

Introduction

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This work is an exercise in philosophy. Philosophy is the discipline of thinking carefully and critically about very broad and important questions, traditionally the following three:

- What is real?
- How do we know what is real?
- What shall we do about what is real?

The word “philosophy” comes from two Greek words, *philia*, meaning affectionate, familial love, and *sophia*, meaning wisdom. So philosophy is the love of wisdom. The Greeks thought of wisdom in a very practical way: it meant knowing how to live one’s life, how to conduct oneself in order to live in a good way. Philosophy is the effort to find out how to live well.

Anybody can give you advice about how to live. Philosophy entails thinking clearly, rigorously and carefully about things, so that you have good reasons for what you think, and can explain those reasons to yourself and to others. Being able to explain them gives you some assurance that you can retrace your chain of thought so you know what you know – as opposed to what you merely think or suspect might be true – and why you know it. You have some protection against getting confused. Instead of just relying on the advice of others, you have thought about things yourself and have come to conclusions in which you feel confident. When you make decisions, you make them on the basis of what you believe to be true for very good reasons.

In Part I of this book, consisting of four chapters, I pose the question how to live a fulfilling life and answer it by describing human nature in three ways, giving reasons and evidence for my assertions.

- The first chapter, “[Posing the Question](#),” sets up the framework for investigation.
- The second chapter, “[Facets of Human Nature](#),” describes human nature from an objective, scientific point of view, specifically evolutionary psychology and comparison of humans with other primates.
- The third chapter, “[The First-Person Point of View](#),” describes human nature from the point of view of direct investigation of one’s own experience, focusing on how one experiences things rather than on the things experienced.

- The fourth chapter, "[The Transcendental Self](#)," describes human nature from a mystical point of view, which sees human beings as expressions of a transcendent unity.

These four chapters are best read in order, but you can stop at any point along the way. If you think knowledge comes only from an objective, scientific point of view, then stop after the second chapter. However, I encourage you to read the third chapter as well, because there is enough independent corroboration of the assertions made there to give them some plausibility.

If you think there is nothing worthwhile in the mystical point of view, that mysticism is nonsense, then you are certainly welcome to stop after the third chapter. Otherwise, if you think there is or might be something to it, or if you are merely curious, please read on.

If you already believe there is some truth to mysticism, then you could start with the fourth chapter. I advise you read the preceding chapters as well, however, because you are embedded in the world of what the Chinese call the "ten thousand things" and it is useful to learn how to function there.

Part II consists of a number of supplementary essays, which can be read in any order. Several of them are what philosophers call prolegomena, meaning questions that need to be addressed before one gets to the main argument. The chapter on "[Ethics: The Good and the Right](#)," for instance, discusses why one should pursue how to lead a good life in the first place, as opposed to a morally right one; and "[Tao Te Ching Ontology](#)" and "[Metaphysics, or The Nature of Reality](#)" discuss the metaphysical underpinnings of the assertions in "The Transcendental Self." Others, such as "[Self, Soul and Ego](#)" and "[Consciousness and Experience](#)," explain how I use certain terminology. The rest give additional information or insights about some of the topics in the main argument.

The supplementary essays are in several categories:

- Human Nature.
- Ethics: how to think about how to live our lives.
- Metaphysics: the nature of everything.
- Insight: How to acquire a direct intuition into the nature of everything.
- Phenomenology: the nature of experience and how we are conscious of ourselves and the world.
- Epistemology: the nature of truth.

All the chapters, in both parts of the work, in one way or another contribute to the idea of a Goodness Ethic, that we should act to maximize benefit for all concerned. To fully understand that topic, start with "[Ethics: The Good and The Right](#)," which explains the basic conceptual framework.

If you want to decide whether the mystical point of view is true, you need to do more than just think about it. Read "[The Fundamental Insight](#)" and do the practices described in that chapter before going on to read more. Take up meditation or another spiritual practice so you can experience it for yourself.

If you are not an academic philosopher, don't worry. I have written this book in a way that is accessible to an interested person not trained in philosophy, and I think you will be able to follow the arguments without much trouble. It is also rigorous enough that I believe professional philosophers will find merit in it.

There is a technique in software development and other engineering disciplines called Peer Review, which is a methodical examination of a technical document or computer code by the author's peers to identify defects and places where changes are needed. The goal is to find defects early in the process because the earlier you find a bug the easier and cheaper it is to fix it. These papers are not technical documents, but I'd like to apply the same sort of process. My goal is to state my ideas as clearly and unambiguously as possible, and you can help. Please send me your comments and suggestions for improvement. You can contact me at <http://www.bmeacham.com>.

Finally, don't just believe what I say because it sounds plausible. Think it through for yourself. These ideas will have more value to you if you do that than if you don't. Think about them, examine in what ways they might be true and what could prove them false, and choose for yourself whether to believe in them enough to act on them.

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Revision History

Version	Date	Author	Change
2.0	29 March 2010	Bill Meacham	Thorough revision to include Part I.