

STEVEN D. HALES

# THIS IS PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTION

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



**THIS IS PHILOSOPHY**



## **THIS IS PHILOSOPHY**

Series editor: Steven D. Hales

Reading philosophy can be like trying to ride a bucking bronco—you hold on for dear life while “transcendental deduction” twists you to one side, “causa sui” throws you to the other, and a 300-word, 300-year-old sentence comes down on you like an iron-shod hoof the size of a dinner plate. *This is Philosophy* is the riding academy that solves these problems. Each book in the series is written by an expert who knows how to gently guide students into the subject regardless of the reader’s ability or previous level of knowledge. Their reader-friendly prose is designed to help students find their way into the fascinating, challenging ideas that compose philosophy without simply sticking the hapless novice on the back of the bronco, as so many texts do. All the books in the series provide ample pedagogical aids, including links to free online primary sources. When students are ready to take the next step in their philosophical education, *This is Philosophy* is right there to help them along the way.

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For Vanessa

*Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point.*





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# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The problems of philosophy are deeply interconnected, and there is no natural or obvious starting point from which to begin. Indeed, plausible arguments might be given for starting with almost any of the central problems in the field. You might think that we should surely start with epistemology; until we understand what knowledge is and settle the matter of whether and how we can gain any knowledge at all, how can we possibly determine whether we can have knowledge of God, or our moral duties, or the nature of the mind? Clearly epistemology is the most fundamental philosophical project. Wait—how can we be sure that knowledge is valuable to have? Or that we ought to care about gaining truth and avoiding error? We'd better start with axiology and sort out duty, obligation, and responsibility first. Normativity and ethics must be foundational. Of course, how can we determine what our epistemic responsibilities are if we don't antecedently know whether we are free to believe one thing rather than another, or if we are truly at liberty to make choices? Let's begin with the issue of free will and figure that out first. If we're not free, that torpedoed a lot of other philosophical agendas. Yet if we don't know what kinds of beings we are, how can we ever determine whether we are free? Maybe personal identity should be the first stop on the road. And so on.

The chapters in the present book are self-contained units on the topics they address. While there are occasional references within them to other chapters, they can be taught or studied in any order. In *Daybreak* (section 454), Nietzsche wrote that, "A book such as this is not for reading straight through or reading aloud but for dipping into, especially when out walking or on a journey; you must be able to stick your head into it and out of it again and again and discover nothing familiar around you." To some extent,

the same is true of *This Is Philosophy: An Introduction*, even though it is much more straightforwardly systematic and less aphoristic than Nietzsche's *Daybreak*.

That said, the chapters are not randomly distributed, and are placed in one sensible progression. Most people have views about ethics and God before ever encountering philosophy, and so starting with topics to which they have already given some thought is a natural way to entice students into a deeper investigation. Appeal to human free choice is a venerable move in theodicy, and one with which the chapter on God ends. A chapter on free will then follows. Afterwards is a pair of chapters focusing on what it is to be a thinking, persisting person at all—personal identity and philosophy of mind. The final chapter in the book, on knowledge, ties together the threads of evidence, reason-giving, and rational belief that appear, one way or another, in all of the chapters, and ends with a comprehensive skeptical problem.



The problems of philosophy resemble a **Mandelbrot Set** (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEw8xpb1aRA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEw8xpb1aRA)), and the more closely one focuses on the small details, the more complications one finds. Some of the initial hooks and spirals can be found in the annotated bibliographies at the end of each chapter. These bibliographies list primary sources from the great thinkers that one may wish to read in conjunction with the present chapters, as well as some of the more accessible contemporary literature that is the next step for the **Padawan** philosopher (see <http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Padawan>).





# PREFACE

If this is the first philosophy book you've ever read, then you probably have no idea what you are in for. You pick up a book on chemistry and you expect diagrams of molecules and talk about "valences," a book on German and there will be long multisyllable words and lots of umlauts. But philosophy? What could that be about?

The word "philosophy" comes from two Greek words: "philia," which was one of the Greek words for love, and "sophia," which means wisdom. Thus philosophy is the love of wisdom. You may think that is not terribly informative, and it isn't. However, you have to remember that, back in ancient Greece, to be a scholar at all meant that one was a philosopher. You might have been a stonemason, a fisherman, a soldier, a physician, or a philosopher, a pursuit that would have included mathematics and science. Over the years, as concrete, definite advances have been made in different areas, philosophy has spawned spin-offs, fields that have become their own disciplines with their own specific methodology and subject matter. Mathematics was one of the first fields to splinter off this way, and then in the Renaissance science became separate from philosophy. In the nineteenth century psychology broke away from philosophy and, most recently, cognitive science, which used to be the scientific end of philosophy of mind, has become its own field. In some ways philosophy proper is left with the hardest questions, the ones that we have made the least definitive progress on.

That does not mean that philosophers have made no progress in 2500 years. We have. Nevertheless, the philosophical issues to be discussed in the present book are tough nuts to crack. Let us hope you do not crack your own coconut in the attempt! In the modern era, philosophy is in the

business of giving good reasons for one's nonempirical beliefs. That is, philosophers try to give arguments for believing claims about the nature of the self, or the existence of God, or moral duty, or the value of knowledge. These are topics that the scientific method of performing laboratory experiments and giving mathematical explanations does poorly in addressing. Philosophers take seriously the findings of experts in other disciplines, but we still have our own puzzles to solve.

Some philosophical topics stir great passions, and people find it threatening to ask questions about those issues. Philosophers are proud that one of the greatest philosophers in ancient times, **Socrates**, was executed by the state because he refused to stop questioning authority (see <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>). Socrates claimed to know nothing, but he was willing to go down for the *pursuit* of truth, fearless inquiry, and the life of the mind. If you are to find something of value in this book, you too need to be prepared to question your long-standing beliefs, to honestly ask yourself if the things you may have believed your entire life are actually true. All of us believe some things for poor reasons, and to be a philosopher is to try to ferret out those beliefs and either justify them or discard them as unworthy of your intellect. It is a difficult and often painful process to become an athlete of the mind, but there is great joy and thrilling discoveries to be had as well.

Just beneath the surface of your everyday life are chasms of mystery. We will not descend into the furthest reaches of the labyrinth in the present book, but there are wonders aplenty in the beginning passages. **Plato** wrote that philosophy begins in wonder (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/theat.html>)—so let us begin!