

Ludo ABICHT and Hendrik OPDEBEECK

# The Point of Philosophy

An Introduction for the Human Sciences



P.I.E. Peter Lang

**T**he core questions of philosophy about the origin of the world and people, the distinction between good and evil, and the meaning of life – these questions keep us all busy. In this introduction to philosophy, these three questions lead our journey. You want to understand the world and man. Then you try to acquire an outlook on the proper course of action. Perhaps you especially hope to gain insight into the meaning of your own life. And our society, as well, repeatedly collides with questions of its economic, social, and ecological limits. Again and again, philosophy is the necessary condition for finding answers in a rational manner to the demands for in-sight, outlook, and the search for meaning. This is a fascinating story of more than 2,500 years of thought, where the reader might feel inspired to add his or her own responses to the most important personal and social questions. But also to ask new questions – the point of philosophy.

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Bruxelles · Bern · Berlin · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien



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## Introduction

Most people occasionally ask the central philosophical questions about the origins of the world and mankind, about the difference between good and evil, and about our very sense of existence. You really want to better understand how the world and man are actually functioning. Then you want to know the best way to survive and to act. And finally, you want to get a clear insight into the sense, the point, of life itself. Instead of dealing with as many philosophers who have struggled with these questions as possible, this introduction to philosophy for the human sciences strives, rather, to present a readable pattern for dealing with these philosophical questions. It is a kind of tool that will enable readers to proceed down their own path. Thus, there are regular moments in this book that we deal with the various ways in which “in-sight, out-look, and making-sense” surface in philosophy in history. This reading pattern turns out to be a useful tool to keep track of the central questions in the midst of the vast diversity of potential philosophical answers.

It is our explicit purpose to make people sufficiently curious as to entice them to read the original philosophical texts for themselves. For a summary is always something like a translation that can never replace the direct confrontation with the original text. Then you’ll discover soon enough that there may exist different, sometimes even contradictory, parallel interpretations of the same text. In this way, the ages-old dialogue between thinkers and their readers or listeners continues, which is about the best thing one can wish for philosophy, the “love of wisdom.” In fact, even this book is a product of such dialogue, here between an atheist philosopher (Ludo Abicht) and an agnostic but religious philosopher (Hendrik Opdebeeck), accurately edited by Ludo’s son and native speaker Bart Abicht.

Ultimately, this book confronts the reader, time and again, with questions on the concrete economic, social, and ecological boundaries of our society. This is how philosophy not only proves necessary with regard to the ancient questions, but also in order to obtain rationally argued answers to very concrete and current social and ethical questions.



## 1. Insight, Outlook, and the Search for Meaning

*Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;  
It is the center hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel;  
It is the space within that makes it useful.  
Cut doors and windows for a room;  
It is the holes which make it useful.  
Therefore profit comes from what is there;  
Usefulness from what is not there.*

– Lao Tzu, about 500 B.C.E.

### **No Death**

*Within a bird I sing along,  
within a drinking glass tilted toward the sun I sparkle.  
I want my world because I want myself.*

*Women are wearing my mask in the villages  
and men my voice behind the hedges.  
I love myself in others, much much.*

*Here is a good sound and  
there is light to console the eyes,  
even at night,  
and I see my life projected upon my eyelids:  
life, world, women and men.*

*I am wandering, in love with myself, with my green  
and the horizon keeps rippling on.*

*What's more?  
There is no death because there is life.*

– Jan G. Elburg, *Geen dood*, around 1960 (excerpt)

***The Doubter***

*I, he said to us,  
Am the doubter. I am doubtful whether  
The work was well done that devoured your days.  
Whether what you said would still have value for anyone if it Were less  
well said.  
Whether you said it well but perhaps  
Were not convinced of the truth of what you said.  
Whether it is not ambiguous; each possible misunderstanding  
Is your responsibility. Or can it be unambiguous  
And take the contradictions out of things: is it too unambiguous?  
If so, what you say is useless. Your thing has no life in it.  
Are you truly in the stream of happening? Do you accept  
All that develops? Are you developing? Who are you?  
To whom do you speak?  
Who finds what you say useful? And, by the way,  
Is it sobering? Can it be read in the morning?  
Is it also linked to what is already there? Are the sentences that were  
Spoken before you made use of, or at least refuted? Is Everything verifiable?  
By experience? By which one? But above all  
Always above all: how does one act  
If one believes what you say? Above all: how does one act?*  
– Bertolt Brecht, 1937 (excerpt)

