

COLLEGE GUILD  
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# PHILOSOPHY

Unit 6 of 6

This-n-That

In this final unit on Philosophy we will look at fun stuff and some deeply thoughtful questions relating to philosophy. So, put on your philosopher's cap and get ready to think about and answer some tough questions! Once again, take your time in reading and thinking before writing your answers.

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## PART 1

Let's start with an essay by Victoria Safford, called "Stung by Bees", in her book *Walking Toward Morning*.

A young child is stung by hornets on a playground on a summer morning, joining the ranks of children everywhere. It's her first time and she takes it very personally. Weeks after the fact, out of nowhere, she asks, "Why was I stung by bees?" "Why was I stung by bees?" Her mind requires the why, she is not at peace with her vast unknowing, and she is only momentarily satisfied when for the 107<sup>th</sup> time I explain, "You were stung by bees because they were on the play structure exactly the same time as you."

"Were they mean bees?" she says. I say no. "Are bees bad?" I tell her no. "Are they supposed to sting us?" I say, "Not exactly."

"Well, then, why was I stung by bees?"

She is a novice philosopher. For the moment, because she is only three years old, there is no way to explain random chance and luck....no way to say, "Look. It just happened. You and the hornets got there together, okay? It was an accident." She lives in endless echoing of "why." She relies, like many of us, on the illusion of cause and effect in this life to make sense of it, to get her bearings. There is no real way just yet to interest her as deeply in mystery and in the far more serious, echoing question, which is, "So what will you do now?"

*Will you always be scared by bees? Do you still love to look at insects? Would you like to learn about bees and wasps and hornets, or maybe steer clear for a while, move on to ants and beetles, a safer entomology? Shall we put up a sign to warn other children?*

She's trapped, as I so often am, in why it happened, and how. But much more, so much worth wondering and pondering, lies in what happens next.

*Who made the broken world and why? Who made the suffering world and why?* Three year olds and theologians can chew these "tired bones" all day. But for me the real....questions open widely and holy---exciting, dangerous, urgent, comforting, sustaining---when we accept the mystery and then move on or, reverently, move in.

The world was made—gorgeous, tender, broken, dangerous—we know not why.

How now shall we live in it, you and I and everyone?

1. Re-read the paragraph that begins with “Who made the broken world and why?” The phrase “tired bones” is a metaphor. What issue today is a “tired bone” for you?
2. Humans question “Why me?” over and over again when they encounter a painful experience. Write of a personal experience of yourself or someone you know in that situation.
3. In your example, what happened when the “why me” questions stopped and the “what will you do now” questions began?
4. In the second paragraph on page 1 is the line: “Her mind requires the why, she is not at peace with her vast unknowing....” Do you think it’s possible for any of us to be at peace with the vast unknowing of life? Explain.

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## PART 2

An interesting phenomenon that has been taking place over the past decade or so is ordinary people getting together in an informal setting to ask and discuss life’s challenging questions. This is known as “Socrates’ Café”. It was started by a man named Christopher Phillips. Here is a brief article about the founder of Socrates’ Cafe. (Article by editor Josh Glenn)

*Chris Phillips used to be a journalist and photographer, a public school teacher, and a college instructor with three master's degrees.*

*While studying for a master of arts in teaching at Montclair State University in 1996, Phillips chanced to pick up “Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre” (by Walter Kaufmann)... Something Phillips read in Kaufmann's introduction to the book soon sent him rocketing across America, visiting jails, hospices, nursing homes, and other public venues - all on his own dime. “I didn't have any master plan when I started doing this...I just had this little idea: Let's give philosophy back to the people.”*

*“More than anyone else who's ever lived,” Phillips insists, “Socrates models for us philosophy in practice - philosophy as deed, as a way of living, as something that any of us can do. The Socratic Method is a way to seek truths by your own lights; it is a system, a spirit, a method, a type of philosophical inquiry, an intellectual technique, all rolled into one.” Having decided to bring Socrates' ...methods to ordinary men and women around the country, Phillips started what he calls the Socrates Café. What he means by that is a bunch of people getting together in a café or coffeehouse for a couple of hours and, with the help of a facilitator, applying the Socratic Method to some question that troubles them: What is Truth? What is Justice? What is a Philosopher?*

*This kind of group effort, Phillips argues, is the best possible antidote to traditional philosophy lectures, which create a hierarchy of philosopher and student.... “A Socrates Café is a home for a lot of people who've never felt at home in academia, including academics,” Phillips explains. “... It does hopefully expand and broaden the range of inquiry, to the way philosophers used to be, when they would look at any and every question under the sun.”*

*Do Socrates Café participants ever arrive at an answer to their questions? “It's not about coming up with answers but*

finding a way to ask the questions, which, in a way, is the answer," Phillips replies enigmatically. "They never run out of questions, or out of new ways to question. In fact," he concludes, "some of Socrates Café's most avid philosophizers are, for me, the question personified."

