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STEPHEN HETHERINGTON is Professor of Philosophy at the University of New South Wales, Australia. His publications include Good Knowledge, Bad Knowledge (2001), Reality? Knowledge? Philosophy! (2003), Self-Knowledge (2007), Yes, But How Do You Know? (2009), and How To Know (2011).
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A Guided Anthology

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What is real?
(a) Everything.
(b) Nothing.
(c) Some – but only some – stuff.
(d) Hmm. What does that question mean?

Who really has knowledge?
(a) Everyone.
(b) No one.
(c) Some – but only some – people.
(d) Hmm. What does that question mean?

... and so to this book. Welcome.

Prepare to immerse yourself in provocative and powerful philosophical thoughts about reality and knowledge. Your thinking will take you back and forth, up and down, hither and thither. You will contemplate lots of ideas – competing ones; complementary ones. The book is designed to be used in some university and college courses – beginning philosophy courses on reality and knowledge, on metaphysics and epistemology. Within these pages, you will encounter thematically focused instances of philosophical writing on those topics, from some of philosophy’s most justly famous thinkers.

Prepare also for manifest struggle and potential triumph. I have introduced each reading (usually an excerpt) with remarks explaining its historical setting and/or philosophical point. Nevertheless, at times you will be puzzled, even exasperated, by the challenges in these readings – challenges to your senses of yourself, others, and the world at large. Much will seem new: “I hadn’t thought of that.” Your mission will then be to question and to evaluate: “Should I accept that? Why? Why not?” But such challenges are also precious opportunities. Intellects and characters – mine; yours – do not improve without effort and focus. So, here is a book intended precisely to assist you in that respect. I hope you will come to appreciate some of the vitality and depth that philosophy can bring to your life.

The idea for this book was suggested to me in 2009 by Nick Bellorini, who was then the philosophy editor at Blackwell in the UK. His proposal was for an introductory
metaphysics-and-epistemology anthology, blending classic with contemporary writings, offering editorial guidance for each of the book’s many readings. Nick’s model for some of this was John Cottingham’s more general – and terrific – anthology, *Western Philosophy* (2nd edn. Blackwell, 2008). A little later, Nick moved to a new position with another publisher. But Jeff Dean (at Wiley-Blackwell in the USA) continued to be extremely supportive of this project. He gathered many excellent referees’ suggestions for me when I was mulling over the book’s possible contents and organization. (“Thank you,” after all this time, to those referees.) I have appreciated Jeff’s clear-headed and friendly editorial guidance. Jennifer Bray and Janet Moth at Wiley-Blackwell have been very helpful with the production process. Brent Madison provided good feedback on the contents (as did Michaelis Michael and Markos Valaris), as well as on my own writing for the book. Lindsay Yeates was an invaluable proofreader.
You know – excitedly, I hope – that this is a book of philosophy. Yet how well do you know this? After all, do you know what philosophy really is? Remarkably, even experienced philosophers can disagree as to philosophy’s identity or nature. So it would be rash for me to insist at the outset on what could be a needlessly limited characterization of philosophy. Instead of picking out one or two possible proposals as to what philosophy is, I will allow this book’s first few readings – those in Part I – to begin telling the story.

From among philosophy’s many specific areas or topics, the book introduces you, in Parts II and III, to two of the historically central ones – respectively, metaphysics and epistemology. Metaphysics is the philosophical study of being, of reality, of existence. Fundamentally, what is real? Fundamentally, what is it to be real? And epistemology is philosophy’s focus upon knowing, upon inquiry, upon rational belief. Fundamentally, what is knowledge, and in what ways do we attain it? Fundamentally, do we ever attain it?

Here is a cautionary note: It is very possible to reflect non-philosophically upon those two topics – upon reality and upon knowing. There can be something quite artless and simple about philosophical questions; there can also be an art and sophistication to them. How does some thinking become philosophical, about these or any other topics? At any time, philosophy is what has been done in its name – and so its history remains part of it – along with what is still being done in its name and possibly what could then be done in its name. We tend to identify philosophy, too, by its best exemplars – what has been, plus what is being, done well in its name. All of that leads us into this book, which gives you an opportunity to examine exemplary exemplars – both historical and contemporary – of philosophical thinking about being and about knowing.

