

## Chapter 3

# The Love of Wisdom

### *In This Chapter*

- Grasping the three skills that philosophy cultivates
- Analyzing the nature of philosophical analysis
- Assessing the importance of philosophical assessment
- Appreciating the power of good, logical argument
- Understanding the role of wisdom, the true goal of philosophy

*Things have their seasons, and even certain kinds of eminence go in and out of style. But wisdom has an advantage: She is eternal.*

— Balthasar Gracian

**A**s you delve more deeply into the subject, you find many reasons to read, study, and practice philosophy in your life. Philosophy, as a way of thinking, for example, cultivates three intellectual skills that are very important for any of us to possess in the modern world. Philosophy also cultivates wisdom.

First, in this chapter, I look for a moment at those three skills. Then I say a bit more about wisdom — in particular, what it is and why it matters.

## *The Triple-A Skill Set of Philosophy*

Philosophy is, simply put, a way of thinking. More accurately, however, it is a *bundle* of ways of thinking. It's a set of mental tools. And that fact is directly relevant to the question of why we study philosophy. It's not just to amaze our friends with our own profundity, perplex our colleagues with a newfound depth, or irritate family members with crazy-sounding questions (although first-year college students seem to value that last possibility the most in connection with their beginning philosophy courses). We study philosophy because of the mental skills it cultivates in our lives as well as for the new perspectives it gives us.



In my years at Notre Dame, every student was required to take two courses in philosophy. The fact that, long ago, Notre Dame required four courses in philosophy didn't assuage the students' initial complaints. Why should a pre-med or business major waste any time at all in a philosophy classroom? Wasn't this rule much like requiring that every student take a course in Ancient Babylonian entomology? Wasn't it just some esoteric relic of the humanities curriculum of the past, no longer relevant to modern life?

Why, for that matter, should any busy business executive take time out to read philosophy? Why should a parent at home engaged in the demanding tasks of raising children ever sneak away with a book of philosophy? What's its relevance? What could possibly be the payoff? The following sections may give you some answers.

### *Paralysis without analysis*

Philosophy as a way of thinking cultivates our ability to *analyze* complicated problems. It helps us untie mental knots. It teaches us to get to the core of an issue. It shows us how to peel away peripheral issues and penetrate to the essence of a matter: What's really important here? What's ultimately at issue? How can I break this problem down into more manageable questions?

*Analysis* is a skill that you need everywhere in life. Lawyers analyze complex claims and sort out the issues; physicians analyze symptoms; detectives look for patterns in the evidence; business people sort through the parts of an intricate deal; parents try to untangle and get a grip on the issues troubling a family. The skill of analysis is useful in every walk of life. Analysis is so prominent in philosophical ways of thinking that a major trend of 20th-century thought is even known as *analytic philosophy* because of its emphasis on the centrality of this skill. But all good philosophy involves close analysis.

Ultimately, philosophy teaches us how to analyze our lives: Who am I? What do I really want? What is this life all about? What can make me happy? How can I make my greatest contribution to the world? What are my highest talents? How can I best make use of my time?

In following a philosophical analysis of a major human question and learning from some of the greatest thinkers in history how to tackle a complicated issue, we can learn to be better analysts ourselves and more analytical in other aspects of our lives. Now, I don't mean this statement as an endorsement of analysis as the most important mental skill or as a claim that a practice of philosophical analysis is somehow paramount in human life. It's not. It is, however, important. We are genuinely paralyzed in many ways in life if we are unable to analyze properly the circumstances that we are in, and the opportunities that we face.



*Man is but a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed.*

— Blaise Pascal



Analysis is a vital mental skill. It must, however, be used appropriately. There is a well-known phenomenon, commonly called *analysis paralysis*, which results when too much thinking actually gets in the way of action — or in the way of feeling. A person can analyze a relationship to death. The unexamined life may not be worth living, as Chapter 1 explains, but the *unlived* life is definitely not worth examining. Thinking should never replace taking action; thinking should merely guide what we do. All good things can be misused. And certainly, logical, analytic thinking can be misused. It is up to each of us to use it well.

My point here is that the better you become at analyzing complex problems, the better off you are for solving them. Analysis is a skill that philosophy cultivates. And it's a skill for all of life. The real truth about thinking and action is that, if you don't possess analysis as a life skill, you're much more likely to experience fruitless paralysis in the face of difficulty. Analytical acumen, at its best, truly liberates.

