

# What is Philosophy?

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Philosophy is a field of study that many people (including students) don't know much about. This course enables you to increase your knowledge of philosophy by examining its origins in ancient Greece, as well as some of the areas that are studied by philosophers today, including logic, epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics.

This section responds to the question, "What is Philosophy?" in three parts:

1. [The Beginning of Western Philosophy](#)
2. [The Big Picture and a Contemporary Definition](#)
3. [Some Major Branches of Philosophy](#)
  - 3a. [Ethics](#)
  - 3b. [Epistemology](#)
  - 3c. [Metaphysics](#)

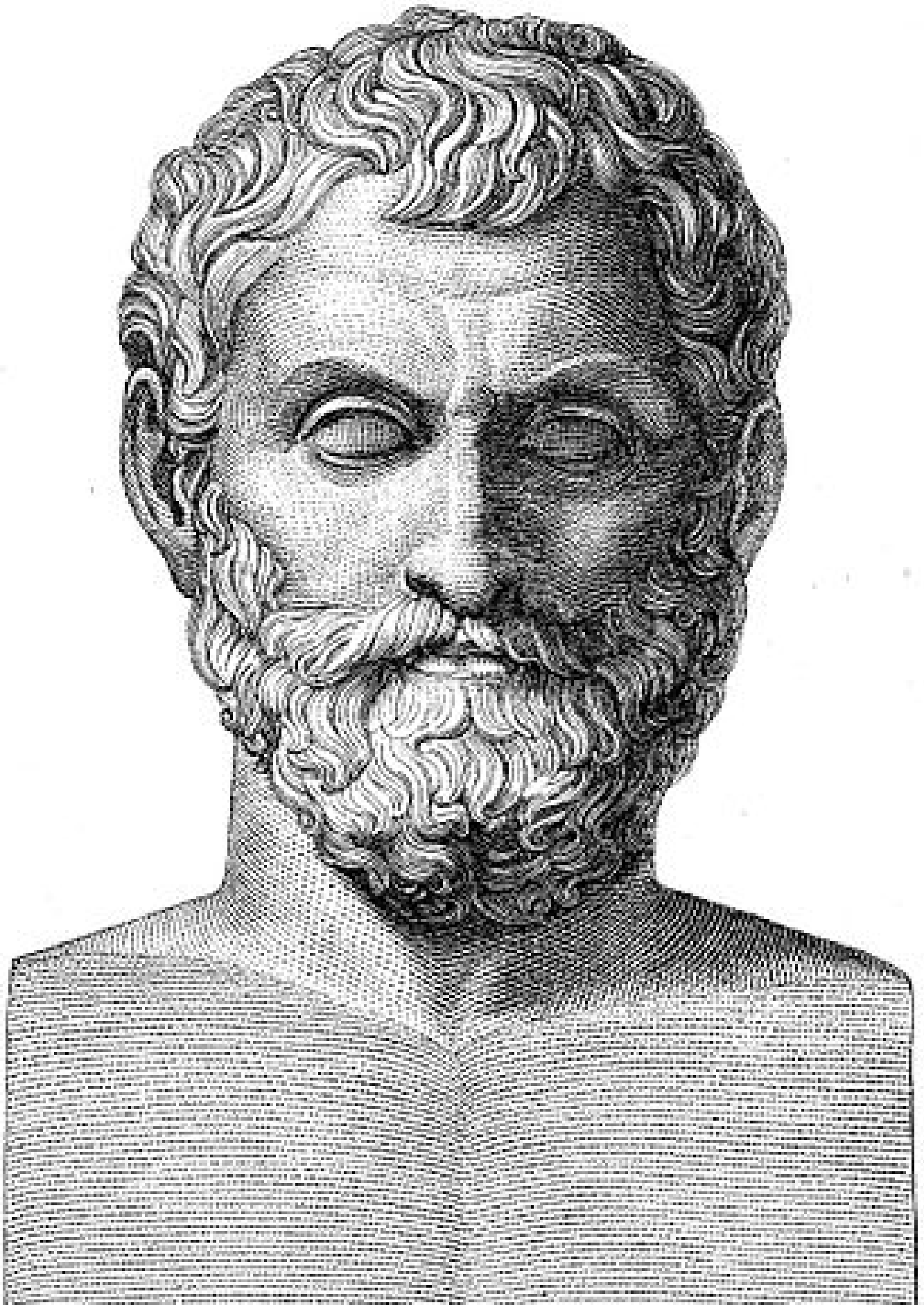
## 1. The Beginning of Western Philosophy

Western philosophy is traditionally thought to have started when a mathematician named Thales of Miletus successfully predicted an eclipse in 585 BCE. Although this may seem to have been an accomplishment in the field of astronomy, not philosophy, astronomy, like many other sciences, was once considered to be a branch of philosophy.

Imagine for a moment that you lived in Greece 2600 years ago, but Thales had not made his famous prediction about the eclipse. What would people have thought caused the eclipse? Would they have concluded that the gods were angry, or bringing the world to an end? Whatever conclusions might have been reached about the meaning of the event, it's likely that it would have been connected to the gods. By making his prediction based on analysis of his observations, Thales demonstrated that humans were capable of interpreting reality on their own, without divine assistance.

Thales demonstrated that the world was fundamentally understandable and predictable. Human beings do not need to appeal to the gods to learn about the world, or to use what they learn. By applying reason to

observations, people can solve many of life's puzzles. The desire to know and learn is the foundation of philosophy.





Thales, illustrated here, was a pre-socratic philosopher. In addition to philosophy, Thales also had a strong interest in mathematics and astronomy.

## 2. The Big Picture and a Contemporary Definition

To better understand what philosophy involves, consider the etymology of the word, “philosophy.” It comes from two Greek words, *philos* and *sophia*. *Philos* means “love.” It is the basis of a number of common words, including “philanthropy” and “Philadelphia.” *Sophia*, which is also part of “sophisticated” and “sophomore,” means “wisdom” (and before you sophomores start feeling too proud, sophomore means “wise fool”). Philosophy, at a fundamental level, is the love of wisdom.

Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. One can have all of the knowledge in the world but still lack wisdom. Rather than referring to information retained in memory (i.e, knowledge), wisdom refers to the ability to apply reason to knowledge, in order to make use of it in beneficial ways. Wisdom focuses on how we use what we learn, rather than on what we learn.

The highest degree one can earn in biology is a PhD—a doctorate in philosophy. A PhD in biology not only means that you know facts and concepts in the field (i.e., knowledge), but that you can use that knowledge to make new contributions—in biology or a related field. You can evaluate the body of biological knowledge and determine how parts of it can be used in new ways. As a result of philosophy's focus on wisdom, science and philosophy share a similar methodology.

Defining philosophy as “love of wisdom” helps us to begin to understand it, but it lacks precision. Here is the definition of **philosophy** that we will use in this course:

Philosophy seeks to find truth in areas where science cannot.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Consider this philosophical question: “Is there a creator god of a certain description?” We cannot answer this question by looking for a god through a telescope. In this instance, science cannot help us to find the truth. There are two possible answers to this question: “there is” or “there isn’t.”

In seeking to arrive at the truth, philosophy is *not* mere opinion. If two people disagree, this doesn’t mean that it is not possible to find an answer and that they must agree to disagree. With respect to the example above, if two people disagree as to what is true, one of them is simply wrong. Philosophy helps us to determine which one.

Since we cannot use a telescope, a microscope, etc. to discover who is right and who is wrong, we must make inferences: We take the evidence we have and ask whether it supports one position or the other. We use logic

to decide which position is better-supported and, therefore, more reasonable. It is for this reason that logic is the backbone of philosophy.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Philosophy

The pursuit of truths that cannot be wholly determined empirically.

