What is philosophy?

It is fairly common to begin an introductory class in any discipline by asking for a definition of the subject matter of that discipline. What is it that we are going to be studying this semester?

The approach is a sound one generally but a difficult one in the specific case of philosophy. It is not that no one knows what philosophy is—it is a discipline that has a long and continuous tradition and there are ways of thinking that clearly belong to that tradition. The tradition itself dates from about 800 B.C.E. in the Western world, though there are similar traditions in Asia that date from roughly the same period. There are general characteristics that philosophical thought exhibits and that can be identified, but, as we will see, they have more to do with an approach and a way of thinking about some very fundamental issues that human beings confront and so are difficult to identify concretely. In this way, philosophy is unlike physics, biology, sociology, or anthropology. We cannot say that it is about only one sort of thing—not even very broadly. The best way to figure out what philosophy is about is to do it. Nonetheless, we can say something about both what it is and it is not by way of introduction.

For a first attempt, let us say that philosophical thought is self-conscious. To say that it is self-conscious means that when we think philosophically, we are conscious of ourselves even as we think about other things. So doing philosophy involves taking on a philosophical stance, which is a sort of detached attitude. This is not the attitude that most of us have as we go about our daily lives. While being philosophical, we may find that we question things that we usually take for granted and we want to know why things
that we have never wondered about before are the way that they are. To question the things we take for granted, it is almost as though we have to step outside of ourselves and stop being that person who took the way things are as how they always have been and always must be.

So for instance, we are all taught and see that in general lying is wrong. But if we were to think about this philosophically we might ask what it is about lying that makes it wrong. Notice that you don't need to be a philosopher to do this. We all do this at those moments when we consider whether under some particular circumstances it might be okay to lie, even though generally we acknowledge that it is wrong. Is it okay to lie to your mother about where you were last night when you know it will just upset her to find out, nothing bad happened, and you don’t ever plan to go there again! Aren’t you, in fact, doing a good deed because you are preventing her from experiencing unnecessary distress? Situations like this are the moments in life when we stop to question some general principle that we have always taken to be a truth or guideline for how to live. We might find ourselves trying to answer the question of what we should do by considering what it is about lying that makes it wrong. Maybe there is some more fundamental principle that we can fall back on to sort out what we should do in this particular case. Is lying wrong because it harms another person? Well, then in this case it would be more harmful to my mother if I told her where I had been so the more fundamental principle is now supporting my belief that in this particular case it would be correct to lie. Or is there are harm done to someone even if they do not know that they were lied to? These are philosophical questions.
In this example, you can see that there are other things happening as well. There is a self-consciousness but there is also at least the potential for thinking carefully and even deeply about some basic principles that are important to the way we act in the world. This is a feature of philosophical thought as well – it involves thinking deeply and carefully about the things that are most important to us.

From what I have said so far, you can see the way that philosophy is unlike some of your other academic subjects in that it is not identified with a specific subject matter but rather as a method. And yet we can still say that are certain subjects that are more typically philosophical than others. The classic texts that we will be reading tackle philosophical questions and we will be sorting out what it is that is philosophical in them and the various strengths and weaknesses of the answers that are offered.

I would like to make one last point about philosophy and questions before we move on. Students of philosophy frequently complain that there are no answers to the questions philosophers ask and so there is no point to asking these questions. I would dispute this for two reasons: first, these questions have many answers and evaluating the answers and trying to determine what each of them entails is part of the work of anyone who deals with these questions; second, it is through the conversations generated by searching for the answers to these questions that we come to understand ourselves, the choices that we make about what we will believe, and the effect that our beliefs have on our actions and consequently, our lives and the lives of others.

We are all philosophers.
Everyone is reflective at one time or another. I am sure that you have heard the expression “to be philosophical” about something. Generally when we say that someone is being philosophical we mean that they are taking a longer-range view about an issue or putting it in perspective. We are able to do this when we think about problems without being totally consumed by it. This kind of thinking involves a certain amount of detachment.

