

# VCE PHILOSOPHY

*THIRD EDITION*

**A STUDENT TEXT  
FOR UNITS 1 & 2**

**ANNA SYMES  
LENNY ROBINSON-McCARTHY**

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**DAVID BARLOW PUBLISHING**

AUSTRALIA

For Brian – my greatest teacher. And Maxwell – my favourite thinker.

And Loon and Tild – for adventures with twirls.

With unending gratitude to all my wonderful Philosophy students from St Leonard's  
College 2003-2010.

*A.S.*

For Macca.

And all of my Philosophy students, past and present. Thank you.

*L.R.M.*

The authors acknowledge the help of their families, without whose support this book would not have been possible. Thank you to David for his patient support, to Eric and Thijmen for their skills and forbearance, and to Wilbert for capturing the whimsy we hoped for. We acknowledge also the support of the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools.

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# Introduction

Challenging, provocative, inspiring, revolutionary, confronting, life-changing. These are some of the ways that past students have described their experience of studying VCE Philosophy.

It may change your mind. It could bend your mind. It should stretch your mind. And certainly, it will open your mind.

Philosophy is a subject unlike any other. In asking the deeper questions about what lies behind all other fields of study, nothing is taken for granted and everything is ripe for debate and deconstruction. Your passions will be aroused and your certainties erased. You may look at aspects of the world entirely afresh.

Most of all, philosophy should push you to think – really, *really think* – in sustained ways, and serious ways, about things that matter to you, that matter to the world, and that have engaged some of the greatest minds in the history of humankind. Philosophy is a stimulating and enjoyable adventure – even as you work through its inevitable bewilderments and frustrations.

Philosophical questions – Who am I? What am I? How do I know? What should I do? – are enduring puzzles, not at the periphery of our lives, but fundamental to our lives and what we make of them.

And what better time of life to grapple with these questions, and be introduced to processes for making sense of them, than in the senior secondary years? You are fortunate in having the opportunity to study a subject that, in the curricula of most other states and countries, can only be studied at university.

Yet for many past students, VCE Philosophy has proved to offer optimal grounding for tertiary success. From engineering to economics, from media to management, from design to dentistry, from law to linguistics, VCE Philosophy provides essential tools for negotiating academic challenges wherever they present.

Philosophy teaches us the art of thinking well and increases our intellectual confidence. We learn to clarify concepts, distinguish good arguments from bad ones, analyse ideas, and to develop and defend our opinions. “Philosophy has made me smarter,” commented one past student.

But philosophy also nurtures wisdom, intellectual humility and moral courage. When equipped with the skills to understand and critically assess what the smartest people in history have written and said, we grow braver in thinking for ourselves, in questioning ourselves and others, in listening openly and genuinely, and responding with grace to views that contradict our own. As we hone our skills of reasoning, we broaden our vision and relinquish prejudices.



So, philosophy is something we *do*. It is not about passively memorising a history of ideas, but rather about actively participating in a conversation that began over 2,500 years ago, and finding our voices within it. This course will not “teach down” to you with second-hand summaries alone. Rather, you will be invited into direct communion with the dialogues of Plato; the fireside musings of Descartes; the revolutionary writings of Locke, Hume and Kant; and the dense, sometimes mind-spinning argumentation of contemporary philosophers. The emphasis on primary texts in this course – grappling with them, debating with them and hypothesising with them – is one of its most challenging but also exhilarating and rewarding aspects.

We hope this book gives you much to ponder and to be excited, intrigued, infuriated, confronted, overwhelmed, puzzled, dazzled, delighted and amused by. We hope it provides many opportunities for you to think hard by yourself as well as with your classmates. We hope you find philosophy as much fun and as enduringly valuable as we do.

Anna Symes and Lenny Robinson-McCarthy

# About This Book

Welcome to this third edition of *VCE Philosophy: A Student Text for Units 1 & 2*, written as a companion for students and teachers on the journey of VCE Philosophy Units 1 & 2, and updated to meet requirements of the VCE Philosophy Study Design, 2019-2023 ([https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/philosophy/PhilosophySD\\_2019.pdf](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/philosophy/PhilosophySD_2019.pdf)).

The changes to the Study Design for 2019-2023 have been minimal at Units 1 and 2 compared with Units 3 and 4, so there are no structural alterations for this new edition. However, we have taken the opportunity to update examples, activities, resources and suggestions for assessment, add more close studies of primary texts, increase the range of philosophical thinkers examined, add visual stimuli where appropriate, and revise the text throughout.

**Chapter 1: Welcome to Philosophy** engages students in a series of warm-up activities, introduces what it means to “do” philosophy, and gives an overview of the discipline and its history. Viewing this book and *VCE Philosophy: A Student Text for Units 3 & 4* as a two-volume set, we encourage students and classes new to Philosophy – whether embarking on the course at years 10, 11 or 12 – to make use of this introductory chapter.

Similarly, **Chapter 2: Logic and Reasoning** provides training with the philosopher’s basic toolkit, essential to doing philosophy at all levels. While this chapter specifically covers the mandated Key Knowledge and Key Skills from Unit 1, Area of Study 3 and Unit 2, Area of Study 3, this is an assumed knowledge and skill-base for Units 3 and 4 as well. We imagine that this chapter will be referred to, its terms assimilated and its material integrated and assessed, throughout Units 1 and 2 Philosophy and beyond, through Units 3 and 4.

In **Chapters 3-6**, we present a selection of significant concepts, ideas, viewpoints, arguments and theories which correspond to questions listed beneath each Theme prescribed for Unit 1, Areas of Study 1 and 2, and Unit 2, Areas of Study 1 and 2. We also provide a range of activities designed to stimulate students to “do” philosophy in response to these concepts, viewpoints and arguments, thereby developing their philosophical skills and deepening their thinking.

For each major theory, we offer students the opportunity to go directly to its primary source. Situating ideas within their original presentation in primary texts should give students a sense of philosophy as an ongoing conversation, to which their own voices are welcomed. Primary text extracts do not have to be lengthy; sometimes a single paragraph can clarify concepts, deliver strong argument and ignite debate, while introducing students to the particular style and flavour of one of philosophy’s influential giants. That said, there is definite merit in building the intellectual stamina required to work through longer pieces, and we provide plenty of suggestions for these, too.

*VCE Philosophy for Units 1 & 2* is a broad course that allows teachers flexibility to pick and choose from a smorgasbord of possibilities. As the Study Design makes clear, the lists of theme questions are *guides only*, and teachers may exclude and add as they see fit. This book likewise encourages teachers to draw on their own knowledge and resources, and to acknowledge the interests and abilities of their students, when designing a course. Each Theme in this book provides *substantially* more material than classes will have time to cover. We remind teachers that rather than mandating coverage of a specific body of material, the Study Design advises that satisfactory progress is deemed to occur in VCE when the Key Knowledge and Key Skills, listed for each Outcome, are broadly satisfied. We emphasise that the over-arching aims of every class in Units 1 and 2 Philosophy should be to get students interested in ideas, engaged in key arguments, and *really thinking*.

You will note that Chapters 2–6 also each contain lists of **Useful Resources** (to further extend the scope of each Theme and for more information on suggested primary texts) and **Assessment Tasks**. The number of Assessment Tasks included does not reflect the number of assessments students are required to do to complete a Theme satisfactorily, and teachers should feel free to do as many or as few (and to change or adapt or ignore) as they see fit, always referring closely to the Key Knowledge and Key Skills listed in the Study Design.

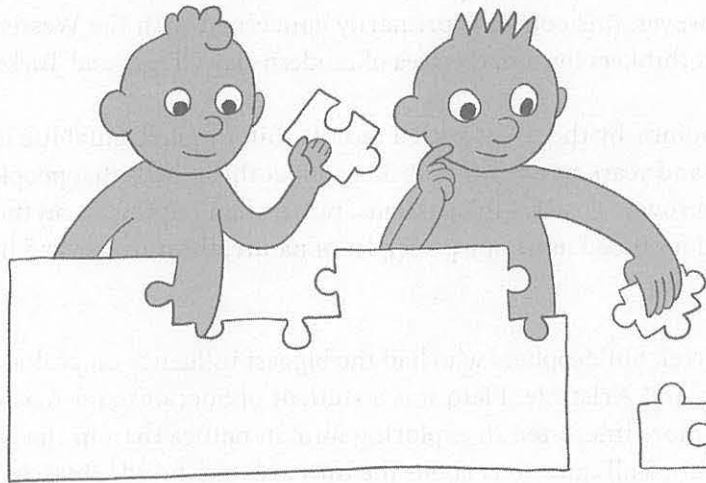
We refer teachers to **Chapter 7: Advice for Teaching and Learning with this Book** for further recommendations, including a **Sample Course Design** and **Suggestions for Student Assessment**.

Finally, although every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this text accurately reflects the requisites of the current Study Design (2019-2023), the Study Design should always be the first port of call and a continuing reference point when developing a course.

We hope you enjoy the adventure of VCE Philosophy!

## CHAPTER 1

# Welcome to Philosophy



### What is Philosophy?

Do you like to ponder life's deepest mysteries? Do you often question the things others take for granted? Are you attracted to dangerous and subversive ideas? Have you ever looked up at the vastness of the cosmos and wondered about your place in it? If so, you already have some sense of what it is to do philosophy.

The word itself comes from the Greek *philein* which means 'to love' and *sophia* which means 'wisdom'. So philosophy literally means 'love of wisdom.' But the deeper question of what philosophy is, is itself a philosophical question. It is a *contestable* question, yielding many possible correct answers, among which some contain more truth than others.

Perhaps it is the striving for truth which lies closest to the heart of what philosophy is.

Addressing the biggest questions of the universe can be exciting, terrifying, difficult and fun. It doesn't require any particular qualifications, experience or equipment to engage in philosophical debate. You can commune with the greatest minds in human history and pit your wits against some of the most ingenious arguments ever produced. All that is required is that you open your mind to possibilities and tune your ideas to precision.

For as much as doing philosophy is enjoyable, it is also rigorous. Developing your intellectual muscles is one of the major things you will appreciate about philosophy. 'Philosophy was the

subject that taught me how to really, *really* think,' said one past student of this course. 'Not just to *pretend* to think, or to hide behind things other people said or that sounded superficially smart, but to really discover my own brainpower to nut out challenging problems.'

This chapter will give you a sense of the scope of philosophy, and how you might tackle its questions in your VCE classes.

## ***Where did philosophy come from?***

No doubt people have always asked deep questions about their world, and no doubt there have been many philosophers whose thoughts would be worthy of study but which were never written down. Systems of revolutionary thinking have emerged from many places on the globe through human history. However, this course is primarily concerned with the Western philosophical tradition, whose first thinkers lived in the area of modern-day Greece and Turkey.

It is difficult to pinpoint why there was such a radical shift in intellectual life in ancient Greece two and a half thousand years ago. What is striking about this time is that people started looking to *human reason* to provide answers to questions, rather than relying on mythology, magic and religion. They looked for broad, unifying principles of nature, the universe and human life within it.

The three ancient Greek philosophers who had the biggest influence on philosophy and science were Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Plato was a student of Socrates and Aristotle a student of Plato. Socrates was more interested in exploring human nature than in the natural world but Plato's interests spanned all questions about the universe, the mind, physical entities, and the relationships between all of these. Plato began the first school dedicated to philosophy and 'natural philosophy' – the term used until relatively recently for what we now call 'science'. This school was called the Academy, from which we derive words such as 'academic'.

Plato's Academy in Athens survived for over 800 years. Its most famous student was Aristotle, who went on to tutor Alexander the Great. Aristotle took the study of natural philosophy even further than his teacher Plato, with topics including logic, physics, cosmology, anatomy, and ethics.

Philosophy was further developed through the Middle Ages (800-1400AD) by thinkers such as St Augustine, who carried on Plato's ideas, and Thomas Aquinas, who used Aristotelian principles. Both these philosophers married the teachings of Christianity with ancient Greek philosophy, to produce many of the most enduring and fundamental ideas of Western culture.

After the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries, brought about by the discoveries of Galileo, Copernicus, Isaac Newton and others, philosophy took a new direction. This is said to be the age of **modern philosophy**, beginning with Rene Descartes in the seventeenth century and continuing through John Locke, David Hume and Immanuel Kant, all of whom continued the same conversations started by the Greeks.

These debates have continued through the **contemporary philosophy** of the twentieth century and are alive and well today. You will be introduced to many of them in this book.



## DO

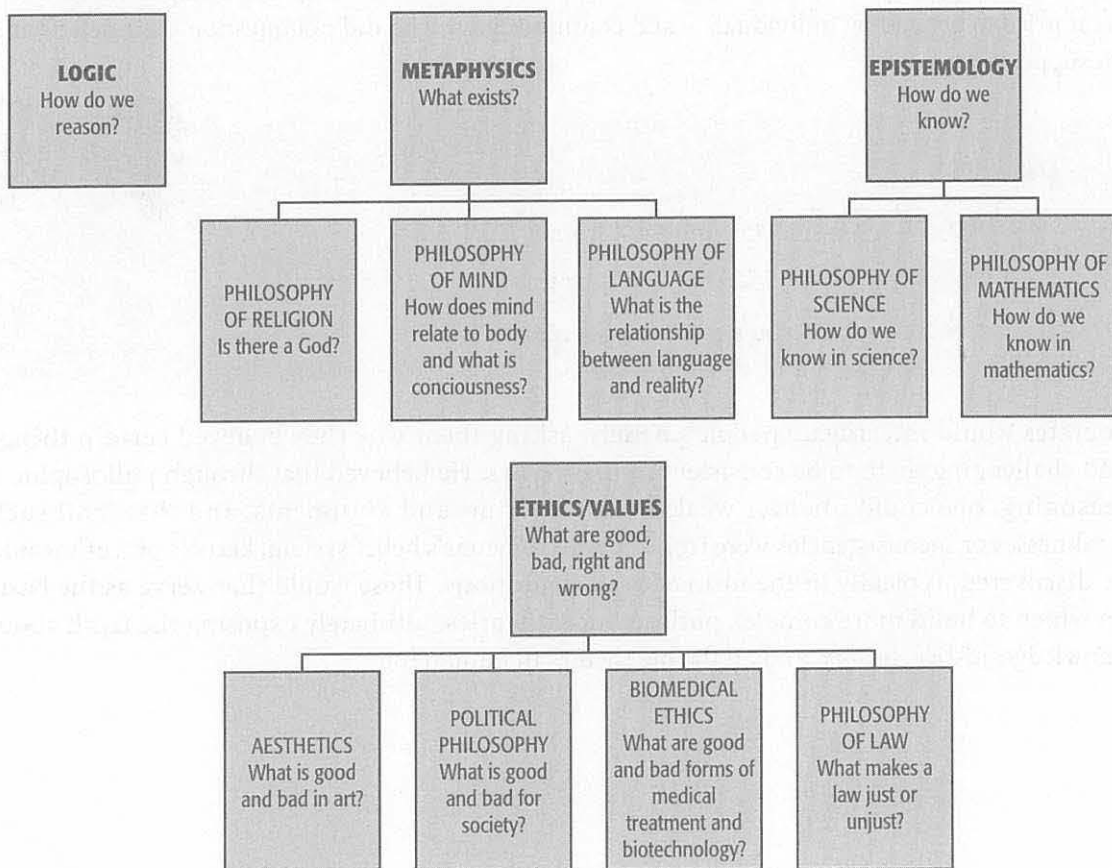
Create a timeline – perhaps a collective one for the wall of your philosophy classroom, a personal one in your workbook, or both. You could begin it around 600BC or earlier, and continue it to the present day. Include major world events as well as significant thinkers and ideas from the history of philosophy. Continue adding to this timeline throughout your studies in this course.

## Branches of Philosophy

As you will have gathered, the questions considered by philosophers range across many different areas, and some philosophers are more interested in some areas than others. There are three basic kinds of philosophical question:

1. What is there?
2. How do we know?
3. What matters?

These questions correspond to the three broad categories of philosophical inquiry: **metaphysics**, **epistemology** and **ethics**. In addition, the field of **logic** underpins and examines the philosophical process itself. These broad categories have several sub-categories, some examples of which are listed in the diagram below.





## DO

Working in a pair, write down 15 philosophical questions that link to a variety of branches of philosophy, as described in the diagram. (This activity may be best done after reading the next few pages about philosophical questioning.)

Then each pair should pass their lists of questions clockwise to a neighbouring pair. With your partner, try to match to a branch of philosophy each question on the list you have received.

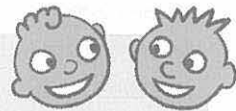
## What is 'Doing Philosophy'?

If you really want to discover what philosophy is, you have to *do* some philosophical thinking. This is not easy. Thinking carefully and deeply is hard work! But it is a kind of thinking that anyone can do if they try. That was the message of the 'father of philosophy', Socrates.

### *The Socratic Method*

Socrates was a well-known figure around ancient Athens, always chatting in the marketplace, going to parties, and engaging anyone and everyone in philosophical conversations. For Socrates, philosophy was not some dry, intellectual pursuit restricted to elite scholars. Rather, he regarded it as a necessary basis for any person to live a good life.

He famously proclaimed, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' He thought there was a great price to be paid by individuals – and communities – who did not question their beliefs and presuppositions.



## DISCUSS

'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

1. What do you think Socrates meant by this?
2. To what extent do you agree with Socrates?

Socrates would interrogate people's beliefs, asking them why they believed certain things and challenging them to be consistent in their views. He believed that through philosophical reasoning, one could uncover weaknesses in claims and arguments, and that if all such weaknesses or inconsistencies were ironed out of someone's belief system, kernels of truth would be discovered, typically in the form of basic definitions. These would then serve as the basis on which to build more complex philosophical theories, ultimately exposing the truth about knowledge, justice, beauty, and all the big themes in human life.

Socrates believed so wholeheartedly in finding the truth through philosophical questioning, that he was prepared to die for it. His relentless challenging of others' opinions offended some powerful figures in Athens, and he was sentenced to death. Refusing to compromise his integrity with an apology, he became the great martyr of philosophy and truth-seeking.

Sentenced to death for "corrupting youth." Jacques Louis-David's famous painting, 'The Death of Socrates' (1787) depicts Socrates philosophising to his distressed followers before drinking a cup of poisonous hemlock.

Jacques-Louis David [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons



## THINK

Do you think the truth and personal integrity are worth dying for? Why or why not?



The **Socratic Method** of philosophical questioning, or **dialectic**, has had a profound influence on processes of philosophical enquiry ever since. It is a method of cross-examining someone's claims and premises in order to reveal contradictions or inconsistencies. It is an excellent method from which to draw inspiration for your own philosophising. You can practise Socratic dialogue both with your classmates in whole-class and small-group discussions, as well as with yourself in your philosophical journal-writing.

The Socratic method of doing philosophy has been passed down to us by Plato, Socrates' student. Texts by Plato are typically written in dialogue form. They feature Socrates in the role of **inquisitor** – asking provocative questions – with various others in the role of **interlocutor** – answering the questions and revising the hypothesis under consideration. The process of **elenchus** would involve participants in considering a hypothesis about something, thinking critically about it, identifying any weaknesses in the hypothesis, posing questions about it, and revising the hypothesis in the light of discussion. A philosophical session would continue until a satisfactory hypothesis was settled upon.





## DO

Watch the DVD *Philosophy as a Guide to Happiness* with Alain de Botton (2000) – Episode 1: ‘Socrates on Self Confidence’.

Pay particular attention to the section on Socratic Method (the visual sequence features the making of a vase on a potter’s wheel).

As explained by de Botton, there was often a particular sequence to Socrates’ questioning techniques. In his book to accompany the series, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Alain de Botton outlines the Socratic Method in the following way\*.

1. Write down a statement we generally accept as common sense.  
*For example: Studying hard is beneficial.*
2. Imagine that the statement is actually false. Try to think of situations or contexts where the statement would not be true.  
*Could studying hard ever be damaging?*  
*Do the benefits of study depend on the subject studied?*  
*Do the benefits of study depend on the reasons why one is studying?*
3. If any exceptions are found, the statement must be false or imprecise. Write down any exceptions you can think of.  
*It is possible to study too hard and neglect other important areas of life such as one’s health and one’s obligations to others.*  
*Studying destructive subjects is not beneficial.*  
*There may be poor reasons for studying hard.*
4. Modify the initial statement to take account of any exceptions found.  
*Studying hard may be beneficial if motivated by good reasons, if the subjects studied are worthy, and if studying does not jeopardise other important activities in life.*
5. The process should be repeated to discover any problems with the revised statement. The truth, insofar as we can attain such a thing, lies in a statement which it seems impossible to disprove. It is by finding out what something is not that one comes closest to understanding what it is.

Working with a partner, write a Socratic dialogue using the method described by de Botton and outlined above. Start by coming up with a statement that is commonly accepted as true. For example, you may examine a well-known proverb or a school rule. Then carry out each of the suggested steps, aiming to arrive at a statement of truth by the end. Perform your dialogue for the rest of the class.

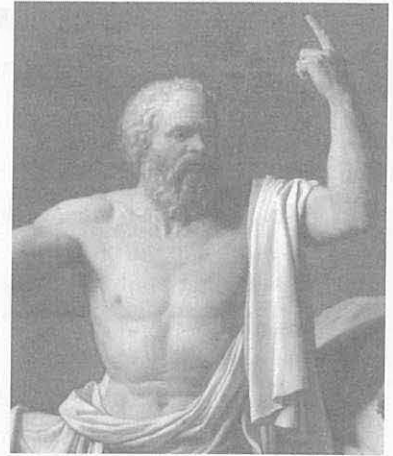
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\* Alain de Botton 2000, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Penguin, London, pp.24-5.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Socrates (c.470–399BCE)

Shabbily dressed and usually barefoot, Socrates spent his days engaging ordinary people in philosophical discussion. Not everyone appreciated Socrates' challenging questioning, but it was through this process that Socrates thought he could establish answers to the most important problems in life: 'What is justice?' 'What should we do with our lives?' 'What is happiness?' Many regarded Socrates as the wisest man in Athens, to which he is said to have replied, 'All I know is that I know nothing.'



Socrates' insatiable curiosity and determination to find the truth about important matters eventually got him into trouble. He challenged the beliefs of too many powerful men and was consequently sentenced to death and executed by being made to drink poisonous hemlock.

Socrates did not write down any of his ideas but we are fortunate that his student, Plato, recorded numerous Socratic dialogues. Socrates is known as the Father of Philosophy for having founded the practice of philosophical questioning. He remains the great hero of philosophy for having died in defence of free, critical thought.

### THINK

"All I know is that I know nothing" or "Wisest is he who knows he knows nothing" are statements associated with Socrates. What did he mean and was he right? Why or why not?



## **SOME SOCRATIC QUESTIONS**

Try using as many of these questions as you can in your class discussions throughout the year.

- *Why do you say that?*
- *What do you mean?*
- *How does this relate to what we have been talking about?*
- *What is the nature of ...?*
- *What do we already know about this?*
- *Can you give an example?*
- *Are you saying ... or ... ?*
- *Can you rephrase that, please?*
- *What else could we assume?*
- *You seem to be assuming ... ?*
- *Please explain why/how ... ?*
- *How can you verify or disprove that assumption?*
- *What would happen if ... ?*
- *Do you agree or disagree with ... ?*
- *How do you know this?*
- *Can you give me an example of that?*
- *What do you think causes ... ?*
- *What is the nature of this?*
- *Are these reasons good enough?*
- *How might this be refuted?*
- *How can we be sure of what you are saying?*
- *Why?*
- *What evidence is there to support what you are saying?*
- *On what authority are you basing your argument?*
- *Another way of looking at this is ...*
- *What alternative ways of looking at this are there?*
- *Who benefits from this?*
- *What is the difference between... and...?*
- *Why is it better than ...?*
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of...?*
- *How are ... and ... similar?*
- *What would ... say about it?*
- *What if you compared ... and ... ?*
- *How could you look another way at this?*
- *Then what would happen?*
- *What are the consequences of that assumption?*
- *How could ... be used to ... ?*
- *What are the implications of ... ?*
- *How does ... affect ... ?*
- *How does ... fit with what we learned before?*
- *Why is ... important?*
- *What was the point of asking that question?*
- *What does that mean?*

## ***Philosophical Skills and Techniques***

As we have suggested, one way of thinking about what philosophy is, is to view it as a search for the truth. Outlined below are some techniques to help you in this quest you will share with your classmates.

### **1. PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION AND DEBATE**

‘All philosophy begins in dialogue,’ said Plato. Naturally, in course of this dialogue, people often disagree. But that is not to say that we don’t reach any answers or consensus in philosophy. As we debate with each other, we hope to gain clarity about the problem at hand, even if we only succeed in realising it is more complex than it first appeared. Sometimes we make progress by seeing what is *not* the right answer.

The number one rule of any philosophical discussion is that any point of view should be supported by *reasons*. It is only **justified** claims that help us get to the truth. ‘Why do you think that?’ is a very good question to ask each other in philosophical dialogue.

This book will introduce you to many of the major dialogues and disagreements among philosophers through history and invite you to critically consider different points of view. You will often be exposed to ideas which radically challenge your normal assumptions. You will find strengths and weaknesses in all the views presented and you will often be asked which you find the most convincing view and why. Similarly, in class discussions, you will toss ideas around together, aiming, as a group, to achieve greater clarity and coherence in your understanding.

When functioning as a shared quest for the truth, a philosophical discussion is not about some people being right and others wrong. Indeed, ideally, egos should be left at the door. The topic of debate is a set of ideas, not the people presenting the arguments.

Disagreement is healthy and productive. When someone criticises your argument, take this as a compliment and a show of respect. The person making the criticism has made the effort to listen to you and think about your ideas. Criticisms are a way for the whole group to build upon your ideas and together journey closer to the truth. You may find yourself agreeing that a criticism is warranted and reflect that your argument was misguided. Don’t be afraid to change your mind if a different view is more convincing; this shows intellectual integrity rather than weakness. On the other hand, your critic may have misunderstood you, or your argument may simply require further development, in which case you should certainly continue to advance your original view!

Some people feel at ease when arguing a case. Others, whether by nature or upbringing, find it challenging to defend their view and be exposed to criticism. Among the most important skills you will learn in philosophy are to listen carefully to the views of others, to articulate reasonably your own views, and to criticise respectfully both your own views and those of other people – whether they be long-dead philosophers or your own classmates. Along with these comes a further skill: learning to accept and build upon the criticisms others make of your ideas, regarding these criticisms as helpful rather than hurtful. A group of philosophers who are skilful in these ways will make excellent progress together and have a lot of fun. Remember, *the truth* is your goal!

## THINK



1. Think about a situation where you have needed to argue your point of view. Describe how you felt. Did you feel calm, excited, anxious, relaxed, scared?
2. Notice what happens in your body as you think about arguing for your point of view. What do you think might help you to stay calm as you try to make your argument?
3. Do you feel differently about arguing for your point of view in different situations? For example, do you feel calmer and more confident when debating with a parents, siblings, friends, classmates, teachers, strangers or online? Why?

## DO



1. Socrates and Plato believed that rational discussion and debate were necessary underpinnings for a well functioning society. To what extent does rational debate, as described above, guide decision-making in our society? What are the sources of evidence for your view?
2. Listen to a session of parliamentary debate. Assess what you hear with respect to the recommendations you have read in this Chapter for philosophical debates. In what ways is parliamentary debate similar to or different from philosophical discussions as just described? What might be some consequences if parliamentary debates were more similar to philosophical discussions?

## 2. ASKING QUESTIONS

Asking questions is one of the most powerful techniques you can use in doing philosophy. During a discussion, it is just as valuable to ask an appropriate question as to offer an opinion. Useful questions can be about the topic under discussion, or request clarification of a previously stated position, or may even draw attention to the process being used to tackle the problem. The list of Socratic questions above (p.8) is a good starting point for practising your philosophical questioning.

## DO



Allocate the Socratic questions listed in the box above (see p.8) to different class members. (They could be printed out on to cards, with each class member choosing several cards to 'play'.) Aim to use your allocated question during class discussion – either during a single class, or perhaps over the course of a week. These are also useful questions to use when writing philosophical reflections and journal entries.



## DO

### PHILOSOPHY IN FILM

Watch a film rich in philosophical themes and ideas. *The Matrix* is recommended as an effective forerunner of your studies in metaphysics and epistemology, but you could also consider *Dark City*, *Existenz*, or others.

1. During and after your viewing, make a list of all the philosophical questions you can think of, that are raised by this film.
2. Around your classroom, your teacher will arrange large sheets of poster paper, each headed with a branch of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Write a minimum of five questions on these sheets, placing them in the category to which you think they belong.
3. You may save these lists on your classroom wall. See how many of the questions are addressed by your studies in VCE Philosophy this year!

## 3. LISTENING AND READING

Some people are attracted to philosophy because they are good at talking, and it is true that a lot of discussion goes on in philosophy. But it is equally important to listen intently to what others have to say, and to actively consider others' views and their implications. When you feel eager to contribute a certain idea to discussion it is sometimes hard to give your full attention to others' comments. Remind yourself of the collective quest for truth and tune in!

Another mode of tuning into the views of others is when reading primary texts. Giving effortful consideration to views that may be hundreds or even thousands of years old can be hard work, but well worth the effort. This is discussed further on pages 16-18.

When listening to or reading the ideas of other philosophers – whether famous dead people or your classmates – it is important to exercise the **Principle of Charity** (see p.29). This means that you try to interpret someone else's argument in the most coherent and convincing way, *before* finding fault with it. In face-to-face discussions, this includes helping the other person to build their argument: 'Do you mean x...?' That way, when you come to criticise the argument, you can be sure that you are targeting real, rather than imagined, weaknesses.

## THINK

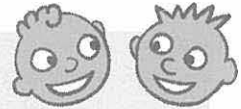
1. Are you a better talker or listener? How might you become a better listener?
2. Can you think of any occasions when have you used the principle of charity?



## 4. ARGUMENTS AND REASONS

An argument in philosophy does not generally imply a fight. In fact, the word argue comes from the Latin *arguere* which means 'to make clear or prove.' As you will learn more about in the next Chapter, a philosophical argument is a statement supported by reasons. Logic and reasoning are the foundations of philosophy, and among the most important things you will learn in this course are how to distinguish good reasoning from bad, and how to construct effective arguments. Chapter 2 will be your constant guide on these matters.

Remember, defending your ideas is different from insisting you are right. Justified opinions are far more useful than ones that are merely asserted. And some reasons are of course more convincing than others. You will become well practised in distinguishing weak reasons from strong.



### DISCUSS

#### GIVING REASONS

So why have you chosen to study Philosophy?

All my friends are doing philosophy, and they seem to like it, so I thought I'd join in too. Ahmad

My starsign said that as a Sagittarian, I am naturally philosophical. It also said that I would choose to do something radical on the day the enrolment forms were due, so I ticked the Philosophy box! Lucilla

I have always been drawn to big questions and I spend a lot of time daydreaming about philosophical matters. It's my favourite hobby, really. Roshan

I don't know much about philosophy but I love reading and philosophy involves a lot of reading. Jess

My mum says I'm good at arguing and she can never beat me in an argument, so this sounded like a good subject for me. Steph

I needed another subject and this one fitted in my timetable. Sienna

I've grown up reading Philosophy. My parents are philosophers so I grew up reading Plato while my friends were reading Harry Potter. Arthur

I'm an out-there kind of guy, I guess. I go to protest marches if I can. I believe in anarchy. Zac

1. Work in a group of two-three classmates. For each of the student quotations in the cartoon above, try to supply at least one **supporting reason or supporting argument** which defends the speaker's position, and one **objection or counter-argument** which challenges the speaker. Write these down.
2. Still as a small group, see if you can reach a consensus ranking for the quotations, with number one designating the **strongest reason** and number eight designating the **weakest reason**.
3. As a whole class group, share your rankings by writing them on the whiteboard.
4. Discuss the rankings. Was there broad consensus across the whole class? Where there are differences, how do those groups defend their choices?
5. What have you learnt about **reasons** from doing this exercise?

## 5. REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

Stepping back to consider quietly your own views and those of others is not always encouraged in our fast-paced world. Yet formulating a well-reasoned viewpoint takes effort and time. Sometimes we have no view on a matter until we start to think seriously about it. Sometimes someone else will articulate a view and our first reaction is to say, yes, that makes sense. But perhaps if we take time to really think about its reasoning, we will find the argument is weaker than we first supposed. Perhaps if we deeply consider the bases for our own views, we will find that we change our minds on some matters.

Philosophy aims to move beyond the half-baked assertions, snappy soundbites and snazzy slogans that often pass for opinions in our culture. Studying philosophy isn't an excuse for aimless daydreaming, but if your parents ask, 'Are you doing your homework?' the response, 'I'm thinking about it' is a commendable one! As much as it is important to engage in the fast flow of varying viewpoints that discussion with classmates provides, it is also crucial that you experience regular, quiet and sustained philosophical contemplation.

Philosophical discussions almost always have to be cut short while there are still people bursting with important points to make. Whether it is the bell for the end of class or the need to press on with course content, there will never be enough time to fully thrash out a problem to everyone's satisfaction. This is where journaling is a valuable means of catching the 'overflow'. Internet forums can also serve this purpose, should your class wish to set one up.

Philosophical dialogue occurs most obviously in live, face-to-face discussion. But it also, very valuably, occurs inside your own head! Keeping a written journal of the to and fro of your own thoughts can be an indispensable aid in the development of your philosophical skills. So we encourage you to keep an ongoing journal throughout VCE Philosophy, whether or not this is a task required for assessment. Class discussions will invariably offer many threads to reflect upon, and at the end of every Theme in this book, several questions for reflection are listed.

### THINK

1. How often do you *really, rigorously THINK* through an idea or problem? What does it look like when you are doing this thinking? Are there any places or times that are particularly conducive to this kind of serious contemplation for you?
2. How often do you notice other people *really thinking* and in what settings?
3. How could participants be encouraged to think harder and offer more carefully considered responses during class discussions?
4. Over the course of a couple of days, record all the times you notice actual, effortful *thinking* going on, and all the times you notice its opposite – that is, glib assertion – being presented as viewpoints or facts. (Include social media, TV, newspapers, people around you, and any other influences you are exposed to). What conclusions can you draw about thinking and modern culture?

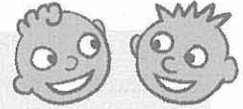




## 6. SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS AND REASONS

When you are considering a viewpoint or an argument advanced by another philosopher – be it someone famous, a classmate or yourself – an important strategy is to try to offer further arguments or reasons to support why, indeed, this might be the case.

For example, if it suggested that having a school uniform is a good idea because it reduces competition to wear the latest fashions, you might add that a uniform also makes it easier and quicker for students to get dressed each morning. You have added a further reason to support the viewpoint that uniforms are a good idea.



### DISCUSS

#### 'THE PERSPECTIVES GAME'

Philosophy involves considering different perspectives and viewpoints, sometimes bending your mind to appreciate a different view of reality altogether, and considering arguments used to defend it. This activity offers a taste of this experience.

1. Form groups of three-four people.
2. Your teacher will bring along a collection of household items. Each group will examine one item.
3. Your task is to think about an alternative use for this item, other than the obvious. In your group, make your case for the purpose of this item, as convincingly as possible.
4. Present your arguments to the class about the use of your item.
5. At the end, vote on which group presented the most convincing reasons and arguments to support the novel use of their item. Be prepared to defend your vote with reasons!

## 7. COUNTER-ARGUMENTS AND OBJECTIONS

Another important skill is the ability to offer counter-arguments, also called objections. An objection to school uniforms is that they inhibit personal expression and individuality. Another objection is that in most professions, a uniform is not required. This could be further countered, though, with the response that many professions do require uniforms, and that almost all jobs demand some standard of dress.

## 8. EXAMPLES AND COUNTER-EXAMPLES

Use of examples is a vital way of supporting an argument in philosophy. Your examples can come from anywhere – your own daily life, your school, your dog... – they don't have to sound sophisticated to be effective in supporting a claim or argument.

A counter-example is an example which *disproves* a case. In the school uniform debate it only takes one person to say that they have experienced bullying on the basis of their choice of school clothing to cast doubt on another person's claim that freedom in dress promotes harmony and respect for individuality.

## 9. CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Philosophy is generally concerned with broad, contestable concepts that are basic to human experience. These include knowledge, matter, time, happiness, virtue, goodness, freedom, beauty and so on. Much of philosophy is concerned with forming **definitions** of these terms. A dictionary is usually of little help in finding the kinds of definitions that interest philosophers. A dictionary offers clues as to how a term is *commonly used*, but a philosopher wishes to go deeper than that. A philosophical definition aims to fully explain a concept by covering all relevant circumstances.

In exploring what a concept means and includes, philosophers are also concerned with what it is *not*. Thus, the ability to draw **distinctions** is another important skill in the philosopher's toolbox.

## 10. PRECISION OF LANGUAGE

As you should already have gathered, philosophy is intimately concerned with words. Philosophers often struggle to achieve the most exacting and accurate choice of words to express precise nuances of meaning. This is important when discussing ideas that are subtle, complex and abstract. This is another reason why you should *listen* carefully to your classmates and give them *time* to formulate their ideas. 'I know what I mean, I just can't express it!' will no doubt be uttered by someone at some stage in your philosophical discussions. Give each other time and encouragement. Offer help: 'Do you mean.....?' Likewise, when you are writing down your philosophical ideas, you will often need to make several drafts, refining your language each time in order to pinpoint precise meaning and remove ambiguities.

### ***The Community of Inquiry***

A particular kind of philosophical discussion you may conduct in your classroom is the Community of Inquiry (CoI). This is a structured session, following a practised format which aims to emphasise all the philosophical skills outlined in our previous section.

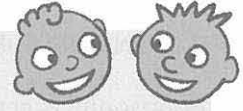
A CoI begins with some kind of stimulus material – whether a question, idea, topic, text, scenario, picture, object or poem. Participants then contribute questions arising from this stimulus, and these are listed for all to see – usually with the contributor's name beside each one. Some analysis of the questions then takes place (can they be grouped into categories, for example?) and a collective decision is made about which question seems to offer the most interesting starting point for discussion.

One way in which a CoI differs from most class discussions is that the teacher assumes no particular authority or responsibility. When the teacher participates it is ideally as an equal member of the group. Issues such as who speaks next are decided by participants, and passing some kind of 'conch' (which must be held by the speaker) can assist this. Decisions about the direction a discussion should take are also taken by participants.

Achieving a smoothly functioning ‘community of inquirers’ can take some time. Just to get beyond the habit of always addressing comments to the teacher can be a challenge. However, when the group dynamic matures, this format is an excellent way of making progress in philosophical discussions.<sup>1</sup>

## DISCUSS

How does it feel when your teacher steps down from the role of authority in a discussion? Are you accustomed to a teacher providing all the “right” answers for you to dutifully transcribe and learn? In a philosophy class, do you think your teacher’s view should count for more or less than anyone else’s? Why?



## DO

Conduct a CoI using Socrates’ view that ‘An unexamined life is not worth living’ as your stimulus.



## Studying Philosophical Texts

Your classmates are your obvious philosophical companions. But do not forget that this subject invites you to participate in a dialogue which dates back thousands of years and which features some of the most interesting and brilliant minds in human history. We think there are some philosophers who simply must be read, including Plato, Aristotle and Descartes, but whether it is a little or a lot, this course will encourage you to sample a broad range of primary texts.

Keep in mind that even while it might seem as though we describe the intellects of famous philosophers in awed terms, we don’t read their work because they were always right. On the contrary, the work of famous philosophers is of value because it inspires debate.

Most of these writings are dense, difficult and challenging. That is why they have stimulated discussion amongst philosophers, often continuing for hundreds or even thousands of years. Don’t be deterred by this. A second reading often makes the world of difference. (And even more becomes clear on a third, fourth and twentieth reading!) Sometimes a philosopher’s writing style reflects their era and takes some getting used to. Only recent philosophers can be relied upon to use gender-neutral language. Resist the temptation to reject a philosopher’s ideas because of examples you find unusual. Remember, philosophy develops intellectual muscle and stamina. Just as you can’t build strong biceps in the gym by baulking at heavy weights and repetitions, you can’t build philosophical intelligence by running away from difficult texts and arguments. Both activities hurt a little, but offer rewards!

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<sup>1</sup> The *Useful Resources* section at the end of Chapter 7 directs you to further information about the CoI and the role of the facilitator.

## TWO PROCESSES TO FOLLOW WITH PRIMARY TEXTS: ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

The first thing you are trying to do when reading a primary text is to identify what the key arguments are. What are the important points the philosopher most wants to get across? Next you should see if you can detect the structure of the arguments. Are there reasons given to support the main claims? Chapter 2 will help you develop these skills.

Approaching primary texts in accordance with the ‘principle of charity’, trying to build the strongest possible case from the ideas presented, and piecing together a coherent body of argument from a primary text, is a process known as **philosophical analysis**.

Once you have analysed a text, your next task is to **evaluate** its claims and arguments. To evaluate means to identify strengths and weaknesses. Chapter 2 will train you in many techniques for evaluating arguments, including distinguishing good reasoning from bad, and recognising fallacies. Evaluation also calls forth skills outlined above, including offering supporting arguments and examples, and counter-arguments and counter-examples.



### WRITE

#### WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

1. Consider all the material presented in this chapter, along with the quotations printed below.
2. What seems to you to be the nature of philosophy? Write a paragraph in response.
3. Extend this into a journal entry using one or more of the quotations below as stimulus for reflection. What seem to you to be the most interesting aspects of philosophy?

‘Philosophy should never be dismissed as some airy-fairy, ‘head in the clouds’ preoccupation. In many ways it is the most practical of all activities. Philosophy is very relevant to everyday life. We all hold philosophical beliefs.’  
(VCE Philosophy teacher)

‘Doing Philosophy, you run the risk that in the end you’ll feel you know less than you did before. But in a good way.’  
(Past VCE Philosophy Student)

‘Don’t do philosophy to prove that you are right or that you are smart; do it to feel stupid and more confused than ever. And enjoy!’  
(Past VCE Philosophy Student)

‘Doing philosophy is like climbing the Himalayas. You work really hard to get to the top of one mountain. But the top of that mountain is the bottom of another mountain. There are always deeper, harder questions to ask. Crazy, it’s all worthwhile and rewarding in the end.’  
(Past VCE Philosophy Student)

‘All philosophy begins in wonder.’  
(Aristotle)

‘Philosophy is more about asking questions than finding answers.’  
(Past VCE Philosophy Student)

‘Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.’ \*  
(Bertrand Russell)

\* Bertrand Russell 1998, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.93-4.

‘Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!’  
(Dr Seuss)

‘[Philosophy is] ‘an explosive, in the presence of which everything is in danger.’  
(Friedrich Nietzsche)

‘Philosophy is not about WHAT to think, it’s about HOW to think. Don’t do it if you just want to be told all the right answers.’  
(Past VCE Philosophy student)

‘He who is most certain knows the least’  
‘Wisest is he who knows he knows nothing.’  
(Socrates)

‘You need to be prepared to have your deepest ideas challenged. The risk is that in the end you’ll feel you know less than you did before.’  
(Past VCE Philosophy student)

‘There is nothing so absurd that it hasn’t been said by some philosopher.’  
(Cicero)

# Useful General Resources for Studying Philosophy

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## Books

- Baggini, J. 2004, *What's it all about? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, Granta, London.
- Baggini, J. 2005, *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten and Ninety-nine Other Thought Experiments*, Granta, London.
- Baggini, J. and Stangroom, J. 2006, *Do you think what you think you think?* Granta, London.
- Blackburn, S. 2001, *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Clark, M. 2002, *Paradoxes from A to Z*, Routledge, New York.
- Cohen, M. 1999, *101 Philosophy Problems*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Cooper, D. 2003, *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction* (2nd edn.), Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Massachusetts
- Craig, E., ed. 2005, *The Shorter Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York.
- de Botton, A. 2000, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Penguin, London.
- Fearn, N. 2005, *Philosophy: The Latest Answers to the Oldest Questions*, Atlantic, London.
- Gaarder, J. 1995, *Sophie's World*, Phoenix, London.
- Honderich, T. (ed) 1995, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Horner, C. & Westacott, E. 2000, *Thinking Through Philosophy: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- King, P. 2004, *One Hundred Philosophers: The World's Greatest Thinkers – Their Life and Work in a Nutshell*, ABC Books, Sydney.
- Kleiman, L. & Lewis, S. 1992, *Philosophy: An Introduction Through Literature*, Paragon House, Minnesota.
- Law, S. 2000, *The Philosophy Files*, Orion, London.
- Law, S. 2003, *The Philosophy Files 2: The Outer Limits*, Orion, London.
- Law, S. 2004, *The Philosophy Gym: 25 Short Adventures in Thinking*, Headline, London.
- Magee, B. 1998, *The Story of Philosophy*, Dorling Kindersley, London.

- McInerney, Peter K. 1992, *Introduction to Philosophy*, Harper Collins, New York.
- Morton, A. 2004, *Philosophy in Practice (second edition)*, Blackwell, London.
- Osborne, R. 1992, *Philosophy for Beginners*, Writers and Readers, New York.
- Palmer, D. 2001, *Looking at Philosophy: The Unbelievable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Phelan, J.W. 2005, *Philosophy: Themes and Thinkers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Rauhut, Nils Ch. 2007, *Ultimate Questions: Thinking About Philosophy (second edition)*, Pearson Longman, New York.
- Russell, B. 1998, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Solomon, R.C. 2006, *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Thomson Wadsworth, Belmont.
- Tittle, P., 2005, *What If: Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy*, Pearson Longman,
- Warburton, N. 1999, *Philosophy: The Basics*, Routledge, London.

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## Documentary and Film

- *The Matrix*, dir. Wachowski A. & Wachowski L. 1999, Warner Bros, DVD.
- *Existenz*, Cronenberg, D. 1999, Columbia DVD.
- *The Truman Show*, dir. Weir, P. 1998, Paramount DVD.
- *Dark City*, dir. Proyas, A. 1998, Warner DVD.
- *Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness*, de Boutton, A., 2000, ABC/Roadshow, DVD.
- *The Tree of Life*, dir. Malick, T. 2011, River Road Entertainment.
- *Bladerunner*, dir. Scott, R. 1982, Warner Bros.
- *A Scanner Darkly*, dir. Linklater, R. 2006, Warner.
- *Waking Life*, dir. Linklater, R. 2001, Fox Searchlight.
- *Existenz*, dir. Cronenberg, D. 1999, Miramax.
- *Pi*, dir. Aronofsky, D. 1998, Artisan Entertainment.

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## Magazines and Journals

- *The Philosophers' Magazine* – games and online activities.  
<http://www.philosophersnet.com/games/>
- *Philosophy Now*  
<http://philosophynow.org>

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## Websites

- *The Conversation* – <https://theconversation.com/au>
- *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – [plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)
- *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – [iep.utm.edu](http://iep.utm.edu)
- Edge: Conversations on the edge of human knowledge – [edge.org](http://edge.org)
- *Philosophy Pages* – [philosophypages.com](http://philosophypages.com)
- *EpistemeLinks: Philosophy Resources on the Internet* – [epistemelinks.com](http://epistemelinks.com)

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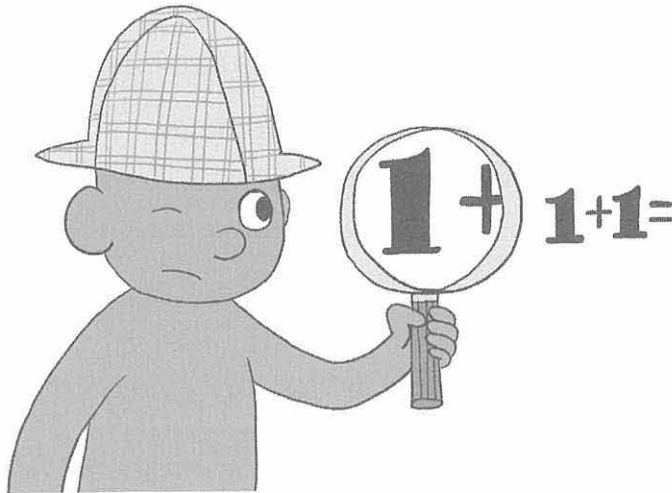
## Podcasts

- *Philosophise This!* – <http://philosophizethis.org/>
- *The Philosophy Guy* – <https://thephilosophyguy.fireside.fm/>
- *Philosophy Talk* – <https://www.philosophytalk.org/>
- *The Philosopher's Zone* – <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/>
- *Philosophy Bites* – <http://www.philosophybites.com/>



## CHAPTER 2

# Logic and Reasoning



Many people are attracted to philosophy because it provides an opportunity to engage with questions fundamental to our existence, such as: Who am I? Why am I here? How should I live my life? What should I believe in? Yet philosophy is more than a collection of ideas. It's also a way of thinking. By learning about this way of thinking you can increase your capacity to engage critically and thoughtfully with the concepts, arguments and viewpoints you encounter. It will also help you to formulate your own arguments and, by providing you with the tools to distinguish between good and bad reasoning, to evaluate the viewpoints and arguments of others.

In this Chapter you will be introduced to the distinctive nature of philosophical thinking and to some fundamental tools and techniques philosophers use to identify, reconstruct and evaluate arguments. You will explore other techniques of critical reasoning, such as thought experiments and analogies, as well as some common argumentative fallacies. You will also be invited to reflect on your own judgments, and the judgments of others, by acquainting yourself with the concept of cognitive bias and some of the common biases we are likely to fall prey to when making decisions. Along the way you will be provided with exercises that allow you to practise your skills and test your knowledge of the key terms and concepts.

As with all of the chapters in this textbook, at the conclusion of this Chapter you will find a 'Useful Resources' list. As it is impossible to cover more than what is both fundamental and relevant, you can extend your knowledge and skills by consulting this list.

Although these tools and techniques are presented in a single chapter you should make use of them throughout your study of philosophy. As already mentioned, philosophy is a way of thinking, and these tools and techniques make up this way of thinking. Thus it is expected that you will use at least some of them every time you are doing philosophy.

You will notice, as you work through this textbook, that the exercises have been designed to encourage you to use these tools and techniques. We further encourage you to use them in your written work and in your classroom discussions. Indeed, this Chapter should be a reference point for the whole of your study, as whether you are examining questions associated with metaphysics, epistemology, ethics or aesthetics, you will always be examining, at some level, arguments.

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## Identifying Arguments

### *What is an argument?*

Often when we hear the term ‘argument’, what immediately springs to mind is a heated exchange in which two or more individuals who disagree about something raise their voices in an effort to get their point across. Perhaps doors are slammed. Perhaps insults are hurled or, if it gets out of hand, some pushing and shoving might occur.

Although such behavior is not entirely absent from the history of philosophy, it is not what is usually referred to as an argument. For philosophers, the term ‘argument’ has a very narrow and precise meaning. At its most basic, an argument is a unit of reasoning which consists of a **belief** and **reasons** to support that belief.

For example:

*It’s going to rain today. See the red sunrise? Whenever there is a red sunrise it means rain is on the way.*

In this unit of reasoning, the statement ‘It’s going to rain today’ is the **belief**. The **reasons** offered to support this belief are: ‘there is a red sunrise’ and ‘whenever there is a red sunrise it means rain is on the way.’

In the language of philosophy, the reasons used to support a belief are referred to as **premises**. The belief the premises are used to support is the **conclusion**. Both the premises and conclusion are expressed as statements or **propositions**. Thus, to refine our definition we might describe an argument as a series of propositions, of which one is a conclusion and the rest of which are premises intended to support the conclusion.

From this definition one might assume that identifying an argument from other forms of reasoning is easy. In reality, this is not always the case. **Rhetoric** is a form of persuasive expression that is often mistaken for argument. Like argument, rhetoric tries to persuade a reader or listener to accept particular beliefs. But unlike argument, which seeks to do this by appealing to the reader/listener’s critical faculties, rhetoric uses particular words and techniques chosen to appeal to, and manipulate, the emotions. This is not to say that rhetoric is always a bad thing. Historically, it has been employed to great effect for noble purposes. Take for example this excerpt from the ‘I Have A Dream’ speech delivered by Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC in 1963:

*There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights 'When will you be satisfied?' We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating 'For Whites Only'...No, no we are not satisfied, and will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream'.<sup>2</sup>*

In this excerpt we are never presented with an *argument* for African American civil rights. Rather, King uses images of the various injustices visited on African American people combined with repetition, biblical allusion and rhetorically charged language to evoke righteous indignation and incite his audience to action.

Another form of expression that can sometimes be mistaken for argument is **explanation**. Explanations often look very much like arguments. Take, for example, the following:

*The glass is broken because I knocked it off the table.*

If you look closely at this sentence you will see that, like an argument, it contains a belief (the glass is broken) and what appears to be a reason for that belief (because I knocked it off the table). Yet despite the fact it contains (or appears to contain) all the elements of an argument, the way in which those elements fit together makes it something quite different. If you take a second look at the above sentence you will see that what at first appears to be a reason for the belief is in fact an explanation of cause. Thus an explanation differs from an argument in that, rather than a *logical* connection between the premise/s and conclusion there is a *causal* connection.

## ***Analysing Arguments: Identifying Conclusion and Premises***

This of course raises the question of how one recognises an argument from other forms of expression. Although there are no hard and fast rules, perhaps the most straightforward approach is to ask yourself whether or not the arguer is making a claim or advancing an opinion. What is this claim or opinion? Once you have confirmed there is a claim being made or an opinion being proffered you then need to establish if the arguer is supporting this claim or opinion with reasons intended to appeal to the reader/listener's critical faculties. If both these elements are present, chances are you are dealing with an argument.

A good exercise to help you to clarify whether or not an argument is being presented is to try summarising the argument in a single sentence using the following generic structure:

*The author/speaker claims that \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.*

Once you have determined that an argument is being presented, the next step is to identify the argument's premises and conclusion. If you have used the above exercise, chances are you know

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2 <http://www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf> (accessed 15th March 2013)

the conclusion and have some general idea of the premises. If not, start by asking yourself, 'what point is the arguer trying to make?' More often than not, this will be the conclusion.

A common mistake many students make when first learning about argument is to look for the conclusion at the end of a piece of reasoning. It is important to remember that a conclusion can be expressed at any point within an argument, not just within the final words or lines.

Given that conclusions can, and do, appear in a variety of locations, it can often be difficult to distinguish a conclusion from the premises being employed to support it. If you are experiencing this problem, it is often helpful to write down all possible candidates in brief, declarative sentences. This should enable you to see the relationship between the candidates more clearly and, through so doing, identify your conclusion.

Once you have established the argument's conclusion you will then be in a position to identify the argument's premises. This is not always an easy task. Sometimes the premises may be embedded in language that is not part of the argument's structure or they may be **unstated** or **implied**. An unstated or implied premise is a premise assumed or intended by the arguer that is not actually expressed in the argument.

For example:

*John is an unmarried man so John is a bachelor.*

In this unit of reasoning the implied or unstated premise is 'all unmarried men are bachelors.'

Sometimes an unstated or implied premise will take the form of a **conditional**. Conditionals are statements that consist of two parts, which are respectively referred to as the **antecedent** and the **consequent**, and are characteristically expressed as 'if-then' statements.

For example:

*If it's over 38 degrees then the football match will be cancelled.*

Conditionals often appear in **extended arguments** (see pp.30-32) and can be difficult to spot because they appear to simply repeat what the argument expresses explicitly. However, their identification is important, for it allows us to accurately assess whether or not we have good reason to accept an argument.

When trying to work out whether a sentence is a premise or if an argument contains a premise that is implied or unstated, it is useful to ask yourself what premises the argument requires to advance its conclusion. Again, it is a good idea to write down all possible candidates. In the case of unstated or implied premises, a good rule of thumb is to accept only those candidates which a) appear to be clearly implied by the arguer and b) are necessary for the argument to work. What you should not do is contrive a premise simply to prop up the argument.

Something which can help you to recognise and distinguish premises and conclusions are **inference indicators**. Inference indicators are words or phrases which introduce or frame the premises and conclusion and which operate like signals, alerting the reader/listener to the location of the premises and conclusion in the argument. Inference indicators can be divided into two types, **premise indicators** and **conclusion indicators**. Common premise and conclusion indicators include:

Premise indicators	Conclusion indicators
because...	therefore...
since...	thus...
is established by...	hence...
the reason for this is...	it can be concluded that...
for...	consequently...
follows from...	establishes that...
is indicated by...	shows that...
is demonstrated by...	it follows that...
can be inferred from...	so...

Although inference indicators are certainly useful, it is important to note that they are not infallible. Recall the example from above:

*The glass is broken because I knocked it off the table.*

Although the word 'because' is employed within the sentence, it doesn't mean that what follows is a *logical reason* for the fact the glass is broken or that what is being expressed is an argument. Thus it is still important to use discrimination when deciding whether or not something is an argument, a premise, or a conclusion.

## DO

Create a crossword puzzle (you can find free crossword puzzle generators online or you can make one yourself) which includes the following key words:

Argument / premise / conclusion / proposition / rhetoric / explanation / implied premise / conditional / inference indicator.

When your crossword puzzle is completed, swap it for one created by another member of your class. You might also like to share the puzzles your class has created with another class studying philosophy. See if you can complete your classmates' puzzles.





## EXERCISES

1. Indicate which of the following are **arguments**.
  - a. Of course I'm sunburnt. I was standing in the hot sun without sunscreen or a shirt on.
  - b. Karen is a good person because she's always giving money to charity.
  - c. Drugs destroy families and ruin individuals economically, socially and financially. We see evidence of this every day in our cities and streets and in the waiting rooms of charitable organisations. This evil cannot be condoned.
  - d. My phone is no longer working because I accidentally dropped it in the bath.
  - e. I'm pretty sure that Kate is in her bedroom. There are only four rooms in our apartment and she isn't in my room, or the kitchen, or the bathroom, but she's definitely at home.
  - f. Everybody knows that car use is seriously damaging the environment. We should do what we can to protect the environment and reducing car journeys would reduce damage to the environment. So we should use cars less.
2. Answer the following questions in your own words. Work in pairs to generate original examples to clarify the distinctions you have made.
  - a. How does **rhetoric** differ from argument?
  - b. How do **explanations** differ from arguments?
3. Identify the **premises** and **conclusion** of each of the following arguments. Don't forget to include any unstated or implied premises.
  - a. Dan is 32. Susie is four years younger than Dan, so Susie is 28.
  - b. Long showers represent an unnecessary waste of water so we need to stop having long showers.
  - c. I'm going to be hungry by mid-morning because I didn't have breakfast this morning and whenever I don't have breakfast I am always hungry by 10.30 am.
  - d. Good musicians are always practising. Charlie never plays guitar so I doubt Charlie is a good musician.
  - e. There will be more violence in our community because more people are becoming desensitised to violence.
  - f. I know the sun will rise after 6.20am tomorrow because it rose at that time today and at this time of year it always rises progressively later.
  - g. Of course computers can't think. Thinking is a property of the mind and no computer possesses a mind.
  - h. It is obvious that a life of pleasure is a good life because pleasure brings happiness and a happy life is a good life.

- i. Capital punishment is morally wrong because murder is morally wrong.
- j. A genuinely honest person is someone who never tells a lie. Of course, when we look around us we see that no one is like that. Everyone lies at least some of the time. Therefore the whole idea that some people are honest and some are dishonest is ridiculous. No one is genuinely honest.
- k. Criminal behaviour results from the socio-economic conditions into which the criminal is born, so crimes are not the responsibility of those who commit them because the criminal is not responsible for the socio-economic conditions of his or her birth.

## DO

As a class, and using newspapers and magazines to find examples, create a poster that demonstrates the difference between rhetoric, arguments and explanations. Display this poster in your philosophy classroom.



## Standard Form

### *Finding the Key Propositions*

Standard form is a way of re-presenting arguments so as to produce maximum clarity. By stripping away all that is extraneous to a piece of reasoning, standard form provides a clear view of an argument's premises and conclusions, and the relationship between them, and helps to ensure that during the process of **evaluation** (assessing the argument's strengths and weaknesses) we don't lose sight of exactly what the argument is.

When putting an argument into standard form, the first step is to **identify the argument's conclusion and then its premises**. As previously discussed, this is not always easy. Often arguments are surrounded by language that plays no argumentative role but is instead intended to serve as a framework, provide emphasis or increase the argument's persuasive force. Take, for example, the following:

*Last weekend our city streets were again witness to mindless acts of unprovoked violence. The brutal assault of two young men outside a city nightclub shocked even those most hardened to Saturday night excess. What is to be done about this atrocious waste of young lives? How many more tragedies need to occur before something is done to stem the tide of this thuggish behaviour? Like most people I believe this should be the last time such an incident occurs on our streets. I also believe that there is only one way that this will occur – mandatory imprisonment. The threat of prison will teach those who wish to compromise our safety that their behaviour is likely to be paid in kind. No doubt the fear of what happens behind the razor wire will make people think twice before attacking those who are looking for nothing more than an innocent night out.*

In this instance the arguer's conclusion appears to be that mandatory imprisonment should be introduced for violent assault. His/her main reason for this is that if mandatory imprisonment was introduced, then violent assault would disappear. This argument is, however, surrounded by other language which plays no argumentative role. Thus if we wanted to re-present the argument we would need to get rid of all this extraneous material.

To do this requires the capacity to distinguish between what belongs to the argument and what is simply 'window-dressing.' Later on in this Chapter we will be examining some of the different rhetorical ploys authors and speakers use when articulating their viewpoints. You may like to refer to this list to get a clearer idea of how such distinctions can be made.

Once you have decided what belongs to the argument, you then need to find a way to express its parts as clearly and precisely as possible while at the same time remaining faithful to the arguer's apparent intentions. This can be difficult, especially when propositions are implied or unstated (see p.25), **ambiguous** (have more than one possible interpretation in a given context – for example, 'she was looking for a park' could mean she was looking for a space to park her car or a place of recreation) or **vague** (the meaning of the word is indefinite or uncertain). One way of dealing with arguments that contain such propositions is to employ what is known as the **principle of charity**. Essentially the principle of charity states that, when attempting to reconstruct an argument, you should *choose the best possible re-presentation of that argument*. In other words, based on the available evidence (the circumstances in which the argument was produced, the context in which it is embedded, its source and so on), and starting from the presupposition that the arguer is attempting to produce the best possible argument for his/her position, what is the most likely interpretation of the propositions? If you are still in doubt, it is always a good idea to give several reconstructions of the argument, each incorporating a different interpretation of the problematic proposition.

When you are ready to rewrite the argument, you should express each proposition in plain and simple language and remove all inference indicators from the premises and conclusions. There is no need to worry if your wording of propositions is not identical to their expression within the argument. As long as the meaning is accurate and the proposition is articulated in such a way as to produce the maximum degree of clarity, it can be worded however you wish.

## **Standard Form Format**

Once you have all the propositions of the argument tidied into neat, declarative sentences, the next step is to place them into the standard form format. Begin by numbering the premises (P1, P2, etc) and writing them out in order, one beneath another. Under the final premise draw a line. This line is referred to as an **inference bar** and its purpose is to differentiate the steps of argument. Under the inference bar write the conclusion preceded by three dots (:.). These three dots are the traditional symbol for 'therefore.'

Thus the *main* argument from the example above would look like this:

- P1     If mandatory imprisonment for violent assault is introduced,  
          violent assaults will cease.
- P2     Violent assaults need to cease.
- 
- ∴     **Mandatory imprisonment should be introduced.**



As you can see, we are now in a much better position to analyse argument and provide some sort of evaluation.

---

## Extended Arguments

When analysing examples of reasoning, we often discover that what we are examining actually consists of a series of **sub-arguments** that have been chained together to form a whole argument. In such cases, at least one of the premises of the **main argument** (the argument that supports the final conclusion) will also act as a conclusion for a sub-argument and, quite possibly, one or more of the sub-argument's premises will be the conclusion of another sub-argument, and so on. Sub-arguments are important for they enable us to establish whether or not we have good reason to accept the conclusion of the main argument.

The easiest way to re-present an extended argument is to begin by reconstructing the main argument. Once you have worked out its premises and conclusion you can then return to the piece of reasoning and look for further arguments to support the premises.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell which propositions belong to which arguments. As always, the best approach is to write out all possible candidates as this will enable you to see the relationship between propositions and to identify where within the argument implied or unstated premises are occurring.

Once you have identified the main argument and each of the sub-arguments, you will then be in a position to re-present the arguments so as to make explicit their relationship to one another. Outlined below are two alternative approaches for re-presenting extended arguments. For the purposes of clarity both approaches use the following argument:

*More money needs to be spent by the Government on public transport. The reasons for this are simple. When petrol prices increase fewer people use cars and when fewer people use cars more people use trains and buses. Petrol prices are predicted to increase dramatically, thus more people will opt to travel by train or bus. This in turn means more trains and buses will be needed and this will cost money.*

This argument consists of a main argument and two sub-arguments.

### Main argument:

- P1     If more trains and buses are needed the Government needs to spend more money on public transport.
- P2     More trains and buses will be needed.
- 
- ∴     The Government needs to spend more money on public transport.

### Sub-argument 1:

P1 An increase in petrol prices results in fewer people using cars.

P2 When fewer people use cars more people use trains and buses.

---

∴ An increase in petrol prices will result in more people opting to travel by train or bus.

### Sub-argument 2:

P1 Petrol prices are predicted to increase.

P2 An increase in petrol prices results in more people opting to travel by train or bus.

---

∴ More trains and buses will be needed.

One way you might choose to re-present this argument is using a variation of standard form in which **intermediate conclusions** (conclusions which are also premises) are identified numerically. Generally, the conclusion with the highest number is the conclusion of the main argument.

For example:

P1 An increase in petrol prices results in fewer people using cars.

P2 When fewer people use cars more people use trains and buses.

---

**C1 An increase in petrol prices results in more people opting to travel by train or bus.**

P3 Petrol prices are predicted to increase.

---

**C2 More trains and buses will be needed.**

P4 If more trains and buses are needed the Government needs to spend more money on public transport.

---

**C3 The Government needs to spend more money on public transport.**

Another way to re-present an extended argument is to use an **arrow diagram**. In this format intermediate conclusions are indicated using an arrow. As with the above approach, the final conclusion reached is also the conclusion of the main argument.

For example:

An increase in petrol prices results in fewer people using cars.



When fewer people use cars more people use trains and buses.

An increase in petrol prices results in more people opting to travel by train or bus.



Petrol prices are predicted to increase.

More trains and buses will be needed.



If more trains and buses are needed the Government needs to spend more money on public transport.

**The Government needs to spend more money on public transport.**



## EXERCISES

1. Identify the **main argument** contained in each of the following passages.

- a. More than half of all Australians are overweight or obese, diabetes is on the rise and more people are dying of heart disease than ever before. Most people are aware of this and yet they continue to consume highly processed, fatty foods. What, then, is the answer to Australia's growing health crisis? Perhaps our health professionals and politicians should consider the example set by the campaign against smoking and push for health warnings on fast food. Like cigarettes, such food is potentially harmful to human health and surely anything that is harmful to human health should carry some kind of warning. Perhaps in this way we can begin to address what is no doubt one of the greatest problems facing our country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- b. The fashion industry should hang its head in shame. For every luxurious coat paraded on the runway at last night's show, several animals lost their lives. For every pair of calf skin boots an animal was deprived of its adulthood. Surely such unnecessary killing should be stopped. I therefore propose that the fashion industry should cease using fur and hides in both its shows and collections.

2. Write a brief paragraph describing the **principle of charity** in your own words and its role in argument reconstruction.

3. Write out the following arguments in **standard form**. Don't forget to include any unstated or implied premises.
- a. All cats like sardines so Chester will like sardines.
  - b. Skateboards should be banned from our city's streets. Anything that endangers the safety of our citizens should be banned and skateboards cause more accidents than any other vehicle.
  - c. I'd be pretty careful how you speak to Peter today because I reckon he's in a bad mood. I've noticed he's been very quiet and usually when he's quiet like that it means he's in a bad mood.
  - d. Young people should be encouraged to pursue activities that broaden their horizons and enrich their lives. Only activities which provide young people with diverse experiences can broaden their horizons and enrich their lives. Schoolies fails to deliver diverse experiences. So young people should not be encouraged to attend Schoolies.
  - e. Patricia doesn't eat chocolate so it must have been Katherine who ate the last Tim Tam.
  - f. The only way to be happy is to engage in pleasurable experiences. Spending time with good friends is always pleasurable. Thus the key to happiness is to spend time with good friends.
  - g. To live a good life it is important to make peace with the past. Counselling enables us to revisit and make peace with the past. Therefore it is the first step towards a good life.
  - h. The school fete has definitely been cancelled. The principal said if it rained on the morning the fete was scheduled it would be cancelled and its been raining since daybreak.
  - i. Celia is wearing the yellow dress so Tania must be wearing the blue dress. There are only three dresses and I have the pink one.
  - j. Rob isn't a vegetarian. He had sausages for dinner on Friday.
  - k. There is no way I am going to sleep tonight. I've just had two cups of coffee right before bed and whenever I drink coffee right before bed I always have trouble falling asleep.
  - l. No matter what people say, money is essential for a happy life. If we have money we are able to buy the things we need. Having things we need makes our lives more comfortable and surely comfort is essential for a happy life.
  - m. Of course Louise did the wrong thing when she took David's laptop without asking. Taking someone's property without his or her permission is stealing.

4. Write out the following **extended arguments** using either of the argument formats explained on pages 30-32.
- a. When you think about it, the whole idea of war is a strange one. In our society murder is considered wrong but in the theatre of war people are allowed to kill without any personal motivation. Thus war sanctions killing 'in cold blood.' Most people would agree that to sanction killing in cold blood is to sanction murder. War must therefore be wrong.
  - b. I believe kitchen garden programs should be introduced into all primary schools. The reasons for this are simple. Our health care system is under-resourced and there are no signs that this will change in the future. It is well known that a rise in health problems in later life produces a significant strain on our medical resources. Thus we need to decrease the incidence of health problems in later life. Now studies have shown a direct correlation between childhood obesity and health problems in later life. However, studies have also shown that kitchen garden programs in schools decrease the incidences of childhood obesity significantly. Obviously it is necessary to decrease the incidences of childhood obesity, hence my proposal.
  - c. Although various arguments have been proposed against the idea of animal rights, a close examination of the grounds on which these arguments are founded very quickly reveals their flawed nature. According to the findings of biological science, animals, like humans, have a developed nervous system. This also means that, like humans, animals have the capacity to feel pain because anything with a developed nervous system has this capacity. Most of us would agree that anything that has the capacity to feel pain should be given rights, so why shouldn't animals?
  - d. We are here to argue for the immediate closure of Australia's detention centres. When an individual's mental and physical health is compromised, their wellbeing is jeopardised. As everyone knows, high levels of anxiety compromise mental and physical health, thus high levels of anxiety jeopardise an individual's wellbeing. In Australia's detention centres many inmates exhibit high levels of anxiety, suggesting that detention centres are jeopardising inmates' wellbeing and, as I am sure you will agree, any institution which is jeopardising the wellbeing of those incarcerated within it needs to be shut down.
  - e. What we refer to as the mind is not some intangible spiritual substance as some have claimed, but the mental phenomena generated by the physical processes of the brain. This truth has been clearly demonstrated by science, which holds this view. While some might doubt the authority of science it will be admitted that science uses physical evidence to support its claims and physical evidence is far superior to, for example, religious revelation or intuition. For this reason it is time we broke free of the shackles of superstition and accepted that this thing we have revered for so long is nothing more (and nothing less) than the brain and its processes.



## DO

In pairs, construct five arguments (three or four simple arguments and one or two extended arguments) in standard form. Rewrite each argument as a paragraph of reasoning and exchange these rewritten arguments with another pair from your class. You can then practise standard form using these arguments.

## Other Tools for Understanding Argument

Throughout your study of philosophy you will encounter a variety of argument types and techniques. Outlined below are some of the types and techniques that you are likely to come across.

### **Arguments to the Best Explanation**

**Arguments to the best explanation** are **inductive arguments** (see p.42) which commence with premises that describe particular facts and conclude with a hypothesis which, if true, would explain those facts.

For example:

*The laundry is no longer on the washing line. Collette is staying at a friend's house so it is unlikely that she brought the laundry in and Louise never brings the laundry in because she worries that our washing powder will cause her hands to itch, so it must have been Patrick who brought the laundry in.*

Such arguments are called arguments to the best explanation because their aim is to produce, from a set of alternative explanations, the best possible explanation for a given phenomenon.

To decide what constitutes the best possible explanation, philosophers have developed a set of three guiding principles that may be expressed as questions:

1. Is the chosen explanation the least complicated? In other words, how little does the explanation require us to speculate beyond the given evidence?
2. Does the explanation cohere with what we already know?
3. Is the explanation comprehensive? In other words, does it explain more than other possible explanations?

Of course arguments to the best explanation do not always provide the *correct* explanation, but this shouldn't condemn them. After all, many of the questions explored in philosophy have no definitive answer but instead gesture towards a variety of different possibilities.

## READ



In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see *Useful Resources*), Aristotle uses argument to the best explanation to arrive at several of his conclusions. Read Book I, Chapter 7 and Book II, Chapter 5 of this text and try to identify these arguments. Once you have identified these arguments put them into standard form. Share your work with a classmate.

## **Reductio Ad Absurdum**

**Reductio ad absurdum** is an argumentative technique where the arguer argues from a set of premises to the logical consequences of those premises to demonstrate the inaccuracy or absurdity of a particular position. Plato (Famous Philosopher File pp.93-94) is particularly noted for his use of reductio ad absurdum. In the *Gorgias*, for example, he uses the technique to demonstrate the absurdity of Callicles' claim that cleverer people should have more by showing that such a position would entail, among other things, that doctors should have more food and drink than anyone else and that cobblers should have more shoes.

Reductio ad absurdum is a useful technique to understand, not only because you are bound to come across it during your studies, but also because it effectively demonstrates when a position needs to either be discarded or revised.

## READ



Read the example from Plato's *Gorgias* (489c-491b – see *Useful Resources*) described above. Briefly summarise this argument in your workbook. In pairs, construct your own reductio ad absurdum argument and share with the class.

## **Transcendental Arguments**

In one of the most famous arguments in philosophy, the 17th century philosopher, Rene Descartes (Famous Philosopher File p.102), argues from the fact that he can doubt to the fact of his own existence. By reasoning from the facts of experience to what must be true in order to make such experience possible, Descartes produces what is termed a **transcendental argument**.

Transcendental arguments are often employed in response to scepticism and its defining question – 'but how do we *know*?' They suffer from some limitations and provide no guarantee that a particular conclusion is true. However, because they start with the facts of experience and not from any assumptions about those experiences, they remain an extremely persuasive argumentative tool.



## DO

In small groups, and using online resources such as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>) or the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy ([www.iep.utm.edu/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/)), find one or two examples of transcendental arguments. Discuss these examples in your group (you may require some help from your teacher to understand them). When you have arrived at an understanding of the argument, explain the argument to your class. Write your own example, plus an example from another group, in your workbook.

## Analogies

In the *Republic*, Plato (via the character of Socrates) describes his concept of the Good by comparing it to the sun: just as the sun illuminates the objects of the visible realm and thereby permits us to see, for example, plants and flowers, the Good illuminates the objects of the intelligible realm, allowing us to 'see' knowledge. This is a particularly powerful example of the use of **analogy** in philosophy.

Philosophers use analogies (extended comparisons between like things) to make abstract or difficult concepts comprehensible. By constructing a link between the given concept and something more readily understood, analogies allow us to use our imaginations to make sense of difficult ideas. Philosophers also use analogies when constructing arguments (**argument by analogy**). Such arguments operate according to the supposition that, because two things share a certain property or are *analogous* and because a certain additional property is true of one of these things, it is also true of another. For example:

P1     The Good is like the sun.

P2     The sun permits us to see the objects in the visible realm.

---

∴     The Good permits us to see objects in the intelligible realm.

Yet, despite the value of analogies, they can also be problematic. Unless the things compared share a large number of relevant similarities (and a small number of relevant differences) the analogy may be considered a **weak analogy**, in which case it can either render an argument fallacious (by relying on the false belief that two things that share some similarities are similar in all respects) or fail to illuminate a given concept.





## DO

Perhaps the most famous example of analogy in philosophy is Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which appears in the *Republic* (514a-517a – see *Useful Resources*). Read the analogy as a whole class or watch one of the many short film versions, such as 'The Cave: An Adaptation of Plato's Allegory in Clay,' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69F7GhASODM>) available from YouTube. Afterwards, research the analogy and write a brief description of it (including what it is an analogy for), accompanied by a diagram, in your workbooks.

## Thought Experiments

**Thought experiments** are imagined scenarios or situations created by philosophers to test ideas, explore the boundaries of concepts or examine the implications of theories. By isolating the essential elements of particular problems and removing them from their everyday context, thought experiments allow us to focus on the real issues, unencumbered by the tangle of variables which can often confuse us.

Although they are not without controversy – some philosophers have criticised thought experiments as an inadequate method for doing philosophy – there are plenty of well-known examples that you are likely to come across during your studies. These include the **Ship of Theseus**, Hilary Putnam's **Brain-in-a-Vat** (p.290), John Searle's **Chinese Room** (p.160), Robert Nozick's **Experience Machine** (p.410) and Judith Jarvis Thomson's **Violinist**.

When first encountering a thought experiment you may be tempted to describe it as ludicrous – after all, they invite us to consider scenarios that are sometimes outlandish – but such a judgment misses the point of the experiment. Thought experiments don't pretend to describe real life. Rather they are a tool to help us engage with the essence of a problem and to think about it both critically and imaginatively.



## DO

In pairs, research a famous thought experiment from philosophy. For example:

- Philippa Foot's **Trolley Problem**
- John Rawl's **Original Position**
- Hilary Putnam's **Twin Earth Experiment**
- Edmund Gettier's **Gettier Problem**
- Frank Jackson's **Mary the Neuroscientist (Mary's Room)**
- John Harris' **The Survival Lottery**
- Donald Davidson's **Swampman**
- Robert Nozick's **Utility Monster**

You may also choose to research one of the examples identified in the description above this text box.

Share your thought experiment with the class. You may also like to discuss a selection of these thought experiments together or in small groups.

## Useful Fictions

A sub-species of the thought experiment, **useful fictions** are imagined objects or entities which philosophers create to help explain concepts or investigate the consequences of particular ways of being. A well-known example of a useful fiction – and one that you may come across during your studies – is Friedrich Nietzsche's *Übermensch* ('over man').

Like all useful fictions, the *Übermensch* has no existence independent of Nietzsche's philosophy. Nor is it necessarily a prescription for something that should be brought into the world. Rather it is an ideal created by Nietzsche to illustrate his notion of a fully realised human being.

Useful fictions are useful in the sense that they provide us with a tool to consider not only particular theories and their consequences, but the nature of the world and ourselves, why it and we are the way we are, and how both could be improved. However, it is important to remember that useful fictions are *fictions* and as such, should not be mistaken for facts.

## DO

Research Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. What more can be inferred from this research about the purpose of useful fictions in philosophy?



## WRITE

In your own words, construct a glossary that includes definitions of each of the tools described in the above section.



## Evaluating Arguments

Once you have grasped the art of re-presenting arguments, you will be ready to start evaluation. The purpose of evaluation is to decide whether or not there are sufficient grounds for accepting a particular conclusion. In philosophy there are two main reasons we might reject an argument: either the reasoning is faulty (in other words, the relationship between the premises and the conclusion isn't working) or at least one of the premises is false. To clarify, think of an argument as like a receipt from a restaurant. If I want to assess whether or not the final charge is correct, I can do so in either of two ways. I can check that the bill has been added up correctly or I can check that the listed items are indeed the ones I purchased. What I can't do is reject the total on the grounds that I don't like how the bill is phrased, or because the waiter is rude, or because I think calling eggplants aubergines is pretentious. So it is with arguments.

### **Logical Assessment: Validity and Cogency**

**Validity** and **cogency** are terms used to describe the relationship between an argument's premises and its conclusion. When a conclusion logically follows on from a particular set of premises we describe that argument as valid or cogent. Which term we employ in a given situation is not arbitrary but dependent on the kind of argument we are assessing<sup>3</sup>.

### **DEDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS AND VALIDITY**

If we are assessing an argument that provides *maximum support* for its conclusion (in other words, where it would be impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false), we describe that argument as valid. Validity is a property of well-formed **deductive arguments**. Deductive arguments are arguments where the conclusion is presented as following on from the premises *necessarily*.

For example:

P1 All unmarried men are bachelors.

P2 John is an unmarried man.

---

∴ John is a bachelor.

3 Although a valid argument may be described as cogent, inductive arguments cannot be described as valid because inductive arguments by their nature cannot be valid.

In this example, the conclusion ‘John is a bachelor’ may be described as following on from the premises necessarily, for, if the premises are true, then it would be impossible for the conclusion to be false. We might also describe the conclusion as **entailed**<sup>4</sup> by the premises, for the conclusion in this particular argument is a valid deduction: in other words, the argument is a valid, deductive argument.

This is also a valid, deductive argument:

P1	All unicorns are spicy.
P2	Philip is a unicorn.
<hr/>	
∴	Philip is spicy.

You may be wondering how such an argument could be regarded as comparable to the first. Unicorns don’t exist and even if they did it is questionable whether they would be spicy or called Philip. However if we disregard the *content* of the argument and concentrate only on its *structure*, we can see that it is exactly the same as the first:

P1	All Xs are Ys.
P2	Z is an X.
<hr/>	
∴	Z is a Y.

Therefore, if unicorns did exist and were spicy, and one of them was called Philip, Philip would *necessarily* be spicy. Validity, then, is a judgment relating to the structure of an argument, not to its content.

This may of course invite the question as to why we need to bother with validity – after all, a valid argument may also be, as the previous example illustrates, entirely ridiculous. However, it should be remembered that just because an arguer’s reasons for a belief are good, this is no guarantee that the conclusion they have arrived at should be accepted.

Take, for example, the following:

P1	All vodka contains alcohol.
P2	This bottle contains alcohol.
<hr/>	
∴	This bottle contains vodka.

---

4 This is a general understanding of **entailment**. A more technical definition would require not only that the premises entail the conclusion, but also that there is a logical connection between the premises. For the purposes of this course the more general definition is probably sufficient.

At first glance it would appear we have excellent reasons for accepting this conclusion: it may very well be true that the particular bottle contains alcohol and it is certainly true that all vodka contains alcohol. But look a little closer. Even if it is true that the bottle contains alcohol, this is no guarantee that it contains vodka. Perhaps it contains wine or gin or rum or even methylated spirits. Thus despite the fact we have been given good reasons to accept the conclusion, it doesn't mean that we *should* accept the conclusion.

This is what is termed an **invalid** argument. Like valid arguments, invalid arguments often cohere to a particular structure. For example:

P1 All Xs are Ys.

P2 Z is a Y.

---

∴ Z is an X.

Invalid arguments can be tricky because, unlike valid arguments where true premises guarantee true conclusions, invalid arguments can have true premises and a true or false conclusion or false premises and a true or false conclusion. To illustrate, reconsider the above argument. While the premises do not guarantee that the bottle will contain vodka, the bottle may actually contain vodka. This doesn't mean that I have been presented with a good argument (or a valid argument – the conclusion, although correct, does not follow necessarily from the premises), only that the arguer has somehow managed to alight on the correct conclusion.

## INDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS AND COGENCY

Sometimes when assessing arguments you will notice that, rather than providing maximum support for the conclusion, the premises instead provide good reason to expect that the conclusion is true rather than false.

For example:

P1 I am often tired all day when I get less than five hours sleep at night.

P2 Last night I got less than five hours sleep.

---

∴ I will be tired all day.

In this example the conclusion 'I will be tired all day' is not inescapable – the day in question may prove an exception to the rule and I may be full of energy – but, given the premises, I have good reason to believe it is most probably correct.

Arguments in which the conclusion follows on from the premises not with necessity but with **probability** are called **inductive arguments**. Inductive arguments can take a variety of forms. Often, like the argument above, they will take the form of **inductive generalisations** which generalise from a series of samples to an individual case, or to all cases, or from a series of samples to a whole class. They may also appear as **analogies**, rules of thumb or **arguments to the best explanation**.

Cogency relates to inductive arguments. Whether or not an inductive argument is cogent will depend on how well the premises support the conclusion. Thus, unlike validity, cogency is a matter of degree. An inductive argument may be clearly cogent, weakly cogent or not cogent at all.

An inductive argument in which the premises give strong support to the conclusion (the argument is clearly cogent) may be described as **inductively strong** or **inductively forceful**. To assess whether an argument is inductively strong we need to ask ourselves if, given no other information except for that which is contained in the premises, it would be more reasonable to expect that the conclusion is true rather than false. Thus we might describe the above argument as an example of an inductively strong argument.

Inductive reasoning can also be used to help us reconsider the value of poorly formed deductive arguments. A poorly formed deductive argument, although failing the test of validity, may still be a strong inductive argument depending on the information contained in the premises. If the premises provide good reason for accepting the conclusion as true, then despite the fact that the premises do not provide maximum support for the conclusion, the argument is still of value.

For example:

P1 Some dogs enjoy fetching sticks.

P2 This is a dog.

---

∴ This dog will enjoy fetching sticks.

This is not a well-formed deductive argument but it may be a strong inductive argument if by 'some' the arguer means 9 out of 10 dogs and if the conclusion is interpreted to mean 'this dog will *probably* enjoy fetching sticks.' Obviously whether or not the argument should be interpreted in this way will be largely dependent on the extent to which we can fairly employ the principle of charity. Even if such an interpretation is excessively charitable it is still worthwhile as it allows us to understand both the problems with the original argument and how it could be improved.

## ***Factual Assessment: Truth***

### **TRUTH OF PREMISES AND CONCLUSIONS**

So far we have concentrated on the logic of arguments. Judgments of validity and cogency are, however, only one aspect of argument evaluation. Of equal importance is the truth of the premises. Unless the premises are true we cannot be said to have good grounds for accepting the argument – even if the argument is inductively strong or deductively valid.

Like most terms philosophers use when discussing arguments, the term 'truth' has a narrow and precise meaning. Quite simply, truth (and falsity) is a property of statements. Therefore *only* propositions (premises and conclusions) may be described as true, never arguments.

To assess whether a premise or conclusion is true or false we can take one of two approaches: we can ask ourselves what evidence there is to support the belief expressed in the premise/conclusion, or we can ask ourselves what evidence there is against the belief. Which approach we choose will be largely dependent on how the premise/conclusion has been expressed.

For example:

- P1 Most secondary schools in Victoria teach Literature.  
P2 The school down the street is a secondary school.
- 
- ∴ The school down the street probably teaches Literature.

If I wanted to assess the truth of these premises I might walk down the street and check the school's signage (premise 2), then do an internet search of subjects taught across Victorian secondary schools (premise 1). But consider the following:

- P1 All bread contains yeast.  
P2 These snacks are made with bread.
- 
- ∴ These snacks contain yeast.

While the truth of the second premise could be assessed in the same way as the second premise of the previous argument, by, for example, reading the ingredients list on the package, the first premise could not. To do so would require a comprehensive study of all breads ever produced. Thus it would make more sense to establish what evidence there is against the premise.

One of the easiest ways to do this is by looking for what is termed a **counter-example**. Counter-examples are exceptions to generalisations used to challenge the truth of a generalising statement. So, in response to the premise 'all breads contain yeast', I may raise the counter-example of mountain bread or damper, as both are breads that don't contain yeast and both therefore demonstrate that not all breads contain yeast.

## **SPEAKER-RELATIVE PROPOSITIONS**

Sometimes, when students first start doing philosophy, they find the idea of describing a premise/conclusion as either true or false problematic. Many of us are taught that all truth is **relative** – in other words, that what is true is simply a matter of personal opinion. In some instances this is clearly not the case; to say Melbourne is the capital city of Victoria, for example, is to assert an objective fact. To establish its truth I need only look at a map of Victoria. This is what we might describe as a **non speaker-relative** proposition as the factual status of the proposition is independent of the speaker asserting it. But many propositions are not this clear-cut. Consider the following:

- I believe that tarot cards can predict the future.
- Tarot cards can predict the future.
- It is more fun to try to predict the future using tarot cards than by reading palms.
- I think it's more fun to try to predict the future using tarot cards than by reading palms.

The first two propositions seem very different. The first appears to assert a personal belief whereas the second seems akin to the proposition 'Melbourne is the capital city of Victoria.' But if we think about it a little more we will see that they are exactly the same. To say 'I believe that tarot cards can predict the future' is really the same as saying 'tarot cards *can* predict the future.' Thus both propositions are non speaker-relative propositions and can be assessed accordingly, despite the fact the first commences with the words 'I believe.'

The second two propositions, however, are different. Each expresses a *preference* for tarot cards over palmistry, the first by asserting an apparently apersonal belief, the second by attaching a personal pronoun to that belief. Yet although these propositions are different from the first two, they are not different from each other. Both are what we might call **speaker-relative** propositions. Speaker-relative propositions are propositions that express, either implicitly (like the first) or explicitly (like the second), preferences or attitudes relative to the individual who asserts them. In other words, they are about the individual, not about the world.

Despite the apparent and actual differences between each of these propositions, all of them can be assessed in terms of truth and falsity. In the case of the first two propositions I can read studies and perhaps do some experiments as a way of deciding whether or not the assertion that tarot cards can predict the future is true or false, or is more likely to be true rather than false. In the case of the second I need simply refer to my own preferences or the preferences of the individual making the assertion to work out whether the assertion is true or false.

Where the propositions differ is in terms of their capacity to be the object of genuine debate. Because the first two propositions make a claim, not about individual preference but about the state of things, I can critically discuss the truth of the claim by, for example, citing studies or discussing the logical and philosophical conundrums of predicting the future. But because the third and fourth propositions are about personal preference the most I can do is respond by expressing my own personal preference. I cannot genuinely debate the issue because to do so would be to argue that someone doesn't believe something when they clearly state they do.

## ASSESSING VAGUE PREMISES

Another problem that can hinder our ability to evaluate arguments is the problem of **vagueness**. Vagueness occurs when the wording of a proposition makes it difficult to assess its precise meaning.

For example:

*Some bands at the festival will be performing hip hop.*

By using the quantifier 'some,' the arguer has made it difficult to ascertain just what proportion of bands are performing hip hop and what proportion are, for example, performing funk or pop. While this might not, in itself, appear to be much of an issue (surely I need only establish more than one band is performing hip hop to declare the premise true), consider the following:

- P1     Some bands at the festival will be performing hip hop.  
P2     My friend's band is performing at the festival.

---

∴     My friend's band will be performing hip hop.

If by 'some' the arguer means 7 out of 10 bands will be performing hip hop, then the argument could be declared inductively strong, for, given the odds, it is quite probable that her friend will be performing hip hop. But if by some she means two or three bands on a bill of 20 then the argument is quite weak.



This example highlights the significance of seeking out evidence to establish the truth or falsity of a given proposition. By seeking out such evidence, we are not only better positioned to assess the truth of the premises, but whether or not the argument is working as a whole.

## THE STRONGEST ARGUMENTS: SOUNDNESS

When an argument has true premises *and* is valid/cogent we describe that argument as **sound**. To be sound, an argument must fulfill both these criteria. Thus an argument cannot be ‘sort of’ or ‘kind of’ sound. It is either sound or **unsound**.



### EXERCISES

1. Write a short paragraph describing in your own words the difference between **deductive** and **inductive arguments**.
2. Write out the following arguments in **standard form**. For each argument, indicate whether it is **valid**, **invalid**, **inductively forceful** (clearly cogent), **weakly cogent** or **not cogent** and why. You may find there is more than one reasonable answer. If this is the case, indicate why.
  - a. Kendrick Lamar is a singer. Since all singers are musicians it follows that Kendrick Lamar is a musician.
  - b. Of course Natasha speaks English. She’s from New York and most Americans speak English.
  - c. Jamie is definitely a woman because I know Jamie is a mother.
  - d. When I drink more than two cups of tea before bed I usually wake up in the night. This evening I had three cups of tea so I will probably wake up at some point in the night.
  - e. It’s been raining. The streets are wet and if the streets are wet it’s been raining.
  - f. Most children who go without breakfast have trouble concentrating at school in the morning. Peter is very focused this morning so Peter must have had breakfast.
  - g. Three weeks ago when I made lemon meringue pie, the price of lemons was \$6.50 per kilo. Today I am making lemon meringue pie so the price of lemons is sure to be \$6.50 per kg.
  - h. Jacob is a member of the choir. Everyone who is in the choir can’t attend dance practice on Tuesday and Jacob is not able to attend dance practice on Tuesday.
  - i. Marisa goes to the grammar school down the street. All students who attend that school wear a blue blazer and Marisa wears a blue blazer.
  - j. If I do more homework then I’ll probably get a better mark in English. If I quit my part-time job then I’d probably do more homework. So I should probably quit my part-time job if I want to do better in English.

- k. Casey doesn't live in Bendigo because she doesn't live in Victoria.
  - l. Melburnians are well known for their love of coffee. Georgia is from Melbourne so Georgia will probably love coffee.
  - m. Sometimes, when the sky is overcast, I need to take an overcoat to work. This morning the sky is overcast so I will definitely need to take an overcoat to work.
  - n. Only vegetarians like broccoli. Phoebe likes broccoli so Phoebe is a vegetarian.
  - o. Someone has walked clay all through the house. Robert works for a potter so it's probably Robert who walked clay all through the house.
  - p. If there has been an accident then the train will be late. The train is late so there must have been an accident.
  - q. If school has returned for the year then there will be a lot of traffic on the roads. School has not yet returned for the year so there will not be a lot of traffic on the roads.
  - r. Most left-handed people are quite artistic so it is likely that Patricia is artistic.
  - s. Everyone who is going to the party is preparing a plate of food. Katherine was preparing a plate of food when I left the house so Katherine is going to the party.
  - t. If every person has the right to determine what happens to their body then euthanasia would be legal. Euthanasia is not legal so clearly no one has the right to determine what happens to their body.
3. The following arguments each contain one or more false or questionable premises. Write out the arguments in standard form. Identify the false/questionable premise/s and find a **counter-example** for each of them.
- a. I'm sure Henry's new pet can fly. All birds can fly.
  - b. Florence will never be a great artist. Everybody knows that, although women can be great muses, they can never be great artists. After all, all great artists – painters, writers, musicians – are men.
  - c. No one has proven that UFOs exist so clearly UFOs don't exist.
  - d. Katherine won't want cheese on her pasta. She's a vegetarian and vegetarians don't eat cheese.
  - e. No matter what people say money can make us happy. If we have money we are able to buy the things we need. Having what we need makes our lives more comfortable and surely comfort is essential for a happy life.
  - f. The star of the new action movie will definitely be a man because female actors never star in action movies.

- g. Whatever she may think, Sara's behaviour is motivated by self-interest because all human behaviour is motivated by self-interest.
  - h. It's OK not to take a present to Dan's birthday party. After all, there's no law that says you have to take presents to birthday parties and if there is no law against it then it's not wrong.
  - i. Of course I have free will. Whether we want to believe it or not, every human action is free.
4. Answer the following questions in your own words:
- a. What is the difference between a **speaker-relative** and a **non-speaker-relative** proposition? Give an example of each.
  - b. What does it mean for an argument to be **sound**?

## WRITE

Together with a partner, write a five-minute dialogue between two characters – one who is presenting an argument and one who is evaluating it – that employs the techniques for argument evaluation described in this section. Your dialogue should begin with an argument (for example, 'we cannot condemn the young woman for her criminal behaviour because no human action is free') and then proceed to evaluate the argument. You may like to include a second or third argument to support the first and extend the dialogue. When you have completed your dialogue perform it for the class.



## Thinking about Judgments: Cognitive Biases

One of the most important skills you can learn in philosophy is how to recognise instances of good and bad reasoning. Concepts such as truth, validity, cogency, soundness and unsoundness are all indispensable tools for helping us to do this. However, it is also important to have some understanding of the *psychology* of judgment – in other words, of how ourselves and others arrive at particular judgments. Through understanding the psychology of judgment, we are better placed to make decisions regarding the acceptability of evidence and the strength of arguments. We are also better placed to reflect on and understand our own reasoning, and so become better thinkers.

**Cognitive biases** are common errors of judgment that people are prone to make in particular situations. These errors arise from the various shortcuts our mind takes to simplify and speed up the process of decision-making and judgment. While these shortcuts can be beneficial in that they allow us to make quick decisions and ease the cognitive strain placed on us by effortful mental activity, they can also lead us to accept arguments or explanations on insufficient grounds by undermining or distorting our reasoning. Rather than accepting the best or most logical argument or explanation, cognitive biases instead lead us to accept what is most intuitively appealing or what best conforms to our own views, values and preoccupations.

The idea of cognitive bias was first introduced by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in 1972 and grew out of their observations of the limitations of intuitive reasoning. Psychologists, including Kahneman (who would later win the Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences) and Tversky, have since identified dozens of these biases affecting a range of mental processes relating to judgment.

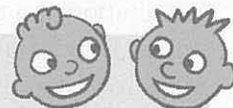
Outlined below are some common cognitive biases that may prove useful in your study of philosophy.

## **Confirmation Bias**

The **confirmation bias** refers to our natural tendency to accept arguments or explanations that conform to, or confirm, our existing beliefs or hypotheses. Examples of behaviour indicative of the confirmation bias include seeking out information that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs (for example, by reading news sources that reflect one's political views, or selecting data that confirms one's hypothesis) and then using this information as proof of one's beliefs, or interpreting information that is vague or ambiguous as supporting one's beliefs. The confirmation bias is dangerous because it persuades us to accept conclusions based on questionable evidence and, through so doing, cultivates over-confidence in the 'truth' of our own beliefs.

### **DISCUSS**

Consider recent discussions you have had in your Philosophy class. Are there times when your responses and arguments have been influenced by the confirmation bias? When? In what situations are you most susceptible to this bias?

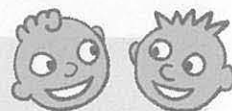


## **Gambler's Fallacy**

The **gambler's fallacy** is a cognitive bias that many people may recognise even if they do not know it by name. Imagine that you and a friend are engaged in a coin toss. This coin toss began in the usual way – 'heads or tails?' – but after your friend has accurately called heads twice you request 'best out of five.' Why? Because you believe that with a few more coin tosses it is likely that tails will have to appear. This, however, is fallacious reasoning that arises from our tendency to judge probability by reflecting on what has happened in the past and considering how similar the present event is to that memory. In actual fact, unless you are planning to toss the coin hundreds of times, in which case variation is to be expected simply by right of the fact that bigger samples increase the likelihood of variation, the probability of heads appearing is no different from that of tails – both are equally likely.

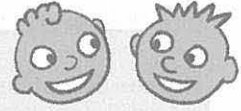
### **DISCUSS**

What are some examples of situations where we might see the gambler's fallacy used in argument? In light of these examples, why do you think the gambler's fallacy is considered so problematic?



## Predictable World Bias

At some time or another you have probably heard the sayings: ‘all bad things happen in threes,’ ‘what goes around comes around,’ or ‘everything happens for a reason.’ Perhaps you have even felt a shiver of foreboding after two ‘bad things’ have happened consecutively. If so, you have fallen prey to the **predictable world bias**. The predictable world bias refers to our tendency to perceive order where none has been proven to exist. While it is most obviously exhibited in superstition, we can also see it in other ways we try to understand the world; for example, both science and religion have at times used the presupposition of apparent order to support various beliefs.



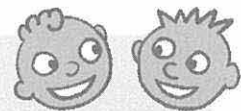
### DISCUSS

What are some examples of conclusions about the world that exhibit the predictable world bias? Considering these examples, in what kinds of argumentative situations do we need to be particularly vigilant for the predictable world bias?

## Attribution Bias

‘Attribution’ is a term used in psychology to refer to our reasoning from behaviour or events to causes. For example, if I notice that the chocolate biscuit I left on the kitchen table when I went out of the room has disappeared on my return, I might attribute its disappearance to my brother, who appears to be avoiding eye contact while loitering in the kitchen. While attribution is a typical process we use to make sense of the world (and missing biscuits), it can also lure us to flawed judgments.

**Attribution biases** are a collection of common errors people make when reasoning from events or behaviours to causes. Perhaps the most common of these errors is the **fundamental attribution error** or correspondence bias, whereby individuals tend to over-emphasise personality or dispositional explanations for behaviour or events and under-emphasise situational explanations. For example, rather than attribute my brother’s pilfering of my chocolate biscuit to the fact he is hungry and the biscuit is the last snack in the house, I may instead attribute it to the fact he is shifty and greedy. My brother, on the other hand, may excuse his thievery by arguing that I had left the biscuit on the table unguarded and ignore the fact that he was just too lazy to look in the cupboard for something else. In doing this, my brother has also fallen prey to another form of the attribution bias: the **actor-observer bias**. This occurs when the individual over-estimates the role of situational explanations for their *own* behaviour and under-estimates dispositional explanations.



### DISCUSS

What are some other examples of the attribution bias that you have observed in every day life?

## Availability Heuristic

The **availability heuristic** refers to our tendency to gauge the probability of certain things happening according to how readily we can think of examples of those things. For example, we might conclude that there is a high likelihood of being killed by a shark off the coast of Western Australia because we can recall three incidences of shark attacks in the area over the last summer. Or we might worry that it's becoming more dangerous to walk home from school because the idea of walking home from school immediately incites a memory about a fairly recent kidnapping. Statistically speaking, however, such events are extremely unlikely. The reason we believe they are more likely is because similar events have stuck in our memory – perhaps because they were very recent or particularly unusual or because they aroused us emotionally – and are therefore more easily recalled.

The availability heuristic can also explain the development of certain collective beliefs. For example, thanks to heightened coverage in the media and public awareness campaigns, the perceived threat from a particular disease may be elevated in the public's imagination. This results in increased public pressure for funds to be diverted to medical research to find appropriate treatments or cures for the disease. However, the disease might pose less threat to human health than other diseases that have not attracted the media's eye. This phenomenon is known as an **availability cascade** and has affected many aspects of public discourse, from our views regarding particular diseases to the significance we attach to the threat of terrorism.

The availability heuristic is significant because it reminds us of the importance of checking factual claims against research and statistics, rather than simply accepting them because 'they sound correct.'



### DO

Consider the following statements.

- Australian women are more likely to die of breast cancer than any other kind of cancer.
- Men are far more likely than women to die in fatalities on Australian roads.
- There are fewer teenage mothers now than there were 10 years ago in Australia.
- Smoking is more prevalent among teenagers than any other age group in Australia.
- Australians only have a very small risk of being killed by a shark or dying in a bushfire.
- Marriage rates are lower than they were 15 years ago.
- Violent attacks have significantly increased in the city of Melbourne in the last five years.

Record your responses to these statements. Then, using a statistics website (for example the Australian Bureau of Statistics: [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)), check the accuracy of your responses. Discuss the results of this experiment as a class.

## Belief Bias

The **belief bias** occurs when we accept or reject an argument according to whether the conclusion is consistent with our own beliefs or is more believable rather than less believable, rather than on the strength of the argument's logic.

### THINK

During your study of philosophy, have you accepted or rejected, or have you been tempted to accept or reject, an argument on the grounds that the conclusion did not accord with your own beliefs?



## Framing Effect

The **framing effect** describes the phenomenon of drawing different conclusions from the same information depending on how (or by whom) the information is presented. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky demonstrated the framing effect using a thought experiment that described a deadly disease affecting 600 people and two treatments for the disease: Treatment A would result in a death rate of 400 people and with Treatment B there was a 33% chance no one would die and a 66% chance everyone would die. Kahneman and Tversky framed these statistics to the participants in their experiment in two ways:

### Treatment A

1. Will save 200 lives
2. 400 people will die

### Treatment B

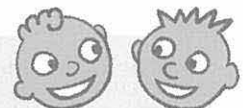
1. 33% chance of saving all 600 lives but a 66% chance of saving no one
2. 33% chance no one will die, 66% chance everyone will die

When asked what treatment they would choose, 72% of participants chose Treatment A when it was framed positively ('200 lives') whereas only 22% of participants chose the same option when it was framed negatively ('400 will die'). This experiment has since been replicated using different examples but with the same results, demonstrating our tendency to accept information if it is framed positively rather than negatively.

The framing effect is a pertinent reminder to always consider the real reasons we are accepting or rejecting a piece of information – is it because of the information or is it because of the way the information is presented to us?

### DISCUSS

In what kinds of situations might people be particularly vulnerable to the framing effect? What does this demonstrate about its possible dangers?





## DO

As a class and using a web-based tool such as Google Sites, create a glossary of cognitive biases. Include the cognitive biases that you have been introduced to in this section as well as other biases that may be of use to your studies. Examples of such biases that may be useful to add to your web page/wiki include:

- Attentional bias
- Anchoring
- Expectation bias
- False consensus effect
- Bandwagon effect
- Hindsight bias
- Bias blindspot
- Illusionary correlation
- Empathy gap
- Just world hypothesis
- Selective perception
- Overconfidence effect
- Texas sharpshooter fallacy
- Dunning-Kruger effect

Use your web page/wiki as a class reference throughout your study of philosophy.

---

## Further Tools for Evaluating Arguments: Fallacies

During your evaluative encounters with arguments you may have noticed that certain flaws seem to re-occur. Outlined below are some common errors in reasoning that are well worth adding to your philosophical tool chest.

Fallacies are recognised patterns of poor reasoning. Generally speaking, they can be divided into two types: **formal fallacies** and **informal or substantive fallacies**. In the case of the former, the fault lies in the form or structure of the argument. In the case of the latter, it lies in the argument's content. Thus to identify a fallacy it is often necessary to place the argument into standard form.

It is worth familiarising yourself with some common fallacies. Such knowledge is useful, not only because it can help you to identify where an argument has gone wrong, but because it provides you with a precise language to convey this assessment to others.



## Common formal fallacies include:

### **Affirming the Consequent**

The fallacy of **affirming the consequent** occurs when an argument adheres to the following pattern:

P1    If A then B  
P2    B  

---

∴    A

Thus:

P1    If rental properties are scarce more people will be homeless.  
P2    More people are homeless.  

---

∴    Rental properties are scarce.

Like all arguments which commit formal fallacies, this argument is **invalid** – the fact that more people are homeless is not a sufficient reason to conclude that rental properties are scarce. Thus, while the premises could be true it is possible that the conclusion is false.

To affirm the consequent is an easy mistake to make and for this reason it can be difficult to spot. Consider how similar the above argument is to the following **valid** argument:

P1    If rental properties are scarce more people will be homeless.  
P2    Rental properties are scarce.  

---

∴    More people will be homeless.

In this argument the **conditional** (P1) gives a condition under which more people will become homeless and P2 meets that condition. Rather than affirming the consequent, this argument is **affirming the antecedent**. This is a valid argument form known as **modus ponens**.

### **Denying the Antecedent**

This fallacy occurs when we argue from the negative of the conditional's antecedent to a conclusion in which the consequent is negated.

For example:

P1    If rental properties are scarce more people will be homeless.  
P2    Rental properties are not scarce.  

---

∴    There will not be more homeless people.

Thus the argument adheres to the following structure:

P1    If A then B  
P2    Not A

---

∴    Not B

As in the previous example, this argument is invalid: the fact that rental properties are not scarce does not mean there will be no more homeless people.

Like the fallacy of affirming the consequent, this fallacy bears a close resemblance to a valid argument form which, rather than denying the antecedent, denies the consequent (known as **modus tollens**).

For example:

P1    If rental properties are scarce more people will be homeless.  
P2    More people are not homeless.

---

∴    Rental properties are not scarce.

Although at first glance this argument might look invalid – surely we cannot infer from the fact that there are no more homeless people that rental properties are not scarce – if you look at it more closely you will see that, in arguing to the negative of the consequent, the second premise meets the condition of the first premise. Thus, if it is true that a scarcity of rental properties means more people will be homeless and more people are not homeless, then it must also be true that rental properties are not scarce. In other words, the argument is valid.

## ***The Fallacy of the Undistributed Middle***

The fallacy of the undistributed middle is a formal fallacy particular to **categorical syllogisms**. A categorical syllogism is a deductive argument consisting of three categorical propositions – a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion – each of which contains two categorical terms (terms which represent a category). In the major premise one of these terms is the major term (the predicate of the conclusion) and in the minor premise one of these terms is the minor term (the subject of the conclusion). The third term, called the middle term, is shared by both premises.

For example:

P1    All **teachers** carry **whiteboard markers**.  
P2    My **mother** is a **teacher**.

---

∴    My **mother** carries **whiteboard markers**.

In this argument the middle term is teacher/s.

The fallacy of the undistributed middle occurs when the middle term is never distributed across the premises.

- P1 All **teachers** carry **whiteboard markers**.  
P2 My **mother** carries **whiteboard markers**.

---

∴ My **mother** is a **teacher**.

If we look at this argument closely we can see that the failure to distribute the middle term has rendered the argument invalid. Just because my mother carries whiteboard markers doesn't mean she is a teacher. Although all teachers carry whiteboard markers, not all people who carry whiteboard markers are teachers.

Generally speaking, arguments that commit the fallacy of the undistributed middle are also arguments that affirm the consequent or deny the antecedent.

### ***Deriving 'Ought' from 'Is'***

The fallacy of **deriving 'ought' from 'is'** occurs when a prescriptive conclusion (a conclusion which makes a claim about what should or ought to be the case) is deduced solely from descriptive premises.

For example:

*People should stop eating meat because it involves the killing of animals.*

As it stands, this argument is not cogent. The mere fact that the consumption of meat involves the killing of animals does not, *in itself*, provide sufficient grounds for concluding that we shouldn't eat meat. Even if we add a *prescriptive* premise – thereby making the argument cogent – it still remains unsound because the additional premise simply isn't true:

- P1 Eating meat involves the killing of animals.  
P2 Anything that involves the killing of animals should be stopped.

---

∴ We should stop eating meat.

To accept the middle premise and remain consistent we would also have to advocate that euthanasing sick animals, killing animals in self-defence and allowing animals to hunt other animals should be stopped.

Even if we put aside the content of the second premise, logicians would claim that the very fact that this second premise must be included to render the argument cogent demonstrates the point that a value cannot be derived purely from a fact. This is an important fallacy to remember, not only because it is common, but because it can often go undetected.

## **Ad Populum Fallacy**

This is committed when we apportion praise or blame to an argument or idea simply because it accords with the majority view.

For example:

*The argument that we should convert to nuclear energy is absolutely ridiculous. Recent polls have shown that over 70% of the population disagrees with such a proposal. This clearly indicates that it should not be introduced.*

We can see how this argument is fallacious by making explicit the hidden assumption which is responsible for the illegitimate inference:

P1     70% of the population disagrees with nuclear energy.

P2     **Whatever the majority of the population disagrees with should not be introduced.**

---

∴     Nuclear power should not be introduced.

This argument is valid but clearly unsound: the fact that the majority of the population (or group, or class, or household) disagrees with something does not, *in itself*, provide good reason for either accepting or discarding a particular argument or idea.

## **Ad Personam Fallacy**

The **ad personam fallacy** is one often committed by those new to philosophy and, in particular, to applied philosophy. It occurs when, rather than judging an argument on its own merits, we judge it according to how our response will make us feel (I might, for example, find myself rejecting an argument in favor of euthanasia not because the argument is bad but because I may feel uncomfortable agreeing with it).

While there is nothing wrong with holding particular personal convictions, as philosophers we need to look past such convictions and instead examine the arguments according to their own merits.

## **Ad Hominem Fallacy**

This is an extremely common example of poor reasoning which is usually committed in one of two ways: either a claim is rejected because of dislike or disapproval for the individual who makes it, or, rather than addressing an argument, the individual presenting the argument is attacked.

For example:

*Kathy is such a pessimist. I don't think we should accept her arguments against visiting Columbia when we are next in South America.*

If we put this argument into standard form we can clearly see it is fallacious:

- P1 Kathy argues that we shouldn't visit Columbia.  
P2 **Kathy is a pessimist.**

---

∴ Kathy's argument should be rejected.

Although it is quite possible that Kathy's pessimism has shaped her views about visiting Columbia, the fact that she is pessimistic does not provide sufficient reason for rejecting her argument.

## ***The Genetic Fallacy***

Similar to the ad populum and the ad hominem fallacies, the **genetic fallacy** occurs when we mistakenly judge the veracity of a claim according to its origin. To take a popular example, consider news of the latest Hollywood break-up. Whether we treat such news as actual or as nothing more than a media beat-up will often depend on the source we read it from.

While this may seem prudent, we need to remember that the general unreliability of a belief's origin is not in itself sufficient grounds to conclude that the belief is without justification. The belief may be supported in other ways (for example, a more reputable publication may have published similar claims) or the source in question, although largely unreliable, may have for once got things right.

In a more general sense, the genetic fallacy may be said to occur when a conclusion is reached regarding something's present nature from premises about its origins.

For example:

*Of course Professor Marks will argue that climate change exists.  
He used to be a left-wing political activist back in his university days.*

Although it may be true that Professor Marks was a left-wing activist in his university days, this in no way proves that he will argue according to his past political persuasions or that he even holds the same convictions. The fact that this argument is fallacious is obvious when we make explicit the hidden assumption:

- P1 Anyone who is a left-wing activist will argue that climate change exists.  
P2 Professor Marks used to be a left wing activist back in his university days.  
P3 **Anyone who was once a left wing activist will always be a left wing activist.**

---

∴ Professor Marks will argue that climate change exists.

Knowing about the genetic fallacy is useful not only because it is another example of a fallacy we regularly encounter in our everyday lives, but because it reminds us to consider the possible value of all arguments regardless of where they might come from.

## **The Naturalistic Fallacy**

Strictly defined, the **naturalistic fallacy** is a formal fallacy, first identified by the philosopher G.E. Moore (Famous Philosopher File p.410). It is committed when an arguer attempts to prove an ethical claim by appealing to a definition of good in terms of one or several natural properties (pleasantness, desirability, etc). Moore argues that just because certain properties are associated with good doesn't mean that these properties are *synonymous* with good. For example, while we often describe what is pleasant as good, it would be fallacious to reason that pleasant is the same thing as good just because it accompanies it.

More generally, the term 'naturalistic fallacy' is used to describe what is also known as the **appeal to nature**. This fallacy occurs when an arguer equates what is natural to what is good or right and what is unnatural to what is bad or wrong. Take, for example, the following argument:

*When we look to nature we see that it endorses the view that it is right that the strong should dominate the weak.*

If we place this argument into standard form and make the hidden assumption explicit, we can see that it's clearly fallacious:

- P1     In nature the strong dominate the weak.  
P2     **Whatever is natural is also right.**
- 
- ∴     It is right that the strong dominate the weak.

Even if we accept the claim that it is natural for the strong to dominate the weak (which is certainly contentious), the second premise does not give us sufficient reason to conclude it is *right* for them to do so.

The appeal to nature, or 'naturalistic fallacy', as the above example demonstrates, bears a strong resemblance to the **fallacy of deriving 'ought' from 'is.'** The difference is that the naturalistic fallacy specifically relies on appeals to nature to support its conclusions.

## **The Fallacy of Conflating Morality with Legality**

No doubt we are all familiar with the 'there's no law against it' argument for rationalising morally questionable behaviour. Most of us will therefore be familiar with the **fallacy of conflating morality with legality**. This fallacy is committed when an arguer mistakenly assumes that because something is legal/illegal it is also moral/immoral.

For example:

*I don't know why everyone keeps saying Yolanda has done something wrong by having an affair with a married man. After all, there's no law against having a relationship with a married man.*

This argument is clearly fallacious because it implicitly assumes that because something is legal it is also morally acceptable:

- P1 Yolanda has had an affair with a married man.  
P2 There is no law against having affairs with married men.  
P3 **Whatever is legal is morally acceptable.**
- 

∴ Yolanda's affair with a married man is morally acceptable.

There are countless other examples which can be used to demonstrate why the fact something is legal/illegal does not necessarily mean it is moral/immoral. Thus simply pointing out that an action is in line with, or against, the law may hardly be considered a sufficient reason for declaring it right or wrong.

## ***Fallacy of Equivocation***

The **fallacy of equivocation** is a **fallacy of ambiguity** that occurs when an arguer, trading on the ambiguity of a particular word or phrase, employs its different meanings across the propositions of the argument.

For example:

- P1 Barbara is lying on the sofa.  
P2 Lying is deceitful.
- 

∴ Barbara is deceitful.

In the above argument the word 'lying' is used differently in each premise: in the first it signifies a position of the body, in the second, a type of speech that is intended to mislead. Thus the conclusion – 'Barbara is deceitful' – is spurious.

The fallacy of equivocation reminds us of the inherent instability of language and of just how important conceptual clarity is to any philosophical discussion. Without clear definitions we may easily find ourselves arguing to cross-purposes and, as the above example illustrates, accepting flawed conclusions.

## ***Amphiboly Fallacy***

Closely related to the fallacy of equivocation, the **amphiboly fallacy** occurs when an argument trades on grammatical ambiguity to create an illusion of cogency.

For example:

- P1 Captain Nemo caught a whale in his pyjamas.
- 

∴ It is dangerous for whales to wear pyjamas.

In the above argument, premise 1 could be interpreted to mean either Captain Nemo was wearing pyjamas when he caught the whale *or* the whale was wearing pyjamas when caught by Captain Nemo. The ambiguity created by the grammatical structure of premise 1 makes it difficult to accept the argument's conclusion as either true or false.

Like the fallacy of equivocation, the amphiboly fallacy reminds us of the importance of clarity in argument.

## **The Fallacy of Composition**

The fallacy of **composition** occurs when an argument infers, from the attribution of some feature to each member of a class, the possession of that same feature by the entire class. For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99) reasons that, because each part of the human body has a function, human beings as a whole must have a function. This argument is clearly problematic for even if we accept that each of our body parts has a function (which is contestable), this isn't sufficient reason to suppose that we have a function separate from these individual functions.

Just as it is fallacious to reason to the truth of the whole simply from the facts of the parts, it can be likewise fallacious to reason that, because something is true of the whole class, it is also true of each of its individual members.

For example:

P1	Broad Ridge football team has a strong sense of team spirit.
P2	Jack is a member of Broad Ridge football team.
<hr/>	
∴	Jack has a strong sense of team spirit.

While it may be true that the Broad Ridge football team has a strong sense of team spirit, this alone isn't sufficient reason to believe that every single member of the team will possess the same degree of team spirit.

When an argument reasons in this way – from the whole back to the parts – it can be accused of committing the **fallacy of division**.

## **Causal fallacies**

Causal fallacies occur when we make incorrect inferences about the cause of something. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into three types:

- *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*. This fallacy is committed when we infer that event A *caused* event B simply because event B followed event A. Such an argument is fallacious because it relies on a flawed assumption that whenever one event occurs after another event, that event was caused by the preceding event.



- *Mistaking correlation for cause.* This common fallacy occurs when it is assumed that, because one state of affairs is usually found in conjunction with another state of affairs, a causal relationship exists between the two.
- *Inverting cause and effect.* This occurs when it is assumed that if A causes B, then an absence of A will prevent B.

Causal fallacies can often be found in newspapers and can generate a great deal of unnecessary alarm. Aside from their importance for helping us to critically evaluate arguments, they also remind us to not always accept the assessment of data at face value.



## EXERCISES

1. Identify the fallacy that each of the following arguments commits. In some cases, you may find it helpful to first convert the argument into standard form.
  - a. If welfare payments increase, more people will be unemployed.  
Unemployment figures have risen, so welfare payments must have increased.
  - b. Stealing Tommy's toys makes him cry, so Violet shouldn't steal Tommy's toys.
  - c. Mr Carmichael has done nothing wrong in sacking 25 members of his staff.  
The sackings were done in complete accordance with the law.
  - d. Studies show that in areas where a higher percentage of the population holds tertiary degrees the average household income exceeds \$100,000. Thus it can be concluded that a tertiary degree is a necessary precursor to obtaining a higher income.
  - e. Of course Freya is going to say Timothy is a bad person. She is always so nasty about people she doesn't know.
  - f. It's time we outlawed the use of mobile phones on public transport. A recent survey showed that over 75% of public transport users find people on mobile phones so annoying that they believe they ought to be banned from using them on trains, trams and buses.
  - g. All the bands playing at the festival are fantastic, so it should be a great festival.
  - h. Try not to worry too much about your new teacher. The school is very well-organised so I'm sure your teacher will be well-organised too.
  - i. Katy said her new computer is very bright so it should be able to solve that equation in a second. One needs to be very bright to solve such difficult equations.

- j. When I called the publisher she said she'd waste no time reading my manuscript so I know she will read it right away.
- k. Women who believe it's ok not to have children are wrong. You only have to look at the behaviour of almost any other species to know the correct thing for a woman to do is have children.
- l. I wouldn't believe what Gianna has to say about the dangers of eating red meat because Gianna is a vegetarian.
- m. I don't agree that euthanasia should be legalised. The whole idea of helping someone to commit suicide just doesn't sit well with me.
- n. My sister is a novelist. She has written a book.
- o. Celia won't have the party at her house tomorrow. Celia said if it rains tomorrow she'll have the party at her house and there is no rain forecast for tomorrow.

## DO

In pairs or individually, create an example of one of the fallacies outlined in the above section. Re-write your example, underneath a heading and definition, onto a piece of A4 paper. Collect these examples and from them create a wall display of common fallacies for your Philosophy classroom.



## Other Problems with Arguments

The following are also recognised examples of poor reasoning. With the exception of the first, all are common fallacies, although not all of them are characterised by unsoundness.

### **Inconsistency**

**Inconsistency** is a property characterising two or more statements or, more broadly, two or more beliefs, which contradict one another. Inconsistency is problematic for, in being inconsistent, we are contravening the **law of the excluded middle**, which holds that for any statement  $x$  or not  $x$  must be true, and the more fundamental principle of **bivalence**, which holds that every statement must be either true or false *and* there is no other alternative.<sup>5</sup>

Although inconsistency appears quite straightforward, it isn't always easy to spot. Two statements which may appear inconsistent, may in fact be **consistent** when examined more closely.

<sup>5</sup> It should, however, be noted that bivalence is a controversial concept on the grounds that there are some statements that can be partly true or partly false. This is particularly the case with vague concepts. However, generally speaking, where there is no vagueness within the concept the principle of bivalence should be upheld.

For example:

*While I agree that it's wrong to kill innocent human beings, I strongly support the legalisation of abortion.*

While these statements may at first appear inconsistent (it could be argued that abortion *is* the killing of innocent human beings), on further investigation we can see that, if we take the position that a fetus is not the same thing as a human being, then the statements are in fact consistent.

