



# *Philosophy for Kids*

Forty Fun Questions That Help You Wonder ... About  
Everything!



David A. White, PhD

Illustrations by Cheryle Chapline



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## Preface

In 1993, after many years teaching philosophy in universities – frequently to jaded and unresponsive audiences – I began giving programs in primary-source philosophy to primary and secondary-school students.

These programs consist primarily of analysing brief passages from important philosophers throughout the history of the discipline – punctuated by considerable interaction between me and the students. Simply put, we argue a lot. In fact, a treasured memory is the comment of an especially contentious (and perceptive) year six who one day stopped en route to his next class and said, with great gusto: “*I really like philosophy; it’s the only class where we get rewarded for arguing!*”

These youthful audiences were neither jaded nor unresponsive. Indeed, my overwhelming reaction after the years I have spent philosophising with young people is that they are very thoughtful about important issues. If appropriate topics are suitably presented, young people do wonderful things with these ideas. They love to think about such questions, to express their thoughts and to argue about their views – often with great intensity and insight. This interest is reflected in how I am occasionally greeted – “*Hey, philosophy dude!*” I am in no sense a “dude”, but the fact that students think of me in this way suggests that for them it is “cool” to do philosophy in the classroom.

*Philosophy for Kids* opens the door to the cool way philosophers wonder about the world through a format combining the precision of philosophical thought with a light and, at times, loony touch. Anyone ten or over is invited to browse through this book and participate in thoughtful activities evoking the wondrous world of philosophical ideas. My public hope is that thinking about these questions will prove exciting, informative and fun. My private hope is that, once this excitement thrills their minds, young people will start reading about philosophical questions on their own. Such a response would realise a philosophy teacher’s dream!

# Introduction

## About This Book

The ancient Greeks believed that philosophy begins with wonder. If this belief is true, then young people should make excellent philosophers since they naturally wonder about many things. If you have ever wondered about why you felt a certain way when things happen to you, why animals or plants do what they do, why stars shine at night or why a machine works, then you might be a philosopher.

*Philosophy for Kids* is intended to foster that sense of wonder and to aim it in many directions. The word *philosophy* was coined by the Greeks and it means “love of wisdom”. A philosopher is not necessarily wise, but a philosopher wants to *become* wise. Wise about what? In the traditional sense of philosophy, wise about everything – yourself, the people around you, the world you live in.

For example, have you ever wondered whether someone who you thought was your friend is really your friend? Have you ever wondered about what time is, which is a very different question from “*What time is it?*” Did you ever wonder what happens to numbers when you aren’t thinking about them during your maths class? Did you know that the answer to the old question about whether a tree makes a sound when it falls in the forest with no one around is very important to philosophy? These are only a few of the ideas you can explore in this book. There are many others equally as interesting.

Philosophers have been thinking about these questions for almost 3000 years. Philosophers come in all shapes, races, nationalities. They can be men or women, older, middle-aged, younger. Some can even be your age. In this book, you will find forty questions that philosophers have often asked. Perhaps you’ve already thought of some of these questions. For example, “*Should you ever tell a lie?*” or “*Can computers think?*” But others will probably be new – “*How do you know for certain that things move?*” or “*Is it possible to think about nothing at all?*” Look over the questions in the Table of Contents and see how many of them you have already asked yourself or, perhaps, someone else. If you find a question that looks interesting, turn to that question in the book. It’s time to try philosophy!

When you begin to explore a question, you’ll see an introduction briefly explaining it. This discussion is followed by an activity inviting you to think about the question and helping you to learn about it in an interesting and enjoyable way. An important philosopher’s answer to the question is included in the discussion so you can see what that individual thought about the question. (The

philosopher's name appears at the top of the page.) After you have been introduced to the philosopher's thoughts, there are more questions and activities (in the section called For Further Thought) to help you discover *your own* answer to the question. Also, there is a Glossary at the end of the book to remind you of the meanings of important philosophical words.

It is essential to realise that philosophy is not like mathematics, where answers to problems appear at the back of the book. In fact, philosophers often keep thinking about a question even after they feel they have answered it. Thus, although the discussions and activities in this book are fun, they are also challenging. For example, "*Can you think about nothing at all?*" is a question that might sound easy to answer but, in fact, is not (as the discussion of this question will show). All forty questions are answered in such a way as to make you want to think even more about them. So, have fun wondering about – and learning – philosophy!

### *Philosophy and Questioning*

If you are reading this, then you are probably curious. If you are curious, then you wonder a lot. If you wonder a lot, then you ask questions. And if you are serious about the questions you ask, then you want answers to your questions.

Philosophy asks questions – lots of them. These questions are about concepts or ideas that concern everyone in one way or another – justice, friendship, time, truth and so forth. But, the questions are not easily answered because they are about very basic issues and because it is challenging to reason about these issues, as philosophers typically do. In fact, some of the questions are in the form of a paradox – an especially fascinating paradox will present you with a simple three-word sentence and you will be mystified as to whether this sentence is true or false! Another paradox, over 2000 years old, will make you wonder whether you have ever really seen anything move!

Thinking about all the issues contained in this book will help you to understand them and also, in the process, help you to understand more about yourself. Here are some examples of questions that will increase your self-knowledge: "*Are you a fair and just person?*" "*Should you be rewarded for your effort at school?*" "*Are you the same person you were five years ago?*" Once you begin to start thinking about these and other questions, you will enjoy it. You will learn about all sorts of things and see the value in wanting to be wise. You will be a philosopher.