In calling those exemplars exemplary, I do not mean to presume that either you or I will accept all of them as correct in what they conclude. Presumably, it is possible for some philosophy to be good yet mistaken. In fact, there are many ways in which, it seems, that is possible. Sometimes, a piece of philosophy is good because it raises good questions. Sometimes, a piece of philosophy is good because it develops an imaginative answer to someone else’s good question. Sometimes, a piece of philosophy is good because it finds surprising and instructive flaws in an otherwise tempting answer to a good question. Sometimes, a piece of philosophy is good in one respect, yet not so good in another respect. And on it goes, for the many possible respects in which a piece of philosophy may deserve respect.

Please be alert, then, when reading this book’s extracts from some excellent instances of philosophy, each of which is good in at least one notable respect. Look for each reading’s
insight, and/or its unusual question, and/or its bold idea, and/or the clever reasoning, and/or etc. Then start forming your potential morals about what philosophy can, or what it cannot, accomplish. Once you reach the end of the book, hopefully you will have witnessed for yourself a representative sample of what philosophy can achieve. You could even have taken a step or two yourself, maybe three or four, toward that achievement.
Part I

The Philosophical Image
Systematic Western philosophy began in Greece, most influentially with the engagingly profound dialogues written by Plato (c.428–c.348 BC). They are centered upon his teacher Socrates (469–399 BC) being constructively puzzled by … well, almost anything about which others within his hearing claim not to be puzzled. When Socrates wanders around Athens, he meets many people who are eager to share with him their confidently held views as to what is ethically right, what is religiously proper, what is natural, what is socially just, what is beauty, what is knowledge, what is real, etc. Socrates listens – before asking for more details, requesting help in understanding, suggesting alternative formulations and ideas. Time and again, he enters into other people’s thoughts, earnestly wondering, seeking clarity on one point after another as he professes slowness of wit and paucity of comprehension. (He was inquiring with what philosophers now call the Socratic method of inquiry used by many teachers: questions guiding gently and adaptively, sometimes professing a lack of understanding even when the questioner understands better than the audience does.)

What happens as a result of Socrates’ questioning? Subtle thinking occurs; new possibilities emerge; and Socrates’ companions tend to acquire feelings of uncertainty and frustration. Thanks to Plato’s writing, we are privileged to be able to immerse ourselves in this fascinating process, this way of improving our powers of reflection. That Socratic form of thinking has contributed powerfully to the subsequent centuries of philosophy.

---

But philosophy has also been influenced by some of Socrates’ themes. We see this in our extract from the Republic, one of Plato’s most famous dialogues. Two themes are especially important in this reading. (1) Philosophy seeks knowledge. (2) Not just any knowledge, though; it should be knowledge of a reality worth knowing, indeed a reality deeply worth knowing. With philosophy spurring on our hearts and minds, we should strive to know the true nature of goodness (“the Good,” Socrates names it). We should settle for nothing less than that ultimate prize. And we should hold in mind that what seems good and ultimately valuable might not be. We must learn the difference between settling for an appearance of something ultimately good (e.g. something really only transiently or superficially valuable) and finding something that really is fundamentally good.

Plato brings alive that human mission with what has become one of philosophy’s lasting images — a picture of how we are if we do not succeed in knowing true goodness. This is Plato’s celebrated image of the cave. It is a metaphor for how too many of us do, yet how none of us should, live our lives — by being trapped within a cave of shadows and human lighting, settling for mere appearances of ultimate value. Even when not held back by poverty and oppression, people might be trapped in the way envisioned by Socrates — constricted by their lack of philosophical imagination about, and genuine insight into, their real underlying natures and achievements. Can we escape this? Suitable knowledge is needed. Philosophy is the means.

Book V

[…]

[Socrates:] “Then affirm this or deny it: when we say a man is a desirer of something, will we assert that he desires all of that form, or one part of it and not another?”

“All,” he [Glauccon] said.

“Won’t we also then assert that the philosopher is a desirer of wisdom, not of one part and not another, but of all of it?”

“True.”

“We’ll deny, therefore, that the one who’s finicky about his learning, especially when he’s young and doesn’t yet have an account of what’s useful and not, is a lover of learning or a philosopher, just as we say that the man who’s finicky about his food isn’t hungry, doesn’t desire food, and isn’t a lover of food but a bad eater.”