While inconsistency and consistency are important things to keep in mind when evaluating arguments, it is also important, as the above example demonstrates, to ensure that the terms within the argument are clearly understood before making judgments.

## ***Begging the question***

In every day discourse the term 'begging the question' is generally used to point out that a particular remark invites further questions. In philosophy, however, to **beg the question** is to assume in one or more of the argument's premises, the truth of what is to be proved by the conclusion.

For example:

*We only have to look to the diversity and complexity of nature to know that God exists. Only God can create such diversity and complexity. Thus we can be sure that God exists.*

In this argument the arguer claims that God's existence is evidenced by the diversity and complexity of nature, and that the diversity and complexity of nature can only be explained by God's existence:

- P1 Nature is diverse and complex.  
P2 Only God can create such diversity and complexity.
- 
- ∴ God exists.

Because the argument assumes the truth of its conclusion (God exists) in one of its premises (only God can create such diversity and complexity), we may describe this argument as 'begging the question.' For obvious reasons, the fallacy of begging the question is also described as **circularity** or **circular reasoning**.

## ***Slippery slope***

The **slippery slope fallacy** occurs when an arguer mistakenly assumes that a particular course of action will inevitably lead to certain undesired outcomes without supplying good reasons to suppose that these outcomes will indeed eventuate.

For example:

*If we legalise euthanasia in this country it will only be a matter of time before it becomes a form of state-sanctioned suicide for the depressed and unhappy, rather than a choice for the terminally ill. For this reason, it should never be legalised.*

If we place the argument into a valid standard form (by including a second prescriptive premise), the fallacy is obvious:

- P1     If euthanasia is legalised, it will inevitably be used by those wishing to commit suicide for reasons other than terminal illness.
- P2     Whatever allows people to commit suicide for reasons other than terminal illness should not be permitted.
- 
- ∴     Euthanasia should not be legalised.

As it stands, the argument provides no good reason for the first premise. If, however, the argument formed part of a larger, **extended argument** in which we were given an argument for the claim that the legalisation of euthanasia will result in the specified consequences, then it is quite possible that the slope really is slippery and the arguer has not committed a fallacy at all. As the example demonstrates, whether or not the fallacy is committed is dependent on the presence or absence of good reasons for the controversial premise.

## **Straw man**

The **straw man fallacy** is not only a fallacy but something akin to a dirty trick. It is committed when an arguer, rather than criticising their opponent's real position, instead criticises a caricaturised, distorted or simplified version of the position, or otherwise misrepresents the position, thereby giving the false impression that the real argument has been defeated.

## **False dilemmas**

*false dichotomy*

As the name suggests, a **false dilemma fallacy** is committed when an arguer misrepresents the number of possible positions on an issue thereby presenting a dilemma where none really exists.

For example:

*Given today's competitive economic climate young people have only one of two choices, either get a tertiary qualification or face an uncertain future competing against the better educated in an unstable jobs market.*

By posing the problem in this way, the arguer gives the (false) impression that there are only two possible choices. False dilemmas can be insidious as they can make us feel cornered into believing particular things that may in fact be false.



## EXERCISES

1. Identify the reasoning flaw in each of the following arguments. In some cases, you may find it helpful to first place the argument into standard form.
  - a. The advisory committee on climate change has suggested we need to dramatically reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. Clearly we need to guard against these attacks on industry and mining which are bedrocks of this country's progress.
  - b. Marijuana should not be legalised. Legalisation of marijuana would result in a significant increase in the use of other narcotics and a rise in dangerous criminality.
  - c. God is all good and the creator of everything.
  - d. It is a fact that war is wrong because murder is wrong.
  - e. If the local council doesn't move to shut down bars at midnight then more people will move out of the city because of noise levels.

## DO

In pairs or small groups, create an example of one of the flaws in reasoning outlined in the above section. Rewrite your example, underneath a heading and definition, onto a piece of A4 paper. Add these examples to your wall display of common fallacies (see p.63).



## Rhetorical Ploys

It is doubtful that a day goes by in which we are not bombarded by **rhetorical ploys**. Rhetorical ploys are persuasive devices which masquerade as arguments but, rather than appealing to reason, appeal directly to the emotions. Rhetorical ploys are generally used to try to influence our behaviour and opinions. For this reason, they are the stock-in-trade of advertisers, corporations and politicians – and anyone who has something to gain by arousing our feelings. In philosophy it is important to be able to distinguish rhetorical ploys from real arguments.

### ***Trading on an equivocation***

An arguer may be accused of **trading on an equivocation** when he or she uses a conceptually vague or ambiguous word or phrase in an effort to influence our interpretation of a particular view favorably or unfavorably.

For example:

*Shop at Browning's – the biggest name in hardware.*

In this example the word ‘biggest’ is ambiguous. It could mean that Browning’s is the most renowned name in hardware, or that it has the biggest stores or that it literally has the biggest name. The problem is, we don’t know. The statement could be true – an advertiser could face prosecution if he or she was willfully lying – but it may not be true in the way we think it is.

The ploy of trading on an equivocation bears a close resemblance to the fallacy of equivocation (see p.60). However, whereas in the latter the arguer uses a key term across the propositions of the argument in different ways in an effort to convince of us the truth of the conclusion, in the former the arguer uses vague or ambiguous language to influence us emotionally.

## **Trading on Implicature**

To **trade on implicature** is to hint at a proposition but not actually state it, thus avoiding responsibility for the reader’s/audience’s interpretation.

For example:

*According to a leading economist, the arrival of more asylum seekers into Australia would put a massive strain on the economy.*

It is tempting to read this sentence as ‘more asylum seekers are coming into Australia and they’re going to put a strain on the economy,’ but that isn’t what’s being asserted. In fact, given the phrasing, it is more likely that the economist is proposing a hypothetical – *if* more asylum seekers come into the country it would put a massive strain on the economy (note how the sentence also trades on an equivocation – what exactly is meant by ‘more?’). By using implicature in this way, the speaker/ author is attempting to arouse an emotional response while at the same time making us believe we have been presented with an argument for that response.

## **Value-Laden Language**

Some words and phrases derive great rhetorical power due the various connotations that, over time, have become attached to them. For example, consider the word ‘spinster.’ Although it literally means a single woman, when we hear the word ‘spinster’ we tend to think of an elderly woman who has been ‘left on the shelf.’ Thus **value-laden language** is a means of shaping our perceptions, often with the intention of modifying our esteem for a person or thing.

## **Smokescreening**

This is surely something most of us – either fairly or unjustly – have been accused of at one time or another. **Smokescreening** is the tactic of avoiding discussion of the issue at hand by instead addressing a side issue. So, for example, an individual whose partner catches her out in an infidelity by reading her emails may, when confronted with her behaviour, launch into a speech about how the partner has committed a terrible breach of her privacy by going through her in-box. Like value-laden language, smokescreening is important to recognise because, if used effectively, it can make us lose sight of the real argument.

You will note that smokescreening bears a close resemblance to the straw man fallacy (see p.65).

## ***Appeals to Novelty or Popularity***

Appeals to novelty or popularity can be quite insidious. Often they masquerade in the guise of arguments but, rather than appealing to our reason, they appeal to our fears, desires or egos.

For example:

*We are now living in a post-feminist age, and as such, feminism is no longer relevant.*

This is a statement often made by the disparagers of feminism and could easily be taken for an argument. But if we examine it closely we can see that we have been given no reason to reject feminism. Rather, we are told it's old-fashioned and 'no longer relevant'. Thus the statement is intended to incite us to give up our beliefs by appealing to our fear of being behind the times and our desire to see ourselves as intellectually current.

**Appeals to popularity** work in much the same way although they target a very particular set of desires. Consider the following:

*This winter get yourself into a pair of Harvey denim jeans – the denim of choice for Melbourne's hot young things.*

By informing us that Harvey jeans are the jeans of choice for 'Melbourne's hot young things' this statement not only appeals to our desire to be considered a hot young thing, it also it invites us to make some assumptions about the product. For example, if these jeans are the jeans of choice for Melbourne's hot young things, then surely they must be edgy, extremely fashionable and created by a designer of note in the right circles. Even if we consider this an argument – and we can – it is hardly a good one given its first premise:

- P1     The best jeans to purchase are the jeans chosen by Melbourne's hot young things.  
P2     Harvey jeans are the jeans chosen by Melbourne's hot young things.

---

∴     Harvey jeans are the best jeans to purchase.

## ***Appeals to Compassion***

Most of us are familiar with the advertisements of aid agencies that depict malnourished children fetching pails of muddied water from sparse riverbeds or polar bears struggling to gain their footing on melting ice sheets. We have all heard the catch-cry 'these children/animals/ people/old growth forests need your help.' These are what we call **appeals to compassion**. Their intention is to incite action by inviting us to empathise with the plight of others. Although certainly worthy – through feeling compassion we are often prompted to find arguments to support our actions – such images and slogans do not alone provide good reason for engaging in the encouraged action. This doesn't mean that we *shouldn't* engage in such actions, only that we should understand that what we are presented with is not an *argument* for those actions.

## Scare Tactics

This is another rhetorical ploy that most of us will be familiar with. **Scare tactics** are tactics intended to incite fear for the purposes of influencing behaviour, action or attitudes.

For example:

*If Australia doesn't enforce mandatory detention our borders will be swamped by asylum seekers and our country will no longer be safe.*

Although there may be good arguments for enforcing mandatory detention of asylum seekers, this isn't one of them. No reason has been given as to why other responses to asylum seekers would create a massive influx of arrivals into the country or why this would render Australia no longer safe.

These problems become obvious when we reconfigure the statement into an argument and place it into standard form:

- P1     If Australia doesn't enforce mandatory detention our borders will be swamped  
          by asylum seekers.
- P2     If our borders are swamped by asylum seekers Australia will no longer be safe.
- 
- ∴     Australia must enforce mandatory detention to remain safe.

Although it is important to be able to distinguish scare tactics from proper arguments it is also important to be able to distinguish genuine warnings from scare tactics. In the case of genuine warnings, the connection between the reasons for action and the course of action recommended is well-founded. With scare tactics there is no justified connection between the fear incited and the course of action recommended.

This is just a sample of the different rhetorical ploys you might encounter. During conversation and in your encounters with various media, you are sure to come across many others which are well worth adding to your philosophical tool chest.



## EXERCISES



1. Using a highlighter and annotations, identify the rhetorical ploys used in the following passage:

*It is time that the world took stock of its behaviour and invested more money in the Third World. Every day, hundreds of thousands of people are without food, shelter and clean water. Children die of preventable diseases and the average life expectancy is below that of Western nations. If nothing is done about this growing poverty anti-Western sentiment will flourish and we will see terrorism prosper.*

*Many people in the first world are already giving part of their wages to charities specifically targeted at Third World poverty. Without a doubt, it is the fastest growing area of philanthropy in Australia today and our celebrities have led the charge, leaving behind once 'fashionable' causes such as AIDS and animal welfare to lend their hands to those less fortunate.*

*We need to follow that lead. Give now to your favourite charity.*

### DO

Working in small groups, select an article from a newspaper or magazine that contains a number of the rhetorical ploys described in the above section. Cut the article out and affix it to a larger piece of paper. Identify the rhetorical ploys in annotations. Display in your Philosophy classroom.



### DO

Create 'bumper stickers' for the rhetorical ploys described in the above section which include the name of the rhetorical ploy and a pithy statement to describe it. Display these bumper stickers alongside your annotated newspaper articles (see previous activity box.)



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## **Assessment Tasks**

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Reflect on the role of cognitive biases in your own response to philosophical questions and discuss how they may undermine good thinking.

### **Assessment Task Two: Short Answer Responses**

Complete a series of short answer responses on the aspects of argument described in this Chapter.

### **Assessment Task Three: Written Analysis**

Use annotations to identify the premises, conclusions and possible evaluations in a philosophical primary text.

### **Assessment Task Four: Written Analysis**

Outline and evaluate an argument or arguments from a selected philosophy text (for example, Descartes' *First Meditation*) using correct terminology.

### **Assessment Task Five: Written Dialogue**

Write a philosophical dialogue between two characters on a metaphysical, epistemological or ethical question, or a question drawn from value theory, that employs the techniques of argument evaluation described in this Chapter.

### **Assessment Task Six: Presentation**

Create a visual presentation (poster, PowerPoint presentation, etc.) that identifies and explains using examples, a selection of tools and techniques used to reconstruct and evaluate arguments.

### **Assessment Task Seven: Research Task**

Find examples of features of arguments, cognitive biases and common fallacies, in media sources.

# Useful Resources: Logic and Reasoning

- Baggini, J. & Fosl, P. 2010 *The Philosopher's Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods* (2nd edn.), West Sussex
- Baggini, J. 2006 *The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten: 100 Thought Experiments for the Armchair Philosopher*, Penguin, New York
- Bowell, T. & Kemp, G. 2009 *Critical Thinking: A Concise Guide* (3rd edn.) Routledge, Oxford
- Cohen, M. 2007 *101 Philosophy Problems* (3rd edn.), Routledge, London
- Fisher, A. 2001, *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Massachusetts
- Kahneman, D. 2011 *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York
- Shand, J. 2000 *Arguing Well*, Routledge, New York

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## Software

- *Rationale* 2006, Microsoft, Austhink software, Carlton  
(Available from [www.austhink.com.au](http://www.austhink.com.au))

# Suggested Solutions for Chapter 2: Logic and Reasoning

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## Identifying Arguments

### Task 1

b, e, f

### Task 2

- Rhetoric tries to persuade the reader or listener to accept particular beliefs by appealing to the reader's emotions, whereas argument tries to do this by appealing to the reader's critical faculties.
- The relationship between the belief and the reasons for the belief are *causal* in the case of explanations and *logical* in the case of arguments.

### Task 3

\*P indicates premise

\*C indicates conclusion

\*UP indicates unstated or implied premise

- Dan is 32 (P). Susie is 4 years younger than Dan (P). Susie is 28 (C).
- Long showers represent an unnecessary waste of water (P). We should stop wasting water unnecessarily (UP). We should stop having long showers (C).
- I didn't have breakfast this morning (P). Whenever I don't have breakfast I am hungry by 10.30 am (P). I am going to be hungry by mid-morning (C).
- Good musicians are always practising (P). Charlie never plays guitar (P). I doubt Charlie is a good musician (C).
- More people are becoming desensitised to violence (P). When people become desensitised to violence, violence in the community increases (UP). There will be more violence in our community (C).
- The sun rose at 6.20am today (P). At this time of year the sun rises progressively later (P). The sun will rise after 6.20pm tomorrow (C).
- Thinking is a property of the mind (P). No computer possesses a mind (P). No computer can think (C).
- Pleasure brings happiness (P). A happy life is a good life (P). A life of pleasure is a good life (C).
- Murder is morally wrong (P). Capital punishment is murder (UP). Capital punishment is morally wrong (C).

- j. A genuinely honest person is someone who never tells a lie (P). Everybody lies at least some of the time (P). No one is genuinely honest (C).
- k. Criminal behaviour results from the socio-economic conditions in which criminals are born (P). The criminal is not responsible for the socio-economic conditions of his or her birth (P). Crimes are not the responsibility of those who commit them (C).

## Standard Form and Extended Arguments

### Task 1

- a. Fast food is potentially harmful to human health (P). Anything that is harmful to human health should carry some kind of warning (P). Health professionals and politician should push for warnings on fast food (C).
- b. The use of fur and hide by the fashion industry in its shows and collections results in the unnecessary killing of animals (P). Anything which results in the unnecessary killing of animals should stop (P). The fashion industry should stop using fur and hide in its shows and collections.

### Task 2

- a. The principle of charity states that, when attempting to re-construct an argument, you should choose the best possible representation of that argument.

### Task 3

- a.
 

P1	All cats like sardines.
UP2	Chester is a cat.
$\therefore$ Chester will like sardines.	
  
- b.
 

P1	Anything that endangers the safety of our citizens should be banned.
P2	Skateboards cause more accidents than any other vehicle.
$\therefore$ Skateboards should be banned.	
  
- c.
 

P1	Peter is very quiet today.
P2	Usually when Peter is quiet it means he's in a bad mood.
$\therefore$ Peter is in a bad mood.	
  
- d.
 

P1	Young people should be encouraged to pursue activities that broaden their horizons and enrich their lives.
P2	Only activities which provide diverse experiences can broaden horizons and enrich lives.
P3	Schoolies fails to deliver diverse experiences.
P4	Schoolies fails to broaden young people's horizons and enrich their lives.
$\therefore$ Young people should not be encouraged to attend schoolies.	

- e. UP1 Either Patricia or Katherine ate the last Tim Tam.  
P2 Patricia doesn't eat chocolate.
- 
- ∴ Katherine ate the last Tim Tam.
- f. P1 The only way to be happy is to engage in pleasurable experiences.  
P2 Spending time with good friends is always pleasurable.
- 
- ∴ Spending time with good friends is the key to happiness.
- g. P1 To live a good life it is important to make peace with the past.  
P2 Counselling enables us to make peace with the past.
- 
- ∴ Counselling is the first step towards a good life.
- h. P1 The principal said if it rained on the morning the fete was scheduled the fete would be cancelled.  
UP2 It is the morning the fete is scheduled.  
P3 It has been raining since daybreak.
- 
- ∴ The fete will be cancelled.
- i. P1 There are three dresses: a yellow dress, a blue dress and a pink dress.  
UP2 Either Tania, Celia or myself have the blue dress.  
P3 I have the pink dress.  
P4 Celia has the yellow dress.
- 
- ∴ Tania has the blue dress.
- j. P1 Rob had sausages for dinner on Friday.  
UP2 Vegetarians don't eat sausages.
- 
- ∴ Rob isn't a vegetarian.
- k. P1 Whenever I drink coffee right before bed I have trouble falling asleep.  
P2 I have had two cups of coffee before bed tonight.
- 
- ∴ I won't get to sleep tonight.
- l. P1 Being comfortable is essential for a happy life.  
P2 Having what we need makes our lives more comfortable.  
P3 Money enables us to buy what we need.
- 
- ∴ Money is essential for a happy life.

- m. P1 Louise took David's laptop without asking.  
 P2 Taking someone's property without their permission is stealing.  
 UP3 Stealing is wrong
- 
- ∴ Louise did the wrong thing when she took David's laptop without asking.

### **Task 4**

- a. P1 War sanctions killing without personal motivation.  
 P2 Killing without personal motivation is killing in 'cold blood.'
- 
- C1 War sanctions killing in 'cold blood.'  
 P3 Killing in 'cold blood' is murder.
- 
- C2 War sanctions murder.  
 P4 Murder is wrong.
- 
- C3 War is wrong.**
- b. P1 Our healthcare system is under-resourced.  
 P2 Health problems in later life place a significant strain on the healthcare system.
- 
- C1 We need to decrease the incidence of health problems in later life.  
 P3 There is a direct correlation between childhood obesity and health problems in later life.
- 
- C2 We need to decrease the incidence of childhood obesity.  
 P4 Kitchen garden programs decrease the incidence of childhood obesity.
- 
- C3 Kitchen garden programs should be introduced into all primary schools.**
- c. P1 Animals have a developed nervous system.  
 P2 Anything with a developed nervous system has the capacity to feel pain.
- 
- C1 Animals have the capacity to feel pain.  
 P3 Anything with the capacity to feel pain should be given rights.
- 
- C2 Animals should be given rights.**

- d. P1 High levels of anxiety compromise physical and mental health.  
 P2 When mental and physical health is compromised, wellbeing is jeopardised.
- 
- C1 High levels of anxiety jeopardise wellbeing.  
 P3 Many inmates in detention centres exhibit high levels of anxiety.
- 
- C2 Detention centres jeopardise wellbeing.  
 P4 Any institution which jeopardises the wellbeing of those incarcerated within it should be closed down.
- 
- C3 Detention centres should be closed down.**
- e. P1 Physical evidence is superior to religious revelation or intuition.  
 P2 Science uses physical evidence to support its claims.
- 
- C1 The claims made by science are superior to other kinds of claims.  
 UP3 Whatever is superior is also correct.
- 
- C2 The claims made by science are correct.  
 P4 Science claims that the mind is the brain and its processes.
- 
- C3 The mind is the brain and its processes.**

## Evaluating Arguments

### Task 1

Deductive arguments are arguments in which the conclusion follows on from the premises necessarily. Inductive arguments are arguments in which the premises give us good reason to believe that the conclusion is true – the premises follow on, not with necessity, but with probability.

### Task 2

- a. P1 All singers are musicians.  
 P2 Nick Cave is a singer.

---

∴ Nick Cave is a musician.

This is a valid, deductive argument.

- b. P1 Most Americans speak English.  
 P2 Natasha is from New York.

---

∴ Natasha speaks English.



This may be considered a poorly formed deductive argument (its phrasing would suggest that the arguer views the conclusion as following on from the premises necessarily) but it also be considered inductive and inductively forceful – the truth of the conclusion is quite likely given the premises.

- c. P1 Jamie is a mother.  
UP2 All mothers are women.
- 
- ∴ Jamie is a woman.

This is a valid, deductive argument.

- d. P1 Whenever I drink more than two cups of tea before bed I usually wake up in the night.  
P2 This evening I've had more than two cups of tea.
- 
- ∴ I will probably wake up at some point in the night.

This is an inductive argument that may be considered inductively strong as the arguer has provided good reasons to believe that the conclusion is most likely to be true.

- e. P1 If the streets are wet, it has been raining.  
P2 The streets are wet.
- 
- ∴ It has been raining.

This is a valid, deductive argument.

- f. P1 Most children who go without breakfast have trouble concentrating at school.  
P2 Peter is very focused this morning.
- 
- ∴ Peter must have had breakfast.

This is an inductive argument that might be considered weakly cogent as all we are told is one of the reasons why children have difficulty concentrating at school, not the reasons why children have better concentration.

- g. P1 When I last made lemon meringue pie the price of lemons was \$6.50 per kilo.  
P2 Today I am making lemon meringue pie.
- 
- ∴ The price of lemons will be \$6.50 today.

This is an inductive argument that could not be considered cogent. The fact that the arguer is making a lemon meringue pie has no bearing on the price of lemons, thus the conclusion does not follow on from the premises.

- h. P1 Everyone who is in the choir can't attend dance practice on Tuesday.  
 P2 Jacob cannot attend dance practice on Tuesday.
- 
- ∴ Jacob is in the choir.

This is an invalid, deductive argument. Although everyone who is in the choir cannot attend dance practice, the choir may not be the only reason people are unable to attend dance practice. The conclusion is not entailed by the premises.

- i. P1 All students who attend the grammar school wear a blue blazer.  
 P2 Marisa wears a blue blazer.
- 
- ∴ Marisa attends the grammar school.

This is an invalid, deductive argument. Although everyone attending the grammar school wears a blue blazer, not necessarily everyone who wears blue blazer attends the grammar school. The conclusion is not entailed by the premises.

- j. P1 If I do more homework then I'll probably get a better mark in English.  
 P2 If I quit my part time job I will probably do more homework.
- 
- ∴ I should probably quit my part-time job if I want to do better in English.

This is an inductive argument that may be considered inductively strong as the arguer has provided good reasons to believe that the conclusion is most likely to be true.

- k. UP1 Bendigo is in Victoria.  
 P2 Casey doesn't live in Victoria.
- 
- ∴ Casey doesn't live in Bendigo.

This is a valid, deductive argument.

- l. P1 Melburnians are well known for their love of coffee.  
 P2 Georgia is from Melbourne.
- 
- ∴ Georgia will probably love coffee.

This is an inductive argument that may be considered inductively strong as the arguer has provided good reasons to believe that the conclusion is most likely to be true.

- m. P1 Sometimes, when the sky is overcast, I need to take an overcoat to work.  
 P2 This morning the sky is overcast.
- 
- ∴ I will definitely need to take an overcoat to work.

This is an inductive argument that could not be considered cogent as the conclusion (I will definitely) doesn't follow on from the premises (sometimes).

- n. P1 Only vegetarians like broccoli.  
P2 Phoebe likes broccoli.

---

∴ Phoebe is a vegetarian.

This is a valid deductive argument for if the premises were true, then the conclusion would have to be true.

- o. P1 Someone has walked clay all through the house.  
P2 Robert works for a potter.  
UP3 Potters work with clay.

---

∴ Probably Robert walked clay all through the house.

This is an inductive argument (the conclusion follows on from the premises with probability, not with necessity) that may be considered inductively forceful as the arguer has provided good reasons to believe that the conclusion is most likely to be true.

- p. P1 If there has been an accident the train will be late.  
P2 The train is late.

---

∴ There has been an accident.

This is an invalid, deductive argument. Although the train will be late if there is an accident, the train may also be late because of other reasons, thus the conclusion is not entailed by the premises.

- q. P1 If school has returned there will be a lot of traffic on the roads.  
P2 School has not yet returned for the year.

---

∴ There will not be a lot of traffic on the roads.

This is an invalid, deductive argument. There may be other reasons for traffic on the roads, thus the conclusion is not entailed by the premises.

- r. P1 Most left-handed people are artistic.  
UP2 Patricia is left-handed.

---

∴ It is likely that Patricia is artistic.

This is an inductive argument that is inductively forceful. The arguer has provided good reasons to believe that the conclusion is true.

- s. P1 Everyone who is going to the party is preparing a plate of food.  
P2 Katherine was preparing a plate of food when I left the house.

---

∴ Katherine is going to the party.

This is an invalid, deductive argument. Although everyone who is attending the party is preparing a plate, not everyone preparing a plate is going to the party. The conclusion is not entailed by the premises.

t. P1 If everyone had the right to determine what happens to their body  
euthanasia would be legal.

P2 Euthanasia is not legal.

---

∴ No one has the right to determine what happens to their body.

This is a valid, deductive argument. If the premises were true, then the conclusion would necessarily be true.

### Task 3

There are a number of counter-examples that could be used for these premises. What follows are simply suggestions. Problematic premises are identified in bold.

a. P1 **All birds can fly.**  
UP2 Henry's new pet is a bird.

---

∴ Henry's new pet can fly.

Emus, chickens, ostriches, cassowaries and penguins are all examples of flightless birds.

b. UP1 Florence is a woman.  
P2 **Women can never be great artists.**

---

∴ Florence will never be a great artist.

Frida Kahlo, Diane Arbus, Virginia Woolf, Patti Smith, PJ Harvey, Cindy Sherman, Fede Gallizi, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Madonna, Billy Holliday, Lady Gaga are just a few female artists who are recognised as significant in their fields.

c. P1 No one has proven that UFOs exist.  
P2 **Whatever has not been proven to exist does not exist.**

---

∴ UFOs do not exist.

Just because something has not been *proven* to exist doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Scientists estimate that there are thousands of animal species that exist which are yet to be proven and recent scientific discoveries (for example, the Higgs boson particle which was theorised in 1964 but only proven in 2013) demonstrate that a lack of proof doesn't necessarily demonstrate that something doesn't exist.

- d. **P1 Vegetarians do not eat cheese.**  
**P2 Katherine is a vegetarian.**

---

∴ Katherine will not eat cheese.

Although some vegetarians may avoid cheese containing animal rennet, not all cheese contains animal rennet. Generally speaking, vegetarians only avoid eating meat and vegans avoid eating dairy products and eggs.

- e. **P1 Being comfortable is essential for a happy life.**  
**P2 Having what we need makes our lives more comfortable.**  
**P3 Money enables us to buy what we need.**

---

∴ Money is essential for a happy life.

Although comfort is certainly conducive to happiness, we may question whether it is essential. Such a claim suggests that those who are very poor cannot be happy, which is debatable. It also denies the happiness of those who actively seek lives of asceticism, such as Buddhist monks and others who undertake holy orders. One might also question whether money can enable us to purchase everything we need. While it certainly enables us to acquire food and shelter, many psychological needs, such as love, are not commodities and so cannot be readily purchased.

- f. **P1 No female actors ever star in action films.**

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∴ The star of the new action film will be male.

Angelina Jolie (*Tomb Raider*), Linda Hamilton (*Terminator*), Sigourney Weaver (*Alien*), Milla Jovovich (*5th Element*, *Resident Evil*) and Uma Thurman (*Kill Bill*) are all examples of women who have played action heroes.

- g. **P1 All human behavior is motivated by self-interest.**

---

∴ Sara's behavior is motivated by self-interest.

It is contestable whether people who risk their lives to save the lives of others (for example, by rescuing them from burning buildings or stormy seas) can be described as being motivated by self-interest. It is our best interests to preserve our own lives and such people are actively risking their lives.

- h. **P1 There is no law that says we must take presents to birthday parties.**  
**P2 If there is no law against something then it isn't wrong.**

---

∴ It's OK not to take a present to Dan's birthday party.

Marital infidelity, humiliating others, pushing in in a queue and smacking children are considered wrong by many people; however, there is no law against any of these behaviours.

- i. P1 I am a human.  
P2 Every human action is free.
- 

∴ I have free will.

The claim that all human actions are free is certainly debatable. The behaviour that results from those suffering significant mental illnesses such as schizophrenia could be considered an example of a human action that is not freely chosen.

### **Task 4**

- Speaker-relative propositions are propositions that express, either implicitly or explicitly, the preferences or attitudes of the individual who asserts them. Non-speaker-relative propositions are propositions whose factual status is independent of the speaker asserting them.
- An argument is sound if it is cogent/valid *and* the premises are true.

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## **Further Tools for Evaluating Arguments**

### **Task 1**

- Affirming the consequent.
- Deriving 'ought' from 'is.'
- Conflating morality with legality.
- Causal fallacy – mistaking correlation for cause.
- Ad hominem fallacy.
- Ad populum fallacy
- Fallacy of composition.
- Fallacy of division.
- Fallacy of equivocation.
- Amphiboly fallacy.
- Naturalistic fallacy.
- Genetic fallacy.
- Ad personam fallacy.
- Fallacy of the undistributed middle.
- Denying the antecedent.

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## **Other Problems with Arguments**

### **Task 1**

- Straw man.
- Slippery slope.
- Inconsistency.
- Begging the question.
- False dilemma.

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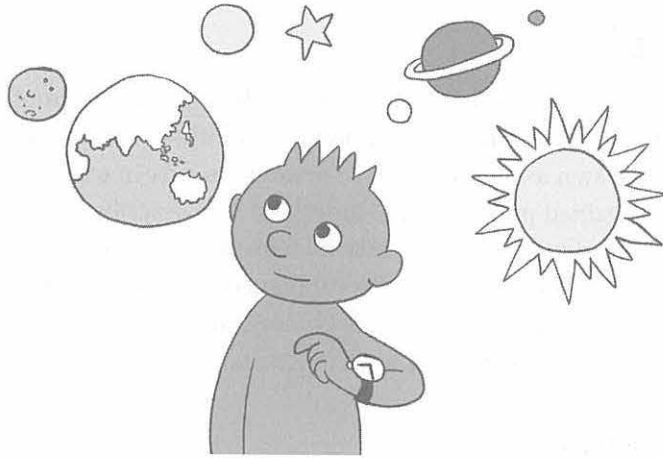
# Rhetorical Ploys

## *Task 1*

Scare tactics ('anti-Western sentiment will flourish and we will see terrorism prosper'); trading on equivocation ('average life expectancy is below that of Western nations' / 'part of their wages' / 'fastest growing area of philanthropy'); appeals to novelty ('leaving behind once 'fashionable' causes such as AIDS and animal welfare'); appeals to popularity ('many people in the first world' / 'we need to follow that lead'); appeals to compassion ('every day hundreds and thousands...' / 'children die of preventable diseases').

## CHAPTER 3

# Metaphysics



Metaphysics is a broad and complex area of philosophy that is difficult to define precisely. Most simply, it is concerned with ‘what there is’: what is real, what exists and the nature of that existence. This includes the external world as well as oneself and other people.

This Chapter begins with questions about the nature of reality, asking whether things in the physical world are as they appear or to us, or whether what we perceive has existence in our minds as much as outside of us. From here we proceed to an enquiry about the mind itself. Is the mind part of the physical world or does human consciousness go beyond what can be explained in material terms? This leads us to consider the problem of free will. If humans are entirely physical beings, they must operate according to the physical laws of the universe. But if causal laws determine all our thoughts and actions, then our free will must be illusory – a position which conflicts with most of our everyday assumptions. Moving to an even bigger picture of reality, we consider the nature of time and whether time travel might one day be possible. And lastly, looking beyond even the physical universe, we ponder the question of God. What kind of being is God, and what arguments can be made for the existence of God?

In the course of this Chapter you will continually exercise the same skills of logic and reasoning you were introduced to in Chapter 1. And looking ahead to our next Chapter, you will find that metaphysics links closely with epistemology: investigating the nature of reality and existence will inevitably also involve questions about how and whether we can know the things we claim.

Studying metaphysics is an exhilarating and often mind-bending journey. We hope you enjoy exploring this very important branch of Philosophy.



## THEME 1

# On Materialism and Idealism

### What is there?

It is this most open of questions which perhaps offers the best definition of what concerns us in the study of Metaphysics. What there is, and how we as humans may best make sense of it, are questions which have drawn analysis from the greatest minds in our history. In recent times, scientific accounts have gained prominence. Modern science describes a physical universe, which behaves according to a set of consistent laws by which phenomena can be explained and predicted. Science asks us to believe in atoms and far-distant planets even though we have never seen them with our own eyes. On the other hand, we may be divided when it comes to things not so easily explained and predicted in physical terms, such as spirits, angels and God.

### Introductory Activity



#### DO

'What is there?'

Use this question as the starting point to brainstorm a list of the first 25-30 words that come to mind in your class. Have someone write the list on the board.

Your list may have looked something like this:

SAUCEPAN	SENTENCE	PENCIL	BODY	PHOTOGRAPH
SEAHORSE	STORY	ART	RULE	FEELING
NUMBER	COLOUR	TREE	PERSON	CATEGORIES
IDEA	SCIENCE	FLYING	EARTH	SPACE
MIND	GRAVITY	POSSIBILITY	FACT	CABBAGE
PAIN	DREAMS	MORALITY	TIME	GOD
PERFECTION	ATOMS	EVIL	FRIENDSHIP	MUSIC

**Equipment:** Pieces of paper – A3 or larger; coloured pens or pencils

**Your task:** Working with a partner, you are to arrange the words on your list, in any formation or representation which makes most sense of them to you. You and your partner need to be able to justify your arrangement of the words. You are not bound to any particular method of mapping, but may make use of such tools if you wish.

**Follow-up:** Going around the class, each pair will display and explain their arrangement of the words, justifying their decisions and answering any questions.

**Discussion:** Did any common themes emerge about how the words were arranged? Which approaches seemed most successful? Was this a difficult task? Why or why not?

In the introductory activity above, you may have found it useful to distinguish **physical** from **non-physical** items. This distinction – between the **material** and the **immaterial** – has fuelled many of philosophy’s most important debates. When we address *what kind of thing* something is, we are engaging with the subdivision of metaphysics known as **ontology**. Ontological questions will drive this Theme.



## WRITE

Write a definition of **ontology** for future reference.

You could consult a resource such as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy ([plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)) to add further detail.

## Real and Unreal

Another distinction which may have been used by your classmates in the introductory exercise, is between those things we might describe as ‘real’, compared with the ‘unreal’.

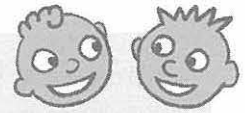


## DO

Working with a partner, arrange the following words on a page which at one end says REAL and at the other end says UNREAL.

UNREAL -----REAL

god	desks	chemicals	Santa Claus
thoughts	imagination	your shadow	air
evil	love	the number 9	morality
pixies	pain	Harry Potter	the future
dogs	unicorns	germs	electricity
aliens	Superman	triangles	choice
mathematics	awareness	spirits	the average person



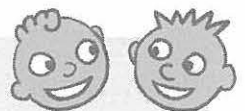
## DISCUSS

1. If something is real, does this mean it exists?
2. Can something be real but not exist?
3. Can something exist but not be real?
4. How real is  $2 + 3 = 5$ ?
5. Can something be real even if the senses can't perceive it?
6. Do you think there are different types of reality?
7. Which of the items listed above can or will go out of existence?
8. Where does a piece of music have existence?
9. If a tree falls in the forest and no-one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

## WHAT IS REAL?

Before the dawning of the scientific age around three hundred years ago, our account of reality in the Western world was based around God and to believe anything else was a punishable offence. Now, for many people, forming a coherent idea of how the world works can be a matter of picking and choosing from a huge variety of religious, philosophical and scientific accounts.

In some people's ontology, all entities – such as those listed in the activity above – are classified as real. For other people, it is the physical entities which are the most real, perhaps with the most basic building blocks on which everything depends, such as atoms, being considered the most real. For others, it is thoughts and feelings which are most real because they are immediately inside ourselves and we can be in no doubt as to their presence. For still others, the ultimate reality is God, as God is that from which everything else originates. **Cosmology** is the term used for the totality of existence: the nature of the universe as a whole and the place of humans within it.



## DISCUSS

### A CENTRAL QUESTION OF THIS THEME – 'WHERE IS REALITY?'

Is reality an objective set of facts, located outside ourselves? Or does it only have existence in our own heads, such that reality is uniquely constructed by each one of us? Or does the answer lie somewhere in between? And if there is such a thing as an objective, external reality, can human minds ever know and explain it?

1. Write your own journal response to one or more of these questions. Use words from the lists in the activities above to test any case you make.

2. Run a class discussion or Community of Inquiry (see p.15) based on these questions. After 25 minutes (or another time agreed on by the group), each class member should write down what they find to be the most interesting question – *not* included above – that has been raised so far during discussion and through individual journaling. These new questions can be written on the board.
3. Using one or more of the new questions as a starting point, complete a reflective piece of writing.

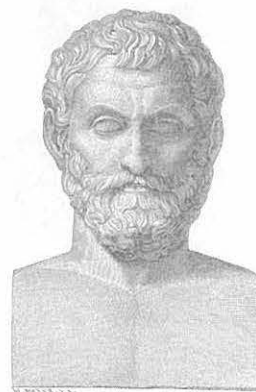
## The First Metaphysicians: Pre-Socratic Theories of Reality

We are now going to take a journey through the history of Western philosophy, to see what famous thinkers of the past have made of these important questions about the nature of reality.

The earliest Western philosophy we know about started in Greece about two and a half thousand years ago, with philosophers known as the Pre-Socratics. This term means that they lived before the time of Socrates (Famous Philosopher File p.7), the man considered to be the father of Western philosophy. Little of what the Pre-Socratics thought and taught survives in written form, whereas Socrates' student, Plato (Famous Philosopher File pp.93-94), wrote down a great deal of his teacher's work, and his volumes of dialogues survived the centuries to have their influence on medieval Europe.

**Thales** (624-546BCE) is generally regarded as the first Western philosopher. He asked the question, 'What is the world's most *basic* substance?' Or in other words, 'What is the world *ultimately* made up of, if we look beyond obvious appearances?' It is easy to take this enquiry for granted in our scientific age that is so knowledgeable about chemical elements, particles and so on. But for Thales to have asked and answered this question was an influential breakthrough in human thought, and marks the beginning of both Western science and philosophy. Thales' answer to the question was that everything in the universe ultimately consists of *water*. He declared that as the earth rests on water, and all things on it depend on water, it must be the ultimate material reality.

After Thales, other ancient Greek thinkers challenged this view. Thales' student, **Anaximander** (610-546BCE), suggested that there was some basic *apeiron*, or non-specific *stuff*, which made up the world. He said we could never experience this stuff directly or in its pure form, we could just know its manifestations. This stuff went beyond boundaries of time and space and produced the opposites we recognise in the world, such as hot and cold, hard and soft, short and long. These dichotomies structure our experience and keep everything in balance. Today we accept that indeed, there is 'stuff' which we cannot see or directly experience – that is, atoms and molecules – lying behind the obvious appearances of our world. But to the ancient Greeks, Anaximander's claims were radical indeed. Also significant is Anaximander's rejection of the views of Thales, his teacher. This notion of critically questioning one's teachers and other authorities is a cornerstone of philosophical practice, and also underpins Western notions of intellectual progress.



Thales  
By Ernst Wallis et al (own scan) [Public domain or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

A student of Anaximander's called **Anaximenes** (585-528BCE) in turn rejected his teacher's mysterious arguments, and claimed instead that everything is made of *air*. He thought water to be thickened air and earth to be very thickened air. The breath which gives life to humans is a form of air, which thickens to form the body. Likewise, steam condenses to water and thickens to ice.

An alternative view was suggested by **Heraclitus** (536-470BCE). Everything must ultimately be derived from fire, he argued, as like fire, the things of the world are constantly changing and consuming other things.

**Democritus** (460-370BCE) developed a radical theory: he suggested that the world is created by tiny elements called *atoms*. These could not be broken down any further, but could mix and match in infinite combinations to produce all the things in the world. The atoms, he claimed, are indestructible and eternal; it is only the forms they take when in combination with other atoms that are destroyed or reconfigured.

You will be struck by how close Democritus's theory is to what scientists believe today. But it would be wrong to think of all the other theories as primitive and ignorant. There are ways in which all these views of the world still have influence in people's outlooks in the 21st century. Furthermore, today it is not only **materialist** views of the world – that is, that reality is ultimately made up of physical components – that prevail. And so too in ancient Greece, many thinkers subscribed to **immaterialist** theories, believing that reality was best explained in non-physical terms.



Pythagoras  
Line engraving by B. Barlocchini  
after C. C. Perk [CC BY 4.0  
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Another immaterialist philosopher was **Parmenides**, who argued that because our world is constantly changing, it cannot be real at all. If the things of the world are always changing, we should not trust our sense perceptions of them. Therefore, we should comprehend reality via mental contemplation.

**Heraclitus** added a non-physical element to his materialist theory of fire mentioned earlier. He said that although the world is constantly changing, there is one unchanging element and that is *logic*.



Democritus  
By UnknownUnknown author  
(Thomas Stanley, 1655, The  
history of philosophy) [Public  
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Heraclitus  
See page for author [CC BY 4.0  
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There are some more terms that are useful when analysing and comparing different theories of reality. **Monism** is the view which holds that the universe is really just one thing, despite its diversity of appearances. **Dualism** believes that there are two levels of reality. **Pluralism** holds that more than one kind of basic stuff makes up the universe.

### THINK

Which of the theories above are monist theories? Are there any dualist theories?



### WRITE

In your workbook, write brief definitions of: materialism, immaterialism, monism, dualism, pluralism.



### DO

1. Select one of the Pre-Socratic ontologies outlined above and present a series of arguments (you may write these in standard form if you wish) supporting why this must be the case. Try to be as imaginative in these arguments as you can. But remember, you do not have the advantage of reference to all the science of the modern world.
2. Select one Pre-Socratic theory to investigate further. Present your findings to the class. What links can you make between this Pre-Socratic theory and views which are still in evidence today?



### TEXT STUDY: Democritus, On the Physical World (around 400BCE)

[see Useful Resources]

Only fragments of writing by Democritus have survived. Read the following piece, which outlines his atomic theory of nature.

45 *The universe is infinite because it has not been produced by a creator. The causes of what now exists had no beginning.*

46 *There is an infinite number of worlds of different sizes: some are larger than ours, some have no sun or moon, others have suns or moons that are bigger than ours. Some have many suns and moons. Worlds are spaced at differing distances from each other; in some parts of the universe there are more worlds, in other parts fewer. In some areas they are growing, in other parts, decreasing. They are destroyed by collision with one another. There are some worlds with no living creatures, plants, or moisture.*



47 *The material cause of all things that exist is the coming together of atoms and void. Atoms are too small to be perceived by the senses. They are eternal and have many different shapes, and they can cluster together to create things that are perceivable. Differences in shape, arrangement, and position of atoms produce different things. By aggregation they provide bulky objects that we can perceive with our sight and other senses.*

48 *We see changes in things because of the rearrangement of atoms, but atoms themselves are eternal. Words such as 'nothing', 'the void', and 'the infinite' describe space. Individual atoms are describable as 'not nothing', 'being', and 'the compact'. There is no void in atoms, so they cannot be divided. I hold the same view as Leucippus regarding atoms and space: atoms are always in motion in space.*

49 *Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion.\**

Work in small groups to consider the following questions.

1. What do you think Democritus means by 'the void'? Why would his theory need a concept like this?
2. How do you think this theory would explain the way a tree grows?
3. If atoms are 'too small to be perceived by the senses', how is it that you can taste your food and see this book?
4. Write one or more questions that you could ask Democritus to explain about his theory.
5. How is Democritus's theory different from the account of atoms given by modern physics?

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\* <http://www.humanistictexts.org/democritus.htm#The%20Physical%20World> (accessed July 14, 2013)

## ***An Ancient Worldwide Philosophy Boom***

As we have seen from the brief snapshots above of the intellectual activity occurring in ancient Greece, the middle of first millennium BCE was a turning point for intellectual life in the Western world. Extraordinarily, the same period saw independent eruptions of new thought systems in several other places as well.

In China, **Confucius** and **Lao Tsu** established all the main threads of Chinese philosophy. Similarly, in India, the **Upanishads** and the **Buddha** addressed every major philosophical question. In Iran, **Zarathustra** presented the struggle between good and evil as the basis for an entire worldview.



## DO

Research one of the thinkers mentioned in bold in the previous paragraph. What can you discover, in brief, about their view of reality? To what degree would you say the following terms could be accurately applied to their worldview: materialism, immaterialism, monism, dualism, pluralism?

# Foundations of Western Metaphysical Thought: Plato and Aristotle

What does it mean for something to exist? What kinds of substances exist and how do they relate? What does it mean for something to change? While Pre-Socratic answers to these questions survive only in fragmentary form, we now move on to study the first two great systems of metaphysics in the Western World, as conceived by Plato, and Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99).

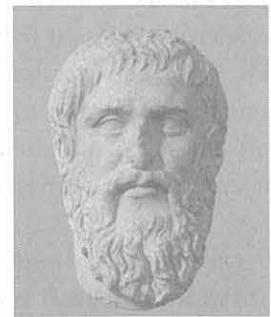
Plato was a student of Socrates (Famous Philosopher File p.7). Plato's writings typically employ dialogue form, with the character of Socrates as the chief protagonist. Socrates was most interested in moral questions, and Plato diligently recorded his teacher's ideas. However, when Plato's dialogues deal with metaphysical questions, even though the mouthpiece is Socrates, the theories espoused are probably Plato's own.

Aristotle was in turn a student of Plato, and became his teacher's harshest critic. Both thinkers aimed to resolve the problems they inherited from the Pre-Socratics. In so doing, Plato and Aristotle established what we call Western Philosophy, and, as we shall see in later Themes, also laid the foundations for Christian theology.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Plato (427–347BCE)

Alfred North Whitehead is often quoted for his comment that the whole of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. This is because Plato started the debates on almost every philosophical question that we have cared to explore since. He set the agenda for discussion for the next two and a half thousand years.





Plato was the first Western philosopher whose written work survives intact. Plato always wrote his ideas in the form of philosophical dialogue, featuring Socrates as the protagonist. Plato was a student of Socrates. He was 31 when Socrates was executed in 399BC; this must have been very traumatic as Plato admired Socrates as the best and wisest of human beings. Probably his intention in writing Socrates into all his dialogues was to rehabilitate his teacher's reputation. Certainly he succeeded in ensuring enduring influence for the ideas of both Socrates and himself. Scholars have debated how much of Plato's writing is simply historical records of actual conversations had by Socrates and how much is original philosophy by Plato himself. It is generally agreed that as the years went by, more and more of Plato's own ideas were worked out in the dialogues.

Plato's early work is concerned with moral and political philosophy, showing little interest in problems about the natural world. But the later dialogues are passionately curious about every kind of philosophical question, from abstract ontology to how we should spend our leisure time. Plato regarded mathematics as the purest form of enquiry. Over the door of his Academy were the words 'Let no-one unversed in mathematics enter here'.

Plato's dialogues, as well as being among the most significant works of philosophy in the Western world, are also among the world's great literature. He is considered as much artist as philosopher for his poetic style and memorable metaphors.

## ***Plato's Forms***

In his famous **Theory of Forms**, Plato managed to reconcile materialist and immaterialist views of reality.

To Plato, it is the immaterial world that must be more real. He argues that there is a world of **perfect Forms**, which he calls the **World of Being**, and which contains all the eternal concepts and ideas on which the material objects of this world are based. The Forms – sometimes translated as 'ideas' – are imperishable, indestructible, unchanging and permanent. Plato argues that even though all the things of this material world – the tables, chairs, trees, goats and people – will eventually perish and die out altogether, the *concepts* of these things must be eternal, even when there are no more human minds in existence to carry those concepts.

Plato calls *our* world – of changing, dying, destructible and impermanent physical things – the **World of Becoming**. It is real, but it is less real than the World of Being, because all it contains is temporary items – fleeting snapshots of reality. In contrast, the World of Being contains the ideas or blueprints for all that has ever existed and will ever exist. We are not to imagine the World of Being as an actual place. It is not located anywhere. It transcends human minds, even though human minds are able to tap into its truths.

Let's consider the example of a perfect circle. Can you draw a perfect circle? Given a pair of compasses, or something to trace around, could you draw a perfect circle? Using a computer function, could you draw a perfect circle? Are there any perfect circles in our entire physical world? The answer to these questions is no. Any circle we could ever attempt to draw would turn out to be so jagged at its edges, or so pixelated, that it couldn't be called a perfect circle at all. So

although we use the *concept* of the perfect circle all the time (think of all the objects around you that are apparently perfect circles: coins, glasses, bottles, clocks,...) it is actually impossible to find or create a perfect circle in this world. So do perfect circles exist? Surely they do have some kind of existence. Do they exist only in our minds? Well surely their existence goes beyond just human thought and doesn't depend on us; surely perfect circles can have existence beyond the existence of the human species. Thus, Plato argued, perfect circles – or the Form of the Perfect Circle – must have existence in the World of Being, the eternal plane that is the source of all our ideas.

Plato himself famously used the example of a horse. If I show you a tiny wooden model of a horse, how is it that you recognise it as a horse? It has so little resemblance to an actual horse in almost every respect! Plato said that what you are tapping into is the *Form* of Horse – the concept of 'horse-ness', if you like – which *precedes* and *transcends* every individual physical instance of horse and is permanently available as a blueprint for what it is to be a horse.



The Theory of Forms also explains Plato's **rationalism** – that is, his view that the way to work out the truth about the world is through rational contemplation rather than through the senses, which can be deceived. For Plato, the way to understand reality is not to go around the world examining physical objects, but rather to use reason to understand the essence or *Form* of a thing.

Unfortunately, Plato arrived at his Theory of Forms quite late in his career, so he never developed it to the extent he no doubt intended. Those speculations and criticisms have been left to his successors, and the Theory of Forms has been a profound influence on thinkers ever since. Plato did establish that there is a hierarchy of Forms, and objects can participate in more than one Form at a time. Thus we can interpret that two bananas participate in the Form of Two at the same time as participating in the Forms of Even and of Pairs and of Fruits. In its turn, the Form of Fruits participates in the Form of Edible Things and so on. However, these aspects of the theory were

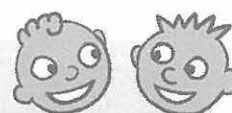
not articulated in detail by Plato. Critics have wondered whether there are problems for the theory running into an infinite regress of participation in Forms. What Plato did make clear was that he thought there was an overarching Form – an ‘uber-Form’ if you like – which made possible and illuminated all other Forms. This is the Form of The Good.

When early Christian thinkers got hold of Plato’s writings, they translated the World of Being and in particular the Form of The Good into ‘the mind of God’ – a realm of infinite possibility. Perhaps Plato’s theory becomes easier to conceive of and to communicate to the masses in this way. However, Plato’s vision of reality did not rely on any God. Plato did, however, explain the immortality of human souls in reference to the World of Forms, arguing that the soul – which is like the essence or concept of a person – has infinite, imperishable existence. In this way, the World of Being also became transformed into ‘heaven’ by the early Christians, although this is a fairly crude sketch of how the complicated marriage between Platonism and Christianity came about.



## WRITE

1. Explain, in your own words, Plato’s Theory of Forms.
2. Try describing the ‘Form’ of some ordinary objects around you, in accordance with Plato’s theory.
3. How might you know whether an object is defined by one Form or another?
4. Can an object have conflicting Forms? Can you think of any examples?
5. Must Forms all be ‘perfect’ in a positive sense? Could there be, for example, the Perfect Form of a Smelly Sock?
6. Can we understand our recognition of objects without some conception of Forms to explain how it is that we recognise them?



## DISCUSS

An objection Aristotle made to Plato was he thought the Theory of Forms doubled the number of things in the universe. For Plato, the physical item ‘brown horse in that paddock’ is preceded by the Form of Horse if it is to be at all intelligible. Why do we need to speak of two kinds of thing or two levels of existence here, wondered Aristotle? He questioned whether, if reality is as Plato described, might there not be a further Form of Form of Horse, creating an infinite regress where there are then three, four, five, one thousand levels of reality, thereby creating absurdity.

Form small groups to discuss the following:

1. To suggest that a theory leads to *infinite regress* is a criticism often used in philosophical evaluations. What is meant by this expression and why might infinite regress be problematic?
2. How effective do you find this criticism of Aristotle’s?
3. How might Plato have responded to this criticism?

## Plato's Cave Myth

In his great work, *The Republic*, Plato dramatises the Theory of Forms in a powerful myth. This myth operates on many levels and there is enough in it to keep you pondering its ideas and connecting its themes with other areas of life for the rest of your days. So it rewards some detailed study and is best read in its original text. If you buy one primary text in philosophy you shall not go wrong by adding Plato's *Republic* to your collection!



### TEXT STUDY: Plato, *The Republic* 514a-517a (around 380BCE)

[see Useful Resources]

Read Plato's Cave Myth in its original text from *The Republic*.

1. a. Outline the Cave Myth in your own words. What are the five main stages of the prisoner's journey? OR  
b. Draw a picture or diagram outlining the Cave Myth. Label each stage. OR  
c. Act out the Cave Myth for your class.
2. How does the Cave Myth link to Plato's Theory of Forms? Does it depict the Worlds of Being and Becoming, do you think? In what ways does the myth make the Theory of Forms clearer for you?
3. You may have seen the film, *The Matrix*. If so, how can you see Plato's Cave Myth at work in its narrative? Can you think of any other literary or filmic narratives with links to the Cave Myth?

## Aristotle's Metaphysics

Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99) may have been Plato's student, but he developed very different ideas. He argued that he saw no sense in having a theory of 'two worlds'. You may find Aristotle's theory to be relatively 'down to earth'. It is certainly simpler to grasp than Plato's, largely because it has prevailed as the commonsense and scientific view in our society for centuries. But you should try and think about aspects of reality which Aristotle's theory does *not* explain.

Aristotle argues that the physical things of this world – changeable and impermanent as they may be – *are reality*. He sees little point in speaking of a remote World of Forms that we can never directly experience. Aristotle thinks Plato has things back to front in his suggestion that we first recognise 'horse-ness' or the Form of Horse before we can identify particular instances of horses. Aristotle says we develop the concept of 'horse' *after* seeing several horses. For Aristotle, the **form** of a horse – or our definition or idea of a horse – is *contained in horse-like objects themselves* – and is made up of all the common characteristics we have observed in horses. So Aristotle uses the word **form**, but in a different way from Plato.

Another key term in Aristotle's metaphysics is **substance**. Aristotle defines substance as 'that which stands alone'. By this he means independent existence. A tree exists in its own right and is therefore a substance. But its leaves could not exist without the tree's existence; therefore Aristotle argues that a tree's leaves are not substances. A person, a dragonfly and a plant are all substances, or **primary beings**, for Aristotle. But hair, wings and flowers are not substances. Rather, they are secondary *qualities*. Along the same lines, a person may have six feet of height, a dragonfly two wings and a flower 17 petals; these are secondary *quantities*. Any of these secondary qualities and quantities could change, but the primary being would remain in existence.

So, according to Aristotle, substance is what underlies all the properties and changes in something. In this sense you can say you are the same person you were several years ago, despite having undergone many changes since then. A substance is a concrete individual thing, which remains constant despite the fact it changes and has different qualities at different times.

And what about this book and the pen in your hand? Aristotle thinks that manmade objects are not primary beings because they don't have their own natures. They can only exist and fulfil their purposes alongside humans.

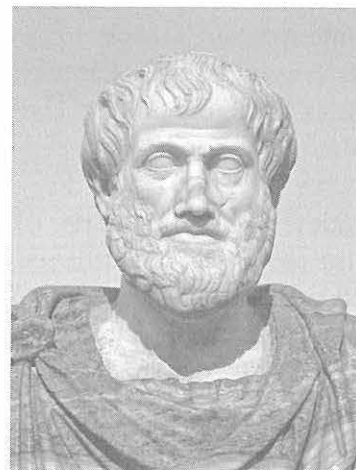
You can see that while Plato argues for an ultimate level of reality *beyond* our everyday world, for Aristotle it is our everyday world which is the ultimate level of reality. Substances, for Aristotle, are the ultimate things of reality, while for Plato it is the Forms.

However, Aristotle does not reject Plato's distinction between appearances and reality. He argues that at a superficial level of reality, we can immediately recognise tree-substances and dog-substances. However, we don't necessarily understand the *essential natures* of these things – what it is to be a tree, or what it is to be a dog. Aristotle describes these essential natures as **essences**. Here Aristotle directs us to the level of analysis that is required to see the reality beyond appearances and to *explain* rather than just observe the world around us.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Aristotle (384–322BCE)

Aristotle was Plato's student for around twenty years and we can see many of Plato's ideas in his work. However, often Plato's views were a starting point from which Aristotle developed his own divergent philosophy. After Plato's death, Aristotle opened his own school, the Lyceum, where Plato's work was studied and criticised. He then became tutor to Alexander the Great, ensuring a line of succession spanning four generations of great figures from Socrates to Alexander.



Aristotle was born in Stagira (now Macedonia). He was sent to Plato's Academy in Athens when he was 17. Although Aristotle admired his teacher greatly, he thought Plato's fundamental view of the universe – consisting of two worlds, one an unseen realm of perfect Forms – was nonsense. As far as Aristotle was concerned, the world we can sense and experience is the only world we can philosophise about.

Aristotle was inexhaustibly curious about the natural world. He would often be seen crouched down, peering into bushes or collecting insects. He was the great organising father of science, classifying the living world into groups and sub-groups by characteristics, aiming to ultimately categorise all human knowledge. Indeed Aristotle mapped out all the basic areas of scientific inquiry and his divisions and words for them are still used today, including logic, physics, political science, economics, psychology, metaphysics, meteorology, rhetoric and ethics. Aristotle is also known as the father of logic, as it is from him that we inherit our system of deductive validity which you learned about in Chapter 2.

Aristotle achieved an extraordinary amount in his lifetime, and history would not produce another thinker of his calibre for the next two thousand years. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Aristotelian knowledge was lost in Europe. Fortunately it was kept alive in the Arab world, and found its way back to Europe in the 13th century. It was then combined with Christianity to produce the biggest single body of knowledge in the world, and over the next few centuries would engender the Scientific Revolution. However, Aristotle was not right about everything. His view of women as 'unfinished men' not fully capable of rational thought, when linked with the biblical story of Eve being created from Adam's rib, helped to keep women's status subdued in the Western world until the 20th century.

An essence is the aspect of an individual that defines it as a particular individual. For example, it is part of your essence that you are a human being, that you are living in the 21st century A.D., and you are breathing. Anything that lacks these properties could not possibly be you. You have many other properties, of course. You live in Australia, you have a pet goldfish, you play soccer on Saturdays, you have long brown hair, you study VCE Philosophy. But these are not essential properties; they are not part of your essence. Rather, Aristotle calls these *accidental properties*. You would still be you without them. But change any one of the essential properties and you are a different entity. You could not be a buffalo and still be you.

A third key term in Aristotle's metaphysics is **matter**. This basically refers to what something is made of. The matter of your chair may be wood.

Substance, for Aristotle, is a combination of form and matter. Matter is given structure and shape by form, and together these things produce substance.

This enables Aristotle to explain change. Aristotle believes things combine matter and form in a variety of ways. Substantial change – the coming to be and passing away of things – happens when matter is given a new form.

In addition, the notion of **telos**, or purpose, is central to Aristotle's theory. Formed matter, according to Aristotle, moves and changes in order to achieve some goal. Acorns always grow into oak trees and children into adults. That these things will change to acquire such purposeful forms is part of their essence, Aristotle would argue. Thus, the matter of each kind of object has the potentiality for acquiring a form proper to that object. A natural **teleology** will lead each object in the universe to achieve its final form, unless there is some unusual interference.

Aristotle spent many pages trying to explain these ideas in his *Metaphysics*. His several definitions of the term 'substance', in particular, preoccupied philosophers throughout the Middle Ages.

### DO

Act out or draw the life cycle of a caterpillar (you may need to research it first). Add commentary which makes use of the following terms from Aristotelian theory: form, substance, essence/essential properties, telos/teleology, primary being, secondary qualities, secondary quantities, accidental properties, change.



### WRITE

1. Outline Aristotle's account of reality in your own words.
2. How does Aristotle use the terms **form** and **substance**?
3. Distinguish between Plato and Aristotle's use of the term **form**.
4. Contrast the ways in which Plato and Aristotle would describe the reality of a tree.
5. How are Aristotle and Plato different in how they account for *changes* in an object?
6. What are the advantages of Aristotle's theory of reality compared with Plato's? What are some disadvantages?
7. To which theory of reality are you most persuaded – Plato or Aristotle's? Why?



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## Modern Philosophy's Views on Reality

### ***Rene Descartes: Distinct Mental and Physical Realms***

You will have noticed the confidence of Plato and Aristotle that the world is ultimately explainable by human inquiry. This confidence continued in the Middle Ages (from the late Roman Empire onwards), when philosophers and theologians – including notable figures St Augustine (Famous Philosopher File p.201) and St Thomas Aquinas (Famous Philosopher File p.231) – developed complex systems of metaphysics, often on the basis of Plato and Aristotle's ideas.

While Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are the key figures of Ancient Philosophy, it is Rene Descartes (Famous Philosopher File p.102) who is regarded as the first major voice of Modern Philosophy. This 'modern' era, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, was marked by strikingly new ideas, departing boldly from teachings of the Christian Church.

Descartes presented his metaphysics most famously in his six *Meditations on First Philosophy*, a text you will be invited to study in later Themes as well.

Descartes' 'method of radical doubt' will warrant your close attention when studying Epistemology. Descartes begins by doubting everything he believes, with the aim of finding a first premise that is beyond doubt, from which he will then reason to find other truths. He firstly doubts his senses; surely they could be misleading him, as they have done before in cases of illusion or hallucination. Then he wonders whether he could be dreaming all his experiences. Thus he has called into question the existence of the natural world and even of his own body. He doubts mathematics and science, and even God. Just suppose, he wonders: could an evil demon actually be trying to deceive me about the nature of reality?

It is this dramatic and sinister moment that leads Descartes to his famous moment of revelation: that he himself must exist. Because the fact that he is able to doubt everything, and to wonder whether a demon is deceiving him, must mean that he exists in the first place. He exists, and he exists as a thinking thing, he concludes. However, Descartes goes on to argue that he cannot know for certain that he has a body, since the evil demon could be deceiving him about that. His body, and the rest of the physical world, could be illusions.

Descartes later proceeds to prove to himself that the physical world does in fact, exist. But he has already demonstrated a separation between the mental and physical worlds: that the latter can be doubted, while the former is beyond doubt. This position – which holds that mind and body are two separate substances – is known as **dualism**.

Descartes now has to confront a troublesome issue: how can he explain how the physical and mental realms manage to interact, if they are such radically different kinds of substance? You will read more on this question in Theme 2 of this Chapter.



## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Rene Descartes (1596–1650)

Descartes was born in a little French town now called La-Haye-Descartes. Descartes showed great talent as a student and studied classics, Aristotelian physics and mathematics. Then he committed to seeing the world firsthand through travel with the military. He made his home in Holland for his most productive years as a mathematician, scientist and philosopher.

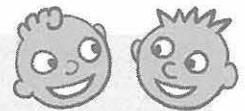


In his early twenties, Descartes solved several problems that had frustrated mathematicians for centuries. Next he turned to the great mysteries of physiology. Aided by dissections of sometimes live animals, and examinations of human corpses he obtained from the local hospital, Descartes made remarkably accurate hypotheses about the mechanisms of the human body, in particular the workings of the eye, the limbs and the digestive system. Turning then to meteorology, Descartes is credited with producing the first correct explanation for the formation of rainbows. During these years, Descartes fathered an illegitimate child; he was shattered when she died at just age five.

However, Descartes is probably most famous as ‘the father of modern philosophy’ because he revised many of the ideas that had held sway since Aristotle. His *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) is compulsory reading on most first-year university Philosophy courses around the world. Other important works include *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and *Principles of Philosophy* (1644). Descartes’ account of the mind has perhaps received more attention than any of his other philosophical ideas, largely because most twentieth century notions of mind have formed in opposition Descartes’ theory.

In 1649 Descartes went to Sweden to become a personal tutor to Queen Christina. She insisted that the lessons start at 5am, and the early mornings spent trudging through snow to the palace eventually brought on the pneumonia that caused the philosopher’s death.

## DISCUSS



1. Is Descartes’ division of reality into mental and physical realms a sensible one? Why or why not?
2. Does his reasoning – that one can be doubted and the other cannot – form a convincing argument that mind and body are separate substances?
3. Can you think of any other arguments for dualism – that is, the idea that the world is made of two different kinds of thing, physical and non-physical?



## TEXT STUDY: Rene Descartes, *Meditation I* (1641)

[see Useful Resources]

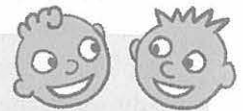
Note that this is a preliminary study of this important text. A more detailed guide and questions on this text is contained in Chapter 3, Theme 2).

Read Descartes' *Meditation I*.

1. Highlight all the sentences which seem to you to be about nature of the mind or the body.
2. Locate any passages which seem to draw a contrast between the mind and body and mark these with an asterisk.
3. Identify a passage of argument which draws on differences between the physical and mental realms.
4. What seem to be Descartes' main ideas in this section about how the physical compares with the mental?

## John Locke: *Primary and Secondary Qualities*

We have already pondered the question of where our reality exists: is it 'out there' in an external world, or is it dependent on our minds for its existence?



### DISCUSS

1. Where does an apple have its existence? Is it out in the world, as a being that is independent from you, and which continues to have existence when you cease perceiving it?
2. What about the red colour of an apple? Does that exist in the apple, independently of you? Or is somehow dependent on your perceptions?
3. What about the taste of the apple? What kind of reality does that have?

Many ontological questions concern the extent to which various phenomena are 'mind-dependent'. According to many philosophers through the centuries, while objects themselves may have independent existence, the colours that objects *seem* to possess are not, in fact, truly possessed by them. Along with tastes, smells, sounds and feels, colour – it is argued – is to some degree the product of the observing mind.

John Locke (Famous Philosopher File p.104) was among the earliest thinkers to distinguish in this way between so-called primary and secondary qualities. He defined **primary qualities** as features which exist objectively in an object. These are independent from, and external to, any observer. They include position, number, shape, size and motion. **Secondary qualities**, by contrast, are features which are dependent on the minds of observers, and include colour, taste, smell and feel.

Note that Locke did not argue, as some others have, that secondary qualities exist entirely in the mind. Colour, says Locke, consists of an attribute or disposition of an object, which triggers a certain kind of experience in the mind. So, for Locke, for an apple to be red means that if an observer looked at it under normal conditions, then it would produce in them an experience of 'red' colour.

Importantly, this means that Locke's theory enables the apple to remain 'red' even if no-one is looking at it. For as long as it remains apt to set off a 'red' experience for an observer, the apple can still be considered red.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

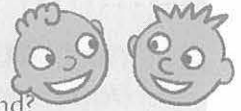
### John Locke (1632 – 1704)

John Locke was born in Somerset, England. He completed his Bachelors and Masters degrees at Oxford University in both philosophy and medicine. Aristotle had a big influence on him, and if you have already studied Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, you may be able to identify some points of agreement between Locke and Aristotle. Like Aristotle, Locke was fascinated by scientific questions, and he completed a medical degree in 1674. His talents didn't end here; Locke also had interests in political philosophy and diplomacy; he was both personal doctor and political advisor to the Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the leading politicians in London at the time.

At the age of 50, Locke published the two books of philosophy for which he is best known. *Two Treatises of Civil Government* would become so influential that its principles can be credited with shaping the American constitution. It is *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* for which Locke is most noted in modern philosophy, as the influence of this book on the next 100 years of Western thought was profound. Berkeley, Hume and Kant all developed their theories on the basis of Locke's *Essay*. In it, Locke explored the nature of human knowledge and the way in which the mind organises and judges sensory data. Having read Descartes' *Meditations*, Locke was impressed by Descartes' vow to provide science with firm epistemological footing. However, Locke just disagreed with Descartes' rationalism, arguing famously that the human mind is like a 'blank slate' or *tabula rasa*.



## DISCUSS



If a tree falls in a forest, and no-one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

What do you think?

What would John Locke have said?

Of course, Locke needs to answer the question of how it is that physical objects cause the sensations they do in human observers. Locke's answer, influenced by his contemporary, the great scientist Isaac Newton (Famous Philosopher File p.197), is that microscopic particles within the object somehow act upon observers to produce certain sensations. Modern science adds support to this early molecular theory.

So how does Locke argue for his theory? Locke is an **empiricist**; this means that much of his reasoning, instead of aiming to be a series of logical proofs (in the manner of mathematics), instead appeals to our everyday experience of the world. By means of examples, Locke demonstrates that several properties of objects are consistently described in the same ways by observers (that is, the primary qualities). Meanwhile, the secondary qualities can be described in different ways by different observers and moreover, suggest no objective methods of measurement.

## THINK



1. Imagine that the human optical system changes so that colours no longer appear as they used to. Perhaps one day apples are red, and the next day they all appear blue. Are apples now blue? What do you think? What would Locke have said?
2. If a ball looks yellow and round to you, is it *really* round and yellow? What do you think? What would Locke's response be?

## WRITE



1. How does Locke distinguish between primary and secondary qualities?
2. Select three common objects and describe them in terms of their primary and secondary qualities, according to Locke's definitions.
3. 'Are things as they seem?' How might John Locke have answered this question?
4. Locke points out that primary qualities are described in consistent ways by observers and can be measured. Secondary qualities are difficult to measure objectively and attract different descriptions from their observers. Are these good arguments for separating the primary from secondary qualities in objects?



## **TEXT STUDY: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter VII (1689)**

[see Useful Resources]

The following questions address sections 8 to 25.

1. How does Locke use the following terms: sensation, idea, property?
2. How does Locke use the following examples to advance his argument about the differences between primary and secondary qualities?
  - a. Fire
  - b. Pain
  - c. Manna (a sweet juice extracted from certain plants)
  - d. Porphyry (a hard rock consisting of red and white crystals)
  - e. almond and almond oil
  - f. putting a cold hand and a hot hand into the same water
3. Can you think of any examples of your own which would operate in the same way as Locke's examples listed above?
4. How effective are Locke's examples? Select one from the list above and identify a strength or a weakness, explaining why you think it is a strength or a weakness.

## **George Berkeley: *All in the Mind***

The debate about the mind-dependence of objects led to the development of one of the most challenging and provocative theories in all philosophy.

Bishop George Berkeley (Famous Philosopher File p.107) denied that Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities could be upheld. Berkeley could not see how, if physical reality lies somewhere beyond our ideas about it, we could ever know it at all. Berkeley reasoned that all we can be absolutely sure of is what we perceive. But what we perceive is ultimately in our heads – it is our *mental ideas*. I can be more sure of my mental perception that there is a horse in the paddock than I can be sure that the outside world is there, that the horse is really present, and so on. When I turn away from the paddock, there is nothing about the horse that remains apparent to my perception apart from my *idea* that it is probably still in the paddock. Therefore, for Berkeley, the highest level of reality is that of our own minds. We cannot be sure of material objects. We cannot be sure of the external world. We must say that the kind of existence that these things have is in our minds.

But how can we be sure of our minds? Well, we can be sure that our perceptions and ideas exist, and these things presuppose minds. Berkeley further argues that our minds require God's infinite mind as a 'presupposition'. It is because God's mind contains all things that the horse is able to still exist in the paddock when I don't perceive it. Everything has existence in God's mind, and things in turn exist for us, as and when we perceive them. This is how Berkeley would answer the objection that things like stars and planets surely existed before there were human beings to perceive them. It is also the way that he answers the objection that two people seem to be able

to see the same thing. You might argue against Berkeley that it seems ridiculous for you and I to both see a horse and therefore for there to be, in effect, two different horses in existence: your perception and my perception. Berkeley says that what we each see is a copy of the idea of the horse that is already in God's mind, which is the single true horse.

You should note that Berkeley does not deny that things of the world exist; he just denies that they have *physical* existence. Berkeley is called an **idealist** because of his view that the only kind of reality or existence is non-physical, mental existence. The mind is ultimate reality, whether our own mind or the mind of God. The universe is made up of minds and things dependent on minds and nothing else.

You can see that Berkeley's **idealism** addresses the concern that you may have had about Locke's division of the properties of objects. How can you be so sure – you may have wanted to ask Locke – that primary qualities are objectively present, or even that the object is definitely there in the first place? As Descartes argued, it is possible to call into doubt our physical world, but harder to deny that we are having thoughts and ideas. If we further collapse any distinction at all between physical and mental worlds, classifying both as essentially of the mind, we overcome Descartes' problem of explaining how mental and physical might interact.

Berkeley set out his idealism in his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, where Philonous defends Berkeley's idealist position and Hylas defends the standard materialist doctrine of the day, as argued by Locke.

#### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1783)

Irish philosopher and Bishop George Berkeley was a protestant Irishman, educated at Trinity College in Dublin. All the philosophy for which he is now famous was published while he was still in his twenties, including *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). It was twenty years later that he became a bishop, travelling to America and promoting university education there. The city and university of Berkeley, California, are named after him.

Berkeley is known as the father of philosophical idealism. His ambitious project attempted to show how the assumptions of Locke and Newton were not secure enough to build a science upon. Berkeley's most famous statement is 'Esse est percipi' ('to be is to be perceived'). This summarises his major doctrine, that because we can only be sure of the mental content of what we experience, the world essentially exists as a mental, rather than physical, reality. It has been recognised ever since that this is fairly hard to deny, even though the consequences of these premises take us into a way of looking at the world that is far from the common-sense view.



## THE ARGUMENT FROM MICROSCOPES

The first way Berkeley defends his idealism is by collapsing the distinction made by John Locke between primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley argues that features of reality such as colours and tastes are just as real as scientific features such as size and weight. All of these are just as much in our minds as they are in the outside world.

His argument goes something like this:

- P1 We perceive different secondary qualities in objects (for example, colour, taste, smell) depending on our perspective (for example, an object appears to be different colours if we see it through a microscope).
- P2 We also perceive different primary qualities in objects (for example, speeds, shapes, sizes) depending on perspective (for example, something that appears spherical with the naked eye is proved to be covered in bumps if we see it through a microscope).
- 
- C1 Therefore our perception of all objects depends on our mental interpretation of them, rather than what is actually in the objects themselves.
- C2 Therefore, our reality is formed from mental interpretations, not from the physical world.
- C3 Therefore, what exists is mental, not physical.

## THE UNPERCEIVED TREE ARGUMENT

In this argument, Philonous challenges Hylas to come up with an example of something that exists but is neither perceived nor thought of. But the problem is that anything Hylas suggests will have been thought of by Hylas himself. So we can never think of an example of any object in the world which has no connections with our minds. For Philonous (and Berkeley), this shows that the reason for this is that such objects do not exist. Everything which exists is related to our minds.

A problem with this argument is that while it may demonstrate that we cannot *show* that there is anything unperceived, it doesn't prove that there *isn't* anything unperceived.

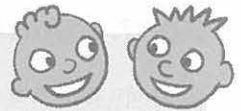
## REASONS FOR BELIEF ARGUMENT

The next argument attempts to address the objection just made. Berkeley argues that the only *reason* we have for believing something is that we perceived it. Therefore, the only things we have reason to believe exist are perceived things. Therefore, we have reason to believe that it is only perceived things which exist.



## WRITE

1. Define the term **idealism**.
2. Outline Berkeley's account of reality in your own words.
3. How is the mind of God crucial to Berkeley's idealism?
4. How would you respond to Berkeley's Reasons for Belief argument?
5. Which argument for Berkeley's idealism, of those outlined above, do you find most convincing? Why? Which argument do you find least convincing and why?
6. Could Berkeley's account of reality be correct? Why or why not?
7. How would Berkeley respond to the question, 'If a tree falls in a forest and no-one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?'
8. The great critic and poet Samuel Johnson is famously described as kicking a stone hard with his toe during a discussion of Berkeley's idealism. 'I refute it thus,' pronounced Johnson. How does this suggest Johnson may have misunderstood Berkeley?



## DISCUSS

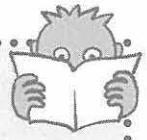
### Class debate:

'Idealism is the only sensible conclusion about the nature of reality.'

Form two teams: an affirmative and a negative. Each team has the task of preparing the **THREE** strongest arguments they can develop for their contention. Each team then has a maximum of 10 minutes to present these arguments as convincingly as they can.

At the end, the class will vote on whose arguments were the strongest.





## **TEXT STUDY: George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713)**

[see Useful Resources]

**READ: The First Dialogue** from Hyl: 'I tell you, Philonous, external light is...' until Phil: 'through a microscope.'

1. Consider Berkeley's strategy. What does he achieve by having Hylas advocate Locke's view of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities?
2. Locate the point at which Philonous starts persuading Hylas that secondary qualities are located in the mind.
3. What is Hylas's response?
4. What is Philonous's next move?
5. What is the absurd conclusion which Philonous claims Hylas has committed himself to? What are the premises which lead to this conclusion?
6. Can you think of any ways in which Hylas could have saved his argument?

## ***Kant: Reality Constituted by Minds***

German philosopher Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) took idealism in a different direction again. Kant agreed with the empirical views of Aristotle and Berkeley that everything we can say is real must be available to our experience. But Kant took this idea further than any previous philosopher by arguing that reality is actually *constituted* or *created* by our mental concepts. Kant said that our minds are constructed in such a way that there are certain universal, necessary, *a priori* concepts (see Chapter 3, Theme 2) which have to be the case for us to perceive anything at all. For Kant, time, space and causality are part of the structures of our own minds rather than phenomena or laws which exist 'out there' in the world, independent from us.

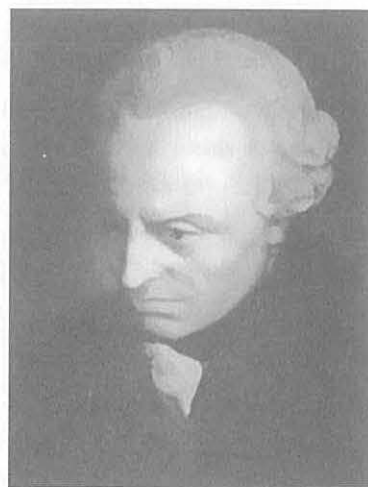
Kant goes even further and says that we live in not just one reality but two. He describes a world of nature, contrasting with a world of action and belief. When we interact with nature in the sense of studying something or seeking knowledge, Kant argues that we see reality through a particular set of mental concepts. But when we engage in practical reality as human subjects, we use a completely different set of rules. For example, a scientist will give us a detailed account of what happens to muscles, nerves and bones when we walk. But when we walk somewhere, that is not the reality we are usually conscious of; rather, our walking is the means to our achieving some mental intention or end. For Kant, both these accounts of the world are distinct, but equally real and rational.

Kant's metaphysics is extremely complex and overlaps with his epistemological theories which you will visit in Chapter 3 Themes 2 and 4. We will leave our account of his ontology here, but encourage you to look further into Kant's descriptions of how we come to know reality, as they have had enormous influence on the course of philosophical thought ever since.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

German philosopher Immanuel Kant is commonly regarded as the greatest philosopher to have emerged in the Western world since the ancient Greeks. He led a very confined life. Deeply religious, he never went outside the area of eastern Germany where he was born, he never married, and the people of his village would set their watches by him as he passed their houses on his daily walk. But Kant was not boring. He was popular dinner company and an amusing conversationalist. His brilliant lectures brought people from miles around and along with his books, made him internationally famous in his lifetime.



In 1781, Kant published one of the greatest books of all time: the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This work was so profoundly original that philosophers struggled then, as now, to understand it, but it was to change the way philosophers dealt with nearly all the major problems of epistemology and ontology. Concerned that his manifesto was being misunderstood, Kant published a briefer, simpler summary which is still considered one of the best introductions to Kantian metaphysics.

Kant also made major contributions to ethics with his slim volume, *A Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. The *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Critique of Judgment* completed his published output and included Kant's theories across nearly all major branches of philosophy, including Aesthetics.

## WRITE

1. How is Kant's theory an **idealist** theory?
2. Outline Kant's account of reality in your own words.
3. Compare and contrast Kant's idealism with Berkeley's.
4. In what ways does Kant's theory appeal to you? In what ways is it unappealing? Give reasons.





## DO

### COMPARING THEORIES OF REALITY – GROUP ACTIVITY

Construct a table like the one below and fill it in for the different theories we have studied in this Theme. Place one or more SPOTS somewhere on the spectrum for each philosopher, and add a few sentences to explain your positioning of each spot.

For example, Locke is a realist about the primary qualities of everyday objects. But he is a non-realist about their colour and other secondary qualities. Note that there are stronger and weaker realist and anti-realist positions (hence the idea of a ‘spectrum’ on this chart). Locke’s notion of colour depends to a degree on our minds to interpret it, but unlike Berkeley, he still allows it to exist even when no-one is looking at it.

When you have finished, share your group’s chart with other groups. Discuss any differences in your findings.

Philosopher	Realism ← ('Reality is not dependent on minds')	→ Anti-realism ('Reality is mind-dependent')
PLATO		
ARISTOTLE		
DESCARTES		
LOCKE		
BERKELEY		
KANT		

## Contemporary Discussions of Reality

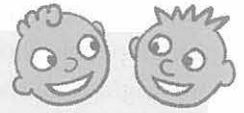
### *Realism versus Anti-Realism*

Since Kant, philosophers have been divided firmly into camps of **realism** and **anti-realism**.

Contemporary realism is the belief that reality is an absolute, enduring phenomenon, objective and external to us. This commonsense view of our world – that appearances and reality are largely in agreement – traces its lineage back to Aristotle.

In contrast, anti-realists follow Kant’s suggestion that our reality is actually a construct of human minds, and argue that any human perception of reality is inescapably the product of human consciousness and its structures, biases and limitations. If you think back to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, you will be reminded that Plato’s philosophy asks us to look beyond our limited experiences in order to discover the true nature of reality.

Thus, the debate that for most of this Theme has occurred between the positions of materialism and idealism, has since Kant shifted to a clash of views between realism and anti-realism.



## DISCUSS

What are some similarities and differences between the contemporary realism/anti-realism debate, compared with the historical materialism/idealism debate?

## TEXT STUDY: David Papineau on Scientific Realism (2009) – a podcast



[see Useful Resources]

Listen to the link provided at <http://philosophybites.com/2009/01/david-papineau-on-scientific-realism.html>

In this interview, British philosopher David Papineau (1947- ), a staunch realist, outlines the debate occurring between realism and anti-realism in science.

1. How does Papineau define the realist and anti-realist positions in contemporary science?
2. What does the anti-realist mean when she says that theories are underdetermined by data?
3. What is an example of a theory which a realist would accept but an anti-realist would reject? Why does the theory draw these responses?

## Virtual Reality

Virtual Reality (VR) is a term sometimes stretched to include books, films and any other product of fantasy and imagination. However, it is most commonly refers to computer simulations. These may aim to create a lifelike experience – for example, in flight simulations – or they can differ deliberately from reality, in the manner of VR games.

This Theme has pondered the nature of reality and how we experience it. We have seen that throughout the history of Western philosophy, thinkers have tried to explain the relationship between the material stuff of our world and the realm of thoughts and ideas. Is one of these any more real than the other?

What would happen if the ‘virtual world’ of technology could simulate the ‘real world’ so closely that it was very hard to tell the difference? As technologies advance, this is a question worth debating. Cutting edge headsets such as the Oculus Rift will allow people to be totally immersed in the world of their screens. Those who have experienced these so-called immersive technologies claim that it is difficult to remember that you are in any other world. Work in robotics has already produced machinery which can be controlled by thought alone, so thought-controlled computers and simulation games may not be far away. Philip Zhai, in his book *Get Real: A Philosophical*

*Adventure in Virtual Reality*, argues that everything about the way we currently experience reality could be recreated by technology. Everything that we regard as essential to our physical existence could be recreated in the virtual world, he argues. The result could be an immaterial world in which people choose to live their lives, finding as much ‘reality’ in this virtual world as in what we might term their ‘real’ world.

### **RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: HOW REAL IS VIRTUAL REALITY?**

In groups of 2-4 people, explore the question ‘How real is virtual reality?’ by researching a VR game such as World of Warcraft, Second Life or The Sims. (There are many others you could investigate.) Clips on Youtube may be useful.

1. How likely is it that the world of a game such as this could ever ‘overtake’ the real world? Why?
2. What does the experience of playing this game suggest to you about the relationship between the material stuff of our world and the realm of thoughts and ideas? Is one of these any more real than the other?
3. Here is a list of characteristics of reality, as suggested to us by our studies in this Theme. How does gaming reality compare with these characteristics?
  - a. continuous existence, even when not being perceived
  - b. capacity to be experienced by other people with the same faculties as us
  - c. ability to have causal effects on other things
4. What seem to you the strongest reasons why virtual reality should be considered exactly that – virtual?
5. What seem to you the strongest reasons why virtual reality should be considered ‘real’?

## **Assessment Tasks**

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Do you think this world is the real world? Or do you believe that there is an existence more real than our own?
2. Are material/physical objects the only things that exist?
3. Are you a materialist or an immaterialist? Why?

4. Do you believe that a convincing account of ultimate reality can only be given by scientists? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe that a convincing account of ultimate reality can only be given by religion? Why or why not?
6. Are you an idealist? Do you believe that reality is dependent on the existence of minds?
7. To what extent does the mind make its world?
8. What does the word 'real' mean to you?
9. How useful is a distinction between primary and secondary qualities for thinking about our reality?
10. Do you think the world we live in is the real world? Or could there be some more real level of existence? If so, do you think humans could ever access it?
11. Which view of reality considered in this Theme do you find most convincing and why?

### ***Assessment Task Two: Essay***

**TOPIC:** Do objects exist independently of our minds? Compare the theories of reality developed by at least two thinkers examined in this Theme. What are some strengths and weaknesses of each view? Give detailed reasons and use examples to support your response.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### ***Assessment Task Three: Dialogue***

Write a dialogue about the nature of reality between at least two of: a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a Lockean, a Berkeleyan and a Kantian. Your dialogue should allow each philosophical position to be aired to its best advantage and should also challenge each position as far as possible, through interrogation by others.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Oral Presentation***

The dialogue task above can be presented and assessed as an Oral Presentation.

OR

Present the findings of your philosophical investigation into Virtual Reality.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses***

Give clear and concise explanations of the various theories and terms outlined in this Theme, offering examples of each.

AND

Answer a series of short-answer questions relating to one of the primary texts you have studied in this Theme.

## THEME 2

# On the Material Mind

We are usually pretty clear about what our body is. We look at it in the mirror, we feed and clothe it, we go to a doctor when it is injured. So what about the mind? Is it the same thing as the brain and therefore part of our body? Should we consider our thoughts, feelings, intellect, personality, pains, memories or consciousness as parts of our mind, or can they be accounted for in physical terms as well? How are mental things different from bodily things, and are those differences significant?

Philosophy of mind explores the nature of body and mind. What kinds of substances are they and how they are related? Where does body end and mind begin? Or, if we take the mind to be simply the brain, are mind and body all one thing?

The philosophy of mind has been a hot zone of debate for several thousand years. Now, relatively new disciplines of neuroscience, psychiatry and psychology are contributing data that increasingly informs this philosophical dialogue. Even disciplines such as computer science and robotics are relevant to the philosophy of mind and to the activities in this Theme. You will also find that many of the questions raised in the previous Theme – On Materialism and Idealism – are relevant, as we debate the nature of mind and whether it lies within or outside the physical world.

### ***Introductory Activities***

#### **DO**

#### **A DRAWING**

Take a blank piece of paper and arrange yourself so you are not in a position to see or be influenced by anyone else's ideas. Draw a picture of the MIND as you imagine it.

When everyone has finished drawing, each student should show their picture to the class and explain it.

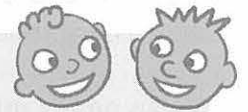
What different views of the mind have been represented?





## THINK

1. Do you think your thoughts are located somewhere? If so, where?
2. Where is your essential self located – is it in your mind, your body, your soul, or somewhere else?
3. Do you believe in the idea of a soul? Is this something that links you to God, or ultimate truth, or the universe, or to other people?
4. Could a machine – such as a robot or very advanced computer – be said to think? Could a robot ever have a soul?



## DISCUSS

### MENTAL, PHYSICAL, BOTH OR NEITHER?

Draw up a table like the one below. Work in pairs to reach consensus and arrange the given words in the appropriate columns. Then share your views with the rest of the class.

MENTAL i.e. to do with the MIND	PHYSICAL i.e. to do with the BODY	NEITHER MENTAL NOR PHYSICAL	BOTH MENTAL AND PHYSICAL

brain            teeth            pains            dreams            cats  
 playing football    consciousness    energy            music            books  
 ideas            fire            talking            friendship            fear  
 memories            fate            heaven            shoes            taste  
 love            senses            experiences    soul            spirit  
 God            earth            air            wind            imagination  
 nerves            thoughts



---

## Different Views of the Mind

What ideas about the mind did your classmates represent in their drawings? Perhaps some students described the mind as an ethereal, spiritual substance, difficult to represent on the page because it cannot be seen or touched. Perhaps, for these students, the mind is similar to the soul or spirit. On this view it may be easy to explain the possibility of life after death; perhaps if the mind is a non-physical substance it is able to escape the body after death and ascend to heaven or paradise, or be reincarnated.

Perhaps some students simply drew a picture of a brain, the physical organ whose appearance we are all familiar with, a version of which resides within each of our skulls.

Some students may have attempted to show a relationship between the brain and the mind, representing them as separate, but related and communicating, entities.

Views on the mind will have been challenged by the MENTAL, PHYSICAL, BOTH OR NEITHER exercise above. Were your arrangements of the words consistent with what you had previously drawn, or did your ideas change? For example, if you drew the mind as simply a brain, did you leave the MENTAL column blank, on the basis that you think everything to do with the mind, that is – everything mental, occurs as physical events within the brain?

The **Mind/Body Problem**, a central debate in philosophy of mind, wrestles with exactly these matters. Some philosophers have made the case that mind and body must be separate, with the mind something quite distinct from the brain. This theory is called **dualism** and argues that there are *two* things operating. It is a view that was famously held by ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and then inherited by Christianity. It can also be found in Hindu traditions. Descartes, in the seventeenth century, put forward some of the most well-known dualist arguments.

There are two main types of dualists. **Substance dualists** argue that the mind exists as a separate substance from the body. On this view the mind is typically imagined as a non-physical soul. Philosophers such as Plato and Descartes believed that humans have souls which are non-physical, immortal and which can exist independently of our bodies, even though they interact with our bodies. **Property dualists** believe that the mind is a set of distinctive properties that derive from the brain but are not the same as the brain. For the property dualist, these properties are not a separate substance.

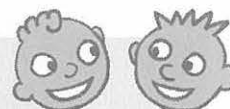
Other thinkers have argued that the mind and body are one and the same. This view is **monism**, believing that mind and body are *one* thing. In fact there are two main monist views: firstly, the more common one, that there is *only body*, or secondly, that there is *only mind*. **Materialism** or **physicalism** are terms used for the first view that there is just the physical body, of which the mind is just one aspect, located in or identical to the brain. This has become the mainstream scientific view today, supported by the research of neuroscience; however, it remains challenged by strong philosophical arguments. **Idealism**, which we encountered in Theme 1 of this Chapter, with the theories of George Berkeley (Famous Philosopher File p.107), argues that there is only a non-physical mind, and that the brain is a purely mental phenomenon, an idea in the mind. However, it is the **dualism versus materialism debate** which is the most interesting for our purposes in this theme.



## WRITE

Define the following terms in your workbooks:

DUALISM	MATERIALISM	MIND/BODY PROBLEM
PHYSICALISM	SUBSTANCE DUALISM	PROPERTY DUALISM
MONISM	IDEALISM	



## DISCUSS

What do you understand by the following terms? Are there important differences?

Discuss these terms in pairs. Then produce a Venn diagram to share with your class, to show how you think the terms are related.

MIND      THOUGHTS      CONSCIOUSNESS

## Cartesian Dualism

Rene Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, usually referred to simply as the *Meditations*, is among the most important texts in Western philosophy. In it, Descartes (Famous Philosopher File p.102) attempts to establish the basis for the entirety of human knowledge and by so doing, provide the foundations for the development of the sciences. We have already considered Descartes' ideas in Theme 1 of this Chapter, and they will be of central interest to our studies in Epistemology (see Chapter 4, Theme 2). However, some of the most interesting of the arguments in the *Meditations* are those bearing on core questions in philosophy of mind. Descartes argues that the realm of the physical is quite different from the realm of the mental; in fact, he thinks the two must be quite separate substances.

Thus, substance dualism is often referred to by the term **Cartesian Dualism**, Cartesian being the adjective formed from 'Descartes'. You may be familiar with the Cartesian Plane – this is a legacy of the same Rene Descartes' work in geometry. Indeed, we can see the influence of the mathematician in Descartes' theory of mind. While it seems obvious that physical things may be measured, weighed and treated mathematically, the same does not seem to be able to be said about mental things.



## THINK

Is there any way of measuring mental phenomena?



## **TEXT STUDY: Rene Descartes, 'Meditation VI' from *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

1. Locate the parts of the text where Descartes reaches the following conclusions. Highlight and annotate these places.
  - a. We are made up of two different substances:  
Mind: Like the soul, this is non-physical, non-extended, immortal, unchanging.  
Body: This is physical, mortal, changing, extended (takes up space).
  - b. Mind and body interact causally with each other.
2. Locate the parts of the text where Descartes presents the following arguments. Highlight and annotate these places to identify where each argument and their premises appear in the text.
  - a. P1. I can be sure I have a mind.  
P2. I cannot be totally sure that I have a body.  

---

C Therefore, mind and body are two different substances.
  - b. P1. The mind must be permanent and unchanging or we could never know it with certainty.  
P2. Physical things are always degrading; they are not permanent and unchanging.  

---

C Therefore, the mind cannot be a physical thing but must be some kind of other, non-degrading substance.
  - c. P1. I have ideas in my mind that result in physical behaviour. *[For example? What is an example that Descartes gives?]*  
P2. I have physical experiences that produce ideas in my mind. *[What is an example that Descartes gives?]*  

---

C Therefore, mind and body must causally interact with each other. The mind causes the body to do things and the body causes the mind to believe things.
3. How convincing are each of the above arguments? Can you find any problems with them? Rank them from most to least convincing and give reasons for your ranking.
4. Can you think of any problems Descartes might run into with this theory? List all the problems raised by members of your class.

## CHALLENGES FOR CARTESIAN DUALISM

Descartes argues that he can be sure of his own mind, and that is all. But does this not point to the possibility that it is only Descartes who exists and everything else is illusion? This view is known as **solipsism**. If the mind is essentially a private sphere, cut off from other parts of reality, could everything else we think we perceive just be our own fantastical creation?

Cartesian Dualism has been criticised for leading to solipsism. Linked to this is the so-called 'Problem of Other Minds': is there any way of knowing that other minds exist, or could I be surrounded by robots? Descartes found a way out of these problems by establishing the existence of God in Meditation Three. But they may continue to be troublesome for a Cartesian atheist.

There is a third and very significant problem for Cartesian Dualism, and that is how to explain the **interaction of mind and body**. As we have seen, Cartesian Dualism argues that the mind and the brain work together, communicating and interacting with one another. The interaction occurs causally in two directions, from mind to body and from body to mind. My mental desire for a biscuit causes my body to reach for one. When my hand feels that the packet is empty, my mind reasons that I should walk to the shop to buy another, and so on.

But if the brain is a physical thing, working according to physical laws, and the mind is a completely separate substance, how can it be that these two things find a way to interact? How could messages be sent between them?

This has proved a philosophical conundrum worthy of attention from some of philosophy's greatest minds over the centuries. Descartes himself supposed that minds were linked to bodies by way of the pineal gland, a small structure in the middle of the brain. The mind stimulates the pineal gland, which sends messages to the body, and receives physical signals which it then relays back to the mind. Descartes chose the pineal gland because it is located in the centre of the brain, it is a single part rather than occurring in a pair, and in his time there was no explanation for its function.

However, there are many challenging questions to be asked of this view. If, as Descartes has argued, the mind and the body are different substances, apparently governed by quite distinctive principles, how can they possibly work together? The way scientists describe it, the physical world is causally closed. If we regard the intervention of non-material minds in the material world as implausible, we should regard Cartesian dualism as implausible.

Many varied attempts have been made to show how mind and body could act together while preserving the thesis that they are separate substances. For example, **parallelism** argues that the mind and the body are set on parallel paths by God, and they just appear as though they interact. The theory of **occasionalism** requires that each time a causal event occurs in the mind, God makes an effect occur in the body, and vice versa. Other attempts to explain mind-body interaction have collapsed dualism altogether. **Epiphenomenalism** maintains that mental events are merely by-products of physical events. **Double aspect theory** says there is only one substance and mind and body are each aspects of it. None of these theories have too many serious adherents these days.

## THINK

What do you think is the best explanation for how mind and body interact? Give detailed reasons for your answer.



## THE APPEAL OF CARTESIAN DUALISM

We do commonly speak about our minds and bodies as quite different entities. This distinction is embedded in our language, in many common-sense ideas, and in our religious and spiritual understanding.

The belief in dualism permeates Western culture very strongly via Platonism and Christianity, and is reaffirmed by all the major world religions. If we believe mental substance not to be destroyed by the same forces which may assail the body, then life after death is possible: the soul may persist into its own afterlife. This is a major premise of most religious views and carries obvious appeal.

Spiritual experiences or '**out-of-body**' experiences are cited by many people as evidence for substance dualism. An out-of-body experience involves the sensation of floating above one's body and in some cases looking down on the body from outside it. These phenomena have been described by numerous survivors of near-death experiences, some of whom have reported witnessing things that were not known to them beforehand. If it is indeed possible for someone's consciousness to move outside of their body, particularly when that body has been pronounced clinically dead, then it seems as though the mind and the body must be two different substances.

Cartesian dualism is also persuasive when compared with our common way of seeing ourselves. Seeing our self identity as held within the mind rather than identifying ourselves with our bodies allows our sense of who we are to transcend our physical state. We usually see ourselves as having bodies but as being quite distinct from them.

## THINK

'I am my mind but I am not my body.' Can you think of reasons and examples to support this claim? Do you agree with it? Do you think most people would agree with it?



Cartesian dualism also meshes with the way we ordinarily experience the world, compared with scientific explanation. According to physics, the world is colourless particles jumbled together. But that is not the way I experience a tree, or a book, or my mother. Sounds are vibrations in air, but that is not how I experience a Beethoven symphony. Dualism makes sense of these clashing ideas. It is perhaps difficult to accept that a purely physical thing such as the porridge-like substance we call the brain, could produce the complexities of thoughts and feelings which define the human experience. How could something purely physical fall in love or create a masterpiece? Can we really say that these complex mental phenomena amount to nothing more than chemical interactions and neurons firing?

There are many other arguments, some of them complex and abstract, that have been made in favour of dualism. Consider the essential properties of physical things. One such property is extension in space; all physical matter, however small, takes up space. However, it seems that mental phenomena **lack spatial features**. For example, when you attend a live concert, the musicians are nearby, striking their instruments, and this in turn produces physical sound waves and physical processes in your eardrums. But what of your *experience* of the music? Could a neuroscientist find it in your head? Would it be long, short, skinny, wide, or weigh anything? There really do seem to be important properties of physical events that make no sense when we consider mental events.

Another property of the mental which does not seem true of the physical is **privileged access**. Other people cannot access your thoughts in the way that you can. You have a special first person authority about them. By contrast, your body is a public entity, and other people, for example a doctor, can even know more about your body than you can yourself.

These ideas have been debated through the centuries, and contemporary philosophy is still yielding arguments to support the dualist view. Consider for a moment the particular **phenomenology** of our mental lives that doesn't seem able to be described by materialism alone. All sensations and feelings have particular qualities as we experience them, from how it feels to have chocolate melt on the tongue, to the brightness of the grass after it has rained. Purely physical things don't have this phenomenology or '**qualia**' – that is, 'what it's like-ness'.

Another point about mental states that doesn't seem to be captured in any physical bodies, is **intentionality**. Thinking, willing, understanding, imagining, desiring and so on, are all directed at something. They all have an 'aboutness' to them. Qualia and intentionality have been important words in the philosophy of mind over the last fifty years or so, with philosophers such as Daniel Dennett giving them lengthy analysis.

Another suggestion about what is distinctive of the mind is American philosopher Donald Davidson's view that the mind seems to operate in a way that places it outside of physical laws and is thus **anomalous**. It doesn't seem to fit with the chains of cause and effect that material objects obey. If I drop a stone out my window, the next events can be predicted and calculated through the laws of physics. However, minds are unpredictable and don't seem to be governed by those same laws.

This has been a brief introduction to some of the most-discussed ideas lending weight to a dualist view. Many of these will be expanded upon later in this Theme.

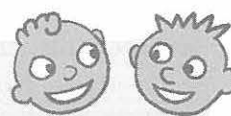


## WRITE

1. Write your own summaries of at least six **arguments for dualism** as described above.
2. Select one of these arguments for dualism and write it in standard form. *Hint: remember to write the conclusion first! Try this: 'C. Therefore, mind and body must be two distinct substances.'*
3. Of the arguments you have summarised, which seems to you to be the strongest and why? Can you add an example of your own, to bolster your response?
4. Of the arguments you have summarised, which do you consider the weakest and why? Can you produce a counter-argument in response?

## The Appeal of Materialism

The view of materialism describes everything in the world in terms of physical objects. Materialists deny views, such as Descartes', that there are any things that cannot be accounted for in physical terms. For the materialist, the word 'mind' refers to nothing more than the brain. For the materialist, it is the physical matter in our heads – including all its complex hormonal chemistry and electrical activity – that is responsible for all our thoughts and feelings. Therefore it follows that the human self is to be identified with their body.



## DISCUSS

Consider the following examples in small groups. How would they constitute a materialist argument against Descartes? How might Descartes defend his substance dualism in the face of these examples?

1. When electrical shocks are applied to the brain, the personality can be dramatically affected.
2. A person who suffers brain damage is no longer the same. In severe cases, he or she will not even seem to be a person at all, but just a living body devoid of any attributes of mind.
3. Robots are becoming increasingly intelligent and exhibit many of the attributes we might consider to be 'thinking'.
4. Certain vitamins and drugs have effects on people's moods and thoughts.
5. There is the famous case of the man named Phineas Gage (a Google search will yield many results), whose railway accident forced an iron rod right through his skull. Gage remarkably survived the accident, but his character underwent a dramatic change. His gentle, ethically upright and considerate nature transformed to snappy, rude, slovenly and untrustworthy behaviour, making him unrecognisable to his family in all but his physical appearance.

In contemporary philosophy the materialist view is overwhelmingly favoured, as you will gather from the studies which follow, of various seminal twentieth century texts. In the meantime, we will consider some of the reasons why materialism has become the mainstream view of the mind – at least in scientific communities.

The field of neuroscience – the scientific study of the brain and nervous system – has expanded enormously over the last hundred years or so, vastly increasing its knowledge base and making use of ever-more sophisticated technology. Neuroscientists continue to demonstrate links between specific parts of the brain and our mental functions. Areas of the brain used in such processes as language, numeracy, creativity and humour have been located. Experiments have shown that when surgery deliberately damages a particular site in a monkey's brain, the precise nature of the mental changes in the monkey can be predicted. Scientific developments are increasingly able to describe our mental lives in terms of the same cause and effect patterns demonstrated in the physical world. All of this challenges the dualist's conviction that mind and brain are separate substances.

Further, the material mind can be argued for on the basis of our biological development. Humans start life as single cells, which then divide, redivide and so on. Physical processes such as nutrition enable the foetus to continue growing into a baby capable of existing outside the womb. So at what point, asks the materialist, does a non-physical element become apparent or necessary in this story? The same question arises if we consider our development from an evolutionary perspective. Our species evolved over millions of years from single-celled organisms, through simple vertebrates, fish, reptiles, mammals and then from the great apes. Have all of these species had a non-physical soul or mind? Or only humans? It remains difficult to discern at what point in evolution a non-physical element could have intervened in the process of physical development, and how and why such a mysterious element could have done this. From a physicist's point of view, energies cannot be created from nowhere without violating the fundamental law of conservation.

For some, the dualist argument just seems far too complicated. It is surely a whole lot simpler, argue many materialists, to simply accept that there is one substance, and that is physical. Why argue for this additional, spooky, ethereal substance if we can explain the mental world without it? This is based on the principle of **Ockham's Razor** – the idea that the simplest explanation is usually the best – named after William of Ockham (1288-1347). Translated more literally it is the principle that 'entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.' This idea has been held as a basic rule of thumb by numerous philosophers and scientists over the centuries and the Australian philosopher J.J.C.Smart has used it to argue against dualism.

The physical realm is certainly, in many ways, much easier for us to attempt to describe and explain. Fields such as neuroscience, psychiatry and psychology routinely assume materialism, holding open the hope that science will one day be able to fully explain the workings of the human mind in terms of the causal patterns that govern our physical world. We have a long way to go in this; the vast majority of the brain and our mental lives are still out of reach of scientific explanation. But if we are one day able to entirely define, describe and account for all aspects of the mind in physical terms, the dualism/materialism debate may be over.



## THINK

Will it ever be possible to prove materialism right and dualism wrong? What kinds of evidence would be needed to prove that there is no such thing as a non-physical mind?



## WRITE

1. Select one of these arguments for materialism (given above) and write it in standard form. *Hint: remember to write the conclusion first! Try this: 'Therefore, mind and body must both be physical.'*
2. Of the arguments for materialism offered above, which seems to you to be the strongest and why? Can you add an example to bolster your response?
3. Of the arguments for materialism offered above, which do you consider the weakest and why? Can you produce a counter-argument in response?



## DO

Research some recent findings in neuroscience. You may wish to work in a pair. Share your finding with the class. See which pair of class members can locate research to most convincingly support a materialist view of the mind.



## Twentieth Century Materialist Theories of Mind

We will next turn to some of the most-discussed viewpoints and arguments in the philosophy of the twentieth century, including detailed studies of several seminal texts. Your teacher may direct you to examine some or all of these arguments for a materialist theory of the mind.

### THE LINGUISTIC TURN AND PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDES

As we now come to examine twentieth century views on the mind, you will notice the emphasis placed by many thinkers on *language*. The so-called *linguistic turn* was a development in philosophy of this period. Broadly speaking, this was the idea that language itself both clarifies and obscures meaning, and that to make progress in philosophy, we need to examine the units of language used to formulate philosophical ideas.

As we found above, one problem when we are talking about the mind is that it can seem mysterious compared with the body. Its hidden, private nature is one reason why it has traditionally been regarded as of a substance different from the body. In order to talk about what we mean by mind, thought and consciousness, many twentieth century philosophers have looked to the kind of language we use when referring to the mental realm. How does *language* show up our thinking around what the mind is about, or its **intentionality**?

Small components of thought called **propositional attitudes** have been seen by many as the key to this. Whenever we reveal our attitude to some proposition (P) – that is, by *believing that P*, *desiring that P*, *hoping that P*, *thinking that P*, *remembering that P*, *knowing that P*, and so on – we reveal a useful piece of mind content. Many of the philosophers you will read about in the rest of this Theme have referred to such propositional attitudes to help make sense of the mental.

Some writers have used the term **folk psychology** to refer to the larger mental scheme revealed by the propositional attitudes. It is then wondered, how might this scheme be connected with our brains? What are the patterns of our folk psychology, and how do these mental events correspond to physical events? Is our folk psychology – the language we use about the mental realm – a help or a hindrance when investigating neuroscience and the physical brain?

Since Newton in the eighteenth century, most scientists have agreed on the principle that the physical universe is governed by strict laws of cause and effect. How, asked twentieth century philosophers of mind, might the mental realm participate in these laws? Can our mental reasoning be a cause for our actions? This last question was investigated most notably by Donald Davidson (Famous Philosopher File p.142) in his paper, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' (1963). To fully investigate the significance of this question leads us away from the mainstream of this Theme, but it is worth keeping in the back of your mind as you consider various other authors and viewpoints.

### DO

Make a list of ten of the propositional attitudes you have held in your day so far.

Do you think they could be a useful way of isolating your mental activity from your physical activity?



### THINK

What propositional attitude led you to the physical action of reading this page? Would you say that this attitude (that is, mental event) was both a reason for, and a cause of, your actions? Why or why not? How is this significant for our thinking about how the mental and physical realms interact?



## Logical Behaviourism

The English philosopher Gilbert Ryle (Famous Philosopher File p.129) is most famous for coining the phrase ‘ghost in the machine’ to highlight what he saw as the absurdity of Cartesian dualism. In *The Concept of Mind* (1949) Ryle argues that to distinguish between mind and matter is to make a **category mistake** because it assumes to begin with that mind and body are part of the same logical and linguistic category.

To clarify what he means by a category mistake, Ryle imagines guiding someone around a university, showing them the library, the lecture theatres, the laboratories and so on. ‘But where is the university?’ inquires the guest. ‘Well, this is the university!’ replies their guide. Ryle’s example highlights that the buildings and the university are terms from different categories. Another example is to imagine explaining cricket to someone who has never seen the game before. You explain the rules, the ball, the bat, the roles of different players. ‘But where’s the team spirit?’ asks your friend.

Similarly, Ryle argues that ‘mind’ is just a way of describing certain physical activities and how they operate in complex and subtle ways. We cannot expect to be shown a mind in the same way as all the other parts of the body, but that is not to say it is a separate, non-physical substance, any more than the ‘university’ is a separate non-physical substance from the buildings, or that ‘team spirit’ can be pinpointed in time and space in the same way as the bat and ball of a cricket match.

Ryle thinks we are stuck in linguistic confusion when we talk about minds. He thinks when our language posits **propositional attitudes**, what we are really talking about are particular *behaviours* of our *body*. It is just that we have developed language to refer to these behaviours *as though* they are something quite distinct and of the mind. Ryle’s theory dispenses with an inner self or mind, and replaces it with **dispositions to behave**. Thus rather than attributing to Person X the mental phenomenon of ‘compassion’, for example, Ryle says we really mean that, given a situation where others exhibit suffering, Person X is likely to offer them sympathetic words, give them money and so on. A ‘lazy’ person is one who, given a situation in which there is work to be done, does something else more convenient. If you ‘believe’ your teacher will be late, you shrug when the bell rings and dawdle to class. If you ‘like’ the music of Radiohead, you will demonstrate behaviour such as downloading it on to your computer and playing it repeatedly. Ryle avoids ascribing persistent characters or states to the mental realm. He re-casts mental events into occurrences we can observe in the physical world of behaviour, and argues that it is our *language* which misdirects us to view mental events and physical events in different ways.

Thus in response to Descartes’ dichotomy between things that can be measured (the physical) and things that are unmeasurable (the mental), Ryle contends that it is only language that hoodwinks us into believing there is a difference. If we reconsider so-called mental goings-on as events in our behaviour, we can indeed observe, measure, record and assess them scientifically.



## THINK

How would Ryle 're-cast' the following statements as 'dispositions to behave'?

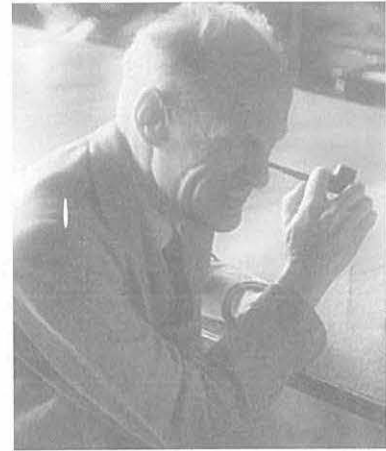
For example: 'Sarah knows her times tables' becomes 'Given a situation where Sarah is required to perform mathematical operations, she is *disposed to* give correct answers to times tables.'

- 'Pedro likes to boogie.'
- 'Gabe knows it will rain today.'
- 'Kay thinks Ryle's philosophy is very difficult to understand.'
- 'Maxwell loves his mother.'

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976)

Gilbert Ryle was born in Brighton, England. His doctor father, who also had interests in philosophy and astronomy, filled the house with books and encouraged young Gilbert's intellectual endeavours. At age 19, Ryle went to Oxford University to study classics, but soon shifted to philosophy. Within a few years he had been offered a lectureship in philosophy, and he taught at Oxford until the outbreak of World War II. Ryle's linguistic talents secured him work as a spy during the war, and he rose to the rank of Major before returning to a professorship at Oxford.



Ryle was among those who followed Wittgenstein in the view that all metaphysical problems could be resolved through analysis of the language we use. It was through linguistic analysis that he developed his notion of the 'category mistake', a now famous theory that language itself leads us into conceptual confusion. Ryle's best known work, *The Concept of Mind*, introduced the influential theory of behaviourism. He also coined the phrase 'ghost in the machine', ridiculing Descartes' idea of a separate mind and body.



## TEXT STUDY: Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949)

[see Useful Resources]

Read Chapter 1, 'Descartes' Myth'.

1. What does Ryle take to be the 'official doctrine' of Cartesian dualism?
2. How does Ryle's use of the phrase 'ghost in the machine' work as a criticism against Descartes' dualism?
3. What does Ryle mean by a 'category mistake'?
4. Explain one of Ryle's examples of a category mistake.
5. Think up your own example of a category mistake and outline it.
6. How does Ryle use his notion of a category mistake to reject Cartesian dualism?
7. Do you think Descartes makes a category mistake in his account of the mind as a non-physical thing?
8. Why does Ryle reject descriptions of internal mental states?
9. What is the significance of *language* for Ryle's argument?
10. Do you agree with Ryle that there is no such thing as a mind beyond people's behavioural dispositions? Why or why not?
11. Is Ryle's conversion of *propositional attitudes* to *dispositions to behave* a satisfactory solution to the problem of how to speak about our mental lives?
12. What might be the appeal of a theory of mind in which mental events are 'public'?
13. What are some possible problems with Ryle's account of the mind?

## Identity Theory

Human understanding of the brain and nervous system has come a long way since the time of Descartes. You probably learnt in middle school science classes that brains and nervous systems consist of long cells called neurons. Electrical changes – themselves the products of chemical signals – occur along neurons, and hence brain events can be described as electro-chemical events.

Between 1800 and 1950 huge advances were made in neuroscience, increasingly suggesting that events of the mind could actually be located in the brain. Fifty years ago it looked likely that before long, neuroscience would be able to pinpoint the precise brain location of every mental function.

In the 1950s, papers published by Herbert Feigl in the United States, and by J.J.C. Smart (Famous Philosopher File p.132), U.T. Place (Famous Philosopher File p.132) and David Armstrong (Famous Philosopher File p.132) in Australia, argued for what has come to be called the Identity Theory of Mind (also known as 'Australian materialism'). This theory argued that mental properties are *identical* with brain (that is, physical) properties.

Identity theorists believe that every mental state can be matched to some description of the brain. For the philosopher, it doesn't matter that we don't yet know quite what that brain state is or how to describe it precisely. If experiencing pain means that C-fibres are firing in particular ways in my brain, then the identity statement is: Pain = C-fibres firing. Neuroscientists can fill in exact details in due course. Hence, for the identity theorist, being in love is a particular kind of electrical and chemical event. Having a belief means that electrical activity is occurring in a particular part of my brain.

Explanations of identity theory are often linked to other cases where updates in our scientific understanding have revealed two entities to be identical. For example, we now accept 'H<sub>2</sub>O' as the correct account of the molecular structure of water. This does not mean that we now commonly speak of showering in H<sub>2</sub>O, or would ever request a drink containing two hydrogen molecules for every molecule of oxygen. Similarly, we now understand that scientifically, lightning can be described as 'electrical discharge'. Venus, the Morning Star and the Evening Star are now realised to be one and the same planet.

Identity theorists argue that falling in love will always be thought of as falling in love, but this doesn't mean that its state cannot be identical with electrical activity in a certain part of the brain combined with particular chemical releases into the bloodstream and so on.

However, it is important to ask, what do identity theorists mean by 'identity'? Do they mean that any person experiencing bright red will be in exactly the same brain state as any other person experiencing bright red? This is the strongest version of the identity theory, known as **type-type identity**, linked to the hope that neuroscience will one day be able to map out human mental experience in the form of universal brain activity. On this account, my thought that this is a lovely day to take a walk in the park will correspond to 'Neural State 35678120' on this and every other time I, or any other person, has that thought. A weaker form of identity theory is known as **token-token identity**. In this version, I might have a slightly different brain state each time I think it is a lovely day to take a walk in the park. And my friend will have a different brain state again.

### THINK

1. Progress in neuroscience has been much slower than most identity theorists expected in the 1950s and 60s. For the most part, 'type-type' identities have not been established. Does this undermine the identity theory, do you think?
2. A pain may be sharp or burning, but a brain event wouldn't be described as sharp or burning. Is this a problem for the identity theory of mind?



The identity theory seems intuitively plausible to most of us. It certainly has less trouble explaining how damage to the brain, or taking drugs, can cause changes in people's mental states and personalities. It also boasts simplicity: why believe there are two substances if we can explain things with one substance? This is the principle of Ockham's Razor, explained above (p.125). However, identity theorists are still challenged by problems of **qualia** and **consciousness**, to be outlined later in this Theme.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

# Philosophy of Mind in Australia: Smart, Place, Armstrong, Lewis, Jackson, Chalmers

### J.J.C. 'Jack' Smart (1920–2012)

Born in Cambridge, England, but after his studies – including completing his PhD at Oxford with Gilbert Ryle (see Famous Philosopher File, p.129) – Smart accepted his first professional post in 1950 at the University of Adelaide and remained in Australia for the rest of his life. Most recently he held the Chair in Philosophy at the ANU.



Smart's work spanned themes in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of science and ethics, but it is as a pioneer in the philosophy of mind that he is best known. The paper 'Sensations and Brain Processes' (1959) outlined his type identity theory. As part of the movement of so-called Australian Materialism – along with U.T. Place, David Armstrong and David Lewis – he changed the course of materialist argument.

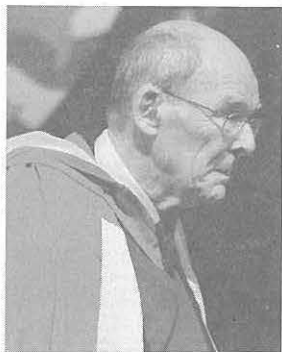
### Ullin Place (1924–2000)

Place was born in Yorkshire and studied at Oxford under Gilbert Ryle. In 1951 he joined J.J.C. Smart at Adelaide University, and was part of the materialist revolution in philosophy of mind. His paper 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process' (1954) argued that mental processes are not to be identified merely with behaviour. Although Place returned to England within four years, his brain now remains in Adelaide. He bequeathed his brain to the University's Anatomy Museum, to be displayed with the message, 'Did this brain contain the consciousness of U.T. Place?'



### David Armstrong (1926–2014)

Armstrong is best known for his work in the philosophy of mind, but he published extensively in metaphysics and epistemology as well. He considered himself a scientific realist, meaning he took the truth of the world to be as it appears to our observations. He developed what he called the 'central-state theory', identifying mental states with the central nervous system. In *A Materialist Theory of Mind* (1968), he argued for an identity theory of mind and explained consciousness as a brain state.



Armstrong studied at the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne, and has taught at both. Until his recent death, he remained Professor Emeritus at the University of Sydney and continued to publish papers.

### David Lewis (1941–2001)

Though an American, Lewis is associated with Australia as for nearly 30 years he spent up to a third of each year here, working closely with Australian philosophers. Lewis started out studying chemistry, but was excited by philosophy after attending lectures at Oxford given by Gilbert Ryle and others. When he returned to the U.S. it was to study philosophy at Harvard. Even as a graduate his brilliance stood out. J.J.C. Smart visited Harvard as a guest lecturer at this time. 'I taught David Lewis,' he said later, 'or rather, David Lewis taught me.' Before he had even gained his PhD, Lewis produced the paper, 'An Argument for the Identity Theory' (1966), improving on Smart's own arguments.



Lewis is probably best known for his theory of 'modal realism' which argues that possible worlds are as real as our own, and for using possible worlds as an argumentative tool to tackle a range of philosophical problems.

Taken together, his work forms a vast, unified theory across many themes in philosophy, and he is regarded as among his century's finest minds. A devoted Australian Rules fan, he was buried with the Essendon club's season ticket.

### Frank Jackson (1943– )

Jackson is currently a professor of philosophy at the Australian National University, having previously studied at Melbourne and LaTrobe Universities. His research interests lie primarily in philosophy of mind, epistemology, metaphysics, and meta-ethics. Jackson is probably best known for his **knowledge argument** against physicalism, featuring a thought experiment known as 'Mary's Room'. This argument has found itself the subject of over a thousand published papers and even several books. However, he has now changed his view and rejects dualism.



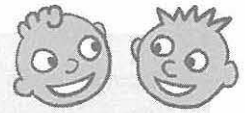
### David Chalmers (1966– )

Chalmers is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Consciousness at the Australian National University. He specialises in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language.

Chalmers' book, *The Conscious Mind* (1996) has become a classic of philosophy of mind. In it, he argues that materialist views of the mind fail to account for the 'hard problem of consciousness', or the feeling of what it is like to be a conscious being. He says there is an 'explanatory gap' between third and first person accounts of consciousness. In support of this, Chalmers has famously offered his 'philosophical zombie' thought experiment.







## DISCUSS

How plausible do you find it that being in love, having a spiritual experience or being in pain all correspond with particular patterns of chemistry and electrical activity in the brain? Does it diminish these experiences to say they are *nothing more than* electro-chemical events?



## WRITE

Neuroscientists advise that: *Severe injury to the frontal lobe area of the brain causes dramatic personality changes.*

1. Construct an argument in standard form, with this statement as the conclusion, and using the reasoning of Identity Theory in the premises.
2. Does this argument convince you that identity theory is correct? Can you think of any ways it could still be incorrect?
3. How might substance dualism explain brain injury and its effects on personality?



