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What Does It All Mean?
A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy

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The main concern of philosophy is to question and understand very common ideas that all of us use every day without thinking about them. A historian may ask what happened at some time in the past, but a philosopher will ask, “What is time?” A mathematician may investigate the relations among numbers, but a philosopher will ask, “What is a number?” A physicist will ask what atoms are made of or what explains gravity, but a philosopher will ask how we can know there is anything outside of our own minds. A psychologist may investigate how children learn a language, but a philosopher will ask, “What makes a word mean anything?” Anyone can ask whether it’s wrong to sneak into a movie without paying, but a philosopher will ask, “What makes an action right or wrong?”

We couldn’t get along in life without taking the ideas of time, number, knowledge, language, right and wrong for granted most of the time; but in philosophy we investigate those things themselves. The aim is to push our understanding of the world and ourselves a bit deeper. Obviously it isn’t easy. The more basic the ideas you are trying to investigate, the fewer tools you have to work with. There isn’t much you can assume or take for granted. So philosophy is a somewhat dizzying activity, and few of its results go unchallenged for long.

Philosophy is different from science and from mathematics. Unlike science it doesn’t rely on experiments or observation, but only on thought. And unlike mathematics it has no formal methods of proof. It is done just by asking questions, arguing, trying out ideas and thinking of possible arguments against them, and wondering how our concepts really work.