

“Philosophy: The Quest for Truth and Meaning serves as an excellent textbook for those interested in the basic study of philosophy. Drawing inspiration from the writings of Bernard Lonergan, Andrew Beards guides his readers to reflect on the great realities of life and seek answers to the ultimate questions about the reason for their own existence and meaning by introducing them to some of the key areas of philosophy such as cognitional structure and epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and philosophy of religion. Through its occasional references to the Catholic philosophical tradition, Beards also makes a sincere effort to enhance the dialogue and debate between believers and nonbelievers in society today by appealing to the common ground of our shared humanity: our shared ability to reason.”

Robert Pen, SDB
Principal, Divyadaan
Salesian Institute of Philosophy
Don Bosco Marg
Nashik, India

“When I read *Method in Metaphysics*, by Andrew Beards, I was impressed with its clarity of prose and argumentation. Now, after having read *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth and Meaning*, I have proof that obscurity isn’t the sole fate of philosophy. In his latest book, Beards takes us on a philosophical journey that is both illuminating and self-affirming. With deft subtlety, he discusses a breadth of philosophical topics ranging from reflections on the nature of philosophy itself to the existence of God. Importantly, he does this without leaving the reader awash in jargon that only a few can interpret. I highly recommend this book to those whose philosophical journeys are just starting, and especially to those who have been at it for a long time.”

Lance Grigg, PhD
University of Lethbridge
Alberta, Canada

Philosophy

The Quest for Truth and Meaning

Andrew Beards



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Preface

This book aims to invite you into the world of philosophical reflection. There are a good number of introductory works on philosophy that, like this book, attempt to provide a user-friendly guide to the subject, so what is different about this one?

Many books introducing philosophy will rightly emphasize that in studying philosophy you will not be learning new material in the way you might learn new facts about the dark side of the moon. Rather, regarding many issues discussed you will be coming to know and have insight into things of which you have been in some sense aware for some time: things about yourself, about others around you, and about the world as a whole. This introduction stresses this aspect of philosophy since it is inspired by the thought of Bernard Lonergan (1904–84). Lonergan’s thought is all about coming to discover in your own experience, to check out in your own consciousness the fundamental philosophical points he argues for. He does this in a consistent and thorough way, a way that, I believe, is found in few other thinkers.

The introduction to philosophy is, then, not primarily an introduction to Lonergan’s thought but rather an introduction to philosophy inspired and influenced by his writing.

This book is addressed to anyone who wishes to reflect on the great realities of life, including those that have to do with human beings as persons who think, know, make choices, feel emotions, love, and seek answers to ultimate questions about the reason for their own existence and the meaning of it all. This book introduces you to some of the key areas of philosophy: the mind and its capacity to know truth and reality (cognitional structure and epistemology); fundamental structures and aspects of reality (metaphysics); the “good” and the “bad,” the “right” and the “wrong” (ethics); and questions about the ultimate purpose of human life (philosophy of religion).

You will also notice in reading this book that the philosophical arguments and discussions in it sometimes make reference to the philosophical tradition of Catholic Christianity. This is in no way intended to restrict the readership of the book. On the contrary, the most recent popes have called for a renewed interest in and application of the resources of the great tradition of philosophical thinking within the Christian tradition. This is to enhance the dialogue and debate between believers and nonbelievers in society today by appealing to the common ground of our shared humanity: our shared ability to reason. In this way believers and nonbelievers may have a better chance of coming to agreement on vital social and ethical issues at stake in our modern world. Such a dialogue on the basis of reason may also allow unbelievers to better appreciate how the worldview of Christian believers is not a negation of human reason but, it may be argued, its fulfillment.

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I also wish to express my gratitude to my wife Christina Beards for the invaluable help she has given me in correcting the errors in previous drafts of the work and in offering advice on ways to improve the text. Mr. Paul James, director of library services at the Maryvale Institute, compiled the index for this book. I am very grateful to him for his excellent work.

Chapter 1

What Is This Thing Called “Philosophy”?