“And we’ll be right in denying it.”

“But the one who is willing to taste every kind of learning with gusto, and who approaches learning with delight, and is insatiable, we shall justly assert to be a philosopher, won’t we?”

And Glaucon said, “Then you’ll have many strange ones. For all the lovers of sights are in my opinion what they are because they enjoy learning; and the lovers of hearing would be some of the strangest to include among philosophers, those who would never be willing to go
voluntarily to a discussion and such occupations but who – just as though they had hired out their ears for hearing – run around to every chorus at the Dionysia, missing none in the cities or the villages. Will we say that all these men and other learners of such things and the petty arts are philosophers?"

“Not at all,” I said, “but they are like philosophers.”

“Who do you say are the true ones?” he said.

“The lovers of the sight of the truth,” I said.

“And that’s right,” he said. “But how do you mean it?”

[…]

“Well, now,” I said, “this is how I separate them out. On one side I put those of whom you were just speaking, the lovers of sights, the lovers of arts, and the practical men; on the other, those whom the argument concerns, whom alone one could rightly call philosophers.”

“How do you mean?” he said.

“The lovers of hearing and the lovers of sights, on the one hand,” I said, “surely delight in fair sounds and colors and shapes and all that craft makes from such things, but their thought is unable to see and delight in the nature of the fair itself.”

“That,” he said, “is certainly so.”

“Wouldn’t, on the other hand, those who are able to approach the fair itself and see it by itself be rare?”

“Indeed they would.”

“Is the man who holds that there are fair things but doesn’t hold that there is beauty itself and who, if someone leads him to the knowledge of it, isn’t able to follow – is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake? Consider it. Doesn’t dreaming, whether one is asleep or awake, consist in believing a likeness of something to be not a likeness, but rather the thing itself to which it is like?”

“I, at least,” he said, “would say that a man who does that dreams.”

“And what about the man who, contrary to this, believes that there is something fair itself and is able to catch sight both of it and of what participates in it, and doesn’t believe that what participates is it itself, nor that it itself is what participates – is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake?”

“He’s quite awake,” he said.

“Wouldn’t we be right in saying that this man’s thought, because he knows, is knowledge, while the other’s is opinion because he opines?”

“Most certainly.”

[…]

“Since knowledge depended on what is and ignorance necessarily on what is not, mustn’t we also seek something between ignorance and knowledge that depends on that which is in between, if there is in fact any such thing?”

“Most certainly.”

“Do we say opinion is something?”

“Of course.”

“A power different from knowledge or the same?”

“Different.”

“Then opinion is dependent on one thing and knowledge on another, each according to its own power.”
“That’s so.”

“Doesn’t knowledge naturally depend on what is, to know of what is that it is and how it is? However, in my opinion, it’s necessary to make this distinction first.”

“What distinction?”

“We will assert that powers are a certain class of beings by means of which we are capable of what we are capable, and also everything else is capable of whatever it is capable. For example, I say sight and hearing are powers, if perchance you understand the form of which I wish to speak.”

“I do understand,” he said.

“Now listen to how they look to me. In a power I see no color or shape or anything of the sort such as I see in many other things to which I look when I distinguish one thing from another for myself. With a power I look only to this – on what it depends and what it accomplishes; and it is on this basis that I come to call each of the powers a power; and that which depends on the same thing and accomplishes the same thing, I call the same power, and that which depends on something else and accomplishes something else, I call a different power. What about you? What do you do?”

“The same,” he said.

“Now, you best of men, come back here to knowledge again. Do you say it’s some kind of power, or in what class do you put it?”

“In this one,” he said, “as the most vigorous of all powers.”

“And what about opinion? Is it among the powers, or shall we refer it to some other form?”

“Not at all,” he said. “For that by which we are capable of opining is nothing other than opinion.”

“But just a little while ago you agreed that knowledge and opinion are not the same.”

“How,” he said, “could any intelligent man count that which doesn’t make mistakes the same as that which does?”

“Fine,” I said, “and we plainly agree that opinion is different from knowledge.”

“Yes, it is different.”

“Since each is capable of something different, are they, therefore, naturally dependent on different things?”

“Necessarily.”

“Knowledge is presumably dependent on what is, to know of what is that it is and how it is?”

