

This is Philosophy: An Introduction

Steven D. Hales

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This is Philosophy: An Introduction is the first book in a new series of introductions from Wiley-Blackwell of which Steven Hales is himself the editor. The *This is Philosophy* series promises forthcoming titles from a number of productive younger philosophers on metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, and ethics. If the first book of the series is any indication of the rest, it will be a good series indeed. Everything about *This is Philosophy*, from the series description to the marketing on the website (www.thisisphilosophy.com), screams “this is hip, down to earth, user-friendly, and cheeky; this is not your grandfather’s introduction to philosophy.” Here is an excerpt from the series description:

Reading philosophy can be like trying to ride a bucking bronco—you hold on for dear life while “transcendental deduction” twists you to one side, “causa sui” throws you to the other, and a 300-word, 300-year-old sentence comes down on you like an iron-shod hoof the size of a dinner plate. *This is Philosophy* is the riding academy that solves these problems.

Hales’s own contribution to the series, *This is Philosophy: An Introduction*, is written with the same kind of tone. Its language is colloquial, its tone is conversational, and it is quite funny at times, all of which makes for a very approachable text. There are also many embedded references to informative websites to take the interested student further than the text (all of which can also be found as hyperlinks on the series website). In terms of being able to attract and hold the attention of undergraduates, these are likely all virtues and should make Hales’s text a good choice for those who are inclined to use single author introductions in teaching an introduction to philosophy course.

Of course, these virtues alone do not a good philosophy textbook make. However, I am happy to say that the text’s scholarship is as noteworthy as its hipness. Hales clearly explains important philosophical ideas with a minimum of jargon and without sacrificing depth of content and he consistently gives a fair and accurate presentation of both sides of central philosophical disputes. The text is organized into seven, self-contained, stand-alone chapters (discussed below). The issues Hales covers in each chapter are for the most part predictable, especially to those who teach these topics in the analytic tradition (broadly construed), and he does a good job fitting a lot of material into a small space and yet not having it feel too crammed and terse.

Chapter 1 covers background ethical issues and theories. He begins with a discussion of normative terms like “should” and how the moral uses of “should” differ from prudential or legal uses of it. He then considers whether acting morally is equivalent to acting out of principles, using Osama Bin Laden as a counterexample to that claim. He then discusses the Divine Command Theory, complete with the compulsory discussion of the Euthyphro problem. His conclusion is that “we *can*

investigate ethics without debating religion” (10). Hales moves on to engaging discussions of ethical and psychological egoism, which include references to contemporary psychology (Daniel Gilbert’s work on happiness) and interesting contemporary examples. The chapter ends with a discussion of moral relativism, the main objection to which is presented as the “criticism objection”: if moral relativism is true then we cannot criticize other cultures, which seems not only wrong but also ironically fails to truly respect the other culture’s views enough to critically engage with them. As Hales notes, since this also applies to our own culture, it leaves no room for the possibility of moral progress in our own culture.

Chapter 2 covers “the big three” ethical theories: utilitarianism, Kantianism and virtue ethics. Hales’s discussion of utilitarianism and Kantianism is more or less standard in terms of content. One thing I found a bit idiosyncratic was the fact that he spends four pages trying to flesh out what might be meant by Mill’s notorious talk of “higher pleasures.” One of the virtues of his discussion of virtue ethics was the consideration of John Doris’s work (which brings to bear the findings of recent moral psychology on the evaluation of whether there is such a thing as character) as an objection to virtue ethics. Sometimes the criticism is made that philosophy is old, stodgy and never changes. However, it is incumbent on philosophers to make philosophy fresh by continually reassessing old ideas in terms of new evidence and ideas. So perhaps it is only (some) philosophers that are old, stodgy and never change. Philosophy can (and should) be always relevant and changing. It is in this spirit that I applaud Hales’s inclusion of the work of empirically-minded philosophers here and elsewhere in this introductory text. In my experience, it is these kinds of things that get students most turned on to philosophy.

Chapter 3 covers philosophy of religion, specifically the question of whether God exists. In addition to covering the traditional arguments for (ontological, cosmological and teleological) and against (problem of evil), Hales also considers some arguments that one might hear on the street even if not in the halls of academia. This is another of the virtues of Hales’s text: it doesn’t confine itself simply to the traditional academic provender but considers the kinds of arguments and ideas that are commonly made by nonprofessionals. One such argument is “the argument from scripture.” After explaining that the argument begs the question, Hales goes on to make the important distinction between historical and religious claims that are made in the Bible. Even if the historical claims in the Bible were largely correct, would that alone give us reason to believe the religious claims were true? Hales, quite rightly, thinks not.

