

**COLLEGE GUILD**  
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

# PHILOSOPHY

## Unit 2 of 6

### Exploring Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Ethics

In our first unit we briefly touched on three main branches of philosophy: Metaphysics, Epistemology and Ethics. In this unit we will look at each of these in a bit more depth. Like a crystal hanging in a sunny window, there are so many facets to each of these branches. But let's give it a try....

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#### PART 1 – METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics is an area of philosophy that tries to answer the question, "What is reality?" Metaphysics seeks to discover general theories for what is real and how that differs from what may seem real but actually is not. Some well-known philosophers of metaphysics are Epicurus (341- 270 BCE), George Berkeley (1685 -1753 CE), and Immanuel Kant (1784 - 1804 CE). (What we used to know as BC and AD to denote its place in historical time is now known as BCE, "Before the Common Era", and CE, "Common Era".)

Metaphysics attempts to determine the difference between appearance and reality. One determination of reality is what one can touch, see, feel, taste, and hear. This is known as empirical knowledge, knowledge that comes from the five senses.

**1. Sit quietly for a moment and become aware of your five senses. In this moment of awareness write down what you:**

- a. Hear
- b. See
- c. Taste
- d. Smell
- e. Touch

If you think the source of knowledge comes only from the senses, then you are an empiricist and your point of view is called empiricism. Many scientists are considered empiricists.

**2. Which of the following items are known by the five senses?**

- a. the laws of gravity
- b. the chair you are sitting on
- c. the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution
- d. your love for your parents (or someone else)
- e. God
- f. justice
- g. Hamlet (by Shakespeare, written circa 1600 CE)

## h. the meaning of the words on this page

### 3. Based on the definition of empiricism, why did you select the answer(s) you chose?

Now let's look at another set of criteria to determine what is real (other than empiricism).

Some people sincerely report having seen little green men emerging from flying saucers. But do we believe this really happened? If not, why not? Well for one thing, little green spacemen are very unexpected and unusual, and for another, they are not seen by more than one individual at the same time. This example introduces a set of criteria which may conflict with the empirical theory as explained above. In other words, a way to determine if something is "real" is by asking these questions: 1) Is the event or "reality" observable to more than one individual? And 2) Does it fit with normal expectations?

### 4. Think about a chair. How would you determine if the chair is real? Now think of that same chair floating in the air. Which is more real: a chair on the ground or a floating chair? Why?

A third theory of determining what is real is called "rationalism" where the source of knowledge is reason. In other words, this view asserts that using your mind is the best way of determining the way things are. For example, when you stick a straw in a glass of water, it looks like the straw is bent or broken because the water refracts light differently than the air. You know it's not, though. A similar notion is one that babies actually have to learn: things continue to exist even when you're not looking at them. This is why 'peek-a-boo' is great fun for them (a person just came out of nowhere!) but not so much for adults.

### 5. Write about an instance in your own experience where you first thought something was real and later decided it wasn't. How did you reach that conclusion?

### 6. Some bookstores have sections of shelves labeled "Metaphysics". What sort of books would you find here? Why do you think these books are called "metaphysical"?

## PART 2 – EPISTEMOLOGY

The theory of knowledge, or *epistemology* as it is sometimes called, is a branch of philosophy which investigates human knowledge. It seeks to answer questions such as: What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? Epistemology seeks to discover what knowledge is and how it differs from simple opinion. Human beings are capable of holding and expressing a wide range of opinions on a variety of topics. But how do we know what we know? Famous epistemologists are Plato (427 – 347 BCE), Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650 CE), and David Hume (1711 - 1776 CE).

### 7. What do you think is the difference between knowledge and opinion?

Another philosophical theory is that we must depend on sense-experience for all knowledge, as empiricists believe. For example, the search for the proof of the existence of God is one such "problem".

### 8. Consider the statement: "Well, it may not be true for you, but it is true for me!" Write a dialogue between Jane and John on any subject that might cause John to utter this sentence.

## PART 3 – ETHICS

The philosophical study of ethics (also known as “moral philosophy”) attempts to decide what values and principles we should use to judge human action as morally right or wrong. It attempts to consider questions such as: How can I know what is right? How should one live? The study of ethics works with such concerns as human rights, racial justice, affirmative action, environmental ethics, and business ethics in order to determine what would be the morally right thing to do.

Ethics comes from the Greek ethos which means “character”. For the ancient Greeks, ethics had to do with developing a virtuous character. They believed that if you develop such a character, you will not only know the right thing to do, but you will also do it. Well-known philosophers of ethics are John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), the Buddha (approximately 563-483 BCE), and Cornell West (born 1953).

**9. Define the following words (feel free to use a dictionary if you have one; if you don't own one, you may request a free dictionary from College Guild.)**

- a. Virtue
- b. Character
- c. Principle
- d. Compassion

Many of us are familiar with ethical dilemmas. An ethical dilemma is a debate between two moral principles, where two sides can argue about what is wrong or what is right. However, there is no correct or best answer to an ethical dilemma. It is simply a matter of what one believes in.

Here's an example of an ethical dilemma:

The mood at Northern High School is tense with anticipation. For the first time in many, many years, the varsity basketball team has made it to the state semifinals. The community is excited too, and everyone is making plans to attend the big event next Saturday night. Jeff, the varsity coach, has been waiting for years to field such a team. Speed, teamwork, balance: they've got it all. Only one more week to practice, he tells his team, and not a rule can be broken. Everyone must be at practice each night at the regularly scheduled time: No Exceptions. Brad and Mike are two of the team's starters. From their perspective, they're indispensable to the team, the guys who will bring victory to Northern. They decide—why, no one will ever know—to show up an hour late to the next day's practice.

Jeff is furious. They have deliberately disobeyed his orders. The rule says they should be suspended for one full week. If he follows the rule, Brad and Mike will not play in the semifinals. But the whole team is depending on them. What should he do?

**10. What should Jeff do and why?**

**11. If you were the parent of Brad or Mike, what would you say to your son? To Coach Jeff?**

**12. How do you think the other team members responded to Mike and Brad? To Coach Jeff?**

Here’s a quotation from former Gulf War General Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr.: “The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it.”

**13. Describe an ethical dilemma you’ve experienced and how you dealt with it. How did the situation affect or influence you?**

**14. Who would you consider is an ethical person and why? (Can be living or historical.) How does this person influence you?**

Thank you for your responses. We hope that you took some time to really think about your answers before writing them down. Seeking “love of wisdom” is not a skill acquired overnight. Sometimes it takes wrestling with the questions and the willingness to question even your own answers.

We’ll see you at Unit 3!

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*Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes*