



PHILOSOPHY 101



The “BIG IDEA” for the
101 Most Important People
and Concepts in Philosophy

MICHAEL J. VLACH, PH.D.

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101

Philosophy 101
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*To my wonderful mother, Patricia Vlach,
whose unconditional love has meant so much
to me at every stage of my life.*

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INTRODUCTION

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

--Socrates

Studying philosophy can be an intimidating endeavor, especially for the beginner. Complicated ideas from philosophers who lived hundreds and even thousands of years ago can make learning philosophy seem like an impossible task. One can easily become lost in a labyrinth of technical terms and abstract concepts. For many, the more one enters the maze of philosophy, the more lost one becomes. Even philosophy books that are meant for “dummies” can make you feel like a dummy when you are not able to follow long, drawn out explanations of matters. There has got to be an easier way!

As a philosophy teacher, I wanted a tool that would make the discipline of philosophy more understandable and even enjoyable for my students. I wanted a clear and succinct guide that would help beginning philosophy students grasp the essential concepts in philosophy. This book is the result of this desire. If you are interested in studying philosophy, there are three reasons why this book will be of help to you:

First, as the title of this book indicates, this work lays out the 101 most important people and concepts in philosophy. Philosophy is a huge discipline with thousands of people and ideas that could be mentioned. I, though, have zoomed in on those concepts that are most necessary for a basic understanding of philosophy. While no two philosophers would ever completely agree on what should be included in a list of 101 philosophy ideas, I am confident that the entries in this book represent the topics that are most discussed in discussions of philosophy at the beginning level.

Second, this book gives you the information you need in a concise and nontechnical manner. Most entries are only a few pages long, so you will find what you are looking for quickly and avoid long, drawn out explanations. With the exception of those topics that transcend a specific beginning point, most entries are listed in chronological order. Plus, I offer nontechnical explanations that are easy to understand. This book also provides interesting and even goofy information about some of the most important people in the history of philosophy. So not only will you learn a lot, sometimes you may even chuckle. In addition, words highlighted in bold mean that there is another entry in the book devoted specifically to that person or concept.

Third, this work offers “Big Idea” summaries at the beginning of each entry. The “Big Idea” is a one-sentence statement that captures the most important idea of each philosophical topic. With the “Big Idea” you do not have to wade through pages of technical jargon to find what you are looking for. The essential meaning is right there!

Whom is this book for? I have purposely made it for the beginning student of philosophy who wants a basic explanation

of the most important ideas in philosophy. To use a baseball analogy, it gets you to first base on the topic at hand.

You can use this book as a reference tool to look up key ideas, or you can read it straight through. Either way, it will give you the information you need to gain a basic understanding of philosophy—a “Philosophy 101” education.

May you find *Philosophy 101: The “Big Idea” for the 101 Most Important People and Concepts in Philosophy* to be of help to you.

1

PHILOSOPHY



BIG IDEA:

Philosophy is the attempt to think rationally and critically about the most important matters in life.

The word “philosophy” was used by the Greek thinker, **Pythagoras**, around 600 B.C. It comes from two Greek terms: *phileo* means “to love” and *sophia* means “wisdom.” Philosophy, therefore, is the “love of wisdom.” Some have said that philosophy is merely “thinking about thinking.” A more formal definition is this: “Philosophy is the attempt to think rationally and critically about the most important matters.” In the eighteenth century, **Immanuel Kant** stated that philosophy addresses three main questions: “What can I know?” “What should I do?” and “What may I hope?” These get at the essence of the meaning of life.

Philosophy is perhaps the broadest discipline of study since it covers nearly everything. The five major branches of philosophy are (1) **metaphysics** (study of reality), (2) **epistemology** (study of knowledge), (3) **ethics** (study of right and wrong), (4) logic (study of reasoning), and (5) **aesthetics** (study of art and beauty). Philosophy also covers several other areas such as **philosophy of religion**, philosophy of education, and philosophy of science. Whenever any discipline is looked at philosophically, it comes under the broad umbrella of philosophy.

