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30-SECOND **PHILOSOPHIES**

THE 50 MOST THOUGHT-PROVOKING PHILOSOPHIES,
EACH EXPLAINED IN HALF A MINUTE

Editor Barry Loewer

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FOREWORD

Stephen Law

Philosophy addresses what are sometimes called the 'big questions'. These include questions about morality ('What makes things morally right or wrong?'); about what we can know, if anything ('Can you know that the world around you is real, and not a computer-generated virtual reality?'); about the nature of human existence ('Are you your brain? Do we possess souls?'); and about the nature of reality ('Why is there anything at all?').

Religion addresses many of the same questions, but while philosophy and religion overlap in the questions they address, they can differ in the approach they take to answering them. While faith and revelation are typically the cornerstones of religious belief, philosophy places great emphasis on reason – on applying our intelligence in order to figure out, as best we can, what the answers are.

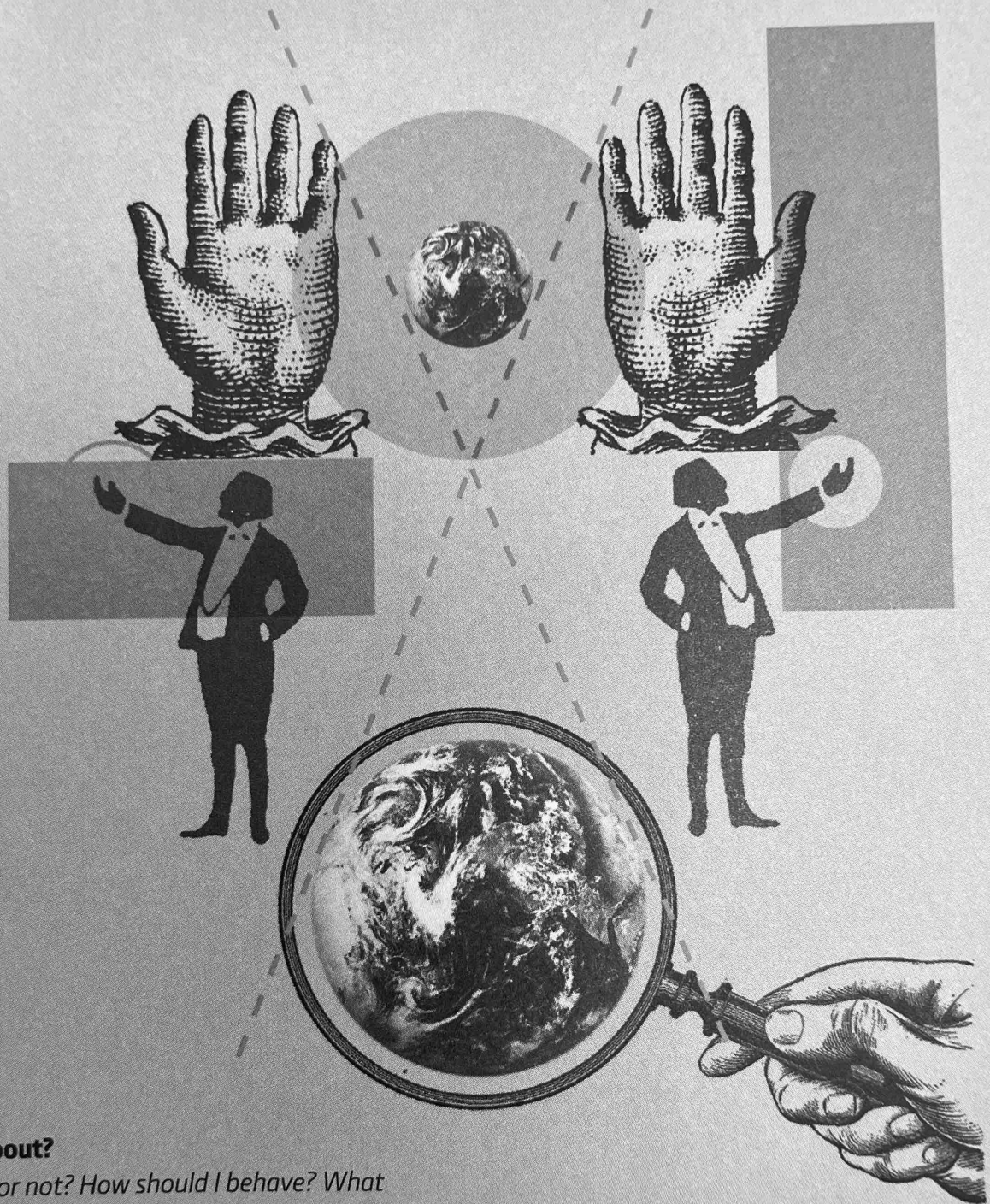
Socrates is supposed to have said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. That's a strong claim – too strong, I think. Suppose someone devotes themselves selflessly to helping and enriching the lives of their friends, family and wider community. They can hardly be said to have led a worthless existence simply because they never bothered to step back and ask themselves a philosophical question.