The Great Questions

Throughout history and across human cultures we can see that human beings have raised and attempted to answer great questions such as the following: What is the meaning of it all? Why is there anything at all? Is death the end for us? Why is there suffering and evil in the world? What is the morally good way to live and to act? How can I know the truth? How can I find true love and happiness in life? That there are such questions, and the proposed answers, also reveals human beings as “the questioners,” those who cannot help being oriented toward answers, answers about truth, goodness, love, meaning, and purpose. We begin to question when we are small children and keep going from there as we grow and learn more and more about ourselves, our community, and our world. This questioning is, then, wonder, and wonder, as the great philosopher Aristotle (d. 322 BC) said, is the beginning of philosophy.

Even when people’s lives are full of the daily business of life, of getting through, these great questions have a habit of breaking into our lives. In moments of great joy and of great sorrow they appear on the horizon. When we mourn the death of a loved one the question about life’s meaning comes up, and when we see the birth of a baby or see a beautiful mountain range at sunset the joy of the experience can also awaken our wonder at it all. These great questions are, of course, explored in the stories, myths, literature, poetry, and art of human cultures as well.

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The great religions of the world also address these questions and offer answers. The difference is that philosophy raises these questions and attempts to offer answers to them using the resources of human intelligence and reason alone. Philosophy itself, however, may also discover the need to point beyond itself to religion: it may indicate ways in which the answers that a religion offers to the great questions of life are more comprehensive, complete, and satisfying than those that philosophy can offer alone.

The fact that such questioning and the desire for answers to live by arise spontaneously for us leads Pope John Paul II, in his great letter on the relationship between philosophy and religion *Fides et Ratio*, to claim that we are all philosophers by nature (4). Studying philosophy, then, is not like studying a particular science or a historical period we have not thought about before. It is the study of something much closer to home: it is the study of essential aspects of who we are and of what our world is. In many cases, as we shall see in the chapters to follow, it involves drawing out aspects of ourselves that in some obscure way we have been aware of for a long time. Once these aspects have been made an explicit theme for reflection then we can go on to see their consequences and understand ourselves, our human community, and our world in a more complete fashion.

Stepping Back

In our world today people are familiar in all sorts of ways with taking time out, or stepping back from a busy life to reflect on that life or their activities in a more focused way. The idea of such withdrawal for reflection is that the renewed action that follows will be better in some way, will be enhanced. We see this when people go on training and staff development days and courses, when they go on retreats, when they meet with counselors of various kinds, even when they take a break to discuss things coming up in life or the world of work with friends or family.

Philosophy too can be understood as a “stepping back” in a similar fashion. The world of academic philosophy and the history of philosophy can be understood as the work of a community of human persons who pursue the great questions common to us all in a more sustained and concentrated manner. Naturally, the person of sound common sense will sometimes ask the relevance of all this. It can be a very good question. Often enough philosophers can seem to arrive at very meager results and go off into all kinds of trivialities. One might pick up a book on the philosophy of language, for example, and think after reading a page, “What has this got to do with the great questions of life?”

The view taken here is certainly not that all philosophy is equally good, sound, or satisfying. But the view in this book is that some of it is. On the other hand, it is true that what sometimes passes for common sense may not always be so; it may be common nonsense or even the bias and expression of the immoral attitudes of a particular culture and time. At some periods of human history the individuals who proposed to the majority that slavery is wrong may well have been told that their view was ridiculous, impractical, not of the "common sense" of the time. So common sense is not the ultimate arbiter of what is true and good.

Another point to make in this context is that the exploration of the great questions we have been thinking about can lead us off in all kinds of directions once we start investigating them. In a way this is how the various branches or fields of study in philosophy today can be seen as coming about and can, hopefully, be seen as being related.

Let us take the question "What is true love?" That seems to be one that has interested a lot of people, from the poets of all ages and times to the columnists of today's magazines, authors of popular novels, and hosts of TV shows.

We might start thinking of an answer in terms of the strength and duration of the passion and emotion shown between a man and a woman. But then someone might object: "Well, if it's only the strength of passions, what about the cases we read of when someone is obsessed with someone else, stalks them, threatens the life of the one pursued, or threatens suicide because of unrequited love? Or what about the domineering, possessive love of some parents for their children?" In fact this kind of discussion about human emotion and good or bad forms of human behavior is seen right at the beginning of Western philosophy in the dialogues of Socrates (d. 399 BC).

