

# Introduction

If you look deep into the eyes of a sheep, you aren't likely to see much more than the back of its head. On the other hand if you look into the eyes of another person, you will see a human being reflected back at you, a person with plans and goals and desires and intentions and wishes. In this respect there is a profound difference between people and animals. Animals live in an environment that presents them with challenges, with threats and opportunities. Their response to these is governed by biological imperatives, by the need to eat and the drive to reproduce.

By comparison, as people we live in an altogether different world. We navigate our world *self-consciously*, aided by knowledge. Our world doesn't present itself to us in the same sort of brutal fashion. Of course there are threats and opportunities; no one wants to find themselves in the direct path of a typhoon, and very few people would turn their noses up at chunks of gold washing around in a riverbed. But what makes our world radically different is the self-conscious way in which we interact with it. We do not accept the world as we find it, we set out to change it, to mould and adapt it to our ends and purposes. For much of history wild places, mountain ranges and jungles were looked on as ugly and unattractive. Nature was regarded as a force to be tamed and civilised rather than as an adventure playground or a

source of visual pleasure. The fascination of the modern world with wild and unexplored places came about after people had entrenched their position in the world, and extensively adapted it to their own ends.

Our relations to the world around us are, then, profoundly different to the relations that obtain between animals and their environment. What underpins this is the sense in which we are minded beings. This is not to deny consciousness to animals. It would be just silly to deny that animals are conscious beings, that they don't feel pain, that they don't respond with some degree of intelligence to their circumstances. But they are not minded beings in the sense that we are. We are essentially beings with aims and goals and purposes; can you conceive of a person lacking these? Would they be recognisably human in any more than physical form? It would certainly be hard to know how to respond to such a being in any given situation.

Given that we are, essentially, minded beings, we find ourselves thrown into a world that presents us with opportunities and challenges to fulfil (or fail to fulfil) whatever-it-is we set out to do. In the process we need to form beliefs, to attain knowledge. As such there are two things that we might want to find out about. There is the world around us, the outer world, and there is the world within us, the inner world. We all know that finding out about the former is a long and often painful process (remember finding out about wasps and stinging nettles?), but finding out about the latter can be painful too. There is a moment in Conrad's novel *Lord Jim* when Jim abandons his ship in shameful circumstances, jumping into a boat along with the rest of the crew. The moment he jumps off his ship he has a blinding moment of self-awareness in which he sees himself as he truly is, as a coward. Jim's misfortune is to respond to circumstances in a way that reveals his true nature to himself, and this self-knowledge eats into his soul. Fortunately few of us are unlucky enough ever to find ourselves in such circumstances, but the point remains that our minds are often less than transparent to ourselves and attaining self-knowledge can be as hard and as painful as attaining knowledge of the world around us.

The importance of knowledge of the inner world, of our selves, is that we find out what it is to be a minded being, about the path that we want to pursue through the world. We find out about our goals,

our desires and ambitions. And hopefully we find out about our capabilities, about what it is reasonable to pursue. How we acquire this knowledge is another matter which we will come back to, but at first glance it isn't easy to see how this is possible. Getting to know about something generally means getting to know about something other, something that is not me. Finding out about something usually involves a subject doing the finding out and an object that is examined. In the case of self-knowledge it isn't obvious that there is a distinct subject and a distinct object. This is something we will come back to, particularly in Chapter 1.

The importance of knowledge of the outer world is rather more obvious. If you set out to do whatever-it-is – build a bridge, perhaps, or trap a mouse – then clearly you need to know what is involved. Here it is rather more obvious that there is a subject and an object to be found out about.

But what, though, is meant by “knowledge”? What is it, and where is it to be found? If there were a succinct answer to this, there wouldn't be a tradition of inquiry, there wouldn't be theories and theorising about knowledge (*epistemology*, from the Greek *epistêmê*, meaning “knowledge”). I'm reluctant to say *the* theory of knowledge, because talk of *the* theory of knowledge suggests that there is only one theory of knowledge, that there is a consensus of agreement over method and results, as there is in, for example, metallurgy or ophthalmology. Rather there are different theories that represent different ways of looking at and thinking about ourselves and the world around us (“theory” derives from the Greek verb *theôrein*, meaning “to gaze upon”).

What I do want to emphasise is the importance of narrative, of having a story to tell about ourselves and the world around us. If philosophy was a science then it would be possible to produce a textbook setting out the results arrived at by previous generations of thinkers, without referring to the specific texts in which their views are expressed. Physics textbooks, for example, set out Newton's laws of motion without using Newton's wordings and without making any reference to the context (in the *Principia Mathematica*) in which they were originally stated. By contrast philosophers go back again and again to the original works of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant *et al*, because the views they put forward resist the sort of straightforward textbook treatment that occurs in

science subjects. Consequently in studying philosophy there is no substitute for reading the original texts, and this is why substantial extracts are included in the following.