## THINK

Is Ockham's Razor a good principle upon which to support or reject a theory? Why or why not?



## TEXT STUDY: David Armstrong, 'The Nature of Mind' (1980)

[see Useful Resources]

READ the following two extracts:

### Extract 1, paragraphs 1-12. The Argument from Neuroscience

This extract contains Main Conclusion 1: *Brain events (i.e. neural states and processes) lie behind and cause behaviour.*

1. What reasons does Armstrong give to support this conclusion?
2. Reconstruct this argument in standard form.
3. How persuasive is this argument?

### Extract 2, approx. paragraphs 18- 26 The Argument via Behaviourism

Armstrong then takes Ryle's behaviourist account of mental events, translating them as 'dispositions to behave'. For example, if a man is angry, he is disposed to shout, bang the table and strike out when provoked. But, argues Armstrong, there is more to anger than just external behaviour: 'it seems as obvious as anything is obvious that there is something actually going on in me which constitutes my thought.' (page 104). And what is more, that thought is actually the cause of behaviour. This leads Armstrong to Main Conclusion 2: *Mental states lie behind and cause behaviour.*

1. How does Armstrong's conclusion from extract 1, together with his conclusion from extract 2, enable him to reach the conclusion articulated in paragraph 24, that 'we can identify ... mental states with purely physical states', or in other words, that mental states *are* brain states?
2. Armstrong supports his reasoning with two analogies: the brittleness of glass and the elasticity of rubber. How do these analogies demonstrate Armstrong's view about mental states and brain states? Explain the links he makes by drawing a diagram.
3. How might a dualist respond to Armstrong's arguments?

## **Eliminativism**

As we have seen, Identity Theorists argue that although our language often contains terms with connotations of more than the purely material body (for example, love, pain and so on), in reality these are no more than electro-chemical events in the brain (C-fibres firing, hormone releases and so on). Eliminativism (often called eliminative materialism) goes further than identity theory by claiming that neuroscience will ultimately provide physical accounts of the common mental states embedded in our language, and that rather than co-existing alongside the traditional language, the scientific accounts will *replace* and *eliminate* the common accounts. In other words, once we have explained and described what it is to *believe* or *desire* or *love* in material terms, we will think about that mental state in a totally different way, and therefore our language will change accordingly. Eliminativists argue that the mind-connoting words in our language – notably the propositional attitudes (see p.127) – are part of 'folk psychology' and that as our understanding becomes more sophisticated, these old words will be redundant and out of date, just as folk medicine is largely brushed aside in the modern world.

The husband and wife team of eliminativists, Canadians Paul and Patricia Churchland (Famous Philosopher File p.136), argued strongly for this view. Paul Churchland's 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes' (1981) argues that our folk psychology is not something ordinary and harmless, but rather it is dangerously false and misleading. He argues that the way we talk about the mental realm actually constitutes a *theory* about ourselves. He compares the way our language construes the mind with blaming demons for causing epilepsy, and argues that it is similarly out of date.

## THINK

Can you think of any other examples in our language which imply something we now know to be false?



### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

## Paul (1942– ) and Patricia (1943– ) Churchland

Husband and wife Paul and Patricia Churchland are Canadian philosophers noted for their contributions to neurophilosophy and philosophy of mind. They are the major proponents of the theory of eliminative materialism, which argues that the everyday language we use to describe mental states is so misleading that it should be replaced by the scientific language of neuroscience. Patricia Churchland has had a particularly close association with neuroscience, and believes that philosophy of mind is more accurately understood as a philosophy of the brain. The Churchlands have two children, both of whom are neuroscientists.



Churchland argues that we constantly use our ‘folk psychology’ to explain and predict things. We speak of **propositional attitudes** – ‘x believes that...’, ‘x knows that...’, ‘x desires that...’ – as causes. For example, we might say, ‘I know that Lily really wants a high grade for Philosophy, so she’ll probably be studying all weekend for the exam, and therefore I don’t believe she’ll come to the party on Saturday.’ Note the chain of cause and effect in this last example. According to Churchland, this is why our language about the mind is actually a theory of experience, and therefore can be shown to be wrong.

Deeply embedded in our language are assumptions that we humans possess mental states in our heads. Churchland thinks we are resistant to the findings of neuroscience because our language traps us in ancient patterns of thinking.

While the identity theorists don’t see a problem with retaining our old language about mental states, even if they are found to have a precise physical description, Churchland argues that our language cannot harmlessly be reduced:

*Folk psychology is a radically inadequate account of our internal activities, too confused and too defective to win survival through intertheoretic reduction. On this view it will simply be displaced by a better theory of those activities.<sup>6</sup>*

6 P. Churchland 1981, ‘Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 78 pp67-90

## TEXT STUDY: Paul Churchland, 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes' (1981)



[see Useful Resources]

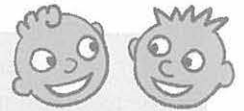
Read an excerpt from this paper. Recommended is Section II 'Why Folk Psychology Might (Really) Be False'.

1. Reconstruct Churchland's argument in Section II to the conclusion that folk psychology is unsatisfactory.
2. *'One is reminded of how alchemy must have looked as elemental chemistry was taking form, how Aristotelian cosmology must have looked as classical mechanics was being articulated, or how the vitalist conception of life must have looked as organic chemistry marched forward.'*\*  
Select one of these analogies and assess its effectiveness (you may have to do a little research!). Is it a persuasive analogy? Why or why not?
3. Is folk psychology a theory? Is it a good theory?
4. What are some links between identity theory and eliminativism?

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\* Paul Churchland, 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes' (1981), p.75

## DISCUSS



*'Our mental descriptions should be eliminated in favour of physical descriptions of brain states and processes.'*

1. In pairs, list three strong arguments **in support** of this statement and three strong arguments **against** this statement.
2. Join with another pair and discuss your ideas. Having weighed up the arguments, decide as a group whether you **agree or disagree** with the statement.
3. Report your conclusion to the class, explaining the line of reasoning which your group found most persuasive, and why.

## Functionalism

**Functionalism** is a theory of mind which is compatible with materialism. However, it actually sidesteps the question of what the mind *is* and instead asks the question, ‘what does the mind *do?*’, or ‘how does it *function?*’. The mind is thereby distinguished from the body not by virtue of *substance* but because of what it *does* that is different from the functions performed by the body.

This kind of distinction is familiar in the computing world. The functionalist is not interested so much in the *hardware* as in the *software programs* of the mind, that is, the *operations the mind performs* rather than the physical mechanisms behind them. Functionalism examines the functions of the mind in causal relationship to one another as well as in relation to sensory inputs and behavioural outputs.

The American philosopher Hilary Putnam (Famous Philosopher File p.139) was among the first to draw this parallel between hardware and software in a computer, and brain and mind in humans, in his 1960 paper, ‘Mind and Machines’. In a later paper, ‘Philosophy and our Mental Life’ (1973), Putnam argued against the eliminativist’s idea that we should discard descriptions of our mental lives. He used the analogy of a square peg that will not fit into a round hole. There are different levels of explanation we can give for this. We can give the dimensions in millimetres of peg and hole. Or we can explain that if you put the square peg at the entrance to the hole, you can see that the corners of the peg stick out and stop the peg going in the hole. There would be physicists with powerful computers who could calculate the precise configurations of the subatomic particles in the peg and in the hole in order to explain why peg into hole won’t go. But, argues Putnam, this technical level is of no use to us, just as it is of no use to most of us to understand the precise activity of ones and zeros in the hardware of our computers. Similarly, he says, we have no need for the technical minutiae of the electrical and chemical activity going on in our brains; rather, we are interested in informative descriptions that help us live our lives. That, says Putnam, means we should preserve the propositional attitudes of the kind Churchland would reject.

These ideas were developed into a complete philosophy of mind by American Jerry Fodor (1935-2017). In ‘The Mind-Body Problem’ (1981), Fodor wrote:

*In the past 15 years a philosophy of mind called functionalism that is neither dualist nor materialist has emerged from philosophical reflection on developments in artificial intelligence, computational theory, linguistics, cybernetics and psychology. All these fields, which are collectively known as the cognitive sciences, have in common a certain level of abstraction and a concern with systems that process information. Functionalism, which seeks to provide a philosophical account of this level of abstraction, recognises the possibility that systems as diverse as human beings, calculating machines and disembodied spirits could all have mental states. In the functionalist view the psychology of a system depends not on the stuff it is made of (living cells, metal or spiritual energy) but on how the stuff is put together.<sup>7</sup>*

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7 Jerry Fodor, ‘The Mind-Body Problem’ (1981), [http://www.lscp.net/persons/dupoux/teaching/QUINZAINNE\\_RENTREE\\_CogMaster\\_2010-11/Bloc\\_philo/Fodor\\_1981\\_mind\\_body\\_problem.pdf](http://www.lscp.net/persons/dupoux/teaching/QUINZAINNE_RENTREE_CogMaster_2010-11/Bloc_philo/Fodor_1981_mind_body_problem.pdf) (accessed July 30, 2013)

A large part of functionalism's appeal for many is its preservation of much of our traditional view of the mind and our everyday language. All the mental items in our common-sense or folk psychology – including the propositional attitudes and the way they interact – are considered a coherent program, worthy of preservation.

While functionalism has appeal, particularly for those working with issues of computing intelligence, it runs into problems when considering first person experience and **qualia**. You will also read later about John Searle's 'Chinese Room' objection, which can be taken as a criticism of functionalism.

### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

## Hilary Putnam (1926–2016)

Born in Chicago, Illinois, Hilary Putnam is known for his contributions to mathematics and computer science as well as philosophy. In philosophy he subjected all arguments, including his own, to rigorous and repeated scrutiny, which sometimes led him to alter his views. He is best known in philosophy of mind, as the first thinker to formulate the theory of functionalism. He ended up rejecting his own functionalist arguments, but functionalism remains the most widely held view of mind among philosophers today.



### WRITE

1. Explain the functionalist theory of the mind, using the metaphor of a computer's hardware and software. Expand the metaphor in detail, using an example of some software with which you are familiar.
2. Using the software versus hardware metaphor, assess the effectiveness of functionalism as a theory of the mind.
3. What might Fodor mean by describing functionalism as 'neither dualist nor materialist'?
4. In what ways might functionalism be an appealing theory for the field of psychology? Why might psychologists prefer it to eliminativism?
5. Outline how functionalism would explain 'folk psychology', using examples of propositional attitudes.



## **Anomalous Monism**

The 1970 article 'Mental Events' by Donald Davidson (Famous Philosopher File p.142) is regarded as a classic of twentieth-century philosophy of mind. Its intricate argument has continued to provoke discussion through the decades since its publication.

The article begins by setting forth a problem. Firstly, at least some mental events seem to *cause* physical events. Perhaps your *belief* that philosophy is interesting is causing you to read this book. Perhaps you are motivated by *desire* to earn high marks when you highlight certain passages.

Secondly, in the physical world, causes and effects occur according to strict laws of physics. The *deterministic* system of the physical world means that physical events can be predicted and explained. We do not live in a random physical universe. If we did, we would never cross bridges, fly in aeroplanes, take medicines or turn on our computers, because we wouldn't assume that any cause and effect mechanisms should apply.

However, Davidson's third claim is that there seem to be no such strict laws governing mental events. Rather, mental events are **anomalous** – that is, they seem to lie outside of strict cause and effect patterns. For example, it may well be that you find Philosophy interesting and desire to earn high marks in Unit 1. But even if those mental states *today* lead you to study this book assiduously, you seem entirely free to perhaps do the same tomorrow, or else to adopt some entirely different behaviour. I cannot predict your mental states according to any strict laws.

This last claim might seem to score a serious point for the dualist. Nonetheless, Davidson still wants to argue a materialist position: that mental events are physical events. Therefore, his article will have to reconcile the anomalous freedom of mental events with the *nomological* (that is, law-following) physical universe.

To do this, Davidson develops a token identity theory. He argues that mental events as a *type* cannot be explained by the laws of physics. For example, any attempt to develop a causal theory about *all pains* will fail. There are no psycho-physical laws, he argues. Instead, he says, particular mental events, corresponding to particular physical identities, *do* have their place in the causal chain, *but* it is only by their physical descriptions that their causal nature is apparent. There is nothing in the language of propositional attitudes that indicates causal relationships.

Let us explain this another way, by considering a scenario. Suppose that you have a bad morning. In your exhausted state last night, you had set your alarm clock for 7pm instead of 7am, so you sleep through till 7.30 today. Having no time for breakfast and being generally flustered, you forget to pack your phone and cycle to school without it. You realise you will need your phone later today and return home to get it, but then have to peddle fast to make it to school on time. In your hurry, and being low on blood sugar, you have a small collision with a car and your phone is smashed on the road, beyond repair. You are so angry that you abuse the driver of the car. The driver turns out to be your school principal. You are suspended from classes for a week. Your parents are furious and unsympathetic, and ongoing conflict in your household ensues. In the subsequent mid-semester exams, your grades are dramatically lower than in previous years.

This scenario contains a mixture of mental states, interacting causally with the physical universe. According to Davidson's version of token identity, each mental event described above will have an individual and distinctive physical counterpart. So even though you felt 'flustered' in many instances, on Davidson's account each instance of 'flustered' would be a particular, distinctive brain event.

According to Davidson, each of these brain events behaves in a predictable way – predictable, that is, for neuroscientists of the future. When taken at the level of their physical descriptions, mental events follow physical laws.

However, there are no laws which can ever dictate or predict the causal behaviour of a mental state, when it is described in *mental* language. 'Flustered' is a kind of mental state with which no strict laws are associated. You might be likely to forget things and quicker to anger when in a flustered state, but there are no laws to say you won't pull yourself together in the next moment.

So, for Davidson, mental events are complex and individual at the level of physical description, and our 'folk psychology', or everyday language, obscures underlying causal, physical patterns. This does not lead Davidson to argue for eliminativism – that is, the eradication of our customary language about our mental lives. Rather, his argument is for *ontological monism* – taking mental events to actually *be* physical things in the world, and for *predicate dualism* – recognising that mental events have two kinds of description, each of which captures very different qualities about mental experience. Thus, Davidson calls his theory **anomalous monism**. It argues for one kind of substance only, but preserves the sense of autonomy captured in our mental language.

Davidson's paper is a complex one, and our summation here has left a lot of gaps. If you are interested in following Davidson's arguments in greater detail, his whole paper is readily available.

### TEXT STUDY: Donald Davidson, 'Mental Events' (1970)

[see Useful Resources]

Davidson concludes his article, 'Mental Events', thus:

*Mental events as a class cannot be explained by physical science; particular mental events can when we know particular entities. But the explanations of mental events in which we are typically interested relate them to other mental events and conditions. We explain a man's free actions, for example, by appeal to his desires, habits, knowledge and perceptions. Such accounts of intentional behaviour operate in a conceptual framework removed from the direct reach of physical law by describing both cause and effect, reason and action, as aspects of a portrait of a human agent. The anomalism of the mental is thus a necessary condition for viewing action as anomalous. \**

\* D. Davidson 1970, 'Mental Events' in *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980), Caredon Press, Oxford.





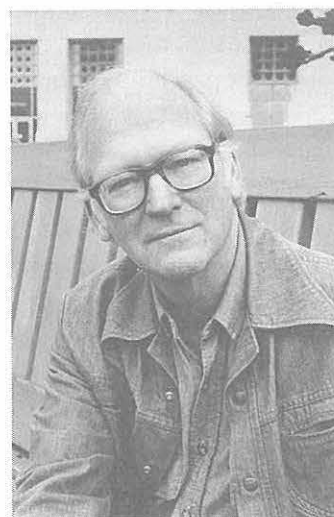
1. Explain Davidson's conclusion here in your own words.
2. What does Davidson mean in saying that the mental is anomalous? Why does he think that the mental is anomalous?
3. Do you agree with Davidson that the mental is anomalous? Defend your view by using examples.
4. What does Davidson mean by psycho-physical laws?
5. Why does Davidson think that there are no psycho-physical laws?
6. Overall, how persuasive do you find Davidson's account to be, and why?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Donald Davidson (1917–2003)

Donald Davidson is widely regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century and yet he didn't publish a single book. His numerous papers, however, form a coherent whole. All his work, in one way or another, tries to reconcile the scientific materialist account of us, with the way we experience our humanity. He had a particular interest in how the philosophy of language could reveal what we are.

Having studied classics and literature prior to philosophy, Davidson had a broad background. He was known as a charismatic and charming communicator who in his spare time flew planes, surfed, climbed mountains and was an excellent pianist. His densely written papers are very challenging but rewarding of close study.



## ***Realistic Monism***

British philosopher Galen Strawson (born 1952 and son of Peter Strawson, see Famous Philosopher File p.152), in his paper 'Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism' (2006), assumes that materialism is true. Strawson responds to reductivist and eliminative materialists who surmount challenges such as qualia and the so-called hard problem of consciousness (see later in this Theme), by arguing them out of existence.

Strawson advocates a 'realistic' materialism, which he says must embrace every aspect of human experience. It is misguided, he says, to look to physics to explain and capture the important things about our mental lives, because it will fail to do so. This is not because mental events are non-physical, but rather because we actually know so little about the physical realm.



### **TEXT STUDY: Galen Strawson, 'Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism' (2006)**

[see Useful Resources]

1. Outline Strawson's theory of panpsychism in your own words.
2. How convincing is Strawson's theory of panpsychism?
3. Might particles have experiences too? Is this question a problem for Strawson's thesis? Why or why not?
4. Is Strawson really a dualist? Why or why not? Is he really an idealist? Why or why not?
5. Can the experiential be reduced to the non-experiential? Why or why not?

## **Qualia and the 'hard problem' of consciousness: A challenge for materialism, or not?**

**Qualia** (singular – quale) refers to the subjective qualities of our conscious experience. The whiteness of whipped egg whites, the taste of pavlova, the pain I feel when I've eaten too much pavlova and so on, are examples of my immediate experience of the world, or of how it *feels* to be a conscious being. Qualia are problematic for materialist philosophers of mind, because they seem to resist being captured by descriptions of what is going on in the brain. Qualia are *under-described* by the language of physics.

Australian philosopher David Chalmers (Famous Philosopher File p.133) has called the subjective nature of our conscious experience, including qualia, the Hard Problem of consciousness. He contrasts this with things about the human mind that he says are easier for materialism to explain. These include our reactions to the environment, recording information, controlling our behaviour and attention, and accessing and reporting on our inner states.

In his book, *Consciousness Explained* (1991), American Daniel Dennett (Famous Philosopher File p.151) identifies four features of qualia, in the way they are usually spoken of. Qualia are:

1. *Ineffable*: that is, they cannot be described in language; they have to be directly experienced.
2. *Intrinsic*: that is, they are not necessarily dependent on other factors of experience.
3. *Private*: that is, they are unique to the subject who experiences them, and they cannot be easily compared with the experiences of other subjects.
4. *Directly apparent to consciousness*: that is, to experience a quale is to know one experiences a quale, and to know all there is to know about that quale.

For all these reasons, qualia are difficult to discuss and form arguments about. Several philosophers have approached the problem of qualia by means of thought experiments. We will now consider several of the most notable thought experiments about qualia: the 'what's it like to be' argument, the zombie argument, the inverted spectrum argument, the knowledge argument and the explanatory gap argument. These thought experiments were all designed by their authors to raise doubts that materialism will ever give a satisfactory account of our mental lives.

*As a real physicalist, then, I hold that the mental/experiential is physical, and I am happy to say, along with many other physicalists, that experience is 'really just neurons firing', at least in the case of biological organisms like ourselves. But when I say these words I mean something completely different from what many physicalists have apparently meant by them. I certainly don't mean that all characteristics of what is going on, in the case of experience, can be described by physics and neurophysiology or any non-revolutionary extensions of them. That idea is crazy. It amounts to radical 'eliminativism' with respect to experience, and it is not a form of real physicalism at all. My claim is different. It is that experiential phenomena 'just are' physical, so that there is a lot more to neurons than physics and neurophysiology record (or can record). No one who disagrees with this is a real physicalist, in my terms.<sup>8</sup>*

Strawson criticises much philosophy of mind for its stubborn refusal to allow physical entities to be capable of experience or consciousness. Just because it is difficult for scientists to comprehend how concrete stuff can be conscious, doesn't mean it's beyond that stuff's capacities.

This tackles the mind-body problem head-on. You should recall the exercises early in this Theme, in which you classified items as physical and mental. We are very aware of insensible items in our world, such as rocks, compared with items in which there is conscious experience going on, such as humans. Western thinking in the dualist tradition since Descartes has supposed that something separate is 'added' to the physical body when consciousness arises. Strawson says materialists ever since have been too committed to 'taking away' the consciousness bit in order to build their arguments. He takes a different approach in suggesting we should take fundamental reality to be *experiential*. Perhaps experiential energy is the fundamental matter of our universe, he speculates. This makes consciousness not anomalous but typical. In this way, the universe is *panpsychic* or essentially consciousness.

Thus Strawson argues that consciousness is a totally physical phenomenon, and that at least some arrangements of matter are conscious or constitute consciousness. This thesis has of course attracted much criticism. Some have argued that Strawson's position is actually a dualist one after all. Others have pursued the difficulties of imagining how our unified and self-aware experience of consciousness could arise from the 'micro-experientialities' Strawson seems to imagine particles as.

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8 Galen Strawson, 'Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism' (2006), [www.uts.utoronto.ca/~seager/strawson\\_on\\_panpsychism.doc](http://www.uts.utoronto.ca/~seager/strawson_on_panpsychism.doc) (accessed July 31, 2013)

We will then consider Dennett's arguments that qualia do not really exist except as properties of an entirely physical consciousness, and therefore that they pose no problem at all for a materialist theory of the mind.

### THINK

Identify three examples of qualia that you have experienced yourself today. Do they match Dennett's four descriptors?



### DO

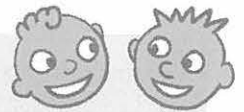
Try to describe the experience of 'blue' for someone who has never experienced colour.

- Is it possible to provide a complete description?
- Would it help to have scientific knowledge – for example, to be able to give a complete physical description of the wavelength of light which hits your retina, and the electro-chemical activity which follows in your brain, to produce the experience of yellow?
- What can be concluded about the nature of the mind from this activity?



### DISCUSS

Do you think qualia are challenging for the theories of mind you have studied so far? Explain why or why not.



## The 'What's it like to be?' Argument

Could physical science ever enable you to appreciate exactly what it is like to *be a bat*?

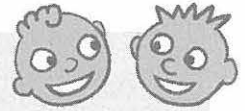
American philosopher Thomas Nagel (1937- ) produced a famous essay in 1974, which challenged the reduction of consciousness to purely physical processes. Titled 'What's it like to be a bat?' the essay opens with the statement: 'Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable.' While he doesn't use the word 'qualia', Nagel goes on to argue that consciousness has an essentially subjective, 'what-it-is-like' character:

*... an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism — something it is like for the organism.*<sup>9</sup>

9 Thomas Nagel, 1974 'What is it like to be a bat?' *Philosophical Review* 83.4, p.436

Nagel argues that that this subjective nature of the mind will probably never be adequately accounted for by any physicalist analyses, 'for all of them are logically compatible with its absence.'<sup>10</sup>

It would seem that every conscious organism has a private, interior life. I would find it challenging to explain the joys of chocolate to you if you had never experienced anything remotely similar to chocolate. But at least we are of the same species and share the same biology, and we can, to a degree, extrapolate from our own experiences to those of other people. It would surely be much harder to appreciate the inner life of a species whose sensory perceptions are alien to us. That is why Nagel chooses a bat for his thought experiment.



## DISCUSS

1. Could we ever know what it is like to be a bat?
2. If science is one day able to track and describe every neurological state in a bat, will we be closer to understanding what it is like to *be* that bat, from 'inside' its experience?
3. Is the question any different in human cases? If it were possible to track every neurological state in your mother, could you know what it is like to *be* your mother?
4. What conclusions do you draw about the mind-body problem in response to Nagel's argument about consciousness? Does Nagel disprove physicalism?

## TEXT STUDY: Thomas Nagel, 'What's it like to be a Bat?' (1974)

[see Useful Resources]

The whole of this article is fairly accessible but your teacher may suggest a brief extract.

You could consider the following questions:

1. What is the subjective nature of conscious experience? How is it a problem for physicalism, according to Nagel?
2. What views does Nagel have about the possibility of a physicalist account of the mind?
3. Outline Nagel's thought experiment about being a bat. How does he use it to form an argument about the nature of the mind?
4. How effective is Nagel's case of the bat in arguing for his position about materialist views of the mind?
5. How are scientific reductions 'magical', according to Nagel?



## The Zombie Argument

Imagine a world of zombies. Zombie World is exactly the same as our world in every physical sense. Your house and your school are there. Your body and the bodies of all your classmates and teachers are there. These physical duplicates of you – and everyone you know – behave, outwardly, in the same ways as in our world. If your classmate stubs her toe, she will cry out in pain. However, the zombies have no inner, conscious experiences, no sentience to actually *feel* the pain. In other words, zombies have no qualia.

Australian philosopher David Chalmers (Famous Philosopher File p.133), in his book *The Conscious Mind* (1996), used the *logical possibility* of Zombie World – that is, the fact that we can conceive of it – to construct an ingenious argument.

According to physicalist theories of mind, everything that exists in our world, including consciousness, is physical. Therefore, Chalmers argues, according to the physicalist, Zombie World must contain everything that exists in our actual world, including consciousness. *But*, we can conceive of a world physically identical to our world in which there is no consciousness – that is, Zombie World. That means such a world is logically possible. And it must follow, therefore, that physicalism is false.

### TEXT STUDY: David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, Chapter 3, 'Argument 1: The Logical Possibility of Zombies' (1996)



[see Useful Resources]

1. Set out Chalmers' argument in standard form. Evaluate its validity and soundness. (*Clue: Refer to Modus Tollens, p.55*)
2. Do you accept that Zombie World is coherent and logically possible?
3. Can a significant conclusion be drawn from something that is conceivable but not known to exist?
4. Chalmers believes that his zombie argument 'can actually be rephrased in a zombie-free way.' How might such an argument be worded? Is this argument any more or less persuasive when zombies are removed?

## The Inverted Spectrum Argument

Imagine you wake up one morning and all the colours in the world have been inverted. Your previously yellow bedspread is now purple, the leaves on the tree outside are pink, and the sky is red instead of blue. Yet your family all swear to you that they see everything exactly as before. You go to the doctor, whose investigations reveal that you are physically unchanged.

## THINK

1. Would this suggest anything to you about the nature of mind and body?
2. What might you conclude from this about qualia?



This thought experiment was originally developed by John Locke (Famous Philosopher File p.104) in the seventeenth century. Locke's response was that we cannot ever know if other people see the same colours as we do, 'because one man's mind could not pass into another man's body to see what appearances were produced by those organs.'<sup>11</sup> In other words, conscious experience is subjective; we can only know what experiences are like *for ourselves*.

It can further be argued that, in this scenario, you could continue your life in the same *functional* way, agreeing with other people that grass is green and sky is blue, stopping at 'red' traffic lights and so on, *even though*, at the level of your *qualia*, the grass is now pink, the sky is red and you stop at blue traffic lights.

This line of argument concludes that a physical and behavioural analysis will always omit something essential: we can never know *what it's like* to be conscious, having perceptions of colours, sounds, feels, tastes, pains and so on.

As with the zombie, the inverted spectrum thought experiment requires us to find its scenario plausible and coherent. Advocates of this experiment claim that if we *do* find it logically possible, then we must admit that qualia exist and that they are non-physical.

## DO

Can you reconstruct the inverted spectrum argument in standard form?



## THINK

1. Do you find the inverted spectrum scenario logically possible?
2. Does the inverted spectrum argument persuade you that qualia are non-physical? Why or why not?



11 J.Locke 1995, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Prometheus, New York.

## The Knowledge Argument

Mary is a colour scientist. She has dedicated her life to knowing every physical thing there is to know about colour. She knows every physical feature of the experience of colour in other people. This includes every detail of the neurological activity that occurs in other people's brains when they experience colours, and the behaviours they exhibit when exposed to different colours. However, Mary has been confined from birth to a room that contains only black and white. Her experiences of the outside world have occurred only through a black and white monitor. What will happen when Mary leaves the room? Will her new experiences add anything to her knowledge of colour?

### THINK

1. What do you think? Will Mary's expertise in colour be enhanced by her first-hand experiences?
2. What does this thought experiment contribute to our consideration of qualia, and the mind-body problem, do you think?



In his article 'Epiphenomenal Qualia' (1982), Australian philosopher Frank Jackson (Famous Philosopher File p.133) offered this so-called 'knowledge argument' for qualia. He thinks that if we agree that Mary learns something when she experiences colours firsthand, then qualia must exist. Furthermore, the knowledge argument challenges materialism. Before her release, Mary knew every physical detail about colour. Yet if she learnt something more about colour after her release, this must show that there is something non-physical about our experiences of colour. Therefore, human consciousness is not entirely physical.

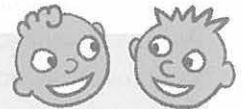
### DO

Can you reconstruct the inverted spectrum argument in standard form?



### DISCUSS

1. Does the 'Mary's Room' scenario persuade you that qualia must exist? Why or why not?
2. Does it persuade you that qualia are non-physical? Why or why not?
3. Has Jackson created an effective argument against materialism? Why or why not?







## TEXT STUDY: Frank Jackson, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia' (1982)

[see Useful Resources]

1. How does our knowledge of qualia undermine physicalism, according to Jackson?
2. Jackson's paper includes a second thought experiment. Outline the 'Fred' scenario. What does Jackson use it to argue? How successful is this scenario in persuading you that qualia are problematic for materialism?

## Daniel Dennett: Qualia are not a Problem for Materialism

We have already considered one type of eliminative materialism, which argued for the elimination of our everyday language about the mind, or our 'folk psychology'. American philosopher Daniel Dennett (Famous Philosopher File p.151) doesn't think we should discard this folk psychology but he is an eliminativist materialist of another kind: he thinks we should eliminate our idea that qualia exist. Dennett does not deny consciousness, but he thinks it can be explained in entirely physical/functional terms. He says the notion of qualia should not be seen as a challenge to materialist theories of the mind because it is hazy and underdeveloped. When we realise how confused our notions of qualia are, Dennett says we will be happy to recognise them simply as properties of an entirely physical consciousness.

In 'Quining Qualia' (1988), Dennett offers several arguments against qualia in a series of thought experiments which he calls 'intuition pumps'. These are designed, he says, to 'flush out' our mistaken 'intuitions' about qualia. He defends his approach thus:

*Rigorous arguments only work on well-defined materials, and since my goal is to destroy our faith in the pretheoretical or 'intuitive' concept [of qualia], the right tools for my task are intuition pumps, not formal arguments.*<sup>12</sup>

As we saw earlier in this Theme (see p.144), Dennett isolates four features commonly ascribed to qualia: qualia are *ineffable*, *intrinsic*, *private*, and *directly or immediately apprehensible in consciousness*. Through the course of his thought experiments, he seeks to dissolve any significance we might see in these features.

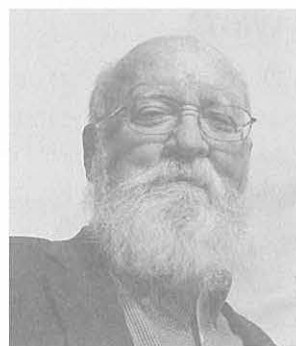
Dennett's intuition pumps include rebuttals to the inverted spectrum, zombie and Mary's Room scenarios we have just considered. Perhaps his most well-known thought experiment is the coffee-taster case. Imagine two coffee-tasters, Chase and Sanborn, who are charged with ensuring that the taste of Maxwell House coffee remains consistent. At some point, the men realise that they no longer enjoy the taste of Maxwell House coffee. Chase thinks the coffee itself tastes exactly the same as always – he is getting the same quale – but he just doesn't like it now. However, Sanborn believes the taste of the coffee itself – and therefore the quale – has changed.

12 Daniel Dennett 1988 'Quining Qualia', <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/quinquial.htm> (accessed August 3, 2013)

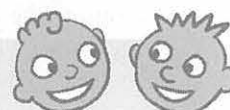
## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Daniel Dennett (1942– )

Daniel Dennett is an American philosopher with particular interest in philosophy of mind. His work has focused on problems of consciousness, meaning, free will and evolution. Dennett has written many books aimed at a popular audience as much as for the academic community. He is an ardent and outspoken atheist.



#### DISCUSS



Is there a meaningful distinction to be made between Chase (who says the taste/ his quale is the same but his judgement of it is different) and Sanborn (who says the taste/quale itself has changed)? Could such a difference be verified?

The question for Chase and Sanborn is: how much of the change in their judgments arises from the qualia themselves, and how much from their judgments of the qualia? If qualia exist, this is a sensible question, and there is a real difference between Chase, whose qualia have stayed the same while his judgments have changed, and Sanborn, whose qualia themselves have changed. But Dennett argues that there is no way of anyone – including Chase and Sanborn themselves – ever determining a real difference between these cases, which hinge on unreliable memories. Therefore there is no meaningful difference between what Chase claims and what Sanborn claims, and therefore there are no ‘facts’ about qualia. There is no need to postulate ‘qualia’ to explain some perceived difference in Chase and Sanborn’s experience; there are just the judgements made, which have perfectly acceptable physical explanations. Therefore, argues Dennett, there is no special ‘hard problem’ of consciousness. We just have to give neuroscientists time to come up with a more detailed and nuanced physicalist account of the mind.

#### DO

*If Chase and Sanborn’s claims about their qualia cannot be verified, does this mean we qualia don’t really exist?*



Divide your class into two teams. Team 1 are the Anti-Quales. Their task is to construct the strongest argument they can against qualia from the Chase and Sanborn case. Team 2 are the Qualia Freaks. Their task is to construct the strongest argument they can for the existence of qualia, using the Chase and Sanborn case.

Following presentations of each team’s arguments, discuss which team made the strongest case and why. Write an individual reflection on which view you find most persuasive.

## WRITE



Dennett argues that our ideas about qualia are actually hazy, confused and under-developed – intuitions at best. On this basis, he dismisses them as a challenge to materialist theories of the mind. Do you agree with Dennett? Make a case for your view.

## DISCUSS



Dennett believes that science will one day be able to explain our mental lives in a completely physical way, eliminating the so-called ‘problem’ of qualia. What would the physical universe have to be like to include conscious phenomena such as pain?

## TEXT STUDY: Daniel Dennett, ‘Quining Qualia’ (1988)



*[see Useful Resources]*

1. Outline Dennett’s argument against the existence of qualia.
2. Choose one of Dennett’s intuition pumps. Work in a pair to: (a) outline the scenario, and (b) explain how Dennett uses the scenario to undermine the notion of qualia, and (c) evaluate the success of this scenario in arguing for the non-existence of qualia. *Note: some of these are very challenging and you will need to think hard! You should also seek your teacher’s close guidance as you work through this task.*
3. How does Dennett respond to the supposed ineffability of qualia?
4. How does Dennett argue against the idea that qualia are intrinsic?
5. How does Dennett interpret the privacy of qualia? How does this link to his arguments about memory?
6. Our tastes change and refine over time. What does this show about qualia, according to Dennett?

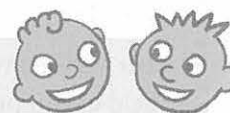


## WRITE

### Materialism in Review

What is the most convincing materialist theory to you? What is the least convincing? Why?

How do the various materialist theories of mind described above fare against the criticisms of materialism outlined in the section you read earlier, 'The Appeal of Cartesian Dualism' on pp.122-23 and against the challenges of the qualia theorists?



## DISCUSS

Hold a class debate on the theme: 'Materialism is a far more plausible way of explaining the relationship between mind and body than dualism.'

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## Artificial Intelligence: Might Machines Ever Be Said To Think?

If the materialists are right, and all the operations of the mind can be explained in physical terms, then theoretically it may one day be possible for human beings to build a brain.

In fact, we have already started doing this. Since Frankenstein, R2D2 and AI, most of us have come to accept at least the possibility that humans may in the future develop a robot of sophisticated abilities. Just over the past decade, the advances made in computing have been remarkable, and many philosophers and scientists believe that while we do not as yet have the technical powers to build a mind, it may not be too long before we do. However, others argue that such a proposal is not even logically possible.

Much of the work in Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been inspired by the work of Alan Turing (Famous Philosopher File p.154). Turing's paper, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' (1950), proposed that it would one day be possible for a machine to think.

## The Turing Test

### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

#### Alan Turing (1912–1954)

Alan Turing (1912-1954) was an English mathematician, logician and computer scientist. He is probably most famous for his work in cracking the German military's Enigma code, a significant breakthrough that helped to bring an end to World War Two.

Turing then turned his attention to founding the field of computer science. His most notable work is contained in the paper 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' in which he poses the question, 'Can machines think?' He replaces the question with a game, often called the Turing Test, which has challenged philosophers' understanding of concepts such as intelligence, consciousness and mind.

Turing's later life was tragic. Homosexuality was illegal in Britain and in 1952 Turing was convicted of gross indecency. He was given the choice between imprisonment or chemical castration via injections of oestrogen. Turing accepted the latter option so he could continue his work in mathematical biology, but the treatment plunged him into depression. He committed suicide at the age of 42. In response to the absurdity of the British laws he had written:

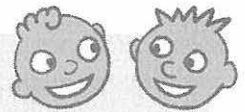
- Turing believes machines think.
- Turing lies with men.
- Therefore machines do not think.

Turing had predicted that machines which appear to think like humans would exist by the end of the 20th century. He may have been overly optimistic with the timeframe, but given another fifty years, Turing could yet be proven right.



### DISCUSS

Could a computer ever be said to 'think'?



In discussing the question above, you probably found yourself getting tied up in the problem of what it means to 'think'. Turing says this is a dead-end exercise. He says dictionaries are only gallup polls – mass surveys – of how most people use the word 'think', so their definitions are no help in really getting to the bottom of what thinking means. And thinking is so multi-faceted that we take all kinds of processes to be representative of thinking, from simple reflexes to creativity to advanced calculus. The list of what constitutes thinking can seem to be endless. So Turing instead asks another question: 'What *behaviour* do we find in other people which satisfies us that they are thinking? What is a minimal demonstration – or a *sufficient test* – for human thought?' And the answer he gives is *language*. To be more precise, it is people's *linguistic behaviour*, Turing says, which convinces us that they are thinking beings.

What does this mean? Well, Turing says when you encounter other people, a **sufficient** demonstration that they are thinking is that they are able to make meaningful and coherent responses to you in conversation. What they say to you links to what you have said to them, and makes sense. In everyday life, you do not demand any more than this from other people to be convinced that they are thinking, so why should you demand any more than this from a computer? He thinks we should have to agree that a computer is thinking if it could pass itself off as a human in a conversation.

In standard form, you could express this as follows:

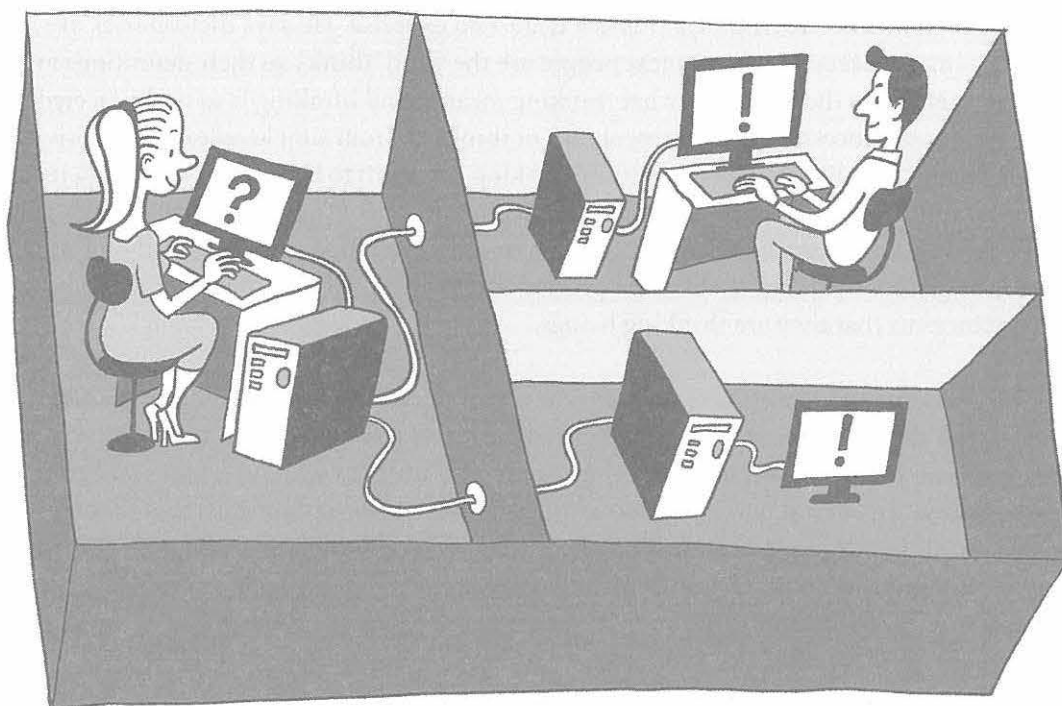
- P1 We accept their linguistic behaviour as sufficient evidence that a human is thinking.
  - P2 It would be unfair to demand any more evidence for a computer thinking than we demand for a human thinking.
  - P3 It is possible that a computer could engage in linguistic behaviour indistinguishable from a human's.
- 
- C Therefore, if a computer could engage in linguistic behaviour indistinguishable from a human's, it would be unfair not to regard it as thinking.

## THINK

Is this a plausible argument? Why or why not?



To demonstrate his argument in practical terms, Turing sets up the so-called Turing Test. Imagine a person, Lucy, at a computer terminal in a room. She is communicating with two other computers, located in other rooms – Room A and Room B. At the computer in Room A is a person, Jonathan, who is typing replies to Lucy's questions. In Room B, there is just a computer, running a person-like program and sending replies to Lucy's questions. Lucy can ask whatever questions she likes to Room A and Room B in an attempt to work out which one is the computer running a person-like program and which one is the actual person. If she cannot do this after substantial and intelligent inquiry, then the person-like program has passed the Turing Test. Turing says that to pass the Turing Test should be accepted as sufficient demonstration that a machine can think.



In 1950, Turing wrote:

*I believe that in about 50 years' time it will be possible to program computers, with a storage capacity of about  $10^9$ , to make them play the imitation game so well that an average interrogator will not have more than 70 per cent chance of making the right identification after five minutes of questioning.<sup>13</sup>*

To put Turing's predictions about computer memory capacity in perspective,  $10^9$  bits is equivalent to 120Mb. The average mobile phone manufactured in 2013 has around 140 times this capacity!

There is an annual competition called the Loebner Prize, which offers \$100 000 and a gold medal for a computer program that can pass the Turing test. So far none has been successful.

## DISCUSS



1. Do you think that a computer will ever be able to pass the Turing Test?
2. If one did, would this be evidence of thought?

13 Alan Turing 1950, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' in Hofstadter & Dennett, D. 2000, pp56-7.



## WRITE

1. Make a list of at least six questions which you would ask if you were the interrogator in a Turing Test, with the aim of discovering whether your conversation partner is a human or a computer.
2. What are the qualities of the computer's 'thinking' which you think may be different from humans'?



## DO

Try chatting with some 'chatterbots' on the internet. One example is Siri, the iPhone's helper bot. However, there are many bots you can attempt to converse with, including past entrants to the Loebner Prize competition.

1. Which were the most convincing programs you chatted with? Why?
2. Which were the least convincing programs you chatted with? Why?
3. From your answers to (1) and (2) above, what do you think are the essential attributes of human thinking which are difficult to create in a computer program?
4. Do you think this is a good test of whether something is thinking?



## DO

Although no computer program has yet taken the gold medal and \$100,000 prize in the Loebner competition, a silver medal is awarded every year for the top-performing program.

Take a look at the transcripts of conversations that have taken place with previous bronze medal-winning computers in the Loebner Test, by going to the Loebner Prize website.

1. Why did none of these entrants take out the gold medal?
2. What are the major difficulties these programs seem to have had in trying to replicate human conversations?
3. Do you think the gold medal will ever be won? Why or why not?

## TURING'S OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

In his paper, Turing anticipates as many objections as he can think of to his view that computers could one day be said to be thinking. He then offers replies which he thinks defeat these objections.



## DO

Make a list of as many objections as you can think of to Turing's proposal that computers will one day be said to be thinking.



Here is a brief summary of Turing's major Objections and Replies:

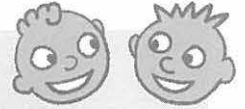
- 1. Theological Objection:** Thinking only occurs when an immortal soul has been bestowed by God. God would never give a machine an immortal soul. Therefore, machine will never be able to think.  
**Turing's Reply:** Turing is not very sympathetic to this religious angle, but he replies that even if it is true that an immortal soul is required for thinking, God *could* decide to give one to a machine.
- 2. 'Heads in the Sand' Objection:** It is too terrible to imagine machines being able to think. It is offensive. Let us not even consider it.  
**Turing's Reply:** This is a weak objection, usually based on people's wanting to cling to the notion that human beings are necessarily superior. It is an irrational fear more than an argument.
- 3. The Mathematical Objection:** This objection uses a complicated mathematical formulation called Goedel's Theorem. It argues that a computer could never escape its own system to examine itself or to predict all of its responses, whereas a human can do this.  
**Turing's Reply:** Can humans really know themselves that well? Can we ever capture a full sense of ourselves? Aren't we trapped inside our own systems of thinking too?
- 4. The Consciousness Objection:** Emotions accompany all human thinking and even if machines show apparent emotional responses we will never be able to be convinced that these are genuine.  
**Turing's Reply:** Surely we cannot be sure of the emotions going on in a person without being that person either. This then leads us to solipsism – the position that says that all we can be sure of is our own first person experience. This is a ridiculous position to sustain and we clearly don't require this when assessing that our fellow humans are thinking.
- 5. The Disabilities Objection:** But there are so many things a computer can't do that humans can: be kind, resourceful, friendly, fall in love, write a symphony, enjoy strawberries and cream, make mistakes and so on. Therefore a computer cannot be said to think.  
**Turing's Reply:** A lot of this may be prejudice; just because you've never seen a machine do these things in the past doesn't mean they won't be able to in the future.
- 6. Lady Lovelace's Objection:** Lady Lovelace was the world's first computer programmer. She stated she did not believe that a machine could be capable of original thought.  
**Turing's Reply:** But are all humans really that original in their thinking? Isn't a lot of our so-called creativity just reassembling bits and pieces we've already learnt? And computers are able to learn [take Spellcheck for example].

7. **The Nervous System Objection:** Humans are analogue systems; computers are digital – operating only with patterns of ones and zeros. A digital system cannot register the subtleties that an analogue system is capable of. In a digital system, everything is ‘rounded off’.

**Turing’s Reply:** A digital system can get very close to the level of accuracy of an analogue system – certainly close enough for what humans are sensitive to or that matters for communication.

8. **The Informal Behaviour Objection:** Computers run on systems of rules; humans do more than just referring to a rulebook when making a decision.

**Turing’s Reply:** How do we know that humans are not following a complex system of rules?



### DISCUSS

1. With a partner, rank the objections above – against the possibility of machines being able to think – from strongest to weakest. Defend your rankings to the rest of the class.
2. Which do you think is Turing’s strongest reply? Which is his weakest reply? Why?



### THINK

1. Can you think of any counter-arguments to Turing’s replies? Select three of the Objections and Replies above and continue the argument with Turing!
2. Are there any objections that Turing has missed? How might he reply to them?



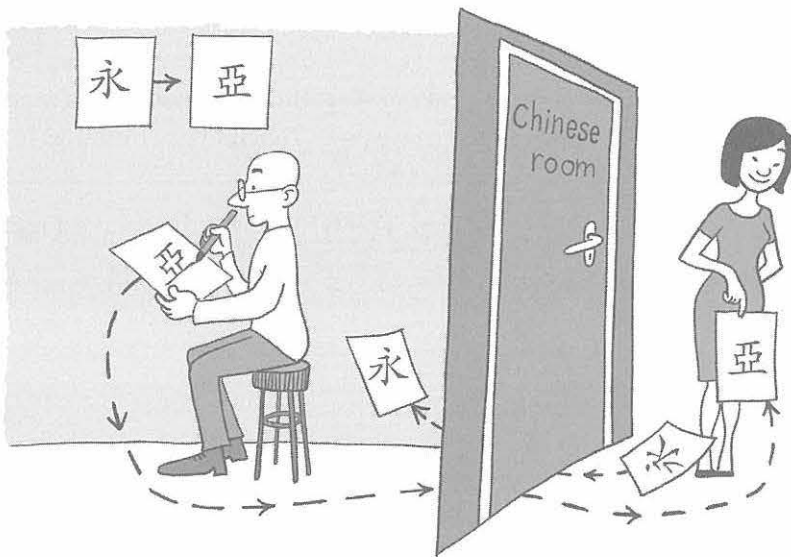
### WRITE

Does the Turing Test really test for thought? Can you think of any ways to improve the test? Include discussion of at least three of the Objections and Replies from above, as well as some reflections on your own experiences conversing with ‘chatterbots’.

## The Chinese Room Argument

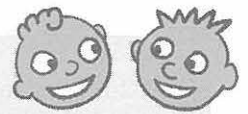
This argument was developed by American philosopher, John Searle (1932- ), against the idea that a computer could ever be said to have a mind or really 'think'. The argument is developed in the form of a thought experiment.

Imagine that there is a room – let's call it the Chinese Room – which appears to understand and speak Chinese. We push under the door of this room a story written in Chinese. We also submit a series of questions – in writing – about the story. After not too long, some responses to the questions – in writing – are pushed back to us from under the door. Our Chinese friends tell us that these answers are perfectly sensible. The room – or something in it – must understand Chinese!



However, what is actually happening is this. There is a person in the room following an instruction manual which tells him what to do in response to various shapes (Chinese characters) that enter the room. He understands no Chinese at all. In fact, he may not even recognise the shapes as Chinese characters and have no idea that he is outputting answers in Chinese to questions about a story.

### DISCUSS



1. Can the Chinese Room really be said to understand Chinese? Why or why not?
2. How does this thought experiment constitute an argument against the Turing Test as a test of a machine being able to think?

Searle's point here is that the person inside the room is analogous to the central processing unit of a computer and the instructions in English are analogous to the program it is running. He suggests it is obvious that the room doesn't actually *understand* the story. Running a computer program is not the same as thinking.

A common reply – the so-called Systems Reply – to this, is to say that although it is true that the woman in the room does not understand Chinese, the system as a whole does.

## THINK

Is the Systems Reply a convincing response to the Chinese Room argument?



### RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: CAN MACHINES THINK?

1. Stage a class debate on this question. Divide the class into an affirmative and a negative team, with each speaker given three minutes to present a case. Which team manages to produce the most convincing arguments?

OR

2. Research the latest advances in computing technology and robotics. You may look into issues such as memory capacity, quantum computing, 'The Cloud' and 'swarms'. Report your findings to the class. What are the implications of these developments for our view of the mind and whether a machine will one day be able to think?

OR

3. Familiarise yourself with a science-fiction story or film which deals with artificial intelligence. Examples could include: *Bicentennial Man*; *I, Robot*; *A.I.*; *Bladerunner*; *Wall-E*; *The Terminator*; *Alien*. In an oral presentation, explain to the class how plausible you find this fictional representation of intelligence and thinking. Does it convince you that a machine could think? Would this machine pass the Turing Test? What does this film say about the nature of mind and body? What does this film say about the nature of being human?

## Assessment Tasks

The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.

### Assessment Task One: Written Reflection

Here are some possible questions to prompt journal entries for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Is being conscious the same as having a mind? Could something have a mind and not be conscious? Is being conscious the same as having a soul?
2. Would you describe yourself as a dualist or a materialist? Justify your position in detail.
3. Reflect on at least three arguments for dualism and three arguments for materialism. Which arguments do you find most convincing for each position?
4. Why is interaction a problem for dualism?
5. What does it mean to say that mind-body dualism is based on a category mistake?

6. What does it mean to say that, for the physicalist, minds not only depend on bodies but are explained solely in terms of bodies?
7. How does the mind-body identity theorist explain what the mind and mental states are?
8. How are mental activity and mind defined by the functionalist?
9. What is the eliminative materialist position on mind, and what are the arguments for it?
10. Which of the following positions has most appeal for you and why? Which has least appeal and why? Behaviourism, identity theory, functionalism, eliminativism, anomalous monism, realistic monism?
11. To what extent does the notion of qualia challenge materialism?
12. If we knew everything there was to know about the physics and physiology of colour, would we know everything there is to know about colour?
13. Are mindless but animate human bodies conceivable? If so, are they therefore metaphysically possible?
14. Might computers have minds?
15. Do you think a computer will ever pass the Turing Test? If it does, should it be considered a thinking thing?
16. Can animals think? Do animals have a mind? What implications might these questions have for animal rights?
17. Do souls exist? What kinds of things are they? Are they things, concepts or something else? Are they immortal?
18. Do you think very advanced brain scans will one day be able to entirely map a person's thoughts, feelings, memories and desires? What would be the consequences of such a possibility?
19. Do you believe in life after death? What are the implications of your belief for your view of the mind?
20. After studying this Theme, how do you now imagine the mind? Have your views changed? What ideas have posed the most significant challenges to your original views?

## ***Assessment Task Two: Essay***

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

**TOPIC 1:** Select at least one argument for dualism (for example: Cartesian dualism; qualia arguments;...) and at least one argument for materialism (for example: behaviourism; identity theory; functionalism; ...). Explain the arguments in detail, and then evaluate them.

OR

**TOPIC 2:** Select any two arguments you have studied in philosophy of mind. Outline and evaluate these arguments.

OR

**TOPIC 3:** What is the traditional, Cartesian idea of the mind and how is it best justified? What is the strongest challenge to this idea of the mind, in your view, and why? Which is the strongest of these arguments and what are the implications of holding to this idea of the mind?

OR

**TOPIC 4:** Explain the concept of qualia. To what extent does it challenge the materialist view of the mind? Include an analysis of at least one relevant thought experiment in your answer.

### ***Assessment Task Three: Applied Metaphysics Oral Presentation***

Present one of the three options under 'Relevant Contemporary Debate' above (see p.161)

OR

Research the latest developments in neuroscience. Report to the class on some of the most interesting and latest advances in knowledge of the brain. What are these implications of these for our views of the mind?

OR

Research out-of-body and near-death experiences. Report to the class on the most interesting cases you discover. What are the implications of these for our views of the mind?

### ***Assessment Task Four: Written Analysis***

Answer a series of short-answer questions relating to one of the primary texts you have studied in this Theme.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Dialogue***

Write a dialogue between a dualist and a materialist. Aim to challenge the ideas of both speakers as far as possible. Perform your dialogue for the class.

## THEME 3

# On Free Will and Determinism

We tend to cherish our freedom as one of the most important ingredients of a good life. Many have fought and died in the name of freedom. The United Nations sanctions freedom as a basic human right and much political rhetoric of the Western world gives emphasis to freedom above all other values. We appreciate *choice* in our lives: to be able to choose who to marry, what jobs to take, where to live, who our friends are and so on.

But science presents a conflicting picture of our universe. Predictable laws of cause and effect govern the behaviour of physical objects. In normal circumstances, we assume that the floor won't collapse under us, food will give our bodies energy, and cars won't suddenly fly into the air. We assume that our physical universe is determined; present circumstances are determined by prior conditions.

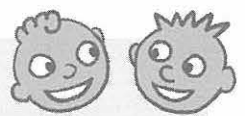
Now, if we consider humans to be entirely physical beings, some interesting implications arise. We, too, must be subject to universal causation. That means all our thoughts and behaviours are part of the predictable causal chains that govern all matter. And on this view, it appears as though we don't have the capacity to choose after all.

This conflict – between the determinism we accept in the physical universe, and the freedom we traditionally assume in our choices – is what we grapple with in this Theme.

### **Introductory Activities**

#### **DISCUSS**

1. How free do you currently feel in your life? Would you like to have more freedom? Why or why not?
2. What circumstances in your life do you imagine are likely to restrict your freedom? Do you see this as a good or bad thing? Why?
3. How important is freedom to you and why is it important?



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## Free Will versus Determinism

### *The Significance of Free Will*

We usually assume that people are able to choose what to do in life. We may do many things out of habit, or because others want us to, or because of legal or moral constraints, but ultimately we consider that people could always decide to do otherwise. We can consider alternatives and then decide to take one of them, having taken into account the potential results of our action.

This is what it is to exercise **free will**. We can detach ourselves from any **antecedent** factors (that is, *preceding* factors), be they psychological, emotional, or in our prior experience, and take any available alternative. While we may be *influenced* by innumerable things, free choices are still ours to make. Our futures are open and full of possibilities.

According to the doctrine of free will, you are free to take any action at all during a Philosophy class, for example. Of course there might be negative consequences to some potential actions, but that doesn't mean you couldn't choose to do them. You could simply walk out of the classroom and go and eat a meal. You could catch a taxi to the airport and be in another hemisphere by nightfall. You could stand in the middle of the classroom and spontaneously perform a provocative dance. Or you could just do what you are told, continuing to read this textbook and thinking philosophical thoughts. Of course there are many factors making some actions more likely than others. The facts that you are habitually a conscientious student, you are anxious to do well and please your parents and teachers, you have no money to take taxis, planes or buy extra meals, and are usually shy dancing in public, could make the other cited possibilities very unlikely indeed. But that is not to say that you couldn't surprise everyone and assert your complete freedom by taking any number of possible courses of action right now.

Note that this kind of freedom does not imply that you are able to fly, or make yourself seven feet tall. To have free will means that physical limitations aside, you are able to control the content of your thoughts, your opinions, your desires and so on. For example, there may be many physical impediments to my desire to rob a bank, but that doesn't impede my freedom to hold the desire to do so if I could get away with it.

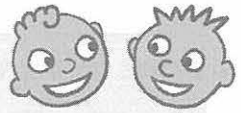
Defenders of free will – called **libertarians** – think that this sense of our own freedom is an essential element of what makes us human. Central to the libertarian thesis is the idea that we always have alternative possibilities open to us. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt (though not himself a libertarian) defined the so-called Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP)<sup>14</sup> as the idea that a person '*could have done otherwise*' (a phrase used by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century). Being able to choose otherwise may be considered a prerequisite for moral responsibility.

So what does free will feel like? How do we know that we have it? Do you feel trapped when sitting in class, or do you have awareness that your life is ultimately your own, and you can choose what you do with it? This Theme will challenge you to reach a position on these and many other questions.

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14 H.Frankfurt 1969, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy*, 66: 829–39.





## DISCUSS

1. Do you consider yourself to be free?
2. Are there ways in which freedom can be a negative thing?
3. Have you ever made a decision that was entirely free? Describe it.
4. How much freedom do you have in the situation you are in right now? Are libertarians right in their claim that (within physical limitations) you can do whatever you like at any time (even though you will probably rationally rule out most options)?

## WILLIAM JAMES: DEFENDER OF FREE WILL

American philosopher and psychologist William James (Famous Philosopher File p.166) writes of our 'ambiguous futures' in his essay, 'The Dilemma of Determinism' (1884). Seventeen years earlier, he had written a now-famous diary entry: 'My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.' James outlines a two-stage model of free will, in which he separates chance (the situation which presents itself to us) and choice (the act of decision-making). For James, we are always free in any given moment to detach ourselves from antecedent influences and decide afresh. He writes that choices, 'in their strange and intense function of granting consent to one possibility and withholding it from another, ... transform an equivocal and double future into an unalterable and simple past.'<sup>15</sup>

### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

## William James (1842–1910)

William James was born into a wealthy New York family which included his brother, the novelist Henry James. He spent his entire study and working life at Harvard University. James started out studying Medicine, becoming a lecturer in anatomy and physiology, but then became professor of psychology and later professor of philosophy. You may have heard of the idea of 'stream of consciousness'; this was first described by James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1880). His lifelong interest in religious belief culminated in a major work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

The strongest influence on James's philosophy was his friend, Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), the founder of philosophical pragmatism. James developed this theory and made it known throughout the world. In James's philosophy it became a theory of truth: the principle that something is true if it can be put to practical use. You will note this principle in James's beliefs about free will and in his epistemology.



15 William James 1884, 'The Dilemma of Determinism', <http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/JamesDilemmaOfDeterminism.html> (accessed August 10, 2013)

## TEXT STUDY: William James, 'The Dilemma of Determinism' (1884)



[see Useful Resources]

Here is a larger extract from James's essay, which was first presented as an evening address to Harvard Divinity students:

*What is meant by saying that my choice of which way to walk home after the lecture is ambiguous and a matter of chance as far as the present moment is concerned? It means that both Divinity Avenue and Oxford Street are called; but that only one, and that either one, shall be chosen. Now, I ask you seriously to suppose that this ambiguity of my choice is real; and then to make the impossible hypothesis that the choice is made twice over, and each time falls on a different street. In other words, imagine that I first walk through Divinity Avenue, and then imagine that the powers governing the universe annihilate ten minutes of time with all that it contained, and set me back at the door of this hall just as I was before the choice was made. Imagine then that, everything else being the same, I now make a different choice and traverse Oxford Street. You, as passive spectators, look on and see the two alternative universes, one of them with me walking through Divinity Avenue in it, the other with the same me walking through Oxford Street. Now, if you are determinists you believe one of these universes to have been from eternity impossible: you believe it to have been impossible because of the intrinsic irrationality or accidentality somewhere involved in it. But looking outwardly at these universes, can you say which is the impossible and accidental one, and which the rational and necessary one? I doubt if the most ironclad determinist among you could have the slightest glimmer of light on this point. In other words, either universe after the fact and once there would, to our means of observation and understanding, appear just as rational as the other. There would be absolutely no criterion by which we might judge one necessary and the other matter of chance. Suppose now we relieve the gods of their hypothetical task and assume my choice, once made, to be made forever. I go through Divinity Avenue for good and all. If, as good determinists, you now begin to affirm, what all good determinists punctually do affirm, that in the nature of things I couldn't have gone through Oxford Street,--had I done so it would have been chance, irrationality, insanity, a horrid gap in nature,--I simply call your attention to this, that your affirmation is what the Germans call a *Machtspruch*, a mere conception fulminated as a dogma and based on no insight into details. Before my choice, either street seemed as natural to you as to me. Had I happened to take Oxford Street, Divinity Avenue would have figured in your philosophy as the gap in nature; and you would have so proclaimed it with the best deterministic conscience in the world.\**

1. Do you agree with James that when you choose between alternatives, 'there would be absolutely no criterion by which (an onlooker) might judge one necessary and the other matter of chance'? Why or why not?
2. Is this an effective defence of free will?

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\* Ibid.

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## Fate, Predestination and Karma

Do you read astrology columns? Have you ever felt that a certain outcome in your life was fated to happen? Are you tempted by predictions that the world will end in a certain year? If so, you are influenced by lines of thinking that in Western culture reach back to the ancient Greeks. Ancient Greek tragedies, such as *Oedipus Rex*, rely on **fatalism**, the view that regardless what course of action people choose, particular outcomes are inevitable. No matter what Oedipus did, no matter how noble he aspired to be, he could not avoid the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

The Greek gods were essential to this notion of fate. Human outcomes were thought to be at the mercy of the Gods' whims. In the Christian tradition, **predestination** is the idea that a single God has created and caused in advance, every event in the universe. As you will see in Theme 5 of this Chapter, this idea has been controversial among theologians for centuries. If God is good, he must have made human beings free. But if we are free, we are free to sin and therefore to do evil. But if God created all our actions, we are not free, and God created evil also. Therefore, can God be good after all? This is one formulation of the so-called Problem of Evil, discussed further on page 227.

You may be familiar with the Buddhist notion of **karma**. Karma does not depend on any God; rather, it is the effects of one's choices, which build up over lifetimes, and which are only escaped through long-term commitment to right actions. According to Buddhism, it is only when one breaks the karmic cycle, giving up all illusions of selfhood and freedom, that nirvana – or ultimate freedom – can be reached. Thus the notion of freedom for a Buddhist is wrapped in complex paradox.

You may be knowledgeable about or interested in other religious traditions and their views on human freedom. In Western philosophy, the challenge made by **determinism** to our sense of free will, is a central and enduring debate.

### THINK

Do notions of fate, predestination or karma influence your thinking about the extent of your own freedom? In what ways?



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# Determinism

## *Causality and Physical Determinism*

The opposite view to that of the libertarian, arguing that there cannot be any human freedom of choice or action, is called **determinism**.

Determinism is different from fatalism and predestination. Fatalism says that whatever happens, and regardless of laws of nature, a particular end is inevitable. Predestination relies on God's power over both natural law and human choices. However, determinism says that an event will necessarily happen *if antecedent conditions* are met.

Thus, determinism can be defined as the theory that all events are caused or determined by antecedent conditions. The argument for determinism follows from the **principle of universal causality**, that is, that every event in the world must be caused by some other event. If human actions are events, then it follows that they must also be caused by other events. And if an action is caused (that is, determined and brought about) by other events, then it is not free. At no point in this process can there have been a genuinely free choice or decision.

Let's consider the notion of causality a little further. Modern physics orders all events into causes and effects and sees the physical universe as a gigantic system of interactive causal chains. This is what enables us to predict things in science: 'If A then B'; 'If B then C'; and so on. It is impossible for water not to boil if heated to a high enough temperature. You rely on these chains of cause and effect every time you get on a train, take medicine to cure an illness, use an oven and so on.

So, if human beings behave as part of the physical world, then it is logical to view us, too, as part of these causal chains, and therefore our behaviour must be determined by causes and able to be predicted.

For many philosophers, the only coherent way to argue that we are not part of the causal chain, and may therefore have free will, is to take a dualist position about mind and body. If we consider the mind to be non-physical and therefore beyond physical laws, it perhaps becomes easier to believe humans have choice. Certainly, it seems that the findings of physics about all the other physical things in the world are not consistent with our ordinary understanding of people as able to choose. If our brains control all our actions and our brains are purely physical, following all natural laws, then humans cannot be free. All brain events must be caused by antecedent brain states or other physical factors.

However, there is still much to be understood about the brain. Physical determinism of brain events has not yet been completely proven. Nonetheless, it stretches to the limit our understanding of physics when we try to account for how a physical system could have a place in it for free will.

### **THINK**

Do you believe everything in the world has a cause? Why or why not?





## WRITE

1. Write the argument for physical determinism in standard form. Evaluate this argument.
2. Can you see any way for a materialist view of the mind to be compatible with free will?
3. How is determinism different from notions of fate and predestination?
4. In what ways might accepting the doctrine of determinism be problematic? Brainstorm all the possible consequences you can think of.
5. What might be some consequences of determinism for the way we live, our morality, our legal system and so on?

## HARD DETERMINISM: A MAP TO PREDICT EVERY EVENT IN THE UNIVERSE

The picture of the universe given to us in the seventeenth century by Isaac Newton (Famous Philosopher File p.197) was of 'matter in motion': tiny particles behave in causal relationship to one another, according to strict laws. The mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827) was so inspired by Newton's system that he claimed that if he knew the location and motion of every object in the universe now, he could predict the location and motion of every object in the universe at any time in the future (or indeed, in the past). He included human beings and their actions in this strict cause-effect chain of **hard determinism**, leaving no room for any form of free will.

Another Frenchman, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), shocked many with his atheism and hardline deterministic views.

*'Man's life is a line that Nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant.'*<sup>16</sup>

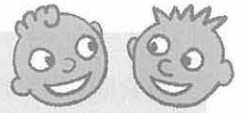
## THINK

Imagine hard determinism is true, and a central database contains a detailed map of your past, present and future.

1. Is this a coherent idea? Why or why not?
2. Would you seek access to this map? Why or why not? (And what is problematic about the terms of this question, from the viewpoint of hard determinism?)
3. Would your life change if hard determinism turned out to be true?



16 d'Holbach 1770, *System of Nature*, <http://www.philosophy-index.com/d-holbach/system-nature/> (accessed August 6, 2013)



## DISCUSS

Would your life so far today have been any different if the world operated according to the doctrine of hard determinism? How?



### TEXT STUDY: Baron d'Holbach, *System of Nature* (1770)

[see Useful Resources]

It is recommended that teachers select a short extract from Chapter 11, with relevance to some or all of the following questions.

1. What does d'Holbach mean when he writes, 'in spite of the shackles by which he is bound it is pretended he is a free agent'? Do you agree that forces of causality are like shackles? Is this a good metaphor?
2. D'Holbach anticipates a possible objection, that there are cases where it seems clear that willpower is exercised, such as when a thirsty man refuses a drink. How does d'Holbach defend hard determinism in this case?
3. How is desire an important concept in d'Holbach's argument?
4. Suppose you perform a seemingly spontaneous act. Let's say you do a crazy dance to demonstrate your free will to your class. How would d'Holbach's hard determinism account for this?

### ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER: NO FREE WILL

In 1839, the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences held an essay competition, asking for responses to the question, 'Is it possible to demonstrate human free will from self-consciousness?' German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (Famous Philosopher File p.172) submitted the prizewinning entry, titled 'On the Freedom of the Will'.

In this paper Schopenhauer agrees that from a first person perspective, we have the sensation of choice. But he argues that, 'You can do what you will, but in any given moment of your life you can *will* only one definite thing and absolutely nothing other than that one thing.' In other words, we do not have free will.

*I can do what I will: I can, if I will, give everything I have to the poor and thus become poor myself—if I will! But I cannot will this, because the opposing motives have much too much power over me for me to be able to. On the other hand, if I had a different character, even to the extent that I were a saint, then I would be able to will it. But then I could not keep from willing it, and hence I would have to do so.<sup>17</sup>*

17 Arthur Schopenhauer 1839 'Prize Essay On the Freedom of the Will' in Guttenplan, S., Hornsby J. & Janaway, C. 2003, p.188

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)



Arthur Schopenhauer was born in Danzig, Germany (now considered part of Poland) into a rich merchant family. He rejected their wishes that he should profit in business and used his wealth to fund a lifetime of studying and writing.

He wrote a book in his twenties which he believed solved the riddles of the universe – *The World as Will and Representation* (1818).

He was surprised when no-one took much notice of this work and his productivity slowed, although he continued to publish articles in the same vein. At the age of 63, Schopenhauer's work gained widespread acclaim and he enjoyed international attention until his death at age 72.

Schopenhauer is known as among the more pessimistic philosophers. He thought the world (*welt*) could be summarised in an acronym, as *weh, elend, leid, tod*, or 'woe, misery, suffering, death.' He saw the real essence of humans as the will, but said we should resist its enslaving power. Schopenhauer advocated contemplation and immersion in the arts, especially music, as the way the way to gain objectivity and overcome our suffering.

That said, Schopenhauer himself lived a comfortable life, surrounded by luxury, fine foods and numerous romantic liaisons. His ideas have been enormously influential and his erudition continues to draw admirers.



## TEXT STUDY: Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Freedom of the Will' (1839)

[see Useful Resources]

In a famous passage, Schopenhauer writes:

*Let us imagine a man who, while standing on the street, would say to himself: 'It is six o'clock in the evening, the working day is over. Now I can go for a walk, or I can go to the club; I can also climb up the tower to see the sun set; I can go to the theatre; I can visit this friend or that one; indeed, I also can run out of the gate, into the wide world and never return. All this is strictly up to me; in this I have complete freedom. But still, I shall do none of these things now, but with just as free a will I shall go home to my wife.' This is exactly as if water spoke to itself: 'I can make high waves (yes! in the sea during a storm), I can rush down hill (yes! in the river bed), I can plunge down foaming and gushing (yes! in the fountain) I can, finally, boil away and disappear (yes! at certain temperature); but I am doing none of these things now, and am voluntarily remaining quiet and clear in the reflecting pond.'*\*

In this passage, Schopenhauer argues by means of a metaphor.

1. Can you explain the metaphor?
2. What is Schopenhauer's argument?
3. How effective is the metaphor in presenting Schopenhauer's view?

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\* Ibid, p.186

## PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

We are familiar with the phrase 'out of character', as in 'It would be really *out of character* for that teacher to suddenly storm out of the classroom – they are always so calm.' We regularly predict how people are likely to react in situations, based on what we know of their personalities. We generally accept that personalities are formed by a combination of genetics and environment, mostly beyond someone's conscious control. Even though we might want to follow the libertarian view for the most part, many of us tend to agree that there is much about our character which will make us more likely to take a certain set of actions, and very unlikely to do the opposite.

The theory of psychological determinism suggests that all psychological states are caused by antecedent psychological states. All our decisions are caused by the factors in our psychological state at the time. We are not free to make our choices because our psychological state, which is governed by causal laws, determines everything we are able to think.

Psychological determinism agrees that there are many facets of a person's character that are fixed and which place many courses of action out of their range of possible behaviour. But the psychological determinist thinks it goes further than this, and that when finer details are known about the mind, we will be able to predict exactly what someone will be psychologically caused to do in all situations. There is no place for any free will in this picture. If psychology ever discovers

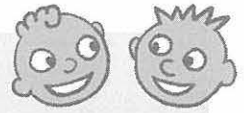


the full set of causal factors which drive our decisions, then psychological determinism will be shown to be true.

If all choices are causally determined, that means there is only one decision which could have been made in any given situation. And yet we have a sense of being equally torn between at least two options. For example, faced with the choice of doing your homework or continuing to play around on the internet, you feel that you could genuinely be pulled either way. But psychological determinism says that your sense of choice is an illusion; if you choose to play on the internet, it is because that is the only thing that you were psychologically capable of choosing.

You can also see a problem here for determinism: it robs us of moral responsibility. If you appear at school the next day and say to your teacher, 'I'm sorry I didn't do my homework, but last night I was psychologically incapable of choosing to do homework rather than play on the internet', you are absolving your own will of any blame. Deterministic doctrines – believing that all our decisions are entirely causally determined – can quickly remove responsibility, credit and blame from all situations, with profound implications for our sense of our humanity.

## DISCUSS



1. Make a list of all the features of your character which you believe trap you into certain patterns, making some behaviour extremely likely and other behaviour extremely unlikely. These things could be positive or negative, caused by genetics or environment.
2. Do the items on the list above make you psychologically determined or is there still a place for free will in your decision-making? Why or why not?

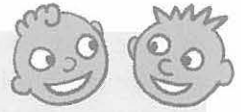
## KARL MARX: ECONOMIC DETERMINISM

According to Karl Marx (Famous Philosopher File p.449), people are products of their economic circumstances. In *The German Ideology* (1846), he argues that, as we work to satisfy our basic needs, we take on a 'mode of life'. Marx claims that how we relate to others, our ideas, language, religion, politics and morality, are all determined by our economic situation and the work we do in its service. He writes, 'Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life'.<sup>18</sup>

Various theories of cultural determinism have arisen since Marx, arguing variously that race, religion, nationality and gender construction determine who we are. The strong argument for cultural determinism holds no possibility of wiggle room: if you are raised a Catholic your behaviour will always be determined by that influence, even if you renounce Catholicism, for example.

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18 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx\\_The\\_German\\_Ideology.pdf](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf) (accessed August 13, 2013)



## DISCUSS

1. Do you think your working life as a student has a strong influence on the way you think and view the world? To what extent are your opinions shaped by your school friends and teachers?
2. To what extent has your parents' economic situation shaped the person you are and the views you hold?
3. What are the factors in your life which will most influence your vote at the next election?
4. 'Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.' To what extent do you agree with Marx? Do your upbringing and lifestyle have an influence so strong as to be termed 'lawlike'? Or do you have some wiggle room to escape these influences?

## ***Implications of Determinism: What about Morality and Responsibility?***

Our views on free will and determinism have profound implications for morality and how we treat people. For example, the more we tend towards determinism, the more we may be inclined to treat people as victims of their circumstances. For example, if one of your classmates starts bashing you repeatedly over the head with his Philosophy textbook, a deterministic view will assume that he actually had no choice about taking this action. Perhaps he had an abused childhood that led him to this inevitability. And even if he was raised with every advantage, determinism still claims that this action was not under his control. On the other hand, that is not to say that punishment is futile, because the causal chain can always be influenced. However, the choice to punish is also a determined one, even though great deliberations may be made about it!

Our sense of humanity is deeply rooted in our sense that we are free agents. Your classmate might feel insulted if you suggest that his shattered childhood led him to hit you. 'No, it's because I hate you for stealing my girlfriend and I deliberately chose to punish you in front of the whole class!' he might reply. Our capacity for moral judgement rests on the principle that human beings choose their actions. When we say that some actions are more worthy than others, our assumption is that we are free to choose our actions in the first place.

What would it do to our sense of who we are if determinism was shown to be true and free will false? Think of our literature and mythology. There is little room for the notion of a hero if our protagonist was always going to do what they did and none of their actions were chosen. However, you might agree with the compatibilist who argues that it is precisely because someone's unique character programs them to choose as they do, that we can praise our hero and condemn someone not so blessed by all those factors beyond their control that determine their decisions.

Our entire legal system is premised on the assumption of free will. Our system of criminal law holds people responsible only for voluntary actions and their results. If you can show that your action was not voluntary – for example, a stranger forced you to rob a bank by holding a gun

to your head – you will not be blamed and punished for that action. Similarly, if you are drunk or have taken other drugs, you can plead that your actions while under the influence of those substances were involuntary. However, you will still be held responsible for the decision to take those drugs in the first place, unless you can prove that someone else forced you to take them. Along similar lines, our legal system has to establish that someone was of ‘sound mind’ when they performed an action, or that they had the ability to choose. Animals, children, and adults with mental deficiencies are regarded as not having the capacity to choose. Beings in this category cannot be held responsible for their actions because they are unable to realise their consequences and may be deluded about the nature of the action in the first place. Child A may push Child B over a balcony because Child A believes that Child B’s Superman cape gives the power of flight. Child A has not imagined any harmful consequences to his action; nor is he old enough to know better.

You can probably think of numerous further examples of how our daily lives, our relationships and all the structures of our society are based on the assumption of human free will and the responsibility it entails.

### DO

Try an experiment. Take a day, or a portion of a day (perhaps a single hour would be a good place to begin) and try to live with the doctrine of determinism at the forefront of your mind. Does it change your view of yourself, other people and the world if you believe that everything is entirely determined?

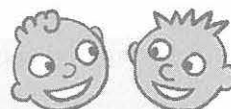
Write a journal entry describing your experience doing this experiment.

Return to class ready to discuss your experience with classmates.



### DISCUSS

1. How might a determinist and a libertarian be different in their ideas about praise, blame and punishment?
2. “If determinism is true, then everything just ‘is’. There is no point holding views about what one should or shouldn’t do, or what actions are good or bad.” Do you agree with this interpretation?



### THINK

It is easy to see how determinism is at odds with our traditional notions of moral responsibility. But some philosophers argue that it is also difficult to see how responsibility can follow from complete freedom. Why might they argue this?



# Indeterminism



## THINK

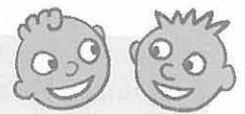
- What would the world be like if things could just happen for no reason?
- If you do some things for no reason, does this mean that you are free?

So, can science salvage any place for free human action in a physical universe?

Studies in Quantum Physics seem to show us that when we go deep inside the atom, to the smallest subatomic particles (and well beyond what the most powerful microscopes are able to observe), events seem to happen randomly, with no apparent cause. Laws of causation, which govern the workings of the universe at the larger atomic level, do not seem to apply at the smallest level. Concepts essential to the way we comprehend our universe, such as before and after, above and below, left and right, do not seem to exist in the same way. Everything is about chance and probability rather than predictable, ordered patterns.

This has been a great intrigue for scientists over the past century and no-one claims to know much for certain about quantum physics yet. But many have wondered whether quantum has relevance for the free will/determinism debate. If the world inside the atom is one of **indeterminism** – where events just happen randomly and by chance – does that show how physical brain events might not be determined after all? Some physicists and philosophers have speculated about ‘many worlds’ or ‘parallel universes’, whereby each instance of quantum indeterminacy produces occurrences of each possible outcome. These hypotheses see multiple new universes branching off from each moment, all of them happening in simultaneous realities.

However, even though the brain, like all physical things, seems to behave indeterminately at the subatomic level, this does not actually help us much with free will. There is a big difference between things happening in unprovoked, random ways, and the process we experience when we make a conscious decision. It is still a problem for libertarians to explain how a ‘free’ mental decision might cause changes in the physical state of our brains and in the external world.



## DISCUSS

1. Is randomness the same as freedom?
2. Does quantum theory threaten determinism?
3. Does quantum theory allow for free will?

## DO

If you are interested, you may wish to do some more reading about the fascinating and mind-bending world of quantum physics. What might be some implications of quantum mechanics for determinism? Is determinism compatible with chance?



## Compatibilism: A Way Out of the Conflict?

We are profoundly attached to the idea that our choices are free, but modern science – and its standard acceptance of the physicalist view of the mind – makes free will harder to accept. We have seen that libertarianism and determinism are two totally opposed doctrines: either free will exists and determinism is false, or free will cannot exist and determinism is true. But you may be wondering, is there some middle ground?

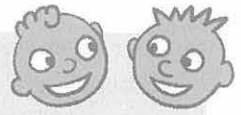
Theories of **compatibilism**, also known as **soft determinism**, claim to reconcile free will with determinism. But if you are hoping to maintain your belief in your freedom, these theories may not be for you. Compatibilism does not allow for any *actual* freedom at all.

The compatibilist project is basically to work out how free will and determinism can be reconciled. Compatibilists generally argue that even though it is true that all our decisions are causally determined by antecedent factors, it is still essential to being human to have the *illusion* of free will. This means that we should still be held responsible for our choices.

Even though it is the case that any decision we make would always have been *that* decision, the compatibilist says that it is still part of the process of making that decision that we weigh up alternatives and use our rationality to select and exclude various options. Indeed, it is necessary to the causality which produces our ultimate decisions that we *do* exercise our – albeit illusory – ‘free will’ in this way. So the compatibilist says that the illusion of human freedom is a necessary element of the deterministic universe.

Compatibilists also argue that because our character and personality determine our brain states and decisions, we should be held responsible for what we do. We should be praised for our admirable behaviour and punished for our misdeeds because our character has made us do these things. For the compatibilist, this actually makes more sense than the libertarian claim that responsibility can only follow from complete freedom.

Compatibilist theories take many forms, so it can be tricky to give catch-all descriptions of their arguments. Next in this Theme you will study specific authors and their arguments in more detail.



## DISCUSS

1. Does compatibilism, as characterised above, overcome the problems of both determinism and free will?
2. Is compatibilism a compromise between free will and determinism? Is it 'in the middle' between free will and determinism? Why or why not?
3. 'I like compatibilism because it allows me still to feel a little bit free.' Is this an accurate interpretation of compatibilism? Why or why not?

## Versions of Compatibilism

Compatibilism has been the most popular position argued by philosophers over the past 300 years or so, but the term covers many different arguments. The first compatibilist movement, known as Classical Compatibilism, was comprised of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume. In the 1960s, three influential arguments were presented by Carl Ginet, Harry Frankfurt and Peter Strawson; these were spoken of as the second movement. The third movement of compatibilism has been marked by a wide variety of arguments that have emerged since the 1960s, including those proposed by philosophers such as Daniel Dennett.

### DAVID HUME: CLASSICAL COMPATIBILISM

Classical compatibilists tended to take a narrow view of freedom, assuming it to be little more than a person's ability to do as they wish without obstacles in their way.

## THINK

Think about this notion of freedom. Is it compatible with determinism?



Scottish philosopher David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182) believed that a simple view of liberty could be reconciled with determinism.

When we study Hume in Chapter 4 Theme 2, we will encounter his unusual ideas about causation. He argued that we will never be able to be one hundred percent certain of causal laws. Hume said there is no necessary connection between cause and effect. We think one thing causes another because we have observed this cause and effect relationship in the past. For example, every time you have heated water to at least 100 degrees, it has boiled. But Hume says that it cannot be completely ruled out that this pattern might be broken in the future. The temperature of 100 degrees and boiling water have a **contingent** rather than a **necessary** connection (see pp.279-280 for more about these terms.) It is logically possible that there is a coincidental rather than a causal relationship between high temperature and boiling point.

Hume argued that we are not forced by logic to inescapable conclusions about causality in our world. However, the world makes little sense to us without our assumptions about causality. It is important that we make inferences about nature in our minds. Perhaps confusingly, Hume used the word 'necessity' to describe the patterns we infer about nature. We infer that one thing follows

another by *necessity*, he said. Causation consists in ‘the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other.’<sup>19</sup> We assume this necessity in our reasoning and planning about the world.

Hume argued that it is the same with human actions. We know that people have a nature and that they act in ways that are consistent with their nature. If we were not able to consistently predict the motivations and behaviour of other people, we would not be able to deal with people in the way we do in relationships and communities. We do not always understand why a person acts in a certain way. But we do not always understand why a machine behaves as it does, either, even though we assume there is some reason and set of causes. Indeed, humans are, if anything, more reliable than machines. When you visit a close friend, you are more certain that she won’t rob you than that her air conditioning won’t break down. Your taxi might break down but your driver will still want to be paid!

It is the predictable necessity of human behaviour that makes possible all of our dealings with others. We understand terms such as friendship, generosity and public spirit because they correspond with ‘uniformity of human behaviour’. Any understanding of morality would be impossible if people did not behave with such regularity.

So, for Hume, having free will means that we are able to act according to our natures. As a naturally friendly person, you are free to chat to lots of people. As a naturally studious person, I am free to write books. Our actions do not just arise out of nowhere. Like the weather, they do arise from antecedent patterns, however complex. Being free cannot imply that we act without precedent or motive, because that would be madness, not liberty.

### THINK

Think about someone you know really well, such as a sibling, parent, or best friend. Is it true that you can at least roughly predict this person’s actions in certain situations? Can you even sometimes predict what kinds of books, movies, foods, places and people this person will like?

Does this make the doctrine of free will false?



19 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, <http://www.bartleby.com/37/3/11.html> (accessed August 13, 2013)

## THINK

Hume argues we cannot be sure of causality in the world. How does that lead to his compatibilist account of human action? Having refused to be locked into agreement with causality, how does he end up being a compatibilist rather than a libertarian?



## WRITE

Hume uses the term 'necessity' to describe the inference made *by the human mind* that there are regular, predictable patterns in nature.

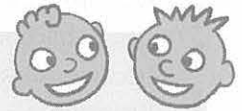
How does his position differ from that of the hard determinists?



## DISCUSS

*'Humans are either free or they are not. They either possess free will and can therefore choose their actions, or they have only the appearance of free will and never really make decisions or choices devoid of prior determining influences.'*

Does Hume overcome the problem of free will and determinism in your view?



## TEXT STUDY: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Section 8, 'Of Liberty and Necessity' Part 1

[see Useful Resources]

Chose three of the *examples* Hume uses to support his argument for compatibilism.

1. Outline what Hume intends to show by the example.
2. How convincing is this example in supporting Hume's argument?
3. Overall, how convincing do you find Hume's reconciliation of free will and determinism?





## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### David Hume (1711–1776)

Scottish thinker David Hume (1711–1776) is the hero of empiricists and sceptics. He scoffed at the views of the rationalists, arguing that all our knowledge must come from sensory experience and we should distrust everything else. As a result, he denied the existence of God, the self, causation and even the reliability of inductive reasoning. His questioning of God caused a public scandal but would have cost him his life a century earlier. He said famously, ‘Errors in religion are dangerous, those in Philosophy only ridiculous’.



Hume’s philosophical aims were to get rid of false assumptions in science and to found a science based on human nature. By age 27 he published his *Treatise on Human Nature* searching for general principles in human psychology. He was bitterly disappointed when this book received little attention. It was Hume’s *History of England* which instead became a bestseller, and he became well-known as an economist an essayist as well as a historian.

When in his thirties, Hume revised and republished his *Treatise* in two smaller volumes: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. However, Hume’s fame as a philosopher came after his death, with the publication of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* which questioned all the standard arguments for the existence of God.

Hume’s views have been enormously influential. Some of the major philosophical problems he posed are still regarded as unsolved, notably the problem of induction. He also continues to be admired for the clarity of his writing style.

## DANIEL DENNETT: SPHEXISHNESS, ABSOLUTE FREEDOM AND SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

Contemporary American philosopher Daniel Dennett (Famous Philosopher File p.151) extends Hume’s broad idea of motivated freedom with some interesting arguments.

In his book, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (1984), Dennett discusses the example of the female sphex wasp. After laying her eggs inside a deep hole, the wasp goes to find some prey with which to feed her youngsters. She drags her immobilised prey to the edge of the hole, and leaves it there while checking to see if anything has disturbed her eggs. If she ascends to the surface to find her prey has been moved, she drags it back to the edge of the hole and then returns to check her eggs again. To a point, this has the appearance of careful, even reasonable behaviour. But researchers have found that if they repeatedly shift the prey, the wasp will repeat the pattern of returning the prey to the edge of the hole, descending to check her eggs, then shifting the prey again, and so on, until she expires. She becomes stuck in an endless and futile behavioural loop. This ‘unmasking’ of the wasp’s programming has led to many interpretations.

## THINK

Think about the behaviour of the sphex wasp. What bearing, if any, do you think this might have on the problem of human free will?



For Dennett, the sphex wasp example shows that we have a kind of flexibility in our behaviour that the wasp does not. We are not driven by instinct in the same rigid way. We can make inferences about our environment and then weigh up options in response. As animals with complex brains, we can model reality in our thoughts and appear to choose from several possible behaviours. This is the meaning of freedom, says Dennett.

However, that does not mean we have what Dennett calls ‘behavioural choice’ – the absolute, unimpeded, God-like ability to create choices outside of causal patterns. For Dennett, our behaviour is still determined by antecedent conditions and cannot be other than it is. But we are able to flexibly respond to and change our environment, bringing together complex elements including knowledge of how other people have thought and acted. Dennett argues that it doesn’t matter that we were always going to make the decision we made in any given situation. For him, the meaning of free will is that we experience ourselves reflecting on our situations and giving rational consideration to different possibilities.

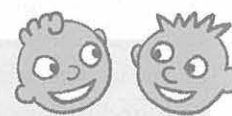
Indeed, Dennett claims that we don’t actually want absolute, metaphysical freedom. The freedom we want, and which is worth having, is the ability to deliberate and make choices on the basis of reasons. Our mechanical brains control our behaviour, and our brains’ complexity means they produce the right behaviour for us in any given situation. Dennett maintains that this kind of freedom is compatible with determinism.

So why, then, do we feel so strongly that we *do* have behavioral choice? After all, the brainpower we expend on apparently exercising our freedom is expensive in a biological sense. Dennett speculates that the illusion of freedom may have been selected by evolution. Humans who lack any sense of real choice may become fatalistic and stop struggling to make optimal decisions about their survival.

## DISCUSS

Consider these questions in small groups:

1. What kinds of freedom do you want?
2. What do you think most people want when they say they want ‘freedom’ and ‘free will’?
3. What kinds of freedom are worth having?
4. What would it be like to have absolute freedom? Would it be worth having?
5. Are the freedoms you listed for questions 1, 2 and 3 compatible with determinism, do you think?



Consider the following questions as a class:

1. Do you agree with Daniel Dennett that the freedoms worth having are compatible with determinism?
2. If we are determined beings, does this make us no freer than the sphex wasp?
3. If we are determined beings, does this make our existence futile?



**TEXT STUDY: Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (1984)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

Dennett is a witty and engaging writer and this is an accessible example of his work.

**READ: Chapter 1, section 2 ‘The Bogeymen’ and section 3, ‘Sphexishness and other worries’.**

Dennett outlines a series of thought experiments which other philosophers have used to make a case for free will – or at least a case for the awfulness of not having free will. He calls these the ‘bogeymen’. Select one of these thought experiments and outline it in your own words. What might its message be about the free will problem? To what extent should we fear the circumstances being described? How effective is this thought experiment in its rejection of determinism?

**READ: Chapter 6, Section 1 ‘Do we care whether we could have done otherwise?’**

What is Dennett’s conclusion in this section? What reasons does he offer? Do you agree with him?

**PETER STRAWSON: MORALITY SUPREME**

British philosopher Peter Strawson (Famous Philosopher File p.185) regarded moral responsibility as the most important aspect of this debate. He argued that moral questions will always be more real to us than whatever the abstract metaphysical truth about free will turns out to be. That said, he found the arguments for determinism to be convincing, and probably true. From that basis, his concern was to reconcile human morality with determinism.

In ‘Freedom and Resentment’ (1962), Strawson asks the question: if determinism is true, will the attitudes we take towards other people, as a result of our interactions, still be the same? Strawson calls such attitudes our ‘reactive attitudes’, including praise, blame, guilt, pride, crime, punishment, gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love and hurt feelings.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Peter Strawson (1919–2006)

Peter Strawson was professor of philosophy at Oxford University during a golden period in the second half of the twentieth century, when a long list of brilliant thinkers generated rich and revolutionary debate. Strawson's first significant contributions were in philosophy of language, and his papers meticulously analysed the way humans describe our world. His classic essay 'Freedom and Resentment' (1960) contended that it is impossible in practice to believe in determinism, whatever the philosophical arguments for it.



#### DO

1. Assign one of the following of Strawson's 'reactive attitudes' to each member of your class: praise, blame, guilt, pride, crime, punishment, gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, hurt feelings. Remember, a reactive attitude is *the attitude you take up towards someone else as a result of your interactions*.
2. Each class member will now describe an everyday scenario involving that 'attitude'. By 'everyday', we mean something that could happen to you and/or your friends today, without being farfetched.
3. As a class, consider each scenario. If determinism is shown to be true, and everyone accepts it as the true account of our actions, are our reactive attitudes altered in any way? In other words, does the scenario scan any differently when considered through a determinist lens, compared with whatever lens we might be used to viewing such situations through? Do you think a belief in determinism could ever change your responses in a scenario like the one described?



Imagine for a moment that someone steps on your hand. What is your immediate attitude to the person who has wounded you? Strawson calls this response (perhaps blame, offence, resentment, and so on) the 'participant reactive attitude'. But while this may be your initial response, you are able to take yourself into a different, 'objective' stance, by reasoning that perhaps it was an accident, the other person was pushed, or they may be too young to know better, or be physically or mentally impaired.

Strawson thinks that if we apply the thesis of determinism in our everyday interactions, we are taken constantly into the objective viewpoint, seeing other people in a more clinical way. However, he does not believe that we can, or should, sustain this way of dealing with others, because it suspends the normal ways we relate to each other and denies intimacy. He argues that participant attitudes are so ingrained in us that accepting determinism would actually not alter our moral attitudes or experience.

‘The human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal relationships is, I think, too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general theoretical conviction [i.e. determinism] might so change our world...’,<sup>20</sup> he wrote. Consistently adopting an ‘objective’ attitude to each other would go against human nature and cause insufferable isolation. Therefore, Strawson found it inconceivable that acceptance of determinism could alter how we respond to each other. Therefore, acceptance of determinism could not and should not lead to rejection of morality.

**TEXT STUDY: Peter Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’ (1962)**



*[see Useful Resources]*

The following questions address sections 1-5 of Strawson’s article.

1. Explain Strawson’s distinction between the optimistic and the pessimistic viewpoints.
2. What is a reactive attitude? How is an analysis of reactive attitudes important in Strawson’s argument?
3. Describe the situations when Strawson says we suspend resentment towards someone who has hurt us, but we retain our reactive attitudes more generally.
4. What is the objective attitude? How is the distinction between participant and objective attitudes central to Strawson’s argument?
5. How does Strawson argue that the possible truth of determinism could not and should not lead us to abandon our ordinary reactive attitudes toward other people?
6. What is the link between our reactive attitudes and morality, for Strawson?
7. Why does Strawson think that a belief in determinism should not entail rejection of morality?

**PETER VAN INGWAGEN: A CONTEMPORARY DEFENCE OF LIBERTY**

American philosopher Peter van Inwagen (1942- ) has developed his arguments on the free will problem over several decades, taking stock of counter-arguments and refining his views. It is interesting to trace the progress of his ideas by reading his numerous published papers on this issue. What we will offer here is a brief outline of the key ideas running through this body of work and an invitation to study a recent paper.

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20 Peter Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’ in Guttenplan, Hornsby & Janaway 2003, p.202.

Van Inwagen maintains that no matter what stance one might take on this debate, one will be faced with having to accept a consequence which seems implausible. He refers to these consequences as 'mysteries'. Ultimately, van Inwagen favours incompatibilist libertarianism, because he says that position involves accepting the least problematic mystery.

Van Inwagen's first argument contends that free will is incompatible with determinism. It might seem that this is an obvious point, already made at the start of this Theme. But you have observed that compatibilists argue that we are still free in some sense, even if determinism is true. Van Inwagen finds such views incoherent, arguing we are either free, or we're not. If we imagine a road forking to show two possibilities for action, then either we can choose one path or the other and we have free will, or we have no choice and determinism is true. Therefore, compatibilism cannot be true.

*'If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.'*<sup>21</sup>

Van Inwagen considers indeterminism but finds this incompatible with free will also. Free choices are not the same as random acts.

Thirdly, van Inwagen examines moral responsibility, which he says cannot be coherently attributed unless we are free to choose our actions. Therefore, if we are to retain any sense of moral responsibility, determinism must be false.

Fourthly, van Inwagen considers free will and argues that it is simply too hard to truly give up the idea that multiple futures are open to us. He thinks that it is impossible for someone who really doesn't believe in free will to decide what to do, because to decide between x and y one has to have the belief that x and y are both possible for one to do.

Thus, van Inwagen arrives at a point of choosing to believe the least mysterious option. He has argued that a belief in compatibilism is incoherent, and that indeterminism does not help with any explanations of human action. Therefore, he is an incompatibilist who, it would seem, faces a choice between libertarianism and determinism. He proposes that rejections of both free will and moral responsibility are just too strange and difficult. Therefore, libertarianism is more likely to be true than determinism. While he freely admits he has no idea how free will might occur, van Inwagen nonetheless considers free will a smaller mystery than how seemingly free humans might be living in an entirely determined universe. Thus, van Inwagen stands out in philosophy as one of the very few voices to defend libertarianism over the last 500 or so years.

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21 Peter Strawson, 'An Essay on Free Will', Oxford University Press, 1983, p.56



## WRITE

1. Use standard form to re-present van Ingwagen's key ideas and the conclusion they produce.
2. How convincing do you find van Ingwagen's line of argument to be?
3. Is it necessary to be able to explain how free will occurs to argue convincingly in support of it, do you think?



## TEXT STUDY: Peter van Ingwagen, 'A Promising Argument' (2011)

[see Useful Resources]

1. Give a brief outline of van Ingwagen's 'Promising Argument'. What does he use this example to argue?
2. How does van Ingwagen modify the Promising Argument in response to Bratman's criticism? Does the newer version overcome possible objections, do you think?
3. How convincing is van Ingwagen's argument?

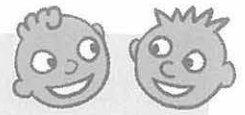
## Moral Luck

We have considered already the threat posed to our notions of morality by determinism. How can we consider a person and their actions to be either good or bad, if that person has never had the capacity to do otherwise?

Papers in the 1980s by Bernard Williams (Famous Philosopher File p.358) and Thomas Nagel, asked us to consider the question of **moral luck**. Consider for a moment: is it a matter of *luck* whether you are a decent person or not? Are you a good person regardless of what happens today, or will it depend on your fortunes? Bring to mind any of the world's billionaires; is any one of them necessarily a better person than you? There are people blessed by nature with great beauty. Are they better people than the rest of us? Traditional notions of morality have placed goodness beyond mere luck. What do you think?

In his paper called 'Moral Luck' (1981), Williams argues that it is 'basic to our ideas of morality' to see morality as immune to luck. But if, as Williams argues, morality is actually dependent on luck, then morality may be quite a different thing than we have imagined. It can no longer be the value that we regard as supreme.

Williams uses a thought experiment to present this argument. The painter Paul Gauguin leaves his struggling family in order to pursue his painting career. He believes that living on a South Sea island will help him to develop his capacities and become a great painter.



## DISCUSS

Was Gauguin morally justified in leaving his family? What do you think?

Williams argues that it makes a difference when we judge Gauguin if we know that he did, in fact, become a great and famous painter.

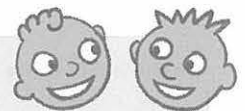


## DISCUSS

What do you think? Does it make a difference to your judgement if you recognise that Paul Gauguin was a great and famous painter? Does that make his decision to abandon his family more morally justifiable?

Williams notes that there was no way for Gauguin to know whether he would succeed in becoming a great painter. However strong his belief in his talents, he could not have known whether the decision to leave his family for a South Sea island would help his painting to flourish or flounder. Williams argues that Gauguin's choice can only be justified by success, and that success is a matter involving a good deal of luck.

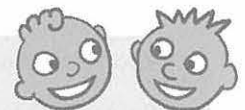
American philosopher Thomas Nagel, in his paper, 'Moral Luck' (1979), offers many more examples of moral luck. Imagine two drivers who have had too much to drink at a party. Each drives slowly to his house nearby. One is soon at home and asleep in bed, with life resuming as normal the next day. The other is unfortunate enough to encounter a child playing on the road, and he kills the child. Is it fair to judge one driver more harshly than the other?



## DISCUSS

What do you think? Is one of the drink drivers more morally blameworthy than the other? Would you judge one a better human being than the other? Is your judgement justified?

You can see that this theme takes us into the territory of moral philosophy, which will be your main focus in Chapter 5. But it is useful to note how metaphysical assumptions are critical to any discussion of morality. The question of whether we have genuine free choice, and could therefore have done otherwise in a situation, should be kept in mind when you come to study Chapter 5.



## DISCUSS

How is the question of moral luck relevant to other issues you have considered in the free will / determinism debate?





## **TEXT STUDY: Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck' (1981)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

Read the passage where Williams presents his example of Gauguin.

1. What does Williams use the example of Gauguin to argue?
2. How effective is this example in making Williams' case about the significance of moral luck? Can you think of any possible objections?
3. Can you think of another example which could be used to argue Williams' case?

## **RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: ASSUMPTIONS OF FREEDOM**

Undertake a review of a daily newspaper to assess the degree to which views about free will are implicit in reported issues.

For example, select an article which reports on a crime, perhaps including a trial and sentencing.

- Are any assumptions made about the 'Principle of Alternate Possibilities' (that is, a person's capacity to choose to do otherwise)?
- What views are implied about moral responsibility?
- How might the commentary be different if a deterministic perspective was taken?
- What is your view – did the defendant act freely? Should they be held responsible for the crime?

## **RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: GENETIC DETERMINISM**

Another category of determinism is termed 'genetic determinism', the theory that our genes predispose us to certain behaviours. Of course it is not as simple as having a 'murderer' gene; there are many factors other than genetics which play a part in forming our eventual character. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify certain genes which might make someone more likely to anger quickly, for example, than the general population. Should we respond to genetics with preventative programs? Would you, for example, support compulsory anger management classes for a child whose genetics indicated a stronger than average temper?

Research this issue. What genes have been isolated that seem capable of determining our behaviour? Could possession of these genes be considered a good thing, a bad thing, or both? How should society respond to such findings?



## DO

Watch the film *Minority Report*, and/or read the original story by Philip K. Dick.

In this story, psychic creatures called 'pre-cogs' can 'see' crimes before they happen. This enables murderers to be apprehended and tried before they commit their crimes under a so-called 'Pre-Crime Program'.

Would you support the Pre-Crime Program?

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## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. How could free will be possible if it requires a gap in universal causality?
2. Does determinism completely undermine moral responsibility?
3. What is fatalism? How is determinism different from fatalism?
4. Do you think that all human actions are the inevitable results of hereditary and environmental factors?
5. Might quantum physics explain the existence of free will? Why or why not?
6. Should we praise or blame anyone if hard determinism is true? Why or why not?
7. Is determinism compatible with chance? Is there chance in the physical world?
8. Is the experience of free will an illusion?
9. Does it matter if the experience of free will is an illusion? Why or why not?
10. Imagine a scientist has discovered a way to prove that humans are entirely determined and free will is illusory. Should he be allowed to share his findings with the world? What are the arguments on both sides?
11. Do you freely attend Philosophy classes?
12. 'Determinism is depressing. It makes all human life completely futile.' Do you agree with this interpretation?

### **Assessment Task Two: Essay**

TOPIC: What is the free will / determinism problem? Is there any way it can be resolved? Your response may refer to the arguments of at least one of the authors included in this chapter.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### ***Assessment Task Three: Dialogue***

Write a dialogue between a libertarian and either a hard or soft determinist. You should ensure that each position is aired to its best advantage and that each is challenged by serious objections.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Oral Presentation Or Written Analysis***

The dialogue task above can be presented and assessed as an Oral Presentation.

OR

Present your findings in relation to one of the Relevant Contemporary Debates suggested above (see p.190)

### ***Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses***

Complete a test which asks for short-answer explanations of the various theories and terms outlined in this Theme.

### ***Assessment Task Six: Text Study / Written Analysis***

Answer a series of short-answer questions relating to one of the primary texts you have studied in this Theme.

## THEME 4

# On Time

Since H.G. Wells' novella, *Time Machine*, written in 1895, time travel has been a recurring theme in science fiction. From *Back to the Future*, the *Terminator* films and the *Doctor Who* TV series, we have all encountered stories that involve time travel. But have you ever thought seriously about the logic of some of these plotlines? How logically plausible is time travel and would it ever be possible?

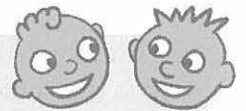
Of course, developing the technology required for time travel is a job for the physicists. But it has always been the domain of philosophy to examine logical possibilities and criticise the coherence of any theory.

Before exploring the possibility of time travel, we will need to explore the complex question of 'What is time?' In discussion, you may find links between this and previous Themes in Metaphysics, thus questioning some of our deepest assumptions about ourselves and our world.

### **Introductory Activity**

#### **DISCUSS**

What kind of thing is **time**? How would you compare it with Space? Mind? Existence? Mathematics?



### **So, what *is* Time?**

Philosophers have been trying to come to grips with the concept of time since the earliest records of metaphysical thought. Some have argued that time is a basic property of the universe. Others have argued conversely that time is not part of the external world at all; rather, it is a property of the human mind, or perhaps merely an illusion. From the beginnings of history, humans have attempted to make devices to measure time. The increasing accuracy of such devices has coincided with modifications to theories on what time is. The study of time has found a home in physics as much as in philosophy.

The ancient Greek philosopher Zeno (Famous Philosopher File p.194), famous for his paradoxes, proposed some interesting problems about time and space, the most famous being 'Achilles and the Tortoise'.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Zeno (490–430BCE)

Zeno of Elea (so-called to distinguish him from another Zeno of Citium, founder of Stoicism) was a clever young student of the philosopher Parmenides. Zeno was brilliant at producing paradoxes, some of which have puzzled people ever since. The most famous of these is 'Achilles and the Tortoise'. As with all Zeno's paradoxes, what seems to be an impeccably logical argument leads to a false conclusion. How can this be?

If we are able to start with a premise to which we can find no objections, and then proceed by logically accurate steps to a conclusion which has to be untrue, this throws our entire sense of logic into chaos. We think that there must be a fault in the logic, but it is challenging to show where this fault might be. This is why people have been puzzling over Zeno's Paradoxes for centuries.



## ACHILLES AND THE TORTOISE

A famously fast runner named Achilles is lining up to begin a race with a very slow tortoise. The tortoise is given a considerable head start to make the race more exciting. The gun sounds and both competitors set off. Achilles starts behind so he must first make up the time and distance between his starting line and the tortoise's starting line. But during that time, the tortoise will have advanced. Then Achilles must make up the time between the tortoise's starting line and the point to which the tortoise has next moved, but in this time the tortoise will have moved further ahead. This continues to the point where Zeno suggests we must conclude that the tortoise will win because whenever Achilles reaches the point where the tortoise was, the tortoise will have moved further on. Because there are an infinite number of points Achilles must reach where the tortoise has already been, he can never pass the tortoise to win the race.

There is another way to consider this problem. Before Achilles can cover the whole distance of the running track, he must cover the first half of it. And he must first cover the first half of that, and the first half of that, and the first half of that. In fact, if space and time are both infinitely divisible (a whole into halves, into quarters, into eighths, into sixteenths, and so on to infinity), how is the distance ever completed?



## THINK

1. Is Zeno right to suggest that Achilles will never win the race, and never even reach the finish line? Why or why not?
2. What does Zeno suggest in this paradox about the nature of time? Is he right?
3. It is via Aristotle that Zeno's puzzles have been handed down through the ages. Use the internet to research what Aristotle's responses were to Zeno's paradoxes. Explain them in your own words. Are they convincing?

## The Nature of Time

What is the nature of the past? What is the nature of the future? What is the nature of the present? Do these entities exist at all, and if so, are they each the same kinds of things as each other, or different kinds of things? Are time and space different kinds of things? These are all ontological questions, that is, questions about the *kind of thing* something is.

A survey of philosophical and scientific views on the nature of time discerns two main camps: what might be called the conventional view, and the 'block universe' view. This section will present a brief overview of these positions, followed by a taste of the views held by significant thinkers in the history of Philosophy of Time.

### THE CONVENTIONAL VIEW

The conventional view of time is embedded in the language we use, dividing it into three parts: past, present and future. The great physicist Sir Isaac Newton (Famous Philosopher File p.197) argued for this idea of time as a sequential dimension of the universe.

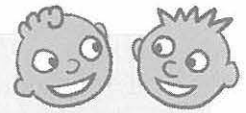


## DO

Working in a group of 2-4 classmates, compare and contrast our concepts of past, present and future. How are they different and how are they alike? Really think hard and try to come up with every point you possibly can. Then note the points thought of by other groups and create a class list.

	PAST v PRESENT	PRESENT v FUTURE	PAST v FUTURE
How are they alike?			
How are they different?			

As you will have found from the exercise above, there seem to be some significant ontological differences between past, present and future. In some ways, the present moment may seem to be our only temporal reality, yet it is constantly slipping away from us, becoming the past.



## DISCUSS

- Is the present real?
- Is the past real?
- Is the future real?
- Is time real?

The view that only the present moment exists – known as **presentism** – has been championed by thinkers since ancient times, as has **eternalism**, the view that the past and the future have existence too.

Philosophers of Time have more recently divided into two camps known as ‘**A-Theory**’ and ‘**B-Theory**’. A-theorists take more or less what we might call the conventional view, giving the present moment special status, such that expressions like ‘a week ago’, ‘last year’, ‘tomorrow’ and so on, which only have meaning in relation to a ‘now’ point, are intelligible. A-theorists speak of the passing of time, regarding time as a moving feature of our world.

## THE BLOCK UNIVERSE

The view which has become most popular among physicists, particularly since Einstein, is that time is laid out as a totality, in the same manner as space. This is, in essence, the ‘B-Theory’, which does not acknowledge any passing or flow of time, and makes no significant distinction between past, present and future.

This theory may seem to go against our basic intuitions and assumptions, but it is supported by some convincing arguments. Important British time theorist J.M.E. McTaggart (1866-1925) proposed an argument for the block universe theory as follows. Past, present and future have different, incompatible properties. Yet for an A-Theorist, every moment in time possesses all these properties. This is contradictory, says McTaggart; therefore the A-Theory must be false.

Another argument contends that if it makes sense to say that time passes, then it should also make sense to ask how fast it passes. But that question doesn’t make sense; therefore time doesn’t pass.

The Special Theory of Relativity proposed by Albert Einstein (Famous Philosopher File p.209) says that two things separated by space cannot occur absolutely simultaneously. Rather, when something occurs is dependent upon the observer’s frame of reference. This means there can be no objective fact about whether a particular event is in the present. You will read more about Einstein’s theories of time later in this Theme.

However, many philosophers have expressed concerns about the block universe theory. New Zealand logician Arthur Prior (1914-1969), a ‘presentist’, used the example of saying, ‘Thank goodness that’s over!’ when your headache finally goes away. If the block universe theory is right, your thankfulness is a nonsense.

The block universe theory also casts human mortality in an entirely different way. We usually fear death because we believe we will no longer exist when we die. But the block universe view makes this irrational as our birth, life and death are all one.



## DISCUSS

Which, at this stage, seems most plausible to you, the A-theory or the B-theory of time?

1. Write definitions of these theories in your own words.
2. Join with a group of three others to come up with the two strongest arguments you can make for the A-theory and the two strongest arguments for the B-theory.
3. Share these arguments with the rest of your class. Then have a class vote. Which were the strongest arguments overall and why? Did anyone change their mind?
4. Imagine scientists and philosophers convince us that the B-theory of time is true. Could we give up the conventional view of time? Explain why or why not.
5. Return to these questions when you have studied the thinkers discussed in the next section. Have your views changed?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Isaac Newton (1642-1727)

English-born Isaac Newton was possibly the greatest scientist of all time. He made extraordinary achievements while still in his youth. Between his 23rd and 24th birthdays, he correctly analysed the properties of light, invented calculus and worked out the law of gravitation. From this point he worked even faster, revising the work of great thinkers before him and addressing all the biggest scientific questions. He created Newton’s laws of motion and developed a system of mathematical physics to yield the first accurate view of the solar system. His crowning achievement was to formulate a complete system of the laws of nature, enabling the accurate prediction of most things in the physical world. Newtonian mechanics led to the development of the machinery which created the Industrial Revolution. Newton’s major work was the *Principia* (1687).





# Significant Thinkers on the Nature of Time



## WRITE

As you study the thinkers discussed on the following pages, keep a log of their ideas by filling in a grid like this one in your workbook.

	Aristotle	Augustine	Nietzsche	Heidegger	Borges	Einstein	Smart
Does time pass? If so, in what way?							
Is only the present real? Or are past or future real as well?							
Is time finite or infinite? Does it have a beginning and end?							
Does time have a particular direction?							
Is the passing of time an objective feature of reality?							
Is time relative or absolute?							
Does time depend on consciousness to perceive it?							
Can time be measured?							
Other notes and questions							

## DO

Conduct a symposium of philosophers on the theme of Time, including representatives for the author positions considered in the following pages. The symposium will debate the questions listed above, plus any others proposed by the group.



## ARISTOTLE: 'A NUMBER OF CHANGE'

One of Aristotle's most challenging and obscure passages is his discussion of time in the *Physics* (IV 10-14). For Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99), the natural world is fundamentally about *change* of every kind, and his primary project in the *Physics* is to offer a detailed account of change. He thinks time is just one of the many manifestations of change.

Aristotle believes that time comes into focus when a conscious mind is aware of two instants of time: now, and ...now. We can understand that between two instants of time there can always be another smaller instant of time, and another and another and another to infinity. Therefore, time is continuous.

Aristotle says it is 'the now that measures time' (219b12). 'The now' makes it possible to divide time into earlier and later. It is the interval between two 'nows' that allows us to distinguish past and future.

Aristotle defines time as 'a number of change with respect to the before and after' (219 b 1-2). One interpretation of this is that units of time are countable, and that change itself can be divided into units of time.

This countability is why Aristotle believes that a mind is necessary to perceive time. While change persists regardless of human consciousness, time depends on beings who can count it. Aristotle characterises God and heavenly bodies as timeless because they are eternal rather than finite.



### TEXT STUDY: Aristotle, *Physics* (IV, 10-14)

[see Useful Resources]

1. Working in a pair, select a paragraph or two of Aristotle's writing about the nature of time.
2. Tag the passage with post-it notes, including:
  - Three paraphrases (where you try to translate Aristotle's ideas into your own words)
  - Two questions
  - One objection – that is, a suggestion about how time could be seen in a different way
3. Then join with another pair, and share the work you have done.
4. Finally, return to your own workbook to write a paragraph explaining one idea of Aristotle's, regarding the nature of time, that you have grasped.

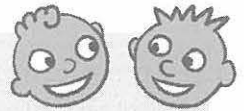
## AUGUSTINE: THE ETERNAL PRESENT

Medieval philosopher St Augustine (Famous Philosopher File p.201) pondered extensively on the concept of time in his *Confessions*. He wanted to make sense of the Aristotelian account of time in relation to the theological notion of an eternal God. For Augustine, all earthly, finite temporality must come from God; yet God Himself is an infinite and eternal Now.

As we have seen, Aristotle conceives time as a constantly fleeting present moment, which lies mysteriously in a continuum between past and future moments. Augustine is interested in this sense of time, as well as in the kind of time experienced by mortal souls, where our present is in this realm, and then another realm is experienced after death.

Attempting to analyse the time we experience in this world, Augustine finds that his argument ends in an absurdity: the distinguishing feature of time seems to be that it tends toward non-existence! The present would seem to be the only kind of time that has actual existence. So how can the past and the future be said properly to exist? But it seems ridiculous to conclude that time itself only exists in infinitesimally tiny pieces, which instantaneously go out of existence. Augustine finally concludes that time is actually a function of human perception and memory.

### DISCUSS



- What kind of existence does time have?
- Do past, present and future all exist in the same way?
- How 'real' are the past, present and future?
- Does time exist 'out there', independently of human minds, or do you agree with Aristotle and Augustine that human consciousness has a role to play in the existence of time?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

Augustine was born in Algeria to a devoutly religious mother, but as a teenager he rejected Christianity. After reading the Roman philosopher Cicero at 18, Augustine set off on a quest around the Mediterranean to learn about religion and philosophy. Following his conversion back to Christianity in 387, he returned to the Hippo region of North Africa to establish a monastery.

During his travels, Augustine studied Plato's philosophy. Augustine thought that Plato had written profound truths about the nature of the universe and that these filled in many gaps in Christianity. While the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew scriptures offered moral instruction, Christianity was not in itself a philosophy or a system of metaphysics. When Augustine returned to Christianity, his thinking and writing were largely concerned with creating a fusion between Platonism and the Christian worldview. For example, Plato's notion that reality and truth are in a realm of eternal and perfect nonphysical entities became the basis for the idea of the Christian heaven and eternal souls. This has carried through the ages, despite the scriptures saying nothing of these matters.

This is why Augustine's writings can be considered of inestimable importance in the shaping of the Western world, and to many of the conventional notions we still hold about reality today, whether we think ourselves religious or not. His two books – *Confessions* and *City of God* – are still widely read because they are regarded among the finest in world literature. *Confessions* is possibly the first autobiography. It includes frank confessions of Augustine's sexual exploits during his travels as a young man. Torn between pleasures of the flesh and wanting escape from desire, he famously wrote, 'Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.' Augustine's writing is admired for its grace and honesty.





## TEXT STUDY: St Augustine, *Confessions* (398AD)

[see Useful Resources]

*For what is time? Who can easily and briefly explain it? Who even in thought can comprehend it, even to the pronouncing of a word concerning it? But what in speaking do we refer to more familiarly and knowingly than time? And certainly we understand when we speak of it; we understand also when we hear it spoken of by another. What, then, is time? If no one ask of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not. Yet I say with confidence, that I know that if nothing passed away, there would not be past time; and if nothing were coming, there would not be future time; and if nothing were, there would not be present time. Those two times, therefore, past and future, how are they, when even the past now is not; and the future is not as yet? But should the present be always present, and should it not pass into time past, time truly it could not be, but eternity. If, then, time present — if it be time — only comes into existence because it passes into time past, how do we say that even this is, whose cause of being is that it shall not be — namely, so that we cannot truly say that time is, unless because it tends not to be?\**

1. What do you think is Augustine's main idea in the above passage?
2. Do you think he is right?

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\* Augustine, *Confessions*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/augconf/aug11.htm> (accessed August 31st, 2013)

## FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: THE ETERNAL RETURN

As we have seen, puzzles about time have concerned philosophers since ancient Greek and medieval times. The renaissance and enlightenment periods both brought about increasingly scientific approaches to the measurement of time. Isaac Newton (Famous Philosopher File p.197) spoke of 'absolute, true, mathematical time' in his *Principia* (1687). German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (Famous Philosopher File p.203) made a radical departure from convention in his thinking about time. He proposed the idea of eternal recurrence – the idea that every event in the universe occurs not just once but an infinite number of times.

Ancient Greek and Indian philosophies, and the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (Famous Philosopher File p.172), had previously made similar suggestions that time might replay itself on a kind of eternal loop. But Nietzsche dramatised the idea and made it a central concept in his philosophy.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

Nietzsche was born near Leipzig, Germany, into a religious family. At university Nietzsche questioned his religious upbringing and excelled in his studies of literature and languages. He was awarded his doctorate without even sitting the exam, and was made professor at Basel University at just age 24.

Nietzsche idolised the composer Richard Wagner and formed a strong friendship with him. Around the same time, reading the work of Arthur Schopenhauer (Famous Philosopher File p.172) turned Nietzsche on to philosophy. However, he rejected Schopenhauer's pessimism and advocated the passionate embrace of life and all its suffering. Nietzsche's ideal was the artistic warrior hero of ancient Greece. He developed the idea of the *Übermensch* or superman, who would overcome all societal barriers and produce a better future for humanity. Nietzsche proposed that life is the only reality and it eternally repeats itself over and over. The *Übermensch* relishes the chance to repeat every detail.

Nietzsche is most famous for his proclamation that 'God is dead'. He believed the Christian era had outgrown its usefulness and that it was time to stop being held back by Christian values of meekness and humility. We should completely re-evaluate our values, he said. His main theme was that people should strive to achieve their full potential of strength and intellect.

Nietzsche wrote in a flamboyant and colourful language style, often open to multiple interpretations. His best known books are *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Human all too Human* (1878), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *The Gay Science* (1887), *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891).

Nietzsche lived much of his life as a recluse, taking long walks in the Swiss Alps. Dogged by illness throughout his life, he spent his later years in mental and physical decline. His late writing included titles of 'Why I am so clever' and 'Why I write such interesting books'. Radical interpretations, including Nazism, tainted his reputation for a time, but he has been an enormous influence in the arts as well as in philosophy.





## TEXT STUDY: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* #285 and #341 (1882)

[see Useful Resources]

Consider this passage:

*What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest solitude and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!*

*Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?... Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?\**

1. Which of the following claims are consistent with the view Nietzsche expresses?
  - 'Time is infinite.'
  - 'Individual occurrences happen in finite portions of time.'
  - 'Time is linear rather than circular.'
  - 'Time is circular rather than linear.'
  - 'Time, and the events that occur in time, are the same thing.'
  - 'Events occur at different moments and are separate from time.'
2. How plausible do you find Nietzsche's ideas about time?
3. Read some other extracts where Nietzsche discusses eternal recurrence (for example, in sections 285 and 341 of *The Gay Science* or in any of his other writings). Report to your classmates on any further ideas in these extracts which are significant to Nietzsche's notion of time and eternal recurrence.

