WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

What is philosophy?
And why do I have
to take it?

'Philosophy' comes from the ancient Greek 'φιλοσοφία' —
philosophia.

philosophia = philo + sophia
philo = love
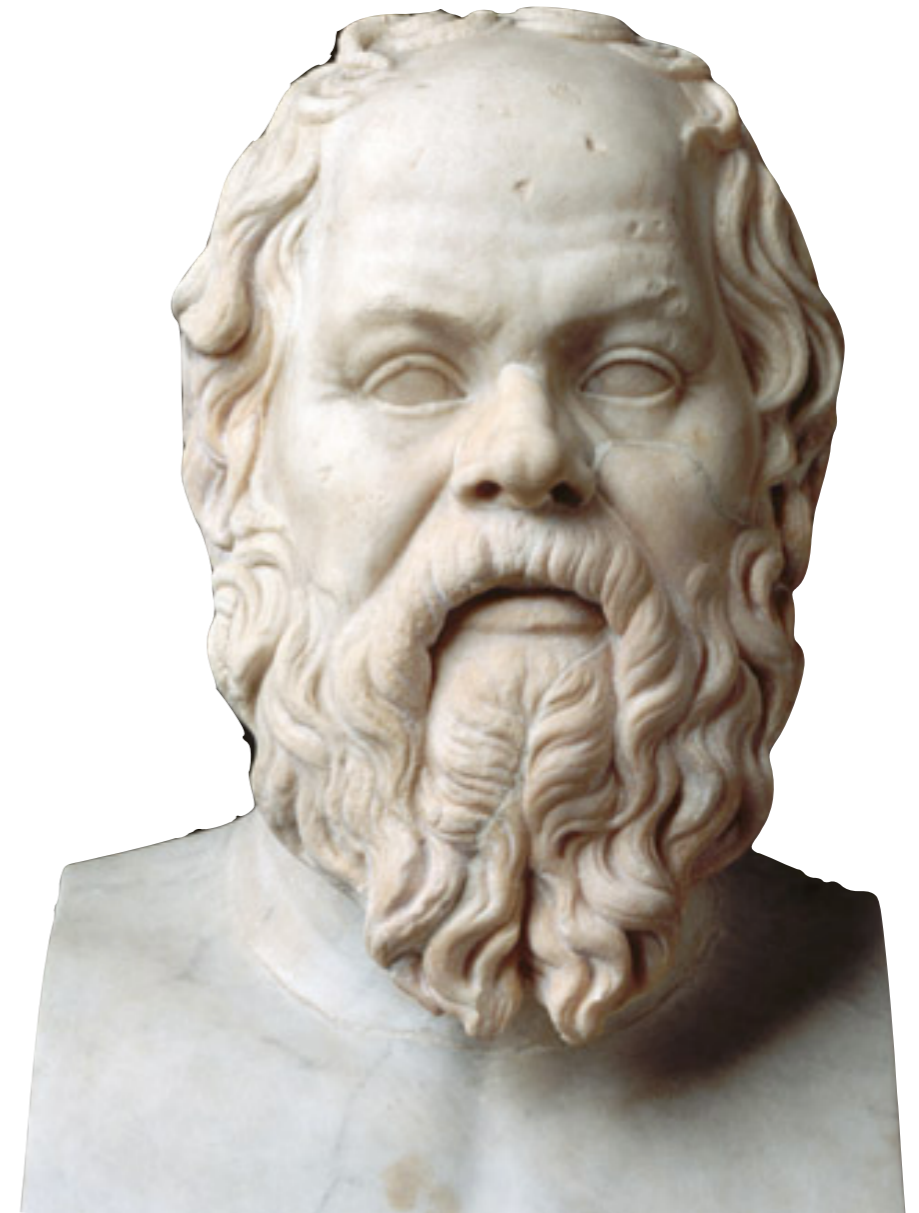sophia = wisdom

What does it mean to love wisdom?

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Socrates, who was one of the first philosophers, contrasted lovers of wisdom with two other sorts of people.

The first were people who formed belief on the basis of custom or tradition rather than argument.

The second were rhetoricians and sophists who used arguments, not to form true beliefs, but to achieve some other end.

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Can you think of any other academic departments at Notre Dame that might describe themselves in this way?

Yes, quite a few. Physics, economics, psychology, biology, sociology, political science (maybe) .... the list goes on and on.