Let’s look at a particular example to try and get an idea about how this might work. Suppose I have made a trip to a crowded shopping mall on a Sunday afternoon. I have circled the parking lot several times in search of a parking space and have not seen one, though I have been tantalized by seeing several other cars beat me to parking spaces. After about fifteen minutes, I begin to get very frustrated. Finally I see that there is a young woman walking purposefully down the lane that I am currently on. I follow her closely, realize that she is parked on the other side of the aisle, race around and manage to arrive as she unlocks her car door and climbs in. I am delighted until I look up and see that there is another car waiting, facing me, the driver signaling that he intends to take this place. The level of my frustration at this point could rise and keep me totally riveted in the moment and in my felt need for this parking space. Driven by this need, I could quickly dart into the space ahead of the other driver. Or alternatively I could leap out of my car and block the space with my body prepared to fight to the death over my right to park there. Or I could consider that there will ultimately be other spaces and that the fight over this one would not be worth the ill will between another human being and myself and so choose to move on and continue my search.
My description of the situation above is one in which the last alternative is the more philosophical one. Not because it is the right thing to do but because it is the option arrived at after reflection and after taking the whole situation into account. That response, as opposed to the others, is not driven entirely by an automatic reaction, but by thinking things through. I was “philosophical” about the loss of the parking space.

I want to emphasize that describing this alternative as “philosophical” doesn’t depend upon it being the best choice, even though we hope that such reflection will lead us, if not to the best choice, at least to better choices. This is part of the motivation for being philosophical and for doing philosophy. But the sense in which I am using the term at the moment refers only to the attitude with which the thinking about the issue is carried out. I might have reflected on the situation and come to the conclusion that if I do not fight for this parking space then my life will be worth nothing because this parking space is clearly a symbol for all those things that I was entitled to and did not get. If this is why I fight, then I believe that I would have to call my decision to fight a philosophical one as well. The point that I am trying to make here is that we are philosophical when we are reflective and when we look at something in a way that takes us beyond the emotions, thoughts, and beliefs that normally govern our immediate actions. We all do this at one time or another and so we are all philosophers in this sense.

I do not mean to suggest that emotions are to be tossed aside when we do philosophy. Many philosophers believe that they have their place and should certainly be taken into account when seeking solutions to many philosophical problems, though some philosophers believe that only reason should be heeded. But emotions tend to be quite specific and notice that in each of the different philosophical conclusions that were
considered in the example above there were general principles that were appealed to that shaped the decision. To be philosophical involves reflecting in a way where we seek the most general categories to which the things around us belong and the most general principles that apply to what we are doing. We look for answers on a more fundamental, and often more general, level than we do when we seek merely practical solutions to problems.

The experts.

Though we may all be philosophers at some times in our lives, this course is really about those who have focused their attention on philosophical modes of thought and who have, in this sense, become experts. For there to be experts in any field or discipline there needs to be a clear sense of what the rules for participating in this discipline are and so what successful work in that discipline looks like. Are there any rules for how to proceed with philosophical thought? What is the proper method of philosophy?

It is difficult to talk about the method of philosophy without talking about the subject matter, so I will say something about both in what follows. The key tool necessary of philosophical method is reason. Logic is the discipline that studies the proper use of reason and consequently some understanding of logic is necessary for understanding what is happening in philosophy. Consequently, one of the first things that
we will be doing in this course is looking at some of the key concepts in logic and talking about how they are applied.

What about the subject matter? There are three main areas in which there are fundamental or philosophical question. They are metaphysics, epistemology, and value theory.

**Metaphysics** is the study of the nature of reality, what there is (ontology) and how the things that exist are related to each other. An example of a metaphysical question might be “Does God exist?” Another question that we still Descartes grapple with is the question of what sort of things mind and body are and how they are related to each other. The philosopher Aristotle thought that metaphysics was the most difficult and most important part of philosophy, the First Philosophy. On the one hand, it might seem fairly obvious what there is. We can look and see the things around us and surely they exist. But the thing is that not all things that we experience exist in the same way. For instance, though a dream is certainly a real dream, the things in a dream are not as real as the things in the world that we experience when we are awake. At least, it is typically thought that they are not as real. But why is that? What is different about dream things and real things other than the state of the "observer"? So that is one kind of problem, but another has to do with other kinds of "things". Abstract things like numbers, ideas, and so on seem to have a reality of some sort. But what is it? You don't see numbers and yet we think that there is something real about them and that they are connected to the things that we do see in important ways. Isn't mathematics the language of nature (as Galileo thought)? It is certainly the language of physics, which tells us a tremendous amount about physical world. How can numbers do this if they are only ideas?
From the time of Ancient Greece through the modern period of philosophy (through the 18th century roughly), metaphysician described things that exist as "substances". But there seem to be different categories of substances. Some things that exist seem to be dependent on others and unable to exist on their own. So, for instance, red exists but doesn't exist independently of things which are red (red isn't floating around all by itself but there are red apples, red shirts, red stop signs, and red flags). One way of describing this relationship is to say that red is a property that things may or may not have. This way of thinking about the world suggests that there are substances and the properties that they have. We still sometimes describe the world in this way today.