Having said that, I've no doubt a little exposure to philosophy can be valuable. The kind of skills philosophy fosters – such as the ability to spot

a logical fallacy, or to make a point succinctly and with precision – are the kind of 'transferable' skills that employers value. A little training in philosophy can also help us build robust critical defences and immunize us against the wiles of pretentious wafflers and quacks. But they're not the only reason why a little philosophical reflection can be worthwhile.

Whether we realize it or not, we all hold philosophical beliefs. That God exists is a philosophical belief, as is the belief that he doesn't. That right and wrong are not just a matter of subjective opinion is a philosophical belief, as is the belief that they are. Many of us go through life without even registering that we hold philosophical beliefs, let alone questioning them. You may ask: 'What does it matter whether we ask such questions? After all, the beliefs and the lives of those who ponder them usually aren't much different to the beliefs and lives of those who don't. So why bother?' Perhaps because the unexamined life is not a life chosen freely in awareness of alternatives, but a furrow mindlessly plowed.

If that doesn't convince you that a little philosophy is a good idea – well, there remains the fact that, good for you or not, *philosophy is fun*. Within these pages you'll find some of the most intriguing, clever, astonishing and sometimes downright disturbing ideas ever entertained by mankind. Dip in and find out.



What's it all about?

Does God exist or not? How should I behave? What is real? How do we know what we know? In this book, leading philosophical writers will engage your thought processes with a crash course in understanding the foundations of understanding.



Platonic idealism

The 'big' questions began with the great Greek philosophers. According to Plato, everything in the world is a reflection of its true ideal form that exists outside the world. Plato likened this experience to the flickering shadows of objects reflected on a cave wall by firelight.

INTRODUCTION

Barry Loewer

Philosophy tries to get to the bottom of things

by asking questions and proposing answers. At the bottom of science, for example, are questions like, 'What are the aims of the sciences?'; 'What is scientific method and why is it so successful?'; 'What is a scientific law?'; 'What is time?'; and so on. Scientists generally don't stop to consider fundamental questions like these since they are too busy working on science itself. They can get along by accepting, implicitly or explicitly, certain views without questioning them. Thinking about questions at the bottom of things and developing systematic accounts of the foundations of science is left to the philosophers of science.

Other branches of philosophy concern the foundations of ethics, art, religion, mathematics, psychology, language and thought in general. Indeed, for every subject and human enterprise there is a philosophy of that subject that delves into the foundations of the subject. The most general branches of philosophy are ontology (about what there is), epistemology (about how and how much we can know about what there is) and ethics (about what we ought to do about what there is).

Philosophers have been thinking about at-the-bottom questions for at least 2,500 years. It started with the great Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and has continued to the present day when most (but not all) philosophers are also university professors. Philosophy has evolved as a kind of conversation through the ages among these philosophers. For example, the question 'What is knowledge?' was asked by the Greeks, their answers discussed by medieval philosophers, and their answers much debated and added to by the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers Descartes, Leibniz and Hume. A contemporary philosopher who addresses this question will have one eye on this history and another on what his contemporaries are saying. In the course of this ongoing conversation many problems, positions and paradoxes have been produced. In this book you will find a sampling of these.

HOW TO BECOME A PHILOSOPHER (IN A LITTLE MORE THAN) 30 SECONDS

Barry Loewer

If you are sceptical that you can become a philosopher in 30 seconds, then you have taken a first small step towards becoming one. The attitude of scepticism and the inclination to question are central to philosophy. By questioning your (and others') beliefs with an open mind, you will better understand what it is you believe, what your concepts are and thus come to know yourself better. Although it is not possible for you to become a philosopher (you may be one already) by just reading this text, I can pose some of the questions that may take you a bit farther along the path.

Most of us take it for granted that we ought to keep promises. But is this always true? What if Burt promises to return Hilary's gun, but learns that Hilary intends to use it to shoot Willard. Should Burt return the gun? Suppose you think, 'No, not in this case'. If so, your next philosophical move may be to look for a general principle that specifies when promises ought to be kept. Perhaps you think the correct rule is: 'Keep a promise, unless keeping it will harm someone'. (This isn't quite right either, since keeping your promise to be faithful to your spouse may harm your lover.)

Next, ask yourself: 'Why ought we to obey this or any proposed rule of ethics?' Some people think that we ought to obey ethical rules because God commanded it. But even if you believe that God exists this isn't correct, since (as Socrates would have said) keeping your promises is not right because God commanded it, but rather God commanded it because it is right. So why is it right? If you explore what philosophers have said about this question over the past 2,500 years, you will discover that there is a lot of disagreement.

Some people conclude that thinking about these questions is a waste of time because agreement will never be reached. But a few people are exhilarated by the process of questioning, thinking about tentative answers, questioning deeper and so on. Even if we don't settle many of these questions, the process brings us closer to understanding ourselves.

Think about it

If you are already wondering why this book exists, then you are well on your way to becoming a philosopher.