As you browse through the questions in this book, you will think of many things. You will also notice that one question almost always leads to other questions, some of which will be discussed in other parts of the book. But, many of



the new questions you'll discover won't be discussed. The reading list at the end of the book – Additional Reading in Philosophy – should be useful in giving you some hints for where you can go to learn more and to become involved in more thinking and more discussion.

Reading about philosophical ideas is an important source of information, but it is equally important to talk to people about your own thoughts – classmates, friends, family members and, of course, your teachers. Many of the activities are more interesting – and more fun – when done with your friends or classmates. Then you can compare your philosophical ideas and, in the process, match wits with other young philosophers. We can learn a great deal from talking, and listening, to others about philosophical issues. We can also learn a great deal by listening to ourselves as we think about these issues.

### *Important Things to Remember About the Activities*

*Philosophy for Kids* includes activities in order to help you understand philosophical ideas and to enjoy yourself while doing so. Some of the activities resemble the kind of exercises that many people have done at school: true/false questions, multiple-choice questions, fill in the blanks. However, these activities are *not* tests; they just look like tests so that you will think hard when you answer them. The questions – and answers – are discussed, so you should not consider the activities as homework or as work of any sort. So, keep this element of playfulness in mind when you are doing an activity for a question such as “*Are impossible things ever possible?*” (which is, by the way, a very important philosophical question). Also, many of the activities can be repeated after a time, so it might be a good idea to use a pencil if you want to write your answers in this book.

Some activity questions – and every now and then some of the answers – are a bit silly. This is part of the fun. But, the fun part of philosophy only begins here. The really interesting part of philosophy comes later, when you start to read the writings of the philosophers and think about their ideas on your own and in conversations with others.

When you become fascinated by these questions and activities, you may have a feeling of novelty, or even strangeness, at something you have never thought about before or something you have thought about, but not in the way you are thinking about it now. This feeling is perfectly normal. In fact, it shows that you have been doing very well as a philosopher. Remember that thinking is fun, but also challenging. If you start to wonder about something and then begin to think about it, try to keep thinking until you have increased your understanding of the



## Question 12 – Aristotle

*What makes something you say true?*

*“Mental activity is easy if it doesn’t have to conform to reality.”*

Marcel Proust, novelist

As a rule, we want to say things that are true – at least most of the time. Sometimes, it might seem useful – especially when we are in some sort of trouble – to tell a lie (but see **Question 7**) in order to remove ourselves from this difficulty, whatever it may be. Normally, however, we place a high value on truth and we try to establish it and, once it has been established, we try to preserve the truth as true.

But, determining just what is true and why it is true is not an easy thing to do. Philosophers since the ancient Greeks have been wondering about, and thinking about, the question of the nature of truth.

Imagine that you are at school. You are taking an examination. It is a “true/false” test, a type of test most students experience fairly often. But did you ever wonder what it meant to indicate that a given statement was “true” rather than “false”?

Here is a true/false examination that will lead you toward one philosopher’s theory of truth. Put an X next to the answer that you think is correct:

1. If many people believe that something is true, then that something must be true. T \_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_
2. If you say something and I believe it, then whatever you said is true. T \_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_
3. If I say something and I believe that what I say is true, then it is true. T \_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_
4. If you say something and you believe that it is true, and if I say just the opposite and I believe that it is true, then we have both said something true. T \_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_



**Question 10. Do we control technology or does technology control us?**

Martin Heidegger (“The Question Concerning Technology”)

Young people tend to answer this question by choosing the former alternative. But Heidegger has a way of thinking about technology where it is not self-evidently true that automobiles, jet planes, computers, smartphone games, television and other forms of technology are as good for us as they might seem to be.

**Teaching Tips**

1. Limit the number of examples of technology to ten items, fewer if time constraints apply. Ask several students for their lists and put them on the board (the lists will overlap). Then, ask for reasons to justify saying that these items are, all things considered, either advantageous or detrimental.
2. The point of this question is to suggest the possibility that technology may not be completely under our control – that it has, in a sense, “a life of its own”. The students need not agree that technology exists in such a disembodied way. As long as they can accept that technology represents something foundational about the way human beings have interacted with nature – in short, that technology is not just “a means to an end” – then this question has been philosophically successful.

## *Additional Reading in Philosophy*

The following works are recommended to give young people additional experience with philosophy:

*Sophie's World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy*

by Jostein Gaarder

New York: Berkley Books, 1996

A world-wide best-selling work, this book is a remarkable blend of philosophy and an imaginative story involving a young girl and her adventures with a gentle, but somewhat mysterious, philosophy teacher. The accounts of philosophers begin with the Greeks, cover the entire history of philosophy and are noteworthy for their accuracy and fairness. Also interspersed into the development of the plot are more general discussions of cultural, social and religious factors relevant to the progression of philosophy. Highly recommended as a source for young people who would like to know more about philosophy.

*The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Great Philosophers*

by Will Durant

S & S Trade, 1967

This is an extremely readable and accurate account of the history of philosophy, with additional biographical features relevant to the philosophers themselves. A good source to provide a more challenging and concentrated review of philosophy than the more generalised accounts given in *Sophie's World*.

*The Problems of Philosophy*

by Bertrand Russell

London: Oxford University Press, 1959

This famous little book, by one of the great mathematician-philosophers of the 20th century, is a lucid description of the major problems that have occupied philosophers since the Greeks (e.g. appearance and reality, truth and falsehood, knowledge and opinion). There is also a splendid concluding chapter on the value of philosophy. Russell was mordantly witty when he wanted to be, but here he restricts himself to laying out philosophical problems in clear and carefully modulated prose. Recommended for slightly older (or more advanced younger) students.