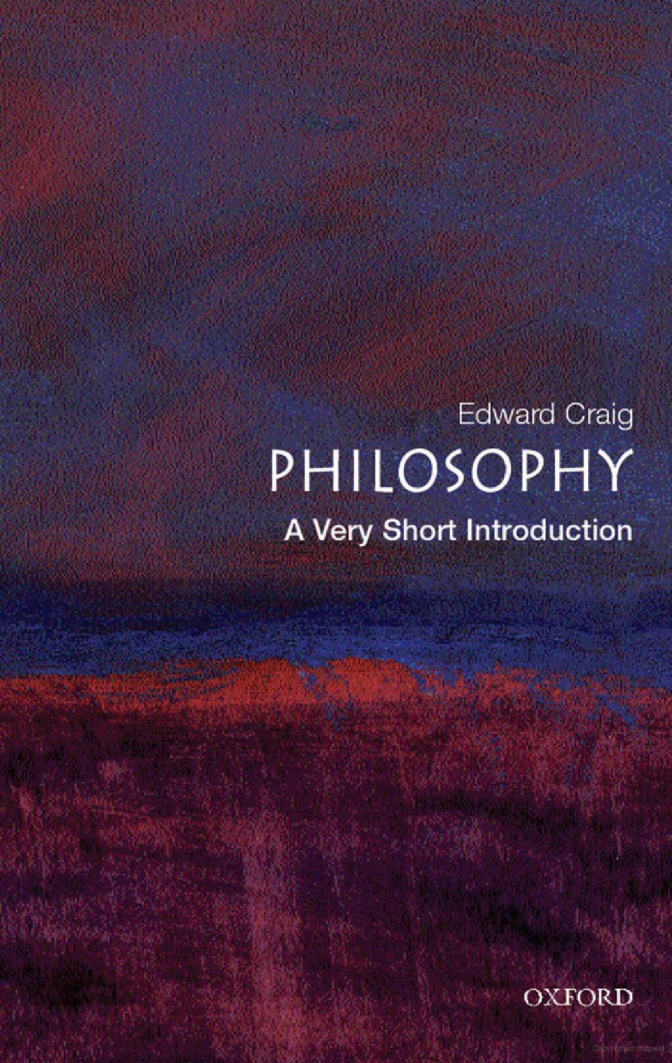
Edward Craig
PHILOSOPHY
A Very Short Introduction
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Chapter 1
Philosophy
A very short introduction

Anyone reading this book is to some extent a philosopher already. Nearly all of us are, because we have some kind of values by which we live our lives (or like to think we do, or feel uncomfortable when we don't). And most of us favour some very general picture of what the world is like. Perhaps we think there's a god who made it all, including us; or, on the contrary, we think it's all a matter of chance and natural selection. Perhaps we believe that people have immortal, non-material parts called souls or spirits; or, quite the opposite, that we are just complicated arrangements of matter that gradually fall to bits after we die. So most of us, even those who don't *think about it* at all, have something like answers to the two basic philosophical questions, namely: what should we do? and, what is there? And there's a third basic question, to which again most of us have some kind of an answer, which kicks in the moment we get self-conscious about either of the first two questions, namely: how do we know, or if we don't know how should we set about finding out – use our eyes, think, consult an oracle, ask a scientist? Philosophy, thought of as a subject that you can study, be ignorant of, get better at, even be an expert on, simply means being rather more reflective about some of these questions and their interrelations, learning what has already been said about them and why.

In fact philosophy is extremely hard to avoid, even with a conscious effort. Consider someone who rejects it, telling us that 'Philosophy is

useless'. For a start, they are evidently measuring it against some system of values. Secondly, the moment they are prepared to say, however briefly and dogmatically, why it is useless, they will be talking about the ineffectuality of certain types of thought, or of human beings' incapacity to deal with certain types of question. And then instead of rejecting philosophy they will have become another voice *within* it – a sceptical voice, admittedly, but then philosophy has never been short of sceptical voices, from the earliest times to the present day. We shall meet some of them in Chapter 6.

If they take the second of those lines, they may also be implying that making the discovery that human beings just can't cope with certain kinds of question, and making that discovery *for yourself* – and actually *making it*, rather than just lazily assuming that you know it already – isn't a valuable experience, or is an experience without effects. Surely that cannot be true? Imagine how different the world would have been if we were all convinced that human beings just aren't up to answering any questions about the nature or even existence of a god, in other words, if all human beings were religious agnostics. Imagine how different it would have been if we were all convinced that there was no answer to the question of what legitimates the political authority that states habitually exercise over their members, in other words, if none of us believed that there was any good answer to the anarchist. It may well be controversial whether the differences would have been for the good, or for the bad, or whether in fact they wouldn't have mattered as much as you might at first think; but that there would have been differences, and very big ones, is surely beyond question. That how people think alters things, and that how lots of people think alters things for nearly everyone, is undeniable. A more sensible objection to philosophy than that it is ineffectual is pretty much the opposite: that it is *too dangerous*. (Nietzsche, see pp. 93–99, called a philosopher 'a terrible explosive from which nothing is safe' – though he didn't mean that as an objection.) But what this usually means is that any philosophy is dangerous *except the speaker's*

own, and what it amounts to is fear of what might happen if things change.