This is no accident. All of these other fields — the natural sciences (like physics, chemistry, and biology), the social and human sciences (like economics, sociology, psychology, and political science), and others — were once part of philosophy. Isaac Newton was a philosopher; so was Charles Darwin; so was Adam Smith.

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These great philosophers went on to form systematic new ways of answering the questions in which they were interested. These 'new ways of answering questions' are just what we now call 'sciences.'

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Metaphysics is derived from the Greek prefix μετά (meta), which means after, and the Greek φύσις (physis), which means nature. This might encourage the view that metaphysics is the study of the supernatural. Fortunately, it isn't. Metaphysics is a name for the study of the ultimate nature of reality.

Epistemology is derived from the Greek word ἐπιστήμη (episteme), which was the word for knowledge or understanding. Epistemology is the study of what we can know about the world.

So our topic is a broad one: the nature of reality and what we can know about it.

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In this class, we'll be focusing on five fundamental questions.

Is there a God?

Do you have free will?

What are you?

What should you believe?

How should we live?

The Catholic Church has always had an optimistic view of questions like these. It has always held that these basic questions are both of great importance, and answerable by the use of human reason.

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Here's how St. Augustine put the point:

'No man has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbor; nor has any man a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God.'

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That is why (in case you were wondering) Notre Dame requires every student to take courses in Philosophy.

Philosophy classes are sometimes taught as history classes. The idea is that you learn the history of what people have thought about questions like these.

That is not what this class is. This class is an attempt to find out the truth about these subject matters.
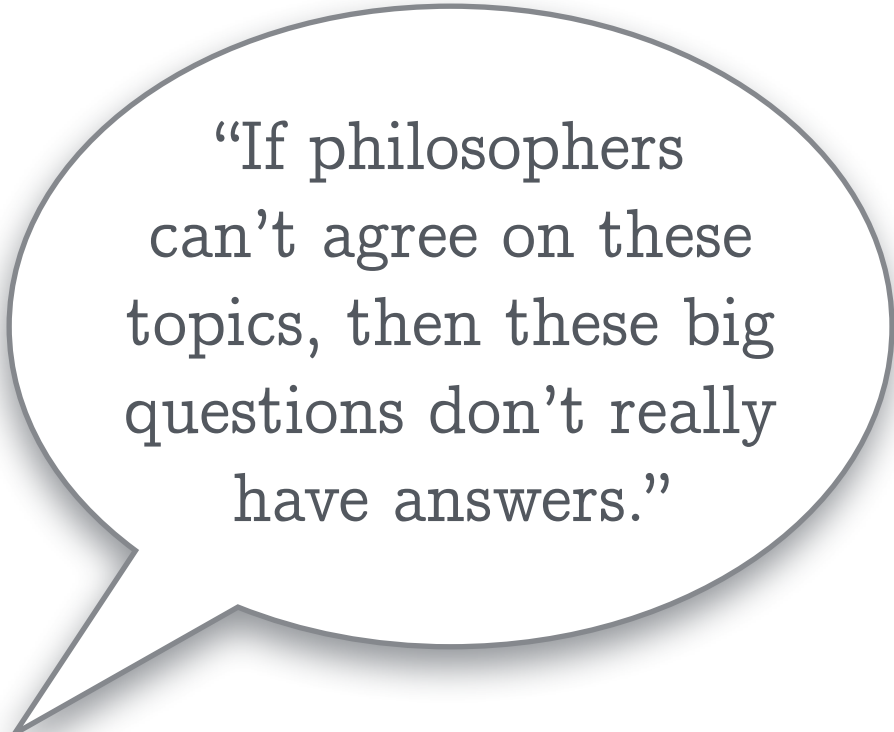
My job is to explain to you the best arguments for different answers to these questions. Your job is to evaluate these arguments, and use them to formulate arguments of your own. Ultimately your aim is to decide where you think the truth lies, and to be able to defend your belief.

