Hello. Welcome to the 5-Minute Philosopher. In this episode, what is philosophy?

So what exactly, or even approximately, is philosophy? You probably know that the word comes from a Greek root that means love of wisdom, and that is certainly one way to look at it. The ancient Greeks invented philosophy as a way of thinking about the big questions in life, from the nature of reality to the quest for happiness, from how to build a good society to what makes life worth living.

The quintessential philosopher was, of course, Socrates, who died at the hand of his fellow Athenians because he was found guilty of impiety, and of corrupting the young with his constant questioning of authority. We do not know for sure what Socrates actually thought, because he did not write any books. But one of his pupils, Plato, became such an influential philosopher that it has been said, with slight exaggeration, that all the rest of philosophy is a footnote to Plato.

Since then, philosophy has developed in Europe, and then in the rest of the world, not as much as a discipline-- like psychology or literary criticism-- but as a way of thinking and asking questions. Indeed, the joke among philosophers is precisely that-- well, at least we’ve got all the questions-- implying that the answers are not quite so easily forthcoming. The basic idea, though, is that philosophy is something that one does, an activity that engages and sharpens our reason, which may be why philosophy majors in college tend to do very well in the sort of tests that are necessary to enter graduate, business, or law school. In fact, did you know that according to the Wall Street Journal, philosophy is one of the top 20 jobs in the United States in terms of satisfaction, salary, security, and benefits? And the Guardian newspaper published that philosophy majors find employment quickly after graduation in the fields of finance, property development, health, social work, and business.

Still, most people don’t really know what philosophy is all about. Broadly speaking, philosophers are interested in six big issues. The nature of the world and the existence of gods, which is the domain of metaphysics. How do we know what we think we know, which is epistemology. How do we tell right from wrong, that is, ethics. What is the best form of government, a question appropriate for political philosophy. And what
is beauty, which defines the field of aesthetics.

There are also more specific branches of philosophy, such as philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science. These deal with questions concerning the nature of their respective subject matters. That is, what exactly is a mind? How does language work? And why is science so successful at discovering things about the world?

It is important to distinguish philosophy from other types of inquiry or belief. For instance, philosophy is different from science, though science was once called natural philosophy. One difference is that scientists conduct their inquiries by means of observation and experiment about the world, while philosophers try to clarify their own and other people’s thinking. Philosophy is also different from mysticism and religion, which do not seek truth by reason and argument, but by intuition or revelation.

Of course, modern academic philosophy is a difficult and specialized subject, just like modern science, or mathematics, or literary criticism. Nonetheless, the basic questions posed by philosophers are actually very much of concern to all of us. Every human being ought to be interested in separating right from wrong, in how we come to know things, or in what it means to have consciousness. These are questions that very much have practical importance for our society. The principles of ethics are the guides to our moral choices and legal systems.

Knowing how people know about things, like global warming, or the most effective ways to curb crime, is important when we vote in a democratic society. And even giving some serious thought to the question of consciousness may lead us to a very different view of delicate issues, such as abortion, or end-of-life care. That's it for this episode of the 5-Minute Philosopher. See you next time for more food for thought.