So far I have described two sorts of questions that might come up in metaphysics. The first is a question about what sorts of things there are: are there ideas and material things, only material things, only ideas? The second has to do with the nature of the material world. Does it consists of substances and properties? If so how real are the properties? Is there anyway that the properties might exist independently of the substances? How does substances come into being? How do they get the properties that they have?

One other very important metaphysical question that philosophers have been concerned with is the nature of change. How do things change and yet stay the same? A primary example of this is the self. I am the same person that was born in 1951 but I have dramatically changed over the years. In what sense am I the same person? Does it even make sense to speak of me as the same person?

All of these and more are metaphysical questions.
**Epistemology** attempts to address questions of knowledge and belief. How do we know that God does or does not exist? Here is an epistemological question that is closely related to a metaphysical question (Does God exist?). One very worrying epistemological question is whether it is possible for us to have knowledge at all. In order to answer this question, we would have to know what knowledge is and how it differs from belief. What is the difference between knowing something and merely believing that it is true?

There are also philosophical questions pertaining to values (value theory). These sorts of questions are about what we take to be good. What things are better than others and why? What are values to begin with? So, for instance, a value question related to our first topic might be: What difference does it make to our lives whether or not God exists? Why should I value the answer to this question?

I have tried to use related questions on the same topic (in this case, God) to illustrate that the answers to philosophical questions are often interrelated. When we give answers to all the questions about a particular topic then we have a systematic philosophy about that topic. Though I used questions about God in this example, philosophy and religion are not the same thing.

Philosophers ask questions about anything that has to do with our lives, and because religion has played an important role in human lives throughout history, it has been a topic of philosophical discussion. But we can think philosophically about all sorts of things. So, for instance, we can do philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, philosophy of art, philosophy of biology, philosophy of technology, philosophy of love,
philosophy of…, well, you get the idea. There could be a philosophy of just about anything. Some of these arenas have been more completely explored than others.

**Method: Reasoning and Logic**

**The importance of giving reasons.**

Why give reasons for what we believe? Students very often comment that much of philosophy just seems to be a matter of opinion. When they make this comment, it would seem that they have in mind a difference between philosophy courses and their other courses. Presumably at least some of their other courses are not just about "opinions" but actually contain "knowledge". This brings us to one of the key questions raised in epistemology. What is the difference between knowledge and opinion?

**How to give reasons**

What follows is a discussion of logic. Logic is the study of the rules for correct reasoning, that is, reasoning that will lead to the truth. Some of it may be familiar to you or at least make sense, but this section introduces the technical language about reasoning that philosophers use. This is important to understand but for the purposes of this course what is even more important is what it is to give a reason for a belief, a claim, a position, or a point of view. I will be asking you to do this in everything that you write throughout this semester and so if you do not understand what it means you will have difficulty with all of the assignments.
To give reasons is to present verbal evidence that counts for believing that the claim or belief that you are presenting is true. Another way to put this is that the reasons count for believing that the position or point of view is the best one or at least a good one to adopt. Giving personal information about how you came to believe such a thing or hold such a point of view is usually not a reason because it will not count in favor of someone else holding the same view. It does not serve as evidence that others should believe the claim, that the belief is true, or that the position or point of view is a good one.

So, for instance, suppose that you claim that eating oatmeal for breakfast every morning is one of the key factors that leads to long life.

Here are two candidates. One of them is not a reason and one is. Which is which?

a. I believe that eating oatmeal is a key factor for long life because my mother told me this from very early on and so I grew up believing it.

b. I believe that eating oatmeal is a key factor for long life because it contains oat bran, which reduces cholesterol and low cholesterol is correlated with a lower risk of heart disease.

Just remember, you don't want to simply explain why it is that you believe something but rather to give a reason why you are justified in that belief and so why others should seriously consider believing it as well (or come up with a reason why your reasons are not good ones). You want to give a logical explanation, not a psychological one.