It might occur to you that perhaps there are people who don't even think it worthwhile to enter into this discussion at all, however briefly, not even to support the sceptical stance that I have just mentioned. And you would be right, but that doesn't mean to say that they don't have a philosophy. Far from it. It may mean that they are not prepared to 'philosophize' – to state their views and argue for them or discourse upon them. But it doesn't mean that they have no abiding values, nothing which they systematically regard as worthwhile. They might think, for instance, that real expertise at *doing* something is more desirable than any amount of theoretical knowledge. Their ideal would not so much be insight into the nature of reality as the capacity to become one with it in the execution of some particular activity, to have trained oneself to do something without conscious effort as if by a perfectly honed natural instinct. I am not just making these people up: a lot of Zen Buddhist thought, or perhaps I should say Zen Buddhist practice, leans strongly in this direction. And this ideal, of aiming at a certain kind of thoughtlessness, was the outcome of a great deal of previous thinking.

If philosophy is so close to us, why do so many people think that it is something very abstruse and rather weird? It isn't that they are simply wrong: some philosophy *is* abstruse and weird, and a lot of the best philosophy is likely to *seem* abstruse or weird at first. That's because the best philosophy doesn't just come up with a few new facts that we can simply add to our stock of information, or a few new maxims to extend our list of dos and don'ts, but embodies a picture of the world and/or a set of values; and unless these happen to be yours already (remember that in a vague and unreflective way we all have them) it is bound to seem very peculiar – if it doesn't seem peculiar you haven't understood it. Good philosophy expands your imagination. Some philosophy is close to us, whoever we are. Then of course some is further away, and

some is further still, and some is very alien indeed. It would be disappointing if that were not so, because it would imply that human beings are intellectually rather monotonous. But there's no need to start at the deep end; we start at the shallow end, where (as I've said) we are all standing in the water already. Do remember, however (here the analogy with the swimming-pool leaves me in the lurch, the way analogies often do), that this doesn't necessarily mean that we are all standing in the same place: what is shallow and familiar, and what is deep and weird, may depend on where you got in, and when.

We may be standing in the water, but why try to swim? In other words, what is philosophy for? There is far too much philosophy, composed under far too wide a range of conditions, for there to be a general answer to that question. But it can certainly be said that a great deal of philosophy has been intended as (understanding the words very broadly) a means to salvation, though what we are to understand by salvation, and salvation from what, has varied as widely as the philosophies themselves. A Buddhist will tell you that the purpose of philosophy is the relief of human suffering and the attainment of 'enlightenment'; a Hindu will say something similar, if in slightly different terminology; both will speak of escape from a supposed cycle of death and rebirth in which one's moral deserts determine one's future forms. An Epicurean (if you can find one nowadays) will pooh-pooh all the stuff about rebirth, but offer you a recipe for maximizing pleasure and minimizing suffering in this your one and only life.

Not all philosophy has sprung out of a need for a comprehensive way of living and dying. But most of the philosophy that has lasted has arisen from some pressing motivation or deeply felt belief – seeking truth and wisdom purely for their own sakes may be a nice idea, but history suggests that a nice idea is pretty much all it is. Thus classical Indian philosophy represents the internal struggle between the schools of Hinduism, and between them all and the Buddhists, for intellectual supremacy; the battle for the preferred balance between human reason

and scriptural revelation has been fought in many cultures, and in some is still going on; Thomas Hobbes's famous political theory (we shall be seeing more of it later) tries to teach us the lessons he felt had to be learnt in the aftermath of the English Civil War; Descartes and many of his contemporaries wanted medieval views, rooted nearly two thousand years back in the work of Aristotle, to move aside and make room for a modern conception of science; Kant sought to advance the autonomy of the individual in the face of illiberal and autocratic regimes, Marx to liberate the working classes from poverty and drudgery, feminists of all epochs to improve the status of women. None of these people were just solving little puzzles (though they did sometimes have to solve little puzzles on the way); they entered into debate in order to change the course of civilization.

The reader will notice that I haven't made any attempt to define philosophy, but have just implied that it is an extremely broad term covering a very wide range of intellectual activities. Some think that nothing is to be gained from trying to define it. I can sympathize with that thought, since most attempts strike me as much too restrictive, and therefore harmful rather than helpful in so far as they have any effect at all. But I will at least have a shot at saying what philosophy is; whether what I have to offer counts as a definition or not is something about which we needn't, indeed positively shouldn't, bother too much.