This makes philosophy different than lots of other classes you will take. Your physics professor does not ask you to come up with your own take on gravity; she'll ask you to learn and apply the theory of gravity on which physicists have agreed.
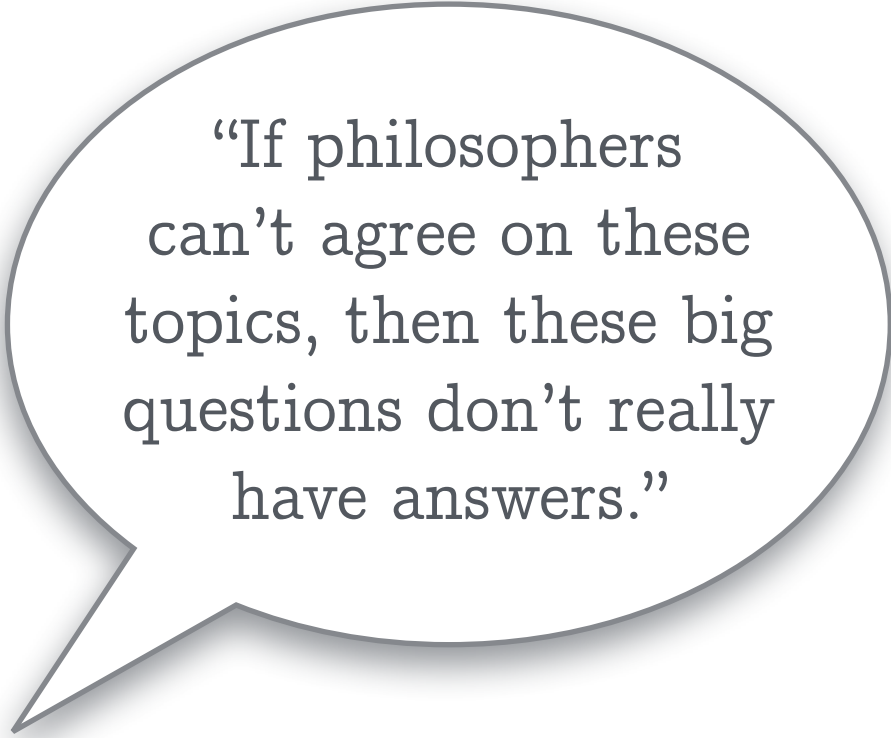
Why is philosophy like this? A short answer: philosophers don't agree.

This sometimes drives students crazy. I'll give the best arguments on both sides of an issue, and students will want to be told which argument is the winner. I won't do this — and this can lead to one of two frustrated responses.

Here is the first frustrated response:

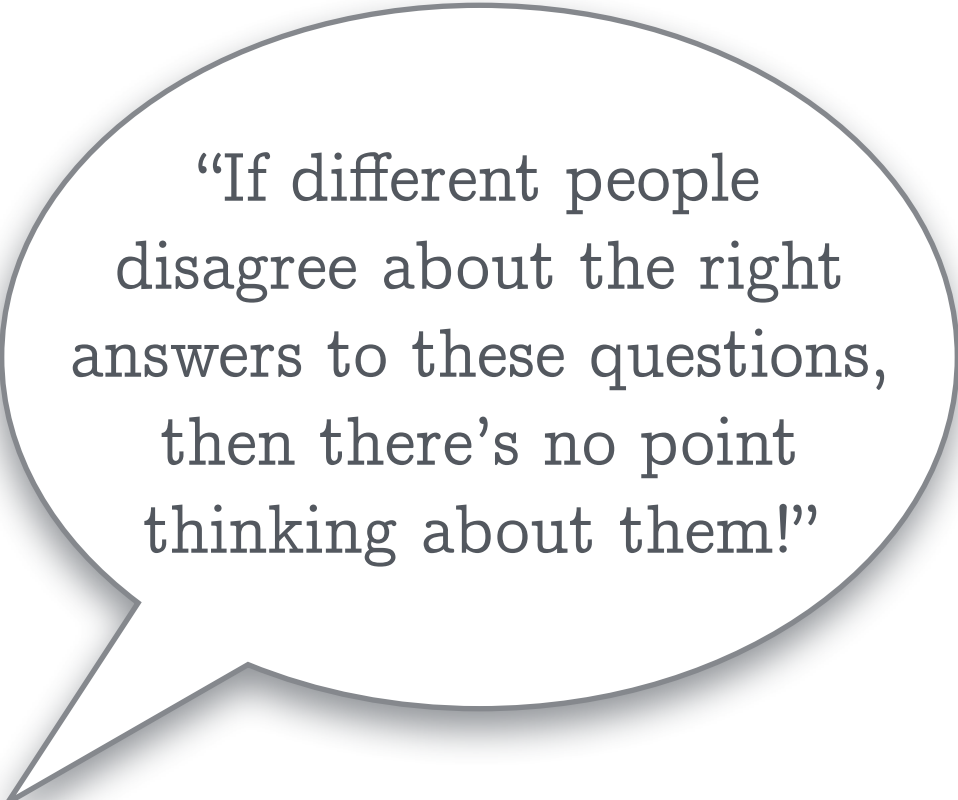"If philosophers can't agree on these topics, then these big questions don't really have answers."

