What is philosophy?

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about what exactly philosophy is. At its base, philosophy is a form of reflective thinking that addresses the most basic questions about our lives as human being and the world – both social and natural – in which we live. As such, philosophy is rooted in a type of thinking that everyone engages in at certain moments in their lives. That's why philosophy is called "philosophy," a Greek word that means "love of wisdom."

But philosophy is also an academic discipline that makes a more systematic study of many of the questions addressed in everyday philosophy. The academic discipline of philosophy goes all the way back to Plato (c. 427-347 b.c.e.) and his predecessors.

Philosophy is a very broad field that addresses virtually every aspect of human existence. Philosophy is also divided into a number of sub-fields, each of which focuses on one area of inquiry. Here is a partial list of the fields to philosophy:

- *Logic* studies the nature of reasoning and argument, providing guidance for distinguishing sound from unsound arguments.
- *Metaphysics* studies the nature of reality and articulates the basic structure of what exists.
- *Epistemology* studies the nature of knowledge, posing questions about its nature and extent.
- *Ethics* studies the nature of moral values such as right and wrong, good and evil, and provides guidance for resolving moral dilemmas.
- *Aesthetics* or the philosophy of art raises questions about what art is and how we judge its value.

Philosophy is practical. Humans exist in a sea of ideas and concepts. We exchange ideas at work, at school, at home, in relationships, and in politics. Philosophy, as a discipline that is consumed with clarifying ideas, thus affects every aspect of life. The better we become at framing and discussing ideas, the better and more precise our definitions, the clearer we can become about the limits of our knowledge and the importance (or unimportance) of the things we believe, the better we might be at living what Socrates called The Good Life.

One way of learning about philosophy is to read from among the thousands of pages produced by philosophers throughout history. From Plato and Nagarjuna to Descartes, Wittgenstein and Mao, philosophers have offered their thoughts about the nature of knowledge, about the relation between the mind and the body, about God and gods, about justice and fairness, about right and wrong and many other basic questions. Of course, anyone can benefit from spending some time with the great philosophers.

But for our purposes, think of philosophy as providing a framework for exploring the most basic questions in an engaging and manageable way. Understanding philosophy as an activity rather than a set of profound, difficult texts enables us to use philosophy as a resource in our everyday lives. Philosophy is an *approach* to questions rather than the answers to them.

There are some basic elements that are necessary for discussing any philosophical question. Foremost among these is the ability to support your belief with **valid reasons**. For example, if Mr. White said, "I'm not voting for that politician." You could reasonably ask why. Suppose Mr. White's response was, "I don't know, I'm just not." Mr. White's failure to support his statement with a reason means that you don't know whether his position was reasonable or not, or if you shouldn't vote for that politician yourself. If Mr. White wants to convince you that something is true, he must offer reasons to support the thing he wants you to believe and you can either accept his reasons or offer some reasons for a different conclusion. This method of "argumentation" is a framework for discussion and has formed the basis of rational discourse since the beginning of time.

So you won't find instruction on the great philosophers of the past and present on this website, or even an explanation of a particular philosophical theory. The goal of *What's the Big Idea?* is to introduce you to the practice of **doing philosophy**. What's more, we want students to learn how to have an in-depth, civil discussion about topics that are important to them and that are actually philosophical in nauter.

Sound appealing? We hope so. But you need to know some basic procedures that will make a secondary school philosophy discussion successful. We suggest that you take a look at **Facilitating a Philosophy Discussion** for some help in planning.