**5. What are your thoughts about a Socrates' Café meeting in your prison?**

**6. Pretend you are a member of a Socrates' Café and it's your turn to bring the question for all to discuss. What would that question be?**

**7. How would you respond to that question?**

But what is the "Socratic Method"? Remember in our first unit that we said Socrates was a Greek philosopher (469 BCE – 399 BCE) who enjoyed asking people questions about all kinds of things. He was curious about the things people claimed to know. The Socratic Method derives from the Socratic *Dialogues* of his student Plato (427 BCE – 347 BCE), in which Socrates would ask a progression of seemingly innocent questions that ultimately led the respondent to a logical conclusion that was incompatible with that person's originally stated belief. Here is a fun but true example reported by David Elkind and Freddie Sweet in *Educational Leadership*:

*Facilitator:* You're offered a \$500 bike for \$100. You know it's hot. What do you do?

*(One boy in the group takes the bait.)*

*Boy:* I would buy it.

*Facilitator:* What would you do if you got caught?

*Boy:* I bought it. I would just refer them [the police] to the person who sold it to me.

*Facilitator:* All right, you're in court, and you say, "Well, it really wasn't me. I didn't know it was stolen."

*Boy:* I didn't.

*Facilitator:* But wouldn't that be a lie?

*Boy:* I did buy it. I paid for it. I paid \$100 for it.

*Facilitator:* All right, but didn't you know that it was stolen? You're on the witness stand right now.

*Boy:* I'd have no choice but to say I knew it was stolen.

*Facilitator:* What if you weren't on the witness stand and you were just talking to the cops, and they came over to the house, and they said "Hey, what about this bike you've got here. Did you know that it was stolen?"

*Boy:* Spur of the moment, I may just say, "No, I didn't know."

*Facilitator:* Okay, what would make you say that?

*Boy:* Initial fear of being locked up. (Laughter from the group.)

*Facilitator:* What would you think of yourself now that you've said that you would lie to the cops out of fear, that you would probably be the kind of person who would say, "I'll go for this. \$500, \$100. That's not a bad deal at all. I need a bike." What vision would you have of yourself at this point?

*Boy:* Well, nowadays, from what I've been learning, I personally would feel low. In a yesterday sense, I wouldn't have cared. I was younger. I was more immature. I didn't care.

*Facilitator:* Do you have a different image of yourself now?

*Boy:* Yes. Proudful. I think more of myself today than I would have yesterday. Because I know that there's better for me out there instead of just running around stealing. You know, that's no good, that won't get me to where I want to go. Okay, I've got big dreams, hopes. I feel like this: I can make it.

*(One of the participants in the group discussion can't contain herself. She speaks directly to the boy.)*

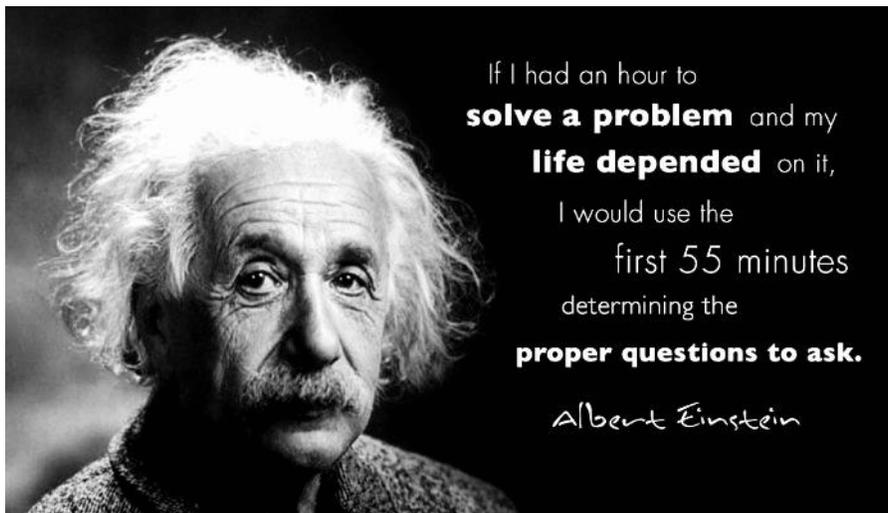
*Girl:* But you still bought the bike! (All the kids laugh. The boy gets the point.)