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This response does not make a lot of sense.

There are also topics about which scientists disagree. For example, biologists disagree widely about the origins of life on earth. Does that mean that there is no answer to the question of how life on earth really originated? Of course not.

Similarly, whether or not we can figure out the answers to them for sure, questions like 'Does God exist?' clearly do have answers. What's the alternative — that God sort of exists and sort of doesn't?

Here is the second frustrated response:

"If different people disagree about the right answers to these questions, then there's no point thinking about them!"

Suppose that you really care about the origins of life on earth. Does that fact that no biologist can tell you what the origins in fact were mean that you should not look at the arguments given for the competing theories? That does not seem reasonable.

Or take a less intellectual example. In the recent past many of you spent some time thinking about where would be the best place for you to go to college. Was there a proof you could find, or some infallible authority you could consult?

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But that didn't make it unreasonable for you to think long and hard about the arguments in favor of various options. Just the opposite — because you cared about this question and because there was no authority to consult, it was **more** important for you to think hard about the arguments.

That is a bit like the attitude I want you to take toward philosophy. Questions about whether God exists, whether you have free will, and how you should form beliefs are questions which you should care about. So, just as you cared about the arguments for and against various options for college, you should care about the arguments for and against (for example) the existence of God.

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And to do that, you will have to learn a bit about what arguments are, and what makes arguments good or bad. I will come back to that in a bit. But first, some nuts and bolts about how the course will work.

If the main thing you are going to be asked to do in this class is to argue for your views, and respond to arguments against your views, you need to know something about arguments. The study of arguments is called logic.

A first step in grasping the basic principles of logic is the mastery of four (semi-)technical terms.

Arguments consist of one or more premises and a conclusion. The conclusion is what you are arguing for; the premises are the (alleged) basis for that conclusion.

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Validity and soundness are the two most fundamental concepts for you to grasp in this course. Let's illustrate them by considering some example arguments.

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1. All men are mortal.
2. Brian Kelly is a man.
_____
C. Brian Kelly is mortal.

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You'll notice that certain words in the argument are repeated.

To get the form of the argument, replace every repeated expression of this sort with a 'dummy letter' — sort of like a variable. That gives us the following form of the argument:

1. All F's are G.
2. x is G

C. x is F.

Can you think of any argument of this form which has true premises and a false conclusion?

This shows that this form of argument is invalid — which in turn is good evidence that the argument at the top, which is of this form, is invalid.

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an argument is **sound** when it is valid and all of its premises are true

1. Either Notre Dame will win the National Title in 2021 or USC will.
2. USC will not win the National Title in 2021.
_____
C. Notre Dame will win the National Title in 2021.

What is the form of this argument? Is every argument of this form valid?

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Here's a slightly trickier one:

1. If the moon is made of cheese, then it will soon become moldy.
2. The moon will not soon become moldy.

C. The moon is not made of cheese.

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2. The moon will not soon become moldy.

C. The moon is not made of cheese.

What is the form of this argument?

One way to put it would be as follows:

1. If P then Q.
2. Not Q.
_____
C. Not P.

Is every argument of this form valid?

Mastering the concepts of validity and soundness gives you way to talk about, and criticize, arguments.

Here is one especially important fact: if an argument is sound, then its conclusion must be true. Can you see why?

In our first section of the class, we'll be considering some arguments whose conclusion is 'God exists' and some other arguments whose conclusion is 'God does not exist.' Suppose that you think that God exists. Then it is your job to explain why you think that the arguments whose conclusion is 'God does not exist' are not sound. After all, if they were sound, their conclusion would be true — and you (in this example) think that their conclusion is false.

How do you show that an argument is not sound? Remember: **soundness = validity + true premises.** So to show that an argument is unsound, you can do one of two things: show that it is invalid, or show that it has a false premise.

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That is a lot of what your 'My Philosophy' work will be like. You'll be asked to take a stand on whether particular arguments are sound, or not, and will be asked why you think this. Depending on how you answer those questions, you'll be asked follow up questions which challenge your views.

You will always have the chance to go back and change your answers to questions as your beliefs evolve over the course of the semester. In fact, it would be surprising if your beliefs did **not** change in this way!

Next time we will put these tools to work discussing an important attempt to answer the first question which will occupy us in this course:

Is there a God?