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\* Friedrich Nietzsche, from *The Gay Science* in Hollingdale, J. ed /trans. 1977, *A Nietzsche Reader*, p. 249-50

## MARTIN HEIDEGGER: 'BEING-TOWARDS-DEATH'

*Being and Time*, one of the most important works of twentieth century philosophy, was the first published volume by German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Famous Philosopher File p.205). At 437 dense pages, it is a rich and challenging investigation into the nature of being, including what it is to exist in time.

Heidegger rejects Aristotle's idea of time as an infinite series of present moments. He also rejects Augustine's distinction between time and non-temporal eternity.

In order to explore the nature of being, Heidegger posits the being he calls *Dasein*. *Dasein* is aware of his mortality – a ‘being towards death’. Heidegger thinks this is what defines time for human beings: our future unfolds as we run towards our anticipated end.

While always projecting towards the future, the experience of the future throws back at *Dasein* his past baggage – his ‘has-been’-ness. However, this past does not necessarily define *Dasein*’s present and future; in what Heidegger calls ‘resoluteness’, *Dasein* can take control of who he is by free actions in the present.

Heidegger calls this the ‘moment of vision’, when *Dasein*, in full awareness of his past, resolutely seizes the present moment and makes it, and therefore the future, his own. It is in this way that Heidegger says *we are time*. It is in us – as finite beings – that time exists, as a unity of three elements, which he calls ‘ecstasies’, of past, present and future. He calls this ‘primordial’ or ‘original’ time, an experience which is finite and yet which includes past, present and future all at once.

Heidegger published *Being and Time* in 1927. Having made clear that that book was incomplete, he continued to work on the puzzle of being as it occurs in time, until his death 50 years later. His work remained unfinished.

This has given you the merest taste of Heidegger’s complexity, and you can read his formulation of these ideas over many pages in *Being and Time*, Division II, Part 3.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)

Martin Heidegger was born in Baden in Germany. As a student in Freiburg, he studied under Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). From Husserl, Heidegger took as his starting point Descartes’ idea that all we can be certain of is what is apparent to our consciousness. He adopted Husserl’s phenomenological method, systematically analysing conscious experience. Heidegger’s interest was in existence itself. How is it that anything exists? Why is there something rather than nothing?

Heidegger’s epic work, *Being and Time*, was published in 1927, and is recognised as a masterpiece. He intended to write a second volume but never completed this, as his philosophy changed direction.

Heidegger joined the Nazi party and this greatly damaged his reputation. He was forbidden to teach for some time after World War II but spent the rest of his life writing.







## TEXT STUDY: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927)

[see Useful Resources]

Consider this passage:

*Coming back to itself futurally, resoluteness brings itself into the Situation by making present. The character of 'having been' arises from the future, and in such a way that the future which 'has been' (or better, which is 'in the process of having been') releases from itself the Present. This phenomenon has the unity of a future which makes present in the process of having been; we designate it as 'temporality'. Only insofar as Dasein has the definite character of temporality, is the authentic potentiality-for-Being-as-a-whole of anticipatory resoluteness, as we have described it, made possible for Dasein itself. Temporality reveals itself as the meaning of authentic care.\**

...

*Care is Being-towards-death. We have defined 'anticipatory resoluteness' as authentic Being towards the possibility we have characterised as Dasein's utter impossibility. In Being-towards-its-end, Dasein exists in a way which is authentically whole as that entity which it can be when 'thrown into death. This entity does not have an end at which it just stops, but it exists finitely.^*

1. Heidegger's ideas are complex and abstract. Working in a pair, try to explain to each other what you can manage to grasp of Heidegger's notion of time. Then one member of each pair moves clockwise to form a new pair. Then this pair exchange their understanding. Repeat this a few times. Then individually write a paragraph explaining the gist of Heidegger's ideas.
2. What appeals to you about Heidegger's way of viewing time and why? What doesn't appeal to you about Heidegger's way of viewing time and why?

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\* Martin Heidegger, 1962 (Macquarie & Robinson trans) *Being and Time*, p.374.

^ Ibid., p.378.

## JORGE LUIS BORGES: THERE IS NO TIME

Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) is primarily known for his fiction, but his essay, 'A New Refutation of Time' (1946), dealt in non-fiction with the fascination with time that Borges had already shown in his short stories.

Borges' aim was to demonstrate that there is no time.

He explained that the unfolding of time must be understood as a stream of endless variety. However, a single repeated sensation, whether in the life of one person, or in the experience of two different people, shows this notion to be false, and the linear model of time refuted.



## TEXT STUDY: Jorge Luis Borges, 'A New Refutation of Time' (1946)

[see Useful Resources]

Consider this passage:

*Let us consider a life in whose course there is an abundance of repetitions.... I never pass in front of the Recoleta without remembering that my father, my grandparents and great-grandparents are buried there, just as I shall be some day; then I remember that I have remembered the same thing an untold number of times already; I cannot walk through the suburbs in the solitude of the night without thinking that the night pleases us because it suppresses idle details, just as our memory does; I cannot lament the loss of a love or a friendship without meditating that one loses only what one really never had; every time I cross one of the street corners of the southern part of the city, I think of you, Helen; every time the wind brings me the smell of eucalyptus, I think of Adrogu in my childhood; every time I remember the ninety-first fragment of Heraclitus 'You shall not go down twice to the same river,' I admire its dialectical dexterity, because the ease with which we accept the first meaning ('The river is different') clandestinely imposes upon us the second ('I am different') and grants us the illusion of having invented it .... These tautologies (and others I leave in silence) make up my entire life. Of course, they are repeated imprecisely; there are differences of emphasis, temperature, light and general physiological condition. I suspect, however, that the number of circumstantial variants is not infinite: we can postulate, in the mind of an individual (or of two individuals who do not know of each other but in whom the same process works), two identical moments. Once this identity is postulated, one may ask: Are not these identical moments the same? Is not one single repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the series of time? Do not the fervent readers who surrender themselves to Shakespeare become, literally, Shakespeare? \**

1. What do you think Borges means by his final sentence in the extract above?
2. What do you understand Borges to be saying about time in this extract?
3. To what extent is Borges's account of time an appealing one for you, and why?

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\* Jorge Borges 1946, 'A New Refutation of Time' at <http://www.mischievousmusique.com/extras/Jorge-Luis-Borges-A-New-Refutation-of-Time.pdf> (accessed August 24, 2013)

## ALBERT EINSTEIN: THE BLOCK UNIVERSE

Albert Einstein (Famous Philosopher File p.209) proposed a radical re-imagining of our universe with his general theory of relativity.

He concluded that the past, present and future all exist simultaneously, in a single, solid block of reality. He argued that the conventional way we think about 'now' is an illusion. He wrote in his book, *Relativity and the Problem of Space* (1952):

*Since there exists in this four dimensional structure [space-time] no longer any sections which represent 'now' objectively, the concepts of happening and becoming are indeed not completely suspended, but yet complicated. It appears therefore more natural to think of physical reality as a four dimensional existence, instead of, as hitherto, the evolution of a three dimensional existence.*<sup>22</sup>

How did Einstein come to this view? The explanation is of course hugely complex, but we will consider one of his lines of argument. Underlying Einstein's theory of relativity is the principle that there is nothing outside the universe; the universe, by definition, is everything there is. Therefore there are no external axes of reference for what happens in the universe. This is a profound insight with huge implications.

Let's consider for a moment the idea of 'now'. Our conventional understanding is that 'now' moves through time, from *will be*, to *is*, to *has been*. But as soon as we start to ask more about the movement of 'now', we run into problems. How fast does 'now' move? Well, we can't describe its movement in terms of itself – for example, 'Time moves at the rate of one second per second' – because that makes no sense. But neither can we find any external measures for time, because there are no clocks outside the universe. Therefore it is illogical to claim that 'now' moves, or that time 'flows'. The passage of time must be an illusion!

Hence Einstein formed his 'tenseless' theory of time, in which all of time is already laid out, in the same way that all of space is laid out. This is the **block universe theory**, now favoured by most physicists.

But, if all times are equally real, why is it that we have such a strong sense that time is flowing in one direction, and is therefore *asymmetrical*? Einstein's explanation is that although causality may seem to be operating in one direction only, it would actually still make sense if things occurred the other way around. The point is more that human perception can remember the past but not the future, and so we feel we are moving from an unknown future to a fixed past.

The strength of Einstein's conviction was made clear after his close friend, Michele Besso, died. In a letter to Besso's family, Einstein wrote that he was untroubled that his friend had died ahead of him, as past, present and future are all illusory. According to the theory of relativity, our departed loved ones are as much alive as they are dead. (And of course, all of us are already dead, anyway!)

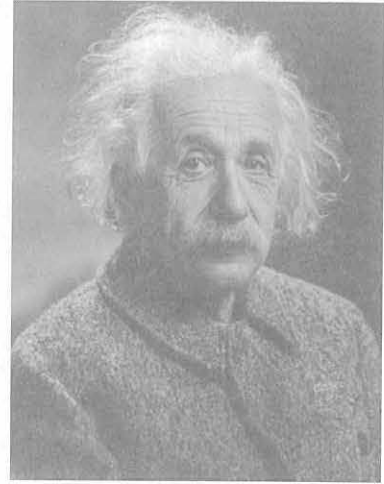
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22 Albert Einstein, 1952, *Relativity and the Problem of Space* [http://www.relativitybook.com/resources/Einstein\\_space.html](http://www.relativitybook.com/resources/Einstein_space.html) (accessed August 29th, 2013)

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

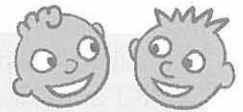
### Albert Einstein (1879–1855)

A scientific genius comparable to Newton came to prominence at the turn of the 20th century. The German Jew Albert Einstein (1879–1855) was at first hard to take seriously because his theories questioned Newton's laws. Failing to get accepted into university, Einstein worked in a patent office in Bern, Switzerland. Here he started developing his theories of general and special relativity which were to form the basis of modern physics. In 1935 Einstein became an American citizen, having fled there to avoid persecution in Hitler's Germany.



Einstein's theories were to have vast philosophical as well as scientific significance. Since Einstein's discoveries, the observer has a far more important role in descriptions of the physical world compared with previous theories by Locke, Kant and Newton. Einstein's central insight is that the speed of light is constant. This principle enables the theory of  $E = mc^2$  – that is, the equivalence of mass and energy – and the law that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. Relativity also gives us the four-dimensional unity of space-time, significant for the possibility of time travel and for working out philosophical problems to do with causality.

### DISCUSS



Imagine time as a dimension just like space, as Einstein described. Chat for four minutes with a classmate about how this might change your notions of *past*, *present*, *future*, *before*, *now*, *after*,.... compared with *here*, *there*, *over there*, *near*, *far*,...

### WRITE



1. Set out the argument for 'tenseless' time and the block universe – as outlined above – in standard form.
2. How convincing is the block universe model to you? What seem to you to be its greatest explanatory challenges?



## TEXT STUDY: Paul Davies, 'That Mysterious Flow' (2012)

[see Useful Resources]

READ this article about the block universe by theoretical physicist Paul Davies (1946- ).

1. Select one idea in the article to explain to other members of your class. Rehearse your explanation, aiming for maximum clarity. You may use diagrams or other aids if you wish.
2. Your teacher will decide on a format for sharing your explanations, depending on the size of the class and the time available. You may rotate around the room, exchanging your explanations in pairs. Or you may work in larger groups with each person taking their turn to deliver an explanation.

### J.C.C. SMART: A TENSELESS THEORY

Australian philosopher J.J.C. ('Jack') Smart (Famous Philosopher File p.132) was a notable adherent of the B-theory of time.

In his paper, 'The Tenseless Theory of Time', Smart argues that tenseless language ought to be employed when discussing mathematics, physics and metaphysics, as the truths about matters such as these – including time – are eternal truths. When we use tensed language (in other words, indicating past, present and future) we are seeing the world from a particular human perspective (and being 'cosmically parochial') rather than from the point of view of the universe.

Smart claims that the passing of time is actually an illusion. If time really passes, he argues, then it would make sense to ask how quickly it passes. However, a further dimension would be required in order for such a measurement to be made. Then this further dimension would need yet another dimension to verify it, and so on in infinite regress. This is called the *rate of passage* argument.

Smart also takes on Arthur Prior's 'Thank God It's Over' argument, finding the case interesting for the deep questions it raises about the asymmetry of the universe. Smart argues that our planning and emotions are most usefully oriented towards the future.

We say 'thank goodness that's over' when some discomfort ceases to be something about which we need to plan and make decisions. Therefore, we do not have to accept a model of time passing in one direction in order to explain this thankful relief; the idea of the temporal asymmetry of the universe is adequate.

Smart's view of time is aligned with Einstein's relativity, and Smart was hugely influential in linking the famous physicist's view with philosophy. Smart emphasises the argument that even though the past and future may be distant from where we are in the present, they still have existence in the same way that distant things in space have existence.

## TEXT STUDY: J.J.C. Smart, 'A Tenseless Theory of Time' (2008)



[see Useful Resources]

*Now why are we pleased that a pain has stopped and not that it is about to begin? This is a question whose answer may seem obvious to commonsense and yet it raises deep questions about the temporal asymmetry of the universe and about the theory of evolution. We are future oriented because we need to plan or at least take quick action. Why we need to plan for the future and not the past, or why planning for the past does not even seem to have clear sense, is nothing to do with A-theory fantasies, such as that the future is not real or that the supposed passage of time is one way. The question has often been seen as that of the so-called direction of time. I prefer to describe it as the problem of the temporal asymmetry of the universe...*

*It is this asymmetry between earlier and later that makes us care about the future in a way in which we do not care about the past (though we may rejoice in or regret the past). Animals may plan for the future or have instincts that cause them to behave rather as if they had planned. A humanoid ancestor confronted by a tiger knows that he was safe in the previous hour but is not sure whether or not the next hour will contain a tiger with his body dead and perhaps partly in the tiger's stomach. It is no wonder that our anxious worries are future-oriented. No wonder that we say 'Thank goodness that's over' when pain or unpleasantness is no longer something about which we need to plan and make decisions... A prisoner who has served nine years of a ten-year sentence is relatively happy that he has only one year left to serve, whereas if he has served one year of a ten-year sentence, even though he is just as temporally near freedom, he will *be* less happy. The past is not in the time direction in which our planning and emotions are usefully oriented. It comes down in the end to the temporal asymmetry of the universe, not to temporal flow or coming to be. If the prisoner thinks that his release is coming or that his consciousness is advancing toward the time of his release, he is in a perhaps happy state of confusion. We do not need this idea to explain why he feels happier a year before the end of his long sentence than he was a year after its beginning.\**

1. How does Smart use the example of the prisoner to defend his view that the passage of time in one direction is illusory?
2. How convincing is Smart's argument?

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\* J.J.C.Smart, 'A Tenseless Theory of Time' at [http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Course\\_Websites/Readings/Smart%20Tenseless.pdf](http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Course_Websites/Readings/Smart%20Tenseless.pdf) (accessed August 22, 2013).

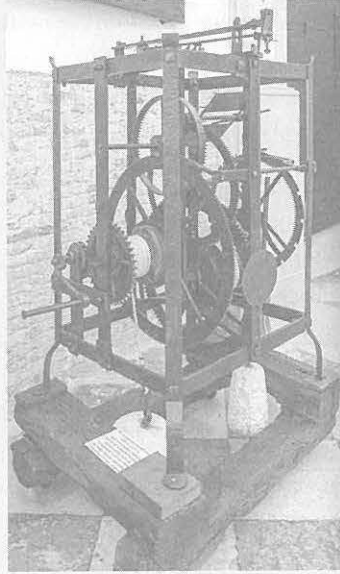
# Time-Measuring Devices



## DO

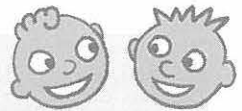
Research the history of time-measuring devices from the earliest instruments up to the time of Isaac Newton.

How do you think the increasing accuracy of human measurement of time may have shaped philosophical theories about the nature of time?



Mechanical clock, circa 1500.  
San Geremia [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)], from Wikimedia Commons

# Travelling In Time



## DISCUSS

1. What time travel stories are you familiar with? Describe one of their plotlines briefly to a classmate. What assumptions does it make about the nature of time? Do you think this plotline is logically coherent? Could it ever happen?
2. If you could travel backwards or forward in time, would you want to? Why or why not?
3. Do you think time travel could ever be possible? Why or why not?

## The Grandfather Paradox

Imagine you build a time machine. You travel back in time and meet your grandfather as a young man, before he has had any children (that is, your father or mother). You attempt to break into his house in order to uncover family secrets. But your grandfather disturbs you and threatens you. In self-defence, you kill your own grandfather.

## THINK

Killing aside, what is problematic about this story?



## WRITE

1. What is a **paradox**? Look up this term and then explain it in your own words.
2. Explain why the Grandfather story above is an example of paradox.



## MORE VERSIONS OF THE GRANDFATHER PARADOX

Science fiction writer Robert Heinlein produced several stories whose treatment of the time travel theme can really make your head spin.

Consider the short story, 'All You Zombies', which since its publication in 1959 has become one of the most famous stories about time travel.

A baby girl called Jane is left at an orphanage. She grows up sad and lonely, not knowing who her parents are. At the age of 18, Jane falls in love with an older man – a bit of a drifter, with an alcohol problem. She becomes pregnant to this man, who leaves her. While she is in labour with the child, doctors discover that Jane has the sex organs of both a male and a female. To save her life, the doctors surgically change her into a man. Then, to top off a bad week, a stranger kidnaps her baby from the hospital.

Jane now has nothing in the world: no parents, no lover, no baby, and 'he' has also lost his female identity. He becomes an alcoholic drifter. Pouring out his story to a bartender several years later, the bartender offers Jane the opportunity to avenge the cruel parents who originally abandoned him. But to do so, he must join the 'Time Travellers' Corps. Jane steps into a time machine with the bartender and is dropped off around the time he was 17. Jane finds himself strangely attracted to a young orphan woman. A passionate affair develops and the woman is soon pregnant.

Meanwhile, the bartender travels to another moment in time. He kidnaps a baby girl from a hospital. Then he gets back in the time machine with the baby, goes back in time, and drops the baby at an orphanage.

Then the bartender collects Jane, snatching her away from his pregnant girlfriend, and takes her forward in time to become a member of the 'Time Travellers' Corps. The bartender disappears in the time machine. Meanwhile Jane manages to get his life back on track and disguises himself as a bartender. Then one day he meets 'Jane', who tells him the story of his tragic love affair, lost baby and recent sex-change operation.





## WRITE

1. Can you draw Jane's family tree?
2. Who is:
  - Jane's mother?
  - Jane's father?
  - Jane's grandmother?
  - Jane's grandfather?
  - Jane's son?
  - Jane's daughter?
  - Jane's grand-daughter?
  - Jane's grandson?
  - The orphan girl?
  - The bartender?
  - The alcoholic drifter?
  - The baby stolen from the hospital?
3. In what ways is this story an example of paradox? How is it similar to the Grandfather's paradox?
4. Make up your own example of a plotline involving some version of the Grandfather's Paradox.
5. Is there any way of travelling back in time and avoiding the Grandfather's Paradox?
6. Is 'All You Zombies' a logically possible time travel story? What would have to be the nature of time to make it possible?

## DOES THE GRANDFATHER PARADOX MEAN TIME TRAVEL IS IMPOSSIBLE?

You will have seen that Heinlein's story is an extreme working out of the Grandfather's Paradox. Another example would be using scientific knowledge to invent a time machine, then going back in time and doing something to stop the scientist who in the future invents that time machine from doing so. Some philosophers have used the principles of the Grandfather's Paradox to argue that backwards time travel must be impossible.

Others have argued that time travel may be possible, but it will be impossible to alter what occurs in the past if we ever get to travel there. But how could we avoid changing the past? Wouldn't any action we took in the past, however small, have effects?

Others have suggested the possibility of parallel universes and therefore parallel timelines which can remain independent from each other. What if there was yet another parallel timeline in which the time traveller went back in time and saved his grandfather? However, this is perhaps still too far in the realm of science fiction to be considered a viable theory.

Indeed, the notion of parallel universes is how the *Back to the Future* films avoided the Grandfather Paradox. In the films, Marty (Michael J. Fox) has to take certain actions to make sure his father becomes his father, including engineering that he date Marty's mum. The Gwyneth Paltrow film, *Sliding Doors* also used the parallel universe idea. But you may have concluded that outside science fiction stories, the Grandfather Paradox makes time travel impossible.

## ***Wormholes As Time Machines: The Scientific View On Travelling Back In Time***

### **DO**

Watch Episode 2 of the TV series, *Into the Universe with Stephen Hawking* (Discovery Channel, 2010). This episode is all about Time Travel.



Stephen Hawking (1942-2018), possibly the most well known contemporary scientist, brought the complexities of cosmology to the masses in his bestselling book, *A Brief History of Time* (1988). Hawking is among many scientists who have remained deeply curious and optimistic about the possibilities of time travel. But understanding their arguments is going to lead us into some advanced physics!

We are all familiar with the three dimensions of space: height, width and depth. Since Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity, it has been accepted that time is the fourth dimension in the single continuum of **spacetime**.

As Hawking explains in *Into the Universe*, we know how to travel along, sideways and up, so what will it take to enable us to travel through the fourth of those dimensions, *through time*?

To enable travel in the fourth dimension, we must find portals to the past or future from within the laws of nature. Do such portals exist? Hawking says they exist in the form of **wormholes**, tiny gaps in space and time that are too small to see. Nothing in our world is completely smooth. This page, for example, when magnified, would appear covered in bumps, wrinkles and holes. If we continued magnifying the page, the irregularities would only increase. Going further, deep inside the atom, in what is known as the quantum foam, we may find tiny tunnels in space and time, only a billion trillion trillionths of a centimetre wide. These are the wormholes that could potentially enable us to travel into the fourth dimension of time.

But how could we ever travel into something so small? Well, scientists do not rule out the idea of capturing a wormhole and enlarging it trillions of times to make it large enough for a human or a spacecraft to enter. American physicist Kip Thorne first explored how this might be done in the mid-1980s and English physicist Paul Davies (much of whose work has been done in Australia) outlined how a large wormhole could be built in his 2001 book, *How to Build a Time Machine*.

But despite the scientific plausibility of building a giant wormhole, Hawking is troubled by the Grandfather Paradox. He uses a version of his own which he calls the Mad Scientist Paradox. A young scientist travels into the past 60 seconds, in a time machine he just built from a wormhole. He takes a gun and raises it at his past self, who was in the process of loading the gun. He shoots and kills his past self. The question is, who fired the shot? And who is dead?

Hawking says this violates a basic law of the universe: that causes precede effects and not the other way around. Things can't make themselves impossible, says Hawking, so there must be some way to prevent the Mad Scientist from shooting himself or the time traveller killing his grandfather.

As we have already considered, time travel could be saved from paradoxes if there are parallel universes. As the traveller arrives back in time, the universe would split into multiple universes including a universe where the grandfather lives and a universe where the time traveller kills him. Hawking is among the many scientists who are not convinced by this. It is an extremely complex picture to imagine.

Hawking suggests instead that perhaps the wormhole has a built-in mechanism that will save it from committing impossibilities such as the Grandfather Paradox. Hawking's Chronology Protection Conjecture proposes that wormholes may be protected by something like the feedback problem you might have covered your ears against at a rock concert. When you go to see your favourite band perform, the sound enters the microphone, is transmitted through wires, made louder by an amplifier and then comes out the speakers. But if too much sound from the speakers feeds back into the microphone, the sound goes round and round, becoming more and more amplified with each loop, and produces a deafening screech called 'feedback'. If allowed to continue too long, this can destroy the sound system.

Perhaps the wormhole experiences the same problem, but with radiation, which can feed back and destroy the wormhole. This could answer the problem of the Grandfather Paradox: the wormhole would be destroyed before the paradox could happen. But it doesn't help us to travel back in time, because even though it may be possible to inflate a wormhole to use as a time machine, the wormhole wouldn't last long enough for us to use it. A few scientists may remain hopeful, but Hawking is forced to conclude that time travel to the past will probably never occur.

### WRITE

1. What is a wormhole and how would it theoretically enable time travel to be possible?
2. How does the Grandfather Paradox lead Hawking to this conclusion that time travel is probably impossible?



## ***But What Does Science Say About Travelling To The Future?***

Time travel to the past may be fraught with logical difficulties, but could travel to the future still be possible? Many physicists have been sure that it is.

### **BLACK HOLE TO THE FUTURE**

Time is not the absolute that Newton would have us believe, argued Albert Einstein (Famous Philosopher File p.209). It is, rather, a relative concept. Einstein's so-called special theory of relativity states that time and space are not the constants we presume in everyday life. He suggests there is only one constant in the universe, the speed of light. Our experience of time, however, can run slower or faster depending on how high we are and how fast we are travelling.

Einstein illustrates this notion with the Twin Paradox, which states that an identical twin sibling, travelling through space in a rocket, will age more slowly than her twin living on earth. If a person travels close to the speed of light, their time passes more slowly than for someone on earth. So a person in a spaceship might experience a few minutes while on earth we are passing through several years. If someone could travel at the speed of light, their time would cease completely and they would only exist trapped in timelessness.

This reality is built into how our modern Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite network operates. Time itself actually runs faster in space, where the satellites are, than it does here on earth. This is because of the mass of the earth; heavy matter *drags* on time. For this reason, the GPS is adjusted to compensate for the third of a billionth of a second that each satellite gains every day compared with earth time. If the system didn't correct this drift, it would go out by six miles every day and cause chaos.

Einstein's realisation that there are places in the universe where time slows down and others where time speeds up, led to his confidence that some form of time travel into the future is possible.

### THINK

How can the fact that time drags when close to a heavy object like the earth help us to achieve travel into the future?

*HINT: If we viewed the activities of people on earth from far away, they would appear to be slowed down. But if, from earth, we watched the activities of people far away from earth, they would appear to be sped up.*



You may be thinking that a third of a billionth of a second isn't much of a time difference to get excited about. And you're right, to travel significantly into the future, we would have to be slowed down by something much heavier than the earth. Imagine, instead, a black hole containing a mass of four million suns, crushed by their own gravity to a single point. This would be so heavy a mass, it would slow things down more than anything else in the galaxy. In effect, it is a natural time machine. If we travelled to this black hole in a spaceship, and orbited round and round it (being careful not to get sucked right into it), time would slow dramatically. For example, a full orbit of the black hole might take 16 minutes for the people monitoring the spaceship from earth, but for the people on board it would only take eight minutes. They could circle the black hole for five years but return to earth to find it had moved on ten years. This is time travel!

So a super-massive black hole is a time machine, scientists tell us. And it doesn't run any risks with paradoxes and it doesn't provoke feedback. However, using a black hole for a time machine is not very practical, it's extremely dangerous, a long way away, very expensive, and it wouldn't actually take us very far into the future.

### ALMOST FASTER THAN THE SPEED OF LIGHT

Perhaps there is a more practical solution than the black hole hypothesis. Many scientists look to the speed of light as the key to travelling to the future. The speed of light is the cosmic speed limit: that nothing can exceed it is one of science's established principles. So what would happen if we

travelled *near* to the speed of light? Well, everything would be slowed to protect the speed limit, and many scientists, such as Hawking, claim this is how we could travel to the future.

If we could board a craft capable of travelling as fast as 99% of the speed of light, we could travel for one week, yet 100 years into the future!

We would have to go into space to travel this fast. The Apollo 10 is the fastest manned vehicle ever created, travelling at 39 987kph. We would need to travel at 2000 times this speed to reach close to the speed of light. But it may be possible.



### WRITE

1. What are two principles of physics which may enable travel to the future?
2. Heavy matter slows down the speed of objects near it. So how could a black hole be used for time travel? Is this a viable method of travelling to the future?
3. Explain how travelling at almost the speed of light could enable travel to the future.



### TEXT STUDY: Paul Davies, *How to Build a Time Machine (2001)*

*[see Useful Resources]*

British born Paul Davies (1946- ) recently retired from his long-held position as Professor of Mathematical Physics at the University of Adelaide. Davies has a talent for making highly complex science accessible for the general reader, so for those interested in reading more about time travel, this book is highly recommended.

Select an extract through which to explore one or more of the following questions:

- How does Einstein's relativity enable the possibility of time travel?
- Explain what is meant by a 'wormhole'. How could it enable time travel?
- What seem to you to be the biggest challenges to time travel? Select one discussed by Davies and explain it in your own words.
- What kind of machine would be required to travel in time?
- Why is travelling to the past a trickier proposition than travelling to the future?



## **TEXT STUDY: David Lewis, 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel' (1976)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

David Lewis (Famous Philosopher File p.133) was an American philosopher who, for the last three decades of his life, worked for part of every year at universities in Australia. His paper 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel' is one of the most discussed pieces of philosophical writing about time travel. You may attempt to read this article in its entirety or your teacher may select parts of it. You will need to read it more than once. Don't be put off by the bits you can't follow yet; just focus on trying to grasp Lewis's key points.

1. Make a list of the main points you think Lewis is making in this article (or an extract from it).
2. What definition of time travel does Lewis offer?
3. Locate the following contentions in Lewis's paper:
  - In four-dimensional spacetime, time travel must be possible.
  - There are paradoxes of time travel, but these do not make time travel impossible.
  - For the time traveller, the self may be fractured but they should still be regarded as the same person.
  - Personal time and external time are different and it is OK they sometimes disagree.
4. Explain how Lewis differentiates personal time from external time.
5. Lewis explains that personal identity is important in time travel narratives because the person who departs from one time must be the same person who arrives in another time. What issues arise for personal identity in time travel? How might they be resolved?
6. Explain Lewis's answer to the Grandfather Paradox. How convincing is this as a solution?

## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: THE POSSIBILITY OF TIME TRAVEL

### Suppose time travel is possible; but is it *desirable*?

**TASK:** Work in small groups. You are part of a government committee that has been entrusted with approving or rejecting an application by a large company, which is proposing to run time travel expeditions for members of the public willing to pay.

Will you approve this application? Why or why not?

Will you impose any kind of limits or conditions on such expeditions? If so, what will they be and why?

Do you see this kind of enterprise as beneficial to society? Why or why not?

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## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### Assessment Task One: Written Reflection

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. How is time best explained? What is the nature of time?
2. Do you think there are there significant ontological distinctions to be made between past, present and future?
3. Does the existence of time depend on there being minds to perceive it?
4. What would happen to time if all the clocks in the world stopped?
5. How must we conceive of time if time travel is to be possible?
6. Do you think time travel will ever happen? Why or why not?
7. Are you convinced by any potential solutions to the Grandfather Paradox?
8. What scientific account of time travel possibility do you find most plausible? Explain.
9. Reflect upon a time travel story (e.g. novel, short story, film, television episode) with which you are familiar. To what extent is this a logically coherent time travel story?
10. 'Time is a great teacher, but unfortunately it kills all its students,' said Hector Berlioz. You may feel that just studying the theme of time has been grueling enough! What was the most mind-bending and challenging idea you encountered when studying this Theme? Explain this idea. Then speculate on what the possible implications of this idea might be – were it to be true.

## ***Assessment Task Two: Essay***

**TOPIC 1:** What is the nature of time? Critically consider at least three different ideas, authors or arguments in order to draw your own conclusions.

OR

**TOPIC 2:** Could time travel ever happen? Critically consider at least three arguments for or against time travel in order to draw your conclusions.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

## ***Assessment Task Three: Written Analysis***

Write your own coherent time travel story. If it runs into paradoxes, you need to build in plausible ways of solving them.

OR

Write your own time travel story. Then write an analysis of your story, explaining the ways in which it is or is not logically coherent.

## ***Assessment Task Four: Short Answer Responses***

Answer a series of short-answer questions relating to one of the primary texts you have studied in this Theme.

## ***Assessment Task Five: Oral Presentation***

Present to the class your findings on the questions posed above in Relevant Contemporary Debate: The Possibility of Time Travel (p.220).



## THEME 5

# On the Existence and Nature of God

Questions about God's existence and nature have intrigued philosophers since at least the time of the Greeks. In particular, philosophers have been interested in the demonstrability of God's existence, God's nature, God's relationship to the world and the rationality of religious belief. In more recent times and with the advent of modern science, philosophers have also been interested in how scientific understandings of the natural world can be reconciled with God's existence: is it still possible to believe in God when the natural world can be explained without God? Do the findings of science support a belief in God or do they undermine it?

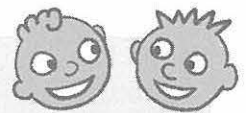
In this Theme you will be introduced to the concept of God as it is understood in the Western monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). You will also be introduced to the different arguments philosophers have proposed to prove God's existence and the various arguments that have been raised against God's existence. You will also consider whether, as a number of philosophers have suggested, it is necessary to prove God's existence at all.

Although this Theme is focused on the Western monotheistic traditions, there is no reason to limit your study to these traditions. In the *Useful Resources* section that follows this Theme you can find texts which provide information on how other traditions have responded to the questions examined in the pages that follow. Your teacher may also be able to advise you on relevant websites or resources held by your school.

### **Introductory Activity**

#### **DISCUSS**

1. What does the word 'God' mean to you?
2. Can we know that God exists?
3. Can we know that God doesn't exist?
4. Do we need to *know* God exists to believe in God?



## What are the attributes of God?

Before we can begin to discuss the question of God's existence, it is first necessary to establish what we are talking about when we use the term 'God' in this Theme. According to the classical view of the monotheistic Western traditions, God is understood as the creator of the universe and of all life. God sustains the world, but unlike the world and all that is in it, God is uncreated, and exists outside the order of contingent nature. God is thus immaterial, immutable and eternal. As befits a being worthy of worship, God is also **omniscient** (all-knowing), **omnipotent** (all-powerful) and **omnibenevolent** (all-loving, or morally perfect). St Anselm (Famous Philosopher File p.229) encapsulates all of these attributes in his description of God as 'a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.' According to this definition, God is not only superior in all ways; God is *synonymous with* perfection.

### THINK

Before reading further, consider the above attributes. Are they problematic? In what way? Are they compossible (capable of co-existing)? If not, why not?



### DO

Monotheism is the belief in one God. While this belief is central to the major Western traditions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, there are other understandings of God.

Research definitions for, and, where relevant, provide examples of, the following understandings of God:

theism      deism      atheism      polytheism      pantheism      agnosticism



As you may have discovered, these attributes, taken both separately and together, aren't without their problems. One of these problems is how to reconcile God's **omniscience** with the accepted belief that human beings are free. In other words, how is it possible for me to make a truly free decision if God already knows the decision I will make? Such a situation implies that I will *necessarily* make the decision that God has foreseen, which means that the decision wasn't really a decision at all but something predetermined.

One way we might resolve this problem is to accept some limitations to God's knowledge. Just as it's a logical contradiction to suggest that human beings have foreknowledge (that is, they already know what they will decide and the consequences) *and* are genuinely free, we might also claim it's a logical contradiction for God to have foreknowledge of human actions if they are freely chosen. However, this is somewhat unsatisfactory. Even if it is logically impossible to reconcile foreknowledge of human action with human freedom as far as humans are concerned, it isn't exactly clear why this is also true for God. Perhaps God's perfect knowledge of creation enables God to predict what we will do with complete certainty even though our choice is entirely free. A further issue with placing limitations on God's knowledge is that it appears to place human

salvation outside of God's control. If human beings are genuinely free, they may freely choose to reject God, thereby permanently frustrating any plan God has for our salvation and denying God's omnipotence.

Medieval philosophers such as Augustine (Famous Philosopher File p.201) and Aquinas (Famous Philosopher File p.231) attempted to deal with this problem by arguing that, unlike humans, God exists outside of time. In other words, rather than experiencing events as a consecutive sequence in which there is past, present and future, God experiences it all simultaneously as a kind of all-encompassing present. Such a view certainly coheres with the idea of God's immutability (as God does not learn anything new). It also does away with the problem of foreknowledge (which seems to imply a notion of time) and makes compossible human freedom and God's omniscience. But is it logical?

While it may seem impossible for anyone to know past, present and future simultaneously, it is worth remembering that God is unlike anything else in creation. Indeed, we might plausibly suggest that time is part of God's creative work. Thus the notion that God is outside time is certainly intelligible.

### THINK

The notion that God is outside of time might be intelligible, but is it plausible? Can you think of any other problems with this view?



Further problems can be raised regarding claims of God's **omnipotence**. To understand these problems it is first necessary to understand the nature of this omnipotence. Contrary to what we might expect, God's omnipotence does not mean that God can do anything at all. God cannot, for example, square a circle or create a four-sided triangle. Like us, God's actions are circumscribed by what is logically possible.

This seems uncontroversial. However, many classical theists, such as Aquinas, also believe that, in addition to these straightforward examples of logical contradiction, there are other actions that God is incapable of. For example, God cannot sin. Nor can God be angry or desire evil. The reason for this is simple: such behaviours contradict God's nature and compromise God's moral perfection.

On the surface this also seems uncontroversial. If God is all-loving then of course such actions would be against God's nature. But we might be forgiven for wondering if an entity that is *necessarily* good is really good at all. Most people agree that moral goodness requires a choice. If this is the case, can we really think of an entity that is incapable of committing evil as good?

Although some theists, such as Augustine, do believe that God is good by necessity, others, such as the English philosopher Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), have recognised the problems of such a view and have argued that God's goodness is a choice; God is perfectly free to choose evil but never does. This response squares with our intuitive understanding of good as well as our understanding of omnipotence (which seems to entail freedom), but we might question its adequacy. Does it mean that God will *always* choose good? The answer to this question must be yes, for to choose evil would compromise God's moral perfection. But surely this implies that God *cannot* choose evil, which means God is *necessarily* good. And so we are back where we started, trying to square God's goodness with our own intuitive understanding of the concept.

### THINK

In what other ways might the notion of a God that is good by necessity prove problematic?



A further criticism that is often raised in discussions of God's omnipotence is framed in terms of a paradox. This so-called paradox of the stone is expressed as a question: can God create a stone that is too heavy to lift? If God is omnipotent then surely God can create such a stone. But lifting this stone would be something that God could not do. By the same token, being unable to create such a stone would mean that God is not omnipotent. Thus it would seem the idea of an omnipotent God is incoherent.

### THINK

Does the paradox of the stone necessarily prove that God cannot be omnipotent?



Many theistic philosophers disagree that the paradox of the stone provides a compelling argument against God's omnipotence. They point out that it relies on a contradiction: like any other entity, God cannot engage in a contradictory action. Thus, they argue, rather than demonstrating that the notion of an omnipotent God is incoherent, the paradox instead shows us that omnipotence is not synonymous with the capacity to do anything at all. God is both omnipotent and limited to what is logically possible.

Just as there are problems with God's omniscience and omnipotence, critics have also pointed to problems with God's **omnibenevolence**, and in particular, with how to square God's moral perfection with God's immutability. If, as the classical theists suggest, God is unchanging, then God cannot experience emotion. God cannot be moved by our acts of compassion, or our suffering, or our decision to put aside sin to live in accordance with God's law.

Many would agree that such a view of God is problematic. To begin with, a God that is all-loving and not in some way moved by the behaviour of human beings seems counter-intuitive: surely if God loves us, God must feel some kind of pain when we suffer. If not, how can we be expected to admire God, or believe God worthy of worship? Secondly, it is difficult to make sense of our relationship to God if God is unchanging. For example, the ritual of prayer seems to require God to consider our prayers and perhaps be moved by them. Also, the notion of forgiveness implies some kind of change in God's attitude towards us. Finally, if God is unchanging, our behaviour should be inconsequential to God. After all, if I come closer to God or move further away, God will not be affected by my actions.

In recognition of these problems, a movement known as **process theism** has proposed the idea that God *is* capable of change. How else, a process theist argues, could we muster the admiration necessary to believe God worthy of worship and to sustain a religious life? A classical theist might retort that a God that is remote and difficult to understand might be less appealing but this doesn't mean that God cannot be like this. After all, with our limited capacities, how can we even begin to understand the significance of God's immutability?

### THINK

In your opinion, is it possible for God to be both omnibenevolent and immutable? Why or why not?



### DO

In small groups, research how God is understood in another religious tradition. Traditions you could choose from include, but are not limited to:

- Hinduism
- Shinto
- Mugyo
- Jainism
- Sikhism
- Zoroastrianism
- Indigenous Australian traditions
- Indigenous American traditions
- African traditions

Share your findings with the class. You may also like to construct a table with your classmates to demonstrate the similarities and differences between these traditions for display in your Philosophy classroom.



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## The Problem of Evil

One of the most significant challenges to God's existence is known as the argument from, or **Problem of Evil**. According to this argument evil is manifest. A brief glance at the nightly news will reveal a litany of **moral** (perpetuated by humans) and **natural** (perpetuated by nature) evils, such as murder, rape, unprovoked violence, genocide, flood, famine and plague. If God is omniscient then God knows this. If God is omnipotent then God has the power to stop it. And if God is morally perfect then surely God must want to stop it. Evil, however, continues. Thus it would seem that the only possible conclusion is either there is no God or God is not as we imagined.

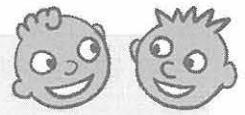
### **Responses To The Problem Of Evil**

While it may appear that the presence of evil is an irrefutable argument against the existence of God, there are those who believe that it is possible to reconcile God's existence with the existence of evil. The arguments they present are known as **theodicies**.

One of the most well-known of these theodicies is the '**free will defence**.' According to this argument, God created the universe as good and, as a mark of God's infinite benevolence, God bestowed on us the greatest gift possible, the gift of free will. Unfortunately the price of this free will is that humans may choose evil if they wish. Thus evil may be understood as our misuse of this divine gift.

Of course various arguments have been raised against this theodicy. Some philosophers have argued that such a gift seems inconsistent with God's status as omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent (why would God give us free will if God knows we will misuse it?), whereas others have asked why an omnipotent God could not create creatures that are completely free and consistently moral. Some philosophers have also pointed out that, while the free will defence may be able to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of *moral* evil, it does not explain why *natural* evil occurs.

Supporters of the defence respond by arguing that it is not always inconsistent for a perfect God to sometimes allow evil to occur. Perhaps such evils make possible the existence of greater goods, such as justice (**the argument from moral balance**), or maybe they allow us to develop a deeper appreciation of what is good by acquainting us with what is bad and painful. Perhaps earth is some kind of proving ground and our existence is a divine test put to us by God, or maybe God has created the world to be full of moral and spiritual challenges to help us to develop our moral character (**irenaean theodicy**). Given that we are, after all, limited and imperfect beings, we should not presume that we can either know or understand the workings of the divine mind. Nor should we infer the nature of God's goodness from our earthly, limited understanding of this concept.



## DISCUSS

1. How persuasive are the arguments against the free will defence identified in the above section?
2. How persuasive are the attempts to reconcile God's goodness with the existence of evil identified in the above section?
3. How else might the existence of evil be reconciled with the existence of God?
4. How effective is the Problem of Evil as an argument against the existence of God?

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## Proving God's Existence

The Problem of Evil attempts to *disprove* God's existence. But can God's existence be *proven*? Outlined below are five arguments that philosophers and believers have proposed to prove God's existence. Each argument (perhaps with the exception of the first) attempts to bridge the gap between experience and what is beyond experience by inferring God's existence from the world.

### ***The Ontological Argument***

The **ontological argument** for God's existence was originally set out by St Anselm (Famous Philosopher File p.229) in the second and third chapters of his *Proslogian*. Taking as his fundamental premise the notion of God as a perfect being, Anselm sets out a **deductive argument** which seeks to establish its conclusion by demonstrating that the notion of a non-existent, perfect being is incoherent.

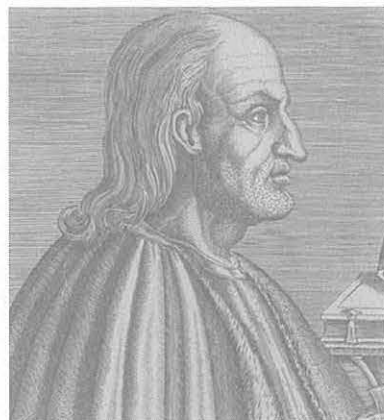
Anselm begins his argument by first clarifying his terms. God, he tells us, is 'a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.' Because even a fool can understand what is meant by this description, Anselm goes on to argue that God exists in the understanding. However, because God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived, God cannot exist in the understanding alone. Therefore, God must exist both in the understanding and in reality for not to do so would compromise God's greatness.

To understand what Anselm means, consider the analogy of a perfect chocolate cake. No matter how many tiers of fluffy sponge sandwiched together with rich, chocolaty ganache you imagine, a chocolate cake which exists in reality, which has all the qualities of the fantasy cake but can be admired and tasted, will always be superior. Thus the cake in your imagination, despite its calorific decadence, is not the greatest chocolate cake that can be conceived because it fails one important criterion: it doesn't exist.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109)

St Anselm was born in Aosta in Northern Italy to a noble family who owned considerable lands. Although he wanted to become a monk from a young age, his violent and aggressive father thwarted his plans. It was therefore not until his late twenties that he entered a monastic life, choosing a Benedictine monastery in Normandy. He became prior and later, in 1078, abbot.



Around the same time, and at the urging of his fellow monks, he wrote down his teaching in two books, *Monologian* (1077) and his masterpiece, *Proslogian* (1078). In addition, he wrote a number of other works on language, truth and freedom. In 1093 he was appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury. After serving under King William II, his life took a tumultuous turn under King Henry I, with whom he argued over the independence of the church and the use of church monies. He was exiled several times before he was able to reach a settlement with Henry, after which he lived peaceably until his death.

### TEXT STUDY: St. Anselm, *Proslogian* (1078)

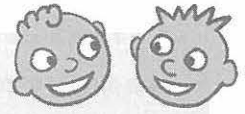
[see Useful Resources]

READ Chapters 2-3 of St. Anselm's *Proslogian*

1. Together with a partner, and using a highlighter, identify all the key **propositions** in each chapter.
2. Write each proposition onto a piece of paper.
3. Using **standard form**, arrange each proposition so as to form the structure of the argument(s).
4. Share with the class. When, as a class, you are satisfied with the argument structure rewrite it into your workbooks.







## DISCUSS

1. What do you think of when you think of a being ‘than which nothing greater can be conceived’?
2. Considering your class’s responses to the above question, do you think Anselm is right when he says even a fool understands what is meant by ‘a being than which nothing greater can be conceived’?
3. What implications do responses to the above question have for the rest of Anselm’s argument?
4. Anselm suggests that God must exist because a failure to exist does not cohere with God’s status as a perfect being. Does this mean the perfect cake must exist also? If not, why not?
5. In his argument Anselm appears to equate existence with other properties, such as omnipotence or omniscience. But can existence really be understood as a property? If not, what implications does this have for Anselm’s argument?
6. Anselm claims that the concept of God is understood. Is it possible to understand God’s essence?



## READ

A contemporary of St. Anselm, the monk Gaunilo, criticises the ontological argument in his *In Behalf of the Fool* (see *Useful Resources*).

1. Read and summarise Gaunilo’s criticisms.
2. Should the ontological argument be rejected on the grounds of Gaunilo’s criticisms?

## The Cosmological Argument

The **cosmological**, or ‘**first cause**’ argument is most commonly associated with the medieval philosopher St Thomas Aquinas (Famous Philosopher File p.231). In his work *Summa Theologiae* (1270), Aquinas outlines five arguments, or proofs (the ‘Five Ways’), for the existence of God. Each argument commences with premises describing something which exists, and moves to a deduction regarding its cause. By starting with the facts of experience and then reasoning from these facts to what must be the case to make these experiences possible, Aquinas employs a form known as **transcendental argument**. Thus the cosmological argument differs from the ontological argument in that it reasons backwards from what can be observed or experienced to what is beyond experience.

Although all five arguments are intended to establish God’s existence, only the first three may accurately be described as versions of the cosmological argument.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

Thomas Aquinas was born into a noble family – his father was the Count of Aquino and his mother, the Countess of Teano. At the age of 14 he was sent to the University of Naples and in 1244, a year after completing his studies, he joined the Dominican order. His family was apparently horrified by his decision. One story claims they hired a prostitute to try to tempt him away from the order. Another claims that his brothers had him kidnapped and held him captive for a year as they attempted to ‘de-program’ him. Whatever the truth of these stories, Aquinas devoted his life to his faith, becoming a priest and later, an advisor to the papal court.



Aquinas’ great contribution to philosophy was to produce a synthesis between elements of Western thought and Christian belief – in particular, Platonised Christianity and the philosophy of Aristotle, who was Aquinas’ major influence. This synthesis plays a central role in Thomism, the medieval philosophical tradition he inspired.

Thomas Aquinas produced over two million words of theology, including his major works *Summa Theologicae* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. However, he ceased writing in 1273 after some kind of religious revelation. One year later, while traveling from Naples to Lyon, he fell ill and, in the abbey of Fossanuova, died. Aside from his immense contribution to philosophy and religious thought, he is also the patron saint of philosophers, students and scholars.

### TEXT STUDY: St Thomas Aquinas, ‘Five Ways’ (around 1270)



[see Useful Resources]

**READ** the first three of Aquinas’ ‘Five Ways’ .

Divide into three groups. Assign one of the ‘Five Ways’ to each group. In your groups re-read the relevant section of text and establish the **conclusion** and **premises** of the argument expressed in that section. Put the argument into **standard form**.

Form new groups. Each group should have at least one member from each of the previous three groups (a minimum of 3 members to a group). Share your standard form re-presentations and then **discuss** the following questions. Record the group’s answers in your workbook.

1. In what way does Aquinas' Third Way differ from his Second and/or First?
2. All three of the above arguments rest on the assumption that the universe is characterised by cause and effect. What arguments/evidence can you think of to support/contradict this claim?
3. Even if claims regarding cause and effect are correct, does this demonstrate the existence of God as understood in the Western monotheistic tradition? Why or why not?
4. To what extent might developments in science, and the scientific understanding of the universe, support or undermine the cosmological argument?
5. In your opinion, how compelling is the cosmological argument?

## The Teleological Argument

In his Fifth Way Aquinas proposes that, as there is purpose and order in the universe, we can infer that the universe is the product of an intelligent designer.

This argument, known as the **teleological argument** (from the Greek word *telos*, meaning 'goal' or 'purpose'), or **argument from design**, has since been developed by a number of philosophers, most famously the English philosopher William Paley (1743-1805). According to this argument, when we look to the natural world we can see evidence of design and order. Water causes plants to grow, force causes motion in objects and bodies and there is a certain consistency to how nature behaves. Thus, as there is evidence of design in the world, it would seem rational to conclude that there exists some kind of intelligent designer.

The teleological argument is both **inductive** and **probabilistic** (it isn't saying that nature provides conclusive proof of a designer, only that it is reasonable to conclude that a designer must exist). It is also an **argument from analogy** because it infers from the relationship between artifacts in the world and a creator that a similar relationship must exist for the universe to be possible.

### TEXT STUDY: William Paley, *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1803)



[see Useful Resources]

In this text, Paley provides what is perhaps the most famous articulation of the teleological argument via his analogy of a watch and a watchmaker.

Read Paley's analogy as a class. **Explain** to the person next to you how the analogy works and then **discuss** the following questions.

1. Paley's argument rests on the strength of his analogy. How effective is this analogy? (For information on evaluating analogies see page 37 onwards of Chapter Two: Logic and Reasoning.)

2. How might scientific understandings of the natural world be used to support/undermine Paley's argument?
3. Even if the argument from design is compelling does it necessarily demonstrate the existence of God as understood in the monotheistic Western tradition? If not, is this a problem?
4. Does Paley provide a convincing argument for the existence of a supreme designer?

In more recent times, contemporary philosophers such as Richard Swinburne (1934- ) have drawn more exclusively on the laws of science to support the existence of an intelligent designer. This modern version of the teleological argument is sometimes called the 'laws of science' or the '**laws of physics argument.**' According to this argument, if we examine the universe we discover certain regularities in terms of how nature behaves. These regularities, which we have codified and established as laws of science, occur consistently and without exception. Supporters of this argument claim that if the universe was simply, as Bertrand Russell termed it, a 'brute fact,' it would seem exceedingly odd for nature to behave in such an organised manner. It therefore seems more logical to conclude that, rather than a chance occurrence, our universe is the product of an intelligent designer.

Another contemporary take on the teleological argument is known as the **anthropic argument from design.** Like the 'laws of physics argument,' it draws from the findings of science, but whereas the 'laws of physics argument' refers to the laws of science to support its claims, the anthropic argument focuses on the conditions that have made life on earth possible. According to current scientific disciplines, such as astronomy and astrophysics, the chances of the right conditions occurring to sustain life on earth are extremely low. The chance of those conditions occurring together are even lower, so low in fact as to be almost incalculable. According to supporters of the anthropic argument, given that our existence is so improbable there are only two possible conclusions: either the universe was designed by an intelligent mind or it was an incredible coincidence. Given the remarkable improbabilities involved, they claim it is more reasonable to believe the former conclusion: that the universe is the product of an intelligent designer.



## DO

The **Theory of Evolution** as proposed by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) is often cited as an objection to the 'laws of physics argument.' Research this theory and then answer the following questions in your workbooks.

1. How does the Theory of Evolution challenge the 'laws of physics argument' for the existence of God?
2. How might a supporter of the 'laws of physics argument' defend this argument against the above objection?
3. Is the Theory of Evolution a persuasive objection to the 'laws of physics argument?' Is it a persuasive argument against the existence of God?
4. What other evaluations can you think of to challenge the scientific versions of the teleological argument?



## TEXT STUDY: David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779)

[see Useful Resources]

In Parts II and V of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182) presents a significant critique of the teleological argument in the form of a dialogue between three characters: Cleanthes, Demea and Philo.

READ the relevant sections from *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* as a class. When you have completed the reading, rewrite the dialogue in your own words, reducing what is said by each character to the essential points, and then discuss the following questions.

1. What is Philo's first criticism of Cleanthes' argument for the existence of an intelligent designer?
2. Is this criticism persuasive? Why or why not?
3. What is Philo's second criticism of Cleanthes' argument for the existence of an intelligent designer?
4. Is this criticism persuasive? Why or why not?
5. Has Hume provided a convincing case against the teleological argument?
6. Has Hume provided a convincing argument against the existence of God?

## WHAT IS 'INTELLIGENT DESIGN'?

The theory of **Intelligent Design** presents itself as an alternative to secular explanations for the origin and diversity of nature. Supporters of Intelligent Design claim that particular features of the natural world are best explained by the existence of an intelligent cause or designer and, although this cause is unspecified, it is generally agreed to be God.

Although the idea of Intelligent Design is at least as old as the earliest articulations of the teleological argument (of which it is a reworking), the term is relatively new, coming to international and popular prominence earlier this century when a group of high school parents in the United States challenged a public school district requirement to teach Intelligent Design as an alternative explanation in biology classes. This dispute reflected what many regard as the position's major source of contention: for its supporters Intelligent Design represents a viable *scientific* alternative to conventional biological science.

Advocates of Intelligent Design support the position's scientific status with a variety of arguments. These arguments include:

- **The argument from 'irreducible complexity.'** According to this argument, the great complexity of living systems, and the necessity of each interacting component to the functioning of an individual system, imply the existence of a designer.
- **The inadequacy of conventional science.** Supporters of Intelligent Design point out that there are natural systems that cannot be adequately explained in terms of natural causes and which exhibit characteristics which in other circumstances we would attribute to a designing intelligence.
- **The 'fine-tuned universe.'** This is another name for the **anthropic argument from design**. According to this argument, the conditions that give rise to life and make it possible are so specific it seems unlikely that life and the universe resulted from chance. Only a designer could ensure that all the required characteristics were present in the required combinations to achieve such an outcome.

The general consensus of the scientific community is that although Intelligent Design may represent an alternative perspective on the origins of life and the nature of the natural world, it does not represent a *scientific* perspective because its central hypothesis is not testable by the methods of science. It also claims that a number of its supporting arguments, such as the claim of 'irreducible complexity' and its understanding of the conditions that give rise to life, are not scientifically accurate. Beyond the scientific arguments, some critics have simply argued that inferring the existence of a designer from the evidence of nature is absurd: nature is full of design errors and, like the teleological argument, the concept falls prey to an infinite regress that can only be escaped by appeal to creationism, which is the very thing Intelligent Design advocates have tried to avoid.

## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: INTELLIGENT DESIGN

Advocates of Intelligent Design argue that it should be presented alongside (or instead of) the theory of evolution in school science classes. *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* (2005) was a landmark case in America on this issue, which you may wish to research. You should also do some research on the arguments for Darwin's theory of evolution.

What is your view – do the arguments of Intelligent Design have enough merit for the theory to be taught in science classes?

### *The Moral Argument*

Whereas the previous two arguments for the existence of God looked to the natural world to support their claims, the moral argument centres on human beliefs. Many, if not most, human beings believe there are certain actions which are morally admirable and others which are morally questionable. Most agree that Hitler's genocide against Jews was abhorrent, while the actions of those who helped the injured during the Bali bombings in 2005 were admirable. If asked, most people would also claim that these judgments aren't simply a reflection of their own personal tastes or beliefs, but that these actions were 'just right,' or 'wrong in themselves.'

In making such claims, these people are appealing to the idea of objective moral values. In other words, they are suggesting there are certain moral precepts, such as 'genocide is wrong' and 'helping others in need is right,' that transcend their own personal beliefs and are 'true' in the strongest sense of the word. This of course raises the question of where these moral precepts come from. Proponents of the moral argument, such as Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) and, more recently, British theologian and author of the Narnia series, C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), claim that the only compelling answer to this question is God. This is because in order to believe in objective moral values it is necessary to have an objective ground for these values, otherwise our belief in them lacks justification. Although other grounds for these values can be offered, they claim the most compelling ground is God. God's existence is both evidenced by, and justifies, the existence of these objective moral values.

Various objections have been raised against this argument. Some critics suggest that the argument's fundamental presupposition of objective moral values is flawed: what we think of as objective moral values are really just cultural constructs (**moral relativism**), emotional responses to certain actions or prescriptions regarding behaviour (**prescriptivism**). Others agree with the idea of objective moral values but disagree that God is the most compelling explanation for these values, instead attributing them to human nature or biology. While these objections are certainly persuasive they are also problematic. If, as some critics claim, there are no objective moral values, it is difficult to see how we can appraise the morality of others or admire moral progress, as all actions would be essentially amoral. As to alternative explanations for objective moral values, even if we are able to establish the existence of something we might call 'human nature' (and many philosophers doubt this) there still remains the problem of demonstrating how the variety of values that exist within the world can be seen as proceeding from it. Of course, any explanations from biology suffer from the same problem.



## READ

In 1948 British philosopher, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Jesuit priest F.C. Copleston (1907-1994) participated in a now famous debate on BBC radio regarding the existence of God. In this debate they engage in an extended discussion of the moral argument.

Read (or you may like to listen to) the section of the debate titled 'The Moral Argument' (see *Useful Resources*). Then complete the following tasks:

1. Outline each of Russell's arguments against the Moral Argument.
2. Outline each argument Copleston offers in response to Russell.

As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. How convincing are Russell's arguments against the Moral Argument?
2. How adequate are Copleston's responses to Russell's arguments?
3. After reading the transcript of this debate, are you more, or less, persuaded by the Moral Argument for the existence of God?

## ***The Argument From Religious Experience***

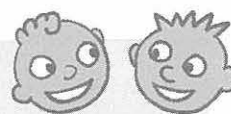
Unlike all of the previous arguments (with the exception of the ontological argument), which seek to deduce the existence of God from the world, the **argument from religious experience** establishes its conclusion from more intimate kinds of evidence.

The term 'religious experience' is used to describe a personal experience of such a quality that the individual who experiences it believes it can only be attributed to a divine source. For some, the experience may be intense and transient, whereas for other it may manifest as an ongoing awareness of God's presence, or of the world as God's creation. The British philosopher, Richard Swinburne, suggests these experiences can be categorised into five types: experiences mediated through a common, public, sensory object (for example, experiencing God through meditation on an icon or on nature); experiences mediated through an unusual, public, sensory object (for example, experiencing God through a visitation, such as the appearance of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes); experiences mediated through private sensations that can be described in normal sensory language (for example, experiencing God through a vision or dream which can be described to another); experiences mediated through private sensations that cannot be described; and experiences where the individual is directly and intuitively aware of God.

While it is easy to see how the argument from religious experience is compelling for those who have had such experiences, some philosophers question whether it is rational to infer the existence of God from such experiences. Even if we concur that it is rational, questions still remain as to whether what the individual experiences is a religious experience (as opposed to, say, a delusion or an extra-ordinary experience interpreted as a religious experience because of the subject's already religious worldview) and whether the inference, despite its rationality, actually results in a conclusion (God exists) that is true.



It is also easy to see how the argument remains unconvincing for those who have not had such experiences. Yet, just as we might question whether an experience that the individual experiences and interprets as a religious experience is compelling evidence for believing in God's existence, we might also question whether the lack of such an experience in our own lives proves that God does not exist. After all, a substantial number of people across history and in different cultures have had these experiences even if we ourselves have not.



## DISCUSS

1. The argument from religious experience depends on the adequacy of personal experience and personal revelation as a source of evidence. Is personal experience/personal revelation a good source of evidence on which to base our beliefs?
2. How might we decide if an experience we have had is a religious experience?
3. In your opinion, is a person who has had a religious experience justified in believing God exists?
4. In your opinion, is a person justified in believing God exists based on the testimonies of others who have had religious experiences?
5. Does the argument from religious experience provide a more compelling argument than the other arguments for God's existence presented in this chapter?

## MIRACLES

**Miracle** is a term used to describe any event attributed to divine intervention which appears to violate the laws of nature. Turning water into wine and a few fish and loaves into a feast are two examples of famous miracles from the Christian tradition that many people may be familiar with.

For believers, such events, if they are deemed authentic, are considered incontrovertible proof of God's existence, for if it is accepted that divine intervention entails divine existence, then God must exist for these events to occur. Others, such as philosopher David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182), are unconvinced. In his *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume suggests that when confronted with the claim of a miracle occurring, we need to ask ourselves which is more probable – that the alleged miracle took place or that the claim, for one reason or another, is false. Given that a miracle, by definition, requires a breach of the laws of nature and that human beings are fallible, Hume famously concludes that 'no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish.'



## DISCUSS

1. As suggested above, a miracle is an event which violates the laws of nature. Can we therefore declare, *a priori*, that there are no miracles?
2. When, if ever, are we justified in believing that certain unusual events have actually occurred?
3. When, if ever, are we justified in believing a certain event has no natural explanation?
4. If we can find no natural explanation for a certain event, are we justified in believing that God was directly involved in this event?
5. In your opinion, do the testimonies of miracles provide compelling evidence for the existence of God?

## Other Justifications for the Existence of God

### Faith

#### DO

As a class, create a list of sentences using the word 'faith.' Read back over these sentences and discuss how the meaning of the word differs between different sentences. On the basis of this discussion, create a list of definitions of faith. Which of these definitions come closest to your understanding of religious faith?



Although the proofs for the existence of God play a central role in philosophical religious discussion, not everyone agrees that God's existence can, or needs to be, established through logical means. For such people, the question of God's existence is instead a matter of faith.

In many respects, faith might be considered antithetical to philosophy. It requires us to put aside the usual standards we employ to judge what is true and real and instead believe in something without having empirically verifiable evidence to prove it. For this reason faith can often survive the assaults of arguments and evidence to the contrary in a way that belief cannot: all the horror presented on the nightly news might not shake my faith in God, but a couple of assaults reported in the local newspaper may change my belief that my neighbourhood is safe after dark. Thus faith may be thought of as akin to a kind of compulsion, and indeed, this is often how it is described. 'I did not choose to believe in God,' the believer will say; 'the belief chose me.'

The view that religious belief is based on faith and not reason is referred to in philosophy as **fideism**. At its most extreme, fideism claims that not only is religious belief not a matter of reason, it is contrary to reason. Perhaps the most well-known exponent of this view was eighteenth century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard (Famous Philosopher File p.240). For Kierkegaard, religious belief is the manifestation of how we have chosen to confront and resolve the mystery of our existence. Kierkegaard describes this choice as the ‘leap of faith,’ and believes that this ‘leap’ is motivated by the fact that our existence is radically subjective, hence we cannot know the answer to the question ‘why do I exist?’

Yet, while the ‘leap of faith’ may provide us with an insight into the reasons why people gravitate towards religious belief, it tells us little about the truth of claims regarding God’s existence. Indeed it could be argued that the whole idea of faith misses the point because it confuses the statement ‘I believe God exists,’ which is subjectively verifiable, with the statement ‘God exists,’ which is an assertion about the nature of reality. Even if we choose to view these statements as synonymous as Kierkegaard appears to be suggesting we do, there is still the issue of whether or not a feeling or conviction that something is the case can tell us anything about what is *actually* the case. I may, for example, feel absolutely certain that something bad is going to happen but this feeling may bear no resemblance to what is actually the case. Thus we may ask whether our faith is justified or misplaced.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)

Søren Kierkegaard was born into an affluent Copenhagen family, although his mother, Ane, was formally his father’s servant. Readers of Kierkegaard’s unpublished journals have speculated that his father believed that God would punish him for impregnating Ane outside of wedlock by ensuring that none of his children would outlive him. This punishment did not, however, come to pass: both Søren and his brother Peter would outlive their father by more than a decade.

Kierkegaard attended the School of Civic Virtue, Østre Borghedyd Gymnasium and then later, the University of Copenhagen, where he studied Theology. He did not find university particularly edifying and, despite graduating with his Magister Artium (the equivalent of a PhD) in 1841, he shunned academia, instead deciding he wanted to ‘lead a completely human life and not merely one of knowledge.’

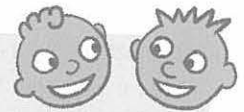
During his time at the University he met a young woman called Regine Olsen. The two fell in love, and in 1840, Kierkegaard proposed to her. But, almost one year afterwards, Kierkegaard broke off the engagement. Although his precise reasons were unclear, he mentioned in his journals that he felt his tendency to melancholy made him unfit for marriage.



This event, together with his dissatisfaction in regards to his studies, had a profound effect on Kierkegaard's work. Throughout the 1840's he wrote prolifically under a number of pseudonyms, which allowed him to publish works from a variety of viewpoints (a common practice in the 19th century) on his favorite theme of religion, and in particular, the individual's relationship with God. In 1845 he was involved in a public stoush with fellow University of Copenhagen graduate, Peder Ludvig Møller in the journal *The Corsair*. Møller criticised Kierkegaard's writing, and Kierkegaard responded unfavorably. Eventually the journal became involved, engaging in a concerted attack on Kierkegaard that made fun of his appearance (his hair apparently rose 6 inches in the air above his forehead in a dramatic quiff), his voice and his habits. Kierkegaard claimed that as a result he was harassed in the streets. This event led Kierkegaard to publish under his own name.

Kierkegaard's final years were taken up with a sustained attack on the Church of Denmark carried out by means of newspaper articles. In 1855 he collapsed in the streets and one month later, in Fredriks Hospital he died from what was believed to be injuries sustained in a childhood fall.

## DISCUSS



Consider the following descriptions of faith.

- Faith is believing in something in the absence of proof.
- Faith is believing in something in the absence of evidence.
- Faith is believing in something despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.
- Faith is believing in something that we don't know is true.

Discuss the following questions, with a partner.

1. Are any of the above descriptions only applicable to religious faith?
2. Are any of the above descriptions completely true of religious faith?

Discuss the following questions as a class.

1. Is faith rational?
2. Are there particular conditions faith must fulfill to be considered rational? Can religious faith fulfill these conditions?
3. Can faith be considered a legitimate alternative to reason?

## ***Pascal's Wager***

For the 17th century French physicist, philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the question was not 'can the existence of God be proven?' but 'is it prudentially rational to believe in God?'

Starting from the position that neither God's existence nor God's nature can be established via rational means, Pascal invites his reader to consider the wisdom of the 'leap of faith' in terms of gambling odds. If God exists, Pascal says, and you're a believer, you have everything to gain. If, on the other hand, God doesn't exist and you believe, you haven't really lost anything. Indeed, you may even have gained by avoiding what he terms 'poisonous pleasures' and by instead developing positive virtues such as honesty, truthfulness and generosity. However, if you don't believe and God exists, you stand to lose everything. Thus it makes sense to believe because whether God does or doesn't exist you lose nothing.

Pascal's Wager may be represented in the following way:

	God exists	God doesn't exist
I believe in God	+ infinity	0
I don't believe in God	- infinity	0

The obvious criticism of Pascal's Wager is that it appears to ignore the fact that some people simply cannot bring themselves to believe in God. Pascal, however, has a reply at the ready to meet such an objection:

*Endeavour then to convince yourself, not by increase proofs of God, but by abatement of your passions...Learn of those who have been bound like you...These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believe, taking holy water, having masses said...Eventually this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness...<sup>23</sup>*

One might feel compelled to ask how God might feel about such a 'believer.' However, it should be remembered that Pascal is not suggesting we mimic belief. Rather, by partaking in religious rituals, he claims we are able to leave our cynicism behind and become true believers.

There are, of course, other important criticisms of the Wager that Pascal doesn't address. For example, given that we cannot know God's nature, how can we be sure that God is in the business of reward and punishment? Perhaps God has no interest in human affairs or perhaps God is truly benevolent, bestowing divine reward on all who come God's way. Even if God is akin to a divine parent, rewarding some and condemning others, how can we know what behaviour elicits what response? For all we know God may be capricious, preferring to grant eternity to the inquiring non-believer rather than the blind follower.

There is also the matter of Pascal's calculations. Pascal claims that if we believe and God doesn't exist, then we have lost nothing. This may be true if all our belief requires is an hour or two a week at our local place of worship, but most religions incorporate a range of prohibitions and some have recommendations which come at immense personal cost. What if our situation and our religion compel us to extreme asceticism or martyrdom or prohibit us from choosing the one we love? We could hardly be considered to have lost nothing by believing.



## DO

*'You must wager. It is not optional.'* – Blaise Pascal

Evaluate Pascal's claim that religious belief is a wager within the context of a formal debate responding to the above quotation. The side for the affirmative should argue in favour of Pascal's claim that religious belief can only ever be a wager and the side for the negative should argue against this claim by seeking to demonstrate that religious belief can be based on more than just a gamble.

## ***Flew's Invisible Gardener***

Like Pascal's Wager, Anthony Flew's invisible gardener thought experiment invites us to consider whether or not it is rational to believe in God.

Flew asks us to imagine two explorers who, while wandering through the jungle, discover a clearing containing flowers and weeds. One of the explorers declares that, as it resembles a garden, there must be a gardener who is responsible for tending the site. The other explorer considers this ludicrous. So the two of them watch and wait for the gardener to appear. Time passes. The more sceptical of the two believes his view is vindicated but his associate is certain he is correct. In an effort to sort out who is right they begin to monitor the site more rigorously. Traps are set. Dogs are brought in and the parameters are patrolled. All to no avail. Finally the explorer confronts his credulous companion but the companion is unshaken in his conviction. 'Perhaps,' he says, 'our gardener is invisible.' The explorer smiles. An invisible, intangible, scentless, soundless gardener. 'How then,' he inquires of his friend, 'does your gardener differ from no gardener at all?'

This thought experiment highlights one of the central problems of religious belief. Is it rational to posit the existence of God when such an existence cannot be objectively verified? Although the believer may protest that we do have evidence of God's existence, such evidence could be dismissed on the grounds that we cannot establish a definite link between it and God. God is, therefore, an unnecessary hypothesis, especially given that phenomena used to support God's existence can be explained in other ways. Indeed, it could be argued that, given the state of the world and the behavior of nature, it would be more rational to infer that God doesn't exist, or, at the very least, is non-interventionist – which, as our sceptical explorer might say, is not much different to having no God at all.

## THINK

How do the conclusions to be drawn from Flew's thought experiment compare with those drawn from Pascal's Wager? Which do you think is more convincing and why?



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## Assessment Tasks

The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Can the existence of God and the existence of evil be plausibly reconciled?
2. Is it necessary to prove God's existence? If God's existence were to be proven, what implications would this have for individuals, society and the world as a whole?
3. Do any of the 'proofs' provide a convincing argument for God's existence?
4. To what extent does the scientific understanding of the natural world challenge/support the arguments for God's existence?
5. How does religious faith differ from other kinds of faith? Is faith good grounds for holding a belief?
6. Should we gamble that 'He is' as Pascal suggests we should? Why or why not?
7. Advocates of Intelligent Design in the United States have argued that it should be taught alongside scientific theories in science classes. Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. Should we believe in God even if God's existence cannot be proven?

### **Assessment Task Two: Essay**

TOPICS:

1. What is the Problem of Evil? Is it possible to plausibly reconcile the presence of evil with the existence of God?
2. What is the 'leap of faith'? Can religious belief be anything more than a leap of faith?
3. Outline *one* of the arguments for God's existence. What implications do developments in science and the scientific understanding of the natural world have for the plausibility of this argument?
4. In his Wager, Pascal implores us to 'wager...without hesitation that He is.' Does Pascal provide a convincing argument for religious belief?

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### **Assessment Task Three: Written Analysis**

Write a critical analysis of between 600-800 words of one of the texts prescribed in the 'Text Study' boxes within this Theme. Make sure you include an outline of the main ideas and argument/s and then an evaluation.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Short Answer Responses***

Complete a series of short answer questions on the arguments for and against God's existence.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Written Analysis***

Complete a series of short written exercises (300-500 words) in which you outline and evaluate three of the arguments for God's existence.

OR

Complete a series of short written exercises (500-600 words) in which you outline and evaluate three of the arguments for God's existence as they are presented in a primary text.

### ***Assessment Task Six: Research Task and Presentation***

In pairs, construct a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation on a religious tradition of your choice (for example, Islam, Judaism, Jainism, Buddhism, etc) which outlines the basic tenets of the tradition and its understanding of God. Present to the class.



# Useful Resources: Metaphysics

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## General Secondary Resources for Metaphysics

- Baggini, J. & Stangroom, J. 2006, *Do you think what you think you think?* Granta, London.
- Blackburn, S. 1999, *Think*, OUP, Oxford.
- Conee, E. & Sider, T. 2005, *Riddles of Existence: A Guided Tour of Metaphysics*, OUP, Oxford.
- Jaegwon, K. & Sosa, E. 1999, *Metaphysics: An Anthology (Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies)*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Loux, M.J. & Zimmerman, D.W. 2005, *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics (Oxford Handbooks)*, OUP, Oxford.
- Loux, M.J. 2006, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge, New York.
- Loux, M.J. 2008, *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings*, Routledge, New York.
- Russell, B. 2001, *The Problems of Philosophy*, OUP, Oxford.
- Taylor, R. 1974, *Metaphysics*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey.

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## Specific Resources for Themes in Metaphysics

### ***Theme 1: On Materialism and Idealism***

#### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Aristotle (Ross, W.D. trans) 1998, *The Metaphysics*, Penguin, London.  
Or online – <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>
- Berkeley, G. 2006, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Longman, London.
- Democritus, 'On the Physical World'  
<http://www.humanistictexts.org/democritus.htm#The%20Physical%20World>
- Descartes, R. (Cottingham, G. trans) 1996, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Kant, I. 1998, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Locke, J. 1995, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Prometheus, New York.  
Or online – <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/loess.html>

- *The Matrix*, dir. Wachowski, A. & Wachowski, L. 1999, Warner Bros. Pictures, DVD.
- Papineau, D. 2009, 'David Papineau on Scientific Realism', *Philosophy Bites* podcast – <http://philosophybites.com/2009/01/david-papineau-on-scientific-realism.html>
- Plato (Ferrari G.R.F ed. & Griffith, T. trans) 2000, *The Republic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Or online (Jowett, B. trans) – <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.4.iii.html>
- Zhai, P. 1998, *Get Real: A Philosophical Adventure in Virtual Reality*, Rowman & Littlefield, Washington DC.

## **Theme 2: On the Material Mind**

### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Armstrong, D. 1980 'The Nature of Mind' in *The Nature of Mind and Other Essays*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane. Available on the VCAA website.
- Chalmers, D. 1996, *The Conscious Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Churchland, P. 1981, 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes', *The Journal of Philosophy* 78: 67-90
- Davidson, D. 1963, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', in *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980), Carnedon Press, Oxford.
- Davidson, D. 1970, 'Mental Events', in *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980), Carnedon Press, Oxford.
- Descartes, R. (Cottingham, G. trans) 1996, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Dennett, D. 1988, 'Quining Qualia', in W. Lycan, ed. 1990, *Mind and Cognition: A Reader*, MIT Press, Massachusetts. And online at <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/quinqul.htm>
- Dennett, D., 1991, *Consciousness Explained*, Penguin, London.
- Feigl, H. 1967, *The 'Mental' and the 'Physical,' The Essay and a Postscript*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Fodor, J. 1981, 'The Mind-Body Problem', *Scientific American*, 244/1. And online at: [http://www.lscp.net/persons/dupoux/teaching/QUINZAINRENTREE\\_CogMaster\\_2010-11/Bloc\\_philo/Fodor\\_1981\\_mind\\_body\\_problem.pdf](http://www.lscp.net/persons/dupoux/teaching/QUINZAINRENTREE_CogMaster_2010-11/Bloc_philo/Fodor_1981_mind_body_problem.pdf)
- Hofstadter, D. & Dennett, D. (eds) 2000, *The Mind's 'I': Fantasies and Reflections on the Self and Soul*, Basic, New York.
- Jackson, F. 1982, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia' in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 32: 262-90.
- Lewis, D. 1966, 'An Argument for the Identity Theory,' *Journal of Philosophy*, 63, 17-25.
- Locke, J. 1995, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Prometheus, New York.
- Nagel, T. 1974, 'What's it like to be a Bat?' in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Also in Cahn, S. (ed.) 2011, *Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., Oxford University Press, New York.

- Place, U.T. 1956, 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?,' *British Journal of Psychology*, 47, 44-50. Also in Lycan, W.G. ed. (1999) *Mind and Cognition: A Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Putnam, H. 1960 'Mind and Machines' in *Mind, Language and Reality* (1975), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Putnam, H. 1973 'Philosophy and our Mental Life' in Lyons, W. ed. 1995, *Modern Philosophy of Mind*, Everyman, London.
- Ryle, G.1990, *The Concept of Mind*, Penguin, London.
- Searle, J. 1980, 'Minds, Brains and Programs', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3: 417-57.
- Smart, J.J.C. 1959, 'Sensations and Brain Processes,' *Philosophical Review*, 68, 141-156.
- Strawson, G. 2006 'Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism', [www.utoronto.ca/~seager/strawson\\_on\\_panpsychism.doc](http://www.utoronto.ca/~seager/strawson_on_panpsychism.doc)
- Turing, A. 1950, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' in *Mind* LIX (236): 433-40, OUP, Oxford. Also in Hofstadter and Dennett 2000, pp.53-67.

## SECONDARY RESOURCES

- Beakley, B. & Ludlow, P. 2006, *The Philosophy of Mind*, 2nd edn, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Blackmore, S. 2007, *Conversations on Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Churchland, P. 1999, *Matter of Consciousness*, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Graham, G. 2000, *Philosophy of Mind: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Guttenplan, S.(ed.) 1995, *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, Massachusetts.
- Heil, J. 1998, *Philosophy of Mind*, Routledge, London.
- Lyons, W. 2001, *Matters of the Mind*, Routledge, New York.
- Maslin KT. 2007, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, Polity, Oxford.
- Searle, J. 2005, *Mind: A Brief Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Smith, P. & Jones, O.R. 1986, *The Philosophy of Mind*, CUP, Cambridge.

## Theme 3: On Free Will and Determinism

### PRIMARY RESOURCES

- Dennett, D. 1984 *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, MIT Press, Massachusetts.
- Dick, P.K. *The Minority Report and Other Classic Stories*, Citadel, New York.
- d'Holbach 1770, *System of Nature* in Bowie, G.L., Michaels, M.W. & Solomon, R.C. 1996, *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Harcourt Brace, Orlando. Or online: <http://www.philosophy-index.com/d-holbach/system-nature/>.

- Hume, D. (Steinberg, E.ed.) 1993, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hackett, Indianapolis. Also online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/37/3/11.html>
- James, 1884, 'The Dilemma of Determinism' in Cahn, S. (ed.) 2011, *Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, 4th edn., Oxford University Press, New York  
And online: <http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/JamesDilemmaOfDeterminism.html>
- Marx, K. 1998, *The German Ideology including Theses on Feuerbach*, Prometheus, New York. And online at: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx\\_The\\_German\\_Ideology.pdf](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf)
- *Minority Report*, dir. Spielberg, S. 2002, Twentieth Century Fox, DVD.
- Nagel, T. 1979, 'Moral Luck' in Nagel, T., 1979, *Mortal Questions*, New York: Cambridge University Press;
- Schopenhauer, A. 1995, *Essays on Freedom of the Will*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.
- Schopenhauer, A. 1839 'Prize Essay On the Freedom of the Will' in Guttenplan, S., Hornsby J. & Janaway, C., eds 2003, *Reading Philosophy*, Blackwell, Cornwall.
- Strawson, P.F. 2008, *Freedom and Resentment and other essays*, Routledge, London. Also in Guttenplan, S., Hornsby J. & Janaway, C., eds 2003, *Reading Philosophy*, Blackwell, Cornwall.
- Van Inwagen, P., 2011, 'A Promising Argument' in Kane, ed. 2011, *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford. Also at <http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi>
- Williams, B. 1981 'Moral Luck' *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

## **Theme 4: On Time**

### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Aristotle (Waterfield R trans) 2008, *Physics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.  
See Book IV for Aristotle on time
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## Theme 5: On the Existence and Nature of God

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- Pojman, L. (ed) 1998, *Classics of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.433-435 (includes chapters II-IV of the *Proslogion* and Gaunilo's 'On Behalf of the Fool').
- <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-proslogium.asp> (full text of *Proslogion* and Gaunilo's 'On Behalf of the Fool')

### **Aquinas' cosmological argument**

- Eshleman, A. (ed) 2008, *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: East Meets West*, Blackwell, Massachusetts, pp.142-143 (includes the 'Five Ways').
- <http://www.sacred-text.com/chr/aquinas/summa/index.htm> (contains the full text of the *Summa Theologicae*. The relevant text can be found in Part Two, Question 2, Article Three 'The Existence of God')

### **Paley's teleological argument**

- Eshleman A. (ed) 2008, *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: East Meets West*, Blackwell, Massachusetts. pp.144-145 (contains both the analogy and parts of Paley's discussion of the analogy).
- Meister, C. (ed) 2008, *The Philosophy of Religion Reader*, Routledge, New York, pp.251-252. (First paragraph articulates the analogy. Also contains Paley's discussion of the analogy.)
- <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~mcgrew/PaleyWatch.pdf>  
(Both the watchmaker analogy and Paley's discussion of the analogy)

### **Hume on the teleological argument**

- Eshleman, A. (ed) 2008, *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: East Meets West*, Blackwell, Massachusetts, pp.146-150 (contains a shorter selection of relevant passages from Parts II&V of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*).
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<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4583>  
<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/humedia.pdf>

### **Russell and Copleston's BBC Debate**

- The full transcript, and an audio recording of Russell's and Copleston's 1948 BBC debate can be found at <http://www.philvaz.com/apologetics/p20.htm> The section relating to the Moral Argument is labeled 'The Moral Argument'.

### **Pascal's Wager**

- Pascal, B. 1958, *Pascal's Pensees*, Dutton, New York. And online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/18269-h/18269-h.htm>

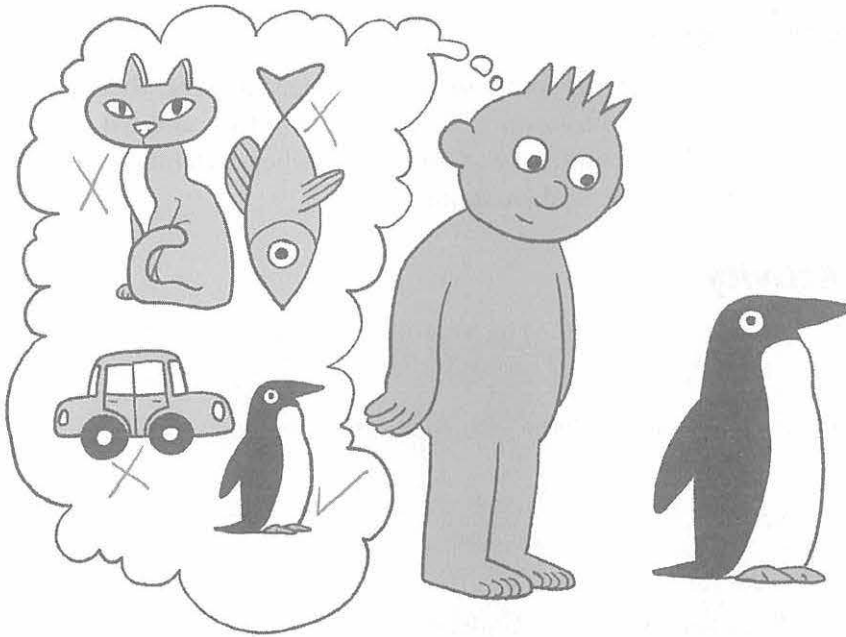
## **SECONDARY RESOURCES**

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- Dawkins, R. 1987, *The Blind Watchmaker*, Norton, New York.
- Eshleman, A. (ed) 2008, *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: East Meets West*, Blackwell, Massachusetts.
- Manson, N. 2003, *God and Design: The Teleological Argument and Modern Science*, Routledge, London.

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## CHAPTER 4

# Epistemology



Derived from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning knowledge, Epistemology is often referred to as the Theory of Knowledge. You are asking epistemological questions whenever you wonder: ‘how do I know?’ or ‘how can I be sure?’ or ‘what can I know?’. Whatever topic you investigate, in any branch of philosophy, your path can always lead back to these questions. Epistemological considerations are fundamental to all philosophical inquiry and to all the Themes of this book.

In this Chapter, you will investigate the ways we can be said to know things, and the level of certainty these sources give us. You will consider the differences between knowing through reason and knowing through the senses. You may find yourself concluding that it is difficult to be sure that we can ever know much at all. After exploring different theories of the truth, you will apply your epistemological studies to contemporary settings, including an examination of scientific knowledge. Lastly, we will raise questions about the objectivity of truth and explore whether what we know is relative to our gender or cultural background.



## THEME 1

# On Knowledge

## What is 'Knowledge'?

A reasonable starting point for this Theme would seem to be a definition of what 'knowledge' is. However, as with so many terms in philosophy, this has been hotly contested through the centuries. How is it similar to and different from notions such as belief, certainty and truth? And what should count as justification for any of these things?

### Introductory Activity

#### DO

Create a **mind map** which includes all the following terms. Explain your map to the class.

Knowledge	Belief	Certainty
Truth	Evidence	Opinion
Justification	Explanation	Understanding
Objectivity	Subjectivity	



### Definitions of Knowledge

The term knowledge doesn't have just one meaning and philosophers have traditionally divided knowledge into different types.



## DO

Group the following types of knowledge:

- Knowing how to speak Latvian
- Knowing Robert Theofilopoulos
- Knowing how to make a pavlova
- Knowing that boron is the fifth element on the Periodic Table
- Knowing the city of Beijing
- Knowing the taste of garlic
- Knowing that David Hume was a Scottish philosopher
- Knowing how to repair a bicycle
- Knowing that monotremes are mammals which lay eggs
- Knowing the music of ABBA

You may have decided, along with many thinkers, that there are three broad categories of knowledge represented above: practical knowledge ('knowing how'), knowledge by acquaintance ('knowing of') and factual knowledge ('knowing that').

**Practical knowledge** is knowledge of how to do something – speaking a language, making a dessert, fixing a bicycle. This knowledge involves knowing how to perform some task but may not involve detailed understanding of the actions involved in the task. For example, you may know how to ride a bike but giving detailed instructions to someone on how to do this might prove challenging. You know how to speak English, but if you learnt it at a very young age you may struggle to explain its intricacies to a non-native speaker. This suggests that practical knowledge may be independent of our ability to explain it or be conscious of exactly what we know.

**Knowledge by acquaintance** is knowing a person, place or thing because we have encountered them or it. We may know Beijing because we've been there, we may know Robert because we've met him a few times, and we may know the taste of garlic because we've tasted it often enough to be familiar with its qualities. Again, we may struggle to articulate precisely what it is that we know in these cases. We can 'know' Robert while actually knowing very few facts about him, we may find it hard to describe garlic's distinctive flavour, and we may recognise an ABBA song if we hear one but not know any of their songs' titles or lyrics.

**Factual knowledge** is knowing that something is the case: that Hume was a philosopher, that monotremes lay eggs and that boron is a chemical element, fifth on the Periodic Table. Unlike the other two categories of knowledge, we can express this factual knowledge as a statement in language. It is easy to create a **proposition** – for example, 'Hume was a philosopher', 'Monotremes lay eggs', 'Boron is the fifth chemical element' – from this kind of knowledge.

For this reason, factual knowledge is also known as **propositional knowledge**. A proposition is a statement that asserts something – which may be true or false – about the world. Unlike practical knowledge or knowledge by acquaintance, factual knowledge involves holding a **belief**. A **belief** is a thought that represents the world in a particular way, claiming that something is the case. This may be true or false. This is why philosophers have traditionally been more interested in factual knowledge than in the other two types – because it involves beliefs that can be expressed as propositions and which may be either true or false. Therefore our next section will consider the nature of factual knowledge.

## FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE

A **fact** is something that actually *is* the case about the world. A fact cannot be true or false, it just *is*. However, whether objective facts can actually exist has been called into question by some of our studies in the last Chapter. Since Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) and even back to Plato (Famous Philosopher File pp.93-94), philosophers have debated the issue of whether humans are actually equipped to possess objective knowledge of an external world ‘out there’.

But putting aside the realism/anti-realism debate (see Chapter 3, Theme 1, p.112), what does it mean for something to be **true**? We will be exploring this question in later sections, but one popular suggestion is that in cases of truth, a belief, the proposition about it and the circumstances observed in the world all match up. For example, when Herbert has a belief that ‘My phone is in my pocket’ and his phone actually *is* in his pocket, Herbert’s belief and the proposition that expresses it are factual and true.

A shorthand has been developed for considering propositional knowledge more easily: ‘S knows that P.’ Here ‘S’ stands for the subject – the person who knows (for example, Herbert) – and ‘P’ is the proposition (for example, that his phone is in his pocket). Philosophers have then asked, what are the *conditions* that must be satisfied in order to for us to claim that ‘S knows that P’ (Herbert knows that his phone is in his pocket)?

### DO

1. What would you suggest are the *conditions that must be satisfied* for a belief to be true (i.e. for a proposition to express factual knowledge)?
2. Write a list of five things that you *know* and five things that you *believe*.
3. What is the case when you *know* something compared with just *believing* it?
4. How would you distinguish between *knowledge* and *belief*?





## DO

For each of the following statements, decide whether you:

- know it
  - don't know it
  - believe it
  - don't believe it
- a. *Other people have minds too.*
  - b. *Science tells us the facts about the universe.*
  - c. *Humans have walked on the moon.*
  - d. *Numbers exist.*
  - e. *The Prime Minister of Australia is a man.*
  - f. *It's better to get painful things over and done with.*
  - g. *Superman and Clark Kent are the same man.*
  - h. *God is good.*
  - i. *Alien life forms exist.*
  - j. *You have two feet.*
  - k. *The Earth is round.*
  - l. *A tossed coin will show heads as often as tails.*
  - m.  $2 + 3 = 5$
  - n. *You are not dreaming at the moment.*
  - o. *It is very hot in central Australia.*
  - p. *It is better to be kind than to inflict suffering.*
  - q. *Dogs are hairy.*
  - r. *Humans evolved from apes many thousands of years ago.*
  - s. *If you drop this book it will fall downwards.*
  - t. *Mozart was a skilled composer.*
1. What **justification** do you have for each of your responses above?
  2. Do your justifications fall into different categories? See if you can group them.
  3. How strong or weak are your justifications? Give them a rating out of 5 where 5 is very strong and 1 is very weak.
  4. How did you distinguish the things you 'know' from those you 'believe'?
  5. On this basis, can you propose a definition of 'knowledge'?



## THINK

1. Do we have to believe what we know?
2. Is there a difference between opinion and belief?
3. Must all knowledge be true?
4. Can we ever know anything with absolute certainty?

## PLATO'S TRIPARTITE DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE

In Plato's dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, the figure of Socrates (Famous Philosopher File p.7) has a discussion with an interlocutor, Theaetetus, about the nature of knowledge.

'Shall I venture to say what the nature of knowing is?' says Socrates.

Theaetetus offers some examples of knowledge, such as the knowledge we have in geometry and astronomy.

'But the question you were asked, Theaetetus, was not, what are the objects of knowledge, nor yet now many sorts of knowledge there are...but to find out what the thing itself – knowledge – is,' objects Socrates.

'...True belief is knowledge,' responds Theaetetus. 'Surely there can at least be no mistake in believing what is true.'<sup>24</sup>

This is the first definition of knowledge considered in the dialogue: the 'True Belief' theory. We can represent it thus:

### The True Belief Theory:

S (the subject) knows that p (some proposition) if and only if

(i) S believes that p; and

(ii) p is true.

## THINK

What is your view of 'true belief' as a definition of knowledge?

Can you think of any examples which show it to be deficient?



Socrates' response to the suggestion that knowledge is 'true belief' is to offer the counter-example of orators and lawyers. These men, Socrates argues, use their skills to persuade others of their views. Sometimes juries are convinced by them, and may even make a correct conviction. But to make a correct conviction on the basis of a lawyer's persuasion is not *knowledge*, says, Socrates, in

24 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3A1999.01.0172%3DTheaet>  
(accessed 18th June, 2013)

the way that an eyewitness could have *knowledge*. Therefore, argues Socrates, ‘true belief’ cannot be a satisfactory definition of knowledge. A belief that is true just because of luck cannot count as knowledge.

So Socrates makes another suggestion, that if we add *reasoning* or *justification* to a belief which is true, then we can be said to have knowledge:

*When therefore a man acquires without reasoning the true opinion about anything, his mind has the truth about it, but has no knowledge; for he who cannot give and receive a rational explanation of a thing is without knowledge of it; but when he has acquired also a rational explanation he may possibly have become all that I have said and may now be perfect in knowledge. [202c]<sup>25</sup>*

This is Plato’s famous statement (via Socrates) of the idea that knowledge has *three parts*: it is **belief** which is **true** as well as **justified**. Hence this view is referred to as a **tripartite** theory.

In more modern terms, we say that the tripartite theory aims to identify the **necessary and sufficient conditions** for knowledge, meaning what is required to be the case for something to count as knowledge (see box, p.260).

Socrates and Theaetetus then proceed to try and find problems with the tripartite theory. They run into a ditch: if a justification is really just a kind of ‘knowledge’, then has a circular definition been formed (that is, that knowledge is true belief plus knowledge), offering no more promise than the ‘true belief’ theory? Clearly the challenge ahead is for Socrates to find a satisfactory account of justification.

Despite Socrates’ lack of conviction at this stage of the *Theaetetus*, other Platonic dialogues such as the *Meno* assume the correctness of the tripartite definition, and it enjoyed acceptance among philosophers for thousands of years. However, these days most philosophers acknowledge weaknesses of the theory, as we will soon discuss.



### **TEXT STUDY: Plato, *Theaetetus* 200d-202c**

*[see Useful Resources]*

1. Outline in standard form Socrates’ argument that true belief cannot be a sufficient definition of knowledge.
2. Can you think of any other examples Socrates could have used against ‘true belief’ as a definition of knowledge?
3. Socrates finally arrives at his tripartite theory, adding ‘rational account’ or ‘justification’ to the elements of ‘true belief’. Does this theory overcome the counter-examples Socrates presented in objection to the ‘true belief’ theory? Does it overcome any counter-examples suggested by you in (2) above?

## NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS

When exploring complex questions of definition, a strategy philosophers sometimes use is to try to set out the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for something to be the case.

**Sufficient conditions** are what is *enough* for something to be the case.

**Necessary conditions** are what is *required* for something to be the case.

Consider the following examples to clarify your understanding of these important philosophical concepts.

Example 1: Being over 18 years of age is a *necessary condition* for being eligible to vote in federal elections in Australia. However, this is not a *sufficient condition* because a number of other conditions must be satisfied to produce eligibility: including that someone be an Australian citizen, that they are of 'sound mind', that they have not been convicted of treason or treachery, that they are not serving a prison sentence of three years or more, and that they have enrolled to vote.

Example 2: Being divisible by six is a *sufficient condition* for something to be an even number. However, this is not a *necessary condition* because there are even numbers that are not divisible by six. Being divisible by two is a *necessary condition* for something to be an even number .

Example 3: We often describe conditions as **individually necessary** and **jointly sufficient**. This applies to cases where *each* criterion is necessary for something to be the case, and when *all* of those criteria are collected, then that thing can be the case. For example, the necessary conditions for a figure being a square are that it has four sides, that each side is straight, that it is a closed figure, that it lies in a plane, that the sides are of equal length, that the interior angles are equal and that all four sides are joined at their ends. By itself, none of these conditions is sufficient for something to be a square, but each is *individually necessary*. When combined together we say these conditions are *jointly sufficient*.

### Try the following yourself.

What might be the necessary and sufficient conditions for someone to be:

- A bachelor?
- A mother?
- Prime Minister of this country?
- A licensed driver in your region?
- A successful student?

## KNOWLEDGE AS 'JUSTIFIED, TRUE BELIEF'

Expressed formulaically, the tripartite theory of knowledge states that:

*S (the subject) knows that P (some proposition) if and only if:*

1. *S believes that P.*
2. *P is true.*
3. *S is justified in believing that P.*

This theory proposes that these three conditions are **individually necessary and jointly sufficient** for saying that 'S knows that P'. This means that according to the theory, you must have each one to have knowledge and if you have all three together, you definitely have knowledge.



### DO

1. Read the cases given below. Working in pairs, decide in each case whether the proposition in question can be termed *knowledge* by asking, (a) does the person *believe* the proposition?, (b) is the proposition *true*? and (c) is the person *justified* in believing the proposition?
  - CASE A: Saleem thinks that dolphins are fish and not mammals because that's what his teacher said.
  - CASE B: Jess thinks the temperature will reach a maximum of 20 degrees in her city this Saturday because that's what the TV weather report said. And it turns out to be right.
  - CASE C: Having researched the topic extensively through a range of internet sites and watched all movies ever created in relation to the issue, Andrew is convinced that alien life forms exist.
  - CASE D: Abdul is convinced that his wife will give birth to a baby boy because he had a powerful dream where this was the case. And it turns out to be true!
  - CASE E: A young Philosophy student learns from this textbook that Rene Descartes was a philosopher best known for his *Meditations*.
  - CASE F: Ruby figures that from the way her Philosophy teacher constantly talks about Descartes that he must be a very famous and important philosopher.
  - CASE G: Unbeknownst to anyone in this country, when she was a young woman in Poland, Mrs Lipski posed for some nude calendar photographs. Now well in her forties and a highly regarded mathematics teacher, Mrs Lipski has just returned some test results to her class. Simon has received a poor grade. With no grounds other than his anger about his poor grade, Simon spreads the rumour around the school that Mrs Lipski is a former nude calendar model. All the students believe the rumour.



2. Having analysed each of these cases according to the tripartite theory of knowledge, what is your view of the theory? Is it an effective theory? What problems does it run into?
3. 'You need to have each one to have knowledge and if you have all three together, you definitely have knowledge, so the theory goes.' From your consideration of the cases above, do you agree that these conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for something to be regarded as knowledge?

## THINK

Could you have a justified, true belief but still not have knowledge?



## THE GETTIER PROBLEM

The main arguments about the tripartite theory of knowledge have centred not on whether the three conditions are necessary but on whether they are sufficient. In other words, is it possible that a belief could be true and justified, yet not qualify as knowledge?

Most philosophers had tended to accept Plato's tripartite definition of knowledge as a pretty good one. Then, when American philosopher Edmund Gettier (1927- ) published a much-discussed article titled, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' in 1963, it was time to reconsider the orthodoxy.

Gettier's article is very short and uses two cases to make its point. Its contention is that a subject may be justified in believing a true proposition but still not have *knowledge* of that proposition. This might come about because the subject believes the proposition by accident rather than because of the justifications she has for it. While Gettier does not dispute that belief, truth and justification are all necessary for knowledge, he does challenge whether they are jointly sufficient.

The first of Gettier's examples is as follows. Smith and Jones both apply for a job. Smith is told by the company's president that he is the unsuccessful candidate and it is Jones who will get the job. Smith also knows (let's say he had observed this in the cafeteria before the interviews) that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. So Smith believes that Jones will get the job and that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. Therefore, Smith reasons that the successful candidate has 10 coins in his pocket.

But suppose that the president changes his mind and gives the job to Smith after all. And suppose that Smith has not counted his coins to have any idea of how many he has, but it just so happens that there are 10 coins in his pocket. The question now is, does Smith *know* that the successful candidate has 10 coins in his pocket?

Smith's belief in the proposition that the successful candidate has 10 coins in his pocket is true. It is also justified, because Smith used valid reasoning from two propositions that he had good evidence to believe. But it seems clear that nonetheless, Smith does not actually 'know' that the successful candidate has 10 coins in his pocket in the sense that we would want to count as knowledge. He only 'knows' by some sort of luck, accident or coincidence, and that surely cannot count as knowledge.

Philosophers have been trying ever since to defend or fix the tripartite theory. One response has been to object that the Gettier cases contain at least one false belief. So perhaps we need to add to the tripartite theory one more necessary condition: that the proposition is not derived from any false beliefs. Another response has argued that if there is any information in existence which would make the subject give up his belief, then the proposition cannot be called knowledge. A third view has said that Plato's three conditions for knowledge are correct, it is just that the belief held is false rather than true.

## THINK

Are you convinced by these defences of Plato's tripartite theory? Why or why not? See if they work in the cases below.



## DISCUSS

Consider each of the following cases.

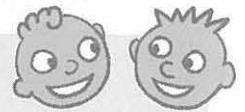
1. Discuss whether *knowledge* is occurring. Why or why not?
2. Does this case pose a challenge to the tripartite theory? If so, can you propose any way in which the theory might be successfully adapted to accommodate this case?

**CASE 1** *A farmer has just cleared his sheep from the top paddock. But back at the farmhouse, he notices there is a white, fluffy animal standing near the tree in the top paddock. He takes a good look and concludes that one of his sheep is still in the paddock. His wife comes to look, too, and agrees that strangely enough, there is still a sheep in the paddock. It turns out that this is not a sheep at all, but a stray dog that has wandered into the paddock. However, there is actually a sheep behind the tree, out of the farmer's sight.*

Does the farmer *know* there is a sheep in his top paddock?

**CASE 2** *Sarah is behaving suspiciously, thinks Ben, her boyfriend. She has been sending text messages and then hastily deleting them or hiding them from him. She also lied about where she had been last Saturday; she said she'd spent the afternoon at home as she had lots of study to do, but a friend of Ben's saw Sarah taking a train into the city. Ben sadly forms the belief that Sarah is cheating on him. It turns out that those text messages and the secret trip to the city were part of Sarah's preparations to throw a surprise 18th birthday party for Ben. However, it also turns out that Sarah has been secretly kissing the boy she sits next to in Accounting class.*

Does Ben *know* that Sarah is cheating on him?



## TEXT STUDY: Edmund Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' (1963)



[see Useful Resources]

1. Read Gettier's paper.
2. Outline Gettier's second example to a partner and explain why Gettier thinks it does not demonstrate knowledge.

### WRITE



1. Write your own definition of a Gettier case. Explain how each element of justification, truth and belief are included and why your belief cannot be counted as knowledge, according to Gettier.
2. Make up your own Gettier case and share it with a classmate.
3. Do you think justified, true belief should be considered knowledge?

## What About Certainty?

Some philosophers have argued that there is a fourth necessary element to knowledge: **certainty**. On this view, it is not sufficient to hold a justified belief that happens to be true; one also has to possess a strong *conviction* that the belief is true. This means that I can't really be said to know something unless I am completely confident in the truth of that knowledge. I can't 'fluke' knowledge.

### DO



Complete the following multiple choice test:

1. When it rewrote its constitution in 2011, which country used Facebook to facilitate community involvement?  
(a) Finland      (b) Iceland      (c) Australia      (d) Singapore
2. Scott Morrison replaced Malcolm Turnbull as Prime Minister of Australia in the year  
(a) 1925      (b) 2016      (c) 2018      (d) 1788
3.  $2 + 3 =$   
(a) 6      (b) -5      (c) 5      (d) 0

4.  $4 - 8 + 2 \times 2 =$

- (a) 0                      (b) -4                      (c) 4                      (d) 2

5. Which famous philosopher died in Sweden in 1650?

- (a) Plato                      (b) Wittgenstein                      (c) Locke                      (d) Descartes

ANSWERS appear at the bottom of the next page.



## DISCUSS

1. How many of the answers did you guess?
2. How many did you know with certainty?
3. Did you score any 'fluke' correct answers?
4. Do scores in multiple choice tests accurately reflect candidates' *knowledge*? Why or why not?
5. Find someone in your class whose score on this test was the same as yours. Talk to them about their responses. Do you each 'know' as much as each other?

It seems that certainty may have something to contribute to the definition of knowledge. But it is also a problematic notion. There may be subjective differences between the way people experience certainty. One person may display habitual confidence in the accuracy of their views, while another may be more prone to self-doubt. We have all come across people who are full of dogmatic certainty but have little justification for their beliefs. Contrastingly, a woman who broke records on a recent television quiz show seemed hesitant and uncertain with every answer she gave, yet her knowledge was extraordinarily accurate.

## OBJECTIVE VERSUS SUBJECTIVE CERTAINTY

When doing the quiz activity above, you may have experienced an interesting difference between questions 3 and 4. It is unlikely any person in your class experienced doubt about question 3 (unless perhaps wondering if it is a 'trick' question!). But question 4 challenges us to remember the mathematical rules regarding 'order of operations,' and to be confident in our decision to do the multiplication part first. If you experienced doubts about the answer to question 4, it was probably because you doubted your ability to correctly apply mathematical rules, not because you doubted your basic arithmetic.

Our confidence in the 'fact' that  $2 + 3 = 5$  may be thought of as 'objective certainty.' There seems no need for any further justification of our knowledge of this answer. It would appear to be **incorrigible**, or beyond any doubt.

Rene Descartes (Famous Philosopher File p.102) took a particular interest in this kind of certainty. Indeed, he sought to establish a series of absolute, **indubitable** certainties, which could then become the basis of his knowledge of all other things.

## RENE DESCARTES: CERTAINTY AS A SUFFICIENT CONDITION

Seventeenth century philosopher Rene Descartes sought to establish a firm basis for knowledge in the sciences. Before the sixteenth century, science – as we now call it – had not advanced much since ancient thinkers such as Aristotle. The Church held huge power and taught that the view of the universe we find written about in the Bible was the final truth. But Descartes was born into revolutionary times; thinkers such as Galileo had been exploring the world using methodologies, and reaching conclusions, independent of religious teaching.

Descartes developed a novel method for discovering certainty. He took each of his most fundamental beliefs about his existence, and interrogated them one by one. He played a kind of ‘devil’s advocate’ or **sceptic** about each of his beliefs, racking his brains to deliberately try to cast doubt even on basic ‘truths’ such as  $2 + 3 = 5$ .

Why did Descartes try so hard to find a way to make  $2 + 3 = 5$  possibly wrong? Because he thought that if he could find any proposition which lay *beyond* the powers of his scepticism, and which *could not* be doubted, then this proposition would have to be treated as a foundational piece of knowledge. Thus, Descartes’ so-called Method of Radical Doubt considered certainty a sufficient condition for knowledge.

You can find more details about Descartes’ *Meditations* on pages 119 and 289.

ANSWERS to activity from previous page: 1(b) 2(c) 3(c) 4(a) 5(d)



## TEXT STUDY: Rene Descartes, *Meditations 1 and 2* [up to and including the Cogito] (1647)

[see Useful Resources]

READ all of the First Meditation, plus the Second Meditation up to ‘...I must finally conclude that the proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.’

1. Explain how Descartes manages to call into doubt the following candidates for fundamental knowledge:
  - a. ‘I can trust what I see, hear, smell, taste and touch.’
  - b. ‘I am awake, sitting by the fire now.’
  - c. ‘My physical surroundings and my body are real.’
  - d. ‘ $2 + 3 = 5$ ’
2. Does Descartes believe a malicious demon is trying to make him believe falsehoods? What is the purpose of the malicious demon in Descartes’ method of doubt?
- 3
  - a. What is the proposition that Descartes finally decides he cannot find a way to doubt?
  - b. Can you (or other members of your class) figure out any ways to doubt this proposition?
4. Do you think certainty of this kind can be a sufficient condition for knowledge? Why or why not?

## Justifications

It seems that Descartes’ kind of certainty is a very strong justification for a belief, while other, less rigorous forms of certainty are not as reliable. In this section we will consider three main theories of justification proposed by philosophers.

Before reading on, though, you should think about what *you* would consider solid justification for a belief.

### THINK

What would you propose as criteria for being *justified* in a belief that something is the case? Use your reflections on the Gettier problems above to help you arrive at an answer. Discuss your ideas with the class.



## FOUNDATIONALISM

What you may have already found when considering issues of justification is that they can lead to infinitely regressive chains of further questions. Say, for example, you suggest that a good justification for believing something is to have seen it with your own eyes. Then your annoying philosophical friend is sure to say to you, 'But how do you know that you were not mistaken in what you thought you saw?' And you might reply that you have recently had your eyes tested and have 20/20 vision. And your friend will challenge, 'Yes but how do you know that you can trust that test? And what does 20/20 vision mean, anyway? To what degree is your sense data reflective of the external world? Isn't your belief that you saw something just a potentially mistaken interpretation of sense data?'

It is in the face of these endless questions that philosophers have sought some kind of bedrock of knowledge. Surely there must be some **foundational beliefs** which need no further justification beyond themselves. These will then be the basic beliefs on which all others are built, or in terms of which all other beliefs are justified.

Any theory of justification that believes foundational beliefs exist is a kind of **foundationalism**. In our next Theme you will explore the two main foundationalist theories: **rationalism** (the view that all our most basic beliefs can be justified by reason, exemplified by Descartes) and **empiricism** (the view that all our most basic beliefs are justified by the senses, exemplified by John Locke). Largely in response to the scepticism of the seventeenth century (including Descartes' approach), rationalism and empiricism have been preoccupied with the question of achieving absolute certainty by discovering the solid foundations of knowledge.

However, as we shall see in the next Theme, empiricism faces many challenges, and there are limitations to the fundamental rational beliefs we hold, such as those about mathematics. Perhaps it is not possible to find justification for our beliefs in the form of basic, foundational truths.

### WRITE

1. Write a definition of foundationalism and provide your own example.
2. Identify at least one advantage and one disadvantage of foundationalism.



## COHERENTISM

You may be relieved that more recent philosophers have reminded us that in everyday life we do not expect or require such high standards of justification as the foundationalists insisted be met. We know all kinds of things which would not stand up to philosophical scepticism as extreme as Descartes'. Perhaps we need philosophical accounts of knowledge which do not have absolute certainty at their core and are more reflective of our normal lives.

**Coherentism** is a very different account of justification. It says there is no ultimate basic certainty and we must therefore allow the regress to continue indefinitely. Rather, what makes a belief justified is that it *coheres* – or fits in with – all the other beliefs we have. The better a belief fits in with the rest of our belief system the better justified it is. Therefore, a belief shouldn't contradict other beliefs that we hold, and it should also be supported and entailed by our other beliefs.

For example, let's say you are researching the theory of rationalism for a Philosophy essay and you find an article on the internet referring to a little-known German rationalist philosopher called Bosendorfer. The article describes the philosopher's belief that the world's fundamental truths can be known by the senses. You are puzzled. Your philosophy textbook and teacher have taught you that it is the empiricists who believe in the primacy of sense perception. Either they are wrong or this article is wrong. Because these new things you are reading about Bosendorfer do not *cohere* with your prior beliefs, you do not feel justified in believing them.



### WRITE

1. Write a definition of coherentism and provide your own example.
2. Identify at least one advantage and one disadvantage of coherentism.

## RELIABILISM

Foundationalism and coherentism believe we must be able to justify our beliefs by appealing to further beliefs that we hold. However, it is very hard to say what justification we have for many of our firmly held beliefs. Much of our knowledge is disjointed and does not link clearly to our other beliefs.

For example, many people will tell you that H<sub>2</sub>O refers to water. But how many people can explain that this means there are two hydrogen molecules bonded to one oxygen molecule? And how many people can take their explanation even further than this? Is their belief that H<sub>2</sub>O is water, justified? Similarly, many people will tell you that a tomato is a fruit, not a vegetable. But can they justify this belief?

It might be said that reliable authorities have said these things and that is good justification. But we probably can't actually remember where we first heard these things. Even so, these beliefs seem well justified and we will be reluctant to give them up. Of course, we could go to an encyclopedia to check these propositions, but the point is that we don't feel the need to do this and we regard them as part of our general knowledge. It is similar in the case of sense perceptions. We tend to trust our senses. Yet as we will see in the next Theme, we have very little idea about how sense perception works and how much it should be relied upon.

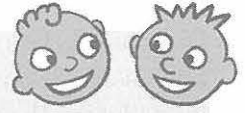
In other words, much of our knowledge is based on justifications to which we ourselves don't have conscious access. The **reliabilist** tells us that this is acceptable. The point is that we originally acquired our beliefs by some reliable method and they generally *work*. Reliable sources may include testimonies by other people, our own memories, sense perceptions and reasoning. We may use combinations of these methods.



### WRITE

1. Write a definition of reliabilism and provide your own example.
2. Identify at least one advantage and one disadvantage of reliabilism.





## DISCUSS

What does good justification consist in? Which is the better means of justification – foundationalism, coherentism or reliabilism?

## Theories of Truth

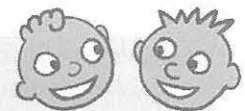
The last two sections have explored the possibilities of defining knowledge and justification. You may also have been wondering about the term ‘truth’ and what conditions should be satisfied for us to call something true. This section will consider three theories that have been developed on the nature of truth.

### CORRESPONDENCE THEORY (‘DOES THIS MATCH THE FACTS OF THE WORLD?’)

Earlier in this chapter we offered a definition of truth which seemed to work well enough for the cases we were then dealing with. The **correspondence theory of truth** simply demands that our proposition matches or corresponds with an observable fact in the real world. So in our example above, when Herbert forms the proposition that his phone is in his pocket, we simply check inside Herbert’s pocket to confirm that there is indeed a phone there and that the phone is his. If we tick these boxes, then the proposition is true.

We use this theory all the time. Roses are red if and only if roses are red. Violets are blue if and only if violets are blue. The cat is on the mat if and only if we find him there. This theory may seem obvious and trivial to you, but it was a powerful force behind the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century that resulted in our modern way of looking at the world.

However, if we call the accuracy of our sense perceptions into doubt (as we will do in the next Theme), you may become worried about some aspects of the Correspondence Theory.



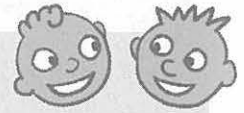
## DISCUSS

1. Think of some everyday examples of when you use the correspondence theory of truth.
2. What are some potential problems that you can identify with the correspondence theory of truth?
3. Is it possible for two people using the correspondence theory to reach different conclusions?
4. What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of this truth theory?

## COHERENCE THEORY ('DOES THIS FIT WITH WHAT I ALREADY KNOW?')

Imagine that Herbert always keeps his phone in his pocket by strong force of habit. He certainly felt it there not long ago. Imagine also that his phone does not appear to be in any other likely place: it's not in his bag, nor on his desk, nor beside his bed, nor connected to its charger. Wouldn't it seem reasonable for him to assume that the phone is in his pocket, given all these other circumstances? Doesn't it seem likely that his proposition, 'My phone is in my pocket' is true, given all the other relevant facts that Herbert is certain of?

We use this theory often, assessing the plausibility of a claim based on the facts we already know. Whereas the correspondence theory demands that we physically check to see if an observation of the world matches our proposition, with the coherence theory we are more likely to think and reason. In a criminal trial, for example, to determine whether or not Suspect X committed the murder, only a direct witness to the killing would be able to use the correspondence theory of truth. The best a jury member can do is to weigh up all the bits and pieces of evidence to assemble a coherent picture, from which to pronounce what they consider the truth.

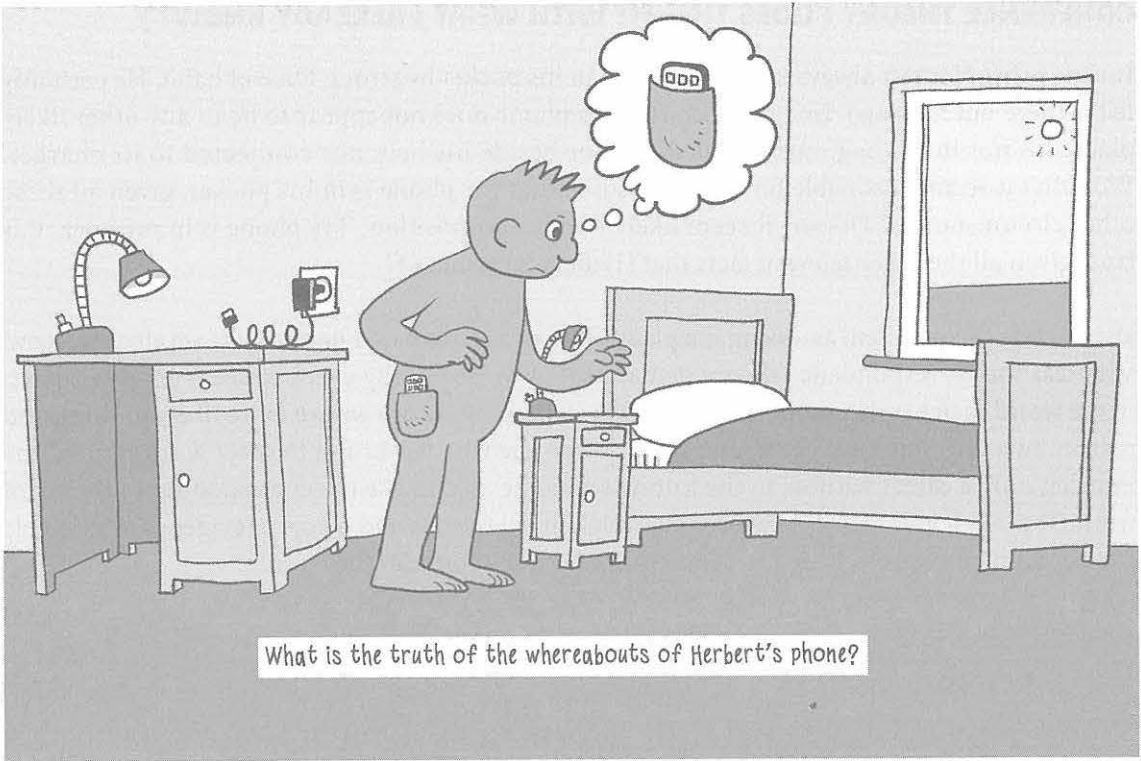


### DISCUSS

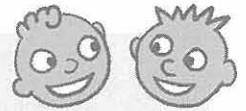
1. Think of some everyday examples of when you use the coherence theory of truth.
2. What are some problems that might arise when using a set of beliefs already held to judge a new proposition?
3. Could two people using the coherence theory reach different conclusions?
4. What would you sum up as the strengths and weaknesses of this truth theory?

## PRAGMATIC THEORY ('DOES IT WORK? IS IT USEFUL?')

Herbert does a quick scan of his room to see if his phone is there. When he doesn't see it, rather than worry he has lost the phone, he just assumes it is in his pocket and goes to catch his bus. For now, at least, it suits him to believe in the truth of the proposition, 'My phone is in my pocket.' The pragmatic theory gives us a tentative rather than a definite truth. It gives us a practical solution to work with. If your car is running well, then its engine must be in good order. If the bridge does not fall down, then the principles on which it was built must be sound. If it makes your life feel more meaningful and worthwhile to believe God exists, then God exists.

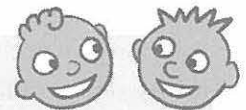


What is the truth of the whereabouts of Herbert's phone?



### DISCUSS

1. What examples can you think of, of when you use the pragmatic theory of truth?
2. What are some problems that might arise when individuals or a whole society accept what works for them, and call it the truth? Use examples to consider this.
3. Could two people using the pragmatic theory reach different conclusions?
4. What would you sum up as the strengths and weaknesses of this truth theory?



### DISCUSS

Which theory of truth would you apply to the following propositions, and in each case what degree of certainty would you achieve?

1. Many species of reef fish abound in the Red Sea.
2. Weathering and erosion always happen in a downhill direction.
3. People with money must be happy.
4. The Earth is round.
5. Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*.

6. Lightning happens when the sky gets angry.
7. Pigs are intelligent creatures.
8. All grandparents have been parents.
9. You have a good sense of humour.
10. Santa Claus is real.
11. My parents care for me.
12. There is life after death.
13. Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in August, 1914.
14. It is wrong to torture small children.
15. Metals expand when heated.
16. Flies have wings.

## ***Contemporary Applications of Epistemology***

### **RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: KNOWLEDGE AND THE INTERNET**

The internet has changed the way in which people acquire knowledge and justify their beliefs. But are these changes good or bad? Do we know more and do we know differently as a result of the internet? Some philosophers have their doubts. Indeed a new area of applied philosophy, Internet Epistemology, has recently come into being. It is time for you to conduct your own epistemological investigation.

Your task is to investigate the electronic media as a source of knowledge. You may choose to examine a specific site such as Wikipedia, Google (or other search engines), Facebook, Twitter, a blog or your school's website.

The key questions you are investigating are:

1. How reliable is this website as a source of knowledge, as opposed to belief?
2. To what extent would you be justified in believing the content of this website? Why?
3. Does this website contain facts? How easy is it to distinguish facts from other content on the site? How would you describe or classify the non-factual content?
4. How helpful are foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism in seeking justification for believing the content of this website?
5. How helpful are the correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth in deciding the truth content of this website?