## **1.1. The Philosophical Questions**

Lao Tzu, Jan Elburg, Bertolt Brecht... three poets from different civilizations, 2,500 years and continents apart. Whereas the Chinese of that period did not yet distinguish between poets and philosophers, we usually do not consider poets and novelists to be philosophers or professional thinkers. This difference is important, as today we study philosophy as a separate discipline, just like biology, history, or French literature. Such a thing would have been impossible in the early stages of Western philosophy, because in those days, roughly since the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., all kinds of thinking (natural sciences, literature, social and political problems) were the realm of the *philo-sophers*. “*Philo-sophers*” (friends or lovers of *Sophia*, or wisdom) were people who – in the thriving commercial cities and ports of what is currently Turkey and, later on, in the large Greek metropolises – sought answers to a series of questions that had until then only been discussed in mythologies or religions, or had been pushed aside for practical reasons:

- Where does the world come from and what is the substance of this Universe?
- Is there an absolute truth and how can we know it?
- What are the rules of thinking?
- Which values and virtues are important?
- What do they call good and evil, and why?
- How do we achieve the best possible way of living together?
- What is the sense of life?

## **1.2. Philosophy and Mythology**

These philosophical questions, each of which in turn introduced new branches of science, only became possible and meaningful after people had reached a certain level of material culture, with the result that they no longer had to spend all their time and energy producing food and protection against nature (heat, cold, wild animals, hunger, and disease). In the Greek merchant cities, a small minority of privileged citizens emerged, citizens who could afford to spend part of the freed time on further research. Until then, this so-called leisure class consisted mainly of male and female priests and “poets” who composed long epic tales to promulgate the myths around the tribal origins (think of the heroic slayer of the tyrant, or the Mexican-Indian tale about the creation of man). A myth is usually presented as a tale that is widely accepted but in no way validated by historical research. In the social and historical process of evolution, there comes a moment when those wonderful tales are no longer sufficient and real curiosity (wonder, *thaumazein*) is aroused. We observe something analogous in the development of children, in such questions as “Where do babies come from?” or “Mommy, why are we living?” The Greek merchants who sent their ships all across the Mediterranean needed more than the myths of Atlas and the Sun King, and they could no longer let the success of their crops depend upon the mysteries of Eleusis and the annual sacrifices to the gods. It is this curiosity, together with growing experience (experiments, travels abroad, contacts with other civilizations) that proved to be the engine of all scientific and, of course, philosophical thinking.

## **1.3. Philosophy and Religion**

It is important to bear in mind that those questions – about the world and mankind, about the difference between good and evil, and about making sense of our existence – are dealt with by religion as much as by philosophy (think of the Ten Commandments, the Talmud, the Christian Catechism, or

the Qur'an). The *method* (the way) to reach answers, however, is different. In philosophy, there is no room for a super- or non-human revelation by which certain truths are revealed to, and accepted by, the faithful.

Philosophy does not necessarily reject these revealed truths ("the existence of God, heaven and hell, eternal life," etc.), but confines itself to a critical and rational approach to the same problems – "Is it possible to prove the existence of God, or of a life after death, logically?" During particular periods (for example, in ancient Greece), philosophy directly confronted traditional religious myths, which could lead to someone like Socrates being accused of "atheism." At other times, the relationship between religion and philosophy has been much more harmonious and free of conflict. In medieval monastic schools, philosophy was the *ancilla theologiae*, the handmaid of theology, as it was supposed to develop thinking to the moment when it was to be taken over by religion. Thus, philosophy and religion are no natural enemies, although certain forms of religious fundamentalism or philosophical dogmatism understand it that way. It is also fact that religion sometimes offers answers to questions that philosophy or science cannot answer, or prefer to leave unanswered.

## **1.4. Philosophy and Ideology**

Ideology is a logically fairly consistent view of the world and mankind, one that provides support and certainty. It is consciously or unconsciously imposed and gives answers without allowing people to ask additional questions. It is, in fact, a frozen worldview that is controlled by authoritarian and absolute authorities (politicians, leaders of movements, or captains of industry) that do not tolerate protest, and that persecute others as subversives or dissidents. Hence, the distinction between ideology and philosophy is total. Ideology is useful to maintain the separation between the traditional "pillars" (different worldviews), as every contact with "people who think differently" or even worse, with doubters and skeptics within one's own group, is thwarted. That is also why philosophy can force a way out of this fossilization, by means of active pluralism.

## **1.5. The Emergence of Philosophy from a Worldview**

There are many different ways to approach philosophy. We could, for instance, start from the view of man and society (*Weltanschauung*) that we were raised with, and which we have evidently taken for granted until now. In our particular society, this is the Christian, mainly Catholic worldview, next to the secular humanist, the Jewish, and the Muslim ones. Each of these worldviews offers an almost complete and satisfactory explanation of our human existence. To proceed from this self-evident worldview to philosophy we need to pass through three different stages: