

# PATHWAYS STUDY GUIDE

*'Anyone can be a philosopher.'* – The quickest way to annoy academic philosophers is to suggest that their subject should be accessible to all, and not just the brainy few. The ability to think fast has its uses, but is overrated. What counts for more is the ability to see a problem. It is not in learning to analyse ideas into their smallest elements, or spin out long lines of argument that one becomes a philosopher, but in training one's capacity for vision. Anyone who wants to can learn how to appreciate a philosophical problem, to feel gripped by it.

At least, that is what I tell my students. After two and a half thousand years, none of the important philosophical problems has ever been solved, even with the best minds on the job. From this standpoint, the most valuable mental quality that the student can aspire to is intellectual modesty.

We are not suggesting that one can make a philosopher out of someone who does not want anything to do with the subject. But if philosophy is something you do want – if the sense of wonder about the world and our place in it has ever gripped you, if only for a few moments in your life – then in acknowledging that fact you have already taken the first step towards becoming a philosopher.

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## PREFACE

**...as regards the sounding-out of idols, this time they are not idols of the age but eternal idols which are here touched with the hammer as with a tuning fork...**

**Friedrich Nietzsche *Twilight of the Idols* 1888**

If you want to philosophize well, you need a good tool kit. Not just a hammer, but screwdriver and pliers, drill and saw. Every student who starts out on the road to philosophy learns how to value and assess the tools available. Try everything. Pick up anything you can use, from as wide a variety of sources as possible.

In the five years that I have been running Pathways to Philosophy, certain basic issues concerning the nitty-gritty practice of philosophy have come up again and again: 'I don't know how to approach a philosophy book,' writes one student. 'Every time I put pen to paper I find myself writing complete rubbish.' 'I just don't know to think!'

The following pages developed out of pieces that I wrote for my online philosophical notebook at *The Glass House Philosopher* web site, and my answers in response to questions submitted to the *Ask a Philosopher* page on the Pathways web site at Sheffield University.

If philosophy as a subject intrigues you, but you doubt whether you have got what it takes to study philosophy, I hope that what you find here will help get over the initial barriers.. So grab your tools and get stuck in!

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**Glass House Philosopher** <http://www.pathways.plus.com/glasshouse/>  
**Pathways to Philosophy** <http://www.philosophypathways.com>  
**Ask a Philosopher** <http://www.philosophypathways.com/questions/>

# 1 what is philosophy?

From *The Glass House Philosopher* 1st October 1999:

When I checked my e-mail this morning there were two questions for *Ask a Philosopher*. Callie asked me, 'How does Greek philosophy affect the way we live today?' Wayne asked, 'What is Philosophy?' I wonder, Wayne, if you've been following this note book! Callie, your question is a pretty tough one too.

I'm going to try to give a straight answer to the 'What is Philosophy' question this time, and not try my usual evasive tactics. Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone. Let's see how it goes!

The Greeks discovered something. Something immense, mind-blowing. They discovered the power of human reason. To begin with, they used this power in a simple, direct way by putting forward ever bolder theories about the nature of the physical world. Philosophers like Thales and Anaximander were doing what we would now call physics. By the time of Aristotle, however, the use of reason had become highly subtle and refined. Aristotle's approach to analysing a concept or a problem is one you might find in any academic philosophy journal today.

Philosophy is all about making our beliefs consistent. You can take in any amount of information, but that won't help if your beliefs clash with one another. The early Greek physicists looked at the Creation myths that were current at the time and saw a mass of irrational assumptions. Like the stories we tell to children about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. So they set about trying to tell a story that gave a consistent account of cause and effect. Where did the Cosmos come from? It was formed, they said, from stuff. The same stuff is in me or you, or a rock or a tree, or the Moon and the stars.

Here's an example of the kind of thing I mean by 'making our beliefs consistent'. We believe in cause and effect. We ourselves are part of the universe, subject to the same immutable laws of nature as rocks, or trees, or stars. We also believe that when a person commits a crime, they deserve to be punished. The combination of those two beliefs is a practical, as well as a philosophical problem: the problem of 'freedom of the will'.

We use all sorts of concepts without fully understanding them, concepts like 'freedom', or 'self', or 'knowledge', or 'explanation', or 'truth'. Because of our misunderstandings our thoughts get tied up in ever tighter knots.

It's true that a lot of philosophy is about repairing the damage done by the failed attempts of previous philosophers. Some problems have a long history going right back to the Greeks. But human curiosity is insatiable and we will not accept being told that it's better not to ask questions in the first place. We are no longer children who believe in the Tooth Fairy. We have grown up. And we demand to know.

I think that the way we live today has inherited a strong bias from Greek philosophy. The bias is towards logical analysis or breaking a problem down into its elements. It is an approach which has made possible the huge advances in science and technology. One can only speculate how things might have been if our culture had been dominated

instead by the holistic, synoptic bias of Indian philosophy. Popular writers such as Fritjof Capra, Alan Watts, and Robert Pirsig have challenged the Western, analytic approach, and its consequences for science and society.