6. Can you determine the identities of the site's authors, their credentials and any organisations they are associated with? Does this affect your trust in the site as a source of knowledge?
7. How up to date is the website? How does it affect its reliability as a source of knowledge?
8. What are the sources of the website's information? Are there links or references to further authorities, databases or experts?
9. Is there any advertising on the website? How is the site funded? Does this affect the page's reliability as a source of knowledge?
10. How can you know what to trust on the internet?

Your teacher will specify how you should present your findings to these questions – whether as a series of short answers, a written analysis, an essay or an oral/multimedia presentation.

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## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Reflect on the differences between the statements 'I am certain' and 'It is certain.'
2. How is knowledge to be distinguished from belief?
3. Is it possible to attain truth?
4. Does finding truth matter?
5. Are justification, truth and belief all necessary conditions of knowledge?
6. Might certainty be a sufficient condition of knowledge?
7. If a belief makes a person feel better, should they regard that belief as true?
8. You are given a lot of information in your classes at school. How do you trust that it is true?
9. Is there anything we know without using some method to know it?
10. Explore another epistemological question which has sparked your interest during this Theme.

### **Assessment Task Two: Essay**

TOPIC: Is it possible for us to have knowledge of something, rather than just belief? Assess the strengths and weaknesses of at least one theory studied in this Theme in your discussion of this question.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### ***Assessment Task Three: Test – Short Answers***

Learn the definitions of all the terms presented in this Theme in preparation for a short-answer test. Be prepared to provide examples of all terms.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Oral/Multimedia Presentation***

The investigation of Relevant Contemporary Debate: Knowledge and the Internet (see pp.273-274) may be presented to the class.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Dialogue***

Compose and present a dialogue between:

- A foundationalist, a coherentist and a reliabilist

OR

- Advocates of the correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth.

### ***Assessment Task Six: Written Analysis***

Answer a series of medium-answer questions relating to one of the primary texts you have studied in this Theme.

## THEME 2

# On the possibility of *a priori* knowledge

Do you know anything? This may seem a silly question. You seem to spend your life gathering knowledge of more and more things, from your own name, to knowledge of basic survival, to how to get to school, to the people around you, to complex ideas explored in your academic subjects.

But how do you know these things? And to what extent can you trust this knowledge? Are some sources of knowledge more reliable than others?

These questions have fascinated philosophers through the ages. Some philosophers have argued that reason is the best path to certainty, while others have maintained that there is no more certain knowledge than that obtained through experience. Through this Theme you will be challenged to reach your own conclusions on these and many other questions.

### ***Introductory Activity***



#### **DO**

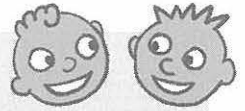
#### **HOW DO WE KNOW THESE THINGS?**

Working in a pair, draw a mind map to show similarities and differences in *how you know* the following things:

- How to play the piano
- I am in this room
- We should be kind to children
- The other classrooms exist
- Cruelty to innocent victims is wrong
- I exist
- All the people in this room are alive
- Last week I slept for some of the time
- If I go outside I will still exist

- Winter is cooler than summer
- I have thoughts
- My classmates have thoughts
- The sun will rise tomorrow
- Grazing your knee hurts
- Lemons taste sour
- A bachelor is an unmarried man
- A grandmother must have had children
- The King is a man
- $3 + 2 = 5$
- December comes after November
- The twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre were destroyed on September 11, 2001
- How to speak English
- Our world began with the Big Bang
- It takes around 10 hours to drive from Sydney to Melbourne
- London exists
- Eating vegetables is good for your body
- Parallel lines will never meet
- All points on a circle's circumference are equidistant from its centre
- If I drop this book it will fall to the ground
- I remember some things about when I was 10 years old
- I was born in a particular time and place





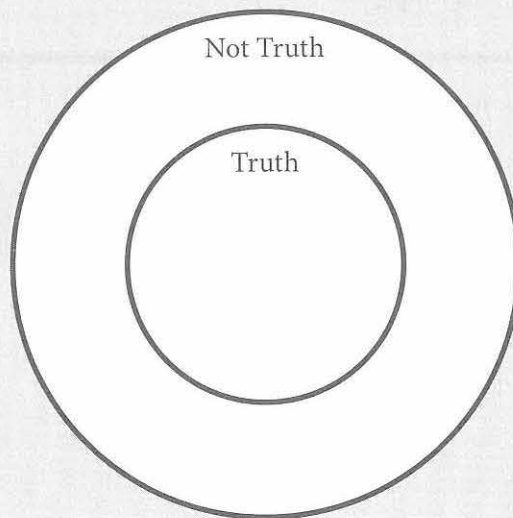
## DISCUSS

1. What categories of knowing did you decide on in order to group the listed cases?
2. Can you produce a class consensus on the categories of knowing which best represent how we know the listed cases?
3. Are any of the following categories useful for grouping the cases?
  - LOGIC
  - NECESSARY TRUTH
  - EXPERIENCE
  - BELIEF
  - SECOND-HAND KNOWLEDGE (education, testimony, hearsay, ...)
  - KNOWING HOW
  - SENSES
  - MEMORY



## DO

DRAW a target diagram like the one below on a poster-size piece of paper. Arrange the listed SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE on the diagram.

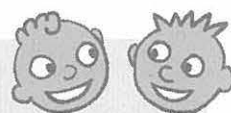


### Sources of Knowledge:

FACT	SCIENCE	EMOTIONS
BELIEF	UNDERSTANDING	OPINION
GOSSIP	INTERNET	TEXTBOOKS
PARENTS	TEACHERS	MEMORY
SENSES	FRIENDS	ART
MUSIC	LOGIC	MATHEMATICS
COMMON SENSE	MORALITY	EXPERIENCE
LANGUAGE	INTROSPECTION	INSTINCT
CULTURAL TRADITION	EXPERTS	RELIGION
REVELATION	INTUITION	NATURE

### DISCUSS

Share your poster with the class. Justify your placement of different sources of knowledge. Allow classmates to challenge any placements they disagree with.



## Two Kinds Of Truth

In comparing different items and sources of knowledge, you may have found that they fall broadly into two categories: firstly, things which are true as matters of logic, and secondly, things which are true as matters of experience.

### ***Necessary, A Priori and Analytic Truths***

Statements which we find to be true as matters of logic or reason include statements such as '3 + 2 = 5' and 'A bachelor is an unmarried man' and 'Parallel lines will never meet'. These are called **necessary truths** because they could not possibly be false. We cannot imagine even the possibility of these things being otherwise.

We say that such things are true *prior to* experience, or without us having to refer to any experience to know that they are thus. I do not have to add all the groups of three things plus two things I can find, to know that they must all add to five things. I do not need to interview all the bachelors I can assemble to work out that none of them are married. I do not need to spend my life following parallel lines just to be sure they never meet. The Latin term that philosophers use for these kinds of truths is *a priori*. This is not meant to imply that we are born knowing geometry, mathematics and the definitions of words such as 'bachelor' or that this is innate. Rather, once language and reasoning skills have been acquired, there are things we can be certain about *a priori* – that is, without having to experience them.

You may also hear philosophers referring to **analytic propositions**, a term suggested by German philosopher Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111). An analytic proposition is that which is true by definition. The meanings of the terms used in the proposition actually contain what is being proposed. Notice how this is the case for statements such as ‘Bachelors are unmarried’ or ‘Squares have four sides.’ These statements are actually tautologies – that is, they repeat their own meaning.

### DO

Shut your eyes. Concentrate really hard and imagine this: a triangle, which has five sides. Can you do it? What does this have to do with *a priori* or necessary truths?



## ***Empirical, A Posteriori, Contingent and Synthetic Truths***

Knowledge that relies on information from the senses, such as ‘Lemons taste sour’, and things you have learnt or had reported to you by others, are clearly in a different category from necessary truths.

Much of what you believe to be true about the world is derived from your own direct experience, via the senses. You have learnt that falling over can cause painful grazes and bruises so you avoid it. You may have seen world events such as bombings and armed conflicts unfolding on a television screen and this is why you believe them to be true. But there are many other facts about the world that you take others’ word for. You trust your doctor that a medicine will cure rather than harm you, without undertaking a detailed pharmaceutical investigation yourself. You probably believe it when experts say that vegetables are good for you, without carrying out an experiment to test the effects of vegetable deprivation. Nevertheless, these are all things that you know *after experience*, whether through your own direct experience or that of someone else. The Latin *a posteriori* is the term philosophers use to describe these truths. The term **empirical truth** is also commonly used.

A third term you should know is **contingent truth**. It is weird to imagine, but still possible, that you could one day bite into a lemon and instead of finding it sour, you could find it sweet. We would all like to imagine that in a kinder world, wars and bombings would not occur. Contingent truths are possible to imagine otherwise, whereas it is utterly mind-bending to try to imagine a necessary truth (for example, triangles have three sides) in a different way. There does not seem to be any *possible world* in which triangles could have four sides and squares could have three.

Kant introduced the term **synthetic proposition** to describe statements that require experience, rather than purely an analysis of the meanings of the statement’s words, to be defended as truth. So while it may be true by definition to say that bachelors are unmarried, it can only be with reference to experience that we can know whether statements such as ‘Bachelors are happy’ or ‘Bachelors are frustrated’ are true or false.

## THINK

1. Is gravity a necessary or a contingent truth?
2. What would you say are some advantages and disadvantages of empirical truths compared with necessary truths?



## DO

Write out a list of seven statements, aiming to include examples of each of: a priori, a posteriori, necessary, empirical, contingent, analytic and synthetic truths. Then give your list to a partner, and get them to identify an example of each kind of proposition. Discuss any disagreements you have.



## Rationalism And Empiricism

Some philosophers – **empiricists** – have argued that our knowledge of the world primarily comes from *experience*. Meanwhile **rationalists** have argued that *logic* is the basis of what we know to be true. The split between these two theories of knowledge – and the philosophers who have supported them – is one of the biggest divides in the history of philosophy.

RATIONALISM: the basis of all knowledge is the MIND

EMPIRICISM: the basis of all knowledge is the SENSES.

### Rationalism

According to rationalism, we can discover the most certain knowledge using reason alone. Plato and Descartes are probably the most famous rationalist philosophers in the Western tradition, and you will study Descartes' methods in detail later in this Theme.

For the rationalist, the way to achieve certainty is to discern some foundational truths that we cannot doubt (*a priori* knowledge) and then reason onwards from these. As long as (1) our starting claims are indubitable, and (2) our logic is valid, this process will lead us to truth and certainty.

So, for the rationalist, the best way to reach certain knowledge is by **deductive proofs**, since in a valid argument we are guaranteed that if the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true (see Chapter 2).

Perhaps, in the exercise above (pp.278-79), you ranked mathematics highly as a source of knowledge. If so, Plato would have agreed with you. He argued that mathematical systems are the best models for how knowledge should be discovered. Geometry, for example, proves all its theorems from the starting points of a few basic axioms.

However, a rationalist needs to be very sure of these basic truths from which he builds his chains of reasoning. If his first premises are even slightly unsound, the arguments that proceed from them, however valid, will not yield the truth.

## INNATE IDEAS

As we have said, rationalist inquiry begins with a few basic truths that are regarded as self-evident and indubitable. These include the fact of existence, the basic laws of logic itself, and all necessary truths. The rationalist's quest is to prove, starting with these basic premises, everything that can be known.

Rationalists claim that these basic truths must be **innate ideas** to the human mind: fixtures that are present in the mind as soon as it exists. Without these innate ideas, say the rationalists, we could not have any of our ordinary experiences because we wouldn't have the powers to process them. However, just because these ideas are innate does not mean that we are conscious of them all the time. Rather, they are called into action by our experiences. In other words, rationalists believe that some ideas must already exist in our minds in order for us to have any perceptions at all.

## SOCRATES, PLATO AND RATIONALISM

Socrates (Famous Philosopher File p.7), known as the father of Western Philosophy, would wander the streets of ancient Athens, challenging people's beliefs and the reasons behind them. He and his gifted student Plato (Famous Philosopher File pp.93-94) believed that philosophical reasoning was the key to unlocking the truths of the universe.

The **Socratic Method** of philosophical questioning, or **dialectic**, has been used ever since as a process for revealing inconsistencies in thoughts and arguments. Perhaps it is a feature of your philosophy classes, in ways suggested on pages 4-5.

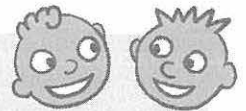
### THINK

From your own experiences of philosophical dialogue, how effective is it as a means of working out the truths of reality?



### DISCUSS

What are your responses to the rationalists' claim that the truth can be discovered through reasoning alone?



## DESCARTES' RATIONALISM

Rene Descartes (Famous Philosopher File p.102) is probably philosophy's best-known rationalist. His *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1647) is one of the most significant works in the history of Western philosophy. You may already have studied the First Meditation as part of your studies of Metaphysics or in the previous Epistemology Theme. We will here highlight Descartes' rationalist approach, and undertake a more detailed study in relation to scepticism later in this Theme.

Descartes' aim in the *Meditations* is to establish a firm foundation for knowledge. How does he arrive at the indubitable truths he seeks? Does he go out and explore the world and gather as much evidence as he can find? No, there is no such empiricism in Descartes' method. Instead, he describes himself sitting by his lounge room fire in his dressing gown, solving immense puzzles using a single tool: his own mind. This is why he may be considered the ultimate rationalist.



### TEXT STUDY: Rene Descartes, *Meditations 1 and 2* [up to and including the Cogito] (1647)

[see Useful Resources]

READ all of the First Meditation, plus the Second Meditation up to '*...I must finally conclude that the proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.*'

1. Describe how Descartes' method of finding knowledge is one of rationalism rather than empiricism.
2. Does Descartes' process show rationalism to be an effective means of discovering knowledge, in your view? Why or why not?

## Empiricism

Seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke (Famous Philosopher File p.104) claimed that our knowledge comes to us not so much from reason, but from our **experience**. This view, known as **empiricism**, would change the way subsequent thinkers would approach epistemological questions.

Empiricists argue that all our knowledge comes from sense perception, followed by 'inner perception', which is when the mind reflects upon, or 'perceives' its own processes. Locke famously claimed that the human mind starts like a piece of blank paper (a **blank slate** or '**tabula rasa**'). In other words, he argued that prior to sense experiences, the mind has no knowledge at all. According to Locke, it is only after perceiving the outside world that we have any ideas or knowledge whatsoever.

Note that empiricists do not deny that we can and should reason about our ideas. But they do deny the existence of innate ideas. For an empiricist, there is no such thing as an *a priori* truth. Consider *a priori* truths such as  $2+2=4$  or 'A triangle has three sides'. For the rationalist, these are innate ideas, elements of the mind that precede the possibility of perception. However, the empiricist argues that it is only by having perceptions first that we were able to discover these truths: we saw things in bundles of twos added together to make four things, and we had many experiences of triangles before we made generalisations about their necessary features.

### WRITE

1. Explain the philosophical position known as empiricism. How does it differ from rationalism?
2. What seem to you to be the strengths and weaknesses of rationalism and empiricism?



## JOHN LOCKE: ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

When John Locke wrote his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), he aimed to work out an explanation of how our knowledge is built up out of various kinds of sense experiences. Locke argues that there is no reason for us to believe that there are any innate ideas that we have prior to sense experience. Indeed, as idiots and children seem to lack *a priori* functions, such as logic or mathematics, it seems to Locke to be silly to claim that they possess these as a pre-condition of any knowledge at all.

In Book 1 of the *Essay*, Locke attacks rationalists such as Plato and Descartes, who believe in *a priori*, or innate, knowledge. The usual justification for the belief in innate knowledge is that there are certain principles with which all human beings universally agree. Locke argues, to the contrary, that there is no principle that every single human being accepts. Or at least, he argues, if there are any principles on which we all agree, this agreement could have come about on the basis of our experiences rather than our innate knowledge. Locke also argues that there cannot be meaningful principles in human minds of which we are unaware; we must have been taught them or experienced them for ourselves for them to operate. Locke also challenges the view, strongly held in his time, that God is an innate idea. He says that because not every single person believes in God, religious belief must be *a posteriori* rather than innate knowledge. Similarly, he says, for morality; because people have different moral ideas, this cannot be innate, *a priori* knowledge either.

However, there is still a problem: how much of the truth lies inside our minds and how much is outside it? Locke claims there are only two sources of knowledge: **sensation** (sense experiences) and **reflection** (the reflections of our mind upon our sense experiences). He goes on to outline that things possess 'qualities' which give rise to ideas of colour, smell, hardness, and so on. Some of the qualities – 'primary qualities' – really do exist in the objects themselves (for example, length and hardness) while 'secondary qualities' produce ideas that are only in the mind and not in the bodies themselves (for example, colour and taste). So, when we look at an apple, the colour may be in our minds, but we can be sure that the 'real' apple (that is, the atoms of the apple) is 'out there'. By this theory, the 'truth' is the facts about the primary qualities, such as spatial dimensions, hardness and so on, and we can measure these things through mathematical physics. You may already have studied this aspect of Locke's metaphysics in Chapter 3, Theme 1.



## TEXT STUDY: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, Chapter II (1689)

[see Useful Resources]

1. What is the theory of innateness – held by ‘some men’ – which Locke is arguing against? (refer section 1)
2. What are the two examples Locke gives in section 4 of principles that some claim are innate?
3. Locke thinks that if these principles were innate they would be universally accepted. How does he support the claim that they are not universally accepted? (refer section 5)
4. Locke then considers the argument that innate principles are in the minds of young children even though they do not perceive them. His response discusses what it means for something to be ‘imprinted on the mind’. Explain what he means here (refer section 5).
5. Locke also considers the claim that the capacity to know innate principles is impressed on the minds of young children even though they don’t yet actually know them. Explain his treatment of this view (refer section 5).
6. How and when do we get general ideas, according to Locke (refer Section 15)?
7. What examples does Locke give of the first truths that children actually do know? Why is he so sure that they are not innate?
8. Outline Locke’s argument against innate ideas. Put it in standard form if you can, remembering to fill in the conclusion first.

### THINK

1. Do you believe we have innate knowledge?
2. Does the truth about objects in the world exist independently of our minds?



### WRITE

Which is the more convincing view to you – Descartes’ rationalism or Locke’s empiricism? Explain your view.

OR

With a partner, compose a dialogue between Descartes and Locke on the topic of where knowledge is derived from.





# How Reliable is Knowledge from the Senses?

## LIMITED CAPACITIES OF HUMAN SENSES

The arguments of Locke and the empiricists place heavy emphasis on the importance of the senses in telling us the truth about our world. We learn early in our lives that we have five senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell – and it cannot be denied that sensory data contributes greatly to the knowledge we build up about our world. But do our senses give us the truth? To what extent should we question sense data?

### THINK

Have your senses ever led you astray? Think of occasions where they did so. Can you explain why?

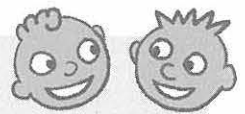


Let us consider the senses of sight and sound. In general, we see light between frequencies of  $4 \times 10^{14}$  Hz and  $9 \times 10^{14}$  Hz. We hear sounds between 20 Hz and 20,000 Hz. However, light and sound are occurring all the time at many other frequencies. The data we can detect with our eyes and ears in fact represent very small windows of the light and sound spectra. You may have noticed your pet dog wagging his tail as he hears the sound of the family car turning into your street, several minutes before your ears detect anything of the kind. Animals see and hear different frequencies of light and sound. For example, rats have a hearing range between 1,000 and 90,000 Hz, while the noctuid moth hears sounds between 1,000 and 240,000 Hz. Penguins can see well into the ultraviolet range of the electromagnetic spectrum. And compare the tongue of a pig with that of a human: a pig has 15,000 taste buds compared with the human tongue, which has only 9,000 taste buds.

There are several other senses which animals possess but humans don't. Sharks can sense the electric fields of prey that may be totally motionless and hidden. Bats and dolphins use echolocation (sonar) to locate movements and objects. The emperor moth can detect pheromones up to 5km away, and the silkworm moth from as far distant as 11km!

### DISCUSS

1. Given the different sensory abilities of animals compared with humans, can any objective truths be acquired from sense data?
2. And what about between humans? When you discuss with a friend the colour of your chair, or the sound of a bird outside, how can you be sure that you are both seeing and hearing the same qualities?
3. What senses must a creature have for it to get a *true* sense of the world?



## THE MIND'S INTERPRETATION OF THE SENSES

There are questions to be asked, too, of the way our minds process sense data. You may be aware of some famous optical illusions, where what we see differs from the objective reality. Have you

ever tried to 'look inside' a 'Magic Eye' picture, to discover a different layer of visual reality beyond what is immediately apparent?

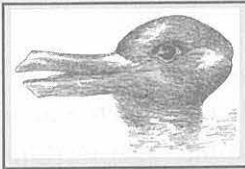
Our everyday lives are full of instances where things appear other than they really are. A stranger may mistakenly think you are a redhead if you stand under a red light. A plane flying into the distance appears to get smaller. It takes so long for their light signals to reach us that many of the stars we see at night no longer exist. You may have heard of amputees feeling phantom pains in their lost limb.

All these examples raise questions for us about the gap between our perceptions and reality.



## DO

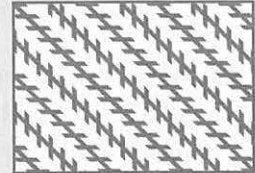
Take some time to examine the optical illusions below. (The internet can provide you with hours of fun exploring many more examples.) How much are your eyes actually seeing and how much is your mind interpreting?



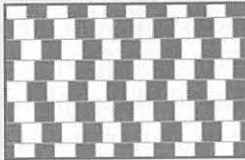
Is this a duck or a rabbit?



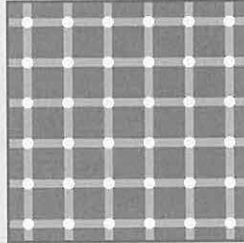
Do you see an old woman or a young woman? Or both?



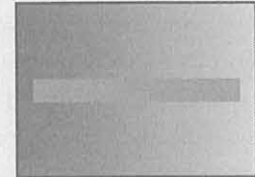
Are the diagonal lines parallel?



Are the horizontal lines parallel?



Do black spots seem to move quickly around this grid?



Does the grey bar change colour?

## THINK

What implications do optical illusions and the differently-abled senses of animals have for what we know about the world?

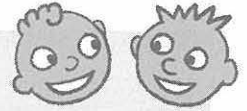


# Scepticism



## READ

The chapter 'How Do We Know Anything?' in *What Does It All Mean?* by Thomas Nagel is an engaging introduction to this topic.



## DISCUSS

1. Do you think it may be true that the inside of your mind is the only thing that exists?
2. Is it possible that there is a world outside your mind but it is totally different from the way you imagine it to be?
3. How could you go about proving that more than just your mind exists?

You may have considered the possibility that it isn't possible for us to know with certainty anything at all. This is the view of **scepticism**, a school of thought which started in ancient Greece. The extreme view of scepticism – that we cannot know anything – may be difficult to maintain without contradiction; if we cannot know anything, how do we know that we cannot know anything? The position of relative or moderate scepticism, on the other hand, claims that there are just certain kinds of things we cannot know.

You may wonder what the appeal of scepticism might be. Scepticism has sometimes been linked with religious views: if it isn't possible to know anything at all for certain, one just has to have faith. A popular motivation for scepticism in philosophy is as the opposite to gullibility: processes of rigorous doubting are useful if we are to reach any ultimately trustworthy conclusions. Earlier in this book we examined Socratic questioning (see p.8), which represents the philosophical ideal of never taking anything at face value and always digging further into an argument to uncover potential weaknesses.

You may have found yourself forming sceptical views when considering the senses. This is one of the arguments used by sceptics – that the senses can deceive us. A stick in water appears to be bent; there appears to be water on the road ahead on a sunny day. The sceptic reasons that since we can sometimes be deceived, we cannot ever be sure that our sense perceptions are reliable.

Another argument for scepticism concerns dreams. Is it possible to tell that you that are not dreaming now? After all, when you are in the middle of a dream, you usually have no idea that your experiences are not real.

One type of extreme scepticism is **solipsism**. A solipsist believes that the only thing he can be sure of is the existence of his own mind and mental states. Beyond that he does not feel entitled to believe in the existence of anything.

## THINK

1. What do you consider the strongest argument for scepticism? What would you argue against scepticism?
2. Could the doctrine of solipsism be right? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever had difficulty telling if an experience was a dream or if it really happened? Describe your experience? Is there any way to tell that you're not dreaming now?



## Cartesian Scepticism

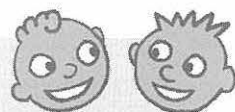
We have already referred to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) several times in this book (see pp.119, 289).

Descartes uses a sceptical methodology, but his aim is to find certain knowledge using only the power of his rational capacities.

The *Meditations* describe with great immediacy Descartes' journey through a process of radical doubt, or so-called **Cartesian Doubt** (also known as the **Cartesian Method** or **Cartesian Scepticism**). His tactic is to distrust every belief as long as there is any chance it may be mistaken, in order to discover ultimately whether any belief can be considered truth. You may think that scepticism is a strange road to take if one's aim is to discover certain, indubitable truths. However, much of the progress made in philosophy and science has been derived from the practice of scrutinising claims carefully and sifting them according to their trustworthiness.

In his 'First Meditation', Descartes challenges all his most basic beliefs about the world with the classic sceptical arguments. He begins to despair of ever discovering an indubitable truth. He realises he cannot trust any of his senses as they have deceived him in the past. In fact, for all he knows, he could be stuck in a dream and not experiencing reality at all! There seems to be a moment's hope when Descartes considers mathematics. However, it is conceivable that an evil genius, capable of getting inside our minds, could deceive us even about something which seems as indubitable as  $2 + 3 = 5$ .

Descartes thinks he cannot find a way out of scepticism, so he decides to go to bed and try again the next night. At the start of the 'Second Meditation' Descartes has a flash of inspiration: he has thought of an argument to defeat his own sceptical reasoning! At this point Descartes presents one of the most famous arguments in all philosophy: *Cogito Ergo Sum* ('I think, therefore I am'). He concludes that even if we are being deceived, we can still be sure of our own existence, as it is impossible to be deceived and not exist. This then becomes the first premise of several further arguments developed in the *Meditations* about the existence of God, the nature of body and mind, and the truths of mathematics.



## DISCUSS

Consider the argument, 'I think therefore I am'. (Can you write it in standard form?) How convincing is it? Do you think Descartes defeated scepticism once and for all with this argument?



### TEXT STUDY: Rene Descartes, *Meditations 1 and 2* [up to and including the Cogito] (1647)

[see Useful Resources]

We have already considered Descartes from a rationalist perspective. Now we will consider his sceptical approach.

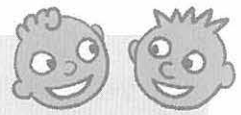
READ all of the First Meditation, plus the Second Meditation up to '...I must finally conclude that the proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.'

1. Just from reading the first paragraph, what is Descartes' goal in writing the *Meditations*?
2. In what ways is Descartes' approach one of scepticism? To what beliefs does he apply his scepticism?
3. Does this extract show scepticism to be helpful in finding the truth? Why or why not?
4. How effective is Descartes' conclusion, 'therefore I exist', as a response to the sceptics' argument that we cannot know anything at all for certain?

## THE BRAIN IN THE VAT THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

We will now consider a famous thought experiment, first discussed by American philosopher Hilary Putnam (Famous Philosopher File p.139). You may find links between this puzzle and Descartes' *Meditations*. You may also link this to Plato's Cave Allegory, explored on page 38.

*Imagine that your brain has been surgically separated from the rest of your body by an evil scientist, and then placed in a vat full of special nutrients which will keep it alive and healthy. Your brain is now linked to a powerful computer which delivers a constant stream of electrical impulses. These electrical signals are responsible for the illusions that you are sitting in a classroom, reading about Descartes and scepticism, eating lunch, listening to an iPod and so on. In other words, your whole life is an illusion fed to you via this computer. Meanwhile, your disembodied brain is actually floating in a vat in a scientist's laboratory.*<sup>26</sup>



## DISCUSS

How possible is it that you are a brain in a vat?

### THE *MATRIX* AND OTHER FILMS ABOUT SCEPTICISM

The films in *The Matrix* trilogy imagine a situation where human beings are deceived on a vast scale by artificially intelligent machines. The billions of humans on earth are living in towers of incubators. The humans' function is to provide energy for the machines. But so that the humans continue to thrive emotionally (which is necessary if they are to continue as healthy power sources for the machines), the humans' brains are hooked up to a computer program which simulates 'real' life. Thus, the humans have no idea of their deprived conditions and meaningless existences; they live under permanent illusion that they are going about their business in the world, having relationships, doing jobs, experiencing sadness, joy and everything else that we regard as 'normal' and 'real'.

The central character, Neo, is invited to join the few humans who live in actual reality – a bleak place since the sun has been torched – travelling in a craft close to the earth's core, constantly on the run from the machines. As the audience, we are invited to consider what we might do: elect to live in bleak reality, knowing the actual disturbing truth, or instead be trapped inside an incubator, being fed endless lies about our lives, ignorant of our situation and that our only real purpose is to provide energy for aliens. Which would you choose?

Much has been written about the connections between these films and philosophical ideas. If you are interested in exploring this further, refer to the Useful Resources section at the end of this Chapter.

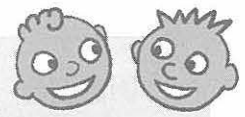


## DO

View the film, *The Matrix*.

Alternatively, you may wish to view just Chapter 10 of the DVD (titled 'Slimy Rebirth') to see how the film depicts almost the entire human population as a mere machines – electrical processors of energy – which are hooked up to computer simulations of 'life', giving them the illusion of having a mind, experiences, emotions, relationships and so on.

Other films you might wish to view on this theme are *The Truman Show* and *Dark City*.



## DISCUSS

1. How possible is it that you are living in a computer simulation, with all your experiences fed to your mind while your body lies inert? That is, could we be living in the Matrix?
2. In *The Matrix*, which is more reasonable for Neo to believe when he wakes up on the craft, the Nebuchadnezzar – that he is now present in the real world, as Morpheus tells him, or that he is still dreaming?
3. Would you have taken the blue pill or the red pill? That is, would you choose reality or lies? Why?

## Hume's Scepticism

### HUME'S FORK

Eighteenth century philosopher David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182) is famous for his sceptical arguments about induction (see Theme 4 of this chapter) as well as for his doubts about causation and whether knowledge of the external world could be possible.

Hume proposed a test for knowledge, which has fascinated philosophers ever since. Hume said there are two kinds of truth: 'matters of fact' (true from experience) and 'relations of ideas' (true by reason). Any belief that can't be proved either of these ways is without justification. This test is known as **Hume's Fork**.

So, using Hume's Fork, for any belief we should ask: 'Is this a matter of fact, to be defended by appeal to experience or experiment?' or: 'Is this a truth of reason, demonstrated by a calculation of mathematics or logic?' If the answer is neither, the proposition cannot be justified.

### HUME'S FORK

For a statement to be considered true, it must be either:

1. A truth of reason (a priori, necessary, analytic): e.g. '3+2=5'

OR

2. A truth from experience (a posteriori, contingent, empirical, synthetic): e.g. 'There are sharks in Australian waters.'



## DO

Using Hume's Fork, analyse the following:

1. All the interior angles of a triangle add to 180 degrees.
2. God exists.
3. Stubbing one's toe is painful.
4. Water boils at 100 degrees celcius.
5. A kilogram of rocks and a kilogram of feathers weigh the same.
6. Life has meaning.
7. Slavery is wrong.
8. I exist.
9. 'All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds... relations of ideas and matters of fact.' (David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*)
10. Everything that happens has a cause.

## HUME'S SCEPTICISM ABOUT CAUSATION

What about number ten in the exercise above? The principle of universal causality says that everything that happens has a cause, and is one of the fundamental laws of physics. So what happens when we apply the test of reason to this case? Is there a logical proof by which we can argue that things must necessarily have a cause? We might know that when one moving billiard ball collides with another, the second one moves, but that refers to experience rather than logical necessity. Of course we might argue that we have certain knowledge of particular causes: fire will burn us, and we will drown in water if unable to swim. But Hume makes the point that these are not *a priori* truths; our ancestors could not have known *prior to experience* that fire would burn them or that they could drown in water – they would have had to learn these things through harsh experience. But still, these experiences only prove *particular cases* of cause and effect; they don't prove a rule that 'everything has a cause.'

Let's look at this another way. You watch a footballer kick a ball. You see his foot touch the ball. The ball moves between the goalposts. But does the footballer's foot *cause* the ball to move? How can you be certain of this? Couldn't these events – the foot's kicking and the ball's movements – be *coincidental* rather than *causal* in their relationship? Hume argued that because we don't perceive a *necessary connection* between a cause and its effect, and sense perception is the only way we know about the external world, we do not have any rational basis for believing that causation exists in the external world. Hume thought that causation was a human projection rather than a truth about nature.

And so Hume reaches a sceptical conclusion about what we usually consider to be one of the fundamental principles of our world: causation turns out not to be justifiable through either experience or reason.



## HUME'S SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Hume's doubts about the external world follow a similar line of argument. Is our belief in the external world a matter of logic? No, because we can imagine what it would be like if the world didn't exist and we can imagine ourselves to be dreaming, as Descartes suggested, or in a computer simulation, as in *The Matrix*. Is it a matter of experience? No. All your so-called experiences of the external world could have been delusions. You can pinch yourself, but it doesn't mean you will wake up from a dream. You could be in the Matrix.

If we accept Hume's theory that any knowledge must be proved by either reason or experience to be true, it is possible that our experience exists but the physical world does not, and that we cannot access any experience within this world by which we can tell that this is not so.

Hence Hume's scepticism is of the relative kind. He admits that reason and experience can give us certainty about many things. But several of the things we take for granted as fundamentals of our existence – including causation and the existence of the external world – do not pass Hume's sceptical test, and, by his reasoning, should not be considered truths.

### WRITE

1. How convincing do you find Hume's Fork as a way of setting our standards for certain knowledge?
2. Can you think of a way around Hume's Fork?
3. How convincing is Hume's sceptical argument about causation?
4. How convincing is Hume's sceptical argument about the external world?



### TEXT STUDY: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section IV, 'Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding' (1739)

[see Useful Resources]

#### Part I

1. How does Hume distinguish between relations of ideas and matters of fact? What examples does he give of each? How do these divisions link to the *a priori* / *a posteriori* distinction?
2. According to Hume, what enables us to know things that are present neither to sense nor to memory? What examples does he give?
3. Hume claims that we only ever come to know cause-effect relationships *a posteriori*. What does he hope to show with his thought experiment about Adam?



4. Explain Hume's use of the billiard ball example. What does he intend to show by it?
5. Outline Hume's argument to the conclusion that causal knowledge is only known *a posteriori*.

### Part II

1. How does Hume suggest we reason about matters of fact?
2. What is the most that past experience can tell us about which objects follow upon which other objects, according to Hume? Why do we have such a strong tendency to extrapolate to what is unobserved?
3. Outline Hume's argument about the nature of causality.
4. How convincing is Hume's argument about causality?

## ***Kant's Resolution of Scepticism***

The disturbing and frustrating thing about scepticism is that it can leave us with little to hold on to as real and true. When Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher (Famous Philosopher File p.111), read Hume's sceptical arguments, he was shocked and could see no way of defeating Hume's doubts. The only way around the Fork, he decided, was to deny it – or maybe bend it a little. Kant argued that the rationalism/empiricism divide was misguided and he set out to show why in his masterpiece, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

Kant found that he could resolve Hume's scepticism by arguing for the primacy of *a priori* knowledge and introducing a new category called the **synthetic a priori**.

As Kant explains it, the external world is the world we experience. But we experience it with our minds. There is no way we can have any possible idea about the world that is not an interpretation performed by our consciousness. Kant says that certain *structures of the mind* or **conceptual schemes** give our experiences of the world their form and categories. He suggests that time, space, cause and substance are basic structures that the mind uses in order for us to be able to have any intelligible experiences at all. These structural presuppositions are not empirical knowledge because they come prior to experience. However, nor are they known logically in the same way as an *a priori* mathematical or reasoned truth. So Kant invented a new term, *synthetic a priori* for these categories. They are synthetic because they are not tautologies or definitions, and they are *a priori* because they are prior to experience.

This means we can only have *a priori* knowledge of the world *as we perceive it* but not *as it actually is*. According to Kant, we receive sense-data and then our mind processes this via mental categories. However, we can never know whether our concepts and categories match those in the real world. This means that for Kant, the real world 'out there' – which he calls the **noumenal world** – is always beyond our comprehension. It is only the **phenomenal world** – that which we perceive and process with our minds – which can be known to us at all.

How does this resolve Hume's scepticism? Well, because we couldn't have any experiences at all without synthetic *a priori* knowledge (for example, of causation), it must be necessarily true. It is pointless to be sceptical about this knowledge because regardless of whether time, space and causation are actually properties of our world, they are the only ways through which we can have any perceptions of the world at all.

If we take the example of the footballer above, Kant would agree with Hume that there is nothing in our observation of the footballer's toe meeting the ball that *proves* causation. However, while Hume argues that this means we can't be certain of cause and effect, Kant argues that this proves that the idea of causality is wired into the structures of our minds as a *precondition* of us being able to make any sense of our observations of football or of anything else.

Kant's collapse of the absolute distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* set in train a furious debate that has continued ever since. Agreement with Kant fuelled much of the philosophy of hugely influential German philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). In the twentieth century, Americans W.V.O Quine (1908-2000) and Saul Kripke (1940- ) have taken up Kant's challenge via analysis of the structures of language. The logical positivists of the twentieth century disputed Kant's conclusions and the idealist philosophies they led to, and sided with Hume's empiricism. These are all philosophers whose views you may be interested in investigating yourself.

### THINK

Which account of knowledge – Hume's or Kant's – do you find the most plausible? Why?



### DO

Imagine Hume and Kant attend a football match. Their observations of the field lead them into a debate about our knowledge of causality and of the external world. Perform your dialogue for your class.



## ***A.J.Ayer and the Logical Positivists***

**Logical positivism** was an extreme form of empiricism developed in Europe after World War I. It was established by a group known as the Vienna Circle, who disapproved of the obscure, idealist metaphysics that had taken hold of much philosophy, particularly in Germany, since Kant. Philosophers such as Hegel and Heidegger had developed complex and at times impenetrable theories about abstract matters, reaching well beyond what is empirically provable. The Vienna Circle sought to bring philosophy closer to science. Through processes of logical analysis, mathematical methodologies and close analysis of language, they thought they could solve several of philosophy's biggest questions and simply do away with many others.

Logical positivist ideas were imported to the English-speaking philosophical community by Alfred Jules Ayer (Famous Philosopher File p.299) in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). Written in a lively and passionate style, Ayer's book makes some radical and sweeping claims. He argues that any proposition worth taking seriously must be either a tautology (that is, true by definition) or an empirical hypothesis (that is, verifiable by experience). This means that for Ayer, all metaphysics is futile nonsense. He thinks philosophy certainly cannot tell us the nature of reality. If we want to know about reality we must rely on the evidence from our senses.

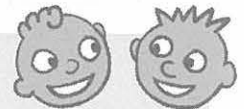
What philosophy can do, according to Ayer, is to analyse and clarify. Philosophy can sort out a lot of muddled thought, Ayer believes, by assessing the logical implications of the language we use, and this is the kind of work that the logical positivists are best known for. Philosophy in this tradition, which has been influential in English-speaking philosophy departments ever since, is known as *analytic* philosophy.

Ayer's views respond directly to Kant in a number of ways. Firstly, Ayer states that analytic propositions (those true by definition) tell us nothing about the world. They include all statements of logic and mathematics, and Ayer argues they are just systems of equivalence that we have developed in order to communicate.

Regarding synthetic propositions, Ayer says they depend entirely on empirical evidence to have meaning. Therefore Kant's *synthetic a priori* is a notion he rejects.

Ayer's Verification Principle emphasises his strong empiricist stance, stating that for a proposition to be meaningful there must be a sense experience which could confirm its truth. For example, 'This book contains seven chapters' means 'If you look through this book you will find seven chapters.' This is a proposition easily verifiable by experience. 'The bandicoot is heading toward extinction' is trickier to verify by direct experience, but Ayer still regards it as meaningful because it is possible to describe the kinds of observations which would confirm its truth in the future.

## DISCUSS



1. Do you agree with Ayer that metaphysics is meaningless nonsense, not to be counted as knowledge at all?
2. How does Ayer regard the terms *a priori* and *a posteriori*? What is the usefulness of each for *knowledge*?



## WRITE

How does Ayer's view of these terms compare with the views of Descartes, Locke and Kant? Complete the following table:

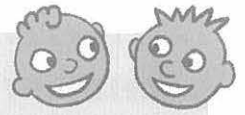
	Descartes	Locke	Hume	Kant	Ayer
Knowledge					
Rationalism					
Empiricism					
A priori					
A posteriori					
The external world					
Induction					
Deduction					
'Hume's Fork'					
Causation					



### TEXT STUDY: A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Chapter 1, 'The Elimination of Metaphysics'.

[see Useful Resources]

1. Why does Ayer wish to 'eliminate' metaphysics? Outline his argument.
2. What are the similarities and differences between the views of Kant and Ayer?
3. Outline Ayer's Verification Principle and explain its 'strong' and 'weak' forms. Provide two examples of your own.
4. How does Ayer justify his claim that 'all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical'?



## DISCUSS

Hold a class debate on the topic: 'Can we ever really know anything?'

You should assign arguments from this topic (such as the following) to speakers from each side to advance or refute:

- Reliability of the senses arguments
- Dreaming argument
- Evil genius argument
- Brain in a vat argument
- Computer simulation (*The Matrix*) argument
- Hume's Fork argument
- Kant's resolution argument
- Ayer's rejection of metaphysics

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Alfred Jules Ayer (1910–1989)

A.J. Ayer was born in London. Described as a lively and precocious child, he was educated at Eton College before attending Oxford. Four years after his graduation and at the age of just 24, Ayer published the work that would make his name – *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). Throughout the war years he continued working as a professional philosopher but also managed to conduct missions for the secret service



in Africa, the United States and France, write film reviews in New York, make a record with Lauren Bacall and help organise the French Resistance movements in London. His life after World War II was no less hectic. During the 1950s, and while holding the Grote Professorship of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at University College, Ayer was heavily involved with various political and social causes – at one time he was the Vice President of the Society for the Reform of Abortion Law, Chairman for the Campaign of Racial Discrimination in Sport *and* President of the Homosexual Law Reform Society. Ayer also managed a rich personal life characterised by a love of drinking, dancing, socialising and football. He had several wives (one of whom was celebrity chef Nigella Lawson's mother) and over 100 love affairs, as well as many famous friends.

Ayer retired from his professorship in 1978. A decade later he choked on a piece of smoked salmon and suffered a near-death experience, during which he claimed to have seen a divine being. He nonetheless remained an avowed atheist until his death the following year.

## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE VERSUS RATIONAL ARGUMENT

1. Work in a pair to select an issue currently being debated in the media, and locate a newspaper article which presents a point of view.
2. Analyse the article and classify what knowledge sources are being appealed to. Highlight in one colour any uses of deductive reasoning, in another colour instances of inductive reasoning, in a third colour any appeals to evidence from the senses, and in a fourth colour any other sources of knowledge (for example: emotions, testimonies, etc).
3. What ways of knowing are most convincing in this article? Why?
4. Join forces with another pair. Tell each other about the articles you have analysed.
5. In a whole-class discussion, offer your thoughts about ways of knowing appealed to in today's media.

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## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### Assessment Task One: Written Reflection

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Compare rationalism and empiricism. Which do you most agree with?
2. Can we work out truths with reason alone or is sensory experience required? Of which method can we be most certain?
3. Are humans born as 'blank slates' or do we have 'innate ideas'? Use detailed examples of your own to explore this question.
4. Which of the two theories do you find more appealing – Descartes' or Locke's?
5. How effective is the method of Socratic questioning and philosophical dialogue for working out the truth of a matter, do you think?
6. A rationalist such as Descartes believed that **deductive logic** was the only process that could lead us to certainty. However, Locke argued that all truths are discovered **inductively**, based on our experiences. What are the advantages and disadvantages of deduction versus induction? Which do you think is more useful in discovering the truth?
7. What are our most reliable sources of knowledge and why?
8. What are some cases where the senses may be deceived? Is this a good reason for calling all sense data into doubt?
9. Might all this be nothing more than a dream?
10. Would you call yourself an epistemological sceptic? Why or why not?

11. How possible do you find it, that you could be a brain in a vat, or living in a computer simulation? Explain your answer in detail.
12. How effective is Hume's fork for determining the truth of a proposition?
13. Does Kant's *synthetic a priori* theory defeat any or all sceptical arguments? Explain your answer in detail.
14. Do you agree with Ayer that philosophy can only bring knowledge if it rejects metaphysics?
15. Reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of two or more theories of how we perceive the external world. Which theory/ies do you find the most and least convincing?
16. Do all our perceptions necessarily involve interpretation? Justify your view, using examples.
17. Do you hold any beliefs which are indubitable? What makes them distinctive? How do they transcend scepticism?
18. Explore another epistemological question that has arisen through your study of this Theme.

### ***Assessment Task Two: Essay***

TOPIC 1: Explain the differences between rationalism and empiricism. Assess the advantages and disadvantages of each of these ways to achieve knowledge, using examples of the arguments and methods of particular philosophers if you can.

OR

TOPIC 2: How convincing is scepticism as a philosophical position? Outline at least three arguments for scepticism and three arguments against scepticism. Then draw conclusions about the degree to which you think scepticism is a plausible theory.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### ***Assessment Task Three: Test – Short Answer Responses***

Learn the definitions of all the terms presented in this Theme in preparation for a short-answer test. Be prepared to provide examples of all terms.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Written Analysis***

Answer a series of medium-answer questions relating to a primary text studied in this Theme.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Oral Presentation***

The Debate activity above (see p.299) can be adapted as an assessment task, with each speaker marked on his/her presentation of arguments.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Dialogue***

Compose and present a Socratic Dialogue as described on page 6.

Then write a brief reflection on this dialogue. How effective is Socratic questioning as a means of attaining knowledge?



## THEME 3

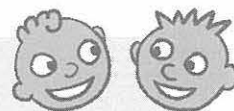
# On Science

When requiring certainty, many people these days look to science to provide it. When we hear that something has been ‘scientifically proven’ we tend to assume that it must therefore be true – at least judging from the number of advertisements which use this slogan to woo customers. But are we right to place so much trust in science? Does it indeed give us facts and certainties, or is it just as fallible as other areas of inquiry?

### *Introductory Activity*

#### **DISCUSS**

1. What connotations does the word ‘science’ have for you?
2. Do you think science is a reliable source of knowledge? Why or why not?
3. Does ‘scientifically proven’ mean the same as truth?



The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, associated with the names of such great scientists as Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and Isaac Newton (Famous Philosopher File p.197), began a period of extraordinary progress which has not slowed down since. In less than 300 years, we have discovered the fundamental laws of physics, the 92 elements of the periodic table and the secrets of human life in our DNA, as well as how to split the atom, clone a sheep and land on the moon, not to mention inventions such as aeroplanes, cars, phones and computers.

These successes have led to science becoming the dominant model for knowledge in our age. Indeed, some people argue that scientific proof is the only reliable source of knowledge. However, as we shall see in this Theme, science does have its limitations and weaknesses.

The word science actually comes from the Latin ‘scientia’, meaning knowledge. The philosophy of science involves philosophical reflection on science, its methods and the grounds upon which scientific claims about the world may be justified as knowledge.

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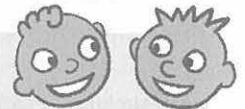
## Philosophy and Science

Until the 18th and 19th centuries, there was no real distinction between science and philosophy. Indeed, the idea of science as a completely separate discipline is quite recent, and science could not exist without philosophy. In many universities today, departments of physics are still known as schools of ‘natural philosophy’. The great names in the history of science are usually considered to belong to philosophy’s hall of fame as well. In addition, many of the great philosopher-scientists have also been theologians. It could be said that philosophy, science and theology have all been engaged in the task of trying to account for the nature of reality and to discover knowledge and truth.

Science has broken away from philosophy as it has become more committed to the so-called scientific method, a method which philosophy helped to develop. Again, it is philosophers of science who have made criticisms and suggested modifications to this method. It is also philosophers who have pointed scientists in the direction of what they can and cannot test, raising new questions and endeavouring to answer as many questions as can be solved through reason alone, leaving the scientists to do the practical testing and experimentation, and mathematicians to perform the complex equations. In your studies of Metaphysics, you no doubt became more aware of some interfaces between philosophy, science and mathematics, and the philosophical thinking which takes metaphysics to the edges of its often-hazy boundaries with physics.

Although Western science has seen many complex changes, there have been two major shifts of worldview that have profoundly influenced both philosophy and science, the two having been interlinked throughout their history. To provide a backdrop to your continuing studies of philosophy, you need to grasp a broad overview of the history of these partnering fields, linking this history to other world events. Philosophical thinking has always been inextricably linked with a historical and intellectual context. This is why the next section is so fascinating and valuable.

### DISCUSS



1. In what ways do you think philosophy and science are similar and different?
2. What similarities and differences are there between your experiences of studying Philosophy and Science at school?
3. Are you surprised to learn that until very recently, science and philosophy were regarded as the same field? Why or why not?

## Historical Overview

### PLATO VERSUS ARISTOTLE

The history of the philosophy of science, at least in the Western world, begins with the philosophers of Ancient Greece. Many ancient Greek philosophers tried to figure out the nature of reality (see pp.89-90), but it was Plato and Aristotle with whom scientific debate – of the kind which would profoundly influence the course of Western thought – really began.

Plato (Famous Philosopher File p.93) built on the traditional Greek mythologies to argue that humans are born with innate knowledge of everything. You will recognise this, from the previous Theme, as the **rationalist** view. Plato argued that everything has a perfect abstract Form. Because any knowledge gained through observation and experiment must be filtered by the senses, empirical knowledge can only ever be mere opinion. Therefore, Plato reasoned, pure knowledge can be derived only through **deductive reasoning**.

Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99), by contrast, believed that Plato had everything the wrong way around, and that knowledge could only be gained by comparing it with what was already known and perceived. He contended that **inductive reasoning** was required to establish some basic premises before **empirical** investigations should take place. Aristotle used the term 'first principles' for all the most basic ideas which he viewed as self-evident from experience (that is, from empirical foundationalism, to use a term from Theme 1 of this Chapter). With these first principles as our starting point, he believed we should gather knowledge by experiencing and investigating more and more things, all the time building from what we already know to be true.

The ancient and profound split in thinking between Plato and his student Aristotle is why Aristotle is referred to as the Father of Science and credited as the founder of the scientific method. Aristotle's empiricism saw him spending his time making many measurements and observations, including classifying living things into families according to their shared characteristics (a process which will be familiar to you from biology classes). He also established foundational ideas of space, time and causality, including the idea of the 'prime mover', which later formed the basis for Aquinas's cosmological arguments for the existence of God (see p.230).

None of this is to say that Plato has no place as a scientist. His influence is also profound, and the elegant mathematical theories which physicists have developed to explain the cosmos are much closer to Plato than Aristotle. Often the work of rationalist philosophers (or scientists working in a more Platonic style) generates theories which empirical science follows behind, attempting to prove or disprove through experiment and observation.

## **MEDIEVAL TIMES**

While the Romans made an immense contribution to practical science, they mostly extended on the methods of ancients such as Aristotle and Ptolemy and eventually lost touch with Greek philosophies. The works of Aristotle were preserved by Islamic scholars, who combined Aristotelian science with techniques learned from the Indian Vedics. Through the centuries of wars and destruction known as the Dark Ages, only the vaguest traces of Greek wisdom remained in Europe. It was eventually via the Arab Muslims in Spain that the teachings of Plato and Aristotle finally reconnected with European thinking in the 13th century, when the first translations were made from Arabic into Latin.

From then on, Greek thought began to be explored again in a systematic way, and subsequent developments in both philosophy and science were very much in reaction to the resurgence of ancient ideas. For several hundred years, ancient Greek teachings became embedded in European thinking thanks to the power of the Catholic Church. For medieval religious scholars, the Greek notions of perfection of form produced an ideal marriage with biblical teaching, such that many of the ideas handed down to us through Christianity, including concepts of heaven and of human purpose, actually come from the marriage of Christian dogma with ancient Greek philosophical thought.

This marriage was a mighty one, as the authority and wealth of the Church ensured that all people, regardless of how little education they had, would be taught a particular worldview, combining the Bible with elements of Platonism and Aristotelianism. One can see this reflected in European art and architecture from the 13th century onwards. These teachings were considered to represent absolute and perfect truth, and to question any element was regarded as heresy and potentially punishable by torture or execution.

It therefore took considerable courage for scientists such as Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) to offer a different view of the universe. The Church taught that deductions must be made from the perfect knowledge which its authority already endorsed; to trust one's own fallible human observations and experimental 'evidence' was a crime against God.

## **THE RISE OF MODERN SCIENCE**

The Renaissance and Reformation were movements in Europe whose cultural influence became widespread and profound. A renewed sense of the value of human reason and the ability to challenge religious dogma became apparent. In addition, the importance of Francis Bacon's influence on the development of scientific method cannot be underestimated, and it is largely through Bacon that science started to distinguish itself from both philosophy and theology.

Bacon (1561-1626) criticised Aristotle's view that deductions should be made from first principles. He argued that if these first principles included the Greek idea of a perfect cosmos, then no progress could be made beyond Greek cosmology. Bacon believed it was time for a different view of the universe. He proposed an induction-based philosophy, proceeding from a series of systematic observations of the world and emphasising the role of experimentation to test the validity of hypotheses.

Galileo, whilst most famous as a scientist, was also a highly respected philosopher. He took Bacon's views of science even further, refining Bacon's experimental methods but also defending a place for rationalism in scientific practice.

### **Newtonian Science**

It is the work of Isaac Newton (Famous Philosopher File p.197) that is usually thought of as having given the world the modern scientific worldview. In Newton's paradigm, observation and experiment lead to knowledge of the laws which govern the world. Perhaps without your realising it, your own scientific education will have been largely Newtonian. Newtonian science sees the world as particles of matter, moving according to physical laws, within a fixed framework of time and space. The world is a giant machine, the workings of which are predictable and can all become known through the scientific method.

In 1687, Isaac Newton published his *De Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis* (*On the Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*), setting forth the mathematical basis to the theories of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, and thus completing the Copernican Revolution. Newton's theory of universal gravitation brought together our understanding of the forces operating in space and on earth, with the insight that planetary motion follows the same laws that govern the behaviour of falling objects.

That Newton is a giant in the history of human scientific inquiry is summed up in the words of Alexander Pope:

*Nature and nature's laws lay hidden in the night,  
God said, 'Let Newton be' and all was light.*

Newton profoundly changed the Western world's notion of what it is to have knowledge, and his principles of inquiry still dominate Western thinking.

### **TEXT STUDY: Isaac Newton: De Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis (On the Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy)**



*[see Useful Resources]*

Read the Preface.

*Note that when Newton refers to Natural Philosophy, or sometimes just 'Philosophy', he means what we would now call Physics. (If you visit the University of Melbourne, you will see the words 'Natural Philosophy' over the door of the building which used to house the Physics department.) So, Newton's work presents the mathematical principles of Physics.*

1. What does Newton set forth as the way in which knowledge should be investigated and arrived at?
2. What is Newton's dream for what scientific knowledge can achieve?

### **TWENTIETH CENTURY CHALLENGES**

Newtonian science works. Almost all the technology around you has been constructed upon Newtonian principles, from your school buildings to roads and bridges. Cars, trains and aeroplanes all run on Newtonian principles; we even landed people on the moon thanks to **Newtonian physics**. So how could it be doubted as a source of truth when its calculations have been shown to be right, over and over again, for centuries?

For most thinkers up until the early 20th century, it was unthinkable that Newton's theories could be wrong or that space and time should not be conceived as fixed principles. However, Albert Einstein (Famous Philosopher File p.209) was to change this. In 1916, Einstein's revolutionary **General Theory of Relativity** claimed that time, space, matter and energy are all related and affect each other, rather than being fixed as in the Newtonian model.

But Einstein's were not the only theories to challenge Newtonian science. **Quantum mechanics**, looking deep inside the atom, has found that at the subatomic level, the laws of physics which operate at the atomic level no longer apply. Indeed, at the subatomic level, particles seem to behave in a random and unpredictable way.

So Newton's theories have been shown to only hold true for a very small section of the universe. When dealing with the very small (subatomic particles) or the very large (planets, stars and so on), Newton's theories are obsolete. So science has shifted radically from the assumptions of predictable mechanics that underpinned the Newtonian universe, to a vastly more complex and less easily fathomable picture. We no longer think that all things in the universe can be observed, measured and explained by induction; instead there are many things about which we can only speculate through mathematical calculations and models.

Thus, cosmology – the field of enquiry which seeks an account of the whole universe – has shifted from the domain of philosophy in ancient times, to a mix of philosophy and theology in medieval times, to the scientists and their empirical methods since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, and now into the realm of theoretical physics – a mixture of science and mathematics which is sometimes controversial because its findings are theoretical rather than observational.

The role of the Philosophy of Science is now to assess the methods used by science, the logic it operates with in moving from observations to theories and laws, and the ways in which its theories are adopted or rejected. These issues are at the core of our studies in this Theme.

### DO

Create a cartoon strip on poster paper to represent the major shifts in scientific thought through history. Feature at least four significant people and use a minimum of six frames. Present your cartoon strip to the class and display it on your classroom wall to remind you of this vitally important history of ideas, so relevant to all your studies of Philosophy.



### OR

Create a timeline which extends from 500BC to the current day. On it, mark all the significant events, theories, people and discoveries mentioned in the section above. In addition, situate at least 15 further items – including world events and famous people from fields other than philosophy and science – on this timeline. Lastly, add in any other philosophers that you have previously studied or heard about. Display your timeline on the classroom wall and refer to it often.

## ***The Scientific Method***

The purpose of science may broadly be said to be to produce useful models of reality. To do this, for the past 300 years or so, science has characteristically used a particular method of observation and experimentation known as the **scientific method**.

As we have learnt, the idea of science proceeding from observation was begun by Aristotle. The scientific method became further formalised by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Thomas Hobbes (Famous Philosopher File p.483) and became a crucial part of the Newtonian revolution in science. Indeed, it is largely due to this method that modern science was distinguished from what had gone before it. It represented a radical departure from religious doctrine into a new world which encouraged open-minded enquiry and the use of independently observed facts.

You will no doubt be familiar with the scientific method from your basic training in science classes, including the following steps:

1. Make **observations**. [E.g. Notice that anecdotally, every time people take *Potion X* when they feel first symptoms of the common cold, the cold symptoms seem to disappear.]
2. Analyse the observations and propose a **hypothesis** based on them. [E.g. Propose that *Potion X* removes symptoms of the common cold.]
3. **Experiment** to see if these observations support the hypothesis. [E.g. Set up an experiment – involving as many subjects as possible – where subjects who experience the onset of cold symptoms are given either *Potion X* or a placebo. Record the numbers of subjects who go on to develop colds or not and analyse whether or not there is a statistically significant number of the *Potion X*-takers who dodge the cold altogether or whose early symptoms of infection disappear.]
4. Draw conclusions and develop a **theory**. [E.g. If the *Potion X*-takers remain healthier than the placebo-takers, propose the theory that *Potion X* removes the symptoms of the common cold.]

## DO

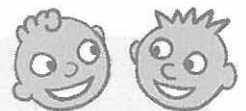
Rewrite the steps of the scientific method, replacing the *Potion X* example with another example of your own devising. (It can be as fantastical as you wish!)



Now, what do you notice about these steps? What kind of logic is being used? This is **inductive reasoning**, the basis of all the things we hold to be scientific ‘fact’. This is the way we discover our so-called laws of nature. From a theory such as the one proposed above – if it is tested, modified if necessary, and repeatedly confirmed – we derive a generalisation about the world, with the power to predict future events. Thus it could come to be considered a law of nature that *Potion X* has the power to remove symptoms of the common cold in humans.

## DISCUSS

Should results yielded by use of the scientific method be considered ‘facts’ and ‘the truth’? Why or why not? Under what conditions? Can you identify any potential problems with using the scientific method to discover new facts? If so, why has this method worked so well for so long and enabled us to make so much progress?



## PROBLEMS OF OBSERVATION

The first step of the scientific method, as outlined above, is that observations should be made. The observations are supposedly unbiased. However, is it possible to make an unbiased observation, or do our knowledge, experiences and expectations affect what we perceive?

### THINK

Imagine that you are interested in finding out what factors contribute to students scoring well on 10-minute mental arithmetic tests. You compare student performances over a whole year. Which of the following factors would you examine when collecting your data, and which would you consider irrelevant? Why?



1. time of day of the test
2. diet of the student / recent meals or snacks
3. amount of sleep student has had
4. weather
5. temperature in testing room
6. colour of clothing being worn
7. concurrent mathematical education
8. position of planets
9. arrangement of desks in classroom
10. fit of student's shoes
11. amount of physical activity undertaken that week
12. number of hours spent in front of a computer screen that week
13. whether the student has a pet at home
14. music-listening habits of student

The point made by the activity above is that scientific investigations always begin with ideas about what is and is not relevant to the problem. This means that we observe selectively, taking particular care to notice some things, while entirely overlooking others. We may overlook something which later proves of crucial importance.

For example, in the 1840s at Vienna General Hospital, when Ignaz Semmelweis was trying desperately to work out why so many new mothers in the doctor's ward were contracting puerperal fever and dying, one of the last things he thought to consider as a possible factor was the state of the doctors' hands. It turned out that many doctors were delivering babies immediately after visiting the dissection room, and had not washed their hands before examining the women. However, even when statistics demonstrated a correlation between increased hand-washing and reduced mortality, the majority of doctors – offended at being asked to wash their hands – rejected hygiene as a possible factor contributing to the mothers' deaths. As extraordinary as this seems to us now, it wasn't until the 1870s that germ theory was accepted. At Semmelweis's time there



was simply no **paradigm** – or system of understanding – to support the idea that hand-washing could have relevance.

A related problem to this is that our expectations influence what we see. When Mercury was observed to deviate from the orbit predicted by Newton's laws, scientists hypothesised that there must be an undiscovered planet called Vulcan causing a pull on Mercury's orbit. So certain were they of this, that some nineteenth century scientists even claimed to have seen Vulcan themselves! It turned out that the correct explanation for Mercury's deviation would be explained by Einstein's theory of relativity.

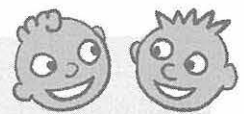
It is also the case that we rely heavily on the accuracy of instruments we use to measure with. At an obvious level, a dirty test tube or faulty thermometer can play havoc with results, and this is why laboratories adhere to strict international standards and experiments must be repeated to verify results. However, it is still worth considering the fallibility of humans when reading and recording results. There can be elements of subjectivity when it comes to interpreting images seen through a microscope, for example.

A further criticism of the reliance on observation in the scientific method is that it depends on **observation statements**. That is, the scientist must use language to express precisely what it is that she has observed. But is it possible to create neutral observation statements? Or is the language we choose to describe our world necessarily going to build in further layers of our own interpretation?

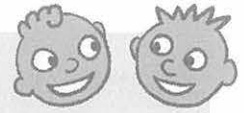
A final problem with observation is that the very act of observation can actually affect what we observe. The so-called **observer effect** plays an important role in quantum physics and it is also critical in human sciences such as psychology.

In Theme 2 of this Chapter we considered the fallibility of our senses as well as various views about how our perception works, allowing for greater and lesser input from processes of mental interpretation. The next Theme will consider the question of whether our upbringing and cultural context influences what we think we observe. All of these ideas call into question the reliability of our sensory observations as sources of knowledge.

## DISCUSS



- A biologist, a member of your class and a person from a pre-scientific culture all look through a microscope at a human skin cell. Do they all see the same things? Whose view is most true?
- Is the objection 'but our perceptions are not infallible and they are certainly not unbiased' a strong criticism against the scientific method? Why or why not?



## DISCUSS

- How would the biologist, the member of your class and the person from a pre-scientific culture each *describe* what they saw through the microscope? How would their statements be theory-laden – that is, not immune from their prior ideas about the world? Is this problematic in terms of knowledge, do you think?
- Is the language of observation statements a problem for the scientific method, in your view? Defend your answer by using examples.

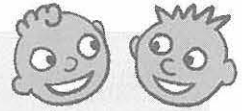
## THE PROBLEM OF INDUCTION

There is a famous story about swans that is often told internationally to illustrate inductive logic and some of its problems. Through over two thousand years of European mythology and literature, the swan was a bird much celebrated for its elegance, fidelity and supposed mystical powers. All of the millions of swans that had ever been observed throughout European history were distinctive for their pure white feathers. Indeed, part of the biological definition of a swan was that it was a white bird. However, the first Europeans in Australia discovered a new phenomenon: birds which were clearly swans in every recognisable respect, except that they were *black*. Thus, the inductive logic tested over centuries, which provided countless repeated observations to confirm that swans are white, was overthrown by a single observation of a native Australian *black* swan.

**Inductive reasoning** occurs when we move *from the observed to the as-yet unobserved*. It occurs when we rely on patterns in our experience to predict the nature of other experiences, often but not always making hypotheses about the future based on the past.

Inductive reasoning is essential to all of our lives. You would have used inductive reasoning thousands of times already today, including every single assumption you have made about the external world. You assumed that when you got out of bed that the floor would hold your weight because it always has before. You assumed that you would find your bathroom in the same place as it was yesterday. You assumed that your philosophy class would be held in the place you expected, because that seems the most sensible assumption to make.

The interesting thing about **induction** is that although it seems like the most sensible and infallible reasoning we do, and we could not live life as we know it without inductive processes, there is actually nothing within the logic itself which locks us into believing that things have to be that way. Although you would have been very surprised to find your bathroom had shifted to a different part of your house in the middle of the night, there is actually nothing *logically necessary* about its having turned up in the same place as yesterday. In other words, induction delivers contingent rather than necessary truths (see pp.279-280) and this leaves it open to a level of doubt.



## DISCUSS

How strong are the italicised arguments or claims? Rank them from strongest to weakest and discuss your rankings with others. What factors make for strong inductive arguments?

1. What is the next number in this series? 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, ... *'The next number is 21.'*
2. *'Philosophy classes have always been interesting in the past, so I assume today's class will be just as interesting.'*
3. *'The sun has risen every day in recorded human history, so it will surely rise tomorrow.'*
4. *'Nearly everyone in my family has suffered mild asthma, so my children probably will too.'*
5. *'All swans have feathers of either black, white or a combination of these colours (based on all observations of swans on Earth).'*
6. *At sea level, water has always been shown to boil at 100°C, and this has been confirmed millions of times in laboratories around the world. Therefore I accept it as fact.'*

You no doubt agreed that none of the arguments above is completely ridiculous. But all of them involve making a leap from the observed to the as-yet unobserved. Therefore, we may misinterpret the patterns we suppose to be present. The pattern of numbers may next descend by three rather than ascending. Or it may shift to ascending by sixes. The bigger plan of the universe may have the sun rising every day until the year 2222, and then only rising once a month.

It was David Hume (who you may recall from Theme 2 in this Chapter – see pp.292-295 and Famous Philosopher File p.182) who is well known for his sceptical arguments about induction. He pointed out that while we might identify the *cause* of our inductive beliefs (for example, that every morning we've ever known, the sun has risen), this is not the same as *justifying* or necessitating these beliefs.

As we saw in the case of the swans, people tend to believe that their inductive argument is strengthened the more evidence they gather. For example, every time another white swan was seen, in another European country, in another century, surely people could be more and more confident in their conviction that all swans are white. But it is always possible for some event to occur that weakens an inductive argument or proves it false. However many millions of times humans had seen white swans, it only took one explorer to make a single observation of an Australian black swan for theory that 'All swans are white' to be destroyed. This is known as the **problem of induction**.



## WRITE

1. Write a definition of **inductive reasoning**. Illustrate this by listing at least 10 instances of induction you have used today.
2. How does **inductive logic** differ from **deductive logic**? In what ways is deduction more reliable?
3. Explain the **problem of induction**. Make up your own example to illustrate it.
4. The scientific method is based on induction. Science moves from what we have observed to make predictions about as-yet unobserved cases. When you are prescribed medicine, when you get on an aeroplane, when you walk over a bridge... all these technologies are supported by inductive logic. Is this enough for you to trust them? Why or why not?



## DISCUSS

1. What is wrong with justifying induction by saying, 'But it always works!'?
2. Has our successful evolution as a species shown that induction is a method of interacting with the external world which we most certainly should continue?
3. 'Induction may or may not give us conclusions which correspond absolutely to the facts of the world, but it is certainly coherent with all our experiences to continue using induction and most of all, it makes pragmatic sense.' Is this a good justification for believing the results of inductive logic?
4. 'Induction may not give us 100% certainty, but it mostly gives us extremely high probability of something being true.' Is this a good argument for trusting inductive logic?



## TEXT STUDY: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section IV, 'Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding', Part II (1739)

[see Useful Resources]

1. How is Hume's of cause and effect related to the problem of induction?
2. What is Hume's argument to the conclusion that we should not make assumptions about the future on the basis of causality?



## DO

**Extension task:** There is another problem with induction, described by the twentieth century American philosopher Nelson Goodman and known as 'Goodman's Paradox.' Research this problem and discuss it in your class. Goodman originally used the proposition 'Emeralds are green' as his example by which to test induction, but perhaps you can make up your own example. When you have understood Goodman's Paradox, form a view about whether you think it poses a challenge to the plausibility of inductive logic. Why or why not?

## How Does Science Make Progress?

Having examined standard scientific process and criticisms of it, we will now briefly explore three theories of its development: **reductionism**, **falsificationism** and **relativism**.

### **Reductionism**

Scientific reductionism is the idea of reducing complex concepts and phenomena down to their individual constituent parts. According to the theory, this will make them easier to study and is more likely to lead to the truth. Extreme reductionist views believe that every process in nature can be broken down into its smallest parts and thus better described and understood. Ultimately, reality will be explained by moving from its smallest elements to its largest elements.

For example, some scientists believe that once we understand what goes on inside the atom at the tiniest quantum level, we will be able to develop theories which explain everything in the universe. Some brain scientists believe that once we understand every chemical and electrical process that occurs in the brain, we will be able to explain all human experience, including emotions, imagination, intelligence and creativity.

Of course there are more questions to be answered here. Just how small should we go? To explain the workings of the brain, will it perhaps be ultimately necessary to go even further than chemical and electrical relations between atoms; might we perhaps need to understand what happens at the subatomic level?

As you can see, the reductionist project can be very ambitious. Many criticise it for tending to oversimplify. If reductionism aims to show the workings of the whole by showing how each constituent part operates, might it thereby commit an error of reasoning?

In many fields it is becoming clearer that to try and study the smallest individual parts is too difficult and impractical, and indeed may be misleading. For some systems in nature it is not how the individual elements behave, but how the *whole* system behaves, that produces the overall characteristic way of functioning.

The reductionist view works well in some cases of modeling. For example, weather patterns behave chaotically so it is impossible to create a computer model which encompasses every possible behaviour. But a simplification of many typical weather elements allows the model work accurately and usefully enough.

So sometimes reductionism helps scientists to tease out complex processes. However, the more we discover in modern science about the interconnectedness of all things, the less reductionism appeals as a promising theory for scientific development.



### THINK

- Imagine a common piece of machinery. What would be the best way to see if it is working at its best – to extract and test each part individually or to observe the parts working with each other and the machine as a whole? Explain your response.
- Revise the meaning of the Fallacy of Composition (see p.61). Does reductionism run the risk of committing this fallacy? How might a reductionist defend the theory against this charge?

## ***Karl Popper and Falsificationism***

If you were disturbed by the problem of induction and its implications for the reliability of scientific claims, then falsificationism may have strong appeal.

Karl Popper (Famous Philosopher File p.317) also took the problem of induction seriously and he proposed a method which would emphasise deductive reasoning instead.

As we have seen, an inductive argument, even with millions of observations to its credit, can still produce a false conclusion.

For example:

- P1 Millions of swans have been observed over thousands of years and every one of them has been white.  
P2 This is a big enough sample from which to make a reasonable generalisation.
- 
- C Therefore, all swans are white.

However, as we have seen, it only takes a single observation of one non-white swan to demonstrate this conclusion to be most definitely false.

- P1 If all swans are white, Swan X must be white.  
P2 Swan X is not white.
- 
- C Therefore, all swans cannot be white.

For Popper, the appeal of the second argument is that its deductive validity makes the conclusion absolutely certain as long as the observation in P2 is correct.

Thus Popper builds his theory of falsificationism on the basis of the power in this deductive formula:

P1 If T (theory) then O (observation).

P2 Not O.

---

C Therefore, not T.

Popper's proposal is that instead of looking for repeated instances of **confirmation** of theories (for example, more and more white swans), science should instead focus on trying to **falsify** their theories. This way, rather than discovering mere *probabilities* via deductive logic, *certainties* can be established instead.

Popper insists that only those theories which can be falsified should be considered proper science. To be falsifiable, there needs to be at least one possible observation that if made, would prove the theory unquestionably false. For example, Popper regards astrology as a pseudo-science because its claims are rarely falsifiable. 'Not everything will go precisely as you expect today,' as read in a daily newspaper's astrology column, is such a broad statement that it could be applied to the life of every person, every day. It is difficult to imagine an observation of someone's day that would prove this false. Therefore, according to Popper, this claim is unscientific.

Popper believes that the best scientific theories are those which have been subjected to rigorous attempts to falsify them, but have withstood falsification. The more falsifiable a claim, the more useful it is to science. For example, if I predict that some kind of precipitation will occur in Melbourne in the next decade, my prediction is falsifiable, but not as readily falsifiable as the claim, 'Melbourne's CBD will receive three millimetres of rain on August 14, 2019'. Clearly the latter claim, if true, would mark me either as a meteorological prophet, or in possession of an impressively high-powered theory of weather prediction!

Of course, an obvious problem of falsificationism is that it gives us negative knowledge. We learn the truth about what is *not* the case rather than what is. It has also been objected that falsification is just not how science actually works; rather, progress has been made through scientific history by instances of confirmation rather than falsification. Thirdly, falsificationism does still rely on observation, so although its conclusions occur via deductive reasoning, these conclusion are only as sound as the observations they follow. There are many other objections to falsificationism which you may wish to research and consider.

## WRITE

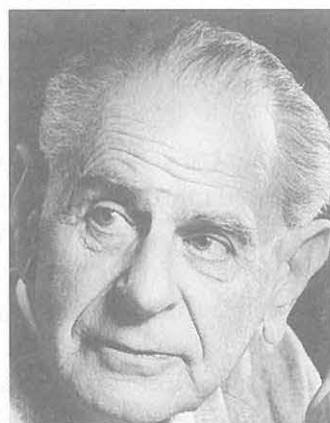
1. Explain falsificationism.
2. What are the advantages of falsificationism over the inductive reasoning of the scientific method?
3. How does falsificationism attempt to overcome the problem of induction? Does it succeed?
4. Evaluate Popper's view that scientific theories should be falsifiable, and the more falsifiable the better.



## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Karl Popper (1902–1994)

Sir Karl Popper is generally regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. He was born in Vienna in a house full of thousands of books (thanks to his book-loving, lawyer father) and as a young student he developed interests across mathematics, physics, philosophy, psychology and music. On leaving school, he worked for periods in house construction and cabinet-making, while dreaming of starting a childcare centre. When he eventually attended university it was to study early childhood education, and he worked for some time at a school for disadvantaged children. In 1925 he studied philosophy and psychology and qualified to teach secondary school mathematics and physics. However, fearing the threat of Nazism, and desiring an academic posting in a country more friendly to Jews, Popper worked hard at nights to complete a book, including many of the ideas for which he would become famous, such as the importance of falsifiability in science. Popper managed to emigrate to New Zealand in 1937, to teach at Canterbury University, Christchurch. Here he wrote *The Open Society and its Enemies*, which led to a posting to the London School of Economics, followed by the University of London. Popper continued to publish influential papers in social and political philosophy as well as philosophy of science. He was knighted in 1965.



### TEXT STUDY: Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, Chapter 1, Sections I and II (1963)



[see Useful Resources]

1. What is the problem of demarcation, according to Popper? Why does he think we should care about it?
2. What exactly is it for a theory to be falsifiable? How can a true theory be falsifiable?
3. Why does Popper think falsifiability is such a useful thing?
4. Do you think we should try and distinguish between disciplines that are scientific or non-scientific? Why?
5. In what ways does Popper find induction problematic, and how does he propose to overcome the problem?



## **Thomas Kuhn and Scientific Relativism**

There has been a prevailing view of science that it is objective and unbiased, and that as older theories are replaced by newer theories we are led closer to the truth.

Philosophers of science such as American Thomas Kuhn (Famous Philosopher File p.320) have pointed out that our view of science as an objective discipline may be mistaken. In his controversial book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn argues that because 'scientific truths' are defined by consensus of a scientific community, there may be factors other than objective truth which contribute to their formation.

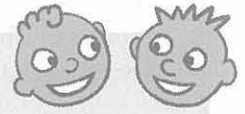
The scientific world is human and therefore full of prejudices, insecurities and vulnerabilities which make its findings similarly vulnerable, suggests Kuhn. Kuhn paints a picture of scientific circles as like an 'in-crowd' where people use the same jargon, procedures and hold the same biases. These conservative circles have the power to exclude other scientists whose theories they dislike or who see things unconventionally. And, because acceptance of a theory depends on its being endorsed by peer review and publication in journals, a scientist who is rejected by his peers will fail to progress.

Kuhn also challenges the mythologies surrounding scientists and the image of the scientist as an heroic individual driven by sparks of genius and the quest for truth. Scientists, Kuhn argues, are as vulnerable to the lure of the dollar as the rest of society. The commercial world offers more money than universities, so many scientists are employed by industry to find a scientific basis for activities which will bring profits. These are but a few of the ways in which Kuhn believes the scientific world is far from objective and disinterested in its attitude to knowledge.

Kuhn believes that this multitude of social factors has a profound influence on the way science progresses. He argues that scientific progress is not absolute; rather, it is **relative** to what is going on in the society and what the surrounding culture desires. He points to moments in history where it is clear that a scientist had already discovered a particular theory which much later would be adopted as the truth; however, the adoption of that theory had to wait until the society was ready. This view is thus one of **relativism** in relation to scientific theories – that is, the view that it is not possible to say that one theory is better or more true than another, but rather that theories are given status due to a range of other cultural factors.

On Kuhn's account, science proceeds in stages. Before any theory or organised body of knowledge exists in relation to a problem, there is **pre-science**. Then, when a theory emerges to solve some pressing problem of the surrounding society, we have a stage Kuhn calls **normal science**. This is the stage when a particular **paradigm** – or system of belief and associated practices – is in place. This is a powerful stage, according to Kuhn. Because there is consensus about a central theory during normal science, scientists can get on with applying the theory to as many puzzles as it has relevance to. Gradually, this science will run into more and more problems it cannot resolve, and eventually a **crisis** stage results, with various theories being proposed but no single theory attracting consensus. A **revolution** eventually occurs, in which a new theory and paradigm gain ascendancy, thus ushering in a new phase of normal science. And so the cycle continues.

While his theory is descriptive rather than normative (that is, it is more concerned with analysing the way things are than with arguing for the way things should be), Kuhn believes that for all the conservatism of normal science, its stability does allow for lots of problems to be solved and thus for 'progress' to be made.



## DISCUSS

How plausible does scientific relativism seem to you? Explain your response.

## TEXT STUDY: Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1953)



[see Useful Resources]

Read Chapter 7 'Crisis and the emergence of scientific theories'. Omit the sections on Lavoisier and Maxwell if you wish.

1. As you read, fill in as many characteristics as you can, about each stage of science as described by Kuhn.

Normal Science	Crisis	Revolutionary Science

2. In what ways is science essentially a conservative enterprise, as Kuhn describes it?
3. How is conservatism in science an advantage?
4. How is it a disadvantage?
5. How does the model of science, as described by Kuhn, make it difficult for a gifted maverick to produce a revolutionary solution to an age-old problem?

## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: DOES SCIENCE OFFER OBJECTIVE TRUTH?

The theories of Thomas Kuhn were revolutionary for their time, because they questioned the objectivity of science. Kuhn's account emphasises the sociological and psychological factors that influence whether a scientific theory is accepted or rejected.

Consider a current issue with scientific theory at its centre, but around which society has a great deal at stake. The issue of whether climate-change is the product of human activity is a good example.

1. What are the factors *other* than scientific factors which have influenced whether the scientific consensus (that is, that climate change is accelerated by human activities) is acted upon? List as many as you can think of.
2. If the scientific consensus was adopted by all nations, as a basis for policy-making, what might be the consequences, both for the scientific community and for the society? How might scientific activity be altered? (Consider new ways in which scientists might be employed, new business opportunities, etc.)
3. In what ways does your consideration of this issue support or reject Kuhn's thesis? What are the implications for society's consideration of this issue?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996)

As a high-school student in Ohio, young Thomas Kuhn had an intense interest in mathematics and physics. He went on to receive a doctorate in these areas from Harvard University, before developing an increasing interest in the history of science. He taught a course in the history of science at Harvard and then Berkeley, before publishing his influential work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which challenged traditional notions of scientific progress and coined the term 'paradigm shift'. Kuhn later taught at Princeton and MIT.



## Paul Feyerabend: Scientific Anarchy

In the many debates that followed Kuhn's account of science, probably the most controversial figure was Paul Feyerabend (Famous Philosopher File p.322). In his book, *Against Method* (1975), he famously argued for 'epistemological anarchism', rejecting all systems of rules and constraint in science.

Feyerabend argues that history's really great scientists have in fact gone outside accepted methodologies. Rather than being slaves to accepted protocols, such figures have been creative, opportunistic and adventurous. Feyerabend believes that science will only make progress if gifted thinkers are permitted to reject rules and adopt an 'anything goes', anarchistic attitude. He thinks that science, as it has been traditionally practised, works actively *against* the creative types who are most likely to make truly significant discoveries, turning them into 'human ants' unable to think outside their training.

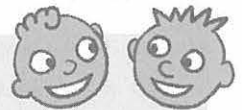
Feyerabend was greatly influenced by Kuhn's account of normal science, but he rejects Kuhn's idea that it is stability within a paradigm that allows for progress. His ideal is what Kuhn would describe as revolutionary science, or the kind of chaotic competition between theories which occurs during 'crisis'.

Central to Feyerabend's work is his discussion of Galileo's challenges to his Aristotelian opponents in the early seventeenth century. Feyerabend argues that if Galileo had followed the methods of science demanded today, his theory would have been rejected immediately, as Galileo did not actually have observational evidence for his claims.

*Hence it is advisable to let one's inclinations go against reason in any circumstances, for science may profit from it.*<sup>27</sup>

### DISCUSS

1. Should science rightly be seen as Feyerabend sees it – as an aspect of human creativity?
2. What does Feyerabend mean in the quotation above? To what extent do you agree?



## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: SCIENTIFIC TRUTH?

1. Find an article from a newspaper or magazine which contains scientific findings of some kind (for example: Do some foods ward off cancer? Is caffeine bad for your health? Are we programmed to be attracted to those with pheromones genetically dissimilar to our own? ...)
2. What scientific findings are referred to in the article?
3. What kind of reasoning seems to have been used to produce these findings? Should we regard the conclusions as 'fact' or 'truth'? Why or why not?
4. What do you think would constitute convincing evidence for these findings?
5. How might theories of reductionism or falsification be applied to this issue? To what extent do you think they would be helpful?
6. What cultural and societal factors have been at play such that this issue was investigated in the first place and is now being brought to your attention in the mass media? Do you think these factors have any bearing on whether the scientific findings should be regarded as 'fact'? Why or why not?
7. Overall, how does your study of this Theme help you to reflect on the epistemological issues raised by this newspaper article? Produce a written reflection of at least 400 words.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Paul Feyerabend (1924–1994)

Paul Feyerabend was born in Vienna, Austria. At school he was an avid reader, and also became passionate about the theatre and singing. When World War II broke out, he was drafted into the German army and his bravery was decorated with an Iron Cross medal. After Germany had begun its retreat, Feyerabend was struck in the spine by bulletfire. He was left crippled, impotent and in lifelong pain, walking with a stick for the rest of his life. Yet he was married four times, had countless love affairs, was once employed by four universities at the same time, and pursued his talent as an opera singer.

After the war, Feyerabend wrote plays, directed opera and studied history and sociology, later switching to physics and then to philosophy, studying under Karl Popper. Academic posts followed, at universities in Bristol, Berkeley, Auckland, Sussex, Yale, London, Berlin and Zurich. Feyerabend's first book, *Against Method* (1975), created a stir. In it he advanced an anarchist view of science, rejecting rules and rationalism. His other significant publications were *Science in a Free Society* (1978) and *Farewell to Reason* (1987).

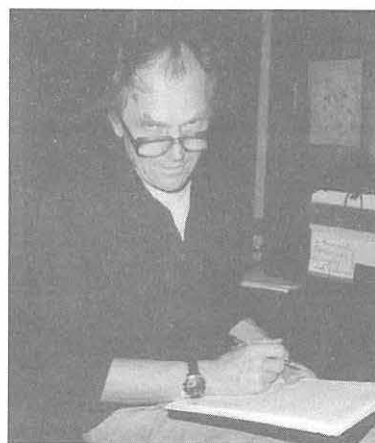


Photo: Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend

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## Assessment Tasks

The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.

### Assessment Task One: Written Reflection

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Overall, how reliable is science as a source of knowledge?
2. Does 'scientifically proven' mean the same as truth?
3. 'Science does have its limitations and weaknesses as a source of knowledge?' What might some of these be, and to what degree should they undermine science's authority in our society?
4. What differences do you see between philosophy and science in today's world?
5. What are some merits and some defects of the scientific method as a way of finding knowledge?
6. Is the so-called Problem of Induction really that much of a problem? Why or why not?
7. In what ways do you think science *should* make progress? Are theories of reductionism, falsification, relativism or anarchy any help in seeking a model for scientific progress?
8. Can science ever be value-free?
9. Which disciplines should count as science and which as pseudo-science? Explore at least four disciplines in your answer.
10. Explore another epistemological question which has sparked your interest during this Theme.

### Assessment Task Two: Essay

TOPIC 1: Does science discover the truth? Discuss, with detailed reference to the scientific method and the problem of induction, plus any other theories or ideas discussed in this theme.

OR

TOPIC 2: 'Science has followed too many failed rules in the past. It is time for scientists to embrace rule-less anarchy.' Do you agree?

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### Assessment Task Three: Short Answer Responses

Learn the definitions of all the terms presented in this Theme in preparation for a short-answer test. Be prepared to provide examples of all terms.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Oral/Multimedia Presentation Or Written Analysis***

The Relevant Contemporary Debate activities on pages 320 and 322 can be set either for an oral presentation or written task.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Written Analysis***

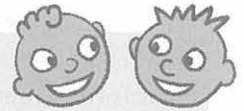
Answer a series of medium-answer questions relating to a primary text studied in this Theme.

## THEME 4

# On Objectivity

Throughout our studies of Epistemology, we have been questioning the kinds of knowledge we derive from different sources and challenging the reliability of this knowledge. While a position of extreme scepticism would make it hard to get along in the world at all, neither does it seem acceptable to naively accept all beliefs at face value. This Theme will further explore the question of whether objective truth is possible or attainable by humans.

### **Introductory Activity**



#### **DISCUSS**

First discuss these questions in a small group and then open the discussion up to the whole class.

1. How old are you? How might your age affect your knowledge and beliefs?
2. What is your sex? Does your gender affect the way you see the world and the beliefs you have about it?
3. What is your native language? Do you speak any other languages? How might your language(s) affect your knowledge of the world?
4. Where do you live – in a rural or urban area? What socio-economic group would you say you represent? How might these things affect your beliefs and knowledge of the world?
5. Do you have any siblings? Describe your place in your family. How might this affect the way you view the world?
6. What kind of schooling have you had? What subjects have you studied? Which have you enjoyed the most? How do you think these things may have affected the knowledge you have of the world?
7. Who raised you? Describe your parents' or guardians' backgrounds. How might your beliefs and knowledge about the world have been shaped by these people?
8. In what country or countries have you spent most time in your life? How has living in this country or countries shaped your worldview?
9. Can you think of any other personal factors which may have affected the knowledge and beliefs you have about the world?
10. Do you think there is such a thing as an absolute truth or do we all see the world from our own perspective? Give detailed reasons.



## ***Epistemological Relativism***

**Epistemological relativism** is the view that no belief can be given greater status or be said to be closer to the truth than any other belief. A relativist believes that what is true for me and what is true for you are different matters, and there are no criteria by which we may decide that you have knowledge, while I am labouring under a terribly misguided illusion. ‘Each to their own!’ the relativist will say, possibly pointing to factors of upbringing, culture, gender, race, religion, class and language to defend that the world inevitably and legitimately looks different to each of us. ‘There is no such thing as an absolute truth, so how can we judge one person to be any closer to truth than another?’ the relativist argues.

These are views which may have arisen in your class discussions, and they are popular views in the liberal Western world today. However, as attractive as it may first seem, deciding that we each live in our own little bubbles of ‘true for me’ is not ultimately a desirable nor necessarily convincing outcome. In this Theme we invite you to consider the extent to which the relativist’s position is tenable.

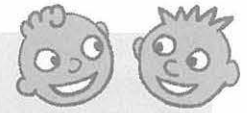
In Theme 1 of this Chapter, we considered three different theories of truth (see pp.270-272). You will remember the **correspondence theory** that truth occurs when our beliefs can be directly observed in the external world. Other definitions of truth move away from the world outside and towards the subject doing the observing. Does the truth have more to do with what fits in with my other beliefs (**coherence theory**)? Or is the truth whatever it is practically useful to believe (**pragmatic theory**)?

These latter two theories each move a step away from the belief in **objective truth** (that is, truth that is independent from minds and personal opinions) towards **subjective truth** (which depends on the subject and his/her mind and opinions).

When we examined sensory perception in Theme 2, it seemed as though there could not be one single truth that you, me, my cat and my elderly neighbour could all be sure we experience identically. Instead of objective readings of the world, are our perceptions actually the product of an order and interpretation we ourselves impose upon the external world, through our limited senses, the structures of our minds, our backgrounds, our biases and our expectations? However, if we argue that there is a different set of facts for everyone, doesn’t that mean *nothing* is true? Doesn’t truth, to have any meaning at all, have to be objective? For example, if I say it is ‘true for me’ that the earth is flat, and it is ‘true for you’ that the earth is round, surely it’s not the case that both of us are in possession of the truth.

And surely there are some beliefs which are frankly ridiculous, or which ignore the evidence, or are inconsistent or unjustified. Furthermore, if every belief is as good as any other, then the claim that every belief is as good as any other is no better than the claim that there is one objective truth! Hence it can be argued that the statement ‘All truth is relative’ is self-contradictory.

On the other hand, if we let go of our attachment to absolute truths, we can also avoid the danger of feeling obliged to impose it upon others when we possess it. **Dogmatism**, as history shows us, can be very damaging.



## DISCUSS

1. What are all the advantages you can think of to epistemological relativism?
2. What are all the disadvantages?
3. Are you an epistemological relativist? Why or why not?

## AFTER KANT: CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

As we saw in Theme 2 (see pp.295-296), the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) introduced to philosophy the revolutionary separation between the *noumenal* world – that is, the world as it is, or ‘things-in-themselves’ – and the *phenomenal* world that we perceive.

According to Kant, the phenomenal world is all we have access to. The mind must have a **conceptual scheme** in order to process the data of experience and make it intelligible to us.

This notion of conceptual schemes has been extremely influential. Many thinkers have wondered whether there is just one set of concepts common to all humanity, or whether different cultures and epochs might encourage the development of distinct conceptual schemes. Such schemes would not be, as Kant insisted, innate and *a priori*. Instead they must be acquired within the context of culture. Furthermore, if the way we process perceptions is a function of a culturally-acquired conceptual scheme, then what we are capable of observing in the world must be as much a product of our culture as of the nature of actual reality.

A consequence of this is that people operating with different conceptual schemes will have markedly different views of the world. This may be reflected in language; rich vocabularies may be associated with things that are valued in a culture, whereas the same things may be all but invisible in another culture, without words to describe them. At its most extreme, this scenario renders different people actually unable to communicate about the world, as the realities they inhabit are so different.

A further consequence of this view is conceptual relativism, suggesting there is no possibility for any true or objective interpretation of the world, since we have no basis for determining which conceptual schemes, if any, are accurate representations of noumenal reality.

Theories about conceptual schemes, and the conceptual relativism they may imply, have been the focus of much of philosophy’s most important work over the past 150 years or so.



## WRITE

Is it plausible that we encounter the world directly and as it is, and can come to know it as correspondence truth?

Or do you agree with Kant that there is a layer of mental interpretation which filters and processes perceptions of reality, such that we can never have direct knowledge of the world as it is?

Use examples to make the strongest case you can for each view, and then justify your view of which seems most plausible.

## WILLIAM JAMES: EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRAGMATISM

Foundationalism considers our immediate sensory experience of the world to be the truth. But it seems unavoidable that I must make some kind of mental translation about what my senses tell me. So even if we were to consider the senses to be infallible, there is still a layer of interpretation on top of this. As Kant put it, 'intuitions [i.e. perceptions] without concepts are blind.'

William James (Famous Philosopher File p.166) approached philosophical problems such as this one from a background in psychology. Before he turned to philosophy he had already published his monumentally significant *Principles of Psychology* (1890), in which he pioneered the notion of the *stream of consciousness* – that is, the flow of thoughts in the conscious mind. Taking this idea to philosophy, James argued that nature and our minds are in fact inseparable, and we can never stop the flux of perceptions about the world to get an objective look at it.

As an extension of this, James argued that we should seek the meaning of 'true' by examining how the idea functions in our lives. In *Pragmatism* (1907), he argues that a belief is true if it is *helpful* to us. It is folly, he says, to think of beliefs as being somehow able to match external reality. Rather, to say something is true means that it is useful in a precarious environment; it has 'cash value' for us as we negotiate survival in an inhospitable world.

You will note links, here, to Darwin's theory of evolution. By James' account, intellectual fitness – measured in what we take to be truth, and how this guides our behaviour – is as important as biological fitness. An important example is religious belief. Religious beliefs have persisted throughout history, as forces which inspire people to endure, create, improve and overpower. James also argues that when our belief systems work for us, and seem to solve pressing problems, we can lead fuller and more satisfying lives.

James's lecture, 'The Will to Believe' (1896) defends the doctrine that a belief can be justified by what it brings to one's life. He says 'passional considerations' – including fear, hope, prejudice and attachment – should count in determining the rationality of our beliefs. Furthermore, he says that in certain cases it may be rational to form beliefs in advance of the evidence and to hold on to beliefs even when the evidence disputes them. If the question of whether something is true cannot be settled intellectually, and if the matter must be settled urgently in order for action to occur, it is legitimate for a belief to remain true for us, he says.



## DISCUSS

1. What is your response to James's argument that the truth is what works?
2. What are some implications for holding this view?



## TEXT STUDY: William James, 'The Will to Believe' (1907)

[see Useful Resources]

1. Explain James's distinction between 'live' and 'dead' hypotheses. How are they related to belief?
2. James rejects Clifford's view that 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.' With whom do you agree?
3. *'Our faith is faith in some one else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other, — what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up?'*

What is James arguing here? Reconstruct his argument in your own words.

4. 'As a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use.' How does James argue for this claim? Is he right?
5. How does James's view compare with contemporary psychology's notion of 'cognitive bias' (see p.46)? What significance does cognitive bias have for epistemology? Can it be overcome?
6. *'The postulate that there is truth, and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it, we are deliberately resolving to make, though the sceptic will not make it.'* What does James mean by this? Can he be termed a relativist on this basis?
7. Explain James's distinction between epistemological empiricism and absolutism.
8. Why should we give up 'objective certitude' according to James? (paragraph 16) Outline his argument. Do you agree with him?
9. How does James argue that belief in truth is actually a moral stance?
10. James's thesis is 'When our intellect cannot solve a genuine option, emotionally we must decide.' What does he mean by this? Do you agree with him?

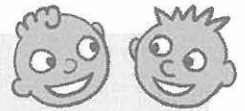
## RICHARD RORTY: AGAINST FOUNDATIONALISM

For Richard Rorty (Famous Philosopher File p.331), the main problems in epistemology arise from philosophers' misguided, foundationalist demands that the mind should somehow mirror external reality. Much of his book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), is devoted to dismantling the theories of everyone since Plato, to argue that there can be no foundational certainties. As well as rejecting empirical, *a posteriori* certainty – that is, the possibility that sensory experience can tell us anything true about the world – Rorty also rejects rational, *a priori* certainty, arguing that analytic sentences in fact tell us nothing about the world itself.

Having torn apart all traditional candidates for knowledge, there is little left standing except for beliefs that are pragmatically useful – placing Rorty in some agreement with James. Rorty considers truth to be a sort of communal consensus on what is best aligned with what we want. He states that 'justification is a matter of conversation, of social practice'<sup>28</sup>, arguing that the notion of truth is something inseparable from the social processes of reasoning we follow with each other and ourselves. This is called a **social constructivist** theory of truth. You may recognise accord here with Thomas Kuhn (see p.320), who suggested that scientists bestow the honour of 'truth' upon whatever theory of the day is best equipped to answer that society's pressing needs.

### DISCUSS

1. Should truth be seen as essentially a social practice?
2. What are some implications of adopting this view?



### TEXT STUDY: Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (1979)

[see Useful Resources]

READ the following passage, from the Introduction:

*The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, non-empirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself. Without this latter notion, the strategy common to Descartes and Kant – getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror, so to speak – would not have made sense. Without this strategy in mind, recent [schools of philosophy] would not have made sense.*



... Dewey, on the other hand, ...wrote his polemics against traditional mirror-imagery out of a vision of a new kind of society. In his ideal society, culture is no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement. In that culture, as he said, the arts and the sciences would be 'the unforced flowers of life.' I would hope that we are now in a position to see the charges of 'relativism' and 'irrationalism' once leveled against Dewey as merely the mindless defensive reflexes of the philosophical tradition which he attacked.\*

1. How does Rorty use the metaphor of a mirror to describe traditional accounts of truth-seeking in philosophy?
2. Rorty invokes fellow pragmatist, John Dewey, in his recommendation of an essentially communal notion of truth. What do you make of the notion that the arts and sciences would be 'the unforced flowers of life'?
3. From your studies of epistemology, do you agree with Rorty that philosophy's (and science's) historical attempts to establish truth have been futile? Why or why not?

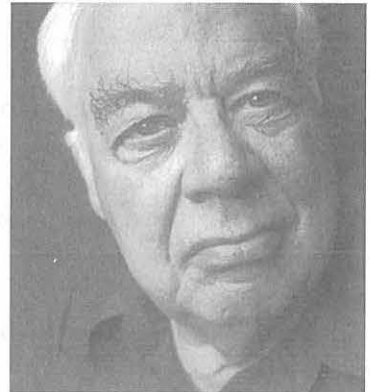
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\* Richard Rorty 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp12-13.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Richard Rorty (1931–2007)

Richard Rorty was born in New York City to activist writer parents. He suffered depression as a teenager but found solace in reading widely from his parents' political library and in the beauty of New Jersey's orchids. His autobiography was entitled *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*. At just 14 years of age, he enrolled at the University of Chicago and went on to complete his PhD in philosophy at Yale. Rorty held teaching posts at several prestigious universities and the courses he taught were extremely popular. He published prodigiously and on a range of topics including epistemology, philosophy of language, religion and ethics.



## Mathematics: Objective Truth?

In the last Theme, we considered the high status of scientific knowledge in today's world and challenged the notions of scientific certainty and scientific 'proof'. Many argue that as proofs are only obtainable through deductive logic, and the scientific method relies for the most part on induction, proof is not possible in science, except about what is *not* the case (that is, in falsification of a theory).

But what about mathematics? Here is one school subject where your answers are definitely right or wrong. Surely this deductive system offers us indubitable proofs, and should therefore be considered objective truth?

Mathematics is a system based on a set of basic assumptions called **axioms**. Traditionally, these have been considered to be self-evident, necessary truths. You are probably familiar with the axioms of Euclidean geometry. Starting with some basic definitions – including that a point is that which has no part and a line has no breadth – Euclid proposed five axioms:

1. A straight line can join any two points.
2. A straight line can extend infinitely in both directions.
3. A circle can be drawn through any given point and will have another point at its centre.
4. All right angles are equal to one another.
5. Given a straight line and another point, there is only one straight line which can be drawn through the point such that it is parallel to the original given line.

Using these axioms as the premises of deductive arguments, Euclid was able to produce several **theorems**, such as:

1. If we draw two lines (A and B) at right angles to another line C), lines A and B will be parallel.
2. Two straight lines can never enclose an area.
3. The angles in a triangle add to 180 degrees.
4. The angles on a straight line sum to 180 degrees.

These theorems (that is, propositions proven on the basis of axioms) can then be used as the premises for more and more complex deductive proofs, some of which you will have encountered in maths classes. Mathematicians seek theorems which are clear, economical and elegant.

But as you know, the conclusion of a deductive argument is only true as long as the premises are true. So can we be certain of the truth of mathematical axioms?

These matters have all been debated in the Philosophy of Mathematics over the centuries. Hopefully you will have vigorous class debates about these questions also!

## DO

Use Hume's Fork (from Theme 2, see p.292 ) to investigate whether mathematics gives us truth and if so, how. Consider the following questions: Are items of mathematics (for example,  $2+2=4$ ) necessary or contingent truths? Do we know them *a priori* (before experience) or *a posteriori* (after experience)? Are they analytic (true by definition) or synthetic (by experiment)?



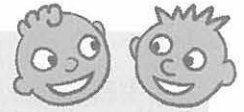
## THINK



1. There are two hungry sharks in the pool. You throw in two large fish. An hour later, how many sharks are in the pool? Does  $2 + 2 = 4$ ?
2. Is it possible to imagine a world where  $2 + 2 = 3$ ? (For example, a world where whenever two objects were added to another two objects, one object would disappear?)
3. When children first learn to add numbers they usually use counters and real objects such as fruit. Does this show that mathematics is empirical rather than necessary (*a priori*) knowledge?

## IS MATHEMATICS DISCOVERED OR INVENTED?

### DISCUSS



1. What is the difference between saying something is 'invented' rather than 'discovered'? Think of examples to illustrate your definitions.
2. Do you think mathematics is an invention or a discovery? What are the most convincing arguments from each side of this debate?
3. If we contact alien life forms, do you think they will have the same mathematics as us? Why or why not?

The view that maths is 'out there' to be discovered is called the Platonic view of maths, after Plato (see Famous Philosopher File p.93), who argued that mathematical truths are perfect, eternal and unchanging. However, the Platonist may face difficulties if confronted by questions such as *where* does mathematics have its existence? Also, why is it that our everyday world, which is full of things that are *not* eternal and unchanging, obeys mathematical laws?

You may have debated in your class whether mathematics is actually outside of us, in the external world, or whether it is a system which our minds impose on the world – that is, a human invention designed to bring order. But surely if we just invented it, it is an arbitrary system and we could just as easily invent an alternative system? Is this possible? And if it is an invention, how is it so clearly the case that mathematics is either right or wrong?

This is a complex and fascinating question, and some of you may feel inclined to investigate the Philosophy of Mathematics further than is allowed by the scope of this course and textbook.

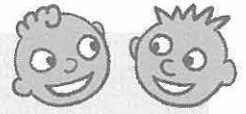


## Language: Determining our World?

In the previous exercise, some of you may have argued that mathematics is a kind of language. If it is, mathematics is clearly a more universal language than the rest of our mother tongues, which, aside from a few unifying principles, seem to be fairly arbitrary products of invention. Yet language is the primary way that we communicate about our knowledge and beliefs. Certainly in philosophy – as opposed to in maths, music, art, or our emotional lives – our knowledge claims are always expressed in language. Are there problems with this? Does language enable us to communicate our beliefs in a pure way? Or does language create a further layer between us, perhaps contaminating our message? And how does the fact that we think in language actually shape the kind of knowledge that we are capable of having in the first place? The Philosophy of Language is a vast and fascinating area of study, which assumed a dominant place in philosophical discourse in the twentieth century. Unfortunately we can only consider a few starting points in Unit 1, but you are encouraged to do further reading.

### DISCUSS

How much could you know about the world if you had no language?



You will no doubt be familiar with connotations in language. It can be argued that there are few words available to us which are not value-laden in some way. Think of all the different words you could use to describe a party, from a 'study session' to a 'booze-up'. What words would you select when seeking your parents' permission to attend? The power of language is profound in yielding knowledge of a situation. If I told you I had seen a 'youth' hanging around outside the railway station, what picture do you get in your mind? How does your 'knowledge' of this scene compare if I revise my description to having seen a 'student' outside the railway station? Of course, further issues arise if we are communicating with someone from a different cultural or language background. When learning a language it takes a long time to pick up on what can be powerful local connotations of words.

### DO

Think of at least six words with strong connotations. Now write a story of a few sentences, using all these words. Pass this to a partner, whose job is to rewrite your story replacing all the value-laden words with synonyms. How does the meaning of the story change? What might this suggest about the relationship between language and knowledge?



Some philosophers have suggested that the influence of language extends much further than values and that our language actually determines what we think and how we think. This view – that our thoughts are completely limited by our language – is called **linguistic determinism**. Two anthropologists, Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Whorf (1879-1941), developed the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** through comparative studies of the ways people of different language groups thought about the world. Whorf studied American Hopi Indians who have no words for time, past and future, and speculated that they must therefore have radically different conceptions and experiences of time compared with English speakers.

A famous example concerns the many words the Inuit people have for snow. Because they have such an extensive snow vocabulary, they are actually able to sense and identify subtle differences in shades and texture and they thus see snow landscapes quite differently from people from other language groups.

You may also be familiar with George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984*, which explores the idea that, as Ludwig Wittgenstein (Famous Philosopher File p.517) put it, 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world'. In the novel, the government introduces a new vocabulary called Newspeak to remove all possibilities of rebellion or subversion from the language, hoping to thereby repress the people.

Much more could be said on this topic, and you may wish to research it further. The links between language and reality flow into many other areas including philosophy of science, philosophy of feminism and political philosophy.

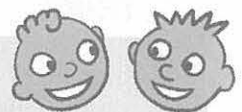
### DO

Find someone (maybe yourself?) who is fluent in more than one language. Ask them: to what extent do you think differently in one language compared with the other?



### DISCUSS

1. Do you think thought is possible without language?
2. What are some possible objections to linguistic determinism and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?
3. How do babies acquire language? What does this suggest to you about the relationship between language and knowledge?
4. Do you express yourself best through words or through some other means? Do you ever struggle to find words for ideas that you have? What does this suggest to you about the relationship between language and knowledge?

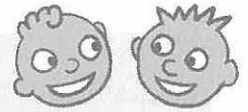


## Emotion: A Way of Knowing?

Philosophy traditionally focuses on thoughts and our reasons for them, with very little consideration of the emotions as a source of knowledge. This is an ancient divide, or **dichotomy**, that goes back to Plato. Plato used a metaphor depicting Reason and Passion as two horses pulling a chariot in different directions. The job of the charioteer was to discipline and overpower the passionate horse and go only in the direction of the reasonable horse. Most of us have been told at some stage to ‘be reasonable’ – to calm our emotions and to speak with a cool head. Emotion is often seen as an obstacle to clarity of thought and to reliable knowledge. It is regarded as the enemy of objectivity. Like philosophy, science and maths are supposed to be emotion-free zones for this reason. But the emotions are essential elements of human nature. Are they really such a barrier to truth? Or should we trust and encourage our feelings and intuitions, and give them higher epistemological status?

### DISCUSS

Should reason be regarded as superior to the emotions as a source of knowledge? Why or why not? Use examples in your discussion.



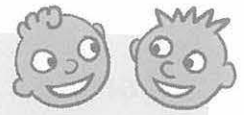
Of course, there is a sense in which emotion and reason are obviously different things. Your desire to do well in philosophy is not the same as your knowledge of the subject. My sadness at my uncle’s cancer diagnosis is separate from my knowledge of his medical prognosis. Yet we may be mistaken if we take reason and emotion to be completely different categories. Can you completely separate the emotions you have had so far today from the thoughts you have had? Studies suggest that while some people may keep their emotions strictly controlled, it is very marked when a person lacks emotion altogether. Because it is emotion that makes anything matter to us at all, a life devoid of emotion becomes one devoid of thought and meaning and quickly collapses altogether.

### THINK

1. How often are your emotions ever completely irrational – that is, prompted by nothing, with no explanation for them whatsoever?
2. In what ways might your rationality require emotions?



**Intuitions** – those moments of ‘gut reaction’ when you seem to grasp the solution to a problem or ‘just know’ something without having gone through any rational processes – are interesting to consider as types of knowledge. You have probably heard about Archimedes, who suddenly came up with his famous insight in the bath and went running, naked, down the street yelling, ‘Eureka!’ (‘I’ve got it!’). Nude runs aside, we have all had these moments where we seemed to ‘just know’ something, but may have been bemused as to *how* we know. These are sometimes described as ‘hunches’ or even as a ‘sixth sense’.



## DISCUSS

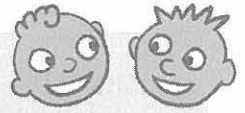
1. Describe a time when you had a strong 'hunch' or 'gut feeling' about something. Did it turn out to be right? Would you describe your intuition as knowledge or belief?
2. Some intuitional beliefs turn out to be true. But can they be said to be justified? Do they need to be justified if we are to trust them?

However, some are sceptical about the idea that intuitions really come out of nowhere. Just because you haven't thought something through consciously doesn't mean that it is not the result of complex sensory and cognitive processes and other pieces of knowledge coming together. For example, how do you know how to catch a ball? How do you know how to write your name or how to interact with someone when you meet them? These things can be sensibly explained even though at the time they seem to come to you automatically. Perhaps Archimedes had his famous insight not out of the blue but because he had been thinking about it long and hard, and then when he was relaxed enough, all the pieces of the puzzle came together in his rational mind.

The main thing to be asked about intuition is whether it is reliable. Although there are many examples of when intuitions have been wonderfully and extraordinarily accurate, there are just as many others that show intuitions can be dangerously mistaken.

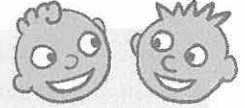
The area of emotion raises interesting epistemological questions, questions that have perhaps been under-valued in philosophy. Neurologist Antonio Damasio's 1995 book, *Descartes' Error*, argues that Descartes' profoundly influential conclusions in 1647 that mind and body are separate, and that humans are essentially 'thinking things', were mistaken. Damasio questions why the Western world has been obsessed with Descartes' notion of 'I think therefore I am'. Why not 'I feel, therefore I am'? Or 'I love, therefore I am'? Damasio's thesis is that rationality is in fact inseparable from emotional input.

American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Famous Philosopher File p.338) similarly argues that the emotion/reason dichotomy should be dismantled. She argues that emotions are actually forms of thought. It is not that emotions merely include a cognitive component, says Nussbaum; rather they are actually necessarily and sufficiently thoughts. 'Emotion-cognitions', as Nussbaum calls them, are thoughts to which a strong sense of commitment is attached. In other words, they are thoughts about what is important to a person. Emotions are intelligent states that highlight to us what matters. This is particularly significant to the law, argues Nussbaum, because the law is designed to protect what matters to people. Therefore, emotions should not be dismissed as irrelevant factors in producing just legal outcomes.



## DISCUSS

1. Should you trust your intuitions when making a decision? How far would you be prepared to trust your intuitions?
2. To what extent should emotions be regarded as knowledge?
3. Should emotion have a greater place in philosophy? Give examples to support your view.



## DISCUSS

Are you familiar with the notion of so-called 'EQ' or with Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences? If so, how many of Gardner's MIs use the emotions? Do you think the MIs are all distinct and separate from one another? What bearing do these theories have on questions of knowledge and epistemological relativism?



## TEXT STUDY: Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error* (1994)

[see Useful Resources]

READ Chapter 11, 'A Passion for Reasoning'

1. What are some of the consequences of the so-called 'Cartesian split' between mind and body, reason and emotions, according to Damasio?
2. What does Damasio mean by the 'biology of reason'?
3. What could be the implications of Damasio's thesis for our views about knowledge?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Martha Nussbaum (1947– )

Nussbaum was born into a wealthy New York City family. She studied theatre and classics at New York University and took up philosophy after a move to Harvard University. While at Harvard, Nussbaum overcame sexual harassment and problems getting childcare for her daughter, to become the first woman to hold the Junior Fellowship. She taught at Harvard, Brown and Oxford Universities, before taking up her current position at the University of Chicago. Nussbaum's many books – on topics ranging from ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, ethics, philosophy of law, feminism, literature and animal rights – have won prizes and acclaim throughout the world.





## **TEXT STUDY: Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (2001)**

[see *Useful Resources*]

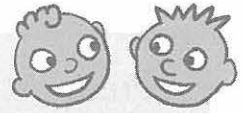
READ Chapter 7, Section 1, 'Compassion and Reason'

1. How does legal process separate reason from emotion?
2. What is Nussbaum's view on this?
3. How might legal proceedings be different if emotions were considered on par with reason as a way to truth?
4. Do you consider emotions to be forms of judgement? Explore this idea through one or more examples of your own.

## ***Gender and Knowledge***

Just as it has been argued that Western philosophy, under the influence of Plato and Descartes, has privileged reason over emotion, so too it has been argued that Western thought has been based on a particularly masculine model. Undoubtedly, women have been largely excluded from philosophy, barred from opportunities to study, to participate in philosophical conversations and to publish their ideas. Aristotle's view that women possessed inferior reasoning capacities was reflected in Greek society and then strongly upheld in medieval times. It is only through feminist writing in the last century that the profound impact of thousands of years of marginalisation of women has been thoroughly considered and deconstructed. Kate Millett argued in her *Sexual Politics* (1970) that repression of women by men is evident in every aspect of our world: in the economy, in all institutions, in every relationship, even in every story that we have about our world and our history. She called this system of male domination the **patriarchy**.

If patriarchy is so deeply embedded in every aspect of our culture, it seems likely that it is also deeply rooted in our language and perhaps even in our very notion of knowledge. Many feminist philosophers have argued that men have been the ones to define not only what knowledge is but also what is 'the truth', while women have been in the margins of society, staying at home and caring for children. Some feminist philosophers have wondered whether women perhaps view reality quite differently from men. If women had been in charge, doing all the thinking and writing all the books over all these centuries, would we have a different sense of knowledge and truth? This is fascinating to think about. But what might a feminist model of knowledge look like? Well, of course this is very difficult to imagine, because for a woman to gain enough education to be asking a question like this, she is already totally enmeshed in the patriarchy and its epistemology. However, some writers including Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have undertaken extensive projects to revise the ways we use language and to expose patriarchal assumptions embedded in the way we communicate. Aiming to remove Cartesianism (that is, the influence of Descartes' separation of mind from body and reason from emotion), many feminist philosophers have focussed on the body as a source of knowledge. Renewed emphasis on emotions and social relationships, particularly the emotion of care, have also been explored as ways of removing traditional gender biases in Western epistemology. Australian philosopher, Genevieve Lloyd (Famous Philosopher File p.340), has done groundbreaking work in questioning the masculine nature of philosophy itself.



## DISCUSS

1. Can you think of any obvious ways in which your education has been patriarchal?
2. Does it seem plausible to you that centuries of exclusion of women from educated conversation has shaped the very notion of what we call knowledge in the Western world? Why or why not?
3. What are some potential difficulties with trying to show this claim to be knowledge rather than belief?
4. Is there gender balance among students studying philosophy at your school, or is it favoured more by males or by females? Can you make any suggestions as to why this is so?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Genevieve Lloyd (1941– )

Genevieve Lloyd is an Australian philosopher and feminist. Born in Cootamundra, NSW, she completed her early studies in philosophy at the University of Sydney, and then her D.Phil at Oxford. While lecturing at the ANU, Lloyd developed ideas of international influence, published in *Man of Reason* in 1984. In 1987 she became the first female professor of philosophy appointed to an Australian University when she accepted the Chair of Philosophy at the University of New South Wales. She has published extensively on Descartes, Spinoza and the philosophy of feminism.



## TEXT STUDY: Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (1993)

[see Useful Resources]

READ final chapter, 'Concluding Remarks'.

1. In what ways is Reason 'male', according to Lloyd?
2. What does Lloyd describe as the main difficulties of trying to resurrect the feminine?
3. What have been some consequences for the absence of women from philosophy, according to Lloyd?
4. How does Lloyd's thesis challenge traditional ideas about what philosophy is?
5. Is Lloyd's argument one of relativism? Why or why not?





## DO

Research a female philosopher and present to your class a brief summary of the philosophical themes that have dominated her work.

## ***Culture and Knowledge***

Of course it is not only women who have been marginalised in the Western world. Western philosophy reflects the conversations of white European males over the past two thousand years or so. This thinking has been remarkable, and has shaped human thought and activity on a global scale as Western ways have steadily spread their influence. But just as we should wonder about the effects of the absence of women from the processes which formed the Western worldview, we should wonder also, how might the world be different if other cultures had gained dominance? Would our notions of knowledge and belief be the same?

There are several traditions of thought in India, China and south-east Asia which are even older than the Western philosophical tradition. There may also have been schools of philosophy in the Americas and North Africa before Europeans arrived. Many Pacific Island peoples may not have written their ideas down, but they have complex systems of ideas, extending back many generations. Indigenous Australians carry oral traditions of complex tribal knowledge, which sometimes conflict with Western views. For example, one of the most valuable techniques for ecological management in northern Australia is systematic firing of the bush. Aborigines have known how to maintain sophisticated methods and sequences of firing for millennia, and these have been more successful than Western science's attempts to use fire in land management. It is only in the last century that, often through anthropological findings, Western philosophers have started to study non-Western ways of knowing seriously.

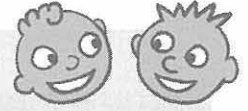
There are many difficulties associated with assessment of knowledge claims from different cultural traditions. In the West, the great ideas of Philosophy have been handed down in a well-preserved, written, argumentative and broadly scientific way. That is, our ideas about what constitutes 'truth' have been shaped by a tradition of demanding literal explanations and clear justifications of either logic or physical evidence. Mythological, esoteric and non-scientific ways of thinking about the universe have been sidelined as belief rather than knowledge. So when we encounter other cultural systems of thought, we tend to impose the same epistemological standards.

This can be problematic in cases such as Chinese philosophy. Chinese logic is so different from the Western logic we learned about in Chapter 1, that we can barely translate it. Chinese philosophy uses metaphors and analogies and is resistant to translation into literal, English terminology. The Chinese language is ambiguous; the characters it is written in can be endlessly reinterpreted for new shades of symbolic meaning and connotation. This is a quality which Chinese philosophy celebrates, in contrast to Western philosophy which aims to pin down every concept to absolute clarity and comprehensive definition.

In many cases, understanding a different culture's philosophy is impossible without immersing ourselves in that culture and its language and history. As well, in many cultures, just as in our own Judaeo-Christian tradition, questions of knowledge are deeply woven into questions of



religion so that to deny or misunderstand the religion means denying or misunderstanding the knowledge. Problems of **incommensurability** are sometimes spoken about, in cases where there is simply no way of finding common ground between two cultures, such that each party cannot even begin to comprehend the viewpoint of the other, let alone agree with it.



## DISCUSS

1. What are some differences in understanding that you are aware of between your own and another culture's beliefs about the world?
2. What kinds of belief would be hardest to give up if you had to adjust to a culture which did not share them?



## DO

1. Research the ways in which the 'conceptual schemes' – or ways of knowing – of indigenous Australians might be described. In particular, consider attitudes to the land, animals and cycles of nature.
2. What conclusions can you draw about how an indigenous Australian might develop knowledge and beliefs, more generally?
3. To what extent would you say there is a problem of 'incommensurability' between Western knowledge and indigenous Australian knowledge? To the extent that incommensurability exists, is there anything that can be done to bridge gaps in understanding?

## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: COMPARING KNOWLEDGE IN DIFFERENT SUBJECT AREAS

Over the course of a week, analyse the work you do in *two* of your other subject areas – such as mathematics, a natural science, a human science, a language, history, geography, art, music, drama and so on.

Record answers to the following:

1. Is this subject dealing with matters of knowledge, belief or neither? Describe the kinds of knowledge claims that you most commonly encounter in this subject.
2. What level of certainty do you have when answering questions in this subject? Why?
3. Are logic and reasoning important in this subject? What kinds of logic are used and in what ways?

4. Is emotion important in doing well in this subject? In what ways?
5. To what extent is your knowledge and use of the English language important in this subject? What potential problems of knowledge does this pose?
6. Would this subject's content be the same regardless of where it was studied? How is its content the product of its culture?
7. Are there any ways in which your experiences of this subject's content are different depending on your gender, do you think?
8. It is often said that in some subjects it is 'harder' to gain knowledge than in others. Do you agree?
9. Should some knowledge be considered of higher 'status' than other knowledge? Is it more important to have knowledge of the sciences than of the arts, for example?
10. What personal factors determine what you learn and the knowledge you gain from this subject?
11. Recalling the correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth we studied in Chapter 4 Theme 1, what theory best describes this subject's relationship with the truth?
12. Overall, how do these two subjects compare, epistemologically? Is it possible or appropriate to argue that one offers a greater degree of truth than the other?

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## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Do you think objective knowledge of any kind is possible?
2. Are you an epistemological relativist? Why or why not?
3. Kant argued that we can never access direct correspondence facts about the external world, but only our interpretations of our perceptions of these facts. Does this seem right to you? Why or why not?
4. Is it irrational to believe things we have no evidence for?
5. 'The truth is what works'. Do you agree?
6. Is truth socially constructed?
7. Does mathematics get us closer to the truth than any other field? Why or why not?
8. Should we listen to our feelings and intuitions more in searching for truth?

9. Do you think that men and women think differently? If so, how do you know? And if so, what are differences from – nature, upbringing, culture or personal choices?
10. Do you think people of different cultural groups think differently? If so how do you know this? And if so, what could be some reasons?
11. How do you think your own personal background has shaped your knowledge and beliefs?
12. Do you think there are universal truths which must hold true regardless of culture, gender, language, time and place? What might some of these be?
13. In what sense do you think philosophers are products of their culture?
14. Philosophy aims to be pure and objective in its search for the truth; do you think it can accomplish this aim?
15. The philosopher Wittgenstein said that ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’. Do you agree?