## *The skill of assessment*

Philosophy trains us to analyze. It also trains us to *assess* competing claims. Do people have free will, or are all our actions determined by heredity and environment? Does God exist . . . or not? Do humans survive physical death, or is everyone destined for personal extinction on the cessation of bodily functions? Does life truly have meaning, or is everything we do ultimately without any real sense and purpose? Is rollerblading great exercise, or is it the fastest route to the emergency room? (Okay, so not all questions are cosmic in proportion.)

We are often confronted in everyday life by competing claims and alternative proposals that we must assess: Should we appropriate more funds to increase the quality of our product, or should we concentrate instead on beefing up our advertising? One group claims that we need more research and development; another declares that only more marketing is necessary. One group of experts says that children need more freedom. Another group claims that they require more clearly defined limits and discipline. How do you evaluate and assess such competing claims? Philosophy trains the mind in the fine art of *assessment*.



All that glitters is not gold. Appearances and realities can diverge. We live today in a world of hype, exaggeration, and hyperbole. Plato's Cave is bigger and deeper than ever before (see Chapter 2). Illusions rule the world. Everyone has something to sell, and we're bombarded every day by claims that we must be able to evaluate. In a world of conflicting views vying for



acceptance, how do we separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, the collectibles from the trash? Caution is necessary. We need discernment. And discernment — assessment — also is a skill that philosophy can nurture.

*The judgment of man is fallible.*

— Ovid

In philosophy, we assess a view by asking for evidence and reasons to think that it's true. We evaluate how one proposal for our acceptance may fit or fail to fit with other things that we already have strong reason to believe or even know to be true.



In assessing a world-view or major philosophical position, just as in evaluating a business proposal, we must ask the following three basic sorts of questions, which we can call the 3 Cs:

- ✓ (C1) **Is it coherent?** Do the various components of the view or position hang together logically? Does it make sense? Is it internally consistent? Is it inwardly congruent?
- ✓ (C2) **Is it complete?** Does it touch on and deal with all the relevant issues that it ought to take in, or does it contain gaps and blind spots? Are any concerns swept under the rug? Is it comprehensive enough?
- ✓ (C3) **Is it correct?** For a position to merely be coherent and complete isn't enough; the available evidence must point in its direction as the correct contender for truth. Coherence is necessary; completeness is important; but only correctness, in addition, gives you what you fully need. An internally consistent viewpoint that's comprehensive in its sweep but at odds with the facts doesn't do you much good in a practical way.

These, therefore, are the 3 Cs of assessment: coherence, completeness, and correctness. A philosophical position, similar to a business plan, may be correct as far as it goes without going nearly far enough. A viewpoint may be correct, within limits, without being complete enough. Such an assessment tells you that the view needs more development. It may be correct in its main principles but incoherent in some of its less vital components — in which case, it needs some logical retooling before we can accept it as a whole. We must check for and identify all three qualities in a position to evaluate it decisively. Keeping this concept in mind, we can greatly enhance our skills of assessment through our philosophical examinations of any position.



## The use of argument

Philosophy cultivates our skills of analysis and assessment. It also schools us on the correct use of *argument*.



Arguments are not, in philosophical terms, shouting matches, verbal tug-of-wars, or altercations. When I was in graduate school in the late '70s, I often started my day by watching a talk show on television. Even in those early days of audience participation and debate-oriented talk shows, I was amazed at what people seemed to think constituted a reasonable exchange of differing ideas. The squared jaws, red faces, and bulging veins that accompanied such rejoinders as "Oh yeah?", "Who says?", and "That's just *your* opinion!" seemed impervious to the call of real argument. This was, of course, long before chair-throwing, kicking, spitting, and hair pulling began to serve as the vehicles of televised argument. And I'm not just referring metaphorically to the syndicated talk shows of political pundits here. As a culture, Americans these days seem to misunderstand what argument at its best really is.

## Reason

Analysis involves the use of *reason*. So does assessment. As does argument. But what exactly *is* reason? The philosophers all use it and urge the rest of us to use it, even as they point out its limits as well as its strengths.

We can think of reason clearly as one of the powers of the mind, as is perception or imagination. It is the power of moving logically from one idea to another, of seeing connections of logic or cause and effect, and of inferring conclusions from given premises. By the power of reason, we can see where truth is to be found.

"Use your head!" we may urge a friend, meaning to advise the use of reason. ("Use the common sense God gave a squirrel!" is sometimes a less complimentary version of the same advice.)