Once, a very long time ago, our ancestors were animals, and simply did whatever came naturally without noticing that that was what they were doing, or indeed without noticing that *they* were doing anything at all. Then, somehow, they acquired the capacities to ask *why* things happen (as opposed to just registering that they do), and to look at themselves and their actions. That is not as big a jump as may at first sight appear. Starting to ask why things happen is in the first place only a matter of becoming a little more conscious of aspects of one's own behaviour. A hunting animal that follows a scent is acting as if aware that the scent is

1. In this Renaissance painting Boethius (*c.*AD 480–525) listens to the words of the Lady Philosophy. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is his most famous book, and consolation was what he needed as he awaited execution. But philosophy has had many purposes besides this one.

there because its prey has recently passed that way – and it is because that really is why the scent is there that it often succeeds in its hunt. Knowledge of this sort of connection can be very useful: it tells us what to expect. Furthermore, to know that A happens because B happened may improve your control over things: in some cases B will be something that you can bring about, or prevent – which will be very useful if A is something you want, or want to avoid. Many of these connections animals, humans included, follow naturally and unconsciously. And the practice, once one is aware of it, can valuably be extended by consciously raising such questions in cases where we do not have conveniently built-in answers.

There could be no guarantee, however, that this generally valuable tendency would always pay off, let alone always pay off quickly. Asking why fruit falls off a branch pretty soon leads one to shake the tree. Asking why it rains, or why it doesn't rain, takes us into a different league, especially when the real motive underlying the question is whether we can influence whether it rains or not. Often we can influence events, and it may well pay to develop the habit of asking, when things (a hunting expedition, for example) have gone wrong, whether that was because we failed in our part of the performance, as opposed to being defeated by matters beyond our control. That same useful habit might have generated the thought that a drought is to some extent due to a failure of ours – and now what failure, what have we done wrong? And then an idea might crop up which served us well in our infancy: there are parents, who do things for us that we can't do ourselves, but only if we've been good and they aren't cross with us. Might there be beings that decide whether the rain falls, and shouldn't we be trying to get on the right side of them?

That is all it would take for human beings to be launched into the investigation of nature and belief in the supernatural. So as their mental capacities developed our ancestors found their power increasing; but they also found themselves confronted by options and mysteries – life

raised a host of questions, where previously it had simply been lived, unquestioningly. It is just as well that all this happened gradually, but even so it was the biggest shock the species has ever encountered. Some people, thinking more in intellectual than biological terms, might like to say that it was what made us human at all.

Think of philosophy as the sound of humanity trying to recover from this crisis. Thinking of it like that will protect you from certain common misapprehensions. One is that philosophy is a rather narrow operation that only occurs in universities, or (less absurdly) only in particular epochs or particular cultures; another, related to the first, is that it is something of an intellectual game, answering to no very deep need. On the positive side, it may lead you to expect that the history of philosophy is likely to contain some fascinating episodes, as indeed it does, and it certainly adds to the excitement if we bear in mind that view of what is really going on. Can reeling *homo sapiens* think his way back to the vertical? We have no good reason to answer that question either way, Yes or No. Are we even sure that we know where the vertical is? That's the kind of open-ended adventure we are stuck with, like it or not.

But isn't that just too broad? Surely philosophy doesn't include everything that that account of it implies? Well, in the first place, it will do us less harm to err on the broad side than the narrow. And in the second place, the scope of the word 'philosophy' has itself varied considerably through history, not to mention the fact that there has probably never been a time at which it meant the same thing to everyone. Recently something rather strange has happened to it. On the one hand it has become so broad as to be close to meaningless, as when almost every commercial organization speaks of itself as having a philosophy – usually meaning a policy. On the other hand it has become very narrow. A major factor here has been the development of the natural sciences. It has often been remarked that when an area of inquiry begins to find its feet as a discipline, with clearly agreed

methods and a clearly agreed body of knowledge, fairly soon it separates off from what has up to then been known as philosophy and goes its own way, as for instance physics, chemistry, astronomy, psychology. So the range of questions considered by people who think of themselves as philosophers shrinks; and furthermore, philosophy tends to be left in charge of those questions which we are not sure how best to formulate, those inquiries we are not sure how best to set about.

This multiplication of thriving disciplines inevitably brings another factor into play, namely specialization within universities, and creates the opportunity to think of philosophy yet more narrowly. University philosophy departments are mostly quite small. In consequence, so is the range of their expertise, which tends to cluster around current (sometimes also local) academic fashion – it must do, since it is normally they who make it. Besides, undergraduate courses are, for obvious reasons, quite short, and therefore have to be selective on pain of gross superficiality. So the natural assumption that philosophy is what university philosophy departments teach, though I certainly wouldn't call it false, is restrictive and misleading, and ought to be avoided.

