

Introduction

Philosophy is a deeply unpopular subject that almost no one knows anything much about. The average school doesn't teach it, the average adult doesn't understand it – and the whole subject can seem scary, strange and not very necessary.

All of this is a huge pity, because philosophy has a lot to say to everyone at any age. It might be the most important subject you'll never be asked to study. We want to start opening the door by taking you on a tour of the history of philosophy's greatest ideas.

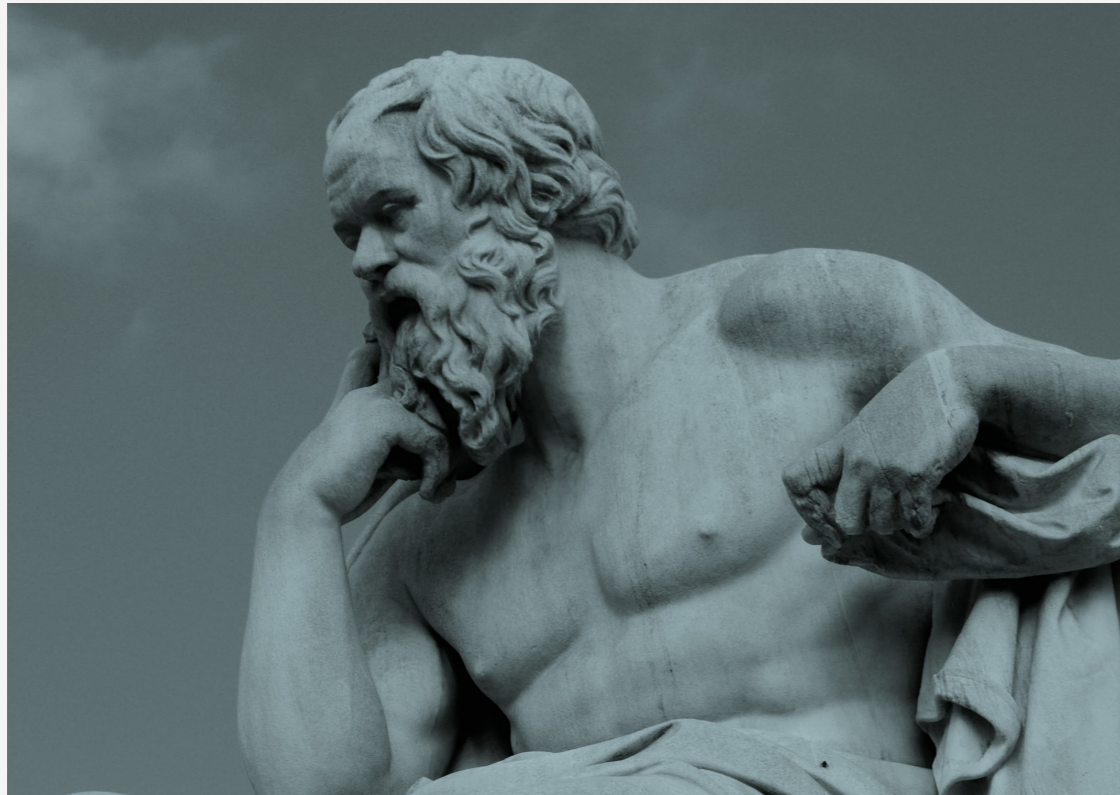
The word 'philosophy' itself starts to tell us why the subject matters. It's originally a word from Ancient Greek. The first part – *philo* – means love. The second part, *sophia*, means wisdom. So philo-sophy means, quite literally, 'the love of wisdom'.

Philosophy is one of the great ways in which human beings can deal with the difficulties of life. It's a storehouse of the best and richest ideas about confronting our tricky moments. Right at the beginning of its life, philosophy used to be done outdoors, in the public square, by ordinary people. That's how one of the great early philosophers, Socrates, did it. Socrates lived in Athens

more than two thousand years ago. He wore long robes (like everyone else in those days); he had a long beard, and he liked to walk about the city and meet his friends and ask them questions about what they were excited or worried or puzzled about. His idea was that often people don't know why they have the thoughts and feelings they do. Socrates used philosophy to help us understand ourselves better. Socrates was very keen on the word 'why'. He was always asking people tricky 'why' questions: why are you friends with this person; why don't you like so-and so? He wasn't being mean or awkward. He really wanted to have an interesting discussion. He wanted to be people's thinking friend.