“Yes.”

“While opinion, we say, opines.”

“Yes.”

“The same thing that knowledge knows? And will the knowable and the opinable be the same? Or is that impossible?”

“On the basis of what’s been agreed to, it’s impossible,” he said. “If different powers are naturally dependent on different things and both are powers – opinion and knowledge – and each is, as we say, different, then on this basis it’s not admissible that the knowable and the opinable be the same.”

“If what is, is knowable, then wouldn’t something other than that which is be opinable?”

“Yes, it would be something other.”
“Then does it opine what is not? Or is it also impossible to opine what is not? Think about it. Doesn’t the man who opines refer his opinion to something? Or is it possible to opine, but to opine nothing?”

“No, it’s impossible.”

“The man who opines, opines some one thing?”

“Yes.”

“But further, that which is not could not with any correctness be addressed as some one thing but rather nothing at all.”

“Certainly.”

“To that which is not, we were compelled to assign ignorance, and to that which is, knowledge.”

“Right,” he said.

“Opinion, therefore, opines neither that which is nor that which is not.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Opinion, therefore, would be neither ignorance nor knowledge?”

“It doesn’t seem so.”

“Is it, then, beyond these, surpassing either knowledge in clarity or ignorance in obscurity?”

“No, it is neither.”

“Does opinion,” I said, “look darker than knowledge to you and brighter than ignorance?”

“Very much so,” he said.

“And does it lie within the limits set by these two?”

“Yes.”

“Opinion, therefore, would be between the two.”

“That’s entirely certain.”

“Weren’t we saying before that if something should come to light as what is and what is not at the same time, it lies between that which purely and simply is and that which in every way is not, and that neither knowledge nor ignorance will depend on it, but that which in its turn comes to light between ignorance and knowledge?”

“Right.”

“And now it is just that which we call opinion that has come to light between them.”

“Yes, that is what has come to light.”

“Hence, as it seems, it would remain for us to find what participates in both – in to be and not to be – and could not correctly be addressed as either purely and simply, so that, if it comes to light, we can justly address it as the opinable, thus assigning the extremes to the extremes and that which is in between to that which is in between. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Now, with this taken for granted, let him tell me, I shall say, and let him answer – that good man who doesn’t believe that there is anything fair in itself and an idea of the beautiful itself, which always stays the same in all respects, but does hold that there are many fair things, this lover of sights who can in no way endure it if anyone asserts the fair is one and the just is one and so on with the rest. ‘Now, of these many fair things, you best of men,’ we’ll say, ‘is there any that won’t also look ugly? And of the just, any that won’t look unjust? And of the holy, any that won’t look unholy?’ ”
“No,” he said, “but it’s necessary that they look somehow both fair and ugly, and so it is with all the others you ask about.”

“And what about the many doubles? Do they look any less half than double?”

“No.”

“And, then, the things that we would assert to be big and little, light and heavy – will they be addressed by these names any more than by the opposites of these names?”

“No,” he said, “each will always have something of both.”

“Then is each of the several manys what one asserts it to be any more than it is not what one asserts it to be?”

“They are like the ambiguous jokes at feasts,” he said, “and the children’s riddle about the eunuch, about his hitting the bat – with what and on what he struck it. For the manys are also ambiguous, and it’s not possible to think of them fixedly as either being or not being, or as both or neither.”

“Can you do anything with them?” I said. “Or could you find a finer place to put them than between being and not to be? For presumably nothing darker than not-being will come to light so that something could not be more than it; and nothing brighter than being will come to light so that something could be more than it.”

“Very true,” he said.

“Then we have found, as it seems, that the many beliefs of the many about what’s fair and about the other things roll around somewhere between not-being and being purely and simply.”

“Yes, we have found that.”

“And we agreed beforehand that, if any such thing should come to light, it must be called opinable but not knowable, the wanderer between, seized by the power between.”

“Yes, we did agree.”

“And, as for those who look at many fair things but don’t see the fair itself and aren’t even able to follow another who leads them to it, and many just things but not justice itself, and so on with all the rest, we’ll assert that they opine all these things but know nothing of what they opine.”

“Necessarily,” he said.

“And what about those who look at each thing itself – at the things that are always the same in all respects? Won’t we say that they know and don’t opine?”