This book is called a very short introduction to philosophy. But, as I hope is now becoming clear, I can't exactly *introduce* you to philosophy, because you are already there. Nor can I exactly introduce you to *philosophy*, because there is far too much of it. No more could I 'show you London'. I could show you a few bits of it, perhaps mention a handful of other main attractions, and leave you on your own with a street map and some information about other guided tours. That's pretty much what I propose to do for philosophy.

At the beginning of this chapter I spoke of three philosophical questions, though they might better have been called three types or classes of question. Chapters 2–4 introduce, from a classic text, an example of each type. By progressing from very familiar ways of

thinking in the first to something most readers will find altogether stranger in the third, they also illustrate (though not by any means in its full extent) another theme of this introduction: the range of novelty to be encountered in philosophy. I have also harped on somewhat about the difficulty of avoiding being philosophical. If that is so, we should expect to find some kind of philosophy more or less wherever we look. As if to confirm that, our first example comes from Greece and the fourth century BC, our second from eighteenth-century Scotland, and our third from India, written by an unknown Buddhist at an unknown date probably between 100 BC and AD 100.

All three of these texts should be fairly easy to obtain, especially the first two (see Bibliography). This book can perfectly well be read without them, but there are good reasons to read them yourself alongside it if that is possible. One is to be able to enjoy the writing. Much philosophy is well-written, and it is strongly recommended to enjoy the writing as well as the views and the arguments. But the main reason is that it will enable you to *join in* if you want to. Remember that this is not a completely foreign country: you are to some extent already a philosopher, and your ordinary native intelligence has a work permit here – you don't need to go through any esoteric training to get a licence to think. So don't be afraid, as you read, to start asking questions and forming provisional conclusions. But notice, *provisional*. Whatever you do, don't get hooked up on that laziest, most complacent of sayings, that 'everyone has a right to their own opinion'. Acquiring rights isn't that simple. Rather, keep in mind the wry comment of George Berkeley (1685–1753): 'Few men think, yet all will have opinions.' If true, that's a pity; for one thing, the thinking is part of the fun.

Finally, please read slowly. This is a very short book about a very long subject. I have tried to pack a lot in.

Chapter 2
What should I do?
Plato's *Crito*

Plato, who was born in or around 427 BC and died in 347, was not the first important philosopher of ancient Greek civilization, but he is the first from whom a substantial body of complete works has come down to us. In the Indian tradition the Vedas, and many of the Upanishads are earlier; but of their authors, and how they were composed, we know next to nothing. The Buddha pre-dated Plato, though by just how much is a matter of scholarly disagreement; but the earliest surviving accounts of his life and thought were written down some hundreds of years after his death. In China, Confucius also pre-dated Plato (he was born in the middle of the previous century); again, we have nothing known to have been written by him – the famous *Analects* are a later compilation.

Plato's works all take the form of dialogues. Mostly they are quick-fire dialogues, conversational in style, though sometimes the protagonists are allowed to make extended speeches. There are two dozen or so of these known to be by Plato, and a handful more that may be. Of the certainly authentic group two are much longer than the others, and better thought of as books consisting of sequences of dialogues. (They are *Republic* and *Laws*, both devoted to the search for the ideal political constitution.) So there is plenty of Plato to read, and most of it is fairly easy to obtain, in translation in relatively inexpensive editions. As regards degree of difficulty, the range is wide. At one end we have a

Chapter 4
What am I?

An unknown Buddhist on the self: King Milinda's chariot

It is generally true of Indian philosophy that we do not know much about the people who wrote it. If we know their names, the region in which they lived, and their dates within fifty years, that counts as scholarly success. But in the case of the *Milindapañha*, the *Questions of King Milinda*, no such 'success' has been achieved – we really know next to nothing. Here a Buddhist monk, Nagasena, debates with a regional king and answers his questions. Nagasena is probably a real figure, grown legendary; King Milinda is generally thought to be Menander, one of the Greek rulers in north-west India left over from the conquests of Alexander the Great. Even that is speculative – so let us just go straight to the text.

Only a few lines into it a shock awaits us. Plato's *Crito*, we saw, is built of elements nearly all of which most readers will have found quite familiar. Hume's argument in *Of Miracles* aimed to start from everyday common-sense observations about testimony plus an unsurprising definition of a miracle, and then arrive at a remarkable conclusion by showing that it is an inevitable consequence. But sometimes authors will adopt different tactics, pitching us straight in at the deep end with an assertion which seems frankly preposterous. We should learn to ride out the shock and read on, seeking to discover what the preposterous assertion really amounts to (it may be what it seems, or it may just be an unusual way of saying something rather less startling), and why they made it. Notice