Socrates' dialogues are given to us filtered through the lens of the philosophy of his student Plato (d. 347 BC). In these dialogues or debates Plato shows us Socrates as engaged in debate with others in the ancient Athens of his time concerning the true nature of human moral qualities such as courage or the reverence one should show to one's parents. Just as we have seen in discussing the nature of true love, so also in the case of these Socratic discussions someone will bring forward an idea of what, for instance, true courage is, and objections will be raised. Socrates and his dialogue partners work in this fashion to try to get at a workable idea of what a human quality is or should be.

So, to return to our question about true love: The objector has said that true love can't be all about the sheer force of emotion or passion because we know of many cases when that leads to disastrous results for the very person

said to be the object of love. Let's bring in Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) at this point. Their contribution to the debate would be to say that true love has to involve "willing the good of the other." Now someone might respond to that by saying it sounds rather cold and unfeeling. But given the larger context in their works in which this idea is put forward, one would say that naturally this is not all Aristotle and Aquinas would say. Rather, what is involved in the true love between husband and wife will be different, both in terms of emotions and responsibilities, from the love between, say, parent and child. But, at the very least, they would claim, true love has to involve willing the good of the other, otherwise you will have all the problems of oppressing or manipulating the one said to be loved that you get when just powerful emotion is involved.

How does all this relate to the way one area of philosophy naturally leads into other areas? Well, in our discussion of true love the next question could very well be, "But what is willing the good of the other?" And here we run up against the question of ethics, of the nature of "right" and "wrong," of "good" and "bad." What is truly good for a human being? But things don't stop there, because that question will lead into the question, "What is a human being?"

If I come into my kitchen and find something is starting to burn in the frying pan, I may violently wave away the smoke. Is it morally wrong to violently wave away the smoke? We don't think so. But it might very well be wrong to do the same kind of action to my son when he is speaking to me, or even to the dog. Why? Because we take it that smoke, boys, and dogs are all very different kinds of being and that because they have the nature they have, that means it is right or wrong to treat them in this way or that.

Again you can see the way these questions were followed through in the story of the beginning of Western philosophy in ancient Greece. The great thing about Socrates is that he was a pursuer of the truth, and he knew some truth: that he *very often did not get to the truth* in the investigations he embarked on. But he knew that truth was a good thing and that we should seek it. When we come to Aristotle, however, we see that for him we have to produce a more detailed and developed plan than we see in Socrates' discussions. (To be fair, we may very well not know of all that Socrates wrote or produced.) So for Aristotle, if we are going to get an ethics, an account of dos and don'ts about what human beings should or should not do, we need to get a full-blown account of human nature. If we are trying to arrive at that, we need to compare and contrast human nature with all the natures of things we find around us in the world.

So it is that we see an account of what is right or wrong in behavior in Aristotle's philosophy, built on an analysis of human nature, and that analysis takes place in the context of a philosophical study of the human person's place in the world at large. Aristotle argues that by nature we humans are "rational animals." The philosophical investigation into the nature of the world and our place in it is what we call "metaphysics." Of course, today we might say, "Well, that was okay for ancient Greeks, but today we come to know the nature of the world through the sciences, through physics, biology, and chemistry," and someone might also add that as for human nature, we study this through human biology, psychology, and sociology. In fact, Aristotle did have quite a lot to say about the relationship between philosophy and physical science. He was a medical doctor and the son of a doctor, and he was fascinated by the physical world: he wrote about all kinds of things in the world, from animal biology to the nature of meteorites. We might want to say that some of what Aristotle wrote on the relationship between science and philosophy is no longer viable; on the other hand, we might argue that some of it is. But notice, this is precisely a philosophical question.

In fact, this only helps to lead us further in our outlining of the different areas of philosophy. So our questions about the relationship between philosophy and science are discussed in areas such as "philosophy of science." Some people have thought that with the coming of the modern sciences philosophy should really close up shop. But this has not happened, and indeed, as we shall see in the chapters to follow, it could not. *In fact, that view is itself not a scientific one but a philosophical one.*

So let us notice: our question about the nature of true love, a question that fascinates columnists in popular magazines, has already led us through ethics to questions about human nature and the world (metaphysics) to philosophy of science (how what the sciences say about human beings is related to what philosophy might say).

"But how can we know any of this?" might ask the skeptic. "Maybe you have all got it wrong, the scientists as much as the philosophers." Now, the question of how we know we "get it right" and how we know we "get it wrong" in coming to know the truth about reality is a question treated in philosophy of cognition and epistemology. We are going to devote a good deal of space to these areas in this book. There are many other areas of philosophy in addition to the ones we have mentioned so far. For example, there is philosophy of art, or aesthetics; the study of logic, which is the study of our patterns of reasoning; the philosophy of history; political philosophy; and the list goes on. In each area a "philosophy of . . ." attempts

to take that step back and look at an area of life in a sustained reflective and analytical manner, bringing to bear the resources of the rest of philosophy in doing so.

A Conversation across Time

G. K. Chesterton (d. 1936) once remarked: “The only alternative to being influenced by thought-out thought is being influenced by un-thought-out thought.” What he was getting at was that there is a danger in just drifting through life assuming all the views around us are correct. As we know from history, this can be a very dangerous road to follow: people can apathetically drift into all kinds of evil political and social compromises. The three great philosophers we have already mentioned—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—lived through a period of cultural upheaval and change, and this was the background for much of their truth seeking: once the assumed customs and ways of thinking of a culture are challenged, the question arises as to where and how we find ways of deciding what is true or false, good or bad. It is the existentialist thinkers of the recent philosophical past who have warned us against “inauthentically” fleeing from our nature as seekers of the true and the good, into the drifting crowd of modern society.

Philosophy, then, in its “stepping back” can help us gain something of a “critical distance” from our immediate culture. The philosopher William James (d. 1910) once remarked that “when most people say they are thinking they are merely reshuffling their prejudices.” We might justifiably think this witticism overly cynical. But it has a point that we can see in our contemporary cultural setting. “Political correctness” is fast becoming a term of abuse in the contemporary West. Why? Because people sense that such “correctness” can sometimes be a set of moral rules that are just imposed by some kind of social authority in a way that denies critical assessment of just how justified these moral stances are in themselves. The assertion of such a worldview seems to be a matter of saying, “Well, that’s just how things are and how we should be doing things in society,” which blocks questioning and reasoned argument. It is no wonder that another of Chesterton’s wonderfully ironic observations on modern society was that there are only two kinds of people: those who believe in dogmas and know that they do, and those who believe in dogmas and don’t know that they do.

Take, for example, the relativistic views on truth and morality that are passed around in our culture as the views that any decent person, respecting a pluralistic worldview, should hold: “any view is as good/true as another”;

"it's a matter of whatever feels right for you or your group." Far from being excitingly "new," such subjectivism and relativism are found at the very origins of Western philosophy in the thought of Sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias in the fourth century BC. It was against such views that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle offered their brilliant reflections on knowledge, morality, and human life, and some of the arguments they deployed against such skepticism are still relevant to our modern predicament.

The very study of the history of philosophy serves to take the sheen of "novelty" off such views: the fact is they have been proposed long ago. This is one of the liberating aspects of studying philosophy. Many introductions to philosophy mention the remark (intended as a thought-provoking exaggeration) of the twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (d. 1947): "All philosophy is just footnotes to Plato." It is an important lesson to learn that some of the most basic questions about human beings keep recurring throughout history, and we can profitably look back in order to go forward. Philosophers today are still wrestling with Aristotle's arguments as if he were a contemporary in debate, not simply a dead voice from the past. The point made in ancient times against such relativism can still be grasped by any intelligent human being today: to say that every view is as true as another is to put forward nonsense; for it is to exclude as false the view that would deny the truth of the view being put forward (that is, the view that holds "not every view is true, or as good as another"). In other words, if you hold A as true you automatically exclude not-A as false. You cannot have it both ways.

The fact that philosophy is a conversation with thinkers across time is itself a great philosophical lesson: it witnesses to the profound common humanity that we share with those who lived before us.

From among the many views of life offered to us in the busy marketplace of the mass media and world of communications, which are we going to accept? There is "no exit," as the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (d. 1980) reminds us: for to choose none is still to choose. The resources of philosophy may be very helpful in making such decisive decisions about your life.