

PART ONE: WHAT IS EVERYTHING REALLY LIKE?
QUESTIONS OF METAPHYSICS

CHAPTER 2
REALITY AND BEING

TEACHING THE LANGUAGE OF PHILOSOPHY

As a result of reading and discussing the first chapter, your students now have a basic vocabulary of the Greek roots of many philosophical terms and some understanding of how the method of philosophy works. They have also had a preview of the three major branches: metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology. In this chapter we begin the pattern the text will follow -- focusing on a single topic, in this case reality.

Most of the vocabulary in this chapter is non-Greek and a fair number of the philosophical terms have made their way into the general lexicon of spoken English. It will be helpful to find opportunities to reinforce the Greek terms from chapter 1 as you introduce these more familiar words and explain their philosophical applications.

The method section focuses on the categorical syllogism as developed by Aristotle and on the method of reducing something to the absurd as a way of dismissing it. Although they may not know the term, students generally are somewhat familiar with the syllogistic pattern of arguing from two premises to a conclusion and they are generally intrigued by the "tricky" nature of the REDUCTIO.

Vocabulary

Taking the obviously Greek words first, you can build on chapter 1 by reminding students of the **-ology** suffix (meaning "study of" or "theory of") and then introducing **telos**, "order or purpose." This gets you to **teleology** and to its companion term **entelechy**, "inner purpose or end," which also uses the **telos** root. **Nous**, the Greek word for "mind," can be related to **logos** since it has a similar meaning in philosophy, indicating the rationality of the cosmos. Plato's concept of the perfect **Forms** should be discussed in this context, although the English word "form" is used in an unfamiliar way.

Four of the vocabulary words end with the suffix **-ism**, meaning "doctrine, theory, or principle of". Although the suffix is a familiar one, you will want to focus on the philosophical meaning of each term in the context of the chapter inquiry -- what is real? **Idealism** emphasizes mind, soul, spirit or life; **materialism** identifies matter; **pragmatism**, from the Greek word **pragma**, meaning "things done," focuses on what works. Whereas each of these three terms takes a stand, arguing or asserting a single doctrine or theory about reality, the fourth term **relativism** contends that there are no objective standards for truth; everything is, therefore, relative and nothing is absolute. Although this is an epistemological theory, it has obvious implications for metaphysics. You might want to remind your students of the Sophists who practiced epistemological relativism.

There are four Buddhist terms in this chapter. **Samsara** is a review term, first introduced in chapter 1. In this round of birth/death/rebirth, **skandhas** or "heaps" temporarily combine to make a human "person." At death, the skandhas dissolve and do not continue into the next existence. Only karma links one existence with the next. A **bodhisattva** experiences existence (**sattva**) in a state of wisdom (**bodhi**). Having attained enlightenment, this person could leave the world of samsara forever but remains to help others attain wisdom. The sky god Indra provides the image for the last Buddhist term. The net of jewels offers a vision of a web of interconnectedness and oneness.

In this chapter we meet Chinese philosophy for the first time. The **tao** is the "way, "principle," or "cosmic order" that is the Chinese equivalent of the Greek terms **logos** and **nous**. There is a significant difference, however; the tao cannot be understood rationally but rather through a more intuitive process. This is an important distinction to make as it will be expanded and elaborated on throughout the text. The tao exists in a state of oneness which cannot be described or spoken about -- there are no words. To speak about it, to make it manifest, the Chinese use the terms **yin** and **yang**. The most important concept here is that yin and yang are two aspects of one whole. Each has no meaning apart from the other -- much as the

front of a hand has no meaning apart from the back of that same hand or the head and tail of a coin depend on each other for significance and integrity. Because the terms signify complementary opposites like female/male, dark/light, wet/dry, students often have the mistaken notion that boys should be yang whereas girls should be yin. Nothing could be further from the truth. Each person is and must be a mixture of yin and yang, following the model of nature, our great teacher. In the interplay of yin and yang we see the energy of the life force which the Chinese call **ch'i**. Ch'i is in nature and in us. When we are healthy and happy, it moves spontaneously and freely. Only when we are "stuck" or "spinning out of control" is the life force not able to function. This does not happen in nature.

