What If…Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy
Peg Tittle (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).
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Undoubtedly, there is a feeling that all of us have had as both scholars and educators of philosophy. Giving a lecture, grading a paper, or listening to a student's question, one may get the feeling that whatever it is that we have been calling philosophy has in fact become the history of ideas. One student, rather than struggling and working through an idea, impatiently demands "the answer." Another, undoubtedly studious, nevertheless turns in a paper that looks like a virtual transcription of your last lecture. Philosophy has a rich intellectual history filled with thinkers and theories that need to be taught more than ever today. Of course, there are facts about that history. The content of the problems philosophers face and the particular methods of dealing with them are important to learn, but our undergraduates (to say nothing of ourselves) ought not to look at philosophy as dogma. At a moment when education is increasingly reduced to a vocational training that considers the critical thinking skills offered by the humanities as a decorative afterthought, questions of pedagogy are not just relevant—they are absolutely crucial if the exigencies of philosophy are to resonate outside the occasionally rarefied air of our departments. Peg Tittle's *What If…Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy* seeks to facilitate such a resonance. It is a stimulating teaching aid that offers thorough consideration of the canon's main themes through exposure to problem-solving skills. In doing so, it makes an introduction to philosophy an invitation to thought itself.

Tittle's approach is to provide a catalog, as it were, of philosophy's key problems. On each page, she isolates a specific philosophical dilemma and then, on the facing page, analyzes its presuppositions and implications. *What If* brings together problem sets stretching in historical breadth from Zeno to Searle. They are thematically arranged in the manner of many introductory courses in philosophy, and, for this reason, professors of almost any undergraduate course can find here a thought experiment to invigorate whatever it is that they might be teaching: metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of mind, personal identity, ethics, and political theory. Instead of merely rehearsing arguments concerning, say, intentionality and idealism, *What If* encourages educators to ask their students about those trees in the forest. Readers are provoked by Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge* in the way he would have intended. Instead of leaving in isolation Kant's arguments that space is an a priori form of sensibility, Tittle's analyses place Kant in dialogue with, in one instance, Strawson's no-space world. The book operates as an elenchus of sorts, provoking an aporia in some cases and demystifying in others.

Surely there are some topics that professional philosophers might find conspicuously absent. Philosophy of religion, one of three parts of the metaphysics section (the largest section of the text), curiously begins with Gaunilo's island without having a separate experiment for Anselm's ontological argument. There is equal treatment given to theoretical and applied ethics, but there is scarcely a word on virtue ethics. The social and political philosophy section is weighted primarily toward liberal

and libertarian thought. It could be balanced and enriched with some discussions from communitarian and social-democratic philosophy. There is virtually no consideration of contributions from contemporary continental philosophy on any of the topics. Such omissions notwithstanding, the scope of the book is remarkable, particularly given its concise length. And the absence of certain topics is incidental to every introductory text in philosophy, where authors always run the risk of doing too much or too little.

Since over simplification is a real threat in teaching philosophy, the text is best used as a supplement so as not to reduce the vibrancy from which these problems arise. Despite the topical division of the text, each section lacks any kind of introduction to highlight key themes and enduring issues. As such, it is not a reference as much as it is a kind of workbook to be used in conjunction with other materials. It should be obvious that the design here is not to create a substitute for sustained exegeses of primary sources. Nevertheless, the text could definitely make for fruitful and thoughtful reading outside academic settings. Those with a casual interest in philosophy who pick up *What If* will find a concise introduction to the field through the very problems with which philosophers grapple.

If, as Aristotle has said, philosophy begins with wonder, then *What If* is surely a great place to inspire it in beginners. Tittle's analyses aim to supply the reader with just enough provocation to initiate thought, while at the same time stimulating further interests and inquiries independent of the specific problems under consideration and, thus, independent of any course in which they might be taught. And this, of course, ought to be the goal of any study of philosophy—to incite an interrogatory comportment within the world while developing tools for critical reflection that may come to permeate our very being. This is a tall order for all of us, indeed, but it is one toward which we must work lest philosophy be relegated to the ends of the seesaw of its stereotype as either another academic requirement consisting of meaningless memorizations or a semi-mystical discipline trapped in its sophistry.