Some may wonder whether philosophy is worthy of study. After all, isn't philosophy just a meaningless quibbling over words? Is philosophy really practical? While it is true that much of philosophy can appear meaningless and unpractical, there is value in studying it. First, philosophy deals with the most important questions and issues of life such as, "Why am I here?" "Does this world have a purpose?" "Does God exist?" "Is there life after death?" "What is the basis for right and wrong?" "Why does evil exist?" "What makes a war a **just war**?" If you have ever wondered about these topics or other issues like them, then you have already engaged in philosophy. Although philosophy can get rather technical at times, it tackles "ultimate issues"—topics that matter the most.

Second, the study of philosophy is important because we are all philosophers in some sense. Whenever we deal with the ultimate issues of life such as the meaning of our lives or how we should act, we engage in philosophy. Even those who don't like to study philosophy or say it is irrelevant have reached this conclusion from a philosophical framework. Aristotle said, "All men by nature desire to know." If that is true, then we are all philosophers to some extent.

A third reason for participating in philosophy is because doing so will sharpen your thinking skills. As you study philosophy, you will engage in and evaluate what others have said about various topics. Sometimes you may say, “That makes sense to me.” Or, “That’s a really dumb idea. Where in the world did he come up with that?” Sometimes you may say, “I’ll have to think about that.” Studying philosophy will help you think. Plus, you will learn a lot about some of the most important and interesting people in history. You may not agree with everything everybody says, but even in the act of disagreement you will learn something and become a better thinker. So the study of philosophy is a way to sharpen your own thinking skills.

It’s also important to remember that philosophy is an activity. And just like any activity such as bowling or riding a bike, the best way to become better at it is to engage it and work at it. Seriously grapple with philosophical issues. Read the works of philosophers. As you do, you will become a better philosopher.

2

WORLDVIEW

BIG IDEA:

A worldview is the overall perspective by which a person or group interprets and understands the world.



The term “worldview” comes from the German word *Weltanschauung*, which means “look at the world.” In today’s usage “worldview” refers to the overall perspective from which a person or group sees, understands and interprets the world. This includes conscious and unconscious presuppositions and beliefs concerning a wide variety of topics such as the existence of God, who we are as human beings, our purpose in life, our duties and roles in society, and life after death. A worldview, therefore, can be defined as any **philosophy**, ideology, religion, or movement that provides an all-encompassing approach to understanding reality.

There are several major worldviews today including Christian theism, naturalistic atheism, Eastern pantheism, New Age, Marxism, **nihilism**, **existentialism**, and **postmodernism**. **Christianity**, for example, promotes a worldview based on the belief that there is a personal and eternal God who created all things for a purpose. Yet because of sin the world is cursed resulting in death. Someday God will restore everything to its intended order. The four key events of the Christian worldview are the (1) Creation, (2) the Fall of Mankind, (3) Redemption in Jesus, and (4) the Restoration of all things with a new heavens and new earth.

Naturalistic atheism, on the other hand, assumes there is no God, the universe happened by chance, and people are the result of an evolutionary process. This naturalistic understanding means that truth and morals are relative and there is no afterlife. People should look to themselves and not some god for meaning.

Eastern religions assume that history operates in a circular manner and that people are reborn again and again in a cycle of reincarnation. This worldview also assumes that attachments and cravings are the main problems in life and that a person should seek to escape these desires and merge into an impersonal Absolute such as Brahman (in Hinduism) or Nirvana (in Buddhism).

Worldviews are not just for philosophers. Every conscious person of age has a worldview whether he or she is aware of it or not. In fact, it is accurate to say that every person thinks and acts in accordance with his or her worldview. What worldview do you live by?

3

METAPHYSICS

BIG IDEA:

Metaphysics is the study of reality and existence.



Just who am I? What is my purpose in life? Does God really exist? Is there life after death? Questions like these come under the category of **philosophy** we call metaphysics. Put simply, metaphysics is a major branch of philosophy that addresses the broad issues of reality and existence. It focuses mostly on the nonmaterial aspects of reality and those things that are not subject to scientific verification or mathematics. Metaphysics addresses issues like the existence of God, the soul, the mind-body relationship, the meaning of life, and whether or not there is an afterlife. Metaphysics is closely related to ontology, which is the study of “being” and the entities that are a part of the universe.

