

**College Guild**  
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

# PHILOSOPHY

## UNIT 1 OF 6

### Introduction

Overview: This course will discuss the five main branches of philosophy and the philosophers who were most influential in their development. This course has been made with input from one of your colleagues, a College Guild student who completed the original philosophy course.

Here are some guidelines for all CG courses:

1 - Answer all the questions that are in bold print. When we receive a completed unit back, you'll be sent the next one, along with your original work and feedback from your reader. You don't need to return the lessons and questions – it saves us both postage.

2 - Take the time to read the questions thoroughly and to think through your answers. Find the most creative way to word your answers. There is no specific deadline to complete any unit, but we would get concerned if we hadn't heard back from you in 2-3 months. You can ask for an extension if your circumstances make that necessary. Remember how often the mail gets lost. **If you don't hear back from us after a month, write to make sure your unit was received and the next unit sent out.**

3 - Let us know if you need a dictionary. It is free to CG students who complete the first unit.

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### INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the amazing world of philosophy. In true philosophical style, let's begin with a couple of questions:

- 1. When you hear the word “philosophy”, what comes to your mind?**
- 2. In your own words (not using a dictionary) how would you define “philosophy”?**

The study of philosophy is so complex and broad that it would take many units to fully cover this topic. It is our hope to provide you with an overview in order to stir your curiosity about “the stuff of life”.

Ah, the questions of life! Have you ever wondered about the purpose of life? Have you ever been curious about what you can reasonably believe? Have you ever marveled at the beauty of nature or been upset by suffering? Have you ever thought life is unfair? Have you ever been puzzled by what you ought to do when facing a major decision? These are the kinds of questions philosophers discuss.

- 3. Pick one of the above questions. Write down your thoughts or observations or experiences about the question you chose.**

The word “philosophy” comes from a combination of two Greek words: “philos” meaning “loving” and “sophia” meaning “wisdom”, hence “the love of wisdom.” To the ancients, the philosopher was one who desired wisdom.

#### 4. What do you think are the qualities of a wise person?

#### 5. Who is a wise person in your life? What is it about his or her wisdom you admire?

Historically the earliest Western philosophers were a group called the Pre-Socratics. The philosophers of this time (around 570 B.C.E.) were interested in nature and how the universe developed. They were also interested in figuring out what things were made of. For these first philosophers, to love wisdom was to search for knowledge about the universe.

The next group of ancient philosophers was called the Sophists or “Wise Ones”. They believed that wisdom is the possession of virtue, which means moral excellence. A virtue is a positive trait or quality deemed to be morally good and thus is valued as the foundation of principles. The Sophists felt that virtue was the ability, especially in politics and society, to influence people.

#### 6. Who do you consider to be a person of virtue? This can be someone you know personally or someone (historically or living) whom you admire. Why is this person virtuous?

Then along comes Socrates, a Greek who loved to ask people questions about all kinds of things. He was curious about the knowledge people claimed to have concerning virtue, justice, and the right way to live. For Socrates, wisdom is an awareness of our ignorance, an awareness of the limitations of our knowledge. Socrates was a lover of wisdom in that he lived his life in pursuit of wisdom. Socrates said, “I know that I know nothing.”

#### 7. The quotation “The life which is unexamined is not worth living” is attributed to Socrates. What does this quotation mean to you?

### BRANCHES OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy is about asking questions about every aspect of life. We are constantly making judgments (creating opinions) about good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, reality and fiction, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust. Western philosophy is divided into branches in order to study these questions. Five main branches or categories of philosophy are: metaphysics, epistemology, politics, aesthetics and ethics. Big words!!

If you find yourself confused, don't worry about memorizing the concepts or immediately understanding what each term means. They are just tools to help you formulate ideas, and should not be the point of doing philosophy. The main purpose of this course, and philosophy as a whole, is to think critically, creatively and deeply.

If you do have any questions as you continue this course, first off, congrats, you're doing philosophy right! A good philosopher knows that they will never have all the answers to the world; their joy comes precisely from their unending wonder about life. Of course, sometimes we may need some clarity and further explanation.

There are a number of strategies available to you so that you can work through problems independently instead of having to wait for your reader's response:

1. Try reading the passage again and turning to the dictionary with words that you do not understand yet or have forgotten.
2. Try breaking a big paragraph or a complex sentence into smaller parts that are easier to understand.
3. Mark the part you do not understand for later and come back to it after you've had some time to 'digest' all this new information you're learning. You will be surprised by what a few minutes of rest can do for your comprehension!

Of course, if all else fails, write your questions into your responses and your CG reader can work through them with you.

**Metaphysics** deals with the issues of what is real, in other words: What is reality? Some questions asked are: What is really real? What am I? Who am I? Is there a God?

**Epistemology** deals with knowledge: How is knowledge acquired, and how do we know what we know?

**Ethics** deals with questions of justice and morality: What ought we to do? How can I know what is right? How should one live?

**Politics** deals with power: How do people negotiate power between themselves? When is it permissible to use force?

**Aesthetics** deals with art and beauty: What is art? What makes something beautiful? Why do people make art? Why and how does art make us feel the way it does?

In the upcoming units, we will explore these five branches in more depth.

**8. Which of these five branches of philosophy is most interesting to you and why?**

Just as we started today’s lesson with questions, we end this unit with even more questions...

**9. How important do you think it is for a person to study philosophy? Explain your answer.**

**10. Do you think in the study of philosophy the answers to questions are final? Why or why not?**

**11. In your personal life, can the answers to your questions be final? Why or why not?**

**12. Given what was discussed in this lesson, would you consider yourself a philosopher? Explain.**

**12. And finally, just to give you a taste of the next unit, please read an excerpt from Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”, from his famous text, *Republic*. Plato was a student of Socrates. “Allegory of the Cave” is written as a dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors (questioners).**

*Socrates: I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets...*

See you at the cave for the next unit.

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