“That too is necessary.”

“Won’t we assert that these men delight in and love that on which knowledge depends, and the others that on which opinion depends? Or don’t we remember that we were saying that they love and look at fair sounds and colors and such things but can’t even endure the fact that the fair itself is something?”

“Yes, we do remember.”

“So, will we strike a false note in calling them lovers of opinion rather than lovers of wisdom? And will they be very angry with us if we speak this way?”

“No,” he said, “that is, if they are persuaded by me. For it’s not lawful to be harsh with what’s true.”

“Must we, therefore, call philosophers rather than lovers of opinion those who delight in each thing that is itself?”

“That’s entirely certain.”
“Next, then,” I [Socrates] said, “make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets.”

“I see,” he [Glaucon] said.

“Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent.”

“It’s a strange image,” he said, “and strange prisoners you’re telling of.”

“They’re like us,” I said. “For in the first place, do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves and one another other than the shadows cast by the fire on the side of the cave facing them?”

“How could they,” he said, “if they had been compelled to keep their heads motionless throughout life?”

“And what about the things that are carried by? Isn’t it the same with them?”

“Of course.”

“If they were able to discuss things with one another, don’t you believe they would hold that they are naming these things going by before them that they see?”

“Necessarily.”

“And what if the prison also had an echo from the side facing them? Whenever one of the men passing by happens to utter a sound, do you suppose they would believe that anything other than the passing shadow was uttering the sound?”

“No, by Zeus,” he said. “I don’t.”

“Then most certainly,” I said, “such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things.”

“Most necessarily,” he said.

“Now consider,” I said, “what their release and healing from bonds and folly would be like if something of this sort were by nature to happen to them. Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this is in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. What do you suppose he’d say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what is and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly; and, in particular, showing him each of the things that pass by, were to compel the man to answer his questions about what they are? Don’t you suppose he’d be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown?”
“Yes,” he said, “by far.”

“And, if he compelled him to look at the light itself, would his eyes hurt and would he flee, turning away to those things that he is able to make out and hold them to be really clearer than what is being shown?”

“So he would,” he said.

“And if,” I said, “someone dragged him away from there by force along the rough, steep, upward way and didn’t let him go before he had dragged him out into the light of the sun, wouldn’t he be distressed and annoyed at being so dragged? And when he came to the light, wouldn’t he have his eyes full of its beam and be unable to see even one of the things now said to be true?”

“No, he wouldn’t,” he said, “at least not right away.”

“Then I suppose he’d have to get accustomed, if he were going to see what’s up above. At first he’d most easily make out the shadows; and after that the phantoms of the human beings and the other things in water; and, later, the things themselves. And from there he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night – looking at the light of the stars and the moon – than by day – looking at the sun and sunlight.”

“Of course.”

“Then finally I suppose he would be able to make out the sun – not its appearances in water or some alien place, but the sun itself by itself in its own region – and see what it’s like.”

“Necessarily,” he said.

“And after that he would already be in a position to conclude about it that this is the source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing.”

“It’s plain,” he said, “that this would be his next step.”

“What then? When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners in that time, don’t you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?”

“Quite so.”

“And if in that time there were among them any honors, praises, and prizes for the man who is sharpest at making out the things that go by, and most remembers which of them are accustomed to pass before, which after, and which at the same time as others, and who is thereby most able to divine what is going to come, in your opinion would he be desirous of them and envy those who are honored and hold power among these men? Or, rather, would he be affected as Homer says and want very much ‘to be on the soil, a serf to another man, to a portionless man,’ and to undergo anything whatsoever rather than to opine those things and live that way?”

“Yes,” he said, “I suppose he would prefer to undergo everything rather than live that way.”

“Now reflect on this too,” I said. “If such a man were to come down again and sit in the same seat, on coming suddenly from the sun wouldn’t his eyes get infected with darkness?”

“Very much so,” he said.

“And if he once more had to compete with those perpetual prisoners in forming judgments about those shadows while his vision was still dim, before his eyes had recovered, and if the time needed for getting accustomed were not at all short, wouldn’t he be the source of laughter, and wouldn’t it be said of him that he went up and came back with his eyes corrupted, and that it’s not even worth trying to go up? And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn’t they kill him?”