### ***Assessment Task Two: Essay***

TOPIC: ‘Objective knowledge is impossible, so epistemological relativism is the only solution.’  
Do you agree?

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### ***Assessment Task Three: Dialogue***

Write a dialogue between an epistemological relativist and someone who thinks some objective knowledge is possible. Include their discussion of at least three of mathematics, language, emotion, gender, culture and science as sites of controversy relevant to this debate.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Research Task and Oral Presentation***

The Relevant Contemporary Debate: Comparing Knowledge in Different Subject Areas (see p. 342) can be set as either an oral presentation or as a written task.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Written Analysis***

Complete a series of questions based on one of the primary texts studied in this Theme.

# Useful Resources: Epistemology

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## General Secondary Resources for Epistemology

- Audi, R. 1998, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, Routledge, London.
- Blaauw, M. & Pritchard, D. 2005, *Epistemology A-Z*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Cardinal, D., Hayward, J. & Jones, G. 2004, *Epistemology: The Theory of Knowledge*, John Murray Publishers, London.
- Dancy, J. & Sosa, E., eds. 2010, *A Companion to Epistemology*, Blackwell, London.
- Morton, A. 2001, *A Guide Through the Theory of Knowledge*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Sosa, E. & Kim, J. eds. 2000, *Epistemology: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Huemer, M. ed. 2002, *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Trusted, J. 1997, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Knowledge*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Williams, M. 2001, *Problems of Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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## Specific Resources for Themes in Epistemology

### **Theme 1: On Knowledge**

#### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Descartes, R. (Cottingham, G. trans) 1996, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gettier, E. 1963, 'Is justified true belief knowledge?' in *Analysis*, 23, Blackwell, Oxford. And online at <http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil1000/Gettier.pdf>
- Plato 1987, *Theaetetus*, Penguin, London.
- Plato 2005, *Protagoras and Meno*, Penguin, London.
- Plato (Fowler, H.N. trans) 1921, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol.*, Heinemann, London. Available online including fully paginated version of *Theaetetus*: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172%3Atext%3DTheaet>.

## **Theme 2: On the Possibility of A Priori Knowledge**

### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Ayer, A.J. 1946, *Language, Truth and Logic Second Edition*, Chapter 1, Eliminating Metaphysics, Gollancz, London.
- Descartes, R. (Cottingham, G. trans) 1996, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- *Dark City The Director's Cut* dir. Proyas, A. 1998, New Line, DVD.
- Hume, D., Millican P. ed. 2008, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford's World Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford. Section IV.
- Locke, J. 1995, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Prometheus, New York.
- Kant, I. 1998, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- *The Matrix* dir. Wachowski, A. & Wachowski, L. 1999, Warner Bros. Pictures, DVD.
- Putnam, H. 1981, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Chapter 1, 'Brains in a Vat'.
- *Truman Show* dir. Weir, P. 1998, Paramount, DVD.

### **SECONDARY RESOURCES**

- De Botton, A. 2000, *Philosophy as a Guide to Happiness*. Roadshow, DVD.
- De Botton, A. 2001, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Penguin, Ringwood.
- Irwin, W. ed. 2002, *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Open Court, Peru, Illinois.
- Lawrence, M. 2004, *Like a Splinter in your Mind: The Philosophy behind the Matrix Series*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Nagel, T. 1987, *What does it all mean?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Yeffeth, G. 2003, *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*, BenBella, Dallas, Texas.
- Website: Are You Living In a Computer Simulation? – [simulation-argument.com](http://simulation-argument.com)

## **Theme 3: On Science**

### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Feyerabend, P. 1988, *Against Method (Revised Edition)*, Verso, London.
- Feyerabend, P. 1987 *Farewell to Reason*, Verso, London.
- Goodman, A.I. 1967, 'A Causal Theory of Knowing', *The Journal of Philosophy* v. 64, pp. 357-372.
- Kuhn, T. 1996, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

- Newton, I. 2010, *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, University of California, Berkeley.  
Or online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/28233>
- Popper, K 2002, *Conjectures and Refutations (second edition)*, Routledge Classics, Routledge, Chapter 1: Sections I and II and sections VII and VIII

## **SECONDARY RESOURCES**

- Chalmers, D. 1999, *What is this thing called science? Third edition*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.
- Godfrey-Smith, P. 2003, *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

## **Theme 4: On Objectivity**

### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

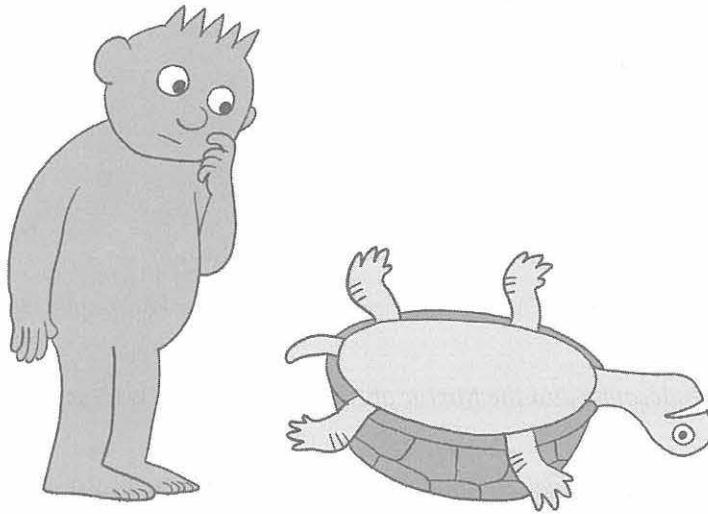
- Damasio, A. 1995, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Harper Collins, New York.
- James, W. 1896, 'The Will to Believe' at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>
- Lloyd, G. *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy (second edition)*, Routledge, London.
- Rorty, R. 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Nussbaum, M. 2003, *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

### **SECONDARY RESOURCES**

- Fricker, M. & Hornsby, J. 2000, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

## CHAPTER 5

# Ethics and Moral Philosophy



What we should do, whether we should do it and why we should do it are questions that we ask ourselves almost every day. They are also questions which lie at the heart of Ethics and Moral Philosophy, fields of philosophical inquiry which examine questions relating to the nature of morality and moral choice.

This Chapter begins by examining different theories on the origins of morality. Is morality a construct of culture and society or are there moral truths that transcend culture and are true for all people in all places and at all times? In Theme 2, On Moral Psychology, we will consider the various theories philosophers have proposed as to why we behave morally and why we sometimes choose to behave immorally. Finally, we will conclude our study with an examination of different theories proposed by philosophers on what makes an action right or wrong.

As you work through your chosen Themes you will be encouraged to engage your skills of reasoning through a range of different exercises – from discussions and written analyses, to dialogues and thought experiments. You will also be invited to apply your understanding to real life circumstances. Even if you choose not to do these applied exercises we do encourage you to consider these ideas in the context of your ‘real life.’ After all, no matter who we are, all of us will at some time or another face moral problems of significance.

## THEME 1

# On the Foundations of Morality

The question of the origins of morality is one that has intrigued philosophers since the time of the Greeks. While some have contended that moral beliefs are simply matters of convention developed by human societies to serve and protect their interests, others have argued that at least some of these beliefs transcend individual cultures and are binding for all people at all times.

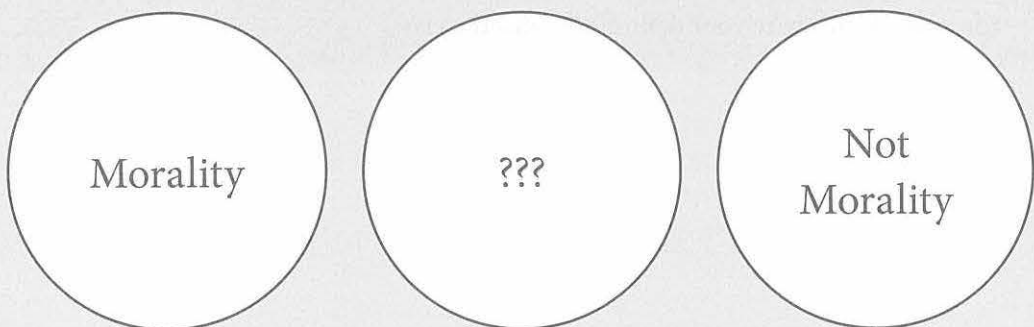
In this Theme you will be introduced to several accounts of the origins of morality and will be invited to consider not only their strengths and weaknesses, but also the implications of adopting these views for judgments regarding the behaviour of others. To further develop your understanding of the Theme you will also be invited to consider the nature of moral statements and what the various definitions put forward by philosophers suggest about the truth of moral claims.

### **Introductory Activities**

#### **DO**

Before we can begin to investigate the foundations of morality it is perhaps first necessary to establish a shared understanding of what morality is.

Using three pieces of A3 paper or coloured card, construct three paper circles:



Attach these three paper circles to the whiteboard. Then, as a whole class, discuss where you think each of the following beliefs should be located. Remember to use reasons to support your choices. It may also be useful for your teacher or a nominated member of your class to scribe during your discussion.





- Driving at 100 kms in a 60km zone is wrong.
- Eating a whole chocolate cake in a single sitting is bad.
- Not saying please or thank you is rude.
- Giving up your seat for an elderly passenger is good.
- Deliberate cruelty to another human being is wrong.
- Wearing stripes with spots is wrong.
- Talking loudly on a mobile phone in a public place is rude.
- It is good to help those less fortunate than yourself.
- It is wrong to have sex outside of marriage.
- One should live according to God's laws.
- It is impolite to interrupt someone who is speaking.
- Every person has the right to a fair trial.
- Eating meat is wrong.

When you have negotiated locations for each of the above beliefs (and agreed to disagree on some of them), invite your scribe to read aloud the notes taken during your discussion. If you didn't use a scribe try to recall the different ways members of your class distinguished what they considered moral beliefs from other kinds of beliefs. Now construct a list of the characteristics your class has ascribed to moral beliefs.

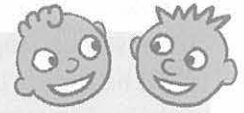
Which of these characteristics do you think a belief must possess for it to be considered a moral belief?

In light of this activity, complete the following sentences in your workbooks:

1. Moral beliefs are ...
2. Morality is ...

You may like to share your definitions with the class.

# Where Does Morality Come From?



## DISCUSS

According to the World Health Organisation, approximately 140 million girls and women have undergone the procedure known variously as female genital cutting, female circumcision or female genital mutilation. This practice, which is carried out in approximately 28 countries in Africa and in parts of Asia and the Middle East, involves the cutting of female genitalia for non-medical reasons. The practice has garnered strong opposition in the West, as well as in countries where it occurs. Those against the practice condemn it on the grounds that it represents a violent violation of women's rights, particularly in regards to sexual freedom, and leads to significant ongoing health issues. However, many men and women who are part of the cultures that engage in it support the practice. These people, along with some sympathetic feminists, point to the cultural significance of the practice – in many cultures it signifies a woman's purity, is an important rite of passage for becoming a woman and garners the respect of both men and women within the culture – as well as its economic importance (in some cultures families receive gifts from the tribe when daughters undergo the procedure) and its aesthetic appeal within the culture. These supporters often condemn opposition to the practice as just another example of imperialism and the imperial attempt to control people of other cultures, particularly women.

There is no doubt that female genital cutting is painful (it is usually carried out without anesthetic) and can significantly affect a woman's health, however it also plays a significant role in many of the cultures that practise it.

As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. Should cultures that practise female genital cutting be prohibited from doing so? Why or why not?
2. Should any group have the power to prohibit another group from engaging in practices that are culturally significant to it? Why or why not?
3. Consider the range of answers your class has produced to the two previous questions. What are the general beliefs about right and wrong behind these answers? What reasons can you give to support these beliefs?

There is no doubt that the issue described in the box above is a controversial one. Perhaps this was reflected in your class's discussion. While some students may have supported the right of cultures to practise female genital cutting – even if they disapprove of it themselves – on the grounds that it is in some way wrong for one group to impose its beliefs on another group, others may have condemned it on the grounds that they feel there is something intrinsically wrong with it despite the fact that it is culturally significant.

The position you take on this debate may well depend on your views regarding right and wrong. To hold the view that there are certain things that are always right or wrong, no matter what the circumstances, suggests an **absolute** or **universal** view of morality. According to this view, certain moral beliefs are binding for all people, no matter where they live. Or you may hold the opposite view. In that case, you might be described as a moral relativist. Moral **relativism** claims that moral beliefs are products of culture and, as such, only binding for particular people, in particular places, at particular times.

## **DEVELOPING MORAL COHERENCE – THE METHOD OF REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM**

**Reflective equilibrium** describes a state of coherence between beliefs arrived at through a careful process of reflection and revision. Although not exclusive to ethical inquiry, many philosophers consider it to be the method *par excellence* for developing coherent moral perspectives.

To reach a state of reflective equilibrium we first begin by assessing the moral beliefs we already hold (which may be termed ‘initial moral judgments’) and asking ourselves which of these beliefs are ‘considered moral judgments.’ In other words, we ask which of these beliefs are products of careful reasoning. Then, we examine these beliefs within the context of the more general moral principles we hold and any theoretical considerations that we may believe are significant to accepting these judgments or principles. Carefully moving backwards and forwards between our ‘considered moral judgments,’ our principles and any relevant theoretical considerations, we work to establish consistency between our beliefs by discarding or making adjustments as necessary. When we have reached a situation where our different moral beliefs are not in conflict, we have achieved the basic requirement for reflective equilibrium.

You are probably already familiar with this process. Consider, for example, your response to a news event such as the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013. You may condemn the perpetrators of this crime on the grounds that ‘it is always wrong to take another human’s life.’ However, a few weeks later in philosophy class you find yourself supporting the idea of assisted euthanasia. This clearly conflicts with your view that it’s always wrong to take another human’s life. So you adjust this view (perhaps to something like ‘it is always wrong to take another human’s life unless that human is experiencing considerable pain and suffering’). Without realising it, you are utilising the method of reflective equilibrium to develop more coherent beliefs.

While some philosophers argue that optimal equilibrium (where all our beliefs cohere with the highest level of acceptability to us) is both possible and desirable, others claim that the process provides no assurance of a stable and continuous moral perspective, and that the development of our moral thought should be open and ongoing. Whichever view you agree with, the method of reflective equilibrium reminds us of how important open-mindedness and critical reflection are in making moral judgments and developing moral beliefs.

As work through your studies in Unit 2 Philosophy, it is important for you to reflect on your own judgments and the judgments of others. Do these judgments conflict with other judgments you or others in the class have made? What beliefs underpin these judgments? Do these beliefs cohere with all the views you hold and/or express? What adjustments need to be made to eliminate any conflict between judgments and/or views? How can your class better work together to develop responses to moral questions? By remaining alert to contradictions in your own thinking, as well as in the thinking of others, you will not only become a better thinker, you will develop a greater understanding of yourself and what you believe.

## ***Morality and Religion***

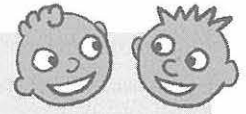
For those who maintain the absolutist position, the question of where these moral beliefs come from and why they might be considered authoritative will inevitably arise. For some, the answer to this question is simple: morality proceeds and derives its authority from **God**. God created the universe and as part of His divine work, He also created the moral principles that we are meant to live by. Thus morality is what God commands.

Of course the initial problem with this thesis is that it is founded on the presupposition that God exists. Yet even if we accept this presupposition, the question still remains of how we are to *know* what God commands. Although there are some similarities – at least between the major monotheistic and Eastern traditions – in terms of moral law, there are also many differences. For example, the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path, warns against engaging in occupations that directly or indirectly cause harm to other living beings, whereas the Bible contains no such prohibition. How are we to decide which view is authoritative?

Even if we look to one particular religion for moral guidance, there is no guarantee that this problem will be rectified. Probably the most well-known of the Ten Commandments is 'thou shalt not kill' and yet in the very same book of the Bible in which this prohibition appears we are also told 'If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them...all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die' (Deut. 21:18-21). One might, in light of this, be excused for being somewhat confused on exactly where God stands on the issue of killing.

Perhaps one way around this problem is to look to the guidance of those in authority, such as religious leaders, scholars or the Church, to interpret the will of God. After all, these people are more likely to have an intimate knowledge of the tradition and some, such as the Pope, are even considered to be God's representative on earth. But the problem of inconsistency between interpretations and of how to arbitrate between these inconsistencies still remains. And what if such people interpret religious texts or their own revelations in a way that conflicts strongly with our own beliefs? The ordination of women and views regarding homosexuality are two examples of where the views of religion and the views of both its adherents and the wider society are sometimes at odds.

Even if we manage to overcome these difficulties and deduce God's will, we might still ask why it is that we should obey God, especially if God's laws seem to go against the values that we deem worthy. To simply answer 'because God commands it' seems somewhat unsatisfactory. This would mean that the only thing that makes, for example, murder wrong, is the fact that God says it is. What if God suddenly decided that murder was right? Many people would no doubt find such moral fickleness unacceptable.



## DISCUSS

Perhaps one of the most famous discussions of the relationship between God and morality occurs in Plato's (Famous Philosopher File p.93) dialogue *Euthyphro*. Known as the **Euthyphro Dilemma**, it begins with Socrates posing a question to the religious expert, Euthyphro: 'Is the pious or holy beloved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is beloved by the gods?' Another way we might consider this dilemma is to ask, 'are moral laws commanded by God because they are good or are they good because they are commanded by God?'

As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. In what ways are each of these perspectives (that moral laws are commanded by God because they are good and moral laws are good because they are commanded by God) on the relationship between God and morality problematic? You may like to consult the Theme 'On the Nature and Existence of God' to further your discussion.
2. Considering your responses to the above question, does the Euthyphro Dilemma represent a decisive refutation of the claim that morality has its source in God and morality is simply what God commands?
3. Is there a way around the Euthyphro dilemma? In other words, is it still possible to maintain the view that morality has its source in God and morality is what God commands, despite the problems you have identified in your discussion of the first question? How?

## ***Ethical Naturalism***

Given the problems of the religious account of moral values, one might be tempted to agree with Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* that without God (or, at the very least, a clear understanding of God's will), 'everything is permitted.'

However, not everyone agrees that we need to posit a God or know God's will to posit the existence of objective moral truths. Such is the view of **ethical or moral naturalism**, which holds that, rather than God, we should look to the natural world and to science if we want to discover the moral principles we ought to live by. For example, if we wish to know what the right thing to do in a given situation is, we might look to the psychological, material or physical effects of our actions on the parties involved, or if we want to know if an action is bad we might look at its physical and psychological consequences.



## THINK

Consider some of the moral principles you are familiar with, such as ‘murder is wrong’ or ‘it’s good to help others in need.’ According to ethical naturalism, exactly why would these actions be considered right or wrong?

At first glance, ethical naturalism would appear to have much to recommend it. It draws its conclusions from a field of human endeavour that has been providing humankind with a reliable understanding of itself and its surroundings for centuries. Indeed, many people consider science a supreme authority on all kinds of questions, from why we are here to why we behave the way we do.

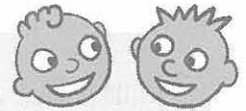
Yet while science can explain to us *what is*, it cannot necessarily tell us what *ought* to be. Consider, for example, a case of torture. Science can explain both the physical and psychological effects of torture on the individual. It can describe the victim’s neurological responses, the way the nervous system reacts to pain and the various physical and chemical effects triggered in the brain by this pain. What it cannot do is show us *why* torture is wrong.

One might respond by saying that the very fact the victim is experiencing a range of severe, adverse responses to the act of torture demonstrates that it is wrong. But if you think about it carefully, all it demonstrates is that the victim is experiencing a range of severe, adverse responses, nothing more. As many philosophers have noted since David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182) first identified the problem in his *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739), moving from descriptive premises (‘torture causes pain’) to a prescriptive conclusion (‘torture is wrong’) involves a logical misstep: factual premises do not **entail**, or force, a moral conclusion. As Hume reminds us, an ‘ought’ cannot be logically derived from an ‘is’ (see p.56 and p.292).

One might, however, question whether nature always provides us with descriptions only. After all, many common moral principles, such as ‘murder is wrong’ and ‘it is good to help others less fortunate than ourselves’ appear to have their roots in the kinds of behaviours that allow social animals, like ourselves, to prosper. Surely then, such behaviors might be considered good, or right, whereas behaviours that conflict with human prosperity might be considered bad or wrong.

The problem with this evolutionary approach to moral values is it tends to confuse what is good or right with some other property, such as happiness or pleasure or prosperity. The British philosopher G.E. Moore (Famous Philosopher File p.410), in his text *Principia Ethica* (1903), articulates this problem in what has become known as the ‘**open-question argument**.’ According to this argument, moral facts cannot be reduced to natural properties because any attempt to identify morality with a set of observable, natural properties will always result in an ‘open question.’ To illustrate, consider the question, ‘is it true that pleasure is good?’ One person might answer that it is, another might answer that it is not, and still another might answer that it is true in some cases but not in others. Thus the question is open because it is capable of eliciting a range of responses. Now consider the question, ‘is it true that good is good?’ There is only one answer to this question, which makes it a closed question. While this latter question is meaningless, the former is not. Because it makes sense to ask, ‘is pleasure good?’ Moore says good and pleasure cannot be synonymous.

While the open-question argument is often cited by philosophers as a criticism of ethical naturalism, one need not look just to philosophy to find problems with the view that nature should prescribe our moral values. Over the centuries such a view has been used to legitimate the exclusion and persecution of different groups of people on the grounds that their behaviour is 'unnatural' and therefore immoral. The playwright Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), for example, spent two terrible years in prison at the end of the nineteenth century for the 'moral crime' of homosexuality, and the pioneering feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, was the focus of cruel satires after her death for her 'unnatural' ideas regarding the intellectual capacities of women. Such views are not resigned to the past: the issue of gay marriage continues to prove divisive in Australia and in any given week a female celebrity will be redeemed by her pregnancy while another who remains childless will be portrayed as either desperately unhappy or selfish.



### DISCUSS

1. Given the problems of both the religious view of moral values and Ethical Naturalism, must a belief in absolute moral values be abandoned?
2. How else might a belief in absolute moral values be supported?
3. What are some possible implications of abandoning a belief in absolute moral values?
4. In light of your answers to Question 3, is the rejection of absolute moral values a positive or negative thing?

## ***Moral Relativism***

Given everything you have read and debated thus far, you may have come to the conclusion that a belief in absolute moral values is unsustainable. Perhaps then, you may find **moral relativism** – the view that moral beliefs are simply conventions developed by individual human societies to serve and protect their interests – more convincing.

To support their argument, moral relativists draw attention to the great diversity which exists between cultures in terms of their moral beliefs and to how such beliefs have changed over time. For the moral relativist this diversity and difference demonstrates that moral beliefs are not, as the previous theories on the origins of morality might contend, absolute, but a reflection of the different contexts and conditions that cultures find themselves in over time.

### THINK

What are some examples of moral beliefs that illustrate this idea of diversity across different cultures and time periods?



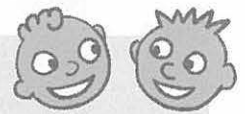
For many people, there is something immediately attractive about the relativist position. It manages to avoid the conundrum of deciding which moral laws are right (and who has them wrong) and it seems to better reflect our observations of the way the world is.

Nonetheless, moral relativism is not unproblematic. Perhaps the most significant criticism of the position is with regard to its implications. By reducing morality to a construct of culture, moral relativism doesn't provide us with grounds for evaluating and perhaps condemning the moral practices of other cultures. Thus cultures which disapprove of female education on moral grounds or which sanction violent retribution for adultery or homosexuality are neither better nor worse than cultures which promote educational equality and punish those who enact violence against others. Such cultures are simply different.

Furthermore, moral relativism calls into doubt the notion of **moral progress**. Moral progress is the idea that, over time, at least some of our moral beliefs have evolved for the better. For example, Australian society in general no longer considers children born out of wedlock objects of shame, nor does it believe it is a teacher's role to physically punish a student. For the moral relativist, such changes are not indicative of improvement, only change.

Finally, moral relativism implies that questions of right and wrong can only be resolved in reference to our own culture. This is problematic for at least a couple of reasons. By suggesting an intimate link between moral beliefs and culture, moral relativism invites us to mistake what is moral for what is legal as we look for ways to decide how our culture might answer questions of moral judgment. Also, by suggesting that the rightness and wrongness of an action can only be understood in terms of culture, moral relativism could be accused of rendering the notion of right and wrong absurd: anything is right as long as there is a culture that approves of it.

## DISCUSS



1. Does the apparent diversity of moral beliefs around the world and across time necessarily demonstrate that moral beliefs are relative?
2. Are moral beliefs as diverse as the moral relativists claim? Are there particular beliefs which appear to transcend particular time periods and cultures?
3. Even if moral beliefs are relative, does this mean that we must accept all beliefs with equanimity? Why or why not?





## **TEXT STUDY: Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (1972)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

In this text Bernard Williams (Famous Philosopher File p.359) argues that relativism does not necessarily entail a view that ‘no society ought ever interfere with another, or that individuals from one society, confronted with the practices of another, ought... react with acceptance.’\*

As a class, read the chapter ‘Interlude: Relativism.’

In pairs and using a highlighter, identify answers to the following questions in the text. Then, in your own words, record your answers in your individual workbooks.

1. At the beginning of the chapter Williams claims that relativism is composed of three propositions. What are these propositions? Why are they inconsistent?
2. How does Williams use this inconsistency to support his claims that relativism does not necessarily entail that others cannot condemn or interfere with another group’s values?
3. As well as problems with consistency, Williams identifies problems specific to relativism’s second proposition. What are these problems?
4. In the second half of the chapter Williams addresses his claim that relativism does not necessarily imply that we must accept all beliefs with equanimity. Why? (You may find it helpful to refer to his example of Cortez in your response.)

When you have completed the above task, discuss as a class the following question.

- How compelling are Williams’ arguments for his claim that relativism does not necessarily entail that no society ought to interfere with another or that we must accept all beliefs with equanimity?

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\* B.Williams 1972, ‘Interlude: Relativism’ in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, p.35.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Bernard Williams (1929–2003)

Bernard Williams, who was one of the most influential British moral philosophers of his time, was born in Essex in 1929. He attended Chigwell School and read Classics at Balliol College, Oxford, finishing with a first class honours degree and the prize of a fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford. After a year flying spitfires for the RAF in Canada, Williams returned to Oxford to take up his fellowship. In 1959 he left Oxford for University College, London, to accommodate the political ambitions of his wife, the politician and academic, Shirley Williams. He moved on to Bedford College for a few short years before being appointed Knightsbridge Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge. As well as his work at the university, Williams served on a number of Royal Commissions and government committees, including committees examining pornography and censorship, drug abuse, gambling and the role of British private schools. Williams' home life was equally fulfilling: he and his wife house-shared with the literary agent Hilary Rubenstein and his wife in a large home in Kensington. This happiness, however, was not to last. Both Williams and his wife were becoming increasingly estranged due to their various commitments. The marriage eventually collapsed after Shirley discovered her husband was having an affair with Patricia Skinner, the daughter of historian Quentin Skinner. Williams and Skinner later married and moved briefly to the United States, where Williams took up an appointment as Deutsch Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkley. A few years after his return to England, Williams was knighted, made a fellow of the British Academy and awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters from Harvard. He died from cancer while on holiday in Rome in 2003.

## ***Nihilism***

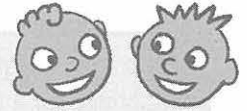
By reducing moral judgments to the preferences of a particular culture, moral relativists could be accused of giving human beings a completely free reign in terms of their actions and behaviours. After all, how can anything that is simply a matter of preference really be considered right or wrong?

The view that there is no justification for the notion of moral truth and that moral values are illusory, is known as **nihilism**. Derived from the Latin, *nihil*, meaning 'nothing,' the term is sometimes also used to mean the active rejection of such values. It is a view often disparaged on the grounds that, in rejecting moral truths, it necessarily sanctions an 'anything goes' approach to life.

Not everyone agrees with the implication that this is such a bad thing. For Friedrich Nietzsche (Famous Philosopher File p.203), who is often described as a nihilist, the idea that moral values do not exist is something positive for it means we are free to create our own lives as we want them to be.

The difficult thing is accepting this freedom. According to Nietzsche, most of us are far too timid to reject those dogmas of the human herd (such as religion and the values which extend from it) which provide us with certainty, for the uncertainty of an existence without values. In other words, human beings *prefer* not to be free.

Although Nietzsche offers an attractive – albeit challenging – perspective of existence without values, some critics would argue that the idea of nihilism is inherently flawed as, by definition, the nihilist believes in nothing and shuns all values. Such a perspective, they claim, is hardly sustainable.



## DISCUSS

1. Do you agree that nihilism is unsustainable?
2. What would the nihilist's life be like?



## DO

Read through each of the following statements. Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the statement by writing 'A' or 'D' beside it.

- If someone witnesses a fatal hit and run accident they ought to report it.
- If someone hurts another person, even unintentionally, they ought to apologise.
- If someone knows that a child is being physically abused they ought to report it.
- Slavery should be allowed to exist among cultures that practise it.
- I believe that certain groups should not be allowed to torture or otherwise physically abuse individuals, even if that torture or abuse stems from their beliefs.
- I believe a man has the right to beat his wife and children within the privacy of his own home.
- I believe Hitler's persecution of the Jews during World War II was wrong.
- I believe that war criminals ought to be brought to trial.
- I believe that such things as environmental protection, human rights and animal protection should be internationally enforced.

Now consider your responses to the above statements within the context of your responses during classroom discussions relating to this Theme.

1. Are there any discrepancies between the responses you have given to the above statements and the responses you have given during classroom discussions?
2. How do you account for these discrepancies? Do they indicate an incoherence in your moral thinking?
3. In light of this reflection, how might you achieve a greater sense of **equilibrium** in terms of your moral thinking?

You may like to respond to these questions in your workbook.

## The Nature of Moral Statements

Up until this point we have been considering the question of the foundations of morality by examining theories which either support or refute the view that moral beliefs are absolute.

Another way of thinking about this question is to consider what kind of statements moral statements are. In other words, when we make moral claims are we uttering statements that can be understood as *either* true or false, or are we simply expressing a particular attitude, that although 'true to us' has no objective status?

We might clarify this question by asking, 'are moral statements **objective** (true or real irrespective of one's point of view) or are they **subjective** (true or real only from a specific point of view and in relation to a specific subject)?



### DISCUSS

Consider the following statements. Which do you believe are expressing facts and which are expressing attitudes? Why?

- It is wrong to deliberately humiliate other people.
- It is wrong to smack children.
- It is wrong to eat meat.
- Slavery is wrong.
- Going to the aid of someone who needs help is good.
- Respecting others is good.

## **Moral Realism**

According to the position known as **moral realism**, which maintains that there are moral facts and we can have knowledge of them, at least some moral principles may be understood as objective rather than expressions of particular personal attitudes. This of course immediately raises the question of how a **value**, such as ‘stealing is wrong,’ can be understood as a fact. Facts are, after all, independently verifiable by appeal to the world, whereas values seem inextricably tied to human beings; it is difficult to imagine that a value like ‘murder is wrong’ could exist outside of human discourse.

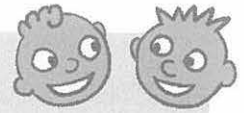
Moral realists respond to this dilemma by drawing attention to the different kinds of factual claims that occur within a moral argument. Consider, for example, an argument in favour of the claim ‘terrorism is always wrong.’ To support this argument, an arguer may point to the number of civilians killed in terrorist attacks and to the fact that the choice of terrorist targets indicates that this type of casualty is intentional. These ‘facts of the situation’ are called **natural facts** and can be proven either true or false by appealing to relevant evidence, such as statistics or newspaper reports. The purpose of natural facts is to provide a reason to believe that the moral claim is true. According to the moral realist, whether or not the natural facts provide a reason for believing that the moral claim is true, is also a kind of fact – what is termed a **normative fact**. Like natural facts, normative facts are either true or false: the fact that civilians are intentionally killed in terrorist attacks is a reason to believe that terrorism is always wrong or it isn’t. Thus the values that normative facts support (or fail to support) are either true or false.

If this is the case, then moral disputes may therefore be understood not as a clash of personal preferences, but as the result of mistaken understanding. Either one of the argument’s participants does not agree with the evidence (the natural facts) or he or she does not agree that the evidence adequately supports the claim (the normative facts). Whether or not he or she is correct is not a matter of opinion but a matter of fact. Thus, according to the moral realist, moral values are (to employ the language from our previous discussions) not relative but absolute.

### **THINK**

In what ways is moral realism similar to ethical naturalism? Is an ethical naturalist necessarily a moral realist? Is a moral realist necessarily an ethical naturalist? Why or why not?





## DISCUSS

1. In your own words, explain the difference between natural facts and normative facts to a partner.
2. While the existence of natural facts seems relatively uncontested, the existence of normative facts seems somewhat more problematic. How might debates regarding normative facts be decided?
3. Does moral realism provide a good argument for the existence of moral facts? Why or why not?
4. If the existence of moral facts could be established, what implications could this have for individuals, cultures and the world as a whole?

Although there are some persuasive arguments to support the moral realist's claim of objective moral values, as you may have noted in your discussion, the position is not unproblematic. Perhaps one of the most common criticisms of the position is that, in assuming moral principles can be derived from natural facts, it commits the **fallacy of deriving 'ought' from 'is'** (see p.56). To demonstrate, consider the above example: the fact that terrorist attacks intentionally target civilians does not *entail* the conclusion that terrorism is always wrong.

Moral realists might respond to this criticism by suggesting that entailment is only one kind of normative fact. There are also other kinds of normative facts, such as proof, reasons for and evidence for. So while it might be true that natural facts don't entail particular moral conclusions, they may provide reasons for, or evidence for, those conclusions.

The problem with this response is that while natural facts may indeed provide reasons for a particular moral conclusion, and may be described as either providing those reasons or as not providing those reasons, it is difficult to see how having a reason for a particular belief makes that belief true. Seeing my best friend's car out the front of my house is reason to believe my best friend is visiting, and it can be agreed that this is a reason for believing the conclusion 'my best friend is visiting' is true, but this doesn't mean it *is* true my best friend is visiting. Perhaps she has simply parked her car out the front of my house because it's close to the train station or perhaps she has other friends in my street.

Another problem with this particular argument is that it assumes that normative facts, or facts about reasons, are like natural facts when actually they are quite different. A disagreement over whether the kitchen table is made from pine or mahogany can be easily resolved by, for example, checking the wood against timber samples or photographs. A disagreement over whether the fact that terrorism intentionally targets civilians is a reason to believe that terrorism is always wrong is less easily resolved. This in turn raises the question of how such a disagreement could be arbitrated. In other words, how do we assess, in terms of truth or falsity, whether natural facts are reasons to believe moral claims?



## TEXT STUDY: J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977)

[see Useful Resources]

In this text the Australian philosopher J. L. Mackie (Famous Philosopher File p.365) argues that although moral statements such as ‘murder is wrong’ may purport to be expressions of fact, such facts do not exist. Because our moral utterances reflect an error of thought (we mistakenly believe that moral values exist), his position is known as **moral error theory**.

Read chapter one, sections 8 & 9 (‘The Argument from Relativity’ and ‘The Argument from Queerness’). Working with a partner, answer the following questions. You may like to use additional resources, such as the internet, to help you with some of the concepts employed in this section of the text.

*The Argument from Relativity:*

1. According to Mackie, and using his example of monogamy, what is the best explanation for moral disagreement?
2. Mackie claims that a ‘well-known’ counter to this argument is that objective values, rather than specific moral rules or codes (which may differ from culture to culture), are ‘very general basic principles which are recognised at least implicitly to some extent in all society.’
  - a. What are some examples that Mackie gives of these ‘very general basic principles?’
  - b. How does Mackie respond to this argument?
  - c. How adequate is Mackie’s response?

*The Argument from Queerness:*

1. Mackie describes the ‘argument from queerness’ as consisting of two parts – one metaphysical and one epistemological – each of which represents an objection to the notion of discoverable moral facts. Describe each of these two parts.
2. Mackie contends that moral objectivism necessitates a belief in **intuitionism**. What is intuitionism and how does its discussion relate to the objections you have identified in Question 1? Why is intuitionism problematic?
3. Referring to Plato’s ‘Form of the Good’, Mackie tells us that the idea of objective values suggests that such values would have a motivational aspect built into them: ‘something’s being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it.’ For Mackie, this also demonstrates the ‘queerness’ of objective moral values. How does this discussion relate to the objections you have identified in Question 1? Why does Mackie believe that hypothesising a motivational aspect to moral values is problematic?

4. A further, related problem that Mackie believes brings out the ‘queerness’ of objective moral values is the fact that such values require a connection to natural qualities. How does this point relate to the objections you have identified in Question 1? According to Mackie, why is positing such a connection problematic?

When you have completed this task, complete a brief written exercise of approximately 500 words that:

1. Outlines Mackie’s arguments against the existence of objective moral values.
2. Discusses whether or not Mackie has presented a convincing argument against the existence of objective moral values.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### J.L. Mackie (1917–1981)

John Leslie Mackie was born in Sydney in 1917. The son of Alexander Mackie, a Scotsman who would later become an important and influential figure in the NSW education system and Annie Duncan, a schoolteacher, Mackie attended Knox Grammar School and then the University of Sydney, where he came under the tutelage of the philosopher John Anderson, a charismatic figure who significantly influenced Australian intellectual life in the twentieth century. Mackie’s intellectual prowess in Philosophy and Classics won him a scholarship to study at Oxford, from where he graduated in 1940. After he completed his studies Mackie served in both the Middle East and Italy with the Royal Mechanical Engineers (an experience he rarely spoke of) before taking up a succession of Philosophy appointments, first at the University of Otago in New Zealand, followed by the University of Sydney and the University of York in the UK, before settling at Oxford where he died in 1981.

Mackie is best known for his contributions to meta-ethics, philosophy of religion and metaphysics, and for his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

## Emotivism

Perhaps you are not convinced by the moral realist belief in the existence of objective moral values. If so, then you might find the view known as **emotivism**, which holds that moral statements are nothing more than expressions of personal preference based on feeling, compelling.

This subjective understanding of moral values has its roots in **logical positivism**, a twentieth century philosophical movement which held that for any statement to be considered meaningful it must be either **analytic** (in other words, it must be true by definition) or it must be **empirically verifiable** (in other words, its truth can be established by reference to empirical evidence). All other kinds of statements, such as those relating to God’s existence, aesthetic judgment or morality – indeed any statement which they believed did not possess the property of either truth or falsity – were considered by the logical positivists to be meaningless.



This of course invites the question, if moral statements don't express truths what exactly do they do? According to A.J. Ayer (Famous Philosopher File p.299), one of the most prominent figures in the logical positivist movement, moral statements are expressions of feelings. Thus if I were to say to someone 'torture is wrong,' what I am really doing is expressing my personal disapproval of torture. I might just as well have said 'I don't like torture' or more simply, 'torture!' with my mouth turned down at the corners and a frown on my face. This is why emotivism is sometimes referred to as the **boo/hooray theory**. It holds that moral statements are akin to booing what we dislike and shouting 'hooray!' for what we approve of.

Not everyone in the emotivist camp agrees that moral statements can be understood this simply. For example, Charles Stevenson (1908-1979), an American linguistic philosopher, argues that when someone issues a moral statement not only are they evincing their approval or disapproval of a particular action, they are also attempting to influence the feelings and behaviours of others. To use the example above, in announcing my opinion that torture is wrong I am not only saying 'boo' to torture, I am hoping to encourage others to boo along with me.

### THINK

Can morality really be reduced to expression of feeling? Consider some of your own moral beliefs. Do you hold these beliefs only because you approve or disapprove of the behaviour related to them or do you hold them for other reasons? If so, what are these reasons?



### DO

Locate a visual image that seems to make a strong moral point. For example: a photograph of a starving child in an advertisement encouraging you to give money to charity; an appealing image of an animal in an article about endangered species; an image of human suffering in the wake of a natural disaster linked to an article on climate change.

1. What emotional reaction do you have to this image?
2. To what extent does your emotional reaction prompt you to take a particular moral stance?
3. Do you think most other people would respond in the same way?
4. What would you think of someone who did not respond in the same way? Why would you think this?
5. Do you think there is a right way to respond to this image? Why do you think this?
6. If your image is linked to text, read the text. Compare your reactions to the image and the text. On what basis are you most likely to draw ethical conclusions about this issue?



## **Prescriptivism**

Another philosopher who shared Ayer's view that moral statements could not be awarded objective status was the eminent British philosopher R. M. Hare (1919-2002). However, like Stevenson, Hare disagreed that such statements were simply expressions of emotion. Rather, he believed that moral language was essentially *prescriptive*. Hence his view is known as **prescriptivism**.

Just as a doctor may prescribe a sick patient a particular course of medication in order for him or her to get better, an individual who declares something to be either right or wrong is also offering a kind of prescription. Of course we may not immediately realise this, as our moral utterances are rarely expressed as dos and don'ts. Nevertheless we are, according to Hare, recommending a particular course of action to others via such utterances.

Hare arrived at this view by analysing how we use moral statements. Hare observed that although we sometimes use moral words in purely descriptive ways – for example, I may use the word 'right' to simply describe something that has been performed in the correct manner – we often use them as either commendations or commands.

When we *commend* something we usually describe the thing in question as 'good.' According to Hare, to make such an assessment requires reference to a particular set of standards. For example, if I was to describe a cup of coffee I was enjoying as good, what I might mean is that the coffee is strong, smooth, creamy and the right temperature. Likewise, if I were to describe the act of giving money to charity as good, or my next-door neighbour as a good person, I would be basing my judgments on a particular set of standards that I believe define a good action or person. By commending such actions or behaviours, I praise those actions or behaviours. Thus our commendation demonstrates to others what we believe is admirable in action and behaviour.

When we describe an action as 'right' or 'wrong', we are doing something slightly different. We are saying quite clearly that a particular behaviour either should, or shouldn't, be pursued. We are, in other words, issuing a *command*. Thus, if I were to say 'stealing from the register at work is wrong,' what I am really saying is, 'don't steal from the register at work.'

Like commendations, commands are also inferred from other beliefs. My command not to steal from the register, for example, may have been inferred from a more general principle that stealing from one's employer is wrong.

In this way, Hare distinguishes his view from that of emotivism. To the emotivists, moral statements are simply expressions of approval or disapproval intended to influence – or manipulate – the behaviours of others. But for Hare and the prescriptivists, our moral statements are products of reason. Thus Hare's theory addresses the most significant criticism of the emotivist position: that it ignores the role reason plays in moral judgments.

By restoring the role of reason in moral discourse, Hare's theory also provides us with the means for assessing the moral judgments of others. We can, for example, assess whether or not a particular inference is a good one by examining the relationship between it and the general principle from which it is derived. We can also ask ourselves whether particular moral judgments are logically consistent by examining whether they cohere with the principles from which they are inferred, and if not, what relevant differences exist to allow for such exceptions. This is not to imply that a given moral view can be deemed 'right' or 'wrong,' rather that some views are better – or rather, more logically coherent – than others.

### THINK

Are you convinced by the prescriptivists' understanding of moral judgment? What **counter-examples** could be used to interrogate the claim that moral language is essentially prescriptive?



### WRITE

In pairs, write a dialogue between a moral realist and either an emotivist OR a prescriptivist. You may like to use one of the following topics as the inspiration for your dialogue:

- Murder is wrong.
- It is never right to tell a lie.
- Giving money to those less fortunate than you is good.
- A life solely devoted to pleasure is not a good life.

You may like to extend this activity by performing your dialogues in class and then discussing how the dialogues inform your understanding of and/or interrogate the three positions.



## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Construct a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation that demonstrates how a selection of theories discussed during this Theme may inform responses to a chosen contemporary moral debate and evaluates these responses.

Examples of such debates include:

- The moral permissibility of abortion
- The moral permissibility of war
- The possession of nuclear weapons
- Female genital cutting
- The demand for apologies for forced adoptions in Australia
- The death penalty for Australians in Indonesia
- The Australian Government's response to asylum seekers

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## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting task to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth.

1. What is a moral belief? How is it similar to/different from other beliefs?
2. In your opinion, how plausible is the idea of absolute moral values?
3. Given the problems of both the religious view of moral values and ethical naturalism, must a belief in absolute moral values be abandoned?
4. What are some of the merits of the relativist account of moral beliefs? What are some of the shortcomings? In light of these merits and shortcomings, how plausible do you think the relativist account of moral beliefs is?
5. In your opinion, is moral nihilism sustainable? What might be some of the implications of this position?
6. Does moral realism provide a convincing argument for the existence of moral facts?
7. Does emotivism provide a compelling explanation for moral values?
8. Of these two positions (moral realism and emotivism) which do you find the most compelling and why?
9. Prescriptivism maintains that moral language primarily operates as either commendations or commands. Do you think this is a plausible account of the purpose of moral language?

## ***Assessment Task Two: An Essay***

### **TOPIC:**

'Morality is a human construct.'

Consider at least two of the theories discussed in this Theme, and their strengths and weaknesses, in your response.

## ***Assessment Task Three: Written Analysis***

Write an analysis of between 600-800 words of one of the primary texts you have studied during this Theme.

## ***Assessment Task Four: Short Answer Responses***

Complete a series of short answer expository and evaluative questions on the primary text/s you have studied during this Theme.

OR

Complete a short-answer exercise on definitions of key concepts relevant to this Theme.

## ***Assessment Task Five: Written Analysis***

Complete a series of written analyses (300-500 words) in which you outline and evaluate a selection of the theories discussed in this Theme.

## ***Assessment Task Seven: Research Task and Presentation***

Present your PowerPoint or Prezi on a relevant contemporary debate (p.369) to the class.

## ***Assessment Task Eight: Written Dialogue***

Write a dialogue (600-800 words) between EITHER a moral absolutist and moral relativist OR a moral realist and an emotivist or a prescriptivist on a set topic.

## THEME 2

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# On Moral Psychology

Our common sense seems to tell us that there is a direct correspondence between our moral judgments and our moral actions: our moral judgments, we believe, *motivate* our moral actions. Our common sense also seems to suggest that we act on our moral judgments because we feel that doing so is 'the right thing to do.' But just how accurate are these suppositions? After all, most of us can recall a time when we have acted in ways that do not accord with what we believe are our moral convictions. If our presuppositions about the relationship between moral judgment and moral motivation are accurate, how then are we to explain this behaviour?

In this Theme you will be introduced to various theories that seek to explain the relationship between our moral judgments and our motivations. Along the way you will be invited to consider whether moral motivation is intrinsic and thus necessarily connected to moral judgment (meaning that we cannot act against our moral judgments) or whether it is contingent and so dependent on things exterior to ourselves (meaning that we *can* act against our moral judgments). You will also be invited to consider human motivation more generally: are we inherently self-interested or are at least some of our actions solely for the benefit of others? Finally we will explore what happens when the relationship between moral judgment and moral motivation breaks down.

As you work through the Theme you might consider your own motivations and behaviours. Often we can be our own best case studies for pondering the questions of moral behaviour.

## Introductory Activities



### TEXT STUDY: Plato, *The Republic* (380 BCE)

[see Useful Resources]

In Book II (359a- 360d) of his dialogue *The Republic*, Plato (Famous Philosopher File p.93) presents a famous thought experiment known as **The Ring of Gyges**.

Read through this thought experiment and discuss the following questions:

1. Do you agree with Glaucon's claim that both the just and unjust man would behave in the same way as Gyges if granted the same powers? Why or why not? What evidence can you think of to support your view?
2. Considering your answers to Question 1, what do you believe motivates human beings to behave morally? What evidence can you think of to support your view?
3. If you were to find a ring that granted you the power of invisibility, do you think you would behave immorally? If not, why not? What do your answers suggest about the motivations behind moral behaviour?
4. Do you think it is possible to act against your moral beliefs? Why or why not?

No doubt you have heard of the Ring of Gyges, or of one like it, discovered in the caves of the Misty Mountains by a hobbit called Bilbo Baggins. In both cases, the ring serves as a test of the wearer's moral fortitude: will the wearer succumb to the temptation of immorality like Croesus' ancestor, Gyges, or will he or she refuse temptation and remain committed to the moral beliefs that he or she holds?

Perhaps, like Glaucon, you are inclined to the former view. After all, it is not unusual to sometimes discover that what we most desire or wish to do conflicts with our moral beliefs. Occasionally we may even act on those desires, despite the fact that in other circumstances we might consider such behavior immoral. And yet, despite the occasional aberration, the moral beliefs that *we* hold (as opposed to these held more generally by others) seem to be reliably motivating. Indeed, some philosophers would argue that such aberrations as we might occasionally succumb to are apparent rather than actual, a sign that the beliefs we *think* we hold are perhaps different from the ones we do hold.

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## Moral Properties and Moral Beliefs

### *Moral Properties and Moral Motivation*

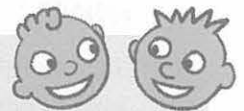
So, what motivates us to behave morally? At first glance the answer to this question appears relatively straightforward. Our moral actions are motivated by our judgments. To illustrate, imagine a child who comes across another child being bullied by two older children in the schoolyard. The bullied child appears frightened and is crying. The child witnessing the episode attributes a particular moral property to the bullies' behaviour and so arrives at a moral judgment: the behaviour of the older children is wrong. This motivates the child witnessing the behaviour to find the teacher on yard duty and inform him or her of what is happening. Thus what has motivated the child's action is her judgment.

This understanding of the impetus towards moral action implies that there is something about moral properties (such as right and wrong, or good and bad) that is inherently motivating. We act morally not because of our own interests, desires or inclinations, but because particular actions or states of affairs are in themselves right or wrong, good or bad. It also suggests that moral action is the outcome of a rational process: we are moved not by our feelings, but by a judgment we have made about a given situation.

You will probably agree that there is something intuitively appealing about this understanding of moral action. Perhaps you can even recall occasions when you have acted not because you have wanted to nor because it was in your best interests, but simply because it was 'the right thing to do.' Such occasions would seem to suggest that moral properties *are* intrinsically motivating.

And yet, it is also quite possible that you can recall a time when your judgment that something was 'the right thing to do' was not enough to motivate you to do that 'right thing.' Perhaps, like Gyges, the temptation to do otherwise was too strong or perhaps the action involved some difficulty or sacrifice. Perhaps you simply couldn't be bothered. Whatever the reasons, such occasions serve to question the notion that moral properties are intrinsically motivating.

#### **DISCUSS**



Together with a partner, discuss how you might respond in the following scenarios and why:

- At the shopping centre one afternoon you see a very small child crying hysterically. There are no concerned adults in the child's proximity, so you assume – quite rightly – that the child is lost. How do you respond to this situation?
- You are sitting on a packed bus one evening on the way home from school, when an elderly woman enters the bus just near where you are sitting. She is using a walking stick and it is clear that she is tired. How do you respond to this situation?



- Your friend, who is giving you a lift to your house, is struggling to carry four heavy bags to the car. You have only a small backpack. How do you respond to this situation?

Discuss the following questions as a whole class:

1. What would generally be considered the 'right' way to respond in each of these scenarios?
2. Do you think that knowing the 'right' response will always ensure that people will respond in this way? Why or why not?
3. In your opinion, what else is necessary for moral judgments to motivate? Is this always the case?
4. In light of the class's responses to questions 1-3, how persuasive is the commonsense view that moral properties are inherently motivating?

## ***Moral Beliefs and Moral Motivation***

If we concede that moral properties are not, in themselves, sufficient motivation for moral action, how else are we to explain the robust relationship between our moral judgments and the actions that proceed from them?

An obvious way of responding to this question is to suggest that, rather than moral properties, it is our moral *beliefs* that motivate us. To illustrate, consider our earlier example of the small child who reports the bullying she has witnessed to her teachers. According to this theory the child is motivated to act, not simply because the behavior she has witnessed is wrong, but because she *believes* it to be wrong. In other words, rather than being motivated by something external, the child is motivated by her own values.

### **THINK**

How plausible does this explanation of moral motivation seem to you? Can you think of any evidence to support this account of moral motivation? Can you think of any evidence against it?



At first glance this understanding of moral motivation has much to recommend it. It explains why we occasionally stray from our moral judgments (our beliefs do not accord with those judgments) and how it is possible for us to cease to be motivated by particular judgments and instead be motivated by others. However, the challenge of this theory is to explain how a **cognitive** state, like belief, can give rise to motivation.

One way of responding to this challenge is to claim that moral beliefs are *directly* motivating. In other words, if an individual believes, for example, that stealing is wrong, she will not steal. Likewise, if she believes that giving to charity is right, she will give to charity.

This explanation, however, seems somewhat insufficient. Although I may believe wholeheartedly that it is good to make regular donations to charity, this doesn't necessarily mean I will make such donations. Belief, it would seem, requires more if it is to be motivating.

Perhaps then, we might suggest that what makes certain moral beliefs motivating is that they generate a desire to act on them and it is this desire that moves us to action. To illustrate, consider the previous example of donating to charity. According to this theory, my belief that donating to charity is good generates within me a desire to do so. And it is this desire, together with my belief, that motivates me to hand over my credit card details to the aid agency spruiking its cause at the local shopping centre. Thus my cognitive state gives rise to a **conative** state (a state of desire) and both work together to move me to action.

### THINK

Does this account of moral motivation seem more plausible than the view that we are simply motivated to act on our moral judgments because of our beliefs? Why or why not?



## Virtue Theory and Moral Motivation

This idea of moral motivation is one shared by some **virtue theorists**, including Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99). In his work *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BCE), Aristotle describes the virtuous person as one who, through habituation to virtuous action, has developed a virtuous character. Such a person acts morally, not because moral properties are intrinsically motivating or because of any broad moral beliefs he or she may hold, but because their understanding of virtue, inculcated via habituation, has given rise to a desire for right action. In other words, it is their belief about virtuous action, together with desire, that motivates them to act.

### TEXT STUDY: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BCE)

[see Useful Resources]

Read Book II ('Moral Virtue'), Chapter I. Answer the following questions in your workbook:

1. Aristotle identifies two kinds of virtue. What are they and how are they cultivated?
2. How is cultivation of moral virtue related to the development of character? Is this a persuasive argument? Why or why not?
3. How is a virtuous disposition developed?
4. Consider your answers to questions 1-3. Write a brief paragraph describing moral motivation in your own words.
5. Has Aristotle provided a persuasive explanation for good action? Why or why not?



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## Desire and Reason

### *Desire and Moral Motivation*

The eighteenth century Scottish philosopher, David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182), agrees that belief alone is insufficient for generating motivation. Hume also agrees that for any belief to motivate, it must be accompanied by some conative state. However, Hume disagrees that this conative state necessarily arises from a pre-existing belief. Rather, he claims that it is the conative state (desire) that pre-exists the belief and gives rise to motivation.

In both *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume argues that all intentional actions arise from the passions, which are themselves produced by our perceptions of pleasure and pain. To illustrate, let us once again consider the example of the child who has reported a bullying incident she has witnessed to her teacher. According to Hume's account of moral motivation, the child is moved to act not because the act she has witnessed is wrong, nor because she *believes* it is wrong, but because her desires, borne of her feelings of pleasure and pain, have compelled her to act. The nature of these desires does not particularly concern Hume – the child may be moved by the fact that she finds the bullied child's pain intolerable, or by her desire to be liked by that child or even by the desire to be thought well of by her teachers – and nor does he commit to any particular view of the sorts of desires that are responsible for moral motivation. Hume simply maintains that such desire is necessary if the individual is going to be moved to action.

#### THINK

Are you convinced by this account of moral motivation? Why or why not?



### DESIRE AND MORAL MOTIVATION: CRITICISMS

Hume's view certainly has its strengths. To begin with, it plausibly explains why an individual can be motivated to act in particular circumstances but not in others. For example, it provides an explanation for why I may choose to give money to a beggar on one occasion but not on another, despite the fact there is no relevant difference in the beggar's observable conditions or my financial circumstances. It also accounts for why people who share the same beliefs are not always motivated in the same way – they do not share the same desires.

However, Hume's theory is less convincing if we consider just how reliably motivating our moral judgments tend to be. Although it is certainly true that most of us are susceptible to occasional bouts of moral fickleness, generally speaking, the connection between our moral judgments and our motivation is robust – we are reliably moved by our moral judgments in a way we are not moved by our desires.

Additionally, one might question Hume's theory on the grounds that it doesn't accord with our everyday experience of moral motivation. Generally, when people are asked to explain the motivation behind their moral actions, they do so by saying something along the lines of 'I felt it was the right thing to do.' Rarely, if ever, do we rationalise our moral actions in terms of our desires.

Finally, Hume's theory doesn't account for the fact that we can be motivated towards actions we judge morally right but have no desire to engage in. For example, a teacher may stay back after class to help students who are struggling with their work because, for one reason or another, he feels this is the right thing to do. However, he may find this chore labourious and boring and may even resent it. It is difficult to see how, in this instance, the connection between moral judgment and motivation could be construed as one of desire.

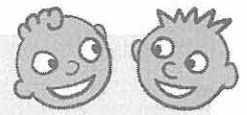
## **Reason and Moral Motivation**

The eighteenth century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111), agrees that desire is inadequate for explaining moral motivation. In his *Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785) Kant argues that humans are creatures defined by reason. One of the ways we use our reason is to make decisions about what we should and shouldn't do. Kant believes these decisions are not arbitrary but based on certain principles or maxims that we develop to help guide our choices (see Chapter 5, Theme 3, pp.419-421). Thus for Kant, it is reason, and not feeling, that is the source of moral motivation.

Kant does not, however, dismiss feelings entirely. He argues that although reason is the locus for our moral judgments and the motivating force behind our moral behaviour, it is our emotions that provide the passion necessary for us to see our judgments through to the point of action. It is important to note that Kant believed that this is the *only* role that feeling should play in the moral decision making process: not only is a predominance of feeling a denial of our status as rational, autonomous agents (because feelings have the capacity to override the will), a truly moral action is always and only a product of reasoned judgment.

## **REASON AND MORAL MOTIVATION: CRITICISMS**

At first glance, Kant's account of moral motivation may seem more plausible than Hume's. It resonates with how we typically think of moral motivation ('I did it because it was the right thing to do') and fits with the fact that we can often be motivated to act on moral judgments, despite having no apparent desire to do so. But can all examples of moral motivation be adequately explained on the grounds of reason? Consider, for example, an individual who sponsors a child in a Third World country. Let's say this decision proceeds from a moral judgment regarding one's obligation to others less fortunate than one's self. While it could be argued that the individual is rationally motivated to provide her regular donation, doesn't it seem more plausible that what has moved her is not her reason, but her feelings of pity and compassion, and the desire to do something that is bred of these emotions? Also, Kant's theory does little to explain the random acts of compassion, such as giving coins to the homeless or helping an elderly person disembark from a bus, that many of us, at some point or another, are spontaneously compelled to engage in.



## DISCUSS

Share with a partner a recent incident of moral motivation that you have experienced, explaining to your partner why you believe you were motivated to act on your moral judgments. Invite your partner to do the same.

Discuss the following question as a whole class:

- Who do you think provides the more plausible account of moral motivation, Hume or Kant? Why?

## Egoism and Altruism

Another way of examining the issue of moral motivation is to consider what motivates our behavior more generally.

### *Psychological Egoism*

**Psychological egoism** is the theory that all human actions are motivated by self-interest, even those acts that appear to be **other-regarding**. Psychological egoists explain instances of other-regarding behaviour which appear to be the result of other-regarding desires – for example, saving someone who is drowning or coming to the aid of someone who is injured – as ultimately rooted in a more basic, self-regarding desire, perhaps one that we may be unaware of. In other words, according to the psychological egoist, we help others only because of the personal benefits we believe we will obtain from doing so and for no other reason (despite what we may think).

Some psychological egoists, known as **psychological hedonists**, offer an even narrower reading of human motivation. According to these thinkers, the self-interest that governs all human motivation is specifically characterised by the desire to obtain pleasure and avoid pain.

Although historically, philosophers have largely rejected psychological egoism, it has had some very famous supporters. The seventeenth century British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (Famous Philosopher File p.483), in his work *Leviathan* (1651) wrote ‘...no man giveth but with intention of good to himself, because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good; of which, if men see they shall be frustrated, there will be no beginning of benevolence or trust, nor consequently of mutual help.’<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the utilitarian philosopher, Jeremy Bentham (Famous Philosopher File p.404), states in the first chapter of his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) that human beings are governed by two masters, pleasure and pain, and it is these two masters that ‘point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do.’<sup>30</sup>

29 Hobbes, T. 1651, *Leviathan* ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hobbes/thomas/h681/chapter15.html#chapter15 (accessed October 10th 2013)

30 J. Bentham 1789 *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/bentham/jeremy/morals/chapter1.html> (accessed October 19th 2013)

Whether or not you agree with Hobbes and Bentham, it is interesting to consider the implication of their views for the question of *moral* motivation. If, as psychological egoism contends, all our actions are motivated by self-interest, so too are our moral actions. Thus the connection between moral judgment and motivation is characterised by the desire to secure our own satisfaction.

### THINK

How plausible is the view that self-interest characterises moral motivation? How plausible is the view that self-interest characterises *all* actions? Can you think of any examples that refute either of these claims?



## PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM: CRITICISMS

Are you convinced that all of our moral actions are reducible to self-interest?

As previously mentioned, the majority of philosophers who have considered such matters are not, and they cite a variety of arguments to support their claims.

Perhaps the most famous (and regularly cited) argument is one that was originally proposed by the eighteenth century theologian and philosopher, Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and is now often referred to as ‘Butler’s Stone,’ after an example Butler uses to explain it. Although originally addressed to psychological hedonism, it can be applied with equal ease to psychological egoism.

Basically Butler argues that all our actions cannot be motivated by pleasure (or, more generally, self-interest) because any pleasure we gain presupposes a desire for something else. To illustrate, consider a scenario in which a woman comes to the aid of a drowning man. The pleasure that the woman gains from helping the man is dependent on a desire for the man’s wellbeing. In other words, pleasure is a by-product, and not the motivating force, for the action.

### THINK

Despite the fact that Butler’s stone is one of the most famous arguments against psychological egoism, not everyone is convinced by it. Why might some philosophers have rejected this argument?



Another argument against psychological egoism, and one that bears a close resemblance to Butler’s, was proposed by the twentieth century British philosopher, Bernard Williams (Famous Philosopher Files p.359). Quite simply, Williams argues that psychological egoism fails to distinguish between desiring one’s own satisfaction and desiring the satisfaction of one’s desires. To illustrate, consider the desire for a nice, hot cup of tea and a wedge of chocolate. My desire, in this instance, is completely motivated by my own satisfaction. But what of my desire to call an ambulance to help my elderly neighbour who has had a fall in her garden? While my action is certainly motivated by desire, my desire is not self-interested. At least some of our desires, Williams suggests, are not related to our own self-interest.

## THINK

At first glance, this seems like a compelling argument against psychological egoism, but is it? Why or why not?



The utilitarian philosopher Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) also believed that psychological egoism, in the form of psychological hedonism, was flawed. His point was that psychological hedonism is paradoxical: we tend to attain more pleasure (or benefit) by focusing on things other than our own pleasure (or benefit). For example, someone who is other-regarding in their relationships is likely to have more friends and thus be happier than someone who is completely self-interested.

## THINK

Is it true that concern only for oneself diminishes one's wellbeing? Why or why not?



Another well-known argument against psychological egoism was proposed by the American philosopher Joel Fienberg (1926-2004) in his 1958 paper 'Psychological Egoism.' In this paper, Fienberg claims that psychological egoism is unsustainable because it results in an infinite regress, which he illustrates in the following dialogue:

*'All men desire only satisfaction.'*

*'Satisfaction of what?'*

*'Satisfaction of their desires.'*

*'Their desires for what?'*

*'Their desires for satisfaction.'*

*'Satisfaction of what?'*

*'Their desires.'*

*'For what?'*

*'For satisfaction.'*<sup>31</sup>

## THINK

Do you find Fienberg's criticism more or less convincing than Butler's? Williams'? or Sidgwick's? Why or why not?



31 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological\\_egoism#Circularity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_egoism#Circularity) (accessed October 19th, 2013)

## Psychological Altruism

Perhaps you are beginning to feel unconvinced by the psychological egoist's claim that all our behaviours are motivated by self-interest. You may therefore find **psychological altruism** more appealing.

Psychological altruism is the view that at least some of our actions can be explained in completely altruistic (or other-regarding) terms. To be altruistically motivated is to be motivated solely out of concern for another being.

Psychological altruism, therefore, stands in opposition to psychological egoism, which completely prohibits it. It is also a weaker position than psychological egoism: whereas psychological egoism makes its claim in regards to all human actions, psychological altruism argues that only some human actions are wholly altruistic. This means that although psychological altruism allows for the possibility that our moral motivations are characterised by altruism, it does not entail it.

Generally speaking, psychological altruism has proven more appealing to philosophers than psychological egoism. To begin with, it accords with our commonsense understanding of seemingly altruistic actions: it is difficult to understand how a soldier who places himself in the line of fire to save the life of a fellow combatant is acting out of self-interest. Of course the psychological egoist could argue that the soldier is still ultimately motivated by his own interests – perhaps, on some unconscious level, the soldier is acting out of concern for his own honour, or his posterity or to be considered brave by his comrades – but this seems to stretch credulity. It seems far more plausible that his behaviour is motivated by his desire to protect his fellow soldier.

Psychological altruism also seems to accord with what we know of humans from the perspective of evolutionary biology. Given that human beings are social animals, it seems unlikely that natural selection would have favoured and cultivated pure self-interest. Also, if we consider a behaviour like parental care, which is believed to have evolved via natural selection, it is difficult to square such behaviour with the view that human beings are completely motivated by self-interest.

### DO

Read through the following scenarios, either independently or in pairs:

1. A small child notices another small child crying in the playground. She goes and hugs the child to comfort it.
2. A mother sacrifices her career and her friendships to devote herself to caring for her terminally sick child.
3. A young man who witnesses his brother slip on some rocks and into the sea jumps into the roaring surf to save him.
4. A live grenade is thrown into the trenches where a handful of soldiers are taking shelter. With no time to spare, their sergeant throws himself on the grenade, saving their lives.





In pairs, discuss the following questions:

1. How might a psychological egoist rationalise the behaviour demonstrated in each of the above examples?
2. How might a supporter of psychological altruism rationalise the behaviour demonstrated in each of the above examples?

As a whole class, discuss the following questions:

1. In light of your small group discussions, which position do you find more compelling in terms of explaining moral motivation, psychological egoism or psychological altruism? Why?
2. If we can explain moral motivation in terms of psychological egoism, are moral actions truly moral? Why or why not?
3. Is psychological altruism necessary for moral action? Why or why not?



## DO

Organise a classroom debate on the following question:

- Should those who commit brave acts be formally honoured?

The side for the affirmative should argue that those who commit brave acts should be formally honoured and the side for the negative should argue that they should not be honoured. When you are preparing your debate be sure to draw on arguments for and against psychological egoism and psychological altruism.

When you have completed this task, write a 500 word reflection on the following question:

- Can moral motivation be wholly characterised by psychological egoism or can at least some of our moral actions be explained altruistically?

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## Internalism and Externalism

So far in this Theme we have been considering how it is that moral judgments motivate. Implicit in our discussion has been the question of whether moral judgments are *necessarily* motivating or whether they are *contingently* motivating. It is with this question explicitly in mind that we now turn to a central debate in moral psychology: the debate between **motivational** (or moral judgment) **internalism** and **motivational** (or moral judgment) **externalism**.

### ***Motivational Internalism***

According to motivational internalism (hereafter, simply internalism), if an individual judges that she ought to do something, she will necessarily and intrinsically be motivated to do it. In other words, one cannot hold a moral judgment *without* being motivated to act on it. Our moral judgments are overwhelmingly compelling.

Yet, although philosophers who support internalism support this basic thesis, there are degrees of internalism, usually described as strong and weak. **Strong internalism** most closely resembles the internalism described above. It maintains that when a person makes a moral judgment he or she will be overwhelmingly motivated to act on it. **Weak internalism**, although in complete agreement that moral judgments are necessarily motivating, recognises that our motivation can be derailed by conflicting desires – for example, the actions that might proceed from my judgment that I should give money to charity may be thwarted by the judgment that I have an obligation to financially assist my daughter in completing university – or by psychological problems, such as depression, illness, or by weakness of will.

### THINK

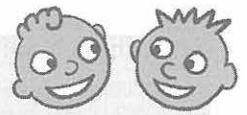
In your opinion, how plausible is the view that the only reason for a disconnection between moral judgment and motivation is either conflicting desires, psychological problems or weakness of will?



### INTERNALISM: CRITICISMS

Internalism has garnered strong support among moral philosophers, most notably because it provides a ready explanation for the reliability of moral motivation; in other words, the reason we so reliably act in accordance with our moral judgments is because they are necessarily compelling. It also accounts for the strong correlation between changes in moral judgment and changes in moral motivation. To illustrate, consider an individual who is against the idea of gay marriage, so much so that she regularly attends rallies to protest her views. However, through mutual friends she meets a gay couple and, after many long conversations and regularly witnessing the depth of the couple's commitment to one another, her moral judgment on the issue changes. She no longer attends rallies to protest against gay marriage. It seems logical to ascribe the change in the woman's behaviour to a change in her moral judgments.

Yet, while internalism certainly seems compelling, it is not without its problems. For example, one might ask if all lapses of motivation can be attributed to psychological problems or conflicting desires. Consider the example, referred to earlier in this Theme, of failing to give a beggar change when I have done so in the past (and may do so again in the future). Such behaviour cannot be attributed to a change in moral judgment (for we have added the proviso that I may give again in the future), nor is it necessarily the result of conflicting desires (if you recall the example, we stipulated there was no relevant difference in my financial circumstances or in the beggar's observable conditions). And, although my behaviour could be attributed to a psychological problem – I may, for example, feel too depressed to care about the wellbeing of others – it is equally plausible that my lack of motivation stems from other, far more trivial reasons: perhaps I simply don't care to give my money away on this occasion.



## DISCUSS

- You have been presented with two arguments in favour of, and one against, motivational internalism. Can you think of any others?

Share your thoughts with the whole class. Then as a whole class, discuss the following question:

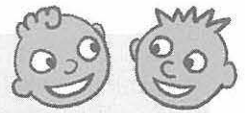
- How convincing is motivational internalism? Why?

## ***Motivational Externalism***

Whereas internalism claims a necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation, motivational externalism (hereafter externalism) claims that any connection between a moral judgment and a moral action is contingent. Thus, according to this theory, moral judgments are themselves inert, dependent on something other than themselves to be motivating.

Of course the challenge of externalism is to explain why it is that moral judgments appear to be so reliably motivating. One possible response is to point to the role of desires or other conative states in motivating us to act on our judgments. In other words, the reason I am moved to act has very little to do with my moral judgments and much more to do with the particular desires I harbour. You may have noted that this is the perspective of Hume as expressed earlier in this Theme.

Yet, while this is a plausible response to the question of why moral judgments motivate, it is a less plausible response to why they are so *reliably* motivating. One way externalists have attempted to address this question is to point to some view of human nature which accounts for a degree of uniformity in terms of desires: our moral judgments are reliably motivating because they tap into desires that are reliably motivating.



## DISCUSS

1. How adequately do the externalist responses address criticisms of the theory?
2. How else might the theory be defended?
3. Does the theory provide a more plausible account of moral motivation than motivational internalism? Why or why not?



## TEXT STUDY: Bernard Williams, *The Amoralist* (1972)

[see *Useful Resources*]

The Amoralist, an individual who makes moral judgments but feels no compulsion to act upon them, is a central figure in debates between internalists and externalists. Internalists contend that the amoralist is a conceptual impossibility, whereas externalists maintain that the amoralist is not a conceptual impossibility and that people can, and do, apply moral concepts without being motivated in any specific way.

Read *The Amoralist* and answer the following questions:

1. Williams identifies two ways that the question ‘why should I do anything?’ can be taken. Which of these ways does he identify with the amoralist?
2. What are the characteristics of the amoralist?
3. What feelings are not allowed the amoralist? Why?
4. How does the amoralist explain moral motivation?
5. How does the amoralist challenge the theory of internalism? You may like to refer to the example of the gangster in your response.
6. Does Williams think the amoralist is a conceptual impossibility? Why or why not?

After you have completed this task, discuss the following question as a whole class:

- In light of your study of *The Amoralist*, which theory of moral motivation do you find more convincing, internalism or externalism? Why?

## WRITE

Complete a written reflection of approximately 500 words in response to the following question:

- Motivational internalism argues that the amoralist is a conceptual impossibility. Why? Do you agree? Give reasons for your response.



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## Moral Weakness

Much of our discussion during this Theme has focused on trying to explain the relationship between moral judgments and moral motivation. But what happens when this relationship breaks down? How do we explain why people do things that they believe are wrong?

The Greeks termed this kind of behaviour *akrasia*, which translates as moral ‘incontinence’ or a lack of self-mastery. To illustrate, imagine you are browsing in a bookshop for a work of philosophy you very much desire. You find the work and despite it being a slim volume it has an exorbitant price tag. As you are deliberating whether or not to spend all of your remaining paycheck to purchase it, you suddenly become aware that the shop assistant has left the shop front to make herself a cup of tea. Although you are firmly convinced that stealing is morally wrong, you are overwhelmed by the urge to take advantage of the shop assistant’s absence and tuck the book into the front of your jeans. So you do it. Afterwards, you feel deeply remorseful and swear you will never do such a thing again.

It is worth noting a few key features of this scenario. To begin with, your act of stealing goes against all of your moral convictions. Secondly, your behavior is characterised by impulse: you are ‘overwhelmed by the urge’ to take the book and are not thinking through your actions. Finally, you feel deep remorse regarding your behavior.

These three things are key aspects of *akrasia*. While akratic behaviour, at least as Aristotle understands it, is characteristic of the akratic personality, it does not represent as a constant condition, but rather an intermittent behaviour driven by circumstance. This is why *akrasia* requires remorse. If the individual were not remorseful it would be clear that her behaviour was something other than a temporary weakness of the will.

Although many philosophers have discussed *akrasia*, including Plato (Famous Philosopher File pp.93-94), Augustine (Famous Philosopher File p.201) and Aquinas (Famous Philosopher File p.231), the name it is most closely associated with is Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99).

Aristotle’s explanation of *akrasia* begins with his understanding of *orexis*, which may be translated as desire or appetite. According to Aristotle, there are three kinds of *orexis* – *boulesis*, *thumos* and *epithumia*. *Boulesis* translates as ‘wishing or willing’. It is involved whenever we are moved to act by reason or deliberation. For example, a decision to go on a diet, which is borne of a wish to slim down and so become healthier, is characterised by *boulesis*. *Boulesis*, therefore, is rational. Both *thumos* and *epithumia* are non-rational. Respectively, they involve the passions, such as love, anger, pity and spite (to throw a tantrum because one does not get what one wants is an example of *thumos*), and the appetites, such as sexual desire, hunger and thirst (to commit adultery is the most obvious example of *epithumia*).

All three of these *orexis* are responsible for motivation, but only two of them, *thumos* and *epithumia*, are responsible for *akrasia*. Because choice, according to Aristotle, is goal-directed, and both *thumos* and *epithumia* are non-rational, *akrasia* cannot be regarded as intentional. *Akrasia* is a behaviour borne of a temporary failure of the moral will and is thus unintentional.

## An Alternative Explanation

Aristotle's predecessor, Socrates (Famous Philosopher File p.7), did not agree that apparent examples of *akrasia* could be explained as temporary lapses of moral will. For Socrates, people act badly simply because they are ignorant of what the right action is, either in the particular situation, or more generally. Thus, according to Socrates, your lapse of judgment in the bookshop was apparent rather than actual – if you really believed that stealing is wrong that book would have never ended up down the front of your jeans.

One question we might be tempted to ask of Socrates is how he would explain the remorse that follows this behaviour. After all, if you didn't really hold the view that stealing is wrong, then surely you wouldn't be so distressed by your actions.

Perhaps one way of explaining your remorse is to claim that it is socially constructed rather than actual. In other words, you feel remorse, not because you genuinely *feel* remorse, but because you have been socially conditioned to do so by your parents, teachers and society. Another way of explaining your remorse is to suggest that you aren't completely aware of your own moral convictions: thanks to that same social conditioning, you may believe that you believe that stealing is wrong, but that's not really true at all. Dig down below it and you are as open to the idea of stealing as your average kleptomaniac.

### THINK

Are you convinced by Socrates' explanation of an apparent breakdown in moral motivation? Why or why not?



### TEXT STUDY: Aristotle, *Book VII, Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BCE)

[see *Useful Resources*]

Read chapters II and III. In pairs, and using a highlighter and annotations, locate the arguments that Aristotle uses to examine Socrates' claim that apparent acts against morality are not examples of *akrasia* but acts performed from ignorance.

When you have completed this task, write the arguments out in your workbooks.

As a whole class, discuss the following question:

- Who provides the more convincing argument regarding acts of apparent 'moral incontinence', Aristotle or Socrates? Why?





## DO

In pairs, construct a hypothetical that serves to interrogate Aristotle's understanding of *akrasia*. Examples of possible scenarios on which to base your hypothetical include:

- A murder committed in anger
- Committing adultery
- Stealing a prized, and much desired, item from a friend
- Deliberately humiliating someone in an impulsive act of retaliation for a perceived wrong
- Smacking a child whose behaviour has become intolerable.

When you have constructed your hypothetical, arrange the class into small groups and assign one hypothetical to each group. Each small group should put together a panel of 'experts' and 'interested parties' to discuss the hypothetical. For example, if students were assigned a hypothetical based on the first scenario, the panel may include a psychologist, a police officer, a reformed criminal and a victim of crime.

The role of the panel is to debate the plausibility of *akrasia* within the context of the hypothetical that they have been assigned. To improve the quality of discussion, students should research the hypothetical within the context of their role on the panel in preparation for the task.



## WRITE

When you have completed the above activity, write a 500 word reflection on the following question:

- How plausible is *akrasia* as an explanation for a breakdown in moral motivation?

## TEXT STUDY: Donald Davidson, *How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?* (1970)

Davidson's essay expresses a contemporary take on *akrasia* that differs markedly from Aristotle's.

Read the introduction to the essay and discuss the following questions:

1. How does Davidson characterise weak-willed or incontinent action?
2. How does this definition differ from Aristotle's definition?
3. Is it a more plausible definition? Why or why not?



If your class is feeling ambitious, you may like to tackle either the first or second part of the essay as well. Both are elegantly written, but can be heavy-going in places.

In Part One of the essay, Davidson examines various ways in which philosophers have tried to deal with what he calls the ‘problem of incontinence.’

- What are some of the different ways philosophers have attempted to deal with this problem and why does Davidson conclude they are ultimately unsuccessful?

In Part Two of the essay, Davidson proposes his theory in light of the issues he has raised. This is perhaps the most difficult section of the text. To tackle it:

- Download a summary of the arguments contained in the essay from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weakness-will/#DavPosWeaWil>).
- Read through the summary, highlighting each of the key steps in his argument.
- Read through Part Two of the essay. Using a highlighter, try to locate the parts of the argument that you have identified in the summary in the original text.
- When you have completed this task, write a summary (approximately 300 words) outlining in your own words how Davidson addresses the problem of incontinence.

## **Capacity for Evil**

Much moral theory reflects on what motivates people to be good and virtuous in their moral judgements. However, events of the twentieth century, and the Holocaust in particular, led people to grapple with just how such a degree of moral depravity could have been possible. Where could such acts of evil have come from?

As Hannah Arendt (Famous Philosopher File p.391) writes in ‘Some Questions of Moral Philosophy’:

*...Standards according to which men used to tell right from wrong, and which were invoked to judge or justify others and themselves, and whose validity were supposed to be self-evident to every sane person either as a part of divine or of natural law... collapsed almost overnight, and then it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of mores, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people. How strange and how frightening it suddenly appeared that ...two thousand five hundred years of thought, in literature, philosophy and religion, should not have brought forth ...the existence of a conscience which speaks with an identical voice to all men. What had happened? Did we finally awake from a dream?*

Arendt, H. 1965, ‘Some Questions of Moral Philosophy’,  
[http://newdoc.nccu.edu.tw/teasyllabus/117154104580/Some-Questions-of-Moral-Philosophy%20\(1\).pdf](http://newdoc.nccu.edu.tw/teasyllabus/117154104580/Some-Questions-of-Moral-Philosophy%20(1).pdf)

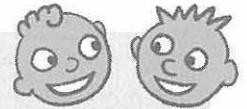


Arendt's most famous book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the 'Banality of Evil'*, consisted of Arendt's philosophical reflections after she witnessed the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the chief architect and executioner of Hitler's 'final solution' – the genocide of Jews, gypsies, academics and homosexuals in Europe. Before seeing Eichmann in the dock, Arendt prepared herself to encounter someone monstrous, a malevolent demon, someone who must have reversed usual moral patterns to believe that evil is good, and for whom hatred and cruelty were causes of delight.

However, the innocuous man in the dock seemed instead to be unthinking in his obedience to instructions, and had therefore failed to distinguish between extermination of people and any other administrative task he might have been assigned. Arendt described this "banality of evil" – whereby fairly ordinary people prove capable of reprehensible acts – as resulting from an absence of the moral imagination and capacity for judgement that – we would hope for most of us – would prevent such deeds. For Arendt, Eichmann had failed to have any kind of internal dialogue with himself about his actions, and he thus had had no self-awareness.

Arendt's work from this point onwards continued to explore how thinking and judgement constitute our moral choices.

## DISCUSS



1. How is it that failure to imagine a situation's moral dimensions can result in evil acts? Can you offer examples?
2. 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing,' Edmund Burke famously said. How do Arendt's ideas about evil speak to this quotation?

## TEXT STUDY: Hannah Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*



Read the whole essay or a section selected by your teacher.

1. Identify one or more of the questions Arendt asks here of moral philosophy.
2. Have your studies in moral philosophy so far offered any answers to these questions? If so, what are those answers, and are they satisfactory in Arendt's terms?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### HANNAH ARENDT (1906-1975)

Joanna “Hannah” Arendt was born into a Jewish family in Hanover, Germany. During her university studies she was taught by Martin Heidegger (Famous Philosopher File p.205), with whom she had a brief affair, and the influential existential psychiatrist and philosopher, Karl Jaspers. In 1929, the year she obtained her doctorate, Arendt started to encounter the antisemitism that was growing in Germany. Just a few years later, she was imprisoned by the Nazis, but managed to flee to Paris and later to New York.

In the U.S., Arendt flourished as a writer, editor and newspaper columnist, as well as teaching in several American universities. She produced several acclaimed works including *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958) *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), *On Revolution* (1963), *Men in Dark Times* (1968) and a three-part epic, *Life of the Mind*, that was incomplete when she died suddenly of a heart attack at age 69.

Arendt is remembered as one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century.



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## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: IS MORAL BEHAVIOUR FOUND ONLY IN HUMAN BEINGS?

Throughout this Theme we have concentrated on the issue of moral motivation as it exists in human beings. But are animals capable of moral judgments and if so, can they be motivated by them? How could we know?

Research these questions in pairs or small groups. When you have completed your research construct a PowerPoint presentation or Prezi that:

- Outlines the evidence for and against the claim that animals are capable of moral judgments and of being motivated by these moral judgments.
- Discusses the implications of this research for EITHER our thinking about animals or our thinking about moral motivation in human beings.

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## **Assessment Tasks**

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Do you think most people would behave immorally if they knew they could get away with it? Why or why not?
2. In your opinion does it seem more plausible that the locus of moral action is desire rather than reason? Why?
3. Can all examples of apparently altruistic behaviour be plausibly explained by the theory of psychological egoism?
4. Are there any examples of moral behaviour that cannot be explained by psychological egoism? What are they?
5. How can a breakdown in moral motivation be plausibly explained?
6. Do you think all immoral acts can be explained as acts of ignorance? Why or why not?
7. If akrasia can produce a habitual disposition to moral incontinence, could cultivating our moral character and virtues prevent it? If so, how?

### **Assessment Task Two: Written Analysis**

Use any of the short written reflections scattered throughout this Theme as the basis for a written analysis.

### **Assessment Task Three: Dialogue**

Write an imagined dialogue between the philosophers Socrates and Aristotle on the problem of moral incontinence. Your dialogue should allow each philosophical position to be aired to its best advantage and should also challenge each position through interrogation of its claims.

### **Assessment Task Four: Oral Presentation**

Use EITHER the debate on page 391 or the hypothetical on page 388 for an oral assessment task.

### **Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses**

Complete a task that asks for short-answer explanations of the various theories and terms outlined in this Theme.

## ***Assessment Task Six: Essay***

Write an essay that outlines and critically compares psychological egoism and psychological altruism. Which of these two theories provides the most convincing explanation for moral motivation?

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay (page 585).

## THEME 3

# On Right and Wrong

What makes an action morally right? According to some philosophers the answer to this question must be sought in the consequences of action. Does the action minimise suffering? Does it maximise happiness? Other philosophers maintain that we must look to the action itself, whereas some suggest we look to the intentions behind the action and the maxims – or principles – those intentions are based on.

In this Theme you will be introduced to three major theories that philosophers have proposed to assess moral actions. You will be invited to consider the persuasiveness of these theories as well as their consequences for moral decision-making. In addition, you will be asked to consider the legitimacy of religious authority as a source of moral principles.

### Introductory Activities



#### READ

As a class, consider the following **thought experiment** proposed by the American moral philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929-):

*One afternoon, a brilliant surgeon finds himself in a terrible predicament: five of his patients desperately require an organ transplant to avoid impending death. Although each patient requires a different organ, not one of these organs is available on the donation register. That very same afternoon, a healthy traveler who is just passing through the city wanders in to the doctor's consulting rooms for a routine check-up. During the course of the check up the doctor discovers that every one of the traveler's organs is compatible with his five dying patients. As his receptionist is out to lunch and the traveler is visiting without an appointment it is very unlikely that his sudden disappearance will be traced to the doctor. He smiles at the traveler. 'Please remain on the bed for a moment more. There is just something else I would like to consider.'*\*

\* Adapted from J.J. Thomson 1985, 'The Trolley Problem', *Yale Law Journal* 94, pp1395-1415

Discuss the following questions:

1. Should the doctor murder the traveler to save the five dying patients? Why or why not?
2. Considering the range of responses to question 1, what are some of the different criteria we use to decide whether an action is right or wrong?
3. What did your discussion of question 1 reveal about the merits and shortcomings of these different criteria?

## THINK

In what ways did the above exercise challenge your views about what makes an action right or wrong? Do you need to modify your views to achieve a greater sense of **equilibrium** (see p.352) in terms of your moral thinking? In what way?



No doubt a number of your classmates (perhaps even you) protested against the possible murder of the unfortunate traveler in the activity above. The reasons for this were probably varied: thoughts may have turned to the traveler's loved ones and their grief on learning of the traveler's baffling disappearance, or perhaps there was a feeling that the traveler's life was a right that must not be transgressed under any circumstances. Maybe some of your classmates felt that killing the traveler was somehow wrong 'in itself.'

## Morality and Religion

The view that murder is 'wrong in itself', if probed a little more deeply, may have revealed itself to be religious in origin. This is hardly surprising given the intimate relationship between morality and religion. Moral laws form a large part of religious teachings and many of our secular moral views correspond to these laws. For example, the commonly held view that unlawful killing is wrong is upheld in both the Hebrew Bible and in the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism.

## DO

Both the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew Bible and the Noble Eightfold Path, which is one of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, are doctrines that have shaped the moral thinking of millions of people all over the world.

Read through these doctrines (outlined below).

**The Ten Commandments** (see *Useful Resources*):

1. Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.



3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
5. Honour thy father and thy mother.
6. Thou shalt not kill.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

**The Noble Eightfold Path** (see *Useful Resources*):

1. Right view.
2. Right intention.
3. Right speech.
4. Right action.
5. Right livelihood.
6. Right effort.
7. Right mindfulness.
8. Right concentration.

Divide into groups of four. Two members of your group can research the meaning of the Ten Commandments and the other two can research the meaning of the eight steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. When you have returned to your groups and shared your knowledge, discuss the following questions:

1. In what ways are the Ten Commandments and the Noble Eightfold Path similar and different in terms of their *moral* prescriptions?
2. In what ways are the moral prescriptions of these two doctrines similar to, and different from, secular moral beliefs?
3. What are some of the merits and shortcomings of these beliefs? Are they good moral values to live by? Why or why not?

Given their significant influence, it seems imperative to ask why these views might be considered authoritative. If you have already read through the first Theme of this Chapter you will know that the usual answer to this question is because they are commanded by God: God created the universe and, as part of His divine work, He also created the moral principles we are to live by<sup>32</sup>.

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32 Of course this is not the case with the moral principles of the Noble Eightfold Path, which are teachings of the Buddha, not commandments from God.

This immediately raises the question of how we are to *know* that these are, in fact, God's laws. After all, the sources from which these laws are derived, such as the Bible or Koran, can sometimes be difficult to interpret or even contradictory (you may recall the example from the Bible on page 353 of this book), and very few of us will ever have the opportunity to clarify our interpretations via a direct experience of God.

Thus for most of us, the answer to the question of how we are to know what God commands will inevitably be sought in religion. And this would seem rational: religious leaders are far more likely to have an intimate knowledge of the faith and be in a position to interpret God's will with greater clarity. However, a problem arises in trying to arbitrate between these views: whose interpretation of what God commands is correct?

### THINK

The question above seems to suggest that arbitration between different interpretations of God's will is impossible. Do you agree? Why or why not?



Even if we do manage to decide between religions, the problem of arbitration between different interpretations of God's teachings still remains. For example, in the Christian tradition some early church leaders, such as St. Paul, initially held that salvation could be achieved through faith alone, whereas others maintained it required the doing of good works. A more contemporary example is the varying interpretations regarding modesty in female dress in the Muslim faith.

A further problem arises when the teachings of a particular religion conflict with one's own sense of right and wrong or even one's interpretation of the faith. In such instances, should one disregard one's own conscience and instead follow the teachings of the faith, or should one follow one's conscience? Issues of gay marriage and abortion are just two examples within the Christian tradition where such a conflict has occurred for some people.

### DO

In small groups develop a **philosophical dialogue** on the question of whether religious authority is a legitimate source of moral values within the context of a relevant contemporary issue. For example:

- Gay marriage
- Legalised abortion
- Teaching sex education (and in particular the use of contraception) in schools





One of your speakers must be in favor of the view that religious authority is a legitimate source of moral values and one must be against the view. When preparing you dialogue it is important that you:

- Research your chosen issue
- Research the viewpoint of a religion on that issue
- Research why the religion holds that view on the issue (this may include some more general research into the religion)
- Consider both the merits and shortcomings of the religious viewpoint

Present your dialogue in front of the class. Afterwards, your class might wish to use these dialogues as the basis for a discussion on the legitimacy of religious authority as a source of moral values.

## Utilitarianism

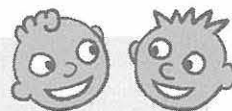
Maybe you are beginning to wonder if religion really is a legitimate source of moral principles. After all, putting aside the various issues connected to discerning God's laws, there is the additional problem of demonstrating God's existence (see Chapter 3, Theme 5).

Perhaps then, you may find **utilitarianism** more appealing. Utilitarianism is the view that what makes an action morally right is the degree to which it maximises happiness and minimises suffering. Thus murder might be considered wrong, not because there is necessarily something intrinsically wrong with taking another person's life, but because it causes unhappiness and suffering. By focusing on the consequences of actions rather than on the intentions behind them, utilitarianism provides a **consequentialist** account of morality.

When evaluating the consequences of action, utilitarianism is both impartial and egalitarian. Your happiness is of no more – and no less – importance than anyone else's. Indeed, when considering the moral value of an action, utilitarianism would urge us to consider all parties involved, both directly and indirectly. This is why utilitarianism is often referred to as the philosophy of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number.'

### DISCUSS

1. What are the merits of judging an action according to its consequences?
2. In what ways might judging an action according to its consequences prove problematic?



Yet, while all utilitarians share the fundamental view that what defines a good action is the amount of happiness it generates, they disagree on what exactly happiness is and, therefore, on what the goal of action should be. Outlined and discussed below are several different versions of utilitarianism for you to consider.

## Classical Utilitarianism 1: Jeremy Bentham

Like all utilitarians, classical or **hedonic** utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham (Famous Philosopher File p.404) and John Stuart Mill (Famous Philosopher File p.405), agree that the goal of action should be to maximise happiness and minimise suffering. However, when these philosophers speak of happiness, what they are specifically referring to is pleasure.

For Bentham, the kind of pleasure that is the object of an action is unimportant: ‘prejudice apart,’ he once said, ‘the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is of more value than either.’<sup>33</sup> Bentham was equally democratic about *whose* pleasure should be considered when evaluating the moral worth of an action:

*‘The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognised, that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate.’<sup>34</sup>*

As far as Bentham was concerned, the only thing of significance when judging the worth of any action was how much pleasure it generated and for how many.

### THINK

Should pleasure be the dominant consideration when judging the value of an action? Why or why not?



At first glance there is certainly something intuitively appealing about Bentham’s utilitarianism. Many of the things we consider bad (murder, torture, genocide) produce unpleasant consequences and, we might argue, are disliked because of this. Likewise, things we consider good (eating ice-cream, love, donating to charity) are often pleasurable, if not for ourselves, then at least for others. There is also something appealing about Bentham’s egalitarianism: why should an afternoon spent watching *Game of Thrones* be considered any less edifying than an afternoon spent at the gallery or the opera? Why should the life of an animal be considered of less importance than a human being’s simply because it is an animal?

However, given the complex nature of pleasure, we might feel inclined to ask exactly how we are to work out whether one action will produce more pleasure than another. Avoiding my homework right now might result in pleasure, but tomorrow when I speak with my teacher my pleasure will most likely be transformed into anxiety. Eating a block of chocolate would certainly be gratifying but I’m likely to suffer the consequences of such indulgence in a few hours time. By simply asking myself what is going to generate the greatest pleasure, I am unlikely to arrive at the best answer or, indeed, arrive at an answer at all.

33 J.Bentham 1825, *The Rationale of Reward*, [http://www.archive.org/stream/rationaleofrewar00bent/rationaleofrewar00bent\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/rationaleofrewar00bent/rationaleofrewar00bent_djvu.txt) (accessed August 20, 2013)

34 J.Bentham 1823, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML.html> (accessed August 20th, 2013)

Bentham recognised that pleasure is difficult to calculate. In his book *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) he provides his readers with a method by which they can measure the returns of an action, known as the **felicific calculus**.

The felicific calculus is a series of criteria against which we can measure the amount of pleasure a particular action will produce and, in turn, judge whether that action is to be pursued. The criteria include: intensity (how intense is the pleasure?); duration (how long will the pleasure last?); reliability (how certain am I that the pleasure will be generated?); temporal proximity (will the pleasure happen now or in the future?); repetition (will it produce further pleasure?); possibility of pain (will it be followed by pain?) and quantity or extent (how many will share in, or be affected by, this pleasure?).

To illustrate, consider a scenario in which a shop assistant has accidentally given you \$100 rather than \$50 change. If you wish to employ Bentham's calculus to help you to decide whether or not to alert the assistant to his mistake, you might begin by considering how you will feel having an extra \$50 in your pocket and how long that feeling would last. You might then consider whether stealing the extra \$50 will result in the pleasure you imagine or whether you may simply feel guilty and derive very little pleasure at all. You could ask yourself whether the pleasure would be fleeting or sustained. You could perhaps then consider the additional pleasure you might derive from spending the money and weigh this against the chance of being caught out and the embarrassment this would generate. Finally you might think about the others involved in your decision, such as the assistant whose till will not balance at the end of his shift, and the friends who might benefit from your generosity on a Saturday night.

To help people to remember his criteria, Bentham composed a short poem:

*Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure –  
Such marks in pleasures and in pains endure.  
Such pleasures seek, if private be thy end:  
If it be public, wide let them extend.  
Such pains avoid, whichever be thy view:  
If pains must come, let them extend to few.*<sup>35</sup>





## DO

The felicific calculus sounds like a good tool for helping us to decide if an action will maximise pleasure. But how useful is it in practice?

Consider a decision regarding some action that you have made in the past and apply each criterion outlined above to that decision.

As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. Did applying the criteria result in a different outcome than you chose at the time?
2. Was this outcome better or worse?
3. Which of the criteria did you find the most helpful? Why?
4. What are the strengths of the felicific calculus for moral decision-making?
5. What are the weaknesses of the felicific calculus for moral decision-making?
6. Would you use the felicific calculus to make decisions in the future? Why or why not?

## EVALUATING BENTHAM'S UTILITARIANISM



## DO

As a class, create a 'lifeboat' in the centre of your classroom by placing your chairs in a tight ellipsis that allows everyone to face everyone else. Assign one of the following roles to each member of your class:

- An activist for animal rights who routinely rescues animals from factory farms
- An elderly widow without any surviving children who has lived through the Holocaust
- A single mother with three young, dependent children
- An adored only child of parents who have lost their two older children in an accident
- The Treasurer to the government
- A famous tracking dog who has rescued hundreds of people from the snow
- A scientist who has won the Nobel Prize for her work in nuclear energy
- An actor who has made some excellent, thought-provoking political films, but is habitually in court for substance abuse and the many misdemeanours (driving under the influence, spousal abuse and so on) that have resulted from it
- A sailor skilled in the art of navigating by the stars
- Bill Gates
- A social worker who helps young people at risk turn their lives around

- A famous cancer researcher on the verge of a significant breakthrough
- Angelina Jolie
- A woman pregnant with twins
- A six-year-old orphan
- A teenager who has been recognised as a musical prodigy
- A doctor who specialises in abortion

As a group, and using Bentham's principle of the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number,' decide which five members on the overcrowded lifeboat are to be sacrificed to the sea to save the lives of the others. As well as mounting arguments (based on utilitarian grounds) for why certain individuals should be evicted from the boat, passengers may also defend their right, as well as the rights of others, to stay on the boat.

After completing the activity discuss the following questions as a class:

1. What are the strengths of the principle of the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' as a moral decision-making tool?
2. What are its weaknesses?

Did you discover any problems with Bentham's idea of the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' during the exercise above? If so, you are not alone. Right from the beginning, Bentham's notion that what is good is synonymous with the greatest pleasure, was controversial. By equalising all pleasures, Bentham was accused of advocating a 'swine morality.' Surely, people argued, eating a chocolate cake is not as good as reading Plato. While we might argue in favour of our afternoon on the couch watching *Game of Thrones*, many of us would probably agree that there are better things we could be doing with our time. Besides, if we simply allowed ourselves to be governed by the principle of the greatest pleasure wouldn't our lives be spent in blur of eating, drinking and making merry?

Although Bentham would have fiercely defended the value of an afternoon on the couch with a box set, he may also have suggested that, if properly considered, the application of the **principle of utility** (that actions are right insofar as they promote happiness or pleasure) would not result in the kind of hedonism suggested above. Although spending my afternoon watching *Game of Thrones* would certainly prove a more intense pleasure than attending to my homework, it is likely that doing my homework will result in greater long term pleasure (I will achieve certain things), further pleasures (I can sleep with a clear conscience) and, ultimately, less pain (I avoid guilt and anxiety). Thus, the principle of utility is not quite as decadent as it initially seems.

### THINK

Do you think the felicific calculus will *always* result in our choosing the 'better' pleasure? Why or why not?



Bentham's critics also took issue with the implication that the happiness of *all* entities is of equal worth. Why, they argued, should animals be granted the same moral standing as human beings when our rational capacities are far superior?

Although most of us would agree that eighteenth century views regarding the treatment of animals were unenlightened, it is questionable whether many of us would completely disagree with Bentham's detractors. If one was forced to choose between the life of a mouse and the life of a child, most of us would choose the life of a child, even if, in normal circumstances, we would disagree with the view that the mouse's life is completely worthless. Furthermore, we might question whether *all* animals should be granted equal status: should the happiness of a loved family pet be given equal weight to that of a rodent pest or a mosquito?

Nevertheless, Bentham's point that the happiness of animals demands our consideration is certainly a worthy one. Science has demonstrated that many animals have the capacity to experience pleasure and pain. If this is so, it is difficult to justify their mistreatment at the hands of human beings. Peter Singer (Famous Philosopher File p.412), in his landmark essay 'All Animals Are Equal', would later describe the discrepancy between the recognised sentience of animals and our treatment of them as **speciesism**: the privileging of members of one species over another for no other reason than shared species membership.

### THINK

Should the pleasure of human beings be considered of greater value than the pleasure of animals? On what grounds? Can these grounds be plausibly defended against the charge of speciesism?



More recently, critics have taken issue with Bentham's emphasis on maximising pleasure for the greatest number. Given the degree of neediness in the world, surely such a maxim would imply that right action would almost always be **other-regarding** (directed towards others). To illustrate, imagine that you have recently received a \$25 a week pay rise. Although you might derive great pleasure from using this money to expand your wardrobe, the pleasure would be far outweighed by that of parents in the Third World whose children could be saved by vaccines your money could buy. It seems that in employing Bentham's maxim, we might find ourselves stripped of the personal indulgences we often consider the reward for our hard work. We might also find that, in the pursuit of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, our own happiness is compromised.

### THINK

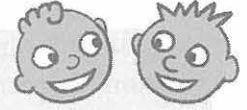
Can the principle of the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' be reconciled with our own personal happiness? How?



Conversely, the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number could also be used to justify behaviour that is less than charitable. Consider the following scenario. A large population decides to enslave the inhabitants of a small neighbouring island. The slaves, although deprived of their freedom, are treated well by their owners. As a result of the slaves' labour, the owners become immensely rich and are able to live lives that are deeply pleasurable. Surely this would mean the enslavement of the island's inhabitants was good. But such a view runs counter to our moral intuitions. How can enslaving other human beings be good?

## DISCUSS

How effective is Bentham's Utilitarianism for moral decision-making?



## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)

Jeremy Bentham was born into a family of lawyers in London in 1748. He was something of a child prodigy and, after his formal education, studied law at Oxford and Lincoln's Inn but never practised. Instead he devoted himself to law reform. Bentham was a prodigious writer, often writing for up to 12 hours a day, however he published very little. Rather, he appeared more interested in practical schemes for improving people's lives. One of his most famous schemes, conceived while on a visit to his brother in Russia, was a model prison, known as the Panopticon. Bentham pursued the idea of the Panopticon for 20 years after his return to England but despite some glimmers of hope (there were plans for it to be built where the Tate Gallery stands today) it was never realised. Bentham died in 1832, leaving behind tens of thousands of pages of manuscript and some quite unusual instructions. He requested that his body be dissected, embalmed, dressed and sat on a chair. This request was carried out and Bentham, minus his head, which is stored elsewhere, remains in his chair to this day in a glass case at the south end of the cloisters at University College, London, which he founded.



Attribution: Michael Reeve

## Classical Utilitarianism 2: J.S. Mill

The philosopher John Stuart Mill (Famous Philosopher File p.405) recognised that Bentham's version of utilitarianism suffered from some significant flaws. Although he agreed with the principle of the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' and subscribed to the **hedonistic** theory of value (what is good is what increases pleasure), he disagreed with Bentham's contention that all pleasures should be considered equal.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### John Stuart Mill (1806–1873)

John Stuart Mill was born in London in 1806. The eldest son of the Scottish philosopher and economist, James Mill, Mill never went to school or university. Instead, he was home-schooled from the age of three by his father and his father's close friend, Jeremy Bentham, who were intent on creating a genius intellect to carry on their philosophical efforts after they were gone. Mill studied ancient Greek from the age of three and by the age of twelve, when his studies in political economy were enabling him to help his father with the writing of his book, *Elements in Political Economy*, he had mastered Latin and mathematics and had read everything from Plato's dialogues to the philosophy of Hume.



At the age of 17 he went to work with his father at the East India Company where he remained until 1858. In 1826, three years after he joined the company, he suffered a nervous breakdown, precipitated, he believed, by his lost childhood and the physical and mental rigours of his education. While navigating his way through the depression that followed, Mill met an intelligent and well-connected woman named Harriet Taylor. The two struck up an intimate friendship, spending weekends together in the country and taking extended trips together – despite the fact that Taylor was married.

Taylor was to have a profound impact on Mill's life and work. Twenty-one years later and two years after the death of her husband, Mill and Taylor married. Believing (rightly, in some cases) that their associates were talking behind their backs about the nature of their previous friendship and the propriety of their marriage, Mill and Taylor withdrew to their home in suburban London and, in the seven years they were together, rarely entertained guests or went out to dine. After Taylor's death in 1858 Mill threw himself into a range of social causes, including compulsory education, birth control and universal suffrage. He was a passionate campaigner for women's rights and in 1866 became the first person in parliament (Mill was the member for City and Westminster) to call for women to get the vote. In 1868, after failing to be re-elected, Mill returned to France where he had lived for a period after his retirement from the East India Company. He died there in 1873.

Mill's contribution to philosophy is significant. He is considered one of the most important, if not *the* most important, of the Victorian philosophers, and his doctrines remain the guiding principles of democratic nations everywhere.



In his work, *Utilitarianism* (1861), Mill distinguishes between what he terms the ‘higher’ pleasures, such as those associated with imagination and intellect, and the ‘lower’ pleasures, which are sensory and base. For Mill, it is the higher pleasures that are to be preferred for it is these pleasures that individuals who are acquainted with both ‘decidedly prefer.’ It could be argued that if choice is the sole criterion against which a pleasure is judged better, Mill’s view that higher pleasures are better is flawed (many people seem to prefer the ‘lower’ pleasures). But Mill argues that most people, if their basic needs are met and their sensibilities have not been blunted, will choose the higher pleasures over the lower. As he writes in *Utilitarianism*:

‘Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites and, when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification...It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.’<sup>36</sup>



### **TEXT STUDY: John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

In Chapter Two, Mill provides a comprehensive account of his version of utilitarianism.

Individually, or as a class, read Chapter Two, paragraphs 1-13.

Then, using a highlighter and annotations, find answers in the text to the following questions:

1. How does Mill define ‘Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle?’
2. On what grounds does Mill believe people dislike or reject this principle?
3. How does Mill respond to these claims?
4. According to Mill, what makes one kind of pleasure more valuable than another kind of pleasure?
5. How does Mill argue for his claim that ‘it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties’?
6. Why, according to Mill, is the somewhat incomplete happiness of the ‘superior being’ preferable to the satisfaction experienced by ‘the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low’?
7. How does Mill reconcile the fact that ‘superior beings’ sometimes choose lower pleasures over higher pleasures with his view that the higher pleasures are preferred?

8. Why does Mill believe that the best method of distinguishing between pleasures is the preferences of those acquainted with both?
9. How does Mill sum up *his version* of the ‘Greatest Happiness Principle’?

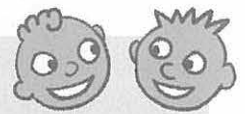
When you have completed the above task, use your annotations to complete a written exercise in your workbooks which:

- Outlines Mill’s version of Utilitarianism.
- Outlines his arguments for discriminating between higher and lower pleasures and why the higher pleasures are to be preferred.
- Describes how Mill accounts for perceived shortcomings of his theory.

By discriminating between what he calls the ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures, Mill was able to successfully respond to critics who claimed that Utilitarianism was a ‘swine’s morality’ that did not distinguish between the sensual and the intellectual. Mill was also able to respond to critics who maintained that Bentham’s egalitarian consideration of the interests of animals was absurd: although their capacity to feel pleasure and pain could not be disregarded, the fact that their pleasures were inferior meant that their happiness was of less value to the happiness of beings capable of more refined pleasures.

Yet, despite these modifications, Mill’s theory was not immune to criticism.

## EVALUATING MILL’S UTILITARIANISM



### DISCUSS

Mill claims that it is better to ‘be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.’ What do you think? Consider the following lives:

- John Stuart Mill grew up in a home fertile with ideas and preoccupied with learning. Although not without difficulties, his adult life was rich and interesting. He was very well read in a variety of disciplines, pursued a range of political causes with great passion, formulated ideas that would form the bedrock of Western democracies everywhere and wrote books that are still studied today. Nevertheless, by today’s standards his life was relatively short – he died when he was 67 years old.
- A blue whale’s lifespan exceeds that of Mill’s by at least 20 years. Since the end of commercial whaling it has no natural predators and spends its days swimming through the warm waters of the Pacific and Indian oceans during the winter months and the rich hunting grounds of the Antarctic during the summer eating tonnes and tonnes of krill.

Discuss the following questions:

1. Which life would you prefer to live? Why?
2. Do you think most people would choose the life of Mill over the life of the blue whale? Why or why not?
3. Considering your responses to questions 1 and 2, how plausible is Mill's claim that it is an 'unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties?'



## WRITE

In your workbooks, write responses to the following questions:

1. Do you agree with Mill's claim that people acquainted with both will naturally prefer the 'higher pleasures' to the 'lower pleasures'? What evidence can you think of to support your claim?
2. Do you agree with Mill's claim that the incomplete happiness of a person with superior sensibilities is preferable to the complete happiness of the person with 'lesser' tastes? Why?
3. How persuasive is Mill's attempt to reconcile the fact that superior beings sometimes choose the 'lower pleasures' over the 'higher pleasures' with his claim that the higher pleasures are to be preferred?
4. What are some of the possible moral implications of valuing 'higher pleasures' over 'lower pleasures'?

One of these criticisms, which you may have picked up on during the activities above, is that in privileging one kind of pleasure over another kind of pleasure Mill is implying a difference between entities in terms of their moral standing. While this allows him to address the criticisms leveled at Bentham regarding his views on the moral worth of animals in comparison to human beings, it does have some rather unpalatable consequences for our notions of equality. Must some human lives be considered more worthwhile by virtue of their preferences and intelligence? It seems to run counter to our moral intuitions to say the happiness of an academic or opera lover is of greater value than a child who enjoys toy cars and playing in the park or an adult who adores clubbing and pop music.

Another criticism, proposed by the British philosopher G. E. Moore (Famous Philosopher File p.410) is that, in treating desire as synonymous with good, Mill commits the **fallacy of equivocation** (see p.60), which in turn causes him to commit the **naturalistic fallacy** (see p.58):

*'Mill has made as naive and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire. 'Good,' he tells us, means 'desirable,' and you can only find out what is desirable by seeking to find out what is desired...The fact is that 'desirable' does not mean 'able to be desired' as 'visible' means 'able to be seen.' The desirable simply means what ought to be desired or deserves to be desired.'*<sup>37</sup>

Supporters of Mill, however, have questioned this criticism. They claim that rather than inferring good from what is desired – a move that is fallacious according to Moore – Mill is simply trying to demonstrate how examining what people desire gives us some indication of what is desirable, that is, his ambitions are far more modest than Moore suggests.

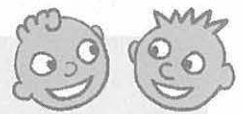
## **Ideal Utilitarianism**

Moore also took issue with Mill's belief that pleasure was the sole and sovereign good. In his book, *Ethics* (1912), Moore presents a thought experiment in which he asks us to imagine two worlds. One of these worlds is much like our own. It contains pleasure as well as other things, such as beauty, knowledge and kindness. The other world contains none of these additional qualities, although it contains exactly the same amount of pleasure. Moore argues that if pleasure is considered the sole and sovereign good, there is no reason to prefer one of these worlds to the other. However, and despite the fact that it cannot be proven either way, it seems intuitively obvious that the former world, in which we might enjoy both pleasure and the additional qualities of beauty and kindness, is preferable. Indeed, Moore goes so far as to argue that to believe otherwise would simply be wrong.

Instead of the **monist** view that pleasure is the sole good, Moore argues for a **pluralist** notion of good on the grounds that objects and states of affairs can have value apart from, and in addition to, the pleasure we may derive from them. For example, a sculpture or work of architecture may be valued for its beauty independently of any pleasure it might give the viewer. To illustrate the notion of **intrinsic** (inherent to the object) value, Moore asks us to again imagine two worlds: one of these worlds is characterised by ugliness, the other by beauty. Is one of these worlds intrinsically better than the other? Moore believed it self-evident that the beautiful world was the better one. By making ideals significant, Moore's version of Utilitarianism has come to be known as **ideal utilitarianism**.

### **DISCUSS**

1. What are some of the problems of classical utilitarianism that Moore's definition of good allows him to avoid?
2. Is Moore's version of Utilitarianism problematic? In what way?



## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### G. E. Moore (1873–1958)

George Edward Moore, who together with Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Famous Philosopher File p.517) made Cambridge University the centre of the philosophical world in the first half of the twentieth century, was born in south London in 1873. In 1892 he was awarded a place at Cambridge to study Classics but under the influence of Russell and the philosopher J.M.E. McTaggart, he decided to add philosophy to his repertoire. In 1896 he was awarded a first class degree in the subject, then two years later won a fellowship which allowed him to continue his work at Cambridge until 1904. After spending time in both London and Edinburgh, he returned to a lectureship at Cambridge in 1911 and lived there for the rest of his life, becoming a professor in 1925.

During his time at Cambridge Moore befriended a number of young men, including the author and publisher Leonard Woolf and the author and critic Lytton Strachey, who would go on to form the influential circle of writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists known as the Bloomsbury Group. Although he was not himself a member, Moore's philosophy had a profound influence on the group, which in turn had a profound influence on early to mid-twentieth century British culture. Moore was also a member of the 'Cambridge Apostles,' a Cambridge secret society founded in 1820.

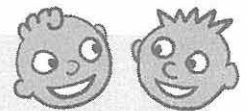
Moore retired from his professorship in 1939 (he was succeeded by Ludwig Wittgenstein) and died in 1958. He had two sons, the poet Nicolas Moore and Timothy, a composer.

## DISCUSS

Is pleasure enough?

In his work *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) Robert Nozick (Famous Philosopher File p.493) asks us to consider the following **thought experiment** (known as 'the experience machine'):

*Imagine that 'super-duper neuropsychologists' have developed a machine that can stimulate your brain to induce any kind of pleasurable experience that you could desire. So advanced is this machine you cannot qualitatively distinguish the experiences the machine stimulates from experiences you would have in real life.*



As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. Would you plug yourself into this machine?
2. Would you plug yourself into this machine permanently?
3. If given the opportunity, do you think most people would plug into this machine permanently? Why or why not?
4. How do your responses to questions 1-3 support or refute Moore's criticism against classical utilitarianism?

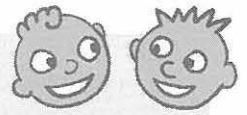
## ***Preference Utilitarianism***

Although most commonly associated with the British philosopher, R.M. Hare (1919-2002), the American philosopher, Richard Brandt (1910-1997) and the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer (Famous Philosopher File p.412), the theory known as **preference utilitarianism** was in fact first proposed in the late 1970s by an Hungarian-American economist and Noble Prize winner named John Harsanyi (1920-2000).

Harsanyi rejected both the hedonistic value theory of the classical utilitarians and Moore's foregrounding of ideals. Influenced by the British philosopher Adam Smith (Famous Philosopher File p.498), who equated the moral point of view with an impartial and sympathetic observer, Kant's (Famous Philosopher File p.111) criterion of universality (see pp.419-420), Bayesian decision theory (to which he made important contributions) and the idea of the 'greatest number' that is central to utilitarian moral reasoning, Harsanyi argued that what is good comes down to the wants and preferences of the individual. In other words, when attempting to make a moral decision I must take into account the wants and preferences of the individuals involved and seek to further them.

An obvious objection to this view is that people's preferences can sometimes be morally questionable. I might have a preference for torturing kittens and teasing small children. If the good may be equated to what is preferred by the individual, wouldn't this mean that my preferences regarding the treatment of kittens and small children are not only right, but should be actively supported?

However, Harsanyi foresees this criticism and addresses it by identifying two different kinds of preferences, that he respectively calls 'manifest' and 'true' preferences. 'Manifest' preferences are those preferences manifested in the observed behaviour of the individual, including the various irrational preferences that are motivated by such things as erroneous beliefs and strong emotions. Examples of such preferences may be my desire to hurt someone who has injured my esteem or my desire to give vent to my sadistic urges. 'True' preferences, on the other hand, are the kinds of preferences one would have if one possessed all the relevant information, reasoned carefully through the issue and were in a state of mind conducive to rational thought. It is these 'true' preferences that the preference utilitarians believe we should seek to satisfy.



## DISCUSS

1. Are you convinced by Harsanyi's distinction between 'manifest' and 'true' preferences?
2. If this distinction cannot be sustained, must preference utilitarianism be abandoned?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this version of Utilitarianism?



## TEXT STUDY: Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (1975)

[see Useful Resources]

Peter Singer's (Famous Philosopher File p.413) *Animal Liberation* is perhaps the most significant work by a philosopher on the issue of animal welfare. In the first chapter ('All Animals Are Equal') Singer outlines his case for animal rights from the perspective of preference utilitarianism, of which he is an advocate.

Independently, or as a class, read 'All Animals Are Equal'.

In pairs, chart the structure of Singer's argument by identifying his main conclusions and the reasons for these conclusions. You should also note any evidence he uses to support his claims.

Still in your pairs, write out the arguments in standard form down the centre of a piece of A3 paper. Be sure to leave room for annotations.

Once you have completed the above task, join with another pair and, as a group, evaluate Singer's arguments. Annotate your argument page with these evaluations.

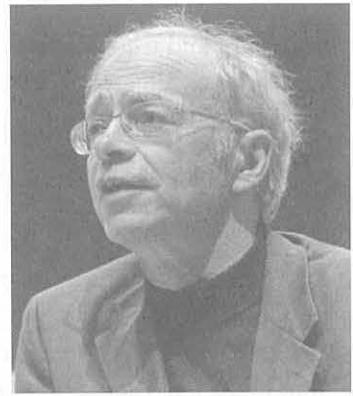
Share your evaluations as a class and consider the following questions:

1. In what way is Singer's argument informed by preference utilitarianism?
2. Does Singer provide a convincing argument for including animals in the moral community?
3. What are some examples of the kinds of preferences Singer's arguments suggest should be met for animals?
4. What implications would this have for human beings?
5. Reflecting on Singer's arguments, what are some of the merits and shortcomings of preference utilitarianism?
6. Is it preferable to other kinds of utilitarianism? Why or why not?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Peter Singer (1946– )

Once referred to as the ‘most dangerous man alive’ for his controversial views on euthanasia, abortion and the so-called sanctity of life, Peter Singer was born in Melbourne in 1946. After completing his education at Preshil and later at Scotch College, Singer went on to study law, history and philosophy at the University of Melbourne. He was awarded his MA in 1969 for his thesis, ‘Why Should I Be Moral?’ and won a scholarship to Oxford where his work was supervised by the philosopher R.M. Hare. After lecturing positions at Oxford and in New York, Singer returned to Australia in 1977 where he founded the Centre for Human Bioethics at Monash University and ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the Greens in the Senate. In 1999 he was appointed the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University in the United States where his views initially attracted fears for his security – he was appointed bodyguards and had his mail scanned. Despite the feelings of some sectors of the public towards his ideas, Singer was awarded Humanist of the Year by the Council of Australian Humanist Societies in 2004. Singer continues to be personally and professionally committed to utilitarianism, donating a third of his annual income to charity and employing the philosophy to examine a range of important issues, from animal rights to the ethics of what we eat. In addition to his post at Princeton he is also the Laureate Professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne and is widely considered to be one of Australia’s most important public intellectuals.



## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: ANIMALS AND ZOOS

According to some animal rights activists, zoos are a violation of animal rights. However, supporters of zoos claim that, because zoos actively work to preserve the health of species through breeding programs and by allowing the public to encounter animals directly, they are working in animals’ best interests. The following research task involves using the principles of utilitarianism to arrive at an informed position on this issue.

Each member of the class selects an animal from the collection held at the Royal Melbourne Zoo. To discover what animals are held by the Zoo, visit their website ([www.zoo.org.au](http://www.zoo.org.au)) and download a zoo map. Using the internet and/or your local or school’s library, learn about your animal’s existence in the wild.



Visit the Zoo as a class. During your time at the Zoo, observe your animal and its enclosure and find out how the Zoo works to enrich your animal's experience in captivity as well as further the interests of animals in general.

To help with this, your teacher might like to book a session with one of the Zoo's education officers – [www.zoo.org.au/education/planning-your-school-visit](http://www.zoo.org.au/education/planning-your-school-visit).

Be sure to take lots of notes.

Write an essay that discusses the ethics of keeping animals in zoos from the perspective of preference utilitarianism and one other version of utilitarianism, using your animal as a case study. You should use your research to help you to develop your arguments about how each version of utilitarianism would respond to the issue.

## ***Positive and Negative Utilitarianism***

Classical, ideal and preference utilitarianism are all examples of what is termed **positive utilitarianism** because each seeks to maximise happiness. By contrast, **negative utilitarianism**, which was first proposed by the philosopher Karl Popper (Famous Philosopher File p.317) in his work *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), suggests we should instead strive to minimise suffering.

Although there is something immediately appealing about this version of utilitarianism insofar as it circumvents the problems of exactly how happiness can be maximised and seems more applicable to a world in which issues of suffering appear more pressing, it has come under sharp criticism, particularly from the English academic, R.N. Smart.

In his 1958 paper 'Negative Utilitarianism,' Smart invites us to consider the following thought experiment to illustrate the shortcomings of Popper's theory:

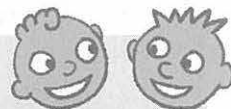
*'Suppose that a ruler controls a weapon capable of instantly and painlessly destroying the human race. Now it is empirically certain that there would be some suffering before all those alive on any proposed destruction day were to die in the natural course of events. Consequently the use of the weapon is bound to diminish suffering, and would be the ruler's duty on NU (negative utilitarianism) grounds.'*<sup>38</sup>

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38 J.J. Smart 1958, "Negative Utilitarianism", in *Mind*, Vol 67, No 268, (Oct., 1958) p.542

According to Smart's thought experiment, Popper's version of utilitarianism would condone the mass destruction of human beings on the grounds that such an action would reduce the sum of human suffering. However, it seems patently obvious that destroying the entire human race would be wrong.

Some philosophers have suggested this problem could be addressed by reconfiguring Popper's theory as *negative preference* utilitarianism. Because preference utilitarianism foregrounds the preferences of individuals, the mass destruction of human beings could not be condoned.



## DISCUSS

1. The above thought experiment highlights a major shortcoming of negative utilitarianism, but what are its merits?
2. In your opinion, how does negative utilitarianism compare to the other forms of Utilitarianism you have examined so far?