One reason why philosophical work resists textbook treatment is because of the importance of narrative. The central aspect of being minded beings is that we make sense of ourselves and of the world around us by making up and telling stories. This is why novels like *Lord Jim* are so powerful, because there is something deep within us that responds imaginatively to stories, to the circumstances in which fictional characters find themselves. The different theories of knowledge we will look at are each of them stories about ourselves and the world around us, and our responses to them are a measure of their strengths and weaknesses. As with all stories it matters whether a view on knowledge is compelling and persuasive, whether or not it grips your imagination. So perhaps a criterion to adopt in evaluating philosophical views is not whether you think a particular approach is true or false, but whether you find it more or less compelling as an account of your own experiences as a minded being thrown into the world at a particular time and in a particular place.

On a more practical note an aim of the book is to help you succeed in the AQA Theory of Knowledge module, the syllabus for which is divided into four main areas:

- Empiricism and Rationalism,
- Knowledge and Justification,
- Knowledge and Scepticism,
- Knowledge of the External World.

In the following we will look at each of these in turn, and in doing so, try and build up a picture of the relations involved in acquiring knowledge about ourselves and of the world around us. The syllabus is topic-based rather than text-based, so in pursuing these topics we will range principally over Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, touching briefly on some twentieth-century work. The theory of knowledge module is intended as a general introduction to philosophy, and the choice of topics is a good one. A grasp of the main elements of the text should serve as a broad foundation for delving further into philosophy, whether for the Baccalaureate or at undergraduate level. I hope it will also stimulate the general reader with an interest in the subject outside of any formal course of study.

There are two sections in Chapter 2 (on induction and deduction, and on internalism and externalism) that are rather harder than the rest of the book and can be skipped without loss of continuity. For the reader with more time they should help to unify topics discussed elsewhere in the book.

References are, wherever possible, to the page or section numbering used in standard editions; in the case of Descartes, for example, by volume and page numbering in the Adam & Tannery (AT) edition. References to Locke's *Essay* are of the form book number.chapter number.section number. Translations from Descartes' *Meditations* are my own, from the 1647 Duc de Luynes French translation. The extract from Ben Goertzel's *Essay* (pp.101-2) is reprinted courtesy of Dr Goertzel. The editions I've used are listed in the Bibliography. The Glossary contains brief explanations of technical terms.

At the end of each chapter I have included a "Further Reading" section. It is tempting to print a standard formula – Read the original texts. Then read them again. – but perhaps this isn't terribly helpful. At the end of his classic introduction, *The Principles of Philosophy*, Russell prints a bibliographical note: "The student who wishes to acquire an elementary knowledge of philosophy will find it both easier and more profitable to read some of the great philosophers than to attempt to derive an all-round view from handbooks." This is as true as ever, but a list like Russell's consisting solely of the works of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume and Kant, is rather forbidding. As a rule of thumb the Oxford Very Short Introductions series is almost uniformly excellent (although Ayer on Hume is more about Ayer than it is about Hume). At a rather more advanced level the Cambridge Companions series is highly recommended. Following each "Further Reading" section is a question section, with exam-style questions and hints for answering them.

In reading philosophical texts you should find, sooner or later, that you are losing your grip on the argument, that you can no longer see what is being said and why it is being said. This is perfectly normal. Part of the discipline of philosophy is to persevere, within reason, with texts you don't understand. You have to go through a process of stocking the mind with things you don't get. Later on, perhaps the next day but possibly months later, in answering a question or reading a different book or attending a lesson or a lecture, it will come to you what it was

about. Stocking the mind in this way is an essential part of studying philosophy, just as musicians practice scales and boxers spar with one another. Struggling with a text isn't something to worry about, it is a normal and indispensable part of getting to grips with the subject.

Finally, a comment on my liberal use of "I", otherwise known as the "vertical pronoun". Use of the vertical pronoun is often frowned on in educational and academic contexts, but if you look closely most authors substitute "here" or "in the present work" or some such self-referential indicator, because you can't get away from the fact that books and journal articles are the work of individual, sentient beings. Philosophy may sometimes be about facts but it is not itself a matter of stating and arranging facts, and eliminating the vertical pronoun is, to my mind, a curiously self-defeating denial that the truly great philosophical works are the products of interestingly cantankerous, passionate and engaged authors.

Relatedly when an author uses "I" they often intend the I to be you; that you are to put yourself in their shoes in order to see what they see. The I of Descartes' *Meditations*, for example, is just such an invitation to you to be I. The best philosophical works are an amalgam of hard-headed rational, logical thinking and extraordinary insight into the human situation. You can do facts and logic in the third person, but insight is more personal and immediate.