The best philosophy, I believe, succeeds in synthesizing the analytic and the synoptic approaches. Reason and logical analysis are tools that the philosopher cannot do without. However, they are only a means to an end. The goal of the philosopher must always be to gain a vision of the whole. To achieve true consistency of thought, we need to think things together rather than apart. That is why for me metaphysics, or the quest for a definition of the nature of reality – the nature of Being – will always be the core of philosophy.

## 2 learning philosophy

From *Ask a Philosopher* Third set of questions and answers:

Daye asked:

*This isn't so much a philosophy question, but more of a teaching question. How does one take the infinite truths that they learn and encapsulate them into instant truths that people can read and understand? How can one take something that they found profound and a universal truth and help others to realize that too?*

Your question is about teaching and also about philosophy. The philosopher who has thought about this question more than any other is Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*. But one could also cite the example of Descartes' *Meditations*.

Let's say that you have discovered a profound and universal truth and you write it down. That is not enough, because the reader needs to be persuaded of its truth. Well, suppose you give the argument, would that be enough? In philosophy, the answer would in many cases be, No. The reader can follow the logic of an argument and still fail to grasp the meaning of its conclusion. Something more needs to be done.

A good teacher can achieve more than can ever be achieved by the written page. In the process of dialogue one engages with an individual, and each individual's needs are different. The process by which you came to appreciate those truths is one you can repeat with others, and so understanding is passed on, not all at once, but in gradual stages.

What is remarkable about philosophical education, however, is how much we all have in common. Descartes conceived his great work, *Meditations on First Philosophy* from a heuristic standpoint. By adopting the very personal style of a series of private meditations, Descartes invites the reader to do the same. The reader is encouraged to look within themselves, and find what Descartes finds there.

Wittgenstein, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, invites the reader to participate in a form of therapy. At every stage, he gives voice to the reader's doubts and worries. So

you find a number of voices, besides Wittgenstein's own. Some times, it is not always easy to tell whether it is Wittgenstein speaking. Unlike Descartes, Wittgenstein never tells the reader where this is all leading. The process is completed when the reader has successfully battled with their illusions, when they are no longer tempted towards false theories of the nature of consciousness and the self.

My practical aims as a teacher are perhaps more modest than your question implies. I don't expect all my students to agree with me. It is enough that they learn to see the question. I do not see that as in any sense a failure. There is no philosophical truth that is so true that one cannot conceive how an intelligent person could be incapable of believing it.

### 3 what is thinking?

From *The Glass House Philosopher* 24th August 1999

How does one acquire the skills of the philosopher? If you are a distance learning student, how do you get to practice and improve your skills? As a Pathways mentor this is a question I take seriously.

'It's not enough to read,' I tell my students, 'you have to write, you have to go through the struggle of attempting to express your thoughts and then the further struggle of seeing what you have written objectively, so that you can criticise it. You have to learn to argue with yourself.'

Well, easy to say. It's one of those answers that comes off pat. But obviously, if you can't think you can't write a single coherent sentence of philosophy. This is the daunting thing. We think we know what thinking is, until we come across a philosophical text for the first time, or listen to a philosopher speak. Then all our thoughts run helter-skelter in every direction, and we find ourselves not able to make sense of words which look as if they are written in English, but might as well be Martian.

Here's an interesting experiment, which one of my students who went to a few meetings of a well known school of Eastern philosophy showed me. He said the idea came from the mystic Gurdjieff. All you have to do is look at the second hand of your watch for just one minute without allowing your mind to wander. Concentrate on the movement of the second hand and nothing else. Sounds easy until you try. – That's how hard thinking is.

I am the first to stress the importance of creative reverie or lateral thinking as a source of new ideas. But that is not *thinking*. New philosophical ideas are of no use to you if you can't think, if you can't keep your mind on a problem for more than thirty seconds.

I believe that we can, and do, get better at thinking simply by practice. It doesn't have to be anything to do with philosophy. Here is a second experiment. Select a topic to think about, it can be anything. For example, what needs doing in the garden tomorrow. As you ponder your chosen topic, be aware of any stray thoughts that interrupt the flow.

Each time, consciously pull yourself back. – Don't try this for too long, though, you will get a headache!

Bertrand Russell once remarked that a good philosopher manages about five minutes real thinking in any one day. A bad philosopher never thinks at all.

We are habitually lazy about thinking, simply because most of the tasks that we do don't require that kind of concentrated attention. But anyone can do it. It is just a matter of practice.

## 4 'good' and 'bad' philosophy

From *The Glass House Philosopher* 22nd and 25th September 1999:

Why should a piece of philosophy be 'good'? Philosophy is not supposed to be entertaining. It's supposed to make you think. A piece of philosophy should annoy and aggravate you, it should stimulate you to react against it so that you do some philosophy of your own. If you want to read something good, read a good novel.