## **Act and Rule Utilitarianism**

During the mid-twentieth century a number of philosophers started to question the practicality of a moral theory that requires such complicated calculations on the part of the moral agent. Is it really possible, they asked, to work out the consequences of each and every action? These philosophers decided to instead focus on the place of rules in moral decision making. Thus the distinction between **act utilitarianism** (utilitarian theories that hold that each and every action should be judged according to its own merits) and **rule utilitarianism** (utilitarian theories that contend that an action should be judged according to whether or not it conforms to a *rule* which maximises utility) was born.

By focusing on rules rather than acts, rule utilitarianism not only manages to avoid the conundrum of trying to calculate how much happiness an act will produce, it provides a kind of 'one-size-fits-all' approach to moral decision-making, making the process much easier for the moral agent. Also, by adopting rules intended to secure the greatest happiness, rule utilitarianism provides some security against problematic situations, such as slavery or child trafficking, where the happiness of the group may outweigh that of an individual. On the other hand, act utilitarianism's more flexible approach recognises the fact that there are exceptions to every rule and that such exceptions require not rules, but individual judgments.



## **TEXT STUDY: J.J.C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (1973)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

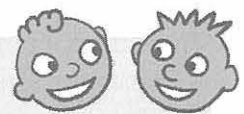
In this text (written together with Bernard Williams – Famous Philosopher File p.359), J.J.C. Smart (Famous Philosopher File p.132) provides an extended defence of act utilitarianism. However, in Chapter 7 ('The place of rules in act utilitarianism') he argues that, even for the act utilitarian, rules have a place in moral decision making.

Read from the beginning of Chapter 7 to the end of the end of the fourth paragraph.

Using a highlighter, identify all of the different kinds of situations when Smart claims appealing to established rules is useful. Then identify the situations where he believes the act utilitarian approach to moral decision-making is more appropriate.

When you have completed this task, answer the following questions in your own words, in your workbook:

1. According to Smart, in what kinds of situations can rules prove useful to the act utilitarian? (*You may like to use one or more of Smart's examples to illustrate your points.*)
2. According to Smart, in what kinds of situations is the act utilitarian approach to moral decision-making more appropriate?
3. Reflecting on your responses to Questions 1 and 2, would you agree that Smart's integration of rules into act utilitarianism provides a solution to the problems of act utilitarianism? Does it provide a solution to the problems of rule utilitarianism? Why or why not?
4. In your opinion, is Smart's integration of rules into act utilitarianism a more effective approach to moral decision-making than either act or rule utilitarianism? Why or why not?



## **DISCUSS**

1. What are the merits of rule utilitarianism?
2. What are the merits of act utilitarianism?
3. What are the shortcomings of rule utilitarianism?
4. What are the shortcomings of act utilitarianism?
5. Is one of these forms of utilitarianism preferable to the other, or do you agree with Smart that integrating rules into act utilitarianism is more preferable? Why?

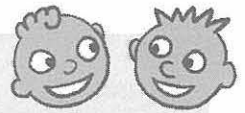


## DO

In pairs, discuss how each type of utilitarianism outlined (excluding act utilitarianism) might respond to the following case scenarios. Use a table like the one below to record your responses.

1. Lara has been invited to a party on Saturday night. It has been a busy and tiring week for Lara and she is very much looking forward to escaping her worries and spending some time with friends. On Saturday morning, however, her best friend, Katherine, calls. Katherine has just broken up with her long-time boyfriend and is devastated. To help cheer herself up she has bought tickets to a poetry recital scheduled for that evening. She would like Lara to come with her. Lara knows that her attendance at the performance will mean a great deal to Katherine. On the other hand, she has been looking forward to the party all week. Besides, she's not really much of a fan of poetry. As the party is some distance away, she cannot attend both it and the recital. What should she do?
2. Ben's mother, Susan, is trying to decide on the right present for her son's eighteenth birthday. Since he was a child, Ben has adored classic cars and Susan knows that Ben is hoping to receive money to purchase an old Ford Mustang to do up. Although Susan is aware that Ben will derive a great deal of pleasure from tinkering in the garage, she is terrified about her son owning such a powerful car and knows that every time he drives it she will be wracked with anxiety. She would therefore prefer to spend the money on Ben's university tuition fees. What should she do?
3. Frieda has just discovered she is pregnant. Having a child will disrupt a career she loves and the 'anything goes' lifestyle that she adores. Frieda is therefore weighing up whether or not to proceed with the pregnancy. What should she do?
4. Kayla has recently come into a large inheritance. The inheritance comes with the condition that all of the monies are to be spent on one thing only. Kayla, who has just finished her VCE, would like to take a well-deserved break on the beaches of Thailand, however she needs money to pay for a course in Art History she has wanted to do since she was 16. She knows that her grandmother, who left her the money, would probably have wanted her to pass the money on to charity and she herself is not averse to this idea. Indeed, she is aware that she would derive some pleasure from doing the 'right thing'. What should she do?

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Bentham's Utilitarianism				
Mill's Utilitarianism				
Preference Utilitarianism				
Negative Utilitarianism				
Rule Utilitarianism				



## DISCUSS

Reflecting on the activity from the previous text box, in your opinion how effective is utilitarianism as a moral decision-making tool?



### **TEXT STUDY: Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (1973)**

*[see Useful Resources]*

In this text, co-authored by J.J.C. Smart (Famous Philosopher File p.132), Bernard Williams provides an extended critique of utilitarianism, arguing, among other things, that it requires agents to ignore the significance of their own 'projects,' or commitments and through so doing, compromises their integrity (wholeness as human beings).

Read Chapter 5 ('Integrity'), from paragraph 5 to the end of paragraph 14, of Williams' extended essay in this text and answer the following questions in your workbooks:

1. What is a first-order project?
2. What is a basic or lower-order project? What are some examples of lower-order projects?
3. What is Williams' first major criticism of the utilitarian attitude to lower-order projects?
4. How does Williams use lower-order projects to demonstrate that not every action is aimed at happiness?
5. What is Williams' second major criticism of the utilitarian attitude to lower-order projects?
6. Do you agree with Williams when he says 'it is absurd to demand of such a man...that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires'?
7. How can such a demand be seen as an 'attack on his [the individual's] integrity'?
8. How persuasive is the argument presented by Williams in this section of the text? Is it an effective argument against utilitarianism? Why or why not?



## WRITE

Write a short (500 word) reflective piece on the merits and shortcomings of utilitarianism as a moral decision making tool.

## Deontological Theories of Morality

Perhaps you are beginning to wonder if judging an action according to its consequences is really the best way of distinguishing right from wrong. If so, you might find **deontology** more appealing.

Unlike utilitarianism, deontology holds that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the action itself, not by its consequences. Different forms of deontology propose different answers to the question of what makes an action right or wrong. For our purposes, we will be mainly concentrating Immanuel Kant's (Famous Philosopher File p.111) version of the theory, which holds that the rightness or goodness of an action is determined by the quality of the **maxim**, or rule, on which it is based.

### *Kant's Deontology*

Kant's views regarding right action are grounded in a particular understanding of the nature of good. According to Kant, for something to be considered good it must be both intrinsically good and 'good without qualification.' To illustrate, consider the example of pleasure. While it is possible (although controversial) to argue that pleasure is intrinsically good insofar as it is sought for its own sake, it cannot be considered 'good without qualification' as it is possible to think of numerous examples where pleasure's goodness is compromised, such as when someone derives pleasure from another's suffering or humiliation.

Kant believed that many of the things we usually consider good, such as intelligence, determination and courage, suffer from this same problem. Indeed, Kant went so far as to suggest there is only one thing that is both intrinsically good and good without qualification. That thing is *good will*, the desire to do what is right because it is right and for no other reason.

Kant argued that the consequences of an action are an inadequate measure for deciding whether or not a person has acted from good will. A person may, for example, exact a positive outcome even though he or she might have intended to do harm. Likewise, the actions of an individual with the very best intentions may result in negative consequences. Thus if we want to discover if a person is motivated by good will we need to look to the motivations behind his or her behaviour. For this reason, deontology is considered an **intentionalist** theory of right action.



## THINK

1. What are some examples of situations where harmful intentions might produce positive consequences?
2. What are some examples of situations where good intentions might result in negative consequences?
3. Is intention the best measure for judging the rightness or wrongness of an action? Why or why not?

When assessing the motivation behind action, we need to ask ourselves whether or not the action was performed from a sense of duty, for, according to Kant, only actions performed out of a sense of duty are actions done in goodwill. To help us to assess whether an action is performed out of a sense of duty Kant devised a simple test, known as the **Categorical Imperative**. Kant gives three versions of the Categorical Imperative. In the first version he invites us to ask ourselves if everyone, in the same circumstances, could act according to the same maxim:

*Act only on that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become universal law.<sup>39</sup>*

What Kant means by this is not that we should act according to those maxims which express how we *wish* everyone would act, rather that we should act only on those maxims which it would be *logically possible* for everyone to act on. To illustrate, take the act of stealing. If I were to act on the maxim 'it's ok to steal' and that maxim were to be universalised, no-one would own anything. Thus stealing is wrong.

In the second version of the Categorical Imperative, Kant asks us to consider whether, in acting on our maxim, we are treating those involved as a means or as an end:

*Act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only..<sup>40</sup>*

By treating others as a means (objects) we fail to acknowledge their intrinsic value and, by so doing, deny their status as rational beings (subjects). This necessitates making an exception of ourselves. Yet part of recognising ourselves as rational beings involves extending such recognition to others. Such a view, therefore, is not sustainable. Thus we should always treat others as an end in themselves and not as a means to something else.

In the final version of the Categorical Imperative Kant asks us, when assessing our maxims, to imagine we are legislators in a world in which everything is chosen for its own sake:

*Act as though you were, through your maxims, a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.<sup>41</sup>*

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39 Kant, I. in Pojman, L. (ed) 2004 *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* (2nd edn), OUP, Oxford, p.311

40 *ibid.*, p.315

41 *ibid.*, p.315

What Kant is suggesting is that we should choose, not according to what we might gain, but according to what it is *right* to choose.

By acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative, the individual acts out of a sense of duty, which is the very bedrock of goodwill.



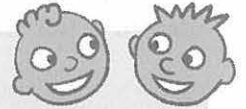
**TEXT STUDY: Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Section 'Transition from Popular Moral Philosophy to the Metaphysics of Morals' (1785)**

[see Useful Resources]

Read through Kant's four illustrations of the Categorical Imperative (commencing with the line '1. A man reduced to despair by a series of misfortunes...')

1. Write a brief description of each of the illustrations in your workbook.
2. Working in pairs, and using these illustrations as your model, create your own illustrations, one for each version of the Categorical Imperative.

**DISCUSS**



1. Does the capacity to be universalised guarantee a maxim will be morally good? Use examples to support your claims.
2. Can all maxims which result in morally fine and admirable behaviour be universalised? Use examples to support your claims.
3. Can acting in accordance with duty result in behaviour that is *not* morally fine or admirable?
4. Kant's views imply that morality and self-interest are opposed. Can an action be both self interested *and* morally fine and admirable?

**EVALUATING KANT'S DEONTOLOGY**

As you may have noted in your classroom discussions, the Categorical Imperative has much to recommend it. Yet it is not without its problems. Perhaps the most glaring of these problems is that its inflexibility can produce consequences that few of us would consider good. For example, imagine a situation in which a violent and abusive husband calls you and demands to know his wife's whereabouts. You know where she is (in fact, she is hiding out in your house) and you also know that if he finds her there is a very good chance he will kill her. According to the Categorical Imperative you are obliged to tell the man the truth when he asks you where his wife is. However, few people would consider this the right thing to do. Indeed, most people would consider such behaviour cowardly and immoral.

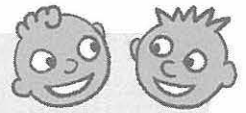


Kant was actually confronted with a similar example during his lifetime. He responded by saying that although the Categorical Imperative could result in such seemingly immoral consequences this didn't demonstrate that it was flawed for the simple reason that the rightness or wrongness of an action has nothing to do with consequences: telling the truth is always the right thing to do, even if it results in someone's death. As Kant put it elsewhere 'better the whole people perish than injustice be done.'<sup>42</sup>

It is difficult to be persuaded by Kant's response. However, should the Categorical Imperative be rejected on these grounds? Some thinkers have suggested that it is possible to produce a moral outcome in the above situation while still obeying the Categorical Imperative. Rather than lie to the homicidal husband I could tell him the truth: I know his wife's whereabouts but because I feel it is my duty to protect her I will not disclose them to him.

Perhaps you are wondering if this really does get around the problem or if it's just a bit of sleight of hand, a failure to address the question directly and so avoid the act of lying. We might also ask if it would work in every situation. To illustrate, imagine that you have been asked to torture a terrorist who has admitted to planting a bomb that will kill thousands of people. The Categorical Imperative would prohibit you from doing this (you are using the terrorist as a means rather than an ends), however, your failure to do as you have been asked will exact a terrible death toll. It is difficult to see how the tactics used to rectify the problem of the homicidal husband could be adapted to this circumstance.

## DISCUSS



In 1967 the British philosopher Philippa Foot (1920-2010) proposed the following **thought experiment**, known as the 'trolley problem.' Although not specifically designed to interrogate the Categorical Imperative, it does raise some interesting questions about its effectiveness as a moral decision making tool.

The Trolley Problem:

Imagine a runaway trolley (or train) is barreling down a set of tracks at a furious pace. Tied up at the end of the tracks are five people. You are standing in the train yard and as you watch the catastrophe unfold, you notice beside you a lever that allows you to switch the trolley to a different set of tracks. Relieved, you reach out your hand only to notice at the very last second that at the end of the other set of tracks is another person, tied up and unable to move. You have two choices:

- Do nothing and allow the five people to be killed.
- Press the lever and allow one person to be killed.

42 <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/> (Accessed 25 August, 2013)

Discuss the following questions in pairs or as a whole class:

1. What would the Categorical Imperative suggest we should do?
2. Reflecting on your responses to question 1, what further objections can be raised in terms of the effectiveness of the Categorical Imperative as a moral decision-making tool?

## DO

In pairs, and using the internet and/or newspapers for inspiration write a scenario that involves a moral conflict. Present this conflict to your class and discuss how Kant would respond and why.

Use these presentations to reflect on the merits and shortcomings of the Categorical Imperative as a moral decision-making tool.



Perhaps you feel tempted to dismiss deontology given Kant's response to the moral dilemma described above. After all, it is difficult to understand how delivering a woman into the hands of her homicidal husband could ever be considered the right thing to do, even if it involves the 'wrong' action of lying.

## ***Another Deontological Theory***

However, not all philosophers who identify as deontologists hold the same inflexible views towards moral principles as Kant holds. One such thinker is the Scottish philosopher, W. D. Ross (Famous Philosopher File p.424).

In his most famous work, *The Right and the Good* (1930), Ross distinguishes between two kinds of duties or obligations, which he terms **prima facie duties** and **absolute duties**. Prima facie duties are those obligations that are both self-evident and obvious. In *The Right and the Good* Ross lists seven such duties: fidelity (to remain true to one's word), reparation (or compensation), gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement and non-maleficence (or avoidance of perpetrating harm). In any given situation any number of these prima facie duties may apply. However, Ross argues that this does not entail the possibility of a conflict of duty, for one of the duties will necessarily be more pressing and thus overrule the others. This triumphant duty or obligation is what Ross terms the absolute duty. In other words, the absolute duty is the duty that remains after all of the conflicting prima facie duties applicable to the particular case have been weighed against one another.

So how does Ross's version of deontology address the problems of Kant's Categorical Imperative? To illustrate, let us return to the example of the abused wife you are hiding in your spare room. Although you may have a duty to be true to your word, you also have a duty to protect the wife from harm. Given the nature of the situation, it seems obvious that your duty to protect the wife far outweighs your duty to be truthful. Thus, according to Ross, it would be legitimate to lie to the husband to protect the wife in this situation.



## DO

Ross's version of deontology seems far less problematic than Kant's, but is it?

In pairs, try to construct a moral dilemma that interrogates Ross's claim that moral dilemmas are essentially impossible because one duty will always prevail over others.

When you have completed this task share your examples and discuss the following questions as a whole class:

1. How easy is it to construct a moral dilemma that disproves Ross's claims?
2. Do these dilemmas actually demonstrate that Ross's claims are flawed? Why or why not?
3. What other problems with Ross's theory were made apparent during this exercise?
4. Despite its problems, is Ross's version of deontology more effective than the Categorical Imperative as a moral decision-making tool? Why or why not?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### W.D. Ross (1877–1971)

One of a group of thinkers that would later become known as the British Intuitionists, William David Ross was born in Thurso, Northern Scotland, in 1877. The first six years of his life were mainly spent in Southern India, where his father, John Ross, was the principal of the Maharaja's College. He returned to Scotland for his formal education, gaining a first class MA in Classics from the University of Edinburgh in 1895. Ross completed his studies at Balliol College, Oxford and remained at Oxford for most of his academic career.

With the coming of WWI Ross joined the army. He worked in the Ministry of Munitions, receiving an Order of the British Empire in 1918 for his services. Although he continued to work in the public service part time, Ross held a number of significant academic positions at Oxford. He was White's Professor of Moral Philosophy from 1923-1928, Vice-Chancellor from 1941-1944 and Pro Vice-Chancellor from 1944-47. He was elected a fellow of the British Academy, serving as its president from 1936-1940. In 1936 he was made a knight of the realm.

Although Ross is recognised for his work in moral philosophy, he is more widely recognised as important and hugely influential Aristotelian scholar. He has also written extensively on Greek philosophy.

W.D. Ross died in Oxford in 1971, leaving behind four adult daughters. His wife, Edith Odgen, died before him in 1953.



## WRITE

Write a short (500 word) reflective piece on the merits and shortcomings of deontology (either Kant's or Ross's) as a moral decision making tool.

## Virtue Ethics

So far, we have focused primarily on action in our quest to distinguish right from wrong. But what about the *character* of the person performing the action? Does this have anything to do with morality?

According to supporters of **virtue ethics** the answer to this question is most definitely yes. By cultivating a **virtuous** character we dispose ourselves to good moral choices and, as our behaviour is necessarily an expression of our character, character is an appropriate determinant of the rightness or wrongness of an action.

Although modern virtue ethicists may differ from one another in various respects, all share a common foundation in the work of Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99).

Aristotle's views regarding virtuous action are rooted in his understanding of human beings. Aristotle believed that what set humans apart from other entities – their unique function – was their capacity to reason. According to Aristotle, as the value of something is defined by how well it performs its function (for example, we call a musician good if she plays her instrument well), a good human is one who uses their reason with the appropriate excellence.

## THINK

How plausible is Aristotle's claim that reason is our unique function?



Aristotle believed that the virtuous person is just such a person. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (350BCE), Aristotle describes the virtuous individual as one who acts 'at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive and in the right way.'<sup>43</sup> To act in such a way requires the careful governance of one's feelings for, as Aristotle points out, the way in which we govern our feelings defines our choice of action. Thus the individual who is able to govern his or her feelings well is virtuous for he/she is better disposed to make the right choice.

43 Aristotle 2009, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, D. ed. Brow, L, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

But what, exactly, is the right choice? According to Aristotle, the answer to this question depends on the situation. Some situations require us to act with intensity, whereas other situations require a milder response. To know which is right we need to use our reason to establish what behaviour coheres with virtue. Although we tend to think of virtue exclusively in moral terms, Aristotle believes that virtue is simply a **mean** that lies between the vices of excess and deficiency. For example, the virtue of bravery is a mean between the vices of rashness (an excess of confidence) and cowardice (a deficiency of confidence), and the virtue of temperance is a mean between the vices of self-indulgence (an excess of pleasure) and insensibility (a deficiency of pleasure).

The virtuous individual, then, is neither someone who overreacts nor underreacts in a given situation but instead manages his or her feelings and uses his or her reason to hit the mean. This is not always easy. As Aristotle points out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, humans have a tendency to gravitate towards the vice that is least like the virtue (in other words, we are more likely to gravitate towards cowardice or self-indulgence than rashness or insensibility) and, depending on our natures, we can sometimes find ourselves easily mistaking a virtue for a vice and vice-versa (for example, a cowardly individual may mistake a brave action for a rash action). Nevertheless, it is not impossible.

To establish whether or not a course of action we are intending to pursue is virtuous, Aristotle suggests we ask ourselves if it reflects the course of action a virtuous individual would take. Aristotle tells us that a virtuous action (an action done by a virtuous individual) is one that is done intentionally, is chosen for its own sake and proceeds from a firm and unchanging character. If the action meets these criteria we can assume that it is virtuous.

By habitually choosing virtue, Aristotle believes we will eventually develop a virtuous disposition. This will not only lead to right action, but a good and pleasant life (for an individual always finds pleasant that which he or she does well) and a life in which our unique human function is utilised to its full potential. The Greeks called such a life a *eudaimonic* life (from the Greek word *eudaemonia*) which, loosely translated, means a 'flourishing life.'

## READ

[see Useful Resources]

In Book II, chapters 6-9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes the Mean.

Read this section of the text. Then, using examples in the text as well as the information above, construct a diagram explaining the Mean.

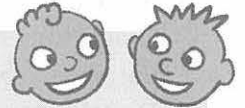




## DO

In pairs, consider the following case scenarios with reference to Aristotle's Mean.

1. A school bully has picked a fight with you in the school grounds after school. Should you stand up to the bully or should you walk away?
2. You are approached by a charity organisation in the street. The charity is asking for regular donations of \$68 per month. It is more than you can afford, but not so much more that you would be broke if you signed up as a donor. Should you hand over your details?
3. You are walking through the city when suddenly shooting breaks out. A child is caught in the crossfire. A man runs to save the child. Has he acted rashly or bravely?
4. You know that a fellow student in your class is handing in as his own, work he has downloaded from the internet. You also know that if you tell the teacher he has a very good chance of being expelled. Should you tell the teacher anyway?
5. Every morning the school-crossing attendant holds the hand of a frail, old woman as she crosses the road. Is the attendant an example of the virtuous person?



## DISCUSS

1. Did the Mean prove a useful tool for moral decision-making in the above scenarios? What strengths and weaknesses were revealed by these scenarios?
2. What additional strengths and weaknesses of the Mean can you think of?
3. Does a good character necessarily ensure that a person will know what is right *and* act in accordance with it?



## DO

After falling out of fashion in the nineteenth century, virtue ethics was revived in the mid-twentieth century by several philosophers. Philippa Foot (1920-2010), Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-) and Martha Nussbaum (1946-) are among those who have updated virtue ethics and discussed its application to contemporary problems (for example, Nussbaum tackles international development).

Research one of these philosophers and report on:

1. What distinguishes this updated version of virtue ethics from Aristotle's?
2. Does this theory overcome weaknesses in Aristotle's theory? If so, how?
3. Is this newer theory a useful way of solving moral problems? Why or why not?



## WRITE

Write a short (500 word) reflective piece on the merits and shortcomings of Aristotle's Mean as a moral decision making tool.

## Assessment Tasks

The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting task to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.

### Assessment Task One: Written Reflection

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Should happiness – either our own or others' – always be the dominant consideration when it comes to moral decision-making?
2. Of the different versions of utilitarianism, which one do you think is best for moral decision-making?
3. Should duty be a dominant consideration when making moral decisions? Can pursuing our duty lead to bad moral decisions?
4. Do humans ever act out of duty or is duty simply self-interest in another guise?
5. Can an individual with a 'bad' character live a good life?
6. Does having a virtuous character guarantee an individual will make the right moral decisions?

### Assessment Task Two: Written Analyses

Complete a suite of written analyses (approximately 500 words each) on utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics that outlines and evaluates each of these theories.

### Assessment Task Three: Dialogue

Write a dialogue between a utilitarian and a deontologist in which the two discuss their responses to a moral dilemma. Your dialogue should allow each philosophical position to be aired to its best advantage and should also challenge each position as far as possible, through interrogation by others.

### Assessment Task Four: Oral Presentation

Participate in a role-play in which each participant adopts one of the three major positions discussed in this Theme. Be prepared to respond to questions from the audience and engage in critical discussion with other members of your team.

## ***Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses***

Complete a task which asks for short-answer explanations of the various theories and terms outlined in this Theme.

## ***Assessment Task Six: Essay***

Choose one of the following topics:

1. Does utilitarianism provide us with an effective tool for moral decision-making? Discuss with reference to a national or international issue (for example, global warming, food production and manufacture, global security, third world poverty, asylum seekers, etc).
2. Could the categorical imperative produce a better society? Discuss with reference to a national or international issue (see above).
3. Which is more likely result in good action – the utilitarian principle of the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number,’ Kant’s categorical imperative, or the cultivation of a good character? Include real life examples in your response.
4. Use the task described in the Relevant Contemporary Debate (pp.413-414) as an assessment task.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay (p.585).



# Useful Resources: Ethics and Moral Philosophy

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## General Secondary Resources for Ethics and Moral Philosophy

- Armstrong, S. & Hill, D. (eds) 1991, *The Animal Ethics Reader*, Routledge, New York.
- Baggini, J. & Fosl, S. 2007, *The Ethics Toolkit: A Compendium of Ethical Concepts and Methods*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Massachusetts.
- Billington, R. 2003, *Living Philosophy: An Introduction to Moral Thought (3rd edn)*, Routledge, London.
- Blackburn, S. 2001, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Driver, J. 2007, *Ethics: The Fundamentals*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Massachusetts.
- Furrow, D. 2005, *Key Concepts in Philosophy: Ethics*, Routledge, London.
- Graham, G. 2004, *Eight Theories of Ethics*, Routledge, London.
- LaFollette, H. (ed) 2000, *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Massachusetts.
- Miller, C. (ed) 2011, *The Continuum Companion to Ethics*, Continuum, London.
- Palmer, M. 1991, *Moral Problems: A Coursebook*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Pojman, L. 2004, *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature (2<sup>nd</sup> edn)*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Singer, P. (ed) 1993, *A Companion to Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.
- Solomon, R. 1992, *Morality and the Good Life: An Introduction to Ethics through Classical Sources (2nd edn)*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Sterba, J. (ed) 1998, *Ethics: The Big Questions*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.
- Thero, D. 2006, *Understanding Moral Weakness*, Rodopi, Amsterdam.

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# Specific Resources for Topics in Ethics and Moral Philosophy

## ***Theme 1: On The Foundations of Morality***

### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Mackie, J.L. 1972 (reprinted 1990) *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin Books, London.
- Plato, *Euthyphro* <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>
- Williams, B. 1972 'Interlude: Relativism' in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, pp. 34-39.

## ***Theme 2: On Moral Psychology***

### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

- Arendt, H. 1965. 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy', [http://newdoc.nccu.edu.tw/teasylabus/117154104580/Some-Questions-of-Moral-Philosophy%20\(1\).pdf](http://newdoc.nccu.edu.tw/teasylabus/117154104580/Some-Questions-of-Moral-Philosophy%20(1).pdf)
- Aristotle 2009, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, D. ed. Brow, L, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press.
- Bentham, J. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* <http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML.html>
- Davidson, D. 2006 'How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?' in *The Essential Davidson*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hume, D. 2008, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford World Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hume, D. *A Treatise on Human Nature*, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hume/david/h92t/>
- Kant, I. *Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals* <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/Immanuel/k16prm/chapter2.html>
- Plato. 1987, *The Republic* (2nd edn), trans. Lee, D. Penguin Books, London.
- Williams, B. 1972, 'The Amoralist' in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, pp. 17-27.

## ***Theme 3: On Right and Wrong***

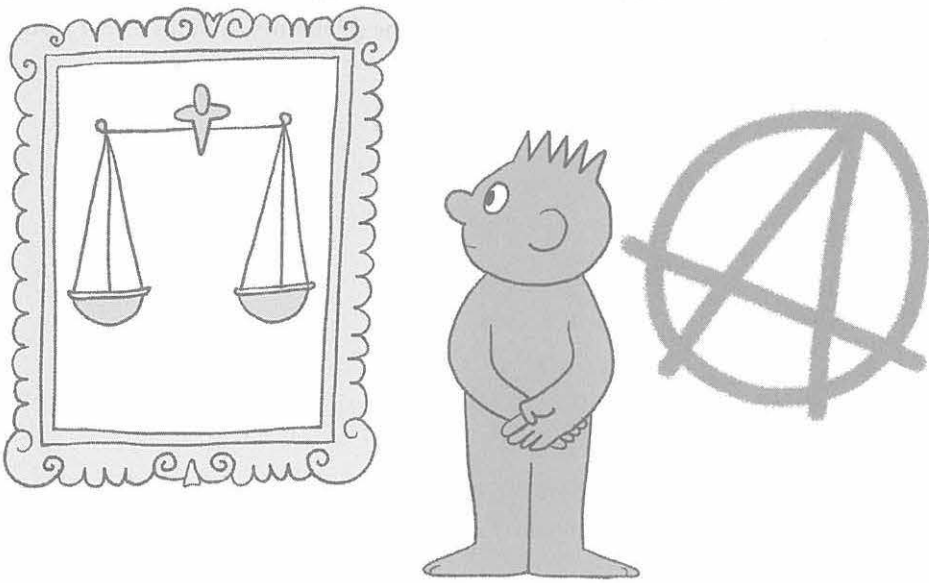
### **PRIMARY RESOURCES**

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- Bentham, J. 1825, *The Rationale of Reward*, [http://www.archive.org/stream/rationaleofrewar00bent/rationaleofrewar00bent\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/rationaleofrewar00bent/rationaleofrewar00bent_djvu.txt)

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<http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML.html>
- Kant, I. 1785, *Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals*  
<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/Immanuel/k16prm/chapter2.html>
- Mill, J.S. 1861, *Utilitarianism*  
[http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john\\_stuart/m645u/chapter2.html](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645u/chapter2.html)
- Moore, G.E, 1988, *Principia Ethica*, Prometheus, New York.
- Nozick, R. 1977, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Basic Books, New York.
- Ross, W.D. 2002, *The Right and the Good*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Singer, P. 1971, 'All Animals Are Equal'  
<http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-m/singer02.htm>
- Smart, J.N. 1958, "Negative Utilitarianism", in *Mind*, vol.67 no.268 (Oct 1958).
- Smart, J.J.C. & Williams, B. 1973, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

## CHAPTER 6

# Further Problems in Value Theory



Asking why things matter, or posing questions of **value**, is the central concern of both ethics – including one of its major branches, **political philosophy** – and **aesthetics**. We make aesthetic judgements when we assess what pleases our senses about ourselves, each other, nature, our surroundings and about works of art. So too, we are constantly making political evaluations about how communities of people might best get along, including how governments should treat their citizens. How to make an aesthetic interpretation raises similar problems to how to make an interpretation of a political situation. Asking what makes something art or not art is not unlike asking what makes something a right. How do we answer such questions? Is it even possible to arrive at such judgments and can such judgements ever be considered objectively correct?

Our first Theme in political philosophy considers the nature of rights. What is a right, who can be the subject of a right and how might a conflict between rights be resolved? These questions take us naturally to other questions relating to law, justice and punishment, and how these three concepts relate to rights.

Another major problem facing communities of people is how to deal with human desires for freedom. In our second Theme we ask, is freedom a fundamental human right? Should there be limitations on our freedom and if so, on what grounds? And what is the best form of political organisation to secure our freedom?

Turning then to questions of aesthetic value, Theme 3 explores the nature of art, beauty and the aesthetic experience. What is art, what is its purpose, and how should it be valued?

Our final Theme considers the issues that arise when we look for meaning in art. Should we look to the artist, the artwork itself or to our own personal response when forming an interpretation of art? Should we try to interpret art at all? And lastly, what is the relationship between art and morality? We consider whether art can make us better people, the morality of forgeries and the problem of censorship.

As you complete your studies of Unit 2 Philosophy, your skills of reasoning and argument will be well honed. We hope you enjoy applying them to the problems in value theory posed in this Chapter.

## THEME 1

# On Rights and Justice

What is a right? How do rights come about? Can all things enjoy rights or only things that have particular capacities? Why? What is the relationship between rights, justice and the law, and can punishment be reconciled with justice and rights?

In this Theme you will explore the nature of rights and consider whether, and on what grounds, different kinds of entities can be granted rights. Inevitably questions regarding rights will involve questions regarding justice, and so our discussion about rights will move into a discussion about justice, what it is and what relationship it shares with rights. From there, the Theme will consider the nature of law and its role in administering justice, a discussion which would not be complete without some consideration of punishment and the role it plays in the successful governing of society.

## Rights

### *Introductory Activities*

#### **DO**

Consider the following examples of rights:

right to life

right to privacy

right to a fair trial

freedom of association

right to vote

freedom of religion

right to operate a forklift

freedom of expression

right to practise law

right to healthcare

right to seek asylum

right to an education

right to drive a car

right to sick pay

right to an abortion

right to feel proud of  
what one has done

right to dress as  
one pleases

right to pronounce a  
couple man and wife



In pairs, group these examples according to similarities. As you group the examples, try to come up with a sub-heading for each group that explains the kinds of rights it includes. As a class, share your groupings and discuss the following questions:

1. Is everyone entitled to all of these rights or are there certain criteria an entity must fulfil to be granted these rights?
2. Which of these rights would you consider universal? On what grounds?
3. Can any of these rights be revoked or are they **inalienable** (unable to be taken or given away)? On what grounds?
4. What responsibilities are implied by these rights?
5. Considering both the activity and discussion questions 1-4, how would you define a right?

## ***What is a Right?***

In the modern world, **rights** are the measure by which we judge the permissibility of actions and the justice of institutions. They shape our understanding of morality, form the bedrock of our laws and call to account the governments of the world. But what exactly are they?

At its most basic, a right is simply a freedom or entitlement. Rights define what people are allowed to do, or what they are owed, and generally they necessitate a duty on the part of someone else. To have a right means to have a claim according to a legal system, social convention or ethical theory.

Yet, although the basic concept of rights is relatively straightforward, there are some differences between the kinds of rights that we enjoy. Outlined below are some of the differences that philosophers and political theorists have identified.

### **NATURAL RIGHTS**

Unlike some rights, **natural rights** (also known as moral rights) are not relative to particular societies and do not derive their authority from law. They exist necessarily and are universal: all people, in all parts of the world, are entitled to these rights by fact of their humanity.

This immediately raises the question of where these rights come from. Although different philosophers hold different views, the seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke (Famous Philosopher File p.104) maintains they are granted to us by God and are a part of our existence in the **state of nature** (a pre-political stage of human existence), where we are all equal and independent. In this state of nature we enthusiastically defend our lives, our freedom and what we own. Thus Locke famously formulated the existence of three natural rights – life, liberty and property – which we are entitled to so long as our pursuit of liberty does not conflict with the right to life, and our ownership and pursuit of property do not conflict with either the right to life or the right to freedom. Locke believed that the role of government was to create laws to protect these three natural rights. If it failed to do so, the people could rightfully overthrow it.

Although Locke's views regarding rights have proven extremely influential – the rights of life, liberty and property form the bedrock of Western democracies everywhere – not everyone agrees that rights are natural entitlements.

The eighteenth century philosopher Jeremy Bentham (Famous Philosopher File p.404), in his posthumously published *Anarchical Fallacies* (1816), described the notion of natural rights as 'nonsense upon stilts.' According to Bentham, rights are created by laws, which are in turn created by governments at the will of the sovereign. Because rights are *dependent* on governments, it makes no sense to talk about 'natural' rights, for in a state of nature rights could not exist. Additionally, the duties to which these rights generally correlate are also determined by governments (via the law), which, according to Bentham, further demonstrates his claim that such rights could not precede governments.

Bentham also rejected natural rights because he believed their existence was posited on a fallacious understanding of how civil societies come about. This understanding, known as the **social contract**, holds that civil societies are created when individuals living in a state of nature gift their autonomy to a sovereign in return for certain rights and protections. Bentham claims that this view is not only unhistorical, the notion of a 'contract' between autonomous individuals in a state of nature and a sovereign is completely ridiculous: how could such a contract predate a government whose job it is to enforce contracts and make them legally binding?

Finally, Bentham accused natural rights of being 'anarchical.' He claimed that if there are natural rights, they are anterior to, and so cannot be limited by, law. Yet for rights to exist in any meaningful way requires some limitations on the individual's freedom (for example, my right to life is only meaningful if you have no right to kill me). Thus the notion of 'natural' rights doesn't seem to make sense. Furthermore, the limitations necessary to make rights meaningful imply that rights must be capable of being enforced, which in turn requires law – which is the province of governments.

## DO

Create a list of examples of natural rights (you may like to use the internet for ideas).

Discuss the following questions:

1. How widely recognised are these rights?
2. Is the fact of their recognition grounds enough to grant them authority?
3. Should authority be granted to particular rights simply on the basis that they are widely recognised?



## LEGAL RIGHTS

Although Jeremy Bentham was a staunch critic of natural rights, he didn't dismiss rights completely. Bentham simply believed that the only 'real' rights were **legal rights**.



Legal rights are rights based on a given society's customs and beliefs and are codified in law. The right to vote is a legal right in Australia and the right to bear arms is a legal right in the United States. Because legal rights are products of particular societies, they are culturally and politically relative.

### THINK

Are there legal rights that are also natural rights? If so, does this cast doubt on Bentham's claims regarding natural rights?



## LIBERTY RIGHTS AND CLAIM RIGHTS

Another distinction drawn by philosophers when talking about rights is between liberty rights and claim rights. Put simply, **liberty rights** are freedoms. They permit us, among other things, to say what we please (right to freedom of opinion and expression), think what we please (right to freedom of thought) and worship whom we please (right to freedom of religion).

**Claim rights** are entitlements. They involve certain duties and responsibilities being fulfilled by other parties for the right holder. Examples of claim rights include the right to a basic education and the right to a fair trial.

Although distinct, both liberty rights and claim rights moderate one another and are dependent on one another for their flourishing. Thus a person who enjoys a certain liberty can only do so if no one else holds a claim right against the assertion of that liberty. Likewise, a person's claim right will necessarily serve to limit someone else's liberty by obliging them to fulfill particular duties or responsibilities. There are also examples where liberty rights and claim rights overlap, such as when laws are created which oblige other parties (such as the state) to respect and protect particular liberties.

### THINK

What are some examples of liberty rights and claim rights? Which of these rights are also natural rights? Which of these rights are also legal rights? Are any of these rights both natural *and* legal rights?



## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE RIGHTS

A third distinction drawn by philosophers is between positive rights and negative rights.

**Positive rights** are entitlements to specific services, or permissions to engage in certain actions. They imply an obligation on behalf of others towards the right holder. For example, the right to receive a basic education implies an obligation on behalf of the government to supply it. Likewise, the right to receive unemployment benefits in certain circumstances implies an obligation on behalf of the government to create the economic infrastructure necessary to ensure this right is met.

**Negative rights** are rights that forbid others from acting against the right holder, usually by means of coercion or abuse. Examples of negative rights include freedom of speech, freedom of worship and the right to a fair trial.

Both negative rights and positive rights can also be legal rights or natural rights, liberty rights or claim rights. Yet, while many thinkers – particularly **libertarians** – agree with the distinction between these rights, others argue that the distinction is false. They claim that, as negative rights can only be upheld through positive action (for example, my right to freedom of speech is dependent on the whole legal apparatus which upholds it), negative rights are really just positive rights in a different guise. However, supporters of the distinction point out that, as negative rights do not necessarily imply that someone else has a *duty* to enforce them, the distinction is warranted.

### THINK

What are some other examples of negative rights and positive rights?



## CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

Civil and political rights are generally negative rights aimed at protecting against interference from governments or private organisations, and ensuring the ability of individuals to participate in the civil and political life of their respective society without fear of discrimination or repression.

**Civil rights** include protection from discrimination on the grounds of race, gender and religion and rights such as freedom of thought and conscience.

**Political rights** include rights relating to the law, such as the right to a fair trial, due process and the right to seek redress, and rights relating to participation within civil society, such as the right to vote and freedom of association.

Both political and civil rights constitute the first portion of the Declaration of Human Rights and are recognised as some of the first human rights.

### DO

Go back to the rights listed in the Introductory Activity for this Theme (p.435). Together with a partner, identify the kind of right each right represents (there is more than one possible answer).

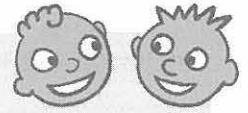


### WRITE

Write a definition for each kind of right described in this section in your own words in your workbook.



## The Function of Rights



### DISCUSS

What is the *function* of a right?

The above question appears deceptively simple. But as your discussion may have revealed, it is actually quite complex. Is the function of a right to give the right holder control over others' duties, or is its function to further the right holder's interests?

If you agree with the former, your view coheres with that of **will theory**. Will theorists, like Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) hold that the purpose of rights is to grant the right holder control over the duties that others owe him or her and, through so doing, make the right holder a 'small scale sovereign.'

But perhaps you agree with the latter view. If so, your opinion reflects that of **interest theorists**, like Jeremy Bentham (Famous Philosopher File p.440). Interest theorists claim that the reason rights exist is to make us better off by securing our wellbeing.

Of course, each view has its merits. Will theory acknowledges the powerful link between ourselves and others that lies at the very heart of rights and recognises that rights confer a certain power on the right holder by imposing duties on others. On the other hand, interest theory taps into the deeply intuitive idea that rights are really about making us better off.

Yet, while both theories have their merits, they also have their shortcomings. By positing that rights are things controlled by the right holder, will theory implies that rights can be waived or annulled if the right holder should so choose. However, this is clearly not the case. For example, the right not to be enslaved cannot be waived by the right holder. Furthermore, by claiming that rights confer sovereignty on the right holder, will theory fails to recognise the rights of those who are unable to exert sovereignty, such as animals, the severely disabled and babies.

Because interest theory views rights as instruments through which the individual's well being is secured, it manages to avoid the major pitfalls of will theory described above. However, and despite its intuitive appeal, interest theory doesn't quite fit with how we commonly understand rights. Most people would agree that simply having interests doesn't *automatically* entail having a right and, contrariwise, having rights doesn't *automatically* entail having an interest. For example, I may have an interest in my child attending an elite private school in a wealthy area but this doesn't mean my child has the *right* to attend that school. Likewise, the fact that you may or may not have an interest in receiving a basic education has very little to do with the government's duty to supply it. Additionally, interest theory fails to recognise that there are occasions when the interests of the individual are less important than other interests: it is certainly not in my interests to risk my life being shot at in a war zone, however my interests may be less important than the national interest which requires compulsory military service.

## THINK

Will theory and interest theory both have merits and shortcomings. But which do you think is the most persuasive account of the function of rights?



## Rights and Responsibilities

At the beginning of this Theme we described rights as freedoms or entitlements. This necessarily implies that rights impose particular responsibilities or **duties** on others. For example, your right to a basic education implies that the government has a duty to supply it and your right to life implies that others have a duty to refrain from harming you. Thus the duties imposed by rights are duties to do, and to refrain from doing, certain things.

The link between rights and duties is called the **correlativity of rights and duties**. Many philosophers believe that there cannot be a right without a corresponding duty. Many philosophers also believe that a right requires more than a corresponding duty for its existence; it also requires the duty to be accepted by the subject of the duty. If the duty goes unrecognised by the subject of the duty, the corresponding right cannot exist.

## DO

Do you have a school charter or a set of school values? If so, acquire a copy of it.

Divide the key points into rights and duties. For each right, try to work out the corresponding duty. For each duty, try to work out the corresponding right.

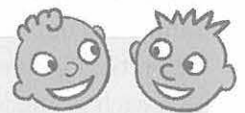
When you have completed this task, discuss the following questions:

1. Do all rights have corresponding duties and vice-versa?
2. Are rights and duties equally distributed among students and the school?
3. Reflecting on the correlation between rights and duties in your school charter / school values, what, in your opinion, is the primary purpose of this document?
4. Reflecting on your answers to questions 1-3, would you describe your school charter / values as fair?



## DISCUSS

1. What are the consequences of failing to recognise a duty?
2. In light of these consequences, should we always recognise our duty to fulfil certain rights?
3. Under what circumstances can failing to fulfil our duties be justified?



Just as rights imply certain duties, they also imply certain constraints. For example, your right to life means I that cannot kill you. Your right to freedom from enslavement means that I cannot force you into slavery. Your right involves a constraint on my freedom.

This seems relatively uncontroversial. Some philosophers, however, have argued that not all rights operate in this way. In certain circumstances, the obligation to fulfil certain rights or to refrain from acting against certain rights can be overridden by stronger moral claims. For example, the constraint on my freedom implied by your right of freedom of expression (that I cannot prevent you from expressing your opinion) may be overridden by the fact that in expressing your opinion you have expressed sentiments intended to incite violence against a particular person or group.

Of course, not all philosophers agree with this. Nor do all philosophers agree that only some rights operate in this way. For further discussion of the circumstances in which rights can be overridden and obligations violated see pp.462-464 ('A Conflict of Rights').

### THINK

Consider some examples of rights. What constraints on others do those rights involve? Are those constraints absolute or are there certain circumstances in which they can be violated?



## Human Rights

Generally, when we hear the term 'rights' what usually springs to mind are what are called **human rights**. Human rights are internationally recognised moral guarantees aimed at protecting people from various political, social and legal abuses and securing the prerequisites for leading a minimally good life. Like all rights, human rights encompass duties as well as rights: the duty holders are primarily governments, who are responsible for complying with, and enforcing the rights, and the right holders are all human beings by right of their humanity.

Although some commentators have suggested that human rights can be traced to the moral universalism expressed in the writings of Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99) and the Stoics (a school of philosophy which started in Athens around 300BCE), most agree that that the concept begins with the idea of natural right proposed by John Locke (Famous Philosopher File p.104) and his predecessor, the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (Famous Philosopher File p.483). Locke's view that all human beings possess certain inalienable rights (see p.483), not only influenced our contemporary conceptualisation of human rights as universal, it also served as the theoretical inspiration for both the American and French Revolutions and the rights documents that each produced. These documents, respectively The American Declaration of Independence (1776) and The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789), enumerated various rights that the people could expect their governments to uphold. Some of these rights, such as freedom of religion and freedom of the press, are still recognised today.

Another historical source of inspiration for our contemporary conceptualisation of human rights is the moral philosophy of the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) and in particular, his views regarding the moral autonomy of rational human beings. You can read more about Kant's views in Chapter 5, Theme 3 (pp.419-421).

Yet, while these writings were certainly important, perhaps the most significant influences on the development of contemporary human rights were the atrocious abuses of human life and dignity that occurred in the early to mid-twentieth century, and in particular, the Holocaust. It was in the wake of this event that the United Nations General Assembly adopted what is considered the main source of contemporary human rights, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This document consists of a preamble that recognises ‘the inherent dignity...and inalienable rights of all members of the human family’ and reminds its signatories that ‘human rights should be protected by the rule of law’<sup>44</sup>, and over two-dozen specific human rights. These include rights to life, freedom, political participation and to the protection of the rule of law (what have been described as **first generation** human rights), as well as socio-economic and cultural rights (known as **second generation** human rights). This document was supplemented in 1953 by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and in 1966 by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and has been reinforced by various other declarations and treaties at national and international levels.



## DO

Using the internet and the information above, create a timeline of the historical development of human rights. Display this timeline in your classroom.



## READ

*[see Useful Resources]*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) largely defines our contemporary understanding of human rights.

In pairs or small groups, read through this document. Using a highlighter and annotations, as well as the information contained in the above section on human rights, group the individual articles according to the types of rights they represent.

When you have completed this task, discuss the following questions:

1. Do you agree that all of these rights are equally important? Why or why not?
2. Should all governments be expected to protect and enforce these rights? Why or why not?
3. Could all governments realistically protect and enforce all of these rights?
4. If a government did not protect and enforce all of these rights, would it necessarily be a bad government?
5. In what circumstances, if at all, could these rights be justifiably withdrawn? What might be the implications of withdrawing rights?
6. Reflecting on your answers for questions 1-5, how important do you think it is that governments subscribe to and uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

## **JUSTIFYING HUMAN RIGHTS**

Generally, philosophers agree that human rights are a combination of claim rights and liberty rights, positive rights and negative rights. They also agree that human rights evolve out of moral beliefs and their goal is to create the conditions for a minimally good life. Additionally, philosophers typically acknowledge that human rights possess particular moral force and that they trump other social and political considerations.

However, there is much disagreement among philosophers, particularly with regard to whether or not human rights can be understood as natural, universal and objective, what their purposes are and exactly which norms should be recognised as human rights.

The least controversial definition of human rights is the one that we used at the beginning of this section: human rights are moral guarantees expressed in national and international law aimed at protecting and securing the wellbeing of individuals. However, some philosophers have argued that if this is the only way that human rights exist, their availability is necessarily contingent on national and international political developments. As this contradicts our moral intuitions regarding the nature of human rights – we tend to think of them as things possessed by all people regardless of their political situation and geographical location – it is argued that human rights must have foundations that transcend law.

This immediately invites speculation as to what these foundations are. Some thinkers have suggested that the answer to this question is God. Just as God defines the moral laws that we should live by, so too does God define the rights that all human beings can expect to enjoy.

Putting aside the obvious issues of establishing God's existence and ascertaining God's intentions regarding rights, there still remain a number of significant problems with this theory. To begin with, if rights emanated from God they would necessarily be applicable not only to all people, everywhere, but also at any time. This means they would have to be relatively few in number, general and abstract. While some rights certainly do fit some of these criteria (for example, the right to life), most rights are specific and many presuppose contemporary institutions (for example, the right to a fair trial). To claim that rights emanate from God would be to deny the significance of some of our most important rights.

Furthermore, even if we accept that there are certain God-given human rights, it is uncertain how their status as God-given would render them practically secure. For many people throughout the world, God is either a redundant concept or not something understood in the same way as in the monotheistic traditions. It is unlikely that such people could be persuaded to adhere to rights if they don't believe in their metaphysical foundations.

Recognising the limitations of the religious theory, some thinkers have instead suggested either that rights exist as part of actual human moralities – in other words, as shared norms that occur within most human moralities – or that their existence can be demonstrated through moral reasoning – in other words, that they can be demonstrated as either true or false by the normative facts that support them (see 'Moral Realism,' p.362).

At first glance, these approaches may seem more persuasive: they don't require a belief in God and most of us can readily think of specific moral norms or values that appear to transcend cultures, such as the right to life. However, most people, if pushed to identify shared norms and values beyond the right to life, start to struggle, thus throwing into question whether these shared norms and values really do exist. Furthermore, as human rights gain increasing acceptance across the world, it has become clear that unanimity regarding human rights simply doesn't exist. In fact, it can be forcefully argued that the whole purpose of human rights documents is not to enshrine pre-existing norms, but to change them for the better.

Finally, the claim that the objective status of human rights can be demonstrated by appeal to normative facts seems to suffer from the same problems as general moral realist arguments (see pp.362-3). While it can certainly be demonstrated that acts such as torture compromise an individual's wellbeing, it is much harder to show why this entails that humans should not be tortured.

A more general criticism of the view that human rights are natural, universal and objective comes from moral relativists (see Chapter 5, Theme 1 pp.356-7), who claim that human rights are products of culture. This not only means that the principle of human rights that transcend culture is flawed, but that human rights *per se* are flawed because they are biased towards the particular cultures that produce them and fail to recognise important cultural differences.

The most obvious retort to this argument is that pointing to differences between cultures doesn't *in itself* provide strong justification for relativism or for the claim that the integrity of cultures must necessarily be respected. Surely, such an attitude would necessarily result in condoning regimes that were repressive or violent towards their own people. However, the claim that there is some level of cultural homogeneity embedded within human rights, is more difficult to deny – after all, the world's primary source for the contemporary understanding of human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a product of Western culture. Partly in response to this, a **third generation** of rights, including rights regarding self-determination and the rights of indigenous minorities, has appeared in various documents and treaties.

## WRITE

Construct a table that lists arguments in favour, and arguments against, the view that human rights are natural, universal and objective. Where possible, use examples to support your points.

In addition to the information supplied in this section, use the internet and discussions with your classmates to enrich your arguments.



Just as philosophers have debated the status of human rights, controversy also exists regarding their purpose and justification. Do human rights exist to protect and promote our basic interests (interest theory) or are they an expression of our status as autonomous entities (will theory)?



You will already be aware of some of the strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches from our earlier discussion on the function of rights (p. 440). No doubt you will recall that one of the strengths of interest theory is that it corresponds to our intuitions that rights are things created to secure our wellbeing. It also appeals to a notion of interests as shared norms – all humans, it would seem, share basic, fundamental interests – and through so doing provides a powerful rationale for the idea of inalienable rights.

However, interest theory has been accused of ignoring the diversity and reality of the human experience and failing to provide a coherent basis for respecting the rights of others. By positing the view that there are certain, basic interests that all humans share, interest theory implicitly appeals to a notion of human nature. Appeals to human nature have always proven highly controversial and are complicated by social and cultural diversity. This in turn makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly what these interests are. Even if we do manage to pinpoint some shared interests – for example, it could plausibly be argued that all human beings share a basic interest in their own security – the question still remains of how best to translate this interest into a right, given the different requisites for feeling secure in different cultures. Additionally, although the notion that rights are grounded in interests is intuitively appealing, such a view, because it is focused on the individual, provides no rationale for why I should respect the rights of anyone else.

Like the interest theory approach to human rights, will theory also has its strengths and weaknesses. As mentioned in the previous discussion of these theories (p.440), will theory taps into the powerful link between ourselves and others. It also recognises humans as autonomous creatures who are fundamentally free – a view shared by supporters of natural rights. However, it fails to account for our intuitive sense that those who are incapable of acting in a rationally autonomous fashion – such as babies, those with dementia, and those who are comatose or suffer from severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia – should also be part of the rights community. Indeed, many of our rights specifically address those in such situations.

## WRITE

Reread the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see *Useful Resources*).

In light of your reading, which do you think provides a more plausible account of the purpose of human rights, will theory or interest theory?

Write a half-page response to this question using the articles from the Declaration to support your claims.



Philosophers have also disagreed with regard to what norms should be considered human rights. By expanding the list too widely, philosophers argue we risk devaluing human rights. By the same token, too narrow an approach could mean that significant rights are overlooked.

One area of human rights that has proven particularly contentious with regard to this problem is what are termed **social rights**. Along with economic and cultural rights, these rights were put into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1966 in the form of a separate treaty (the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). Those who deny their status as human rights claim that they don't serve fundamental interests, that they place too much strain on the tax system and are too burdensome for governments, and that they're simply unachievable for less developed nations.

The first of these criticisms taps into wider claims that what should rightly be described as human rights are those norms that specifically address significant goods, protections and freedoms. It is easy to see why such rights might be considered to fail this criterion: the right to housing is hardly on par with a right like freedom from torture. However, it could also be argued that some social rights are extremely significant. Without housing people can become extremely ill, are exposed to threats to their personal security and could even die. Also, some social rights, such as the right to education and the right to work, play a significant role in facilitating what are considered the more 'important' civil and political rights.

The second criticism – that social rights are too costly and too burdensome – is generally proposed by **libertarians** on the grounds that such rights demand excessive taxation. It is certainly true that rights like the right to education, the right to an adequate standard of living and the right of mothers to receive paid maternity leave do cost governments significantly, and these costs are passed on to the taxpayer. However, many civil and political rights, such as free elections and rights to due process and a fair trial, are also costly. Thus denying these rights the status of human rights simply on economic grounds seems flawed.

The third criticism, although bearing some resemblance to the second, is perhaps more problematic. For less developed nations that have limited funds and therefore must prioritise, rights such as access to paid maternity leave may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Although some philosophers, such as John Rawls (Famous Philosopher File p.469), have claimed that it is the duty of liberal democratic nations to support less fortunate countries to realise these rights, reasons as to *why* this is the case have been less forthcoming. Others have argued that rather than rights, the rights contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights should be understood as *desirable goals* to be progressively realised. Of course, such an argument could also be used by detractors of these rights as human rights: if they are goals then by definition they cannot be understood as rights.

## DO

[see Useful Resources]

Independently, or as a whole class, read through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Divide the class into an even number of small groups (for example, four groups of three students). Half of these groups will work on mounting a case in favour of the legitimacy of the rights contained in the Covenant as human rights and the other half will focus on mounting a case against the legitimacy of these rights. In preparing their cases students should focus closely on the articles contained in the Covenant.

When students have completed this task, each group in favour of the legitimacy of the rights will join with a group against their legitimacy. Each side will present their case and have the opportunity to critically examine and evaluate the case of the opposition. Students should use the skills of evaluation developed in Chapter Two (from p.40 onwards) during this activity.





## WRITE

After completing the above task, write a brief reflection (approximately 500 words) on the following question:

- Are social rights human rights?



## TEXT STUDY: James Griffin, *On Human Rights* (2008)

[see Useful Resources]

Divide the class in half. One half of the class will read and summarise Section 2.3 and the other half of the class will read and summarise Section 2.4. To help you to construct your summary you can use the questions listed under the relevant sections below.

### Section 2.3 A Proposal of a Substantive Account

1. How does Griffin define human rights?
2. On what view of human beings is this understanding of human rights based?
3. What are Griffin's three components of personhood and how is each defined?

### Section 2.5 A Second Ground: Practicalities

1. Why does Griffin believe that personhood, taken alone, is an insufficient ground for human rights? (*You may like to summarise his example to illustrate your response.*)
2. What is meant by the term 'practicalities'?
3. What is the role of practicalities in Griffin's conception of human rights?

When you have completed the above task, divide into pairs. One member of the pair should have read Section 2.3, the other 2.5. Share your summaries.

Still working in your pair, construct a visual representation (for example, a flow chart) of Griffin's arguments. Your visual representation should include:

- Griffin's definition of a human right
- Griffin's two grounds for human rights and his rationale for these grounds
- Examples of rights that would conform to his understanding of human rights.

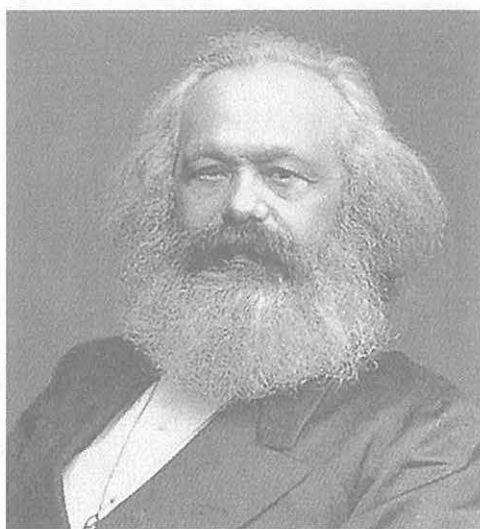
Share your visual representation with the class and then as a whole class discuss the following question:

- Does Griffin provide a convincing account of human rights?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Karl Marx was born into a wealthy middle-class family in Trier, a town in southern Germany, in 1818. He was descended from a religious family – his paternal line had supplied Trier’s rabbis for almost 100 years – however his father, Herschel Marx, converted from Judaism to Lutheranism prior to Marx’s birth. Not much is known about Marx’s childhood. He was privately educated until the age of twelve, when he entered Trier High School. At seventeen he commenced studies in law at the University of Bonn where, among other things, he served as co-president of the Trier Tavern Club Drinking Society and took part in a duel. After his grades began to deteriorate, his father transferred him to the University of Berlin. Marx was awarded his doctorate in 1841. In 1843 Marx moved to Paris after marrying Jenny von Westphalen, a baroness of the Prussian ruling class whom he had known since he was a child. It was in Paris that Marx commenced his private studies in economics. He was exiled from France in 1845 for publishing a radical newspaper and moved to Brussels, where he first met his long-time collaborator and friend, Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Together they wrote what critics believe is Marx’s best treatment of the concept of historical materialism, *The German Ideology* (1932). This was closely followed by the pair’s most famous work, a political pamphlet known as *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Later in 1848 Marx was forced to flee back to France after the Belgian Ministry of Justice accused him of arming Belgian workers who were planning revolutionary action. He remained in Paris for less than a year before his revolutionary activities saw him once again expelled. He and his family moved to London, where he remained for the rest of his life. Marx continued working as a radical journalist while refining his understanding of economics and engaging in revolutionary activity, including holding a position on the General Council for the International. In 1867 he published the first volume of his master work, *Das Kapital*. Although he worked on the manuscripts of the two other volumes for the rest of his life, they would not be published until after his death. After the death of his wife in 1881, Marx fell into ill-health. He died in London from bronchitis and pleurisy and was buried in Highgate Cemetery, London.





## TEXT STUDY: Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question* (1843)

[see Useful Resources]

In this essay Marx criticises the revolutionary documents of eighteenth century America and France on the grounds that the rights they articulate are based on a flawed conception of human beings as isolated individuals whose interests can be defined without reference to one another. He is particularly critical of the key rights of equality, liberty, security and property on the respective grounds that they: separate the individual from others; promote a culture of self-interest and invite individuals to see others as limitations on their own liberty; encourage the view that each isolated individual is self-sufficient; and reinforce individuals' egoism by perpetuating the notion that the purpose of society is to guarantee each individual's security (implying that we are always potentially in conflict with others).

Read the following passage:

*Let us notice first of all that the so-called rights of man...are simply the rights of a member of civil society, that is, of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community. The most radical constitution, that of 1793, says: 'These rights... (the natural and imprescriptible rights) are: equality, liberty, security, property.*

*Liberty is...the right to do everything which does not harm others. The limits within which each individual can act without harming others is determined by law, just as a boundary between two fields is marked by a stake...liberty as a right of man is not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather on the separation of man from man...It is...the right of the circumscribed individual, withdrawn into himself.*

*The right of private property is...the right to enjoy one's fortune and to dispose of it as one will; without regard for other men and independently of society. It is the right of self-interest...It leads every man to see in other men, not the realization, but rather the limitation of his own liberty.*

*The term 'equality' has here no political significance. It is only the equal right to liberty as defined above; namely that every man is equally regarded as a self-sufficient monad.*

*Security is the supreme social concept of civil society...The whole society exists only in order to guarantee for each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property...Security is the assurance of its egoism.*

*None of the supposed rights of man...go beyond egoistic man...that is, an individual separated from the community, withdrawn into himself, wholly preoccupied with his private interest and acting in accordance with his private caprice...The only bond between men is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic interests.\**

\* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>  
(accessed September 5th, 2013)

Using a highlighter, identify where Marx:

- Defines rights
- Provides his criticism of the right of liberty
- Provides his criticism of the right of equality
- Provides his criticism of the right of security
- Provides an overall criticism of the 'rights of man'

In pairs, construct a series of arguments in favour of, and against, Marx's criticisms of rights using examples (you may want to refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to help you to do this).

Share these arguments with the class, then discuss the following question:

- How persuasive is Marx's argument against human rights (the 'rights of man')?

## **RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: HOW SHOULD AUSTRALIA RESPOND TO ASYLUM SEEKERS?**

### **A DEBATE.**

Perhaps one of the most controversial issues in Australian politics in recent years has been our country's response to asylum seekers.

Research current Australian policy regarding asylum seekers.

When you have completed this task, prepare for a debate on the issue of whether or not Australian policy breaches asylum seekers' human rights. The side for the affirmative should argue that Australia *is* breaching asylum seekers' human rights and the side for the negative should argue that Australia *is not* breaching asylum seekers' human rights. Although various human rights documents can and should be consulted in the preparation of your debate (as well as Australian policy), you should also draw on your more general knowledge of human rights, and in particular, the various questions that have been raised about the legitimacy of some human rights.

You might like to stage your debate for your wider school community.

## Women's Rights

Historically, women have been denied the opportunity to access the same rights as men. In many non-Western countries, these inequalities are marked and continuing, including denial of rights to own property, travel freely, drive cars and to access employment. While we have come a long way in the last 100 years, there are still many areas of life in Australia and other Western societies where females experience unequal treatment compared with males.



### DO

Try this quiz. Check your answers on the next page.

1. A man and a woman do exactly the same job in Australia in 2018. Is the woman paid less or more, on average?
  - a. Less, but only about 0.8% less.
  - b. Slightly more, on average.
  - c. 18.2% less.
  - d. 10% less.
2. The leading cause of death, disability and injury in women aged 15-44 is:
  - a. cancer
  - b. violence from a male partner
  - c. heart disease
  - d. road accidents
3. The first country in the world to allow women to run for parliament in 1903 was:
  - a. Finland
  - b. United States
  - c. Germany
  - d. Australia
4. In Australia, women were not permitted to enter the public bar of a hotel, and often required a male companion to be permitted even in the Ladies Lounge, until:
  - a. 1963
  - b. 1903
  - c. 1888
  - d. 1920

5. In developing countries, women die as a result of pregnancy complications (mostly easily preventable) and childbirth at the rate of:
- a. 10 women each year
  - b. 1 woman each week
  - c. 1 woman each day
  - d. 1 woman each minute

ANSWERS ON NEXT PAGE

## EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN IN THE WEST: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Imagine you are a woman in London in 1788. If you are single, there is little protection for you of any kind under the law. If you marry, you cease to possess a legal identity of your own but are granted legal rights under the wing of your husband. However, you may not independently access legal representation, sign a contract, inherit or buy property, vote, or have rights over your children.

As law professor William Blackstone noted in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* in 1758:

*The husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs every thing.*

[Source: William Blackstone. *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Vol. 1 (1765), page 442.]

This was the context into which Mary Wollstonecraft (Famous Philosopher File p.455) launched the bold declarations of her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. She argued that as human beings, *both* men and women should enjoy rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – in other words, that to speak of ‘human rights’ should be to speak of women’s rights.

One of Wollstonecraft’s key arguments centres on her identification of a vicious circle by which men retain power. She argues that women’s education and opportunities are restricted by men. Then men claim that women lack the necessary capacities to participate in public life, and use this to further justify restrictions on women’s education and opportunities. According to Wollstonecraft, this is how men have perpetuated the false notion that women are naturally inferior and that only men should hold power.

So, according to Wollstonecraft, men do not dominate because they are naturally superior; rather, women have been restricted to subjugated roles and denied the rights to education and skill development that would enable greater participation in public life. She writes, “It cannot be demonstrated that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated.” Wollstonecraft, well-versed in classical and enlightenment philosophy, argues that an ideal society should be governed by reason, virtue and respect for knowledge. She argues that, contrary to the view that had prevailed since Aristotle and medieval times, women are not naturally deficient in reason. For Wollstonecraft, such a view is fundamental to grotesque injustices visited daily upon women, and thereby to the diminishment of civilisation as a whole.



The view that women lack rational capacities, and their lack of access to education, also trap them, Wollstonecraft argued, into playing superficial roles, caring only about external appearances and being treated like “toys”. She writes: “indoctrinated from childhood to believe that beauty is woman’s scepter, spirit takes the form of their bodies, locked in the gilded cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.” She argues that if women are allowed to become men’s intellectual equals, men too will enjoy more fulfilling relationships. She sympathises that for an intelligent man, life must be lonely indeed with a wife who lacks education and has grown up considering it unseemly to demonstrate intellect.

Wollstonecraft’s solution is an education system which would educate boys and girls together and equally. “Truth must be common to all,” she writes.

## THINK

Are Wollstonecraft’s ideas still radical today? Why or why not?



## TEXT STUDY: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

[see Useful Resources]

Read the Introduction.

1. What is the “one hasty conclusion” that Wollstonecraft identifies as the cause of women’s “misery”?
2. Explain Wollstonecraft’s analogy of the “barren blooming flower”. What purpose does it serve in her argument?
3. What does Wollstonecraft declare about the style she will adopt for writing the *Vindication* and for what reasons?
4. What comparisons does Wollstonecraft make between the ways men and women are perceived and experience the world? Which of these does she believe are grounded in nature and which are contingent on experience?
5. What negative consequences does Wollstonecraft identify as having arisen from the divide between men and women?
6. What is humanity’s greatest gift, according to Wollstonecraft? How does this claim operate as the basis for Wollstonecraft’s argument about equal rights?
7. Why will education for women improve society at large, according to Wollstonecraft?



Answers to Quiz on previous page: 1(c); 2(b); 3(d); 4(a); 5(d).

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759–1797)

Wollstonecraft was born in London, the second of seven children. Her father, abusive to his wife and offspring, squandered his inherited fortune on drinking and gambling. Wollstonecraft received the minimal instruction available to girls at the time, while her brother received a full education. She set about a program of self-education, reading all she could lay her hands on and finding mentors such as Mr and Mrs Clare, who offer her a second home, and with whose daughter, Fanny Blood, Wollstonecraft developed a deep friendship.



George G. Rockwood [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

At age 19 Wollstonecraft needed to earn a living. As a middle class girl she had three choices: housekeeper, companion to a noblewoman or teacher. Having spent a few years in the former occupations, she started her own school in London in 1783 with Fanny Blood, and through this venture she developed friendships with several intellectual young men who shared her interest in Locke's philosophy and beliefs in education for all. At this stage, Wollstonecraft began to write poetry, novels, translations of major philosophical works, children's books, criticism, reviews, articles, and her own philosophical treatises including her work on human rights, *Vindication of the Rights of Man* and her landmark work of feminist philosophy, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

In 1785, Fanny Blood moved to Lisbon where she married and gave birth to a child. Wollstonecraft was devastated by her dear friend's death shortly after childbirth. Not long afterwards, the school fell into financial difficulties and Wollstonecraft devoted herself further to her writing.

Drawn by the ideals of the French Revolution, which promised equal rights for women, Wollstonecraft moved to Paris in 1792. Robespierre's ascent to power ended hopes for a fairer society, and having fallen in love with American adventurer Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft fled with him to Neuilly to escape the guillotine under which other feminist women had died in Paris.

Soon after the birth of their daughter, Imlay abandoned Wollstonecraft for an actress. Still desperately in love with Imlay and writing him daily pleas to return home, Wollstonecraft sank into depression. In 1796, she met William Godwin and began with him a relationship of true intellectual equals. A daughter was soon conceived, who would later be known to the world as Mary Shelley, author of the novel *Frankenstein* (and wife of poet Percy Shelley). Wollstonecraft tragically would never know this second child; she died of an infection ten days after giving birth.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Women* became a bestseller in Wollstonecraft's lifetime, but it would be more than a century until Western societies would implement her ideas.



## DO

Research at least one other feminist philosopher and present at least one of her central arguments regarding women's rights to your class. For example:

- Simone de Beauvoir
- Martha Nussbaum
- Judith Butler
- Julia Kristeva
- Carol Gilligan
- Iris Marion Young

## ***Animal Rights***

Up until the mid-twentieth century, questions associated with the moral status of animals, their rights and our duties towards them were largely peripheral to debates in philosophy. While some thinkers, such as Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File pp.98-99) and Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) believed that the lack of a rational capacity precluded animals from moral consideration, others believed that although animals could be accorded the properties of feeling and perception, they lack other properties deemed essential for participation within a moral community. Although there were some notable exceptions, such as the utilitarian thinker, Jeremy Bentham (Famous Philosopher File p.404), who believed that animals should be afforded moral consideration on the basis of their capacity for pleasure and pain, most thinkers upheld the view that because humans possess certain properties that animals lack, our moral status far outweighs that of animals and our duties and responsibilities to them, if they exist at all, are minimal.

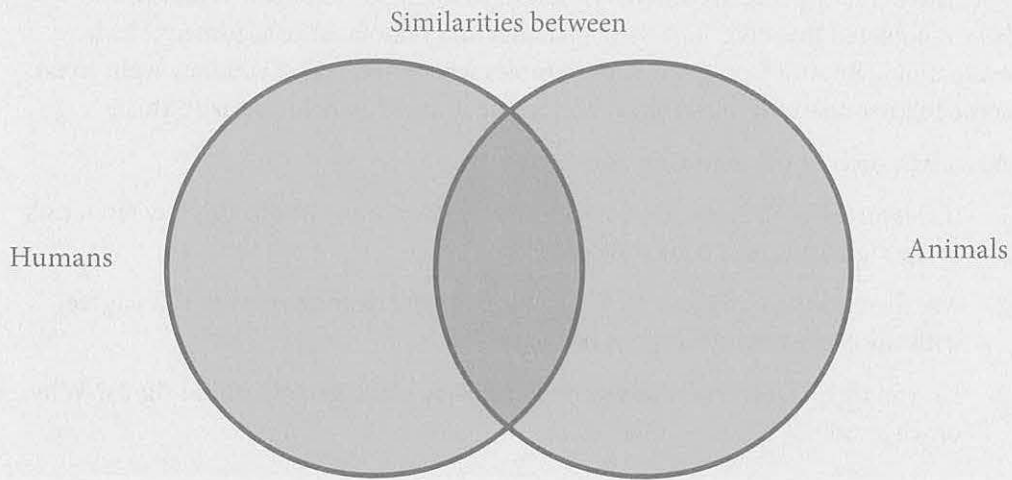
In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, this view began to be challenged by members of the philosophical community. In his landmark work, *Animal Liberation* (1975), Peter Singer (Famous Philosopher File p.412), often cited as the progenitor of the modern animal rights movement, draws parallels between the treatment of animals and other forms of discrimination and concludes that such views are unsustainable because animals, like humans, have interests.

This of course raises the question of just *how* different animals really are from humans and whether or not these differences justify the denial of rights.



## DO

In pairs, construct a diagram like the one below that depicts the similarities and differences between humans and animals:



Share your diagram with the class and then discuss the following questions:

1. Compared with the similarities, are the differences between humans and animals meaningful? In what way?
2. Compared with the differences, are the similarities between humans and animals meaningful? In what way?
3. Do the differences between humans and animals permit us to treat animals in different ways to how we might treat humans? What are these ways?
4. Do these differences mean we are more valuable than animals? Why or why not?
5. Do the similarities between animals and us suggest anything about how we should think about our relationship with animals?
6. What are some possible implications of these similarities and differences for our thinking about animals?

One thinker who believed that animals were *fundamentally* different to human beings was the French philosopher, Rene Descartes (Famous Philosopher File p.102). In his *Discourse on Method* (1637) Descartes describes animals as sophisticated organic machines lacking the essential human property of consciousness. Because animals lack consciousness they do not feel pleasure and pain as humans do; thus, they cannot be harmed.



## READ

[see Useful Resources]

Read Part V of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*.

Reconstruct Descartes' arguments in standard form on A3 paper. When you have completed this task, join with a partner and annotate the arguments with evaluations. Be sure to use counter-examples where necessary (you may want to do some further research in the library or on the internet to help you with this.)

As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. If Descartes' arguments are correct, what implications would this have in terms of the rights animals could be denied?
2. Are there particular rights that may be extended to animals even if we agree with the claims that Descartes has made?
3. Do you think Descartes has mounted a strong case against animal rights? Why or why not?

Although few people would agree with Descartes' views today – science has conclusively debunked the view that animals are incapable of feeling pleasure and pain – many people still believe that animals can be excluded from moral consideration on the grounds that they lack a specific aspect of consciousness, which is *self-awareness*. Without self-awareness, so the argument goes, animals cannot understand themselves as individual entities and so cannot have interests.

However, such a view is almost certainly flawed. Scientists have demonstrated that animals such as elephants and dolphins possess self-awareness and even those creatures that don't possess self-awareness still have an interest in their own survival, however purely biological this may be. Furthermore, many humans cannot be said to be self-aware, yet most of us would agree that, for example, people in comas, the severely handicapped or perhaps very small babies have interests and should be granted moral consideration and thus rights.

Another difference between humans and animals that has been used to exclude animals from the moral community is language. According to thinkers such as Wittgenstein (Famous Philosopher File p.517), language is necessary for consciousness and, since animals do not possess language, they do not possess consciousness. If you completed the task above, you will know that Descartes also used absence of language as evidence that animals lack consciousness. In the *Discourse on Method* he describes language as a capacity exclusive to humans and states that the absence of language 'shows not merely that the beasts have less reason than men, but that they have no reason at all.'

Again, modern science has demonstrated that such views are flawed. For decades now, chimpanzees have been taught sign language at various research institutions around the world. Researchers have observed that the animals not only learn to communicate with their keepers using this medium, but with each other. Researchers in Washington even observed one of their famous chimpanzee students, Washoe, actively teaching signing to an adopted offspring.

Yet even if animals are not capable of language use, this hardly seems adequate proof that they lack consciousness. It is generally accepted that babies possess consciousness despite the fact they lack language, and most of us would agree that adult human beings who for one reason or another are unable to communicate, are not without consciousness.

A third reason given by philosophers for denying animals rights is that, unlike humans, they are not *rational*. Rationality, according to Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111), is a necessary prerequisite for moral consideration as it is rationality that allows us to be moral agents and it is the fact that we are moral agents that entitles us to moral consideration and, in turn, rights. This is not to say that Kant believed we should treat animals however we wish – animals are, after all, often the property of people whom we do have duties to – but rather that our duties towards them extend only insofar as they relate to our duties towards one another.

While it is probably true that most animals are amoral, it is certainly debatable that animals lack reason. Animals have exhibited the capacity to problem-solve, plan and make decisions; the aforementioned chimpanzee, Washoe, even exhibited genuine creativity through language. Yet even if we were to conclude that animals do lack rationality, we would still face the conundrum of the previous arguments: using Kant's reasoning, neither babies nor the severely mentally handicapped can be considered worthy of moral consideration in their own right.

It seems then that on whatever grounds we attempt to exclude animals from the moral community and disqualify them from having rights, we end up excluding a particular group of people whom we clearly believe should be extended moral consideration, or we find a particular species which shares our supposedly 'unique' trait, whatever it may be. This invites the question, is the denial of animal rights simply an act of **speciesism**?

## DO

In pairs or small groups, try to write your own argument against animal rights.

Share these arguments with the class and then discuss the following questions:

1. Which of these arguments would you describe as:
  - a. Credible?
  - b. Persuasive?
  - c. Convincing?
  - d. Compelling?
2. Why have you rated the arguments in this way?
3. Is it difficult to mount a strong case against animal rights? Why or why not?



In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer (Famous Philosopher File p.412) claims that as there is no *important* difference between animals and humans, denying animals rights is much the same as denying rights to women or people of a particular ethnicity. It is an act of prejudice. But is such prejudice necessarily wrong? After all, we often favour those whom we are bonded to and this is rarely seen as morally objectionable: the fact that I would save my daughter's life before I'd save

yours may not please you but you will probably agree (unless, of course, your life is actually under threat!) that my actions are not reprehensible. So is there anything wrong with favouring members of our own species over members of others?

## THINK

Consider the differences you identified between humans and animals in the previous activity (p.457). Do these differences legitimate excluding animals from the moral community?



## TEXT STUDY: Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (1971)

[see Useful Resources]

Peter Singer's (Famous Philosopher File p.412) *Animal Liberation* is perhaps the most significant work by a philosopher on the issue of animal welfare. In the first chapter ('All Animals Are Equal') Singer outlines his case for animal rights.

Independently, or as a class, read 'All Animals Are Equal.'

- Does Singer provide a convincing argument for including animals in the moral community?
- What are some examples of the kinds of rights Singer's argument would suggest animals should have?
- What implications would this have for human beings?



## Environmental Rights

Even if you don't agree that animals should be endowed with rights, you can probably understand why others hold an opposite view. After all, animals at least seem much like us. They require sustenance in the form of food and drink, raise young, feel sensation and often seek out companionship whether with humans or other animals. But what about the environment? Can trees, mountains, rivers, forests and flowers have rights and if so, on what grounds?

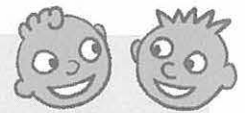
**Environmental ethics** is a relatively new sub-discipline in philosophy, emerging during the early 1970s as people became increasingly aware of the possibility of wide-scale anthropogenic (human-caused) environmental devastation. Although a variety of causes have been posited for the often destructive relationship humans have towards the environment, an often-cited view is that put forward by the medieval history scholar Lynn White Jr. (1907-1987) in his seminal paper 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' (1967). According to White, our attitudes towards the environment are embedded within the Judeo-Christian tradition that has radically shaped Western culture. This tradition maintains that humans are superior to nature and that nature has been created exclusively for our use. For example, the book of Genesis tells us 'God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping

thing that creepeth upon the earth... And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.<sup>45</sup> According to White, this kind of thinking has encouraged humans, particularly in the West, to over-exploit nature.

Thus the challenge for environmental ethicists has been to demonstrate why this anthropocentric (human-centred), instrumental view of nature is flawed. If it can be shown that nature has intrinsic value, a value beyond its capacity to aid human wellbeing, there are grounds for concluding that we have a moral duty to preserve and protect it.

One thinker who has attempted to do just that is the New Zealand-born, Australian philosopher Richard Routley<sup>46</sup> (1935-1996). To demonstrate his argument that the anthropocentrism that dominates our interactions towards nature is a kind of ‘human chauvinism’ no different from the chauvinism that underlies class biases, he proposes a thought experiment known as the ‘last man’:<sup>47</sup> Imagine that a world catastrophe has occurred, resulting in the deaths of all of humanity except for one person. This ‘last man’ decides that before he dies he will ensure the destruction of all remaining living things and acts to do so. From the perspective of what Routley terms ‘human chauvinism’ the last man has done nothing morally wrong because his actions do not impinge on the interests or wellbeing of other humans. However, Routley suggests our moral intuitions would incline to the view that such actions *are* morally wrong, in turn suggesting that these non-human aspects of the world have an intrinsic value beyond their usefulness to humans.

## DISCUSS



1. Are you convinced by Routley’s thought experiment? Why or why not?
2. How may intrinsic worth be understood as a grounds for rights?
3. If we accept that intrinsic value is an adequate ground for rights, and that nature has intrinsic value, what are some of the rights that could be extended to the natural world?
4. What duties are implied by these rights?
5. Are these duties problematic? In what way?

Not everyone agrees that it is necessary to demonstrate the intrinsic value of nature to demonstrate that human beings have duties to protect and preserve it. Some thinkers have argued that moral duties towards the environment can be derived from the moral duties we have towards each other. For example, the protection of old-growth forests can be seen as an extension of the moral duty to ensure human wellbeing. Although this implies that nature is important only insofar as it is useful to us, such thinkers argue that it bypasses the burden of attempting to demonstrate nature’s intrinsic value and it provides a more practical basis for arguing for social policies to protect the environment.

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45 Genesis 1:26-28

46 Later known as Richard Sylvan

47 Routley, R. 1973, ‘Is There a Need For a New, an Environmental, Ethic?’ in *Proceedings of the XVth World Congress of Philosophy 1*, pp.205-210

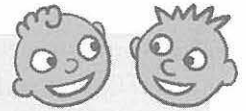


## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: CLIMATE CHANGE

Pretend that you are the environmental minister for the current government. Your job is to persuade the government to take action on climate change.

To this end, prepare a speech (approximately 5 minutes) that uses **one** of the above arguments for environmental rights as its basis. You may like to do some further research into both climate change and environmental ethics. When you have prepared your speech, deliver it to the class.

### DISCUSS



- Reflecting on the above activity, which of the arguments offers the most persuasive case for environmental rights?
- Are there reasons why we should not extend rights to the environment? What are these?
- Is the case for environmental rights more persuasive than the case against it? Why or why not?

## A Conflict of Rights

### DO



Together with a partner, consider the following case scenarios:

- An intruder breaks into your home in the middle of the night when you are home alone. Although you have seen the intruder's shadow and are aware that he is a man much larger than yourself, you do not know if he is armed. You, however, have a handgun in your underwear drawer. Should your right to security prevail over the man's right to life?
- A mother discovers that her unborn child is threatening her life. If she continues with her pregnancy she will die. Whose right to life should prevail, the mother's or the unborn child's?
- In a remote country in the Arctic Circle the only source of income for the impoverished people is fur trapping. Should these people's right to an adequate standard of living (which is provided by the fur trapping) prevail over the animals' – who supply the furs – rights to life?
- To preserve the lives of native animals it is necessary to cull the feral cat population. Whose rights to life should prevail, the native wildlife's or the feral cats'?

- Several good seasons have led to overpopulation among kangaroos, which threatens their native habitat. Should the rights of the habitat prevail over the kangaroos' rights to life?
- A poor nation desperately requires more land to increase its capacity for agriculture, which is its only source of income. However, to increase the nation's land it is necessary to clear important rainforests. Should the rights of the rainforests prevail over the rights of the people to earn a living?

As you read through each case scenario, discuss how you think the conflict of rights expressed at its conclusion should be resolved and why. When you have completed this task, share your responses with the class and, as a whole class, discuss the following questions:

1. What were some of the issues surrounding rights that arose during this activity?
2. Were you able to develop criteria to help you with your judgments? If so, what were these criteria and did they work in every situation? If not, why not?
3. In the attempt to resolve the conflict expressed at the conclusion of each scenario, did you discover any prejudices or presuppositions in your thinking? How might you attempt to justify these prejudices or presuppositions? Are your justifications logical?
4. Reflecting on this activity, do you think there is a method for resolving a conflict of rights? Why or why not?

No doubt the problem of conflicting rights has come up at some point during your study of this Theme. Perhaps some of the scenarios in the above activity echo the content of your classroom discussions, particularly those concerned with animal or environmental rights. And as you may have realised during these discussions, finding a way to resolve a conflict between rights isn't easy.

One of the problems with such a conflict is that it requires us to work out whether there really is a conflict and, if so, which right claim should take precedence. To help us to understand and resolve a conflict between rights, philosophers have devised two theories: **specificationism** and the **prima facie** view.

According to specificationism, although every right is absolute, every right includes qualifications. These qualifications specify when the right does and does not apply. For example, in the case of freedom of expression, we might say that such a right is absolute *unless* in the exercise of that right the individual causes harm, or the possibility for harm, to others. Or, in the case of freedom of association, we might say that such a right is absolute *unless* that association threatens the government's duty to maintain public order. On this view, a conflict between rights is nearly always apparent rather than actual: it results from a lack of awareness about the qualifications that underpin the conflicting rights rather than an irresolvable, actual conflict between those rights.

## THINK

Can you detect any problems with specificationism? What are these problems?



On the other hand, the prima facie view holds that we are best able to understand and resolve a conflict between rights if we first distinguish between what are termed **prima facie rights**, **actual rights** and **absolute rights**. A prima facie right is a right that can be overridden in certain circumstances. For example, many people would hold that an individual's right to freedom of expression may be overridden if, in exercising that right, the individual vilifies a person or group in a discriminatory manner or attempts to incite violence or prejudicial action against a person or group. Prima facie rights imply prima facie obligations – in other words, obligations that can be overridden by stronger moral claims. Actual rights are prima facie rights that, in a particular situation, are not outweighed by other considerations. For example, while freedom of expression may be considered a prima facie right, there are many circumstances where there are no moral considerations strong enough to outweigh the right. In such cases, the right stands. Absolute rights cannot be outweighed by other considerations. They entail absolute obligations. There are no circumstances in which the obligation can be overridden.

When there is a conflict between rights, the prima facie view argues that one must first decide if the conflict is between an absolute and prima facie right. If so, the conflict is easily resolvable: an absolute right *always* outweighs a prima facie right. If, however, the conflict is between prima facie rights then one must weigh the rights against each other by examining the arguments for and against either of the rights being actual rights.

## DO

Divide the class in half. Working in pairs, one half of the class will apply specificationism to resolve the examples of conflicting rights in the activity on pages 462-3. The other half of the class, also working in pairs, will apply the prima facie view to resolve the same examples of conflicting rights.

As students work through the examples, they should note any merits or shortcomings they observe in regards to the theory they are using.

When students have completed this task, as a whole class discuss the following questions:

1. What are the merits and shortcomings of each of the theories?
2. Do the theories contain any inbuilt prejudices? Are some right holders *always* going to be better or worse off when applying these theories to rights conflicts? How could this problem be addressed?
3. Of the two views, which do you think is more effective for resolving a conflict between rights? Why?



## THINK

- What are some examples of prima facie rights and absolute rights?
- Many philosophers have argued against the existence of absolute rights, claiming that there are only prima facie (and actual) rights. Do you agree with them? Why?



## Justice

### *What is Justice?*

Thus far in this Theme we have overwhelmingly focused on rights: what they are, what they entail and who can have them. However, no discussion of rights would be complete without examining the issue of justice. After all, the question of what duties are owed to us, particularly by governments, is really a question about **justice** and what we can, and cannot, rightfully demand.

Although the term justice is notoriously difficult to define, at its most basic it may be understood as giving people what is due to them and denying them what is not due to them. Although this ties into the larger issue of morality insofar as justice defines what is morally required of us, or the institutions that represent us, to do for one another, it is not synonymous with justice. Justice does not necessarily define what it is morally *right* for us to receive, only what it is our *due* to receive. For example, while it may be morally right for a homeless person to receive a few dollars to help her pay for shelter for the evening, it is not necessarily her due to receive this charity. We might speak of my decision to provide those few dollars as morally right. However, we would be unlikely to describe it as morally just.

Most philosophers would probably agree with our definition of justice as a matter of rightful dues. Where they would disagree is in terms of the criteria by which these rightful dues are decided. Although philosophers have arrived at a number of different responses to this problem, we will examine three: the commonsense view of justice as just dessert, Robert Nozick's (Famous Philosopher File p.493) view of **justice as entitlement** and his Harvard colleague, John Rawls', view of **justice as fairness**.

### **THE COMMONSENSE VIEW OF JUSTICE**

The commonsense view is one that you are probably very familiar with, as it tends to characterise most people's thinking when it comes to justice. According to one version of this view, justice is ensuring that those who have the ability and are willing to do better than others, receive more. To illustrate, we might say that individuals who are willing to commit to the amount of study required to receive high ATARS and are then willing to complete six years of medical school, countless hours of professional development and endure the high pressure environment of surgical theatre deserve higher wages than someone who works in an unskilled trade. Likewise, many of us would probably agree that the worker who completes her tasks carefully and to a high standard, and puts in extra hours, deserves a promotion more than the worker who puts in the bare minimum and whose work is of poor quality. We might even agree that this remains the case even if this achievement is due to factors such as the quality of the education the person received, their socio-economic background and their psychological make-up; few people would agree that

the unskilled labourer should be paid more than the doctor simply because the labourer did not receive the same educational advantages as the doctor.

Another version of the commonsense view that is quite different to the one described above and which is perhaps not quite so popular, is that everyone deserves the same regardless of their efforts. According to this view, the conditions that define our position and our efforts, such as the place of our birth, our socio-economic background, the degree of cultural capital we were able to take advantage of as children and our psychological make-up, are a matter of luck. Why should people be rewarded for luck?

Many people, however, probably subscribe to a combination of these views, holding that people don't deserve to be rewarded for things beyond their control but should be rewarded differently for their efforts.

### THINK

What are the merits and shortcomings of each version of the commonsense view of justice? Which version do you think is most persuasive?



## JUSTICE AS ENTITLEMENT

The twentieth century American philosopher Robert Nozick (Famous Philosopher File p.493) would strongly disagree with all versions of the commonsense view of justice outlined above. In his book *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), Nozick describes justice as the recognition and protection of property that is rightfully ours. Property that is rightfully ours includes our selves (both our bodies and our talents and attributes), what we produce (which comes from ourselves) and what we have acquired so long as what we have acquired is: i) acquired justly; or ii) acquired in accordance with the principle of just transfer (in other words, is freely acquired from others who have acquired it in a just way). Thus for Nozick, justice involves recognising people's right to private property and self ownership (including the ownership of what they produce) and leaving them free to do what they please with what is theirs.

Because we are entitled to what is ours – our 'holdings' – we have rights in relation to our holdings. To take away our holdings is to violate our rights. Thus a government which forcibly seizes part of my wages – through taxation for redistribution to others – violates my rights. This is not to say that I could not choose to give part of my wages for redistribution to others less fortunate than myself, but I cannot be coerced into doing so without a violation of my rights occurring. People, including governments, can only have a justice claim to something if it belongs to them.

One possible response to this theory is that it is unfair. People might own themselves but the selves they own are worth different amounts to others. If property beyond the self is acquired in voluntary exchanges with others, how are those who are less fortunate, in terms of health or natural abilities, meant to survive? Nozick wouldn't necessarily disagree with the claim that such a situation is unfair, but he would not agree that it is unjust, for justice is all about respecting a person's property rights and no more.

## THINK

- Would you feel the same way about a government decision to forcibly remove a kidney from all healthy people for redistribution among those suffering from kidney disease as you would about a government decision to seize a percentage of all people's wages over a certain amount for redistribution to the needy?
- What implications does your response to this thought experiment have for Nozick's claim that self-ownership necessarily implies ownership of what we create, and furthermore, his claims regarding the limitations of government?



## JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS

### TEXT STUDY: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

[see Useful Resources]

Read the following passage in pairs or as a whole class:

*The original position is not, of course, thought of as an actual historical state of affairs, much less a primitive condition of culture. It is understood as a purely hypothetical situation characterised so as to lead to a certain conception of justice. Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance... Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favour his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain. For given the circumstances of the original position, the symmetry of everyone's relations to each other, this initial situation is fair between individuals as moral persons, that is, as rational beings with their own ends and capable, I shall assume, of a sense of justice. The original position is, one might say, the appropriate initial status quo and thus the fundamental agreements reached by it are fair.\**

In pairs and in your own words, re-write the 'hypothetical situation' of the 'original position' as a thought experiment.

When you have completed this task, consider the principles of justice that you would choose in this hypothetical situation. Record these principles in your workbook.



Discuss the following questions as a whole class:

1. What principles of justice did you choose?
2. Reflecting on the class's responses to question 1, would you agree with Rawls that the 'veil of ignorance' ensures that the principles of justice, which proceed out of this hypothetical situation, will be fair?
3. Can you think of any reason why people may not respond to this situation as Rawls predicts? What do you think of these reasons?

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\* J. Rawls, 1971 in Zwolinski, M. 2009 *Arguing About Political Philosophy*, Routledge, New York, pp.195-196

As you have no doubt gauged from the above exercise, Nozick's colleague, John Rawls (Famous Philosopher File p.469), held a very different view of what constitutes justice. For Rawls, justice is that which would emerge out of a hypothetical contract arrived at by people deprived of the kinds of knowledge – their talents, social position and individual conception of what makes life valuable and worthwhile – that would render the contract unfair. Rawls believed that from behind this 'veil of ignorance', which characterises what he calls the **original position**, people would incline towards two governing principles. The first is that each person would enjoy the same basic liberties or rights. The second is that any social or economic inequalities would be arranged so as to ensure they provide the greatest benefit to the least advantaged, and that these inequalities would be attached to offices and positions that are open to everyone in accordance with equality of opportunity. An example of this latter point may be a taxation system within the context of equality of workplace opportunity that applies increasing levels of taxation to an ascending scale of wages for the purposes of welfare redistribution.

Thus for Rawls, a just society is one that ensures all its members enjoy the same basic liberties and rights and, if there are social or economic inequalities, it ensures that everyone enjoys the same opportunities to obtain or avoid those unequally rewarded positions associated with them. It also ensures that these inequalities work to maximise the conditions of those who are least advantaged.

## THINK

Would you agree with Rawls that individuals operating from behind the veil of ignorance would necessarily arrive at the principles described above? Why or why not?



### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

## John Rawls (1921–2002)

John Rawls was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1921. He attended Princeton and considered attending a seminary to study for the priesthood but instead finished his BA and joined the army. He served as an infantryman in the Pacific and was in Hiroshima during the aftermath of its bombing. He turned down an offer to become an officer and instead left the army and returned to Princeton to pursue a doctorate in moral philosophy. He was awarded his PhD in 1950 and in 1952 he received a Fulbright scholarship to study at Oxford. On his return to the United States he taught at Cornell University and MIT before landing a position at Harvard. He remained at Harvard for the next 40 years, working alongside Robert Nozick (Famous Philosopher File p.493) and teaching several notable philosophers, including Martha Nussbaum (Famous Philosopher File p.338) and Thomas Nagel (1937-). In 1971 he published his seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, which is widely regarded as one of the most important works in political philosophy, and in 1999 he received both the Schock Prize for Logic and Philosophy and the National Humanities Medal. From 1995 he suffered a series of strokes, which, although severe, did not leave him incapacitated. He is generally regarded as the most important political philosopher of the twentieth century.



By Alvaro Marques Hijazo  
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## DO

Construct a table like the one below that shows the relationship between rights and theories of justice.

Theory of Justice	Rights approved of	Rights disapproved of
The commonsense view (1)		
The commonsense view (2)		
The commonsense view (3)*		
Justice as entitlement		
Justice as fairness		

\*See the three versions of the commonsense view pp.465-466.

When you have completed this task, discuss the following question:

- Considered in the light of the rights they approve and disapprove of, which theory of justice do you think is fairest? Why?

## THINK

Consider your views thus far on the issue of rights and the issue of justice. In light of the above activity, are these views coherent with one another? How might you achieve a greater sense of **equilibrium** (p.352) in terms of your thinking about rights and justice?



## Law

If we consider justice to be giving people what is due to them and denying people what is not due to them, then **law** may be understood as the vehicle through which justice is delivered.

Like all of the concepts we have examined thus far, the concept of law incites much debate among political philosophers. Although at its most basic, law may be understood as a system of rules established by the state for the good of the community, thinkers disagree on its origins, its relationship to morality and the grounds for its authority.

These different viewpoints range from what we call **minimalist** theories of law to what we call **maximalist** theories of law.

Minimalist theories of law view law not as a product of morality, but as an expression of the lawmaker's will. How forceful the law is will depend on the lawmaker's capacity to enforce the law; without this capacity the law is essentially 'toothless.' According to minimalist theories of law, punishment is an essential tool of the law for it is via the threat of punishment that compliance with the law is exacted.

Maximalist theories of law disagree that law can be separated from morality. According to such theories, law shares a complex and intimate relationship with morality and any discussion of law should recognise this. These theories also disagree with the view that coercion via the threat of punishment is the only grounds for compliance with the law. Individuals who are capable of understanding the law are also capable of understanding their responsibilities in terms of the law. This is not to say that the law doesn't derive at least some of its force from coercion, but its power also comes from the fact that laws that are reasonable are also persuasive.

### THINK

Do you think there is a relationship between law and morality? Consider the various laws you are aware of. Do these laws reflect moral values? How else might the existence of such laws be explained?



Whether a theory of law is minimalist or maximalist (or somewhere in between), what is generally agreed is that the law's purpose is to ensure that justice is served. But what if the law fails its purpose? Are we still obliged to obey it?

There are several reasons why a law might be considered unjust. If the law serves the interests of one group (for example, the ruling class) rather than the interests of the community as a whole, then the law might be regarded as unjust. Likewise if the law discriminates in such a way as to render the liberties of one group more important than the liberties of another group, then the law might also be considered unjust.

Another reason a law might be regarded as unjust is if it is inequitable. A law might be considered inequitable if it treats cases which are similar in all relevant ways (for example, a girl stealing a chocolate bar and a boy stealing a chocolate bar) differently. What makes the law inequitable in such circumstances is the fact that it is inconsistent in its application.

Finally, if a law derives from a source other than a legitimate lawmaker (for example, a militia) then that law could be regarded as unjust for it lacks legitimacy. Without legitimacy, the law cannot be considered authoritative and therefore the people under it are under no obligation to obey it.

## THINK

What are some examples of laws that could be considered unjust? On what grounds are these laws unjust?



## WRITE

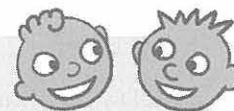
Respond to the following questions:

1. According to each of the theories of justice described on pages 465-469, what should be the main role of the law?
2. In what circumstances could the law be viewed as transgressing rights? Can you think of any examples where the law has done this?



## DISCUSS

1. Do you think we are still obliged to obey the law if it fails in its purpose?
2. Are we obliged to *disobey* the law if it fails in its purpose?
3. In what circumstances might disobedience to the law be considered appropriate? What kind of disobedience might be considered appropriate? Why?
4. In what circumstances might disobedience to the law be considered *inappropriate*? Why?
5. Aside from the legal ramifications, what might be some of the positive and negative consequences of disobeying the law because the law has failed in its purpose?
6. Do these consequences lead you to reconsider your views regarding adherence or disobedience to the law when it has failed in its purpose? Why?



## ***Punishment***

Arguably one of the most important tools of law is **punishment**. Punishment is a type of right awarded to authority for the maintenance of social order and is usually the final step in responding to crime. Although forms of punishment may differ, punishment itself may be understood as a deliberate act performed by a disinterested party (courts, police, parking attendants) on behalf of someone else. Punishment generally involves the deprivation of some kind of good, such as money (via fines), freedom (via incarceration in prison), a particular privilege (for example, driving a car), or, in some countries, life. It is imposed on actual or supposed offenders.

## THINK

Does the government's right to maintain order through punishment conflict with the rights of the people? Is this conflict apparent or actual? You may like to refer to pages 462-464 (A Conflict of Rights) when considering your answer.



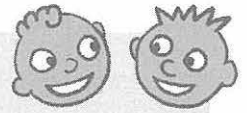
One of the conundrums raised by punishment is how it can be justified given that its intention is to harm others (and so contravene their rights). How we respond to this conundrum will largely depend on how we understand the role of punishment.

Perhaps one of the most widely held views on this issue is the view that punishment is about **deterrence**. By depriving the offender of some kind of good the offender learns that crime doesn't pay and will therefore be disinclined to engage in the same behaviour a second time. This can also work at the social level: in punishing the offender a message is sent to others that behaving in the same way will result in negative consequences. Of course, how effective the punishment is will depend on how severe these consequences are and what the perceived likelihood of being caught is. If, for example, I know that parking fines in the central business district are only \$10 and that the area is only policed by inspectors in the morning, I am much more likely to break parking regulations than if the area is regularly and randomly policed and the fines exceed \$100.

Another popular view about punishment is that, in punishing the offender, we restore the balance of justice within society. Although such a view may sound like revenge under another guise, retributive theorists claim that **retribution** differs from revenge in several important ways. Unlike revenge, which is usually carried out by the victim or someone acting on the victim's behalf, retribution is administered by an impersonal body, such as the state. Revenge can also be indiscriminate, targeting an offender's family or friends, or the religious, ethnic or political community to which they belong, and can be exacted for reasons other than transgressing the law. Retribution, on the other hand, must directly target the offender and can only be exacted on the grounds of law.

A third view regarding the role of punishment claims that punishment is necessary for protecting members of society from the offender. By removing the offender from the community or by taking away particular privileges that the offender enjoys, we ensure that the offender can do no further harm. Such a view is often reflected in the kinds of penalties received for repeated or particularly violent crimes.

A fourth view, quite different to those described above, holds that the purpose of punishment is **rehabilitation**. Rather than an end in itself, punishment is instead a tool which can enable offenders to return to society as law-abiding citizens. Underpinning this view is the notion that criminal acts are performed by people who require some form of help to facilitate their proper participation within society. Thus supporters of rehabilitation may suggest that, rather than simply fining or imprisoning an offender, authorities also recommend rehabilitation for substance abuse, counseling or psychiatric treatment.



## DISCUSS

1. How does each of these views justify punishment?
2. How persuasive are these justifications?
3. In what ways are these views problematic?

Underscoring each of the views outlined above is the assumption that punishment is a legitimate tool of the state necessary for maintaining social order. Not everyone agrees. According to **anarchists**, any exercise of power by the state is an infringement on individual freedom. Thus punishment, which is the ultimate expression of the state's power, is unjustifiable.

This of course raises the question of how social order is to be maintained without the use of punishment. An anarchist might reply by pointing to traditional societies which don't have the apparatus of the state to administer punishment. In such communities social control occurs naturally through, for example, the threat of isolation for the group. Punishment, therefore, is not only unjustifiable, it is also unnecessary as people will work it out by themselves.

Such a view is often accused of being idealistic. Although the threat of being ostracised from the group may have been an effective means of dissuading people from wrongdoing in traditional societies, it could hardly be considered an appropriate tool in densely populated, urban societies where people may not know (or even care about) their own neighbour. In these kinds of societies, critics argue, punishment by the state is necessary to secure law-abiding behaviour.

Furthermore, although punishment may impinge on individual freedom, it can also help it to flourish by removing the threat of harm from other members of society. Thus, punishment may be considered a legitimate tool of the state because, although it restricts freedom, it can also help to facilitate it.



## DO

Does punishment transgress our rights or does it protect them?

Hold a classroom debate on this question. One side should argue that punishment transgresses our rights and the other should argue that it protects them. Your debate should draw heavily from the concepts and theories explored during this Theme and include real life examples from contemporary experience to support its claims.

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## **Assessment Tasks**

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Do all human beings have certain absolute, inalienable rights or is the concept of natural rights ‘nonsense on stilts’ as Jeremy Bentham once claimed?
2. Which provides the more persuasive account of the function of rights – will or interest theory?
3. Do we place too much emphasis on rights in our society and too little emphasis on duty?
4. Are social rights human rights? Why/why not?
5. Can animals have rights? If so, which ones? Why?
6. Can environments have rights? On what grounds?
7. Is it possible to create a truly just society? If so, how?
8. Is a sustainable argument against punishment by the state possible?

### **Assessment Task Two: Written Analysis**

Use any of the text studies in this Theme as the basis of a written analysis.

### **Assessment Task Three: Dialogue**

Write an imagined dialogue between the philosophers Rene Descartes and Peter Singer on the question of animal rights. Your dialogue should allow each philosophical position to be aired to its best advantage and should also challenge each position through interrogation of its claims.

### **Assessment Task Four: Research Task and/or Oral Presentation**

Use EITHER the task on climate change (p.462) or the task on punishment (p.474) as an assessment task.

### **Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses**

Complete a task that asks for short-answer explanations of the various theories and terms outlined in this Theme.

### **Assessment Task Six: Essay**

Use the task described in the Relevant Contemporary Debate (p.462) as an essay assessment task.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay (p.585).

## THEME 2

# On Liberty and Anarchy

Many people throughout the world, but particularly those who live in Western liberal democracies, regard freedom as inherently positive. But is individual liberty always such a good thing? And even if it is, how much of it should we be permitted?

In this Theme you will explore the nature of liberty and in particular, the question of to what degree the state should be allowed to interfere in the private lives of its people. Because this question necessarily involves some consideration of the rights and reciprocal responsibilities of the state and those it governs, we will then move on to examine the nature of civil society, how it evolved, and the implications of our understanding of its origins for the relationship between it and the people. Finally we conclude with a brief examination of democracy and its relationship to liberty.

## Liberty

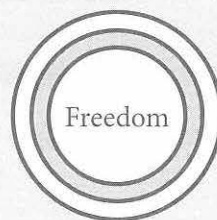
### Introductory Activities



#### DO

Draw a target diagram like the one below on the whiteboard. As a class, discuss where you think the listed examples should be located on the diagram and why.

Not Freedom



Examples:

expressing a personal opinion

voting in a democratic election

getting a piercing

driving a car

visiting your grandmother

belonging to a sub-culture

becoming a parent

compulsory attendance at school

joining a union

using drugs

completing this exercise

visiting a friend in hospital

When you have completed this task, discuss the following questions:

1. Is freedom synonymous with being able to 'do whatever you want'?
2. What role, if any, does constraint play in freedom? Is constraint necessary to freedom? If so, how?
3. Are there different kinds of freedom?
4. How would you define freedom in light of this exercise and discussion?

As you have probably discovered from the exercise above, freedom (or liberty as it is often called by philosophers) is difficult to define. Isaiah Berlin (Famous Philosopher File p.479), in his essay *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958) claims there are over 200 uses of the word and philosophers have been debating its meaning since at least the seventeenth century.

Yet, despite its disputed nature it is possible give a basic, relatively uncontroversial definition of the term: liberty, or freedom, is the capacity for **agency**. Being in control of one's actions is, according to this definition, synonymous with being free.

## ***Two Concepts of Liberty***

Perhaps you are already debating our claim that the above definition is 'relatively uncontroversial.' Liberty, you might say, involves agency but this is only part of the picture. What is meant by agency requires some unpacking.

If this is your response you are correct, at least according to some philosophers. Consider the following scenario. You are studying for the end of year exams. You wake up early on the first day of the study break but instead of sitting down at your desk, you decide to walk to the service station on the corner. Then you head across to the park and around the block before arriving home. To an onlooker you are acting with complete freedom. No one has forced you to leave your desk to run an errand to the service station. You were free to return home immediately or to walk around the block rather than going to the park. You could even have taken a book to get a head start on your day's work.

Now let's add another dimension to this story. When you woke up this morning you were desperate to start work – you want nothing more than to do very well in these exams – but you had no chocolate. It is your addiction that drove you away from your desk to the service station and it is your addiction (and the fear of its discovery by your mother) that drove you in the direction of the park and around the block. Thus there is a sense in which you are not free. Your addiction prevents you from being in control of your actions and interferes with your plans.

This story illuminates two very different meanings of liberty. In the first part of the story you may be described as free because there are no external agents forcing your actions. You are free to leave your desk, walk to the service station and journey briefly around your neighbourhood. But in the second part of the story there is a kind of freedom – the capacity for self-determination – that is lacking.



In *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Isaiah Berlin called these two kinds of freedom **negative** and **positive liberty**. Negative liberty (sometimes referred to as ‘freedom from’) is freedom from constraint. It is described in this way because it is defined by an absence of something (for example, barriers, obstacles or interference from others). Positive liberty (sometimes referred to as ‘freedom to’) is the freedom to act to fulfil one’s potential. It involves the capacity to make genuine choices in terms of one’s actions and interests. It is called ‘positive’ liberty because it requires the presence of something (for example, self-control or self-determination).

According to Berlin these two concepts of liberty are incompatible interpretations of the same political ideal. In its negative form, liberty presupposes minimal interference by outside bodies, such as the state, whereas in its positive form it suggests certain constraints might be necessary to enable individuals to be self-determining.

**TEXT STUDY: Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958)**



*[see Useful Resources]*

Read Section I, paragraphs 1 and 2 (includes ‘The Notion of Negative Freedom’) and Section II (‘The Notion of Positive Freedom’), paragraphs 1-4 (concluding ‘albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self’).

In your own words, write detailed definitions of the following terms. Include at least two examples to illustrate each definition:

- negative freedom
- positive freedom

Together with a partner and using a highlighter and annotations, work out how Berlin reasons to the conclusion that the idea of positive freedom is dangerous because it can be used by others, including the state, to coerce individuals.

When you have completed this task, write out the structure of Berlin’s argument in your workbook and answer the following question:

- Reflecting on this argument, how may negative and positive freedom be viewed as incompatible?

Check over the answers in your workbook with another pair in the class. Then as a whole class discuss the following questions:

1. What are some examples of negative freedom?
2. What are some examples of positive freedom?
3. Would you agree that positive freedom is as dangerous as Berlin suggests? Why or why not?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997)

The only surviving son of a wealthy Jewish family, Isaiah Berlin was born in Riga, Latvia. He spent most of his childhood in Riga but later moved with his family to St Petersburg where he witnessed the revolutions of 1917. Feeling increasingly oppressed by life under Bolshevik rule, his family returned to Latvia in 1920. But their stay was short. Problems with the authorities led them to move to Britain within a year. Although he could not speak English on his arrival in Britain, Berlin quickly mastered the language. He attended St Paul's School in London and later Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he studied Classics and won the John Locke Prize for his philosophy results, which outscored those of his lifelong friend and rival, the philosopher A.J. Ayer (Famous Philosopher File p.299). He subsequently completed the PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) degree at Oxford – once again achieving a first – before commencing work at the University as a tutor. In 1923 he won a fellowship to All Soul's College and from 1957-67 he was the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory. Aside from a few brief stints of war service, Berlin's professional life was spent almost entirely at Oxford. He founded Wolfson College, a centre for academic excellence at Oxford based on egalitarian and democratic principles, received a knighthood (1957) and was awarded the Order of Merit (1971). From 1974-1978 he headed the British Academy. Berlin died in 1997. In his obituary, the *Independent* newspaper described him as 'the world's greatest talker, the century's most inspired reader and one of the finest minds of our time.'<sup>\*</sup>



By Rob C. Croes (ANEFO)  
(GaHetNa (Nationaal Archief  
NL)) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>), via Wikimedia Commons

\* [www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-sir-isaiah-berlin-1292530.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-sir-isaiah-berlin-1292530.html) (accessed 24/09/13)

According to Berlin, positive freedom carries with it certain dangers to individual liberty. But just how convincing is Berlin's claim? If you have completed the activity above, you will have already discussed some arguments in favour of, and against, this claim.

One argument that has been raised against Berlin's views regarding positive liberty points to his presupposition that positive liberty necessarily means that society will force its members into given patterns of behaviour. Rather than assuming that a society will coerce its members to conform to particular views under the guise that these views are more rational and thus in the individual's 'best interests,' a society might instead foster the individual's capacity for rational decision-making. For example, it would be perfectly coherent for a Christian fundamentalist to continue to practise her faith in a secular society that advocates positive liberty if she arrived at her views aware of other reasonable options and by weighing these options rationally against one another.

However, it might also be argued that such an approach to the notion of positive liberty still requires some encroachment on the individual's sphere of negative liberty. To make an informed decision about, for example, a fundamentalist faith, the individual requires education and the availability of options. To ensure that the individual is in the best position to make a rational choice, the state would need to ensure that the minimal levels of education needed to achieve such ends are available to all people, which in turn requires taxation (to fund the education system) and regulations regarding school participation and curriculum – all of which impose on the individual's negative freedom.

As this criticism illustrates, the debate between positive and negative liberty is really a debate about state control. To what degree should the state be permitted to interfere in the lives of its people? How much freedom should individuals be allowed?

To answer these questions, it is first necessary to consider the nature of the state and the relationship between the state and its people.

## ***What is the State?***

Nearly all debates in political philosophy are debates about the state. Yet philosophers disagree on exactly what the state is. Thus, rather than proffer a list of definitions, we shall instead consider some of the characteristics those entities we refer to as states share.

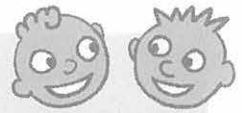
Regardless of their system of rule, states are generally identified with specific territories over which they claim particular powers. These powers include but are not limited to: control of the legitimate use of force; jurisdiction over the people, institutions and organisations within their borders; and the capacity to act as the representative of these people, institutions and organisations in an international arena. In addition, states generally possess a centralised governing body, the role of which is to administer and enforce these powers (and others), either through persuasion (for example, advertising campaigns) or coercion (fines, incarceration, etc).

Understood in these terms, we might describe the state as an apparatus of power whose primary purpose is to regulate the lives of those within its borders. However, many states also provide their citizens with a broad range of benefits. These benefits include: defence against external aggression (perpetrated by other states) and internal aggression (perpetrated by individuals or groups within the state against other individuals or groups within the state); protection of rights; and the provision of culture, infrastructure and social welfare services. Although not all states provide these benefits or provide these benefits to the same degree, it is fair to say that, in addition to their position as regulators, states also serve as both protectors and providers.

### **DO**

In pairs, and using the internet or library, research different definitions of the state. Share these definitions with the class.





## DISCUSS

1. Working from the definitions you have researched, what would you conclude are the **necessary and sufficient conditions** (see p.260) for something to be described as a state?
2. Is it easy to come up with a clear definition of the state? Why might political philosophers have found this task challenging?

## The Social Contract

The **social contract** is a theory proposed by philosophers that seeks to explain the relationship *between* the state and its people via an account of the origins of civil society. Although versions of the theory differ, typically each begins by describing a pre-political stage of human existence (often referred to as a '**state of nature**') and the conditions under which governments come about.

## The War Of Every Man Against Every Man



### TEXT STUDY: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

[see Useful Resources]

One of the earliest exponents of social contract theory is the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (Famous Philosopher File p.483). In his most famous work, Hobbes describes the life of man in the state of nature as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.'<sup>\*</sup>

Read Chapter 13 ('Of The Natural Condition of Mankind As Concerning Their Felicity, and Misery'), paragraphs 1-8 (ending 'sometimes indeed only at strangers but in the night at everyone').

Working with a partner, answer the following questions:

1. What does Hobbes mean when he claims that all men are made equal?
2. What is the immediate consequence of this equality?
3. How does this consequence produce the state of war that characterises existence in the state of nature?
4. According to Hobbes, what is life in the state of nature like?
5. What evidence does Hobbes use to support his views about the natural state of humans?

\* Hobbes, T. 1651 in Cahn, S (ed.) 2005 Political Philosophy: The Essential Texts, Oxford University Press, New York, p.225.

When you have completed this task, discuss the following questions as a whole class:

1. Hobbes' views about life in the state of nature presuppose that humans are, by nature, entirely self-interested. Do you agree with this claim? What evidence can you think of to support this view? What evidence can you think of that contradicts this view?
2. Even if you agree with Hobbes' views regarding human nature, do you accept his description of existence in the state of nature? Why or why not? What evidence can you think of to support your views?

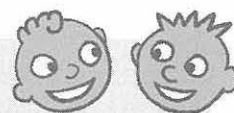
If life in the state of nature may be understood as a 'war...of every man against every man'<sup>48</sup> as Hobbes suggests, this invites the question of exactly how civil society comes about.

As you will already know if you have completed the above activity, Hobbes saw human nature as essentially self-interested. It is this self-interest that explains our behaviour in the state of nature: as Hobbes puts it '...so if any two men want a single thing which they can't both enjoy, they become enemies; and each of them on the way to his goal (which is principally his own survival, though sometimes merely his delight) tries to destroy or subdue the other.' However, Hobbes also believed that humans are essentially rational. It is our rationality that permits us to pursue our desires as efficiently and maximally as possible. In short, it endows us with the capacity to formulate the best way to achieve our ends.

Because we are essentially rational, and because life in the state of nature is, as Hobbes so famously phrased it, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short', it makes sense to us to relinquish our absolute freedom to a sovereign who is able to protect our interests and, in particular, our lives. This consent to rule in return for certain protections is what Hobbes terms 'the social contract.' Hobbes claims that in agreeing to this contract (which we do by submitting to the authority of the sovereign), we agree, collectively and reciprocally, to relinquish the rights we had against one another in the state of nature and submit to the authority of the person or group of persons who have been imbued with the authority to enforce the initial contract.

Thus Hobbes' version of the social contract implies that the state has an obligation to protect our interests and, in particular, our lives. We, on the other hand, are obliged to uphold the rule of the sovereign and comply by his or her laws.

## DISCUSS



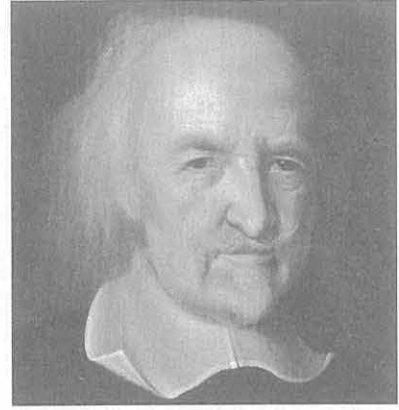
1. How plausible is Hobbes' account of the origins of civil society?
2. How much freedom would individuals who live under the social contract enjoy?

48 Hobbes, T. 1651 in Cahn, S (ed.) 2005 *Political Philosophy: The Essential Texts*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.225

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Thomas Hobbes was born in the English town of Malmesbury to a clergyman and an unknown woman. Hobbes alleged his birth was premature due to the great fright his mother received over the coming of the Spanish Armada. Hobbes grew up in the care of an uncle and, after attending a series of local schools, was sent to Magdalen College, Oxford, to complete his education. Although clever, Hobbes was not a particularly diligent student and took almost six years to complete his bachelor degree. After finishing university, Hobbes found tutoring work with an aristocratic family. He would continue to tutor for much of his life; among other notables, Hobbes taught the young Charles II mathematics.



Although actively engaged in intellectual life, Hobbes didn't involve himself with philosophy until his forties. In 1640 Hobbes left London for Paris, where he remained for eleven years. It was there that he wrote his best-known work, *Leviathan* (1651) and communicated with such luminaries as Descartes and Galileo. He returned to London in 1651 and spent the rest of his life writing. His last scholarly work was a translation of Homer. Hobbes died from a stroke at the grand age of 91. It is said that his final words were 'a great leap into the dark.'

## ***Life, Liberty And The Protection Of Property***

The British philosopher John Locke (Famous Philosopher File p.104) disagreed with his contemporary Hobbes' understanding of both the state of nature and the social contract. According to Locke, although the state of nature is pre-political, it is not pre-moral, for individuals are bound by what he terms the Law of Nature, which is defined by God. Because God commands us not to harm one another, and because we cannot take away what is rightfully God's, the state of nature is relatively peaceful. Within it we are free to act as we see fit, without the interference of others, so long as our behaviour does not transgress God's law.

However, because there is no civil power to govern relations within the state of nature, this situation can easily devolve into something more closely resembling Hobbes' 'war...of every man against every man' if a dispute arises. Because such a situation is intolerable, Locke believes that individuals in the state of nature would willingly relinquish their complete freedom to punish those who transgress the Law of Nature to a government who, in return for the people's consent to govern, will provide them with laws and law enforcement, thus protecting their interests.

## TEXT STUDY: John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689)



[see Useful Resources]

Read Book II ('Of Civil Government'), Chapter VIII ('Of The Beginning of Political Societies'), Sections 119-121.

Answer the following questions:

1. According to Locke, what is required before an individual can become subject to the laws of a government? Why?
2. How is tacit consent to the laws of a government provided by the individual?
3. What are the implications of providing tacit consent?
4. What does an individual who wants to withdraw from his or her contract with a particular government need to do before beginning a contract with another government?
5. Can an individual return to the state of nature? Under what circumstances?

When you have completed this task, discuss the following questions as a whole class:

1. Locke claims that all that is required for an individual to be subject to the laws of any government is tacit consent. Is it possible to avoid giving tacit consent? Why or why not?
2. If we cannot avoid tacit consent, what implications does this have for Locke's argument?
3. If we cannot avoid tacit consent, what implications does this have for **political authority** more generally?

Just as Locke and Hobbes differ in terms of their views regarding the state of nature and the conditions under which individuals choose to gift their absolute sovereignty to a leader or government, they also differ in their understanding of the nature of consent, which forms the bedrock of the social contract. For Hobbes, consent is permanent and cannot be withdrawn. Locke, however, believes that if a government fails to meet the conditions of the contract (by, for example, dissolving into tyranny), that government effectively places itself in a state of nature and thus in a state of war with the people, who have the same right to self-defence as they enjoyed in the pre-political state. In such circumstances, the social contract is effectively dissolved.

### THINK

Who do you think provides the most persuasive account of the social contract, Hobbes or Locke? Why?



## Government By The People, For The People

For the eighteenth century philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau (Famous Philosopher File p.487), existence within the state of nature was neither a desperate fight for survival nor a tenuous peace dependent on people's commitment to God's law. In his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755)<sup>49</sup> Rousseau describes life within the state of nature as solitary, peaceful and uncomplicated. Competition between individuals was rare thanks to small populations and an abundance of natural resources. Without competition, the possibility for conflict was minimised, thus the likelihood of Hobbes' 'war...of every man against every man' was non-existent.

