



# philosophy



## what is it?

It's difficult, but here are a few attempts - it's: the love of wisdom; the investigation of ideas; the opposite of small talk; examining life (Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living); thinking critically; a tool for defining purpose - trying to work out what we're here for; combining intelligence, imagination and values (imagination produces ideas that can be judged by our intelligence and values); or using the most complex thing we've discovered anywhere (until now) - the human brain.

Philosophy is about exploring, with a child's sense of amazement. Children ask deep philosophical questions, like 'if God made everything, who made God?' Try to answer that and you're deep into **metaphysics**, the branch of philosophy that speculates about existence and slowly turns into physics, although we've hardly begun. Or what about 'how do they know that?' Indeed - how do they? That's **epistemology**, the branch of philosophy dealing with knowledge & the nature of evidence. And the classic 'why do I have to do it?' and you're into **ethics** - the human questions, the 'how shall we be and what shall we do?', that Tolstoy said is the only question for humans.

Thales started it all around 600BC in Asia Minor, when he became the first person to say 'I refuse to accept a mythical explanation of existence any more'. He wanted to use his brain to try to work out what everything is, and how to live. Some folks have been doing that ever since. But when it comes to understanding the universe, has science taken over from philosophy? No, because science can't tell us about values. Science answers the 'how' questions, philosophy the 'why' questions.

Where are women in the history of philosophy? As with other subjects, they were mostly kept out



*Thales of Miletus, 624-547BCE: the first person to reject myths as a way of explaining existence.*



*René Descartes, 1596-1650: back to basics - I think, therefore I am.*

by men until the late 20th century. The future of philosophy will be more female, which is good, as the more perspectives as regards gender, race, profession, age and religious, political or sexual orientation the better. A philosophical heritage built by old, white males is a limited one.

## what are the benefits?

- you can learn a lot; increase understanding; hone your mental powers; discover things that help in real-life situations; it's an antidote to the mind-numbing superficiality of mass culture
- it generates ideas. There are big problems looming - ecology, cloning, conflict, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology - and possibly the only way to solve them is via philosophical debates that philosophers really need to be leading, not the business people, financiers, politicians and military who actually are
- philosophy can influence the real world; the two major powers of the 20th century, the US and the Soviet Union, were based on the thinking of Paine and Marx, who were influenced in turn by philosophers who came before them
- as Foucault said, only philosophy can expose the power structures that are used to control us, and come up with structures that don't
- it's a balance between the obsession with materialistic idiocy that blights our world today, and the reversion to magical thinking that many seem to believe is the appropriate response to it

## what can I do?

We can all 'do' philosophy in our everyday life. It's about thinking, and we can all do that. Give yourself some mental space to be able to think. Learn to question everything. Try to make sense of existence by approaching it like a child. Be curious, open, keep asking why.



**Metaphysics:** question metaphysical speculation, and be creative with your own. Beware of cults or gurus. Good philosophy isn't dogmatic. metaphysics is speculative and imaginative, but that's OK - Einstein's genius wasn't his technical ability, but his imagination.

**Ethics:** question whether our social and political structures are the best we can do, or whether they should be tweaked or changed completely.

**Epistemology:** question all claims - extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

It's good to know some history, linguistics, maths, science, psychology, religion, politics, law - they all feed into and are fed by philosophy. But you don't need to have read a lot - it's about what you think. Having said that, reading the thoughts of the world's greatest philosophers will give you insights and inspiration, so on balance, we'd recommend it if you have time. Read general and introductory books, after which you can find the works of individual philosophers who inspire you.

It's probably good to keep a balance, in a yin/yang, left-brain/right-brain (if you like) sort of way. A purely rational philosophy could mean tying ourselves up in ever-more complex logic, irrelevant to the everyday world; and a purely imaginative philosophy could lead to conspiracy theories, religious fundamentalism, flights of fancy and pseudo-science. Maybe the most fruitful route is to try to balance rationality and imagination.

Talk to other people. We need small talk to facilitate social interaction - but don't think that that's all people want. Often people crave 'big talk'. But remember:



Slavoj Žižek, 1949-: *I secretly think that reality exists so that we can speculate about it.*

- be polite - people may not share your philosophy. Big talk can lead to a 'spirited' discussion very quickly. Using 'maybe' or 'I wonder' can be useful. It's not about proselytising, trying to score points or show how clever you are. If someone objects to your ideas, don't take it as a personal affront - take it as an opportunity to explore, learn and grow
- absolute certainty is beyond humans, but we can use our imagination and our rationality to place ourselves in the universe, to analyse humanity and to choose the direction we move in
- some may consider you immature because you question received wisdom or the *status quo*. But it's not immature - dominant ideas and social systems change; they always have and they probably always will. Things are the way they are for a reason, but it may not be a good reason, and they don't have to stay that way
- some people are just not good philosophers, and they may become angry if their assumptions are challenged. With these people it's probably best just to smile and change the subject

If you want to get into more serious philosophy, it may be a good idea to gain a basic understanding of a) what science is saying about the nature of the universe, from the sub-atomic to the cosmic; b) the take-home message of the world's major religions; and c) how the world works - as in where real power lies, and what you think about that.

## resources

- see [lowimpact.org/philosophy](http://lowimpact.org/philosophy) for info, links, magazines & books, including:
- Brenda Almond, *Exploring Philosophy*
- Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*
- Baggini & Fosl, *the Philosopher's Toolkit*
- Gary Cox, *How to be a Philosopher*
- [philosophynow.org](http://philosophynow.org) - *Philosophy Now* magazine
- [bpa.ac.uk](http://bpa.ac.uk) - British Philosophical Association
- [erraticimpact.com](http://erraticimpact.com) - huge online resource
- [guardian.co.uk/world/philosophy](http://guardian.co.uk/world/philosophy) - hundreds of philosophy articles
- [philosophypages.com/dy/zt.htm](http://philosophypages.com/dy/zt.htm) - timeline of Western philosophers
- [askphilosophers.org](http://askphilosophers.org) - ask questions of philosophers
- [philfilms.utm.edu](http://philfilms.utm.edu) - list of films with philosophical discussions about them

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