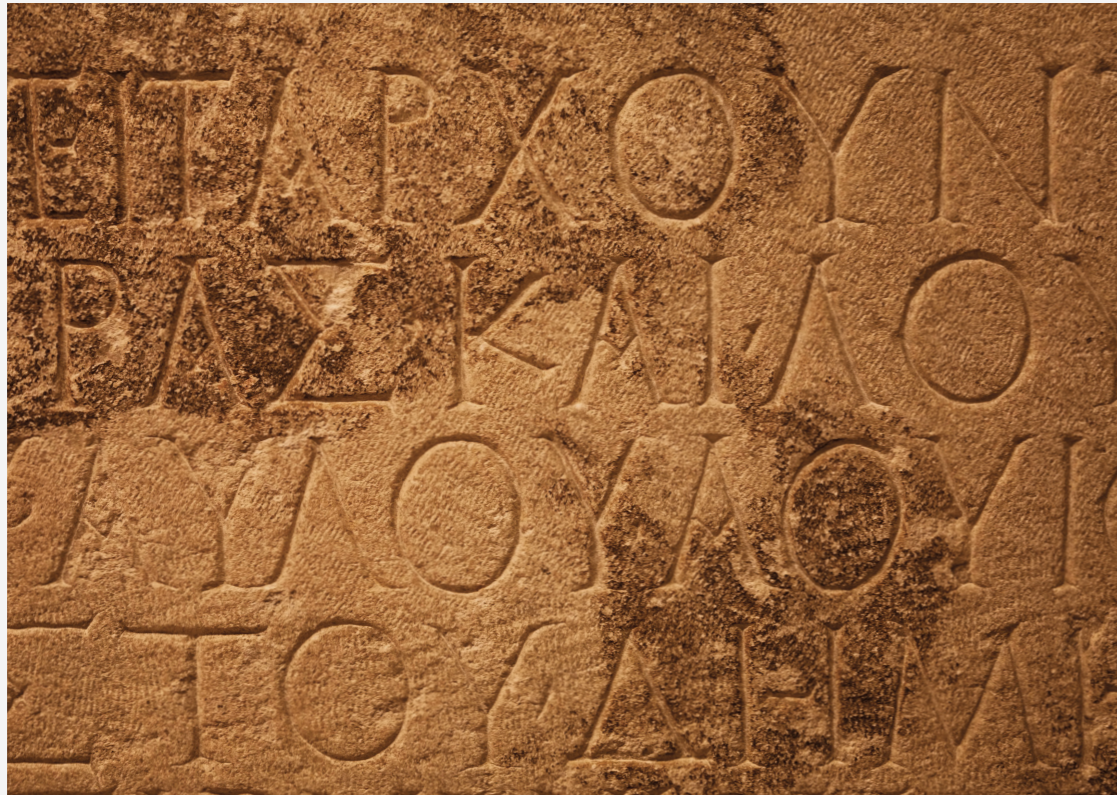
Since Socrates's time, philosophy has become a lot less public, friendly and useful. It's often done in universities by people with no interest in improving the world right now.

Fortunately, philosophy is now back on the public agenda and we can all benefit from its fruits. You too can be a bit like Socrates and be your own thinking friend by asking yourself the biggest questions. Welcome to the conversation.



Know yourself

SOCRATES, the earliest and greatest of Western philosophers, summed up the purpose of philosophy in one simple phrase: 'know yourself'. In giving this motto such importance in his thought, Socrates was alluding to a big problem with being human: we normally don't know ourselves very well, although, fatefully, we might feel as if we do. The spotlight of consciousness usually only shines on a small part of what is really going on inside us. We are governed by forces we rarely pay attention to: envy, disavowed anger, buried hurt, ideas from childhood that have come to frame our outlook but that we hardly realise we possess. The consequences of this ignorance are typically disastrous. As an antidote, Socrates advocated the regular, careful examination of our minds. He recommended systematically asking ourselves, ideally in the company of a patient and thoughtful friend, questions like: what are my priorities? What do I really fear? What do I truly want? Investigating and interpreting our thoughts and feelings was, and remains, the essence of what it means to be a philosopher.



Philo-sophia

IN ANCIENT GREEK, *philo* means love, *sophia* wisdom. Quite literally, a philosopher is someone with an unusually powerful love of wisdom. The concept of wisdom can sound abstract and lofty, but it isn't. We can and should all strive to be a little wiser. The wise are, first and foremost, realistic about how challenging many things can be. They are fully conscious of the complexities entailed in any project. They rarely expect anything to be wholly easy or to go entirely well. As a result, they are unusually alive to moments of calm and beauty – even extremely modest ones. The wise know that all human beings, themselves included, are never far from folly. Aware that at least half of life is irrational, they try – wherever possible – to budget for madness, and are slow to panic when it rears its head. The wise know how to laugh at the constant collisions between the noble way they would like things to be, and the demented way they often turn out.



Eudaimonia

THIS IS AN ANCIENT GREEK WORD, normally translated as 'fulfilment', particularly emphasised by the philosopher Aristotle. It deserves wider currency because it corrects the shortfalls in one of the most central terms in our contemporary idiom: happiness. The Ancient Greeks resolutely did not believe that the purpose of life was to be happy; they proposed that it was to be *fulfilled*. What distinguishes *happiness* from fulfilment is pain. It is eminently possible to be fulfilled and, at the same time, under pressure, suffering physically or mentally, overburdened and in a tetchy mood. Many of life's most worthwhile projects will, at points, be quite at odds with contentment, but may be worth pursuing nevertheless. Henceforth, we shouldn't try to be happy; we should accept the greater realism, ambition and patience that accompanies the quest for *eudaimonia*.