Metaphysics comes from two Greek words—*meta*, which means “after,” and *physica*, which refers to material reality. The term is said to have originated in Rome in the first century B.C. with the philosopher Andronicus of Rhodes. It quickly came to refer to matters that are “after” or “beyond” material reality.

Most people throughout history have held a view of metaphysics in which there is a nonphysical realm that exists in addition to the physical. **Plato**, for instance, argued that there is a realm of “forms” in another dimension that is more real than the physical realm. He believed that people could not experience true reality without understanding these metaphysical forms. This two-tiered view of reality was quite common in the Medieval Era. **Immanuel Kant**, however, startled many in the eighteenth century when he declared that metaphysical issues like God and the soul were not knowable through reason.

4

EPISTEMOLOGY

BIG IDEA:

*Epistemology is the study
of knowledge.*



Can you ever know anything with certainty? Are there truths that can be known? What basis do you have for your beliefs?

These important questions are related to the issue of epistemology. Epistemology is the study of knowledge. As one of the major categories of **philosophy**, epistemology addresses the limits of human knowledge including issues such as the definition of knowledge, types of knowledge, the degree to which knowledge is possible, and the relationship between the one knowing and the object being known. Questions such as “How can I know anything?” and “How can I know what is true?” are questions related to epistemology.

Traditionally, there have been two main schools of epistemology. **Rationalism** asserts that the basis for knowledge is the mind and reason apart from prior experience. **Empiricism**, on the other hand, claims that knowledge is rooted in the physical world—in the data collected from our physical senses.

Epistemology has been debated throughout the history of philosophy. In the fourth century B.C., the **Sophists** questioned the idea of knowledge that was certain and universal. **Plato** argued that true knowledge was rooted in “forms” that existed in a different dimension. In the Modern Era, **René Descartes**, **Baruch Spinoza**, and **Gottfried Leibniz** were leaders in promoting rationalism. **John Locke** and **David Hume** promoted empiricism. **Immanuel Kant** attempted to solve the issue by combining elements of rationalism and empiricism.

5

ETHICS

BIG IDEA:

*Ethics is the study of morality—
right and wrong.*



Ethics is a branch of **philosophy** that addresses morality. It is the study of moral value, right and wrong. Ethics places value on personal actions, decisions, and relations. There are at least five major approaches to ethics—Ancient Greek, Christian, Kantian, **Utilitarianism**, and ethical relativism.

First, Greek ethics includes the ethical approaches of the ancient Greek philosophers. The **Sophists** in the fifth century B.C. raised questions about what morality really was. Protagoras held that ethics was relative and not anchored in absolute moral truths. **Plato**, though, argued that ethics was rooted in eternal “forms” or “ideas.” Thus, there are absolute standards for right

and wrong. **Aristotle** argued that virtue is natural and can be cultivated through practice.

Second, Christian ethics is centered in God's will, especially as revealed in the Bible. With this approach, right is what God wills, and wrong is anything against God's will. This is the case because God is holy and good. What is right stems from God's character and is not something outside of God.

Third, Kantian ethics is an ethical approach based on the teachings of the eighteenth-century philosopher **Immanuel Kant**. For Kant, motive is the most important factor, and ethical decisions must be rooted in a "sense of duty," which is a moral oughtness to act in a certain way apart from any feelings or opportunities for reward.

Fourth, Utilitarianism is the view that what is right or good is that which brings the greatest happiness for the most people. Utilitarianism focuses on the potential consequences of actions and claims that decisions should be based on what will bring the greatest happiness for the most people. Jeremy Bentham founded Utilitarianism, and **John Stuart Mill** refined the utilitarian approach that Bentham started.

Fifth, ethical relativism is the perspective that morality and truth are relative to particular societies or individuals. There are no absolute standards for ethics. Moral standards are what people make them to be and can vary widely from culture to culture.