In the history of philosophy, some philosophers have thought that reason could do everything — from discerning the truth of "First Principles" to

deducing all less fundamental truths from those same principles. Others have insisted that experience of the empirical world — seeing, hearing, and so on — is necessary for discerning substantive truth about life. Swinging from one extreme to the other characterizes a good deal of the history of philosophy, as it does most of life, for that matter. We often call a person a "rationalist" who views reason as very powerful and who wants an argument for the proof of almost anything he believes. We sometimes call a person an "empiricist" who, by contrast, just keeps hammering away on the importance of sense experience for confirming anything that we believe. "I'll believe it when I see it" is a typical empiricist sentiment. But even the most experientially oriented philosophers value the role of reason in analysis, discernment, evaluation, and inference or logical argument.





In philosophy, an argument is a reasoned presentation of ideas, where you marshal evidence in favor of the truth of a conclusion. Arguments, in their essence, aren't something that you direct at people as you would a gun that you're aiming at a target. You don't primarily argue *with* someone or *at* someone; you present an argument for a conclusion, which you often intend as a means to persuade someone else, but sometimes employ just as a means of discovering for yourself where the truth lies.

*The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress.*

— Joseph Joubert

So, in philosophy, arguments aren't the sorts of things that you win or lose. They're not like games or athletic contests of the mind. Even if you engage in an argument with another person in the colloquial sense over a substantive issue — and you truly want to convince your interlocutor of the persuasiveness of your viewpoint — you'd better be able to construct a good argument in the philosophical sense as well. And studying some philosophy helps you know how to do so better than you may already.

In every walk of life, we need to be able to give a reasoned presentation of our beliefs in such a way as to persuade other people. Lawyers aren't the only ones who must worry about convincing others to accept a particular point of view. Persuasive argument is an important part of every management job, is a requirement in the arsenal of any challenged parent, and is as important to preachers and teachers as to practicing scientists. A good argument helps us to intellectually “see” where the truth lies.



In my first year at college, I discovered an important truth about the limitations of argument. For some reason, hair had always been an issue in my family — head hair *and* facial hair. Until I went away to college, my parents had insisted that I shave daily and keep the hair on my head cut fairly short. Off on my own, I let my hair get long and began to grow a Fu Manchu mustache. This bit of rebellion occurred during the early '70s, when a good deal of “the '60s” actually took place. Bell-bottomed pants, ridiculous shirts, and long hair ruled. I shudder now to think what I looked like, but I was exercising my newfound freedom and experimenting with my appearance. A few months later, I saw my mother for the first time since the inception of my new, hirsute look. She offered me a hundred dollars on the spot to shave off my mustache and refused to go to any public place with me until I did. I wish I hadn't taken a stand on principle. Two weeks later, my 'stache itched me half to death, and I shaved with no reward. But that day, mother was adamant and trying any strategy she could. She even went so far as to say to me, point blank, “Something's psychologically *wrong* with anyone who has a beard or mustache!”



I was in my first philosophy course at the time, and was learning how to argue a point, so I wasn't about to let this one pass. I suddenly remembered what philosophers call "argument by counterexample" — that is, you can refute any general claim of the form *All As are Bs* by producing one example of a *B* that's not an *A*. Employing the standard "But, *Mother . . .*" opening of any frustrated adolescent bent on proving a point, I started enumerating aloud all the great personages of history I could think of who had mustaches or beards and yet who were, by any fair estimation, paragons of psychological health and worldly success. Working my way from ancient Greece through the American Civil War, and not forgetting Southern paradigms such as Robert E. Lee, I was taken up short and momentarily struck mute by a sudden realization.

"Mother," I said with all the conviction I could muster, suddenly certain that I had unassailable proof of my own conviction that facial hair and sound psychological health can go quite well together, "Dad has *always* had a mustache!"

"You see what I'm saying?" she instantly replied.



An old country-music lyric says, "One man's ceiling is another man's floor." Sometimes traffic can flow both ways in the analysis or assessment of an argument. What I'd thought was the most decisive possible refutation by counterexample of a general claim that I knew to be false was taken by my dialogue partner as a particularly clear confirmation of her own emphatic view to the contrary.

*There are two sides to every question.*

— Protagoras

Of course, people can sometimes reasonably differ on the obviousness of a piece of evidence cited in an argument, or they can blind themselves to the truth and can even refuse to listen to rational argument at all. The best intellectual reasoning can fail completely to overrule strongly opposed passions.

Emotion and logic are sometimes at odds. But I intend to discuss such profound matters later in various parts of this book. My point now is simple.

In the right context, the ability to argue cogently can prove of great importance for seeing where truth lies and for convincing others to join us in its pursuit. Good argument isn't always guaranteed to produce the good result you may desire, but good argument is better than bad argument any day of the week. And argument, along with imagination and emotion, can provide part of a total case for enlisting the whole person in believing or acting on an important truth. Rational argument is one of the most distinctive of genuinely human abilities and one strongly cultivated by philosophy.