The scientific term **virtual reality** offers the metaphor for the chapter. How can we be certain about what is real if we can step into a computer-generated environment that seems as "real" as ordinary reality? This metaphor is meant to raise some questions about what we accept as real. How much of what we see, for instance, is "out there" and how much constructed by our sophisticated brains? The film "Disclosure" has an interesting virtual reality sequence you might use.

Method

Beginning with the categorical syllogism, we embark on a short course in logic. The most important concept to convey here is the distinction between valid/invalid and true/false. Students are likely to assume that valid means true whereas invalid means false. This first detailed look at the "grammar" of philosophy provides a method for determining whether or not the structure of an argument is sound. If it is, the argument is valid; if it is not the argument is invalid.

In a valid argument, the two premises support or lead to the conclusion. In an invalid argument, they do not. It may be helpful to approach this as you would a problem in mathematics, stressing that the truth or falsity of the premises is not the issue -- only their ability to lead to a particular conclusion. Once students understand the rules governing validity/invalidity, it is helpful to provide an example of a valid argument that is patently untrue. For instance:

All ducks are blue
Socrates is a duck
Socrates is blue

Even though it is **false** that all ducks are blue and equally **false** that Socrates is a duck, **if** those two premises **were true**, it would also be **true** that Socrates is blue. The pattern is that if all ducks are contained in the category of "blue things" and if Socrates is contained in the category of "duck," then it follows that Socrates is also contained in the larger category of "blue things." You may find it helpful to draw a circle labeled "ducks" within a larger circle labeled "blue things" and then ask the students where to place the circle labeled "Socrates." When they see that placing Socrates within the circle "duck" also places him within the larger circle "blue things," the whole concept may be illuminated. For visual learners, this teaching technique works better than the validity tests traditionally used.

Drawing circles is also very effective in illustrating why an argument is invalid. Using the same terms, write this syllogism on the board:

All ducks are blue
Socrates is blue
Socrates is a duck

Ask the students comfortable using validity tests to apply them. This argument fails the first test. The middle term (blue) is not distributed (does not refer to all members of the class) in either premise. Therefore, there is nothing to link the premises with the conclusion. Now ask the visual learners to assist you in drawing the circles containing each term. You might begin by drawing the circle containing "ducks" within a larger circle labeled "blue things." Ask the students where to draw the circle labeled "Socrates." They should see that it will appear (along with the circle labeled "ducks") within the larger "blue things" circle but that the only relationship established between Socrates and ducks is that they are both "blue

things." No link has been made between Socrates and ducks. The way to reach this same understanding with those using validity tests is to ask them to change the syllogism in order to make the argument valid.

Once students understand what makes a valid argument (the premises lead to or support the conclusion), you can explain that the next step is to determine whether or not each of the premises is true. What a valid syllogism tells us is this: **If** all ducks are blue and **if** Socrates is a duck, then Socrates must be blue. Not all valid arguments lead to true conclusions. This one, for instance, leads to a clearly false conclusion -- Socrates was not blue. So, valid arguments are not necessarily true; however, all true arguments must be valid. Validity refers to the **form** of an argument -- not its truth or falsity.

Reductio Ad Absurdum follows a premise to an insupportable conclusion as a way of denying it. The example given in the "How Philosophy Works" box of the text provides an interesting "take" on our common sense view of reality. Based on the experience of Virgil, the blind man who received his sight rather late in life and was never able to "see" in the conventional sense, this argument challenges some assumptions we make about reality.

The common sense logic of the first premise -- "The world as it is matches my perceptions of it" -- is challenged by the sharp divergence of Virgil's perceptions of the world. If Virgil's perceptions are accurate, I must at least re-examine my own. The **form** of this argument allows us to explore the suppressed or hidden premises that underlie much of what we believe. It may seem obvious that the world is as I (and all my friends) perceive it to be, until I learn of the experiences of someone like Virgil who received his sight but never learned to "see."

Discussion Starter

Use one of the images typically found in a psychology textbook in which two different ways of seeing are possible. Are we looking at a young woman whose head is turned away in one-quarter profile and whose chin, nosetip and eyelashes are all we can see of her face **or** are we looking at an old woman whom we see in full face and whose large nose dominates the picture? Although many students may already be familiar with this image (or the equally useful one that is both a vase and two faces in profile), you can guide them to realize that they saw one image spontaneously and had to "learn to see" the other. Indeed, some students are never able to see the second image or are able to see it only after considerable tracing of features for assistance. And, nearly everyone still sees first the image they initially saw.

This discussion can segue easily into how much of reality we have been taught to see or taught to see in a particular way. If children must be taught to "see" the world (as Virgil's experience strongly suggests is the case), what is the world really like before we process it? Some philosophers argue that the only "reality" is the bits of perception Virgil got -- brown, smooth, light. No wonder he had trouble distinguishing his dog from his cat, using only his eyes. If putting those discrete bits of sense data together into the smooth fabric we call reality is so complex a task that we are very far from being able to teach artificial intelligence how to do it, our brains must be playing a very active role in the construction of reality.

Students who find this interesting may want to skip ahead to Historical Interlude E which summarizes some of the recent research in the neurophysiology of the brain. You might find some good examples there to fuel your discussion about what reality is and how much of it is "out there" and how much "in us."

Background

This chapter relies pretty heavily on twentieth-century physics and the implications about reality that flow from it. If you have students who are physics majors or who have taken a course or two in physics, you can enlist their aid in explaining how physics sees reality. Quantum mechanics and relativity theory provide an interesting counterpart to philosophical questions about what is real. Two helpful books that put the findings of the new physics in terms the layperson can understand are: (1) The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics by Gary Zukav (New York: Morrow, 1979) and The Tao Of Physics by Fritjof Capra (New York: Bantam, 1992).

Capra's book specifically connects the worldview of particle physics with ancient Buddhist and

Taoist insights and suggests that explanations about the world put forth by science and philosophy, East and West, are converging. Capra suggests that the quantum field, which is empty yet charged, comes very close to the Buddhist concept of emptiness and the Tao as the source of everything. Zukav's book is less mystical and contains less mathematics. Both are very readable for someone with a background in philosophical literature. You may find these useful for your own preparation and you may want to refer interested students to them as well.

For a readable introduction to virtual reality, I recommend Michael Heim's The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) which takes a decidedly philosophical cut on the new technology and its implications. Like the automobile and the airplane, Heim argues, the computer will radically redefine the context in which our knowledge and awareness of life are rooted. Computers, he suggests, have already altered our thought habits and we are only at the beginning of this fascinating and somewhat frightening technology. Virtual reality is an intellectual feast, the introduction tells us, to which we are all invited.

Many of your students will have had experiences on the Internet, conversing with people in other countries, people they might be unable or unwilling to talk to in ordinary reality. Professors and students share ideas on "lists" and people may retain their anonymity if they wish. There is a strong pull toward intimacy with strangers to whom you might say things you would never say to anyone face to face.

Those who are willing to speak about their experiences can provide some interesting background. It is also increasingly likely that someone in your class will have had a virtual reality experience. Those not willing to speak may be willing to write, providing you with additional background and some very interesting discussion starters. Nearly everyone will have read, seen, or at least heard of virtual reality through films such as The Lawnmower Man and TV programs such as "Star Trek: The Next Generation," "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine," and "Star Trek: Voyager." Students often tape their favorite episodes and may be willing to share a short clip from one of the Star Trek series that you can use in class.

Of course, *The Matrix* films offer students an opportunity to explore the question of what constitutes reality. The Matrix is essentially a computer-generated dreamworld. It is the illusion of a world which no longer exists. Yet, this virtual world seems like the reality. In fact, the main character Neo is on a quest to understand what is reality.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Virtual reality refers to:
 - a. the reality we encounter in our dreams
 - b. reality as experienced using extrasensory perception
 - * c. a computer generated reality, experienced from within
 - d. the quasi-reality of the ordinary sense world
2. According to Plato's theory of ideas, perfect Forms exist:
 - a. within perfect objects
 - * b. in a separate world or kingdom
 - c. in virtual reality
 - d. they do not exist, according to him
3. Plato's metaphysics has been called a:
 - a. one world divided view
 - b. a multi-world view
 - c. a layered world view
 - * d. a two world view
4. One of the implications of Plato's metaphysics is that our senses are:
 - a. valuable guides to knowledge
 - * b. not to be trusted to provide knowledge
 - c. a short cut to knowledge
 - d. superior to reason in learning

5. Aristotle concluded that "tableness" can be found:
a. in the kingdom of ideas
b. in both the kingdom of ideas and the sense world
* c. only in tables
d. nowhere; it does not exist
6. The laws of Newtonian physics, we now believe, hold:
a. everywhere
* b. in the world of the fairly large and fairly slow
c. in the world of the very small and very fast
d. nowhere
7. The world of quantum mechanics is concerned with:
a. certainties
* b. probabilities
c. both certainties and probabilities
d. neither certainties nor probabilities
8. In Taoism, yin and yang are understood as:
a. conflicting opposites
b. occasionally interacting opposites
* c. two parts of one whole
d. completely unrelated
9. Quantum mechanics and Taoism share the view that reality is:
* a. one
b. dual
c. multi-dimensional
d. impossible to understand
10. Quantum mechanics may best be associated with which view of reality?
a. materialism
b. idealism
* c. pragmatism
d. existentialism
11. Newtonian mechanics may be best associated with which view of reality?
* a. materialism
b. idealism
c. pragmatism
d. existentialism
12. Neo-Platonism blends the philosophy of Plato with:
a. the philosophy of Aristotle
* b. mystical Christianity
c. pragmatism
d. materialism
13. In traditional Native American thought, nature is seen as:
a. hostile

- *
 - b. foreign
 - c. sacred
 - d. irrelevant

- 14. In traditional African thought, reality is seen as:
 - a. dualistic
 - b. multi-dimensional
 - c. unknowable
 - * d. one

- 15. In Western thought:
 - * a. mind is considered superior to matter
 - b. matter is considered superior to mind
 - c. mind and matter are considered equal
 - d. both mind and matter are devalued

- 16. The knower and the known are considered separate in:
 - a. Buddhism
 - b. Taoism
 - * c. Western metaphysics
 - d. Native American thought

- 17. **Teleology** means:
 - * a. order and purpose exist
 - b. order and purpose cannot exist
 - c. we cannot know whether order and purpose exist
 - d. none of the above

- 18. In Aristotle's ontology, **entelechy** means:
 - a. entering or merging with
 - b. intelligent, organic being
 - c. randomness or chaos
 - * d. inner order or purpose

- 19. A **bodhisattva** is an enlightened being who:
 - a. immediately leaves the world of samsara
 - b. has no interest in the ordinary world of beings
 - * c. postpones nirvana to help others become enlightened
 - d. no longer has a body

- 20. In Buddhism, **skandhas** refer to:
 - a. the rules governing proper conduct
 - * b. elements that combine to constitute a "person"
 - c. wise men in a monastery
 - d. those who bring scandal to the community

- 21. Plato and Aristotle agree that reality is:
 - a. composed of mind and matter
 - b. mind is superior to matter
 - * c. both a and b are correct
 - d. neither a nor b is correct

- 22. Plato and Aristotle disagree about:
 - a. where Forms may be found

- b. whether or not the senses are to be trusted
 - * c. both a and b are correct
 - d. neither a nor b is correct
23. Buddhism teaches that:
- a. focusing on nature and the ego leads to enlightenment
 - b. the knower is completely separate from the known
 - c. both a and b are correct
 - * d. neither a nor b is correct
24. According to Buddhism, the source of our unhappiness is:
- a. our sinfulness
 - b. evil spirits
 - * c. our attachment to the things of this world
 - d. our unredeemable human nature
25. Aristotelian and Akan thought agree that ethical principles:
- a. cannot be discussed in the abstract
 - b. must be discussed in terms of specific circumstances
 - * c. both a and b are correct
 - d. neither a nor b is correct