Another argument that isn’t always discussed is the argument for atheism from considerations of religious pluralism. In short, if believers of other faiths have all the same kinds of evidence for their belief and yet I think they are all wrong, how can I consistently believe that I am right? However, Hales also considers a number of other arguments/rhetorical strategies in this section such as the point that you, O theist, already disbelieve in 99% of the gods that have been believed in and that if you had been born in India you would have been a Hindu. It would be pedagogically helpful to have sorted these distinct strands out in the text because the objections and responses depend on it. For example, what theists should say in response to the “had you been born in...” objection is that the same reasoning applies to atheists:

Had you, O atheist, been born 200 years ago you would not have been an atheist! In any case, although some theists might not be happy with some sections of this chapter, I think it is on the whole fair and balanced. Hales is careful to note numerous times that there is much beyond the scope of this introduction and that theists have developed many subtle arguments which treat religious experience as a source of knowledge (here I assume he is referring to Hick, Alston, Plantinga and others).

Chapter 4 on free will is another solid chapter in *This is Philosophy*. To be brief, Hales considers a number of different arguments against what he takes to be the common sense conclusion that humans have free will. These include the Divine Foreknowledge Argument (which he fairly quickly sets aside), the Regress of Reasons for Acting Argument, and the traditional Dilemma Argument. These arguments are subtle and complex (at least relative to other arguments presented in the text—the Dilemma Argument has 9 steps) and I thought the Reasons for Acting Argument could have been presented a bit more clearly. In this chapter Hales seems to lean decidedly towards denying that humans have incompatibilist free will (e.g., p. 144). Pedagogically, I don't mind a little bit of bias in the texts I use since I find it helpful in modeling critical engagement with the text itself rather than just treating the textbook as accepted truth (as one would in other disciplines). I can imagine using this chapter in that very way and challenging my students: Is there something that Hales is missing? Why does he seem so sure that incompatibilist freedom is an illusion?

Chapter 5 considers the self and personal identity. Hales does a good job of motivating the philosophical problem of identity over time by considering “the problem of sameness” and the “problem of difference” and noting that although we can easily enough come up with criteria that solve each problem separately, the difficulty is coming up with a solution that simultaneously solves both problems. The rest of the chapter consists of a consideration of four different types of criteria: the soul, the physicalist criterion, the psychological criterion, and the so-called Bundle Theory. There are precious few references to non-Western philosophy in Hales' text so I should here note one of them: Hales connects the Bundle Theory to the teachings of the Buddha about *anatta*—the view that there is no self. I think that many of those in the trenches of teaching philosophy courses appreciate these connections to non-Western philosophy since at many institutions philosophy departments are called on to incorporate “cultural diversity” elements into their philosophy courses. Perhaps this is one area in which one might wish for a bit more out of Hales' text.

Chapter 6 takes on the philosophy of mind covering arguments for and against four traditional theories about the nature of mind: substance dualism, behaviorism, identity theory and functionalism. The chapter has a very nice flow to it with each new theory addressing the shortcomings of the prior theory. There are also some fascinating examples that were new to me such as a real-life case of Frank Jackson's “Mary.” Contemporary philosophy of mind is a jungle and Hales has done a laudable job of seeing the forest for the trees. I particularly appreciated his presentation of the attractiveness of behaviorism in terms of giving a clear explanation of what our mental terms refer to/mean—something that for substance

dualism seems impossible. Here and elsewhere Hales succinctly presents complex ideas from contemporary philosophers without so much as even a reference (e.g., Kripke, p. 194; Gettier, p. 246). I think this is a good tactic: a student who takes only one philosophy course should know of Descartes but I don't particularly care if they know of Kripke or Gettier.

Chapter 7 covers epistemology and is impressively exhaustive, covering the value, sources and analysis of knowledge, skepticism, the problem of the criterion, and the ethics of belief. Pedagogically, beginning the knowledge chapter with the dispute over whether knowledge is intrinsically valuable or only instrumentally so (e.g., only as long as it makes us happy) works very well because it gets students engaged very early. (Would you want to know if your significant other were cheating on you or is ignorance bliss?) Hales considers the Clifford-James debate as a way of considering how much evidence is enough for belief and he raises some novel criticisms of James that I thought were insightful and interesting, despite the fact that I took issue with them. But far from being a criticism of the text, this is high praise. Introductory texts shouldn't be simply a rehash of old stuff that has already been regurgitated many times but should also contain new arguments and ideas. Again, Hales's text is to be praised for doing this both here and elsewhere. Predictably, not everyone will accept the new arguments but as long as they are insightful and interesting they will create and enliven discussions; isn't that part of the point of a philosophy text?

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