**8. Now you try it! Imagine a conversation with "Sam". Write a dialogue between you and Sam where you first ask the question: "Pretend that no one really cared much about anything. If you took the trouble to act kindly to everyone, and received absolutely no benefits from it, and other people had a slightly easier life by acting unkindly, would there be any reward in being kind?" Remember in writing your dialogue you are the questioner.**

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### PART 3

Questions, questions, questions! The philosopher's brain is ever thinking, ever puzzling the conundrums, the enigmas of the matters of life.



**9. Below are seven questions. Select 4 (or all of them if you feel ambitious!) and write a paragraph for each of your selected questions. Do not just say yes or no; expand on your answer.** (From the book: *Consider This: Questions That Make You Think*, by Barbara Ann Kipfer)

- Can a human being produce something that is perfect?
- What great thing would you attempt if you knew you could not fail?
- Is everyone equal at birth?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Is it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?
- As a ruler, is it better to be loved or feared?
- Do societies try to control the behavior of their population?

And from the book *The Pig That Wants to be Eaten: 100 Experiments for the Armchair Philosopher* by Julian Baggini:

*After forty years of vegetarianism, Max Berger was about to sit down to a feast of pork sausages, crispy bacon and pan-fried chicken breast. Max had always missed the taste of meat, but his principles were stronger than his culinary cravings. But now he was able to eat meat with a clear conscience.*

*The sausages and the bacon had come from a pig named Priscilla he had met the week before. The pig had been genetically engineered to be able to speak, and more importantly, to want to be eaten. Ending up on a human's table was Priscilla's lifetime ambition and she woke up on the day of her slaughter with a keen sense of anticipation. She had told all this to Max just before rushing off to the comfortable and humane slaughterhouse. Having heard her story, Max thought it would be disrespectful not to eat her.*

*The chicken had come from a genetically modified bird which...lived the life of a vegetable, with no awareness of self, environment, pain or pleasure. Killing it was therefore no more barbarous than uprooting a carrot.*

*Yet, as the plate was placed before him, Max felt a twinge of nausea. Was this just a reflex reaction, caused by a lifetime of vegetarianism? Or was it the physical sign of a justifiable psychic distress? Collecting himself, he picked up his knife and fork... (the source of the story comes from "The Restaurant at the End of the Universe" by Douglas Adams)*

**10. Imagine a conversation among three people who each have different viewpoints.**

- **Maria believes that if the purpose of pig-hood is to be eaten, then Priscilla is stating her reason for her existence and there is nothing morally wrong with eating her.**
- **Jack believes that despite the fact that Priscilla wanted to be eaten, pigs are interesting and valuable and thus we should not be so arrogant about making pigs into edible pork.**
- **Charlie questions that while people may talk about the dignity of animals, can we seriously suggest that the dignity of the chicken species is undermined by the creation of a de-cerebrated (no brain) version? Isn't Priscilla's death entirely dignified?**

**Explore more deeply these three people's opinions on the story. You can do this in one of two ways: write a page-long script of their conversation discussing this scenario and Max's dilemma OR compare their beliefs with what you believe about this situation in the story.**

**11. There's a "play on words" with Max's name. What is it? How is it "ironic" in relation to the story?**

**12. In Unit One, you were asked the question: "Would you consider yourself a philosopher?" Write down your original answer. How would you answer the question today after completing all six units? If your answer today is different than your original answer, why did you answer differently? Explain your answer.**

Thank you for your participation in this course. Imagine a huge feast piled high on a long, long table. You've been given just one bite out of the entire table, perhaps a grape. That's how deeply complex the study of philosophy is. Congratulations for taking that one little "bite"!

**Since this is your final Unit, we'd appreciate any feedback or suggestions you have for improving the Course!**

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