Logic. A key ingredient of the methodology of Western philosophy is the reliance on reason as a key to answering questions. The discipline that studies the art of reasoning is logic. A more formal definition for logic is that it is the study of arguments. When we
use "argument" in this context – the context of reasoning and in relation to philosophy – we do not mean to imply that there is any dispute that is involved. In philosophy, the giving of reasons in support of a claim is called an argument. So when you decide that you ought to go to college because you will be more likely to get a higher paying job, you are giving yourself an argument for going to college. The reasons are “College will get me a higher paying job” and “I want a higher paying job”. The conclusion of your argument is “Therefore I should go to college.” A more formal definition of argument is: an argument is a series of claims, one of which, the conclusion, is supported by the others, the premises (the reasons). In general, we can think of these claims as being expressed by statements (declarative sentences) and so we can write arguments out as collections of statements where one is the conclusion and the others are the premises. This can be very helpful when we are trying to follow a bit of philosophical reasoning.

Traditionally, arguments are divided into two sorts, ampliative and nonampliative. In ampliative arguments, the conclusion takes us beyond the information presented in the premises. These arguments are also sometimes called "inductive". An example would be the following: Dr. Crasnow was very demanding in her Critical Thinking course when I took it. But I worked hard and I got an A. She is also the teacher for my Introduction to Philosophy course and she seems as though she will be demanding in this course as well. Therefore if I work hard in this course I have a good chance of getting an A.

This argument is ampliative because although the premises give us good reasons for believing that the conclusion is true, the claim in the conclusion takes us beyond the information provided by the claims of the premises. Because it does this, it is always
possible for the conclusion to be false, even though the premises are true. For instance, there might be something very different about an introduction to philosophy course than a critical thinking course and so maybe it is harder to get an A.

Ampliative reasoning differs from nonampliative reasoning in that nonampliative reasoning does not take us beyond the premises in any informational sense (though it sometimes may seem to by revealing something that was implicit in the premises of which we were not yet aware). An argument that is nonampliative is also referred to as a deductive argument. An example of a deductive argument would be the following: Dr. Crasnow is always fair in her grading. She is teaching and grading the work for this intro course. This course will be graded fairly. Notice that in this argument, if the premises are true, then the conclusion would have to be true as well. This is because the information that has been stated in the conclusion has already been stated in the premises.

Western philosophy has been particularly enthralled with the power of deductive reasoning. The power that I am referring to here is the truth-preserving nature of this sort of reasoning. Deductive arguments are truth-preserving in that the truth of the premises is preserved and carried into the conclusion. If you start with truth and reason correctly you will finish with truth. However, to take advantage of the truth-preserving nature of deductive reasoning one must be sure to start with truth or there will not be any truth to be preserved! Ultimately, to arrive at a true conclusion is the goal of any argument whether it is ampliative or not. Nonampliative arguments are arguments in which the reasoning assures us that if we start off with truth we will end up with truth. In nonampliative arguments, though the premises make the truth of the conclusion more likely, they do not insure its truth.
How to evaluate arguments.

In order to evaluate arguments, two different criteria need to be considered.

- Do the premises support the conclusion in the way that they are intended to?
- Are the premises true?

The first of these does not depend on the second. This means that the question of whether reasons are good reasons is in part independent of whether they are true reasons. We need to ask ourselves, "If these claims were true, would they give me reason to believe that the conclusion is true as well?" and then ask separately, "Are these reasons true?"

Corresponding to these two questions are two different standards that must be met for an argument to be considered good. The evaluation of the argument varies depending on whether the argument is considered to be inductive or deductive. If the argument is inductive, then it is strong if the premises provide reason for believing that the conclusion is true. Of course, a strong argument is not necessarily a good argument. The premises will still need to be true. I am not going to discuss these concepts further in relation to inductive arguments as most of the arguments we will be examining are going to be deductive.

Validity and Soundness

A deductive argument in which the premises if true would lead us to accept the truth of the conclusion is called a valid argument. More correctly, the definition of a valid argument is that it is one in where if the premises are true, it is impossible for the conclusion to be false. But again, just as with inductive arguments, an argument is not
good just because it is valid. The premises of the argument also *actually* have to be true.

An argument that is valid and also has true premises will have a true conclusion because the validity of the reasoning and the truth of the premises will necessitate the truth of the conclusion. Such an argument is what we want. Such an argument is called sound.

The following examples illustrate the different types of arguments that you might have:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid with true premises (sound)</th>
<th>Invalid but true premises (unsound)</th>
<th>Invalid and false premises (unsound)</th>
<th>Valid with false premises (unsound)</th>
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<tr>
<td>All whales are mammals.</td>
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<td>All mammals are animals.</td>
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In the examples above the conclusion was true in each instance, but if the argument is unsound either because there are premises that are not true or because the reasoning is invalid, the conclusion could turn out to be either true or false. This is precisely why these arguments are not wanted. They do not give us any assurance that the conclusion is true.

From what has been said you should also be able to see that a valid argument might have any combination of true or false premises and a true or false conclusion *except* for true premises and a false conclusion, because the definition of a valid argument requires that if the premises are true then the conclusion must be true as well.
Giving reasons why an argument should not be accepted.

From what has been said about what makes a good argument, we can make some general claims how to reasonably reject an argument that has a conclusion that you should not agree – that would be one that you believe is false. You will see very quickly that it is not considered good enough to simply say that you disagree – you need to say why you disagree. You need to give reasons – a counterargument, which is an argument against the original argument. What this means is that you need to say what is wrong with the original argument and why. Since an argument can be flawed either by being invalid or by having false premises these are the features that you need to look at when thinking of the reasons why you will not accept the conclusion.

A good way to reject an argument is by giving a counterexample. A counterexample is an example that counts against something. There are two types of counterexamples that we will use frequently. The first is a counterexample to the truth of a premise. In other words, an example that shows that the premise is false. So for the third argument above, the premise "All mammals are whales." is false and we could point this out by giving a counterexample: "Dogs are mammals and they are not whales."

Another kind of counterexample is one that shows that an argument is invalid. We can show that an argument is invalid in a variety of ways and one thing that we would do in a logic class is explore these in more detail. However, the basic idea is always to show that the argument is one that could have a false conclusion in spite of having true premises. You can do this by finding an argument that has the same form of reasoning but clearly has a false conclusion and true premises. Let's do this for the second argument above.
All snakes are animals.
All snakes are reptiles.

All animals are reptiles.

In this argument, the premises are true but the conclusion is false. Since this argument has the same structure as the second argument above, it serves as a counterexample for that argument, showing that the structure of the argument is invalid and so should not be relied upon to preserve truth.

**Reductio ad absurdum**

There is another technique for refuting arguments that we will be coming across in the first few lessons. It is called *reductio ad absurdum*, which means "to reduce to absurdity". The idea behind this method of refutation is that you show that if the premises were to be accepted as true (or at least one of the premises) and you would be force to a false, impossible, or absurd conclusion by arguing validly from them. This means that accepting the premises as true must have been a mistake and so they (or at least one of them) must be false. This result follows from the fact that if you reason validly from true conclusions you must come to a true conclusion. If the conclusion cannot be true, then one of the premises must be false. Here is an example:

Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that all mammals are whales.

If it were true that all mammals were whales then I would be a whale, because I am a mammal.

But this obviously false (absurd).

Therefore my assumption that all mammals were whales must be wrong.
Paradox

Before we leave this section on logic and reason, it is important to understand that the cornerstone of reason is avoiding contradiction or self-contradiction. Logic is based on the belief that it is not possible for the same claim to be both true and false at the same time and in the same respect. This is called the Principle of Noncontradiction. Western philosophy takes a contradiction to indicate that something has gone wrong with our reasoning and we have to rethink the problem. This can be seen in the particular way in which Western philosophers deal with paradox. Here are some examples of paradoxes.

**The Liars Paradox:** In a particular city it is known that everyone in that city lies. If you ask a liar (a citizen of that city) if he is a liar, what will his answer be?

**Russell's Barber's Paradox:** In a particular village, everyone who is not shave by the barber shaves himself. Who shaves the barber?

**The paradoxical sentence:**

![The sentence in this box is false.]

Western philosophy treats paradoxes as indicators of a knot of some sort that reason has yet to unravel, however there is always confidence that reason will eventually resolve the puzzle. In contrast, non-Western philosophies sometimes take a paradox as an indication that the limits of reason have been reached. It is reason that leads us to the paradox after all and so the way to resolve it is to "go beyond" reason or at least recognize that there are some problems that human reason cannot help us with. The difference in approach
highlights the special role that reason has traditionally been thought to play in Western philosophy. Though we will ask questions about reason, its limits, and its nature, we will start with the assumption that has traditionally been made by Western philosophers. Whatever else we may demand of the solutions that we seek to problems we will begin by demanding that they conform to reason.