

Philosophyfortherealworld.com. Episode 1.

Welcome to philosophy for the real world. I'm Professor Thomas White.

There's probably no better image that captures what most people think philosophers do than the one we find in the ancient Greek comedy called *The Clouds* by Aristophanes. When we first come upon Socrates, he's suspended mid-air in a basket staring at the sky. The general theme of the play is that philosophers are, at best, useless—and, at worst, dangerous. Fortunately, those of us who actually do philosophy as a profession hope to be a little more grounded and helpful.

This is the first of a series of podcasts aiming to show how philosophy can help us with everyday life—philosophy for the *real* world. We live in a culture that bombards us with messages about what we should buy, what we should value, what we should believe, what we should do, and how to vote. We're told who our friends and enemies should be. But it's important to keep in mind that all those messages come from people trying to get you to advance *their* interests, not yours. They want *your money*. *Your allegiance*. *Your vote*. If you do what they say, it's great for them—but not necessarily for *you*.

So, how do you make sure your decisions are your own and will help you live the life *you* want to live—and not the result of other people trying to push, scare, or trick you into something?

Not surprisingly, I think *philosophy* can help—because the tools philosophy gives us help us to clearly *understand* the critical issues we face in life and to *think through* decisions before we take any *action*. My goal in these podcasts, then, is primarily *practical*—to show you how applying philosophical tools can put you in a position where *you* have maximum control over your decisions.

To keep each podcast manageable, I'm going to limit them around 10 to 15 minutes. Many of our topics will need more time than that, so for those, I'll do additional podcasts. I plan to release a new podcast every two weeks.

Before we do anything else, however, I should probably tell you something about myself.

I'm a philosopher who specializes in *applied* philosophy, especially applied *ethics*. I received my Ph.D. from Columbia University, and I've actually had two separate careers as a philosopher.

First, I did historical scholarship, specializing in the social and political philosophy of the Renaissance thinker Thomas More. Then I shifted to applied ethics, focusing on business ethics and animal ethics. The most important research I've done is on the philosophical implications—especially the ethical implications—of the scientific research on whales and dolphins. I taught at Upsala College in New Jersey, then at the business schools of Rider University in New Jersey and Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. At LMU, I founded the International Business Ethics Case Competition, the oldest case competition of its kind. I've also written a few philosophy textbooks known for their readability. If you want more details about my career or you're curious about any of my work, you'll find information on the website connected with these podcasts: philosophyfortherealworld.com.

So, let's get down to business.

In this podcast, I'm going to give you a quick overview of the areas of philosophy we'll be applying to real world issues.

To begin with, philosophy is an *intellectual* and *conceptual* enterprise. It's simply disciplined and sophisticated *thinking*. The main instrument philosophers use in conducting our investigations is the mind. However, philosophy isn't just idle speculation. Philosophers work with well-defined *concepts* and in a disciplined fashion.

The most basic part of philosophy we'll be applying is *logic*—the rules of reason. In fact, logic is probably the *most practical tool* philosophy has to offer. The messages I referred to earlier about people wanting to separate us from our money and to win our vote, for example, typically use *logical tricks* and *flawed thinking* to get us to do something we probably wouldn't do if we took the time to think about it carefully. Logic helps us not be the victim of deceptive and manipulative pitches that *sound* logical but *aren't*.

Given how much bad thinking floods the internet and airwaves daily, we'll have no trouble finding examples to analyze.

Another part of philosophy we'll be applying has to do with the concept of *knowledge*. How can we be sure we *know* something? How do we know whether something is *true* or *false*?

You might think something to do with concepts like *knowledge* and *truth* are *theoretical* not *practical* questions—and while philosophers do expend a lot of energy discussing the theoretical aspects of the concept of knowledge, you need to appreciate these questions' *practical* importance. After all, when we decide to *do* something, we do so on the basis of what we think *we know to be true* or at least *have good reason to believe to be true*. So, to make sure you're in charge of your decisions and not being misled, you need to base your decisions as much as you can on *knowledge* about what's *true*. Keep in mind that the world we live in is filled to overflowing with lies, half-truths, misinformation, deep fakes, and crazy conspiracy theories. (In fact, there's an entire industry whose profits come from spreading lies that make us afraid, confused, and anxious—something I'll talk about in a future podcast.) So, to make good decisions—decisions that will help you get what *you* want in life—you need to worry about how you *know* that the basis of your decisions is *true*.

As with logic, there are so many exaggerations, half-truths, and outright lies trying to shape our behavior, we'll find plenty of examples to look at in future podcasts.

Another part of philosophy we're going to be applying to real world problems has to do with our actions—*ethics*. All of us have a standard of *right* and *wrong* we use to evaluate our own actions and those of the people around us. But what determines whether something's right or wrong?

Just as important, *why* should we make the effort to do what's right? If we're going to be looking at things from a *practical* perspective, if we can advance our interests by doing something wrong and getting away with it, why shouldn't we?

This is actually a favorite question of mine because—especially in a world that celebrates selfishness and ego—I've always thought that if we want people to take *doing the right thing* seriously, we need a stronger argument than that doing wrong “hurts other people,” “isn't nice,” or “will cause other people to dislike us.” I'm happy to tell you that there *is* such an argument—one that says that from a completely practical and selfish perspective, it's always better to do the right thing.

The final part of philosophy we'll work with has to do with the fact that *we live in communities with other people*. How should the rules that everybody in the group should live by be

made? Should there be qualifications to be part of a government? In a democracy, should there be qualifications to be a voter? What if the government's rules force us to do things we think are *wrong*? Are we entitled to disobey those rules? How do you decide if a law is "just" or not?

Considering that discussions about politics and government have become little more than pitched battles in which each side is trying to obliterate the other, there will be plenty of issues that philosophy can help us get clear about when we need to make decisions.

For our purposes, that's probably enough to give you an idea of how we're going to apply philosophy to real world problems. Remember, my goal is to help you get clarity about important, practical aspects of your life so you can make decisions that are your own—not the product of bad thinking, false beliefs, or someone trying to manipulate or deceive you.

At the same time, however, my goal in these podcasts is also to get you to stretch your mind and expand your intellectual horizons. So, every now and then I'll discuss something that actively challenges conventional wisdom.

Here's one example. Is humanity's picture of ourselves as accurate as we think it is? I think a case can be made for the idea that—even in terms of a very basic definition of "intelligence"—*homo sapiens* isn't "*intelligent*." The best we are is "*clever*." Humans are also fond of saying that we're *unique* on the planet in having the advanced intellectual and emotional traits that entitle us to be called *persons*. I don't think that's true. As I said above, I've done lots of research on dolphins, and I'll get into that in a later podcast.

Or here's another. What would you say if I told you that the description of a fundamental feature of the culture in which we live—something we hear every day as a *fact*—is *false*? And what if I added that we're being told that because the lie is more profitable than the truth? I'll be getting into this one before too long.

But for my next podcast, let's start with something simple—*our actions*. Specifically, why should any of us worry about whether our actions are right or wrong? And the answer we're going to look at is one you'll probably think is ridiculous—Socrates' idea that vice harms *the doer*.

Two final words. If you want to learn more about the topics of these podcasts, you can find appropriate references and links on my website philosophyfortherealworld.com. I'll be posting the transcripts of these podcasts there if you'd prefer to read them.

Also, I'm happy to hear what you think. You can give me feedback on the contact form on the website. When I have enough comments, I'll do a podcast dedicated to replying.

Thanks for listening. I'm Professor Thomas White, and this has been philosophy for the real world.