Yes, I know, 'good' is a slippery word. An 'attributive adjective' is how the grammarians classify it. A bad philosophical encyclopaedia can be a good door stop. Philosophical writing that fails to give satisfaction or pleasure to the discerning reader can still be good raw material for one's own thoughts. But when all is said and done, it's bad. You don't try to write something bad. You try to write something good and fail.

There's bad and bad. When a piece of philosophy is sloppily argued, or when the writer has no philosophical vision and all they're doing is churning out words, your thoughts are mired in the mud. The only solution is a hot bath. But there are other kinds of bad:

I don't care if a piece is badly, clumsily written. When someone stammers, you try all the harder to grasp their meaning.

I don't care if a philosopher attempts to defend a position which common sense and reason says is utterly indefensible. There's nothing more inspiring than a heroic defeat.

I don't care if the structure of the argument is a mess, and all the planks and girders are showing. More footholds for climbing!

Wittgenstein once remarked, 'Philosophy should be hard. The philosopher should not seek comfort or stimulus in this or that.' He wasn't saying that you shouldn't seek out raw material. You can't philosophize in a vacuum. Thoughts spun out like a spider's web with nothing to support them but other thoughts are just as fragile. But raw material can be found anywhere. In interrogating one's 'first reactions', the things one is tempted to say (for example, about the nature of consciousness and self-knowledge, Wittgenstein's favourite topic in his *Philosophical Investigations*) In books on any subject. In one's day-to-day life.

That is why I advise all my students to keep a note book. Not for publishing. Just for their own private use. First, though, I have to convince them that their thoughts are worth something. From experience, I know that can be an uphill task.

The other day I asked a Professor of philosophy I knew whether he kept a philosophical note book. 'No, I never have!' He would always be working on a book or an article, something intended for others to see. I ventured the suggestion that the problem with a philosophical notebook was the danger that one would fill it with rubbish or half-baked ideas. He readily agreed.

That's how my note books started. But over time they got better. Not so much through a conscious effort to write well, but simply because one is stimulated to self-criticism. You write knowing that in a day or two you will be looking at the words you have written as if they had been written by someone else. Through practice, you learn to be merciless.

Do your best, I tell my students, but don't worry about it being good.

## 5 philosophical questions

From *The Glass House Philosopher* 8th October 1999:

Two more questions for *Ask a Philosopher*. Steve asked me, 'What makes a question philosophical? I have studied philosophy and I still don't have a good answer to that question!' Kanokwan asked, 'I really want to know how important it is to learn Philosophy. How can we use it in our life? how can we think like the philosophers? how do philosophers think? how would this world be if there was not any philosophy?'

Kanokwan's question is easier.

It doesn't matter how clever you are, or how much you know. If you haven't studied philosophy then something vital is missing from your life. That is what I want to tell the world – if there is anyone out there who cares to listen.

What use is philosophy? why is it so important? – I tell my students, 'Philosophy is the ultimate expression of human freedom.' It is about breaking free from the mind prison of average, everyday discourse. Refusing to accept the language and the concepts that the powers-that-be thrust upon us. It is about seeing possibilities beyond the narrow span of the present moment or our own private worlds.

Philosophers are better thinkers not because they think faster, but because they learn the supreme value of being nimble. You learn to question every assumption, every starting point. You have to learn how to question the question otherwise you don't know how to get unstuck. We all get stuck. What makes philosophical problems so difficult is that more often than not we don't know what the real problem is. The value of philosophical thinking for our everyday lives is in teaching us how to get out of the

corners we paint ourselves into, the trenches we dig for ourselves. Your life could be different than it is. Anything is possible.

There's no quick way to 'learn to think like a philosopher'. Like any acquired skill, it's a matter of perseverance and practice. Just to be aware of the possibility that philosophy represents is already to take the first step. If you weren't a philosopher already, you wouldn't have appreciated the question!

But what makes a question philosophical? Why do I find that question so difficult? My answer to Steve is that it is easier to say what makes a question *not* philosophical. If you can find out by doing an inquiry or an experiment, by looking at evidence and weighing it up, then your question is not philosophical.

It should strike us as amazing that not all questions can be answered in this way. It seems at first as if we are being told that there is a secret extra store of knowledge in our own heads and philosophers know the magic spell to bring it out. – If there is stuff hidden away in our heads, that is a matter for psychoanalysts, or practitioners of the occult.

The truth is that there is no philosophical knowledge inside us waiting to be dug out. The truths of philosophy are out there in reality. To get at those truths, however, we have to use reasoning and logic to question the meaning of our beliefs, or the things we say, or are tempted to say. What one discovers from doing philosophy is that half the time we either don't know we are saying, or else we are talking nonsense without realizing it.

I once came across a philosophy book from the 40's in a second hand book shop, *The Silver World*. I find the title very evocative. The silver world of philosophy may lack the robust colours of the everyday world that we all have to deal with. But it has an exquisite beauty of its own that cannot be matched by anything in the known universe.