True/False Questions

- F 1. Plato and Aristotle agree that Forms exist in a separate kingdom.
- T 2. According to the Buddha, life is suffering caused by desire.
- T 3. According to the Heart Sutra, form is emptiness and emptiness is form.
- T 4. According to Taoism, if we want to understand reality, we should study nature.
- F 5. In Taoism, yin and yang are understood as direct opposites.
- T 6. The **ch'i** is the breath of the life force, the energy that dances between heaven and earth.
- F 7. Both Western and Eastern metaphysics agree that there is a sharp distinction between the knower and the known.
- T 8. According to Newtonian mechanics, the world can be understood as a great machine.
- T 9. Materialism rejects the Platonic concept of Form or Idea altogether.
- T 10. Aristotle insisted that four varieties of causes account for the order we observe.
- F 11. Hypatia is remembered for teaching both materialism and pragmatism in Alexandria.
- T 12. The Seneca creation myth is narrated by a member of the stone tribe.
- T 13. There are some similarities between the Seneca view of reality and Buddhist/Taoist metaphysics.
- F 14. In the Akan story of creation, as in the Bible, the creator creates the world out of nothing.
- T 15. Both African and African American religious thought tend to view the entire cosmos as sacred.

Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast the views of Plato and Aristotle on the relationship between Form and Matter. Given your knowledge of Western science and/or Eastern metaphysics, choose **one** of these views and defend it philosophically.
2. Compare the dilemma of the prisoner in Plato's Cave Allegory with the dilemma of the unenlightened person in Buddhist thought. In each case, answer the following questions: (1) what is the source of the problem? (2) What is the solution to the problem? (3) why is there a dilemma?
3. Describe the roles of yin and yang in Taoist metaphysics. How does each represent the Tao and what relationship do the two have with each other?
4. Using quantum mechanics and the experience of Virgil, the man who regained his sight after years of blindness, discuss the relationship between the way things appear to us and the way they actually are. These should be among your considerations: (1) What questions do the theory of quantum mechanics and Virgil's experience raise about the nature of reality? (2) If reality can appear differently at different times and/or to different observers, how do we decide what is really "real"?
5. What are the implications if there is order and purpose in the cosmos and if there is not? Use either the Seneca creation myth or the African American experience of a sacred cosmos to explore the implications of this question.

Resources

Discoveries in astronomy, like those in physics, are raising philosophical questions. When we wonder, as Thales and the first Greek philosophers did, about where everything comes from, the night sky, with its thousands of stars, seems to deepen the question. The human impulse to wonder about and speculate on where the world comes from can be found in every culture.

A VHS video, "So Many Galaxies ... So Little Time," takes viewers on a simulated trip through space (Astrophysical Society of the Pacific 390 Ashton Avenue, San Francisco, California 94112 \$39.95). This video, or others like it, can help you raise questions about whether order and purpose can be found in the cosmos.

Many of your students will have seen the film "Groundhog Day." It provides a good introduction to the Buddhist concepts of rebirth, karma, and enlightenment. Just as Phil (the Bill Murray character) is "reborn" every morning at 6:00 a.m. on February 2nd, Buddhists believe we will continue to be reborn in successive lives until we "get it," as Phil finally did -- until we become enlightened.

Phil continues creating "bad karma" by using his repeating days to hit on an attractive young woman and to dazzle Rita, the real object of his affection. As he gradually wakes up, the "good karma" he creates by saving people from accidents and death as well as bad fortune eventually frees him from the necessity of living the day over and over again. When he wakes up with Rita beside him and discovers it is February 3rd, we realize Phil has been changed forever. He really has achieved a kind of enlightenment. The old Phil has been left behind.

Rent the video and show selected portions to emphasize what you want students to understand. It is helpful to provide them with a study sheet of questions. Another option is to give this as an assignment, asking the students to watch the video and answer or think about some questions. It is particularly interesting to ask them to speculate about Phil's new life. What would the next chapter be if they were writing it? A very clear understanding to some difficult concepts can emerge from analyzing this popular

and accessible film.

Movies, books, short stories, poems, rock songs, all offer windows into philosophical understandings. Because fiction is distilled and condensed, and because characters or narrative voices are living concrete lives, the philosophical ideas can be more easily grasped. I find reflective papers on philosophical fiction to be an effective teaching/learning tool.