## 3. Some Major Branches of Philosophy

Philosophy encompasses a number of branches/sub-disciplines. The three most significant branches involving the philosophers we'll study in this course are ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics.

### 3a. Ethics

Questions of right and wrong fit within the definition of philosophy provided above. Consider this action: punching a small child. The sciences can tell us a lot about this action. Medicine can predict the damage it would cause. Political science can determine its legal consequences. Psychology can provide insight into the mind of the perpetrator. But, no scientific analysis can tell us that this action is *wrong*.

Of course, it *is* wrong, and anyone who claims that "wrong" is merely an opinion and that this action is not something that can be true or false, should be ignored. Science can tell us that this action would cause pain, but it is a *philosophical* truth that causing pain unnecessarily is wrong.

Although questions of right and wrong are the prerogative of philosophy, science has a role. Later in the course, we will consider philosophical approaches to **ethics**, including the philosophy of Socrates, who was not only deeply interested in determining how to live a morally upright life but was willing to die to uphold his beliefs.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Ethics

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value, and thereby determines right and wrong.

### 3b. Epistemology

Philosophy provides a benefit to science through **epistemology**.

Philosophy is sometimes called the "mother of the sciences" because it determines what constitutes knowledge. For example, it helps biologists determine what is biological knowledge (versus mere opinion), and what methods can generate knowledge. Philosophers of science were the driving force behind the development and refinement of the scientific method. Socrates distinguished knowledge from opinion, while Plato gave the first clear account of knowledge. Aristotle, the father of physics, biology, and astronomy, used philosophy to develop and enhance these disciplines.



#### TERM TO KNOW

## Epistemology

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of knowledge and the methodologies by which it is attained.

## 3c. Metaphysics

The largest and, perhaps, the most fundamental branch of philosophy is **metaphysics**.

The prefix “meta” means “beyond.” Metaphysics works on fundamental issues that are beyond science—principles in which science may be grounded. For instance, although science identifies and describes the laws of physics, what is a law? What is its status? What kind of a thing is it? These are metaphysical questions. Metaphysics also considers questions including, is there a god? Are we free to make decisions, or are all of our choices predetermined? What is the ultimate nature of time? What is causation? All of the philosophers included in this course have something to say about these topics. Additionally, we'll learn how metaphysics informs other philosophical disciplines, such as ethics.

These three branches of philosophy will be a major focus of this course. Other branches of philosophy (e.g., natural philosophy and cosmology), have been largely relegated to the sciences.

The subjects studied in what was called "natural philosophy" have moved from philosophy to physics, astronomy, and other sciences. Cosmology is now a branch of astrophysics (cosmogony is a branch of cosmology that focuses on the origin of the universe).



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Metaphysics

The branch of philosophy that seeks to uncover and describe the ultimate nature of reality.

#### Natural Philosophy

The branch of philosophy that examines nature and the universe

#### Cosmology

The branch of philosophy that studies the universe in its totality



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, we discussed **the beginning of Western philosophy, the big picture and a contemporary definition, some major branches of philosophy**—including **ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics**.

Since philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, it supports all pursuits of knowledge. To discover wisdom, philosophy uses logic, reason, and critical thinking, and studies topics including ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics. In this course, we learned about these branches of philosophy, practice logic, and examine philosophical approaches to questions including “What is knowledge?” “What is real?” and “What is a good life and how should I live?”

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## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Image of Thales](#) | License: Public Domain



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Cosmology**

The branch of philosophy that treats the universe in its totality

### **Epistemology**

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of knowledge and the methodologies that attain it

### **Ethics**

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value and thereby seeks to determine right and wrong

### **Metaphysics**

The branch of philosophy that seeks to uncover and describe the ultimate nature of reality

### **Natural Philosophy**

The branch of philosophy that treats nature and the universe

### **Philosophy**

The pursuit of truths that cannot be wholly determined empirically