## The dangers of argument: A short survival guide

How can you actually use argument well and maybe even make progress in an argument with another person — or at least not get your shorts all twisted and wind up with an intellectual wedgie? You can find all sorts of advice on this subject from throughout the centuries. A bit of this advice is philosophical, some of it is psychological, and part of it is just plain pragmatic.

First is the pragmatic advice, such as, "In arguing, answer your opponent's earnest with a jest and his jest with earnest" — Leontinus Gorgias (as quoted in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*). In other words, keep the person with whom you're arguing off balance. But this practice is indeed a subset of rhetoric, which is the art of persuasion, and not of philosophy, which is a search for the truth. Most of the pragmatic advice available about argument presupposes precisely that you're after a win and not after the truth.

The psychological advice warns us most often about the limits of argumentation in dealing with another person and the truth at the same time. Sir Thomas Browne, for example, warned, "In all disputes, so much as there is of passion, so much there is of nothing to the purpose." Debate, you often hear, typically generates more heat than light. Know that likelihood going in. Passion clouds reason. And in the context of an interpersonal argument, or debate, people sometimes are willing to do anything to save face. Joseph Addison once observed, "Our disputants put me in mind of the scuttlefish, that when he is unable to extricate himself, blackens the water about him till he becomes invisible." So, as Publilius Syrus concluded long ago, "In a

heated argument, we are apt to lose sight of the truth."

Finally, some modest philosophical advice of a practical bent: Protagoras did affirm that every question has two sides. And Henry Fielding added in the 18th century that "Much can be said on both sides." Whenever you see sincere, intelligent people supporting a cause or arguing a point of view, you can expect as a maxim of common sense to find more than sheer foolishness in that position or cause. By extrapolation, I think I can say that, in all the history of philosophy, with all the competing schools of thought and opposed points of view, you're never going to come across large numbers of sincere, intelligent, and relatively well-informed people who are just completely wrong in every way. So always try to remain open-minded and look for the truth that any opposing view may capture. On the other hand, Oscar Wilde warned us, with more than a bit of hyperbole, that "The man who sees both sides of a question is a man who sees absolutely nothing at all." Neither reason nor common sense dictate or even advise that we aspire to balanced indecision anywhere in life.

And, of course, life consists of much more than argument. Socrates once remarked, "You are fond of argument, and now you fancy that I am a bag of arguments." You don't want to avoid argument, and yet neither do you want to constantly seek it out as the only thing in life worth your time. Tell your undergraduate philosophy-major friends: Not even Socrates was a bag of arguments.

## Wisdom Rules

To praise and recommend philosophy as an activity worthy of human attention just for its ability to enhance our skills of analysis, assessment, and argument is a bit like praising brain surgery by saying that it's a good thing



because it cultivates the hand-eye coordination of the surgeon. Philosophy can seem like aerobics for the intellect and weight-training for the soul. But its most important feature is the one built into its name.

*Wisdom is the perfect good of the human mind; philosophy is the love of wisdom and the endeavor to attain it.*

— Seneca



Philosophy is one of the noblest activities in which we can engage because it promotes *wisdom* in our lives. And wisdom brings with it two benefits: Depth and practicality.

Wisdom is first and foremost simply insight about living. Insight itself is a sort of perceptiveness or perspicacity of judgment that penetrates beneath appearances and latches onto realities. Wisdom cuts to the core.

In the ancient world, Seneca referred to wisdom as “the only liberty.” Juvenal called wisdom “the conqueror of fortune.” In the pages of the New Testament, Jesus once remarked, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” Wisdom is knowing the truth about what really matters in life. It is glimpsing the foundations and comprehending at least some of the significance of all that’s around us.

A wise person does not readily fall prey to false appearances. Wisdom isn’t easily spooked or unhinged. Wisdom sees the hidden side of any situation. It is patient and measured in its responses.

Wisdom is neither rushed nor stampeded into foolish action.

A wise person has *depth*. In his 17th-century manual on success, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, Balthasar Gracian wrote the following concerning depth:

*You are as much a real person as you are deep. As with the depths of a diamond, the interior is twice as important as the surface. There are people who are all facade, like a house left unfinished when the funds run out. They have the entrance of a palace but the inner rooms of a cottage.*

A wise person is never all ornament and no substance. Any veneer is backed by a strong reality. A wise person sees everything in its ultimate context and so does not easily mistake value.



Superficial living has too often become the way of the world. People suck the foam off the beer of life and never drink deeply of the real brew. Philosophers, on the other hand, insist on depth.

*Wisdom is to the soul what health is to the body.*

— La Rochefoucauld