This situation, however, was not to last. Population increases led to the development of communities and with them, the division of labour. Aided by the evolution of private property, this allowed some people to grow richer than others and inevitably people began to compare the conditions of their own existence to those of others and found them wanting. This awareness of inequality allowed dangerous emotions, such as avarice and envy, to prosper.

Much of the hostility resulting from these emotions would of course have been directed towards those who had flourished within the new social conditions. And it was this awareness, according to Rousseau, that resulted in the social contract. The social contract, therefore, may be understood as the product of those who saw the utility of having a government to protect their private interests from those who might, out of resentment about their own condition, seek to take them away. Thus the social contract, rather than a means of brokering peace between individuals, actually serves to cultivate conflict and division by institutionalising the very inequality that the development of society has produced.

Rousseau did, however, believe there was a way to rectify this situation, and this method of rectification constitutes his second account of the social contract. In this account, human freedom, which is our birthright in the state of nature, is restored through the renunciation of the individual will to the collective will. In other words, a political state is formed when people come together to act as a single individual, making decisions through the rule of the majority. Although this may seem to conflict with his goal of restoring individual freedom, this isn't necessarily the case. Rousseau was not advocating a system of majority rule similar to our own representative democracy, but rather something more akin to the direct democracy of Classical Athens, in which each person, although ruled by the majority, has an individual voice.

### THINK

How does Rousseau's account of the state of nature and the development of the social contract, compare with Hobbes' and Locke's? Is it more or less plausible? Why?



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49 Commonly known as the *Second Discourse*





## TEXT STUDY: John Jacques Rousseau, *Of The Social Contract*

[see Useful Resources]

In *Of the Social Contract*, Rousseau provides his answer to the question of how to set up a political society in light of the problems raised in *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755).

Read Book II, Chapter IV ('The Limits of the Sovereign Power').

Paste your copy of the chapter onto a piece of A3 paper. Using a highlighter and annotations, very briefly summarise each paragraph. When you have completed this task, discuss the following questions with a partner and write your answers in your workbook:

1. What is the relationship between the individual will and the general will?
2. What is the relationship between the general will and equality?
3. What is the relationship between the social contract and individual liberty?



### DO

Construct a chart that compares and evaluates the three accounts of the social contract described on pages 481-486. For example:

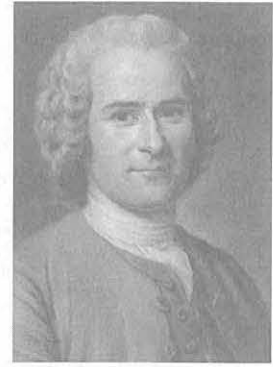
	The State of Nature	The Social Contract	Evaluations
Hobbes			
Locke			
Rousseau			

When you have completed this task, share your evaluations with the class and discuss the following questions:

1. What are some other possible explanations for the evolution of the state? Are these explanations more or less plausible than the notion of a social contract?
2. Even if the social contract is an historical fiction, is it still useful? Why or why not?

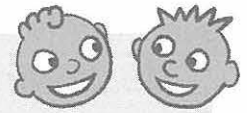
## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)



The son of a watchmaker, Jean Jacques Rousseau was born in the city-state of Geneva. Nine days after his birth his mother, Suzanne Bernard, died of puerperal fever. He remained in the care of his father and paternal aunt until the age of 10 when his father moved to Bern after a legal dispute. Rousseau went to live with a maternal uncle who sent both him and his cousin to board with a Calvinist minister outside of Geneva. After two years, Rousseau was apprenticed, first to a notary and then to an engraver who mistreated him. He fled Geneva at the age of fifteen, finding shelter with a Roman Catholic priest who introduced him to a 29 year-old noblewoman named Francoise-Louise deWarens. DeWarens would prove to be hugely influential in Rousseau's early life. She secured his conversion to Catholicism, introduced him to the world of literature and ideas, and encouraged his education. At the age of twenty he briefly became deWarens' lover. Approximately seven years later, Rousseau moved to Lyon to take up a position as a tutor and then, two years later, traveled to Paris in order to present to the Academie des Sciences a new system of musical notation that he believed would make his fortune (Rousseau would later receive an offer of patronage for his operatic compositions from King Louis XV). His system was praised but ultimately rejected on the grounds that it was impractical. While in Paris Rousseau met Thérèse Levasseur, a barely literate laundry-maid who would become his lifelong companion and bear him five children, all of which, at Rousseau's insistence, she would place in foundlings' homes – a fact that was later used by philosophers such as Voltaire (1694-1778) and Edmund Burke (1729-1797) to attack his views on education and child-rearing. He also met and became a close friend of the philosopher Denis Diderot (1713-184), contributing many articles to Diderot's great *Encyclopédie*. Diderot and Rousseau would later fall out over quarrels arising from Rousseau's attraction to a noblewoman named Sophie d'Houdetot. Together with deWarens, d'Houdetot was the inspiration for Rousseau's first novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Within a year of the publication of this work Rousseau published *Of the Social Contract* (1762) and one month later, *Emile* (1762), his treatise on education. By this time Rousseau had returned to Geneva. Although his books had been a success they were banned both in his home country and in France because of his religious indifference (Rousseau felt that one religion was just as good as another). He was denounced by the Archbishop of Paris, his books were burned in the streets and warrants were issued for his arrest. He fled to Neuchâtel and then, in 1765 and together with the famed Scottish philosopher, David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182), to Britain. Hume found him lodgings but trumped by the language barrier (neither Rousseau nor Levasseur ever mastered English) and without friends, Rousseau suffered a serious mental decline during which he began to experience paranoid fantasies of a conspiracy orchestrated by Hume against him. He later returned to Paris under a false name, although was officially allowed to return in 1770 on the condition he publish no more books. Eight years later, while taking his morning walk, Rousseau died of a hemorrhage. He was 66 years old.

# Liberty and the Limits of Political Authority



## DISCUSS

1. How might Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau respond to debates regarding personal liberty introduced earlier in this Theme?
2. How much liberty do you think individuals should be permitted and to what degree and in what circumstances should the state be allowed to interfere in the lives of its people?
3. In your opinion, can personal liberty be reconciled with the existence of the state? Why or why not?

For Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, the social contract is a means by which our liberty can be secured. And yet that liberty comes at a price. By consenting to be part of a society and enjoy its benefits – whether those benefits be self-protection, the protection of our liberty and property or protection from the inequalities bred of changing social dynamics – we also consent to various limitations on our freedom.

While it can be argued that this isn't necessarily a bad thing – after all, how free could anyone really be in Hobbes' dystopian, pre-political universe? – this trade-off raises some interesting questions regarding the tension between individual freedom and the state. How much freedom should individuals be allowed? To what degree, and in what circumstances, should the State be permitted to interfere with that freedom? And perhaps most importantly, how can individual freedom be reconciled with the State's existence?

## ***The Harm Principle***

Someone who was particularly interested in these questions was the nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill (Famous Philosopher File p.405). In his seminal work *On Liberty* (1859), Mill attempts to establish parameters by which the relationship between the State and the individual can be navigated. Starting with the view that a 'tyranny of the majority' is worse than a political tyranny because its rules are arbitrary, Mill argues for one simple, rationally grounded principle to govern interactions between the State and the individuals who constitute it.

This principle, known as the **harm principle**, states that the only valid reason for curtailing an individual's liberty is if, in exercising that liberty, the individual will do harm to others or if their behaviour poses an imminent risk of harm to others. Mill acknowledges that we may find certain **self-regarding** behaviour (behaviour concerned only with the self) such as dress, drug use or sexual preferences offensive, but offensiveness does not warrant interference by the State. Only those actions which directly affect the freedom of others should be restricted.



## TEXT STUDY: John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

[see Useful Resources]

Read Chapter I ('Introductory') from the paragraph beginning: 'The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle,' to the end of the Chapter.

Answer the following questions:

1. What does Mill mean by 'harm to others'?
2. What doesn't constitute harm to others?
3. On what grounds is intervening in another's behaviour not permitted?
4. How may we legitimately deal with behaviour we do not agree with but which doesn't fulfil the criterion of the harm principle?
5. Mill says that individuals can be compelled to perform certain actions. What are some examples of such actions and how does Mill reconcile this with the idea of individual liberty?
6. What are Mill's grounds for championing individual freedom?

When you have completed this task, discuss the following questions as a whole class:

1. In *On Liberty* Mill assumes a clear-cut distinction between self-regarding behaviour and behaviour which affects others. Can such a distinction always be drawn? Can you think of any examples of self-regarding behaviour that also causes harm to others?
2. Mill also assumes a clear-cut distinction between actions which cause harm and actions which only cause offence. Can this distinction always be drawn? Can you think of any examples of behaviour that is both offensive and harmful to others?
3. Mill claims we can be compelled to engage in positive actions on the grounds that doing nothing can be a kind of harm. Does this claim cohere with his other claims regarding freedom? If not, how might these claims be reconciled?
4. Is harm a sufficient justification for curtailing liberty? Why or why not?

### THINK

Given his theory, how might Mill feel about: pornography; violent video games; hate speech; polygamy; public nudity?



## ***Criticisms of Mill's View***

On first appearances, Mill's harm principle appears to provide a clear-cut, rational solution to the problem of reconciling authority with individual liberty. But as you may have discovered in your classroom discussions, it is not without its problems.

To begin with, Mill assumes a clear-cut distinction between self-regarding behaviour and behaviour that affects others. In reality, however, can such a distinction always be made? Consider, for example, a mother who has acquired a prodigious drug habit. Although her habit is essentially self-regarding, her declining mental and physical health, the threat to her finances and the very real possibility of her death may all prove injurious to her children and directly affect the freedom of others with whom she is intimate, such as her partner, family or close friends. In such circumstances the line between what is self-regarding and what is harmful to others is significantly blurred. This example also highlights some problems with Mill's definition of harm. Withdrawal of parental affection, mental stress caused by the threat of a loved one's death, and the significant efforts required to nurse someone whose health is compromised, may all prove to be injurious to the individual and work to compromise his or her freedom. If the notion of harm can be so elastic, surely there will be a way to rationalise curtailing any number of behaviours.

The problem of attempting to draw a clear distinction between harm and other kinds of behaviour can be further extended to Mill's claims regarding offence. Although it is certainly true that society can (and often does) conflate offence with harm (consider, for example, some of the arguments put forward in favour of banning Muslim women from wearing the burqa), distinguishing between the two can often be fraught with difficulty. For example, one could plausibly argue that pornography depicting sexual interactions between consenting adults, although offensive to some people, is not harmful because it doesn't cause injury or interfere with the freedom of others. However, a growing body of research suggests pornography's normalisation of less common sexual acts and its inaccurate representation of female desire is having a detrimental effect on sexual interactions between people by skewing their expectations and therefore proves injurious to their sexual health.

While it could be argued that in this case research appears to demonstrate that what was once believed to be offensive may actually be harmful and thus Mill's claims still stand, what about cases that are far less clear-cut? In May of 2008 police raided the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Paddington, Sydney, and seized a number of artworks depicting naked and semi-naked children by the Australian artist Bill Henson. In the heated public debate that followed, many people, including the then Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, described the artworks as offensive and lacking in artistic merit. However, others argued that the works possessed aesthetic value and those who argued that the works were offensive were of the mistaken belief that, by depicting naked children, Henson was in some way doing something harmful. Were the works harmful or were they simply offensive to some people? Although none of Henson's models have spoken about the experience of modeling for the artist as harmful or exploitative, can we be sure that the experiences and the images resulting from them will not prove harmful in the future? Whatever your position on these questions, what they serve to illustrate is that disentangling offence from harm is not always as straightforward as Mill suggests.

Finally, Mill claims that in failing to provide certain benefits to others (for example, protecting others from ill-usage, performing acts of beneficence and bearing one's share of the common defence), the individual perpetuates a kind of harm and so compromises their right to liberty. But does a failure to provide certain benefits actually constitute harm, as Mill suggests? Consider Mill's claim that an individual's failure to prevent a person's ill usage at the hands of another is the same as causing harm to another. In this latter instance, it is my actions that result in the harm. But in the former instance someone else produces the harm. My failure to act doesn't cause any harm at all (although it fails to prevent it from continuing). So why should my liberty be curtailed when my actions have not caused harm to others?

No doubt you have thought of some other criticism of Mill's claims (and most probably arguments to support them too). You may also be able to think of other examples that work to illustrate both these and other arguments in favour of, and against, Mill's claims.

## ***Liberty and Distributive Justice***

Like Mill, American philosopher Robert Nozick (Famous Philosopher File p.493) believes in maximum liberty with minimal intervention.

In his book, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), and starting from the principle that all human beings are self-owners (by which he means an end within themselves who cannot be used without their consent), Nozick argues for three **inalienable** rights (rights that cannot be taken away): life, liberty and property. These rights function as what he terms **side-constraints** on the actions of others, setting the limits for their behaviour towards us. Because our self-ownership entails that we own both our selves and our rightful possessions, Nozick believes that we have a right to defend ourselves from harm by others and seek recompense for injustice.

So far, all of this probably seems relatively uncontroversial. And you may also think it intuitively appealing: the notion of self-ownership comes easily to many of us and the notion that it should be the principle on which liberty is founded seems commonsensical. But consider Nozick's next move. Nozick argues that because it redistributes wealth through the system of taxation, the modern welfare state, and its professed goal of equality, violates self-ownership and in so doing, violates our liberty. In other words, equality, as it is pursued through the redistribution of resources, conflicts with freedom.

### **THINK**

Would Nozick agree with Berlin's criticisms of positive liberty? Why or why not?





## TEXT STUDY: Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974)

[see Useful Resources]

In Part II ('Beyond the Minimal State'), Chapter VII ('Distributive Justice'), Section I ('How Liberty Upsets Patterns'), Nozick employs a thought experiment using the example of Wilt Chamberlain, an American basketball player once named one of the top fifty greatest players in NBL history, to demonstrate how patterned principles of distribution conflict with individual liberty.

Read this thought experiment (up to 'by a third party who had no claim of justice on any holding of others *before* the transfer?') in pairs or as a whole class.

1. Rewrite this thought experiment in your own words.
2. In pairs, or small groups, try to come up with some objections to Nozick's argument. Share these objections with your class.

## Criticisms of Nozick's View

Like Mill's, Nozick's views have proven very influential. But also like Mill's, they are not without their problems. To begin with, some philosophers have questioned Nozick's notion of self-ownership, claiming that while the notion of self-ownership is relatively uncontroversial when it comes to our person, it is a different matter when it comes to our property. Do we really own this in the same way that we own our bodies and minds? To illustrate, imagine that the government has decided that to ensure everyone in Australia has one functioning kidney, it is going to demand that all healthy Australians of a certain age must donate one of their two kidneys. Would people feel the same about this as they might feel about having a certain percentage from every dollar taken from their wages for the purposes of creating more equitable access to goods and services?

Secondly, it is difficult to see how to reconcile Nozick's idea of self-ownership with his principle of rectification. For example, consider a situation in which a person seeks compensation in a court of law from an employer who fails to pay the entire sum for a service rendered. While this situation accords with Nozick's principle of rectification, it at the same time breaches the principle of self-ownership by compelling the employer to sacrifice part of her own property to make the payment. The employer is treated as a means, forced to act regardless of consent.

Finally, some thinkers have pointed out that Nozick has provided no reasons for *why* the rights that he has identified shouldn't be violated by others. Without these reasons, one might ask whether Nozick has provided compelling enough grounds for his theory.

### THINK

Which of the above criticisms of Nozick's theory do you find the most compelling?



## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Robert Nozick (1938–2002)

Robert Nozick, the son of a Jewish entrepreneur, was born in Brooklyn, New York. He studied at both Columbia and Princeton (where he gained his PhD.), before taking up a Fulbright Scholarship at Oxford. Although initially drawn to socialism in his early university days, his political views gradually shifted after reading the works of such thinkers as F. A. Hayek (1899 -1992) and Ayn Rand (1905-1982).

For most of his adult life, Nozick taught at Harvard University. He married Gjertrud Schnackenberg, an America poet, and was a colleague of John Rawls (Famous Philosopher File p.469). His most famous work, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) is a response to Rawls' book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

Nozick died after a prolonged battle with stomach cancer and is buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: REGULATING OUR FREEDOM

In pairs, create a Prezi or PowerPoint presentation that explores an issue relating to censorship or the general regulation of personal freedom. Examples of such issues include:

1. Censorship in art, including the removal of artworks by Bill Henson from the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in 2008, or the closing of Paul Yore's *Like Mike* exhibition at Linden Gallery in St Kilda in 2013
2. Laws against sexting
3. The ban on the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women in some European nations
4. Censorship and restrictions in relation to smoking
5. Banning of food deemed unhealthy from some school canteens

Your presentation should:

- Provide your viewers with an overview of your topic.
- Show your viewers how either Mill or Nozick would respond to the topic, drawing on relevant philosophical arguments.

After you have completed this task, use what you have learned to respond to the following questions, within the context of a classroom discussion:

1. What are some of the merits and shortcomings of Mill's / Nozick's views regarding liberty?
2. In light of this discussion, do you think there should be greater limits on our personal liberty than either Mill or Nozick suggest? Why or why not?
3. Can personal liberty ever be a bad thing? Why or why not?



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## Liberty and Democracy

In their respective philosophical works, both Mill and Nozick seek to address the paradox at the very heart of our existence as social animals: how do we reconcile the freedom that many philosophers argue is our birthright with our participation within a civil society?

**Democracy**, a system of government memorably described by the former American president Abraham Lincoln (1809 -1865), as ‘rule of the people, by the people, for the people,’ seeks to do just that. By allowing people to decide the laws they will be compelled to live by, either by providing them with the opportunity to vote directly for those laws (known as **direct** or **pure democracy**) or by putting in place mechanisms for the election of representatives to make decisions on the people’s behalf (**indirect** or **representative democracy**), democracy ensures that the only authority that people are forced to obey are themselves. Thus, according to many philosophers, including Rousseau (Famous Philosopher File p.487), democracy is the system *par excellence* for the promotion of liberty.

### THINK

What is an example of a direct democracy? What is an example of a representative democracy? Are there examples where the two systems are used together? If so, what are they?



## Democracy: Criticisms and Responses

Although it may seem surprising, until the French Revolution (1789-1799) the vast majority of philosophers were hostile to the idea of democracy. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that the earliest surviving criticism, contained in the *Histories* (440BCE) by Herodotus (485-425 BCE), was written when Athens was embarking on the world’s first experiment with this radically new system of governance.

Herodotus, who criticised democracy on the grounds that it placed the decision-making process in the hands of the common people, whom he judged to be selfish and arrogant, was not the only ancient who disapproved of rule ‘by the people.’ In the *Republic* (380 BCE), Plato (Famous Philosopher File p.93), who had watched his teacher, Socrates (Famous Philosopher File p.7) die at the hands of the Athenian democracy, condemned the system on the grounds that it allowed those who were trapped within ‘the cave’ (see p.38) to govern. Plato argued that rather than the masses, the Athenian state should be ruled by ‘philosopher kings,’ people who had been specially selected and educated for the task of leadership and were capable of discerning what is right and true. Elsewhere Plato, through the character of Socrates, asks why, if we would not choose a surgeon or navigator by lot (the Council of 500, or the Athenian senate, was chosen in this manner) but instead because of their training and expertise, we choose our political leaders in this way. After all, statesmanship, like surgery or navigation, requires particular expertise.

Another philosopher who was critical of democracy, and who we have already encountered during this Theme, is Thomas Hobbes (Famous Philosopher File p.483). Although Hobbes acknowledged that democracy was a legitimate form of government, he believed that, given the selfish and hostile tendencies of human beings, the people were better served by **monarchy**, a system whereby the state is ruled or headed by a monarch. Such a system, he believed, had a better chance of maintaining peace and security.

Even Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Famous Philosopher File p.487), who is widely regarded as the father of modern democracy, rejected it as a viable answer to the question of governance. In *Of the Social Contract*, Rousseau argued that, although the people should be responsible for deciding basic legislative principles, it is too impractical to expect that they will do the necessary work required of democracy (Rousseau was thinking in terms of direct democracy). Also, he argued that it would be unlikely that if given the opportunity, people would govern for the people and not for themselves. As he argues in *Of the Social Contract*, only 'people of gods' could govern themselves democratically.

Although all slightly different, each of these criticisms shares a fundamental suspicion regarding the people's capacity for good decision-making. Rule by the masses, so the argument goes, will not result in policies that are best for society because the masses are too self-interested, or unenlightened, or unwilling to do the hard work that democracy requires. But how fair are these criticisms?

While it is certainly true that people will often look after their own interests first, one might ask why this is so problematic. After all, it is often argued that the whole purpose of government is to pursue the common good and who else better knows their good than the self-interested?

Secondly, we might question the view advocated by Plato that the masses are incapable of good political decision-making because of their ignorance. Putting aside any questions about the metaphysics on which Plato's argument is based (see p.38), we might question Plato's claim that good governance requires a particular degree of enlightenment about the true nature of reality. It could be argued that because statesmanship is far more concerned with understanding interests, the capacity for theoretical speculation on big questions is going to be far less valuable than the ability to articulate these interests and think about how they might be acted on.

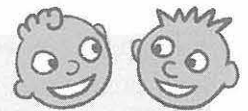
Finally, although Rousseau is probably correct when he claims that the kind of direct democracy favoured by the Athenians would be unattractive to most people and therefore impractical, representative democracy, which enables people who are quite happy to devote their lives to debating and administering policy to do the hard work on our behalf, seems to circumvent this problem while still allowing the people to have a say in how they are governed (albeit a far more limited one).

This final point suggests another criticism that may be leveled at democracy. Although democracy purports to reconcile authority with liberty, given that it favours the rule of the majority, there will always be those whose liberty is compromised: the minority, after all, do not rule themselves, but are compelled to obey the rule of another. This is essentially the view of the German philosopher Karl Marx (Famous Philosopher File p.449) who, although advocating what he saw as ‘true democracy’ (a situation in which all forms of tyranny are dissolved), viewed liberal, representative democracies as providing only the illusion of maintaining liberty while all the time preserving the oppression of the proletariat, or working classes, by the bourgeois – that is, the property-owning middle classes.

One way of responding to this criticism is along the lines of former English Prime Minister, Winston Churchill (1874-1965): ‘Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.’<sup>50</sup> Although democracy does, by its very nature, entail that the liberty of some people will be compromised some of the time, these people are still much freer than those who live under a dictatorship in that they have had the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process. Also, it might be argued that rather than granting every single individual complete autonomy, which would seem an impossible task, democracy at least provides a means by which liberty can be maximised, which is arguably the best that can be expected.

Another way of responding to this criticism is to draw a distinction between the different spheres of liberty that we enjoy. While we might demand complete liberty regarding the choices we make in our private lives, for example, over what we wear, who (or if) we marry, the number of children we have (or if we have any at all) and who are our friends, we might also recognise that when it comes to our collective affairs, some compromise is going to be inevitable. What matters (and perhaps the best that can be expected) is that we have a fair and equal say in how those affairs will be managed.

## DISCUSS



1. How persuasive are the arguments against democracy described above?
2. How persuasive are the responses to these arguments?
3. Of all the arguments outlined in the above section, which do you find the most persuasive and why?



## TEXT STUDY: Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)

[see Useful Resources]

Democracy has often been regarded as having a very intimate relationship with **capitalism**, an economic system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.

In his work *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (Famous Philosopher File p.498) argues that the free economic, political and religious markets which characterise liberal democracies are not only more supportive of liberty but are actually more efficient at generating the wealth of nations. Thus democracy, and the liberty that it fosters, actually serve to make nations richer.

Read the following passage:

*As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.\**

Discuss the following questions:

1. According to Smith, what is the relationship between pursuing one's own interests and the generation of a nation's wealth?
2. Will encouraging people to pursue their own interests always be in the nation's best interests? Why or why not?
3. Could the economic interests of a nation be better served in other ways? If so, in what ways?
4. Is capitalism always conducive to liberty? Why or why not?
5. Is liberty best served by capitalism? Why or why not?

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\* A. Smith, 1776, *The Wealth of Nations* Chapter 2, [www.econlib.org](http://www.econlib.org) (accessed 14th October 2013)



## DO

Hold a debate on the following prompt:

*The best form of government is the one that allows for the best decisions, not the one that allows the people to make the decisions.*

Whether you are arguing for the affirmative or the negative, make sure you draw on the arguments outlined in this section. You may also want to do some further research into these arguments to support your discussion.



## WRITE

In light of the above activity write a reflection of between 500-600 words on the following question:

- Is democracy the best form of government?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Adam Smith (1723–1790)

Adam Smith, a key figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, was born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland. His father was a lawyer and civil servant who died soon after his birth. Not a great deal is known about his early life, although it is rumoured that when he was four years old he was briefly abducted by gypsies. At the age of fourteen he commenced studies at the University of Glasgow. After winning a place at Balliol College, he moved to Oxford University. This period of his life was rather unhappy and descriptions in his correspondence suggest he may have had a nervous breakdown towards the end of his studies. Between 1748 and 1751 he lectured at Edinburgh University. He then took up the position of Professor of Logic at the University of Glasgow where he remained until 1764. That year he resigned from his position as Vice-Rector of the University to serve as a travelling tutor for the third Duke of Buccleuch, spending several subsequent years in France. In 1767 he returned to Scotland and his native Kirkcaldy, where he spent the next decade revising and drafting his books. In 1778 he moved to Edinburgh to take up a position with Customs and a decade later served as the rector of the University of Glasgow. Smith published only two books in his lifetime; *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776 – commonly referred to as *The Wealth of Nations*). This latter book was very popular and made Smith an international celebrity. Smith died in Canongate, Scotland after a painful illness and was buried at the Canongate Kirkyard.



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## **Assessment Tasks**

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. What is freedom?
2. Is freedom a fundamental human right?
3. What are the threats to freedom in the modern world?
4. What is the difference between positive and negative freedom? Is positive freedom a good thing?
5. Is the social contract a plausible account of the origins of civil society? Why or why not?
6. How much liberty should individuals within a civil society be permitted?
7. What are the limitations of political authority in terms of our liberty?
8. Is democracy the best form of government?

### **Assessment Task Two: Written Analysis**

Use any of the text studies in this Theme as the basis of a written analysis.

### **Assessment Task Three: Dialogue**

Write an imagined dialogue between a supporter of positive rights and someone who is against positive rights. Your dialogue should allow each position to be aired to its best advantage and should also challenge each position through interrogation of its claims.

### **Assessment Task Four: Research Task and/or Oral Presentation**

Use EITHER the Relevant Contemporary Debate on page 493 or the debate on page 498 as an assessment task.

### **Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses**

Complete a task that asks for short-answer explanations of the various theories and terms outlined in this Theme.

## ***Assessment Task Six: Essay***

Outline and critically compare the different versions of the social contract presented on pages 481-486.

OR

Research another system of government (for example, communism, socialism, etc). Write an essay that describes and critically compares democracy and this system of government. Which system is preferable and why?

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay (p.585).

## THEME 3

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# On Aesthetic Value

Philosophy can be summed up as the study of what's there, what's true, what's good and what's beautiful. It is to the last of these categories that we now turn.

Often referred to as Philosophy of Art, Aesthetics gives philosophical treatment to the claims of art and the kinds of judgments that can be made about art. 'What is art?', 'What is beauty?' and 'Why should art matter?' are some of the major questions considered in this branch of philosophy and in our final two Themes.

These questions have been explored throughout the history of philosophy, from the theories of the Greeks, through religious debates in medieval times, to Kant's examination of the aesthetic experience, and to postmodernist views in the twentieth century. Art has meant different things to different cultures at different times, so it has become a contested question as to what exactly defines art or what counts as 'beautiful'. Is it enough to resort to relativism and say 'whatever someone thinks is art, is art' or 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'? Or can we agree that there are particular standards that apply to what makes something beautiful, and to what makes something *good* art?

In studying this Theme you will be encouraged to apply these questions to a variety of artforms and to test aesthetic value judgements across a broad range of examples of your own selection. Taking advantage of opportunities such as visiting a local gallery, listening to music of diverse styles, seeing a play or dance troupe, trawling the web's wealth of images of famous (and infamous) artworks, or viewing examples of local graffiti, are all activities which will enhance this Theme for you.

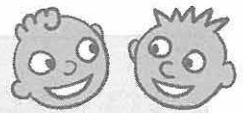
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### What is Beauty?

Although the terms 'aesthetics' and 'philosophy of art' are often used interchangeably, the former has a longer history which has mostly been concerned with the nature of beauty.



## Introductory Activities



### DISCUSS

1. Does beauty have to be something you see? How do you recognise something as beautiful?
2. What might you do to 'beautify' your school?
3. Can the following things be beautiful? Why or why not?
  - fire
  - a feeling
  - a just-cleaned hospital floor
  - a goal in football
  - a mathematical equation
  - a painting
  - muddy footprints through a house
  - a slug
  - a piece of music
  - gunshots
  - a table
  - a refrigerator
  - a dirty sock
4. Describe something you find to be beautiful. If someone else fails to see the beauty in this thing, are they wrong or do they just have different taste? Is there anything that is universally regarded as beautiful?

### **Plato: On Finding Beauty Itself**

When Shakespeare's Romeo thinks of Juliet as 'Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear', he evokes the Platonic notion of beauty. For Plato (Famous Philosopher File p.93), true beauty is something that transcends our earthly lives wherein everything decays and dies and is thus imperfect. Beauty is a transcendental **Form**, an ideal of perfect and enduring reality. The earthly things we consider beautiful can only participate to a limited degree in the Form of Beauty. You can refer back to pages 94-96 to read more about Plato's **Theory of Forms**.

According to Plato, when we recognise a beautiful thing in this world, we encounter the transcendent and eternal Form of Beauty itself. This is what happens when we fall in love. Plato's *Symposium* discusses how love leads us to gain insight into the Form of Beauty, in a speech in which Socrates expounds the view of his teacher, the priestess Diotima. Presuming (as most contemporary scholars do) that she is not an invented character, Diotima may be the most influential female thinker in history – at least in the field of aesthetics.



Diotima of Mantinea

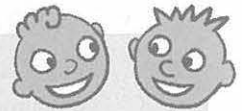
According to Diotima, we encounter true Beauty through loving one person, but the more we come to know and love that person, we love all that is beautiful and Beauty itself. Of course we tend to think, when falling in love with the beauty of another person (or when moved by the beauty of nature, or a piece of music or painting) that we are appreciating the unique qualities of the beloved. Plato argues that there is just one true Beauty, with many earthly manifestations. While there may be differing opinions on the beauty or otherwise of beautiful objects encountered in this realm, the Form of Beauty is objectively and enduringly beautiful.

This is a very abstract way to view Beauty. Clearly what Romeo wants to know better is the actual woman Juliet, not an abstract vision of Beauty that is shared by every beautiful thing. Yet Plato is not concerned with describing attributes of particular beautiful things in the world as though such a catalogue will somehow lead us to a definition of beauty. Rather, the true meaning of Beauty shines through, and is revealed by, our imperfect experiences of beautiful things.

## DISCUSS

Are statements about beauty subjective or objective?

Discuss this question in a small group. Try to come up with three arguments (and/or examples) to the conclusion that judgments of beauty are subjective, and three arguments (and/or examples) to the conclusion that judgments of beauty are objective. Which arguments are the most convincing? Share your group's findings with the class.





## TEXT STUDY: Plato, *The Symposium* (c. 380 BCE)

[see Useful Resources]

READ the following passage, 210a-211e

[210a-210d] He who would proceed rightly in this business must not merely begin from his youth to encounter beautiful bodies. In the first place, ...he must be in love with one particular body, and engender beautiful converse therein; but next he must remark how the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, and that if he means to ensue beauty in form, it is gross folly not to regard as one and the same the beauty belonging to all; and so, having grasped this truth, he must make himself a lover of all beautiful bodies... But his next advance will be to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of the body, so that however little the grace that may bloom in any likely soul it shall suffice him for loving and caring, ... and that finally he may be constrained to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances and our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body's beauty as a slight affair. From observances he should be led on to the branches of knowledge, that there also he may behold a province of beauty, and by looking thus on beauty in the mass may escape from the mean, meticulous slavery of a single instance, ... and turning rather towards the main ocean of the beautiful may by contemplation of this bring forth in all their splendor many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in a plenteous crop of philosophy; until with the strength and increase there acquired he descries a certain single knowledge connected with a beauty which has yet to be told.

...(P)assing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him...a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature. First of all, it is ever-existent and neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and in part ugly, nor is it such at such a time and other at another, nor in one respect beautiful and in another ugly, nor so affected by position as to seem beautiful to some and ugly to others.

...From personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observance to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone; so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty. In that state of life above all others,...a man finds it truly worthwhile to live, as he contemplates essential beauty... entire, pure and unalloyed.\*

1. According to Plato, how does love for the beauty of one person set us on the path to loving Beauty itself?
2. Do you find any truth in the idea that loving one instance of beauty can expand your understanding of things other than that thing or person? Explain.
3. What does Plato mean in the second paragraph above? Explain it in your own words.
4. Select one claim or viewpoint in this passage with which you find some agreement. Explain your interpretation of Plato's view and explain why you agree with it.

5. Select one claim or viewpoint in this passage with which you find some disagreement. Explain your interpretation of Plato's view and explain why you disagree with it.
6. Plato implies that virtue – in the sense of a good and moral life – is attained through love of Beauty. Can you think of any arguments to bolster this view? Can you think of any counter-arguments?

\* Plato 1925, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9 (trans H.M.Fowler, Heinemann, London).  
Also at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>

## **Plato: On Art**

While the Form of Beauty is unambiguously splendid for Plato, works of art are not. This is because for the ancient Greeks, what we would now call 'art' was essentially imitation or representation and not necessarily concerned with beauty at all.

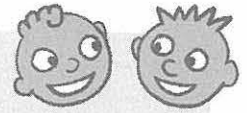
Plato's rejection of art is most famously articulated in the *Republic*. Drawing again on the Theory of Forms, Plato outlines a hierarchy which places The Good above all other Forms, implying that goodness, truth and virtue are overarching categories embracing the purity of all perfect Forms. Beneath the Forms themselves lie the ideas about the truth of the world which we may hold in our heads, arrived at by philosophical reasoning. Further down the hierarchy are the actual objects in the world – that is, the mere appearances of reality. And at the very bottom lie imitations of those appearances, including artistic representations.

### **THINK**

Referring to the painting reproduced on page 503, can you locate each of these levels of insight, as described by Plato?



If art is mere representation of an already imperfect reality, then for Plato it is a regrettable distraction from the pursuit of the real and true which should drive all citizens in an ideal society. Indeed, it can be seen as something akin to a *lie*. Furthermore, citizens should be guided by *reason* to fulfil their functions in the community. The passions inspired by art may lead even the best citizens astray. Plato was particularly distrustful of poetry in this regard. He believed that poetry should be strictly censored in the ideal state. In this view he foreshadows a debate that continues today and which you may pursue further in the next Theme.



## DISCUSS

1. Can a picture of a sunset ever be as beautiful or worthy as an actual sunset? Why or why not?
2. Does this question have bearing on Plato's view of art as belonging at the very bottom of a hierarchy of truth/reality?
3. Do you agree with Plato that art belongs at the bottom of such a hierarchy? Why or why not?
4. Is art always representation? If not, how does this affect Plato's argument that art should be rejected?
5. Is art a bunch of lies?
6. Can art lead us astray morally?

## ***Aristotle: Order, size and balance***

Thinking back to your studies of *Metaphysics*, the different views on aesthetics held by Plato and Aristotle (Famous Philosopher File p.98-99) will be no surprise to you. For Plato, beauty is linked to the transcendent Forms, and art should be judged harshly if it fails to refer us to transcendent truth. Aristotle, by contrast, concerns himself with the characteristics of art as it occurs in this world. He says the nature of beauty can be defined by studying those things most of us regard as beautiful.

Aristotle argues in his *Poetics* (c.335BCE) that beauty results from the size and order of things, or in other words, from its 'form' (used in a different sense from Plato's Form). Aristotle gives particular emphasis to the concept of **moderation**. If something is too big or small, or otherwise out of balance, it cannot be beautiful. Beautiful things appear as unified wholes, with all elements in proportion.

Plato and Aristotle had divergent views on the role of art in society, too. Whereas Plato saw art as valuable only insofar as it could illuminate truth and virtue, and thus be an edifying influence upon citizens, Aristotle believed art was valuable in itself. He writes about the 'self-sufficiency' of art, meaning that art and the pleasure it brings are valuable for their own sake. He argues that it is natural to enjoy imitation, and defends the value of emotional release through art, a process he terms **catharsis**.



## TEXT STUDY: Aristotle, *Poetics* (around 335 BCE)

[see Useful Resources]

READ the following passage:

*A beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long. As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and organisms a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magnitude which may be easily embraced in one view; so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory.\**

**To what extent does beauty depend on ‘orderly arrangement of parts’, the size of the parts and the whole?**

1. Working in a small group, test Aristotle’s ideas on five examples of beautiful things, including examples of artworks. (Try to include examples beyond those of just visual beauty – for example, beautiful music, beautiful writing, etc.)
2. Report your findings back to the class.

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\* Aristotle <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html> (August 5, 2013)

## Since Plato and Aristotle

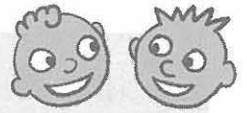
The theories set out by Plato and Aristotle have been of enormous influence in the conversations about aesthetics that have occurred since. Plato’s distrust of art was reinforced by the repression of sensuality advocated by the early Christian church. On the other hand, the idea of beautiful art being a means to transcendent truth was taken up by St Augustine (Famous Philosopher File p.201). He promoted the idea of beautiful art as a vehicle for divine revelation. We can see this idea – that the beauty of art can bring us closer to God – at work in medieval Christian art. Meanwhile, Aristotle’s principles of balance, moderation, size and order were developed further by art theorists and technicians. In medieval times these were seen as the tools for evoking the beauty of the divine in art.



### WRITE

1. Is beauty subjective or objective, according to Plato and Aristotle?
2. How may one example of beauty be judged more beautiful than another, according to Plato and Aristotle?

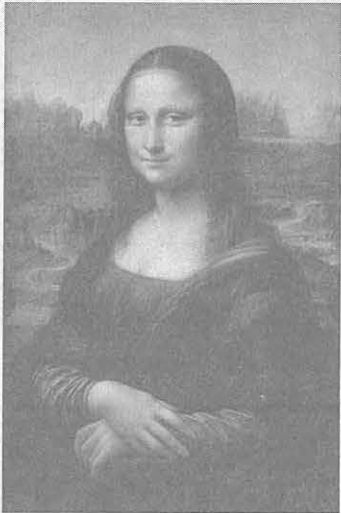
Write and perform a dialogue between a Platonist and an Aristotelian in response to these questions.



## DISCUSS

A) Discuss the next three questions in a small group:

1. Of the following, which is more beautiful?
  - a newly opened, red rose, seen after a shower of rain
  - a dead rose, trodden into the ground
2. Of the following, which is a better song? (*Refer to YouTube if you wish.*)
  - 'Stairway to Heaven' by Led Zeppelin
  - 'Friday' by Rebecca Black
3. Of the following, which is a better picture?
  - The Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci
  - This picture by Ruby-Rose, aged four years.



B) Report back to the class and then discuss the following:

1. Was there consensus on these questions within your group and across your class? Can you draw any conclusions from this?
2. Are judgements about beauty and art entirelyly subjective? Why or why not?

## **David Hume: Matters of Taste**

Both Plato and Aristotle, though in very different ways, believed that the principles of beauty are fixed, constant and objective. Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume (Famous Philosopher File p.182) disagreed. In his essay 'The Standard of Taste' (1757), he adopts a subjectivist stance with regard to beauty, noting the divergence of opinions about what people find beautiful.

However, while Hume acknowledges that there cannot be *a priori* rules to dictate what is and is not beautiful, he nonetheless believes there are certain measures by which we can generally agree that one thing is beautiful and another ugly.

Hume argues that we judge beauty by means of **aesthetic sentiment**. While certain qualities in an object may arouse the aesthetic sentiment, it is primarily to the minds of perceivers that we should look to find clues about how aesthetic sentiment is aroused. For Hume, a thing is beautiful if and only if it arouses aesthetic sentiment in *appropriately qualified judges*.

Hume points out that some people have defective sense organs, while others find it hard to make confident judgements about beauty for other reasons, such as their lack of knowledge of the subject. However, he says the ability to judge beauty can be improved by practice, observation and contemplation. If we try to free our minds of all prejudice and to judge like a ‘man in general’, we can overcome our own particular biases and current fashions, and arrive at a trustworthy judgment of what is beautiful.

Are some things in ‘good taste’ and others in ‘bad taste’? Do you know anyone who could be described as having ‘good taste’? Usually this points to qualities of discernment in a person, suggesting that they are able to judge the things that will endure beyond the trends of the present. This is the kind of good judgment Hume aims to describe.

### THINK

1. What factors might undermine aesthetic judgement?
2. Who could be the ideal observer/judger of beauty? Describe them.



### DISCUSS

1. Do you agree that the test of an object’s beauty is primarily ‘in the eye of the beholder’? Why or why not?
2. Hume says that we should look to what the consensus has been over time, if we want to establish what beauty is. What are the merits of this idea? What are its shortcomings?
3. Some public polls of music and other art – such as the Triple J Hottest 100 – aim to identify the ‘best’ of a given period. Sometimes, as with a recent Triple J poll, recent items are deliberately excluded. In what ways do such methods agree with Hume’s ideas about identifying what is beautiful?
4. Other polls – such as the Booker and Pulitzer prizes for novels, and the Academy Awards for films – believe it is consensus by a selected panel which produces the most trustworthy judgments. To what extent does this agree with Hume’s ideas on finding beauty? Do you think this is a trustworthy method?







## TEXT STUDY: David Hume, 'The Standard of Taste' (1757) – omitting the 'Aside on Moral Differences'

[see Useful Resources]

1. What does Hume mean when he uses the word 'taste'?
2. What is the 'common sense view' about taste, as Hume summarises it (in the fourth paragraph, assuming the Aside is omitted)?
3. Why does Hume reject this common sense view?
4. Why, according to Hume, is it counterproductive to attempt to prescribe 'rules' to which something must adhere in order to be considered beautiful, or as good art?
5. How, then, may 'universal beauty' be judged, according to Hume?
6. According to Hume, how does practice improve one's capacity to make sound judgements about beauty and art? Is he right?



### DO

1. How well are you able to judge the beauty of the following:  
RATE FROM 5 = VERY CONFIDENTLY to 1 = I CANNOT RATE ITS  
BEAUTY OR LACK THEREOF WITH ANY CONFIDENCE WHATEVER
  - a poem
  - a piece of classical music
  - a rainbow
  - a 100-year-old totem pole used in cultural ceremonies on the Haida Gwaii islands
  - a rock music video?
2. If there was any variation in the ratings you just gave for the five listed items, to what do you attribute the variation?
3. What would Hume make of your responses in this exercise?

## ***Kantian Disinterest: The Aesthetic Attitude***

Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) followed many of Hume's leads in his writing on aesthetics. He agreed with Hume that judgments of taste are essentially *subjective*. However, like Hume, he wondered how we can acknowledge the subjectivity of aesthetic judgements while also believing that some judgments are better than others.

In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant disagrees with Hume's idea that seeking a consensus viewpoint is the way to decide aesthetic questions. But he accepts, along Humean lines, that the beautiful is that which provokes a feeling of **aesthetic pleasure** in us.

Kant says this comes about because when making aesthetic judgements, we approach objects in an attitude of 'free play', mingling our capacities for both reason and imagination. Our reason may suggest one 'understanding' of the object and then another, while the imagination freely associates these with memories, sense data, emotions and so on. We derive pleasure and satisfaction from this experience because our faculties are stimulated into harmonious activity.

### THINK

Bring to mind some encounters with beauty and art – for example, appreciating nature on a bushwalk; listening to an enjoyable piece of music or song; looking at a painting or sculpture.

Do these experiences stimulate simultaneously your faculties of reason and imagination? Can you understand what Kant was getting at?



To consider aesthetic experience in this way seems to describe a highly subjective phenomenon. But Kant thinks there must be a 'common sense' that is aroused. He describes the recognition of beauty as a 'necessary' judgement, in the sense that it *can* be shared by any mentally competent person. In the activity on page 508, contrarians in your class might have disagreed with the majority and argued that a dead, downtrodden rose has beauty at least as great as a fresh bloom. This might seem strange, but not as strange as a person incapable of recognising *anything* as beautiful. We would consider such a person as lacking something essential to humanity, and this is what Kant means by beauty being a 'necessary' judgment.

Furthermore, when we make statements about beauty, we generally assume **universal validity** for them. We exclaim, 'Isn't that pretty?' with a belief that others will naturally share our view. For Kant, this is because the involvement of the faculty of reason in the aesthetic experience enables aesthetic judgements to be **disinterested**. Considering the artwork featured on page 508, Ruby's mother finds tremendous beauty in the work of her daughter. But shifting from a subjective stance to the disinterested, Kantian attitude, even Ruby's mother can acknowledge the objective superiority of da Vinci's masterpiece. Kant says that we can recognise universal beauty and distinguish this from the subjective pleasure we get from other aesthetic experiences in which our biases and prejudices are heavily involved.

Kant's treatise on aesthetics, *The Critique of Judgment*, is an extremely complex work, and only a rough introduction to it is possible here. But Kant's influence – in aesthetics as in all other areas of philosophy – has been enormous. He was followed by philosophers such as Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling (1775-1854), who extended Kant's ideas about the unity of reason and imagination in appreciating beauty. These ideas were taken even further by G.W.F. Hegel (Famous Philosopher File p.548), who argued that the universal idea of beauty as the goal of art inspires people's highest spiritual awareness and strivings.

## THINK

1. Is there a difference between saying, 'This is beautiful to me' and 'This is beautiful'? What is the nature of this distinction? Is this a distinction you would be likely to make in everyday conversation? In what contexts?
2. In what ways might your responses to question 1 (above) shed light on Kant's theory that disinterested reason always plays a part in aesthetic pleasure?



## TEXT STUDY: Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), Part I Section vi

[see Useful Resources]

Work through the following steps in a small group.

1. Read through Part I Section vi at least twice in your group.
2. Identify each important claim made in this passage and write these on strips of paper.
3. Arrange these strips to show the structure of Kant's argument. You may wish to revise these – in wording as well as order – until you are happy that you have a set of premises and a conclusion, consistent with Kant's text.
4. When the group is satisfied with its re-presentation of the argument, you should glue the strips to a piece of poster paper or card.
5. Your next step is to evaluate the argument's validity and soundness. Annotate your poster.
6. Lastly, share your group's findings with the rest of the class.

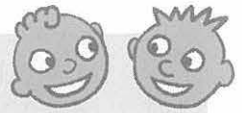


## Beauty and Art

As we noted earlier, for the ancient Greeks, beauty and art were quite separate matters. Indeed, our concept of art is relatively modern. Of course the Greeks had paintings and sculptures, but these were termed *techne*, meaning things produced with skill. The Greeks did not make the distinction, as we do, between arts and crafts.

It wasn't until the late 17th century that German and British thinkers emphasised beauty as the most important element of art and aesthetic experience, and saw art as aiming towards absolute beauty.

In the twentieth century, beauty receded in importance as a goal for art; indeed, for the last 100 years or so, beauty has ceased to be a consideration at all for many artists.



## DISCUSS

Is beauty necessary or desirable in art? Why or why not?

## DO

Speak to some artists you know, including fellow students whose art work you appreciate. Ask them about the degree to which beauty is a consideration in their work.

Don't limit your survey to visual artists. Speak also to those who play or compose music, act, dance, write poetry or fiction and so on.

Contribute your findings to a continuing class discussion on the question of beauty in art.



## DO

Watch the film *Pollock* (2000) directed by Ed Harris. Do you think the artwork depicted in this film is beautiful? Why or why not? What philosophical theories considered so far are relevant to your analysis?



## DO:

### 'ART VERSUS CRAFT'

1. All class members should sit in a circle so that the floor-space in the middle can be seen clearly by all. Imagine that there is a line dividing the floor-space in half. Use pieces of paper with large lettering to label one half of the floor 'ART' and the other half 'CRAFT'.

2. Distribute to members of the class strips of paper on which the following are written:

WEAVING

POTTERY

STAINED GLASS

A PAINTED WALL

A PAINTING IN A FRAME

A PHOTOGRAPH FOR A REAL ESTATE BROCHURE

A PHOTOGRAPH IN AN ART MAGAZINE

SEWING

FASHION DESIGN



A TEAPOT MADE OF NEWSPAPER

ARCHITECTURE

SONGWRITING

ADVERTISEMENTS

KNIT-BOMBING

Skill

Technique

Mass production

Originality

Usefulness

Beauty

Emotional expression

Predictable, pre-conceived result

Unpredictable result

Application of rules/blueprint/recipe/method

Can be taught

Exploration and discovery

Commercial profit

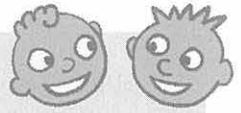
‘Cultivates and expands the human spirit’ (Kant)

3. The class members holding strips of paper should place these on the floor in what they consider to be an appropriate place. Everyone should be given time to make thoughtful placements.
4. When all the strips have been laid down, the whole class has three minutes to silently consider the floor-space. When three minutes are up, it is time for hands to be raised and questions to be addressed to those who placed the strips. For example, ‘I’m wondering, is there is a contradiction between (d) and (f) and could the people who placed those items please justify their positions?’
5. When the discussion has concluded, write a reflection in your workbook in answer to the question, ‘What is the difference between art and craft?’

---

## What is Art?

When we refer to art, we of course refer to a huge range of media and forms, including painting, sculpture, photography, music, poetry, plays, films, novels and dance. This has led some philosophers to conclude that it is impossible to define what art is. After all, where do we draw the line? Note that there is a difference between the empirical question, ‘What things are called art in this society?’ and the questions of aesthetic judgement, ‘What things *should* we call art?’ or ‘What do we value as art and why?’ It is these latter questions which engage us philosophically and challenge us to produce criteria to justify our responses.



## DISCUSS

1. ART OR NOT? Which of the following are works of art in your view? Justify your choices.

- The *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci
- A concert by The Beatles
- A copy of the *Mona Lisa* printed on a small magnet given away inside a cereal packet
- Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*
- An episode of *Neighbours*
- A soiled, unmade bed in a gallery
- A crayon drawing by a four-year-old
- *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
- Uluru (Ayer's Rock)
- A photograph of Uluru (Ayer's Rock)
- A cat's purr
- The film *Avatar*
- The Eiffel Tower
- The ballet, *Swan Lake*
- An album by *Radiohead*
- *The Simpsons* TV comedy series
- A blank piece of paper
- A mathematics equation
- A football game
- A rubbish bin placed in gallery
- A painting by an elephant
- This textbook
- Intricate tilework from the wall of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey
- A lampshade
- A human being
- Further examples proposed by members of the class...

2. Are any of the following ideas useful in your discussion? In what ways?

SKILL	PLEASURE	BEAUTY	DESIGN
CREATIVITY	ORIGINALITY	TRUTH	WISDOM
ELEGANCE	FORM	STRUCTURE	FEELING
EDUCATION	STANDARD	GREATNESS	REPUTATION
HISTORY	ACCURACY	INTERPRETATION	CONTEXT



## WRITE

Reflection:

1. What, to you, makes something a work of art?
2. What criteria would you propose should be satisfied for something to be considered art?
3. Choose any four of the ideas listed in discussion exercise (b) above and explain why you think each one is, or is not, relevant to a discussion of what makes something worthy of the title 'art'.

## ***The Family Resemblance Theory***

As you have probably discovered, determining what makes something 'art' is very tricky indeed. But there are many other collective nouns which are difficult to define precisely. For example, try defining what makes something a 'game'. Is it something with rules, which you enjoy and do for fun? Well, mathematics has rules and may be fun for some people, but it isn't really a game. Is a game something that you play with at least one other person? Well, what about solitaire? And so the discussion continues, until you may conclude that it is very difficult to arrive at any definition of features that are common to all games.

Twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (Famous Philosopher File p.517) used the games example to suggest that sometimes there is not one single, common feature which unites all members of the same group. Perhaps rather, for some groups, the members have overlapping similarities with no single feature common to all members. Wittgenstein proposed that in the case of games, we can see that all members of the group resemble each other, even though it is difficult to define precisely what solitaire, golf, World of Warcraft and Snakes and Ladders have in common. He suggested that this is similar to how resemblances operate in families. You may look like your mother, who looks like her brother. However, you may look nothing like your mother's brother. So patterns of resemblance can overlap rather than there being any particular features which all family members share.

Do you think that resemblances between different kinds of art could be of this type? If so, it may be a mistake for us to look for any single, all-purpose definition of art. However, we may still have to decide on what the features of resemblance are for something to be counted and valued in the art family.

But then again, perhaps you and your class members did actually manage to come up with a convincing set of criteria to define art. Or perhaps you will be persuaded by the various theories described below. In which case, the family resemblance theory – that is, the theory that it is not actually possible to define art – must be false.

## DO

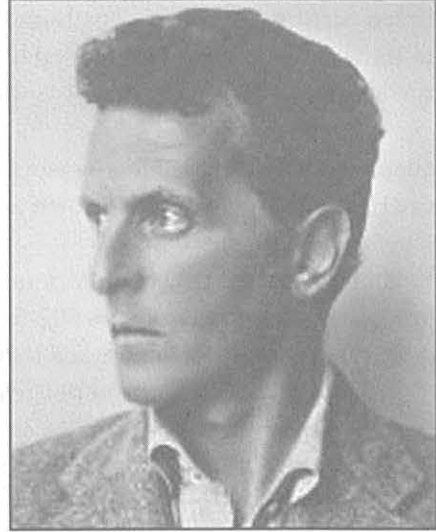
Explain the 'family resemblance' theory to a partner. Is that the closest we might hope to get to a definition of art?



### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

## Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951)

Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in Vienna and wrote his books in German, but spent most of his life in England. He first went there to study aeronautical engineering, having been fascinated by machinery from an early age. While studying engineering, Wittgenstein was increasingly interested in the philosophical questions about the mathematics he was using. Reading the philosopher Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* was a revelation to him. He went to Germany to discuss it with the great logician, Gottlob Frege, and Frege advised him to quit engineering and go to Cambridge to study philosophy with Russell. Russell later commented, 'Getting to know Wittgenstein was one of the most exciting intellectual adventures of my life.'



Wittgenstein's first book, the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, was begun before the First World War and finished after he had served a harrowing time in combat. Having believed he had solved all the major problems that remained in philosophy, he turned to other activities, becoming a primary school mathematics teacher (he even published a children's spelling dictionary), then a gardener and then a designer of houses.

In the meantime, a whole generation of philosophers was hailing the *Tractatus* as a work of genius. However, Wittgenstein had many niggling doubts. He was starting to see some philosophical problems in different lights. Although he published little for the rest of his life, collections of his writings were issued after his death. The *Philosophical Investigations* was published in 1953, revising most of the ideas from the *Tractatus* and offering a completely new vision for how philosophy and language could be considered. Wittgenstein's influence spread to every area of academia from anthropology to literary criticism.

If Wittgenstein had published just one of his major works, he would still have been probably the most influential philosopher of the 20th century. The fact that he produced two extraordinary manifestos, both claiming to solve all possible philosophical problems, has confirmed his significance for a very long time.



# ***The Representational Theory***

## **ART AS IMITATION**

We are often impressed by how well an artist manages to convey *real life* in their work. Perhaps you have appreciated the skill of a fine portrait painter by exclaiming that it looks ‘just like a photo’. You may have heard of method acting – the process which many actors use to immerse themselves totally in a life like that of the character they are playing. Heath Ledger famously locked himself in a hotel room for weeks in order to ‘become’ the sadistic Joker character. His acclaimed performance won a posthumous Academy Award (but also drove him to sleeplessness and to the sleeping pills which claimed his life). Do you know anyone who can draw objects in the world with extraordinary accuracy? Is this skill enough to make them an artist?

The theory that art represents the world realistically, and that good artists are those who can capture reality in their work, is known as **representationism**.

Plato is famous for writing about art as representation, although for Plato, this was a reason to disparage art, as we saw on pages 502-505. Aristotle, by contrast, praised mimicry in artworks. However, neither philosopher argued that representation should be seen as the defining principle of art. Indeed, such a theory did not really emerge until the eighteenth century, and it is true that up to this point, most art *was* essentially representational. The arrival of the camera in the nineteenth century called these assumptions into question and was a catalyst for visual artists to explore other goals in their work, resulting in movements such as impressionism.

From our twenty-first-century vantage point, it is clear that not all art tries to copy or imitate directly the external world. And is simply to make a copy of the world ever enough to make something art? Yet it can be argued that any depiction of objects in the world – such as portraiture or photography – involves interpretation of those objects. The artist makes choices about the composition and framing of their work, which makes the final piece quite different to behold than the real person, scene or object. And it is usually because of these other elements of form – besides just those of capturing a likeness – that we regard a painting or photograph as art or as *good* art. This is also why we reject forgeries and do not value a copy of an artwork (for example, a print of a famous painting) as highly as the original.

But it also seems obvious that there are many artforms that are not representational. If music and abstract painting are to be regarded as art, then surely the representational theory must be false. It could be responded that perhaps these kinds of art represent *feeling*, but it is often hard to pin down just what these feelings might be.

Thus, the representational theory seems to have some severe limitations.

## **ART AS REPRESENTATION THAT CONVEYS TRUTH**

But what about the idea that perhaps art doesn’t reproduce directly a specific item of experience, but instead conveys a more abstract truth or vision about the world? Perhaps art gives us profound insight into our lives, ourselves and each other. This view was proposed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.

Consider the plays of Shakespeare. They are entertaining, often very funny and have been consistently popular with audiences for centuries. And the most oft-cited reason for this is that Shakespeare captures eternal truths about human nature; he wisely teaches us to understand more about ourselves. Similarly, the great symphonies of Beethoven are not 'about' anything in particular, nor do they stir specific emotions that any two people could readily agree upon. But it is generally recognised that these works have profound power. They seem to arouse something deep and eternal in the psyche of the listener and to convey some essence or truth about our humanity. And what about a painting such as Picasso's *Guernica*? Here Picasso conveys the horror and pointlessness of war with unrivalled power.

Or do you disagree? Perhaps you do not share my responses to the works discussed in the previous paragraph. You may find Shakespeare's plays to be boring and believe they add nothing to your life, arguing that studying Philosophy has given you more profound insight than any work of art ever could. You may find deep spiritual resonances in the music and lyrics of a band which I consider to be rubbish. You may contend that the only way to be genuinely horrified by war is to visit a war zone or read the real accounts of people who have experienced war, rather than look at a painting by a now-dead Spaniard famous for his personal infidelities. And where does all that leave the theory that art illuminates and reveals truths about human experience?

## DISCUSS



1. How convincing do you find the theory of representationalism as a way to determine what should be valued as art? What are its advantages and drawbacks?
2. Is the theory of art as representing profound truths or insights an improvement on the theory of art as imitation? Why or why not?
3. What do you make of the claim that art does not copy reality?

## ***The Subjectivist Theory***

Subjectivism holds that any aesthetic judgement is subjective and therefore can tell us only something about the responses of the person making the judgement, and nothing about the work of art itself. Therefore, according to subjectivism, there can be no conflict of opinions in aesthetics; if I say I love a song on Spotify, but you find it hideous, neither of us can be actually wrong.

This is quite an appealing view for reasons you have no doubt already encountered in your discussions. It allows everyone to make acceptable claims about art regardless of their tastes, education, social class or cultural group and is thereby an inclusive and anti-elitist position. It also avoids the problems of trying to find particular factors which might objectively and universally declare something to be good art (which the formalists try to do, as we shall see).

But are there problems with subjectivism? The subjectivist's argument often goes like this:

- P1 There is wide divergence of aesthetic judgements.  
UP2 Cases where judgements diverge widely cannot be objectively decided.
- 
- C Therefore aesthetic judgements must be subjective.

How strong is this argument? Let's consider Premise 1. One thing that is striking about the history of art is how much *agreement* there actually is over what makes something art and what makes it good. There are very few people who will try and argue that Bach or Shakespeare are rubbish, and this consensus has been upheld over centuries. And what about Premise 2? Well, as we have found in our studies of Ethics, just because there is disagreement over something does not mean there is no solution or that it cannot be said that some solutions are more worthy than others.

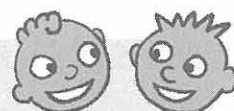
So what about an argument like this?

- P1 Objective judgements can only be made when considering facts that are external to people, their feelings and attitudes.  
P2 Judgments about art are internal to people, their feelings and attitudes.
- 
- C Therefore, judgments about art cannot be objective.

Do you agree with Premise 2? Has aesthetic judgement nothing to do with the work of art itself? This argument sets up a dichotomy between art and its perceivers, and many would argue it is a false one.

As we have seen, David Hume was a subjectivist, but not a hardline one. He argued that while aesthetic judgments could not be seen as facts, there could surely be certain kinds of educated, consensus views that are more valid or accurate than personal, biased or ignorant views.

## DISCUSS



1. If aesthetic judgements are all subjective, why do we tend to rate some art as so much better than other art? Why are some pieces that were created centuries ago still so well-regarded today?
2. Describe your own experiences in art or music lessons. Are there standards you are expected to meet in these studies? Is this fair?
3. Can you propose any objective standards by which we could measure art?
4. Are objectivity and subjectivity the only two options to choose from in this debate? Could there be other helpful alternatives or distinctions?

## The Theory of Aesthetic Emotion

As we have already learned, Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) suggested that we get a distinctive kind of pleasure from art. He said this is not simply about what we like, nor what is morally good, nor about what subject is represented in the art, nor whether it is practically useful to us. In these ways, Kant argued that a work of art stirs in us an **aesthetic emotion** which is *disinterested*. Many philosophers since Kant have worked with this view of a 'psychic distance' between us and an artwork, wherein personal interests are not involved in the same way as they are in real life.

For example, even if we had no belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and no sympathy towards Christianity, to have actually been present at the crucifixion would have been a shocking experience indeed. However, we are all able to look at paintings of the crucifixion of Christ and be moved by them as works of art in ways that may be separate from our religious beliefs, and very different from how we may have reacted if we had experienced that scene in reality. We can actually gain *enjoyment* from looking at paintings which depict quite gruesome subjects, when to see those things in real life would cause us horror and distress.

### DISCUSS



1. Can you think of other examples when this 'aesthetic emotion' of disinterested pleasure is engaged during the experience of a work of art?
2. Do you agree that there seems to be a particular, disinterested emotional attitude that is engaged when you experience a work of art? Why or why not? Can you think of any counter-examples?
3. Do you agree with philosophers who argue that the engagement of this aesthetic emotion is a criterion for judging something as a work of art or not? Why? Can you offer any counter-examples?

## The Formalist Theory

One problem with the theory of aesthetic emotion is that it doesn't refer to anything within the artwork itself. Our responses to works of art can also be very subjective, varying widely from person to person. So some philosophers have suggested that what it is which engages the aesthetic emotion is our response to its **form**, or the particular elements from which it is composed.

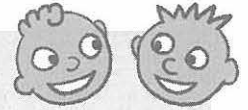
We can recognise that a painter makes choices when creating her art: she arranges shapes, colours, lines and so on, in particular ways. Similarly, a composer uses the elements of music – rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre and so on – and combines them in deliberate ways to create something pleasing. A poet uses rhyme, metre and the sounds of words. A novelist makes choices about plot, setting, character and so on.

The ways these elements are manipulated by an artist, and the ways the elements relate to one another, can be judged as effective or ineffective. This is the basis of the **formalist theory**.

For example, we might judge the elements of a painting to be well balanced, or sculpture to be pleasingly proportioned. A play may be skilfully acted, well cast, with an interesting set, and paced to heighten dramatic tension.

We have already considered a version of this theory as articulated by Aristotle. Clive Bell (Famous Philosopher File p.514) is perhaps formalism's most notable advocate. In *Art* (1914), Bell argues that what is represented by an artwork is irrelevant. Nor does it matter whether something is portrayed realistically, nor what the artist is like, nor why they created the art, nor the context surrounding it. It is purely the manipulation of the formal elements which marks something as a work of art or not, and instructs us as to whether it should be valued. An artist's goal should be perfection of form.

Bell thinks that for our discussion of form to be meaningful, there ought to be some universal principles of form that we judge as desirable. This is difficult because as we have seen, there are different elements of form which apply to different kinds of art. So perhaps there are descriptions which can apply across all art to assess the relations between aesthetic features. Perhaps we can speak of the 'elegance' of an artwork, or its 'balance', and these could be terms which could apply just as easily to a painting as to a ballet as to a sculpture.



## DISCUSS

1. Do you agree with Bell that the subject represented by a work is irrelevant when assessing whether it should be valued as art or not? Use examples in your response.
2. Do you think we can clearly say what it is we appreciate in the form of an artwork?
3. Can the formal elements of different artworks be compared and valued on the basis of words such as 'elegance', 'balance' or 'beauty'? What are some problems with this suggestion?
4. To what extent are you persuaded by the formalist theory as a way of assessing the value of something as art? Did you use any elements of this theory when completing the 'Art or Not?' exercise on page 515? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this theory?



## TEXT STUDY: Clive Bell, *Art* (1914)

[see Useful Resources]

Read paragraphs 1 – 19 as anthologised in Cahn, 2007 (that is, from ‘*It is improbable that more nonsense has been written about aesthetics...*’ up to and including the paragraph beginning, ‘*To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us...*’).

1. Bell states that aesthetic judgments are matters of personal taste. How, then, does he argue for a general theory of aesthetics?
2. What does Bell mean by ‘significant form’? Explain this in your own words.
3. Why does Bell reject beauty as a criterion for something to be considered art?
4. What kinds of pictures does Bell argue are *not* art? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. Printed below is the Frith’s painting, *Paddington Station*, discussed by Bell. What is Bell’s argument about this painting? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?



*Paddington Station* (1862) by William Powell Frith.

6. Explain Bell’s view on art as representation.
7. Identify a work of art (from any artform, even though Bell’s argument focuses on visual art) which moves you. Describe some elements of its ‘significant form’. To what extent is this analysis useful in defending why your selected artwork should be considered art?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Clive Bell (1881–1964)

Clive Bell was raised in an English country manor, surrounded by his father's hunting trophies. He studied English at Cambridge, but developed an interest in art criticism when a scholarship took his studies to Paris. On returning to London he met and married the artist, Vanessa Stephen, sister of novelist Virginia Woolf. After seven years the marriage became an open one; Vanessa bore her third child to another man, whom she remained with for the rest of her life, and Bell became notorious for his womanising. However, the two continued to holiday together and never officially separated.



Bell was a member of the circle of English writers and artists called the Bloomsbury Group. His most important contribution to art criticism, the theory of 'significant form', was influential for several decades. He also popularised post-impressionist art in Britain.

## ***The Expressionist Theory***

You may have identified that a problem with both the theory of aesthetic emotion and the formalist theory, is that they miss the powerful element of emotional *expression* in art – both in its creation and in its appreciation.

As well as defending the naturalness of imitating life in art, Aristotle argued that one of the main objectives of art should be to produce a release of emotion, ridding citizens of their less pleasant feelings of pity and fear. He called this purgation *catharsis*.

By contrast, Kant's idea of pleasurable, aesthetic emotion is *disinterested*; it is an emotion which does not engage us personally. Yet we all know that we value some pieces of music precisely because they capture the passion of a particular experience we have had in our lives, or move us to feel a strong mood. We sometimes say that we value a poem or novel because we 'relate' to it emotionally. Likewise, artists are directly or indirectly expressing themselves and their own emotions and experiences when they create art, even when their work is abstract.

The way that an artist manipulates formal elements certainly affects what we feel. But the formalist theory refuses to take account of the emotional states of either artist or audience. It refuses also to acknowledge the subject being represented. Yet we know that our personal responses to art can have a lot to do with *what* is being portrayed, and not just *how* it is portrayed.

Is it relevant to how we value a work, to know what circumstances an artist created it in? The theory of **expressionism** says yes. You might consider, for example, a self-portrait of Van Gogh, one ear bandaged. Expressionism says that knowing about the mental torment which drove the artist to cut off one ear is relevant to our appreciation of this work. What do you think?

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, argued that the significance of art lies in its power to *emotionally connect* the artist and the audience, and audience members with other audience members. Have you ever been to a music concert where you felt a connection with everyone else in the crowd who felt the music as strongly as you did? That is the kind of the feeling Tolstoy described, and he said that this is what makes art so special as an expression of our shared humanity.

The philosopher R.G.Collingwood (Famous Philosopher File p.526) took the expressionist theory a little further. In *The Principles of Art* (1945), he argues that it is not so much specific feelings as *psychological states* that an artist expresses in his work. An artist will work all kinds of moods into his art, without even necessarily knowing consciously what these are. Indeed, an artist may be very surprised by what ends up being expressed in an artwork.

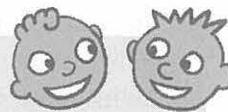


Vincent van Gogh [Public domain or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Collingwood argues that it is through the process of trying to unburden themselves of psychological states that an artist may come to understand what it actually is that they are feeling. Beyond that, an audience may or may not feel the emotional state of the artist, but to the extent that they do understand what the artwork expresses, the audience will experience and express the emotion too.

Collingwood contrasts this with when an artist starts off with the goal of arousing a specific emotion in the audience. For example, the composer of a film soundtrack will try to arouse fear or sentimentality. Collingwood says this should not be regarded as ‘art proper’, but rather as entertainment. He compares this distinction with one that could be made between art and craft; craft occurs when production aims at a pre-conceived end, whereas a work of art evolves as an artist works through a process to achieve greater understanding of their emotional states.

## DISCUSS



1. Does all art express feeling? Can you think of any works that should be counted as art but perhaps express ideas more than feelings? Where does this leave the expressionist theory?
2. Collingwood’s makes a qualification to the expressionist theory by saying that it is *unconscious psychological states* rather than intended, specific emotions which make their ways into works of art. Is this a useful adjustment to the expressionist theory? Why or why not?
3. Would you always want to share the emotions of an artist? Can you think of any cases where this would not be part of your enjoyment of a work of art?



4. In a 2009 interview, the musician Van Morrison said: ‘I do not consciously aim to take the listener anywhere. If anything, I aim to take myself there in my music. If the listener catches the wavelength of what I am saying or singing, or gets whatever point whatever line means to them, then I guess as a writer I may have done a day’s work.’ How might Collingwood analyse this statement?
5. How convincing do you find the expressionist theory of art, overall? Did you use any elements of this theory when completing the ‘Art or Not?’ exercise above? What are some advantages and disadvantages of this theory?

\* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Van\\_Morrison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Van_Morrison) accessed August 8, 2013.

### TEXT STUDY: R.G.Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (1945)



[see Useful Resources]

READ Part VI Art Proper (1) As Expression, Section 2 ‘Expressing emotion and arousing emotion’.

- Working independently or in pairs, outline the steps in Collingwood’s argument that art is primarily about expressing emotion rather than arousing emotion.

### FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

#### R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943)

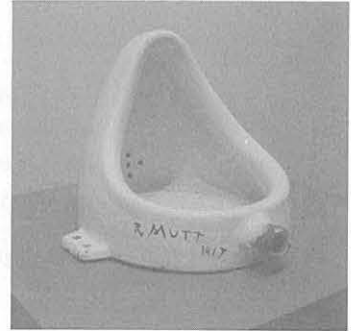
Robin George Collingwood grew up in Lancashire, England. After graduating with a congratulatory first class honours degree in Classics and Philosophy at Oxford, he was offered an academic position. He remained at Oxford for the entirety of his career. As well as a philosopher, Collingwood was an historian and archaeologist. His best known book, *The Idea of History*, is a staple text in the philosophy of history. In *The Principles of Art*, Collingwood argued, influentially, that works of art are essentially expressions of emotion. In 1940 he published *The First Mate’s Log*, recounting a yachting voyage in the Mediterranean which he had taken with a group of his students. He died only three years later, after suffering several strokes.



## The Institutional Theory

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp found a urinal, titled it *Fountain* and sent it into an art exhibition. Would you call it a work of art? In 1999, Turner Prize-nominated British artist Tracey Emin exhibited *My Bed*, an installation consisting of her own unmade, dirty bed complete with used condoms and blood-stained underwear. Is this art?

The **institutional theory** says that something is an artwork if has been given that status by a gallery owner (or publisher, producer, conductor, performer, etc) or the artist themselves. Even if the only artistic work done on the piece was to transport it to a gallery, the institutional theory argues that that affects how the item is then looked at. One gazes at a urinal in a very different way and notices features of it that one might otherwise overlook, when it appears in a gallery rather than in a public toilet.



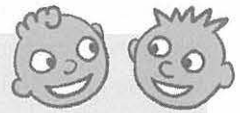
Duchamp: 'Fountain'  
By spDuchamp from Toronto, Canada  
(Fountain) [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

For something to be a work of art because someone calls it a work of art seems to some people to be a pointlessly circular claim. What persons should be entitled to christen something as art? Do they require status or education in the art world? Or if we call it art, can anything any of us does be regarded as art?

What irritates many about this theory is that it does nothing to distinguish why something should be *valued* as art or not, and it seems to encourage pretentious rubbish to be considered art to the point where the word 'art' no longer has any meaning at all.

### DISCUSS

How useful do you find the institutional theory of art? Identify at least one advantage and disadvantage. Is it a helpful theory to apply to any of the cases on our 'Art or Not' list?



### TEXT STUDY: George Dickie, 'What is Art? An Institutional Analysis' (1974)

[see Useful Resources]

READ Section III, paragraphs 1-2.

DISCUSS:

1. What is Dickie's argument in response to the question of whether a piece of driftwood and a painting by a chimpanzee should be considered art?
2. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?





## DO

Here is a philosophical thought experiment that really happened. In 2007, possibly the world's greatest violinist, Joshua Bell, played in a subway station in Washington, D.C., for 43 minutes, in front of over 1,000 people. He performed on a 300 year-old Stradivarius violin worth millions of dollars, in a space with good acoustics. He had performed a sell-out concert three days earlier, at a venue where the cheapest seats cost over \$100AU.

What do you think happened? To find out, read this article in the Washington Post, 'Pearls Before Breakfast' (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html>) and watch the video footage on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyrS0GZdFps>).

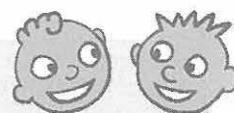
Discuss the following questions:

1. How does the context that art is presented in affect audience reception of art?
2. How does Joshua Bell's subway performance support or refute the institutionalist theory of art?

## *The Intentional Theory*

While the institutional theory emphasises the views held by the art world about a work, the **intentionalist theory** is more interested in the life and mind of the artist. This theory says that we have to know about the attitude and intentions of the artist when he or she created a work in order to be able to judge it. In some ways this theory overcomes the problem of focussing on the audience's reaction and finding it to be variable and subjective. If we focus on the artist, the theory suggests, we will have one definitive account of what the work is meant to convey, and then we can judge how successfully it does that.

However, there are problems with thinking that we can gain an objective view of an artist's state of mind or intentions. Can we ever know anyone else's mental state at any time? The idea that we can is known as the **intentional fallacy**. Indeed, do we ever really know our own mental states and intentions entirely? Sometimes what we think is our intention is actually covering up some deeper psychological motivation. And often we are unable to put into words exactly what our mood or state is. We will consider intentionalism further in our next Theme.



## DISCUSS

1. Should the artist be considered separately from the work of art itself, or do you think knowing about its artist is relevant to whether we value something as art?
2. Is it really fallacious to assume that knowledge of an artist's intentions will illuminate our understanding of an artwork?

## Activities on the Theories of Art



### DO

Revisit your classifications of the items from the ‘Art or Not?’ exercise on page 515. Now consider which theory or theories might be helpful or unhelpful in deciding whether or not something should be valued as art.



### DO

Make an excursion to a local gallery such as the National Gallery of Victoria. Alternatively take a virtual, online, excursion. Most large galleries have websites which feature their entire permanent collections. (For example: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/ngv-collection>).

Select a range of at least 10 works, of different media if possible. For example, you might consider paintings, drawings, sculptures, furniture, jewellery, installations, fashion design, photography, textiles and multimedia. Consider the questions, *what makes these works of art?* and *what makes them of value?* Assess the helpfulness of the theories outlined above when judging these works. You could record your findings in a table as below:

WORK	THEORY	Theory of Aesthetic Emotion	Expressionist Theory	Representational Theory: Imitation	Representational Theory: Conveys Truth	Institutional Theory	Intentional Theory	Subjectivist Theory	Beautiful	Other Notes, Ideas and Questions
Work 1										
Work 2										
Work 3										
Etc										



### WRITE

1. Which of the theories of art do you find most and least convincing? Justify your answer, with reference to specific examples of works of art.
2. Is it possible to define what art is and why it should be valued? Why or why not?

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## What is the Value of Art?

### *Evaluating Art*

Moving on from the kinds of objects we might regard as art, we shall now consider some further questions of judgement. How can we evaluate the merits or otherwise of artworks? What makes one thing ‘good art’ and another thing ‘bad art’? These questions will be explored in further detail in Theme 4 of this Chapter when we address the interpretation of art, but it is appropriate to tie some of the current Theme’s threads to these questions, too.

We have already considered the extreme subjectivist view that all aesthetic judgments are equally worthy. Then there is David Hume’s proposal that consensus by informed, experienced, unprejudiced individuals, preferably gathered over time, is the best way to decide matters of ‘taste’.

Kant believed we simply cannot formulate rules by which to assess art, but must rely on the disinterested kind of pleasure we get from an artwork. His theory focuses on the perceiver of the artwork rather than the artwork itself. So too do theories which look to the power of the emotional response in the perceiver in order to judge art. ‘It moves me so it must be great,’ does not seem a ridiculous way to judge an artwork, but it has limitations if we are looking for more objectively valid judgments.

Other theories have focused on the artworks themselves, reasoning that perhaps **aesthetic properties** – or the various expressions we might use to describe seemingly subjective qualities in art such as *beautiful, ugly, graceful, tragic, boring, lively, powerful, sentimental, joyful* – might themselves arise from the objectively quantifiable **non-aesthetic properties** or **formal properties** such as size, proportions, colours, pitches, sounds, movements and so on.

The formalist view, proposed by Aristotle and extended by others such as Clive Bell, argues that an artwork’s formal properties – their arrangement and their relationship to one another – are an indication of the work’s success. But even Bell relies on the provocation of aesthetic emotion by such features in order to assess their effect, and this takes us back to the subjectivist questions asked of other theories.

As we learned in the first part of this Theme, between approximately 1700 and 1900, beauty was considered the most important feature by which to judge a work of art. But we have also learned that judgments of beauty are just as fraught, and in similar ways, to judgments about whether something is art and whether it is any good.

So are there any objective criteria by which artworks can be judged?

### **BEAUTY AND PROPORTION: THE GOLDEN RATIO**

If you study art, you may already have thought of a way in which beauty and form are brought together: in the so-called Golden Ratio.

The pre-Socratic thinker Pythagoras (570-495BCE) believed that mathematics was the primary ordering principle of the universe. Therefore he believed mathematics to be responsible for the creation of beauty, too, arguing that beauty arises from mathematical harmony, order and regularity. Certainly Pythagoras showed that the musical intervals which are most pleasing to the ear are produced by particular mathematical ratios, and it seemed sensible to propose that other arts might be guided by similar principles.

The so-called Golden Ratio, or *phi*  $\phi$  – 1:1.61803399... – was a source of fascination for Pythagoras as well as for ancient mathematician Euclid, the medieval astronomer Kepler, renaissance painter Leonardo daVinci and innumerable others.

## DO

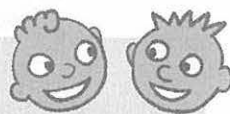


1. Label the line above as 'A'.
2. Divide the line so that the shorter section ('B') has a ratio of around 1:1.6 to the longer section ('C').
3. Now notice that the ratio between A and B is that same as that between B and C.
4. Now keep dividing the line in the same way. What do you notice about the ratios?
5. Now google 'golden ratio image' or 'golden ratio nature image' or 'golden ratio art image'. Describe what you see.

This phenomenon of constant ratios has excited artists as much as mathematicians, because it is argued that *phi* is objectively beautiful. It shows up in nature in spiral forms such as shells, in the patterns on butterfly wings and in some flowers. It has been employed across all artforms. Consistent with the theory that the golden ratio is some kind of guarantee of beauty in a human face, it is even used by cosmetic surgeons.

But there is surely more to the story of beauty than a single, simple ratio. What do you think?

## DISCUSS



1. Is there any such thing as a single 'guarantee' of objective beauty? And how might we go about establishing an answer to such a question?
2. What are some limitations to a mathematically generated formula of beauty?



### DO

Imagine that a centuries-old collection of artworks is uncovered in an underground vault. The works are in pristine, original condition and many of the greatest European masters are represented: Michelangelo, Raphael, El Greco, Caravaggio, Rembrandt. The discovery makes headlines worldwide but only comes to your attention when you are mysteriously identified as the last living relative of the paintings' owner.

What do you value about this discovery?

- a. At auction, each one of these paintings would be worth millions of dollars. (For example, in December 2012, a bidder paid 29.7 million pounds, or 50 million AUD, for a Raphael drawing, and in your possession are more valuable pieces than this). You have become a billionaire.
- b. The paintings are extraordinarily beautiful. When you first see them they take your breath away. You linger for several minutes at each of the canvasses, awed by their power.
- c. These works are moving not just to you, but to almost anyone who sees them. Their creators have been admired through the centuries and the canvasses now in your possession are considered of value not only to you, but to all humanity.
- d. In and of themselves – *intrinsically* – these paintings are of worth, as unique creations.
- e. The paintings depict historical scenes and are thus valuable historical documents.

### DISCUSS

1. What do you decide to do with these paintings and why?
  - You sell the lot, happily exchanging them for other commodities such as houses, cars and luxury holidays.
  - You donate the collection to a museum or gallery, allowing them to be appreciated by art historians and the general public.
  - You keep the paintings as your own private possessions, taking daily pleasure in their great beauty.
2. Defend your choices to your classmates.
3. What does this activity indicate about your views on the value of art?

## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: THE VALUE OF THE ARTS



Attribution: Alexander Sheko



Attribution: Jes Mugley

Australia's federal, state and local governments all contribute a proportion of taxpayers' money to funding the arts.

Why are the arts of value to society? Work alone or in a group to consider the following questions. You could enrich this activity with an excursion to locations of artistic interest that are supported by local or state governments, including sites such as galleries, street sculpture, and other art spaces.

1. What artistic endeavours are supported by government funding? Make your list as comprehensive as possible.
2. What kinds of benefits does the community gain from these endeavours? Why should we value the arts in our community?
3. How should the value we place on the arts compare with the value we place on other community needs – for example: sport; health; support for disadvantaged and homeless people; scientific research?

## ***Aesthetics in Everyday Life and Popular Culture***

This Theme has tended to draw upon examples from the so-called *fine arts* or 'high art': the kinds of paintings and sculptures we find in museums, classical music, opera and dance, and traditional theatre. Of course your own discussions may have been far more inclusive of contemporary forms, such as film, photography, popular music and even graffiti. Art is everywhere. Is it at all useful to draw distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art, and what about more domestic endeavours such as interior decorating and cooking – are these artforms as well? What about hairdressing, make-up and the imagery used in advertising? There is even a branch of aesthetics which analyses the beauty and pleasure we find in nature and the environment. However, these investigations fall beyond what we have space for in this Theme.

### **DO**

- What do the terms 'high art' and 'low art' mean, and how are they used?
- Do you think these are legitimate and helpful categories? Why or why not?





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## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### **Assessment Task One: Written Reflection**

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Do you think that all art should be valued equally? Are some types of art more worthy of value than others?
2. Should a distinction be made between art and entertainment? If so, on what basis?
3. Should a distinction be made between art and craft? If so, on what basis?
4. Can any art be universally appealing?
5. Should we separate art from the context in which it was created? Why or why not?
6. Is the purpose of art to inform us of profound truths?
7. Are photography, heavy metal music, graffiti and landscape gardening all art forms? Why or why not?
8. What is required for something to be considered a work of art?
9. Should mimicry of reality be seen as a merit of an artwork? Why or why not?
10. What is relationship between art and the reality it represents?
11. What is aesthetic enjoyment? Have you experienced aesthetic emotion as Kant described it?
12. Is form all that we value and respond to about art?
13. Does all art express emotions? Should we try to interpret art in the light of the artist's intention?
14. Does something have to move us emotionally to be good art?
15. If something appears in a gallery, should we regard it as art?
16. Is it possible to produce a satisfactory definition for what art is?
17. What is the nature of beauty?
18. Is beauty necessary or desirable in art?
19. What value do the arts have to society?
20. Explore another question which has sparked your interest while studying this Theme.

### **Assessment Task Two: Essay**

TOPIC: When should something be valued as a work of art? Discuss at least three theories of art, and make reference to specific examples of artworks (or potential artworks) in your response.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### **Assessment Task Three: Dialogue**

Write a dialogue between two or more people who are visiting a gallery and debating the artistic merits of various items on display. Your dialogue should give a fair airing to the strong points of at least three theories of art, as well as challenging the problems of each theory.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Research Task and Oral Presentation***

The gallery excursion (or virtual excursion) activity on page 529 OR the Relevant Contemporary Debate activity on page 533 can be used as the basis of a written analysis or oral presentation.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses***

Complete a task which asks for medium-answer explanations of the various theories outlined in this Theme.

### ***Assessment Task Six: Written Analysis***

Answer a series of short-answer questions relating to one of the primary texts you have studied in this Theme.

## THEME 4

# On the Interpretation of Art Works

Our previous Theme considered the nature of art and its value. However, often underlying our assessments of art are questions of interpretation. What does a work of art actually *mean*? Should we look for meaning at all? And where and how should we look for it? Can works of art carry moral meanings? These questions are our focus in this Theme.

As with our previous Theme, it will be useful to draw on any experiences of art available to you. The term 'art' covers a multitude of forms, including novels, poetry, plays, songs, all styles of music, dance, sculpture, installation, film, photography, graphic design, architecture, painting, drawing and animation. Reflecting on your past and present encounters with these artforms, as well as organising new experiences of art – such as a visit to a local gallery – will enhance your philosophical exploration of how we find meaning in art.

### ***Introductory Activities***



#### **DO**

Working by yourself, study the following image and write your own answers to the questions beneath.

1. Describe what you see in this painting.
2. What do you think the artist is trying to depict in this painting?
3. Does this painting have a particular point of view? Could it be said that this painting contains an argument? Why or why not?
4. Do you recognise this painting and its artist? How does that recognition – or lack thereof – affect the way you approach the image?



Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) is among the most famous paintings of the twentieth century. Picasso created it during the Spanish Civil War in response to the bombings of a small town named Guernica in northern Spain.

The painting is generally interpreted as a depiction of the suffering which war inflicts upon innocent civilians. It has become world famous as an indictment of war.

But is this the only interpretation possible? And is it the only correct interpretation?

### DO

Survey your class to find out which students were acquainted with *Guernica* prior to the exercise above, and which students were encountering it for the first time. How did the 'naïve' interpretations compare with the 'informed' ones?



If you are encountering *Guernica* for the first time, what do you see? Do you see images of war, terror, violence, chaos and suffering? Do you read a political message? If you see something quite different from the orthodox interpretation of this work, who is to say yours is not a valid interpretation, an equally important way of finding meaning in this artwork?

And what is the status of the view communicated by Picasso's painting? Is this just as powerful an indictment of war as a philosophical argument for pacifism? Or can it be said that Picasso has produced a philosophical argument – and if so, what are its premises and conclusions?

### THINK

Can art be philosophy? Can it be said to produce arguments? Can you think of other relevant examples to draw into this discussion?

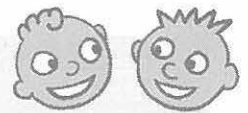


# Arbiters of Meaning: Author, Text or Audience?

## Intentionalism

Picasso himself stated that his purpose in painting *Guernica* was to bring international attention to the bombing of civilians by Germans, who were supporting General Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso was inspired by an eyewitness report by journalist George Steer, published in both the *New York Times* and *The Times*, two days after the bombings. Within six weeks, Picasso, working in Paris, had completed the massive mural-size canvas, and the painting spent the next several years touring the globe and gaining the exposure its artist hoped for. Picasso expressed his wish that *Guernica* should not come to Spain, his country of origin, until freedom and democracy had been re-established. It arrived in Spain in 1981 and now hangs in the Reina Sofia Gallery, Madrid.

For those who follow the **intentionalist** theory of art, this information about *Guernica*'s context and Picasso's intentions is crucial if we are to make an accurate interpretation of the artwork. According to the intentionalist theory, if we can obtain knowledge about the artist, his life, his intentions and state of mind when he created a particular work of art, we will have the definitive and authoritative account of what the work is meant to convey. We can then judge how successfully it achieves these aims. In other words, intentionalism says that a work of art means whatever its creator intended it to mean.



### DISCUSS

1. In your opinion, how relevant to the *meaning* of the painting *Guernica* is contextual information?
2. Does knowledge of Picasso's stated intentions in painting *Guernica* enhance your appreciation for the work?
3. Does knowledge of Picasso's intentions in painting *Guernica* make alternative interpretations *wrong*?
4. In what ways might the intentionalist theory be problematic? Brainstorm a list of responses on your classroom whiteboard.

## KANT, THE ROMANTICS AND THE AUTHORITY OF GENIUS

One of the defining features of the so-called Romantic era – spanning the nineteenth century – was the elevation of the artist to the status of heroic and inspired *genius*. This was the word used by Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111) in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant argued that because art does not follow rules, artistic talent cannot be taught. It must therefore be innate and intuitive. The artist of Romantic imagination was a driven by special sensitivity and insight. The implication of this view for interpreting works of art is that the artist has unique authority, which should be revered.

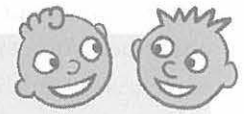
You will no doubt be familiar with this idea, as it still resonates today. R.G.Collingwood (Famous Philosopher File p.526), whose work we read about in the previous Theme, was clearly influenced by Romanticism. In arguing that the worth of a piece of art lies in its expression of the artist's emotion, Collingwood implies that (a) the artist has an emotional intensity which the rest of us would benefit from sharing in, and (b) to understand or value the artwork, we need some insight into the state of mind of the artist (see Text Study, p.526).



## WRITE

1. What is the 'Romantic' view of the artist? Describe it in a couple of sentences.
2. Reflect upon the way you regard creators in various artforms (for example, your favourite authors, actors, directors, musicians and so on). To what extent do you subscribe to this Romantic view? Why?

## DISCUSS



*When the news broke in 2007 it caused a sensation through news media worldwide. After reading from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows at New York's Carnegie Hall, author J. K. Rowling took questions from her audience of 1,600 students. In response to a query about Dumbledore's love life, Rowling replied, 'My truthful answer to you... I always thought of Dumbledore as gay.'*<sup>\*</sup>

*Rowling's stunned audience took its time to recover from the bombshell before bursting into applause. Within minutes, international headlines screamed, 'Dumbledore is gay!'*

*Rowling explained to her Carnegie Hall audience that when reading a film script for one of her books, she had to reject a newly created Dumbledore back-story about a supposed past crush on a girl, scribbling 'Dumbledore is gay!' in the margin.*



How are we to take this new data about a fictional character? Does Rowling, as author, have unique authority to banish alternative interpretations with a 'fact' about her creation, Dumbledore?

1. Is it a 'fact' that Dumbledore is gay if J.K.Rowling says he is?
2. Should interpretations of the Harry Potter books which differ from Rowling's be considered wrong?

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<sup>\*</sup> *'Dumbledore was gay, JK tells amazed fans'* by David Smith, Sunday 21st October 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/oct/21/film.books> (accessed September 1st, 2013)

## ***Anti-Intentionalism***

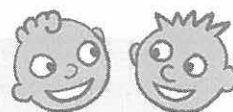
### **T.S.ELIOT, NEW CRITICISM AND THE ‘INTENTIONAL FALLACY’**

In a reaction against the subjectivism of the Romantics, the poet T.S.Eliot published a landmark work of literary criticism in 1919. His essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, rejects the Romantic obsession with the character of the artist, and argues that the only authority on the meaning of a poem is the poem itself. The artist ‘surrenders’ his work after its creation, according to Eliot. Eliot’s arguments inspired the so-called **New Criticism** movement of the 1920s and 30s, which regarded works of art as **autonomous** entities and emphasised close analysis of their internal rather than external features.

Reflecting the New Criticism in many ways, literary theorist W.K. Wimsatt and philosopher Monroe Beardsley published ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ in 1954, arguing – to quote the essay’s final sentence – that ‘critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle’ – that is, the artist. There is always a problem of access when it comes to an artist’s intention, they contend. We can never be fully sure of an artist’s complete state of mind when they created a work of art. An artist’s ideas about her work should thus be considered just one valid interpretation among many. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, when assessing the validity of competing interpretations we should ask questions such as which one best matches the evidence in the text, and which interpretation allows for the richest and most coherent reading.

On this way of viewing an artwork, its meaning belongs neither to the author nor the reader, but to the art, in itself, separate from its context. The art yields a fixed set of possible meanings, regardless of when it is read or by whom.

#### **DISCUSS**



1. One of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s objections to intentionalism is that we cannot always be sure of an artist’s intention. Is this a strong objection? Is there any way it can be overcome to save the intentionalist view?
2. Should we completely reject contextual information when looking for meaning in works of art? Why or why not?

## TEXT STUDY: William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946)



[see Useful Resources]

READ Section I of the essay.

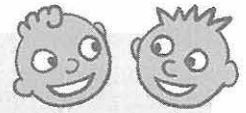
1. What set of assumptions make up what Wimsatt and Beardsley call 'the intentional fallacy'?
2. What are some implications of the view that 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art'?
3. What do Wimsatt and Beardsley argue is the difficulty of inferring an author's intention through studying his/her work?
4. What does it mean to say that 'a poem should not mean but be'?
5. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, can an author's original intention be revised? Why or why not?
6. In what sense may a poem/work of art be said to be a public document?
7. Might there be other justifications for studying the social and publication context of a text in addition to a concern with its author's intentions?
8. Does this essay provide valuable insights on the interpretation of artworks? Which of its points do you find persuasive and why? On what grounds might this essay be criticised?

## ROLAND BARTHES: DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

Like Wimsatt and Beardsley, Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* (1967) rejects the Romantic view of the artist as the supreme arbiter of meaning. But Barthes (1915-1980) went further still, denying the author any role in the ongoing interpretation of her work. According to Barthes, the author is 'dead' once her creation is released to the public. To think otherwise is to 'close' the work. For Barthes, the text is 'open' and perpetually recreated every time it is read. It is 'played' like a game or a musical instrument, with readers as active participants in the production of meaning. The meanings of a text (or work of art) lie in the multiplicity of expanding interpretations made by its readers.

Barthes' ideas foreshadowed the themes of **post-structuralism**. Michael Foucault's 'What is an Author?' (1969) further diminishes the status of the author. Like Barthes, Foucault (Famous Philosopher File p.543) rejects views such as those of Eliot, the New Critics and Wimsatt and Beardsley, who hold the text up as the authority of its own meaning. Rather, for Foucault and post-structuralist reading, the *reader* is the authority. Indeed, each act of reading creates a new work, because, as the post-structuralist argues, every reader brings a vast web of inter-relating meanings and associations to each encounter they have with a text or artwork. On this account, Rowling's reading of Dumbledore has no special status whatever, and each reader is free to 'play' with the stories of Harry Potter as they will. Each time you read Harry Potter you will interact with it in a new way. Foucault argues that it is only because we fear the vast proliferation of alternative meanings that we try to fix meaning to a single authorial source.





## DISCUSS

1. What does it mean to argue that an author is 'dead' once they have produced their work? *Should* we consider the author 'dead' when encountering their work? Why or why not?
2. Working with a partner, do the following:
  - a. Explain to each other what Foucault means when he argues that a new text or work of art is produced every time it is 'read'.
  - b. Try to think up as many arguments in support of this view as you can. Draw on examples if possible. Write down the arguments you produce.
  - c. Still working in your pair, critically evaluate Foucault's view. How is it problematic? If a new work is created with each reading, is it possible for us to discuss any work of art?
  - d. Share your pair's responses with the whole class.



## TEXT STUDY: Michael Foucault, 'What is an Author?' (1969)

[see Useful Resources]

READ the following excerpt:

*How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world? The answer is: One can reduce it with the author. The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches but also with one's discourses and their significations. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning. As a result, we must entirely reverse the traditional idea of the author. We are accustomed, as we have seen earlier, to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations. We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely.*

*The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inserts it, one has an ideological production. The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.*

1. What is Foucault's argument regarding the author's function, in this passage?
2. Is he right?

\* Michael Foucault, 'What is an Author?' 1984, (trans. J.V.Harari) in *The Foucault Reader* (ed. P. Rainbow, Pantheon, N.Y.), pp.118-19.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Michel Foucault (1926–1984)

Foucault was born in Poitiers, France, into an upper middle class family. He was a brilliant, though troubled student, and his periods of intellectual productivity alternated with deep depressions. He led a wild life in the Parisian gay scene of the 1960s, taking experimental drugs and pushing sexual boundaries. During this time he held a series of positions at French universities, and then became Professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the prestigious Collège de France, a position he retained until his death. He was politically active, often protesting on behalf of marginalised groups. He was an early victim of AIDS, succumbing to the disease at age 57. Foucault has been as influential in sociology, psychology and history as in philosophy.



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## JACQUES DERRIDA AND DECONSTRUCTION

Post-structuralism offers a radical take on the interpretation of artworks. Jacques Derrida (Famous Philosopher File p.545) continued the destabilisation of artistic authority with his method of **deconstruction**. For Derrida there is no fixed meaning in texts. All texts allow for multiple valid meanings and there can be no arbiter of these, even when there are contradictory

and conflicting elements. For Derrida, interpretation is a play of known with unknown, presence with absence. Meanings form through constant processes of *differing* and *deferring*, or what Derrida termed *différance*.

*Différance* is the word coined by Derrida to contain two of deconstruction's key principles – 'defer' and 'differ' – at once. (In French these are two meanings of the same verb, *différer*.) Firstly, elements of **signification** (for example, words in language, or brushstrokes in painting) only take meaning from the ways that they *differ* from other elements. Secondly, our understanding of meaning is always *deferred* from one signification to the next. If you look up a word in a dictionary, you will be directed to other words which can in turn be looked up, and so on without end. Thus, *différance* describes a perpetual dance of traces of meaning, always resisting capture.



## DO

1. Explain to a partner your understanding of *différance*.
2. Discuss with your partner: is Derrida right that meaning can never be pinned down?



## TEXT STUDY: Jacques Derrida, 'Ellipsis' (1967)

[see Useful Resources]

1. Quietly read through your own copy of 'Ellipsis'.
2. Take part in a 'silent discussion', as follows:
  - a. Cut a master copy of Derrida's essay up into paragraphs. Each paragraph is to be pasted on to a sheet of A3 paper and these laid out on desks around the room. (*Note: Link the italicised sections to the paragraphs that precede them, rather than treating them as separate paragraphs.*)
  - b. Students should now spread out among the paragraphs. At a starting signal, take five minutes to study a paragraph. Annotate the page with a response such as one or more of the following:
    - Your interpretation of what Derrida is saying;
    - A relevant question to ask Derrida;
    - A relevant comment;
    - A link to the commentary you have read about Derrida's theory in this textbook or elsewhere.
3. At the end of five minutes, all students should move to a new page to consider as above. This process may be repeated 2, 3 or 4 times.

4. Now, select a sentence from one of the paragraphs you have read, which you think is both pertinent to Derrida's main thesis and interesting for discussion. Six volunteers should write their selections on the whiteboard.
5. Have a whole-class discussion about the six sentences written on the whiteboard.
6. Now reflect in your workbook:
  - a. In your own words, what have you gathered from 'Ellipsis' about what Derrida has to say on the interpretation of artworks?
  - b. How useful or persuasive is Derrida's view on the interpretation of artworks?
  - c. Compare Derrida's view on the interpretation of artworks with one other view we have examined. Whose view do you find most convincing?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)

Jacques Derrida was born in French Algeria. He moved to Paris for university studies, where he was influenced by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Of most interest for Derrida was analysis of the writing of philosophy itself. During the 1960s, he taught at the Sorbonne University and published several articles, appealing particularly to left-wing, avant-garde audiences. These essays would be precursors to Derrida's highly influential works, *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*. In 1967, Derrida delivered a lecture to great acclaim at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore, US, and from this point he would divide his time between universities in Paris and America. The radical process of deconstruction, which Derrida initiated, cast Western philosophy in a new light and exposed presuppositions not previously interrogated. His work remains controversial; in 1992 a proposal to award him an honorary doctorate at Cambridge University was met with protests by many of Britain's most prominent philosophers. However, there is no doubting Derrida's influence, which remains strong across nearly all areas of academia.



## ART AS CULTURAL PRACTICE AND POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

For post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, writing as well as reading are **cultural practices**. This means that whenever we interpret an artwork, we necessarily bring to our reading a huge amount of baggage, including personal, political, historical and social positions. No reading is ‘innocent’ or unbiased; interpretations always inescapably represent the ideologies of their creators.

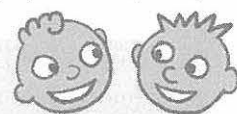
Furthermore, all cultural artefacts can be considered **texts**. A cereal box, a television advertisement, a painting, your pencil-case, your sister’s skateboard... all these are ‘texts’ because they carry meaning which can be ‘read’ or interpreted; they each speak to us in different ways and tell us something about our world. All texts are additionally **intertextual** because nothing stands alone – all human artefacts reference other artefacts, at least in the minds of those who ‘read’ them.

These insights have inspired various political modes of analysis. Recognising that an interpretation will always expose the preoccupations of the reader, disciplines such as literary criticism and art criticism have, since the 1970s, embraced methods of Marxist, psycho-analytic and feminist criticism. To make such a reading is to declare the lens of interpretation through which you will view a text. A Marxist reading foregrounds issues of power, viewing human history as a series of struggles around class and means of production. Art thus becomes a product of social relations in which some voices are ‘privileged’ and others silenced.

Gendered readings of art, including feminist and queer readings, similarly recognise power relations implicit in texts. Accepting that women have been oppressed and excluded by patriarchy leads to realisations about how this is reflected and perpetuated in artworks. Feminism has also further undermined the views of Romanticism and the New Criticism. The Romantic view of artist as heroic genius almost entirely excluded women, argues art historian Linda Nochlin in her essay, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ (1971). And while anti-intentionalist theories aim to eliminate from consideration any factors outside the text itself, the feminist movement has argued that in practice, this is very difficult, if not impossible, to do. Presumptions about power and gender are among the kinds of baggage which critics have shown themselves incapable of putting aside, argues philosopher Anne Eaton in ‘Feminist Philosophy of Art’ (2008).

### DISCUSS

Is it possible to escape our biases and make a disinterested reading of a work of art?



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# Historical and Theoretical Contexts Of Meaning

## *Hegel's Historicism*

A towering figure in the history of philosophy, and in aesthetics in particular, is G.W.F.Hegel (Famous Philosopher File p.548). Influenced by fellow German, Immanuel Kant (Famous Philosopher File p.111), Hegel in turn left a rich and influential legacy in aesthetic theory.

In his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1835), Hegel developed an **historicist** theory of art, arguing that art can only be understood as art if it participates in a particular historical and theoretical context. For example, for most of its history, art has been understood as direct representation, or imitation, of reality (*mimesis* in Greek). To be an artist in this tradition is to subscribe to a particular theory in which progress is defined as decreasing the gap between representation and reality.

Perhaps you have looked at a painting and exclaimed, 'That's so good, it looks just like a photograph!' According to Hegel's theory of progress in art, this is highest praise for an artist operating within the mimetic theory. But with the advent of photography and cinema, where was there for representationist art to go?

In Hegel's own time – the Romantic era – the mimetic theory was overtaken by expressionism. The new explanation for what art and art history were all about was expression of emotion. But while it is easy to define progress within representationism, it is not so easy to identify what constitutes progress in expressionist art. It seems to be a succession of artists' lives and emotions rather than a sustained project with any common, enduring goal.

Hegel argued that in the absence of one shared aim – such as that of representing an objectively recognisable truth or reality – modern art would require interpretation and theory to explain it. That is, it would require philosophy. Indeed, it would *become* philosophy. If the meaning of art is no longer self-evident, it will constantly invite analysis, justification, reflection ... in short, it will be subsumed into philosophy. Art will remain art, but it will cease to stand alone; it will always need some philosophical support for its legitimacy. From something essentially sensuous, it has become cerebral. For Hegel, this was the 'end of art'.

Of course, art did not end with expressionism. But since Hegel's time, there has been a succession of artistic movements (if we consider painting, in particular): naturalism, impressionism, realism, pointillism, Fauvism, cubism, surrealism, futurism, vorticism, synchronism, abstractionism, Dada, pop- and op-art, minimalism, conceptualism, photo realism, neo-expressionism, ...the list goes on. Not all of these movements were expressions of particular philosophies. But perhaps Hegel is right about modern art inviting a greater level of interpretation by its audiences.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831)

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born in Stuttgart, Germany. He was barely three when his mother started teaching him Latin, and he had a thorough knowledge of Greek, Roman, English and German classic literature, as well as science, by the time he was 10. Sadly, his mother died when he was 11 of a fever which young Hegel was lucky to survive. According to his mother's wishes, Hegel studied for the priesthood, alongside the poet Friedrich Hölderlin and philosopher F.W.J. von Schelling, who were both profound influences, and led him to study Kant. However, Hegel's criticisms of orthodox religion led him away from the Church and after completing an M.A. degree he took various tutoring posts. When his father died he had enough money to fund a stint as an unsalaried lecturer at Jena University. After attaining a professorship in 1805, Hegel published his first major work, *the Phenomenology of Spirit*. With the closing of the University due to the victory of the French in Prussia, Hegel had to seek employment elsewhere, so he took a job as editor of a newspaper and then became headmaster of a high school where he also taught philosophy. During this time Hegel married, had children, and published his *Science of Logic* in three volumes. After the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, Hegel became Professor of Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg and then Professor of Philosophy at the University of Berlin, where he would remain until his death. Hegel's earnest teaching style earned him the nickname 'Old Man'. Nevertheless, students flocked from far and wide to hear Hegel, as by this time he had become famous and influential. He held various public positions and in 1830 was elected Rector of the University. Hegel died of cholera at age 61. His writing has been immensely influential, most notably upon Karl Marx.





## DO

Locate images (or in the case of D, a description) of the following artworks. You may wish to research some or all of them further. Your teacher may suggest alternative works.

- a. *Mona Lisa* – Leonardo da Vinci
- b. *L.H.O.O.Q.* – Marcel Duchamp
- c. *Fountain* – Marcel Duchamp
- d. *4'33"* – John Cage (composer)
- e. *Brillo boxes* – Andy Warhol
- f. *Water Lilies* – Claude Monet

1. Can all these artworks be enjoyed in and of themselves, for their sensuous properties alone? Why or why not?
2. Do some or all of these artworks suggest or require some kind of interpretation, analysis or *philosophy*? Why or why not?
3. Does something cease to be art if it depends upon philosophy for its significance?



## ***A.C. Danto and the Artworld***

Philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto (Famous Philosopher File p.552) took up many of Hegel's ideas when contemplating modern art. He was interested in questions of what make something art, and the degree to which modern art depends upon theory and philosophy in order to be considered art.



Danto was particularly perplexed by the **ready-mades** of Andre Duchamp and Andy Warhol. Ready-mades, or 'found objects', are items not usually intended as art but which an artist places in an artistic context – such as a gallery – and designates as art. The most famous of these is probably Michel Duchamp's *Fountain*, a urinal the artist bought from a hardware store and displayed on a gallery pedestal. Many critics refused to acknowledge items such as these as artworks, because they were not original creations by the artist. It would seem that Duchamp himself intended to demonstrate some kind of end to art, contending that most modern art had become pretentious and meaningless.

In his book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), Danto presents a thought experiment. Consider a gallery in which nine, apparently identical, red canvasses are displayed. The canvasses are all painted a uniform red but they each have different histories. Of these canvasses, Danto asks many questions. In particular, he is interested in the role of context, theory and philosophy, (a) in making these canvasses artwork in the first place, and (b), in giving them significance and merit.



## DO

### DANTO'S RED CANVAS THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Consider the following scenario in small groups.

*Walking through the city with a group of friends, you all decide to go inside a small gallery. There are just nine paintings in this gallery, each hanging on a different wall. As far as you can tell, all nine paintings are identical.*

*However, from the gallery notes, you learn the following:*

- i. *Painting 1 is titled Red Square and was painted by a Russian artist also known for his anti-Bolshevik activities during the Russian Revolution (during which Moscow's central plaza, 'Red Square', had a focal role).*
- ii. *Painting 2 was once described by the philosopher Kierkegaard as of Israelites crossing the red sea.*
- iii. *Painting 3 is by a Danish portraitist and is titled, Kierkegaard's Mood.*
- iv. *Painting 4 is not intended to be art yet, but it has been primed with red base paint for future use by the famous painter Giorgione.*
- v. *Painting 5 is labelled: Untitled.*
- vi. *Painting 6 is a canvas that has accidentally had red paint spilled on it.*
- vii. *Painting 7 is titled Nirvana.*
- viii. *Painting 8 is titled Red Table Cloth and is by a student of famous French artist, Matisse.*
- ix. *Painting 9 is titled Red Square.*

- a. Should all of these canvasses be considered in the same way? Should all of them be considered art? Try to reach a consensus view in your group. If they are art, what is it that makes them so?
- b. One of the members of your group refuses to look at the gallery notes. 'If I have to read about these paintings in order to appreciate them, they're no good as art!' objects your friend. Is she right?
- c. What is the significance of *interpretation* when encountering canvasses such as these?

Share your group's views with the class.

According to Danto, to see something as art depends on a surrounding context of artistic theory, which is necessarily located within historical understanding. Art, he says, depends upon theories in order to exist. Without theories, these red canvasses would just be red canvasses and nothing more. Theories are so powerful, they can detach objects from the real world and make them participate in a different world – the Artworld – a world of things we study, analyse, interpret and look for significance in, in particular ways.

Echoing Hegel in his reflections on modern art's relationship with theory, Danto writes:

*Now if we look at the art of our recent past ...what we see is something which depends more and more upon theory for its existence as art, so that theory is not something external to a world it seeks to understand: hence in understanding its object it has to understand itself. But there is another feature exhibited by these late productions which is that the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity, so that virtually all there is at the end is theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness.'*<sup>51</sup>

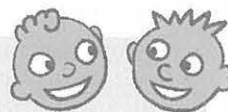
### THINK

What does Danto mean in the last sentence quoted above?



### DISCUSS

To what extent does Picasso's *Guernica* rely on 'theory' in order to be considered art?



51 Arthur Danto, 1981, 'The Transformation of the Commonplace' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 33, Issue 2 (Winter, 1974), p.142.



## TEXT STUDY: Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld' (1964)

[see Useful Resources]

READ Section III.

What is the difference between the Brillo boxes in the gallery and those on the stockroom floor, according to Danto? Why is one art and the other not?

What is your view of Danto's distinction?



Brillo Boxes by Andy Warhol, 1964

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Arthur C. Danto (1924–2013)

Arthur C. Danto was an American philosopher, probably best known for his influential art criticism in weekly magazine *The Nation*. Danto's academic career began with studies in philosophy at Columbia University in New York, took him to Paris on a Fullbright scholarship and then brought him back to Columbia, where he held numerous positions between 1951 and his death in 2013. His philosophical writings have spanned aesthetics, philosophy of history and philosophical psychology, with particular interests in the work of Hegel, Schopenhauer and Merleau-Ponty. He is the author of over 20 books on philosophy and art.



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## WRITE

What is the relationship between art and philosophy? Can art be free of philosophy?

Use examples in a discussion of these questions.

## Art and Symbolic Meaning

### *Susanne Langer: Art as Presentational Symbol*

Susanne Langer (Famous Philosopher File p.555), one of America's foremost twentieth century philosophers, outlined her philosophy of art in two major works: *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) and *Form and Feeling* (1953). Langer challenged the traditional approaches of aesthetics and asked new questions about the primal human need to find expression through symbols.

Langer's central idea is that works of art are symbolic representations of human emotion. To Langer, art is a fundamental human activity, just as important as the use of language.

However, to Langer, our ordinary 'discursive' language – progressing in linear, logical fashion, adhering to grammatical structures – captures only a limited portion of human experience, and is inadequate for expressing what we sense and feel. It follows that what art expresses cannot be put into words. Unlike words, which each refer to their commonly understood definitions, Langer says artworks, in capturing individual experiences, do not conform to rules of reference. Instead, art is 'presentational'; it *presents* an artist's 'life of feeling' whose meaning an observer can only grasp through immediate intuition of the *whole*. Langer says it is not possible to build up an interpretation of an artwork by examining its parts in isolation. You could develop an interpretation of a paragraph written in a foreign language by looking up one word at a time in a translation dictionary. However, as Langer explains, an element used in one painting or piece of music may be used to impart an entirely different meaning elsewhere. Therefore, artworks must be interpreted as complete symbolic forms in themselves.

However, Langer further argues that there is a 'logical form' which connects elements of an artwork and the emotional life it symbolises. This is what enables us to connect intuitively with works of art. For example, in music we recognise patterns of expansion and contraction, flowing and stalling, tension and resolution, speed and deceleration, calm and excitement, which all share 'logical form' with aspects of universal human feeling. A musician as well as a philosopher, Langer took particular interest in music as a 'presentational symbol' of inner, emotional being.



## WRITE

1. What do you take to be the key points of Langer's theory of art and its interpretation?
2. How helpful is Langer's theory in understanding how to interpret art?



## TEXT STUDY: Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (1953)

[see Useful Resources]

READ the following excerpt:

*A work of art differs from all other beautiful things in that it is 'a glass and a transparency' – not, in any relevant way, a thing at all, but a symbol. Every good philosopher or critic of art realises, of course, that feeling is somehow expressed in art; but as long as a work of art is viewed primarily as an 'arrangement' of sensuous elements for the sake of some inexplicable aesthetic satisfaction, the problem of expressiveness is really an alien issue.*

*...The solution of the difficulty lies, I think, in the recognition that what art expresses is not actual feeling, but ideas of feeling; as language does not express actual things and events but ideas of them. Art is expressive through and through – every line, every sound, every gesture; and therefore it is a hundred percent symbolic. It is not sensuously pleasing and also symbolic; the sensuous quality is in the service of its vital import. A work of art is far more symbolic than a word, which can be learned and even employed without any knowledge of its meaning; for a purely and wholly articulated symbol presents its import directly to any beholder who is sensitive at all to articulated forms in the given medium.*

*...An articulate form, however, must be clearly given and understood before it can convey any import, especially where there is no conventional references whereby the import is assigned to it as its unequivocal meaning, but the congruence of the symbolic form and the form of some vital experience must be directly perceived by the force of Gestalt alone. \**

1. What does Langer mean when she says, a work of art 'is not sensuously pleasing and also symbolic; the sensuous quality is in the service of its vital import'?
2. What does *Gestalt* mean? How is it important to Langer's argument about art?
3. Compare Langer's argument about meaning in art with one other theory of aesthetic interpretation. Are the two theories compatible or incompatible? In what ways? With which theory do you have most agreement and why?

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\* S. Langer 1953, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, Scribner, New York, pp.39-40.

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Susanne Langer (1895–1985)

Susanne K. Langer was born in Manhattan to German parents. Music was a large part of her early education and she was proficient as a pianist and cellist by the time she commenced university studies (under the philosopher A.N. Whitehead). Following a PhD at Harvard, Langer went on to teach philosophy at several universities, and was one of the first women to pursue a career in philosophy in America. She became internationally respected for her theories in aesthetics and linguistic analysis. In 1982 Langer finished her three-volume work *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, in which she attempted to trace the complete development of human consciousness.

### ***Nelson Goodman: Arts and Sciences Representing Reality***

The aesthetic theory of Nelson Goodman (1906-1998) uses many of Langer's ideas. Goodman attempts to analyse the symbolic features of various artforms. For Goodman, art is essentially a cognitive process – a way of trying to understand the world and human life within it – and in this way it is comparable to the sciences. Paintings, pieces of music, stories, dances and buildings all shape our experience and understanding, just as scientific accounts do. The differences lie in the symbol systems used, rather than in the matter being represented.

Goodman's essay, 'When is Art?' in his book *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), explores the way art operates as a system of symbols to represent reality. Goodman debunks the assumption that something must have some resemblance to another thing to represent it. He argues that just as in mathematics, the symbols in use bear no actual resemblance to the concepts they represent. Symbolism in art may be just as arbitrary, he says.

#### WRITE

1. How does Goodman think art and science are alike and how are they different?
2. How helpful is this as a way of understanding art?



### ***Meaning in Non-Representational Art***

In the cases of literature, drama and representational painting, a good deal of explaining is already done by the art itself as to what is depicted. The literal content is clear. However, music seems to be a different case. Unless there are lyrics, what is a piece of music 'about'? And even if there are lyrics, to what extent can the music be said to illustrate them? Musicologists distinguish between **program music**, which professes to depict an extra-musical narrative or concept, and **absolute music** which does not attempt to impart concepts or to imitate things in the world. The latter category is by far the largest, and for this reason, expressivism – the view that art is primarily a vehicle for emotion – has been especially strong in music criticism.

But should we accept that music can never be ‘about’ anything? Some, such as Susanne Langer, have claimed all music to be a kind of language. A ‘language of the emotions’ is how Deryck Cooke (1919-1976) describes music. In *The Language of Music* (1959), Cooke sets out a systematic correlation between specific emotions and the kinds of musical patterns which he says represent them.

However, writers such as Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904) reject suggestions that we should think of music in terms of meaning. For Hanslick, to see music as representational is to diminish its beauty. Music ‘pleases for its own sake, like ... a leaf or flower’, writes Hanslick in *On the Musically Beautiful* (1954).<sup>52</sup>

Clive Bell (Famous Philosopher File p.524), like Hanslick, was an opponent of expressionism, arguing that intrinsic properties are all that matter in a work of art. Bell advised, ‘to appreciate a work of art, we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs... nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three dimensions of space.’<sup>53</sup>

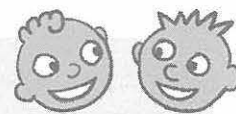


## DO

1. Listen to at least one piece of music without lyrics.

As well as music with no clear ‘program’, listen to some program music such as any of the following: *La Mer* (Claude Debussy); *Pictures at an Exhibition* – any movement (Modest Mussorgsky); *The 1812 Overture* (Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky); *Symphony No. 94 ‘Surprise’* – second movement (Joseph Haydn); *Threnody for the Victims at Hiroshima* (Krzysztof Penderecki).

2. In what ways can this music be said to be ‘about’ something? Are there things you could argue it is *not* about?
3. Is there a mood or emotion that this music imparts?
4. How does ‘meaning’ in music compare with that in other artforms?



## DISCUSS

To what extent should we try to find meaning in a non-representational art such as music?

## Against Interpretation

If you have argued against looking too far into works of art for what they might mean, you may have sympathy for the rejection of interpretation argued for by American thinker Susan Sontag (Famous Philosopher File p.558) in her much-discussed essay, ‘Against Interpretation’ (1966).

52 Eduard Hanslick 1986 (trans Geoffrey Payzant) *On the Musically Beautiful*, Hackett, Indianapolis, p.32  
53 Clive Bell 1914, *Art*, Chatto and Windus, London, p.27.

Sontag argues that an overly intellectual and analytical approach to artworks risks missing or even destroying their sensuous and spiritual power. The essay famously finishes with the words, ‘*in place of a hermeneutics [theory of interpretation] we need an erotics of art*’.



### **TEXT STUDY: Susan Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation’ (1966)**

[see Useful Resources]

1. What does Sontag mean by her claim that ‘mimetic theory ...challenges art to justify itself’?
2. What does Sontag mean by a ‘form-content dichotomy’ and why does she think it is problematic?
3. To make a Marxist interpretation of an artwork is to read it in terms of class and power struggles. To make a Freudian reading is to look for underlying patterns of the psyche that might be revealed in an artwork. Why does Sontag object to these approaches?
4. What do you think Sontag means when she says, ‘*To interpret is to impoverish*’?
5. According to Sontag, what are the most fundamental experiences of art?
6. ‘*What is important now is to recover our senses.*’ Why?
7. What does Sontag mean when she says interpretation needs a ‘*descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms*’?
8. ‘*The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.*’ Explain Sontag’s distinction.
9. ‘*In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.*’ What does Sontag mean?
10. In what sense is Sontag ‘against interpretation’? What reasons does she give for this position?
11. It is clear what Sontag is against, but can you explain what she recommends instead?
12. Select an artwork (of any medium and genre) with which you are familiar. A novel you have analysed in English classes would be an appropriate example.
  - a. (a) What kind of interpretation would Sontag object to? Formulate an example of the kind of a sentence that could be uttered about this art, to which Sontag would *object*.
  - b. (b) Come up with an example of the kind of sentence of which Sontag might *approve*, that could be uttered about this art.
  - c. (c) Do you agree with Sontag that (a) is to be preferred to (b), above? Why or why not?



## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Susan Sontag (1933–2004)

One of America's best known public intellectuals, philosopher, novelist, filmmaker, professor and political activist Susan Sontag was born in New York City. Her father died when she was five and, taking her step-father's surname, the young Sontag was moved from place to place before settling in Los Angeles. She graduated at age 15 from North Hollywood High School and then studied philosophy at the Universities of Berkeley and Chicago. At age 17, Sontag married her sociology lecturer, the writer Philip Rieff, just 10 days after their first meeting. The marriage lasted eight years and produced one son, the writer David Rieff. After completing her Chicago degree, Sontag taught at the University of Connecticut and completed doctoral studies in philosophy at Harvard University. She then transferred to study under Iris Murdoch at Oxford, but of greater influence was her time at the University of Paris, during which she fell in love with French culture. From the 1960s onwards Sontag lived, taught and wrote in New York City, associating with America's intellectual and artistic elite. She wrote a total of five novels, numerous short stories, several plays, directed four films, and published six collections of critical essays spanning high and low culture and appearing in publications from the *New Yorker* to *Playboy*, often tackling controversial themes. Sontag was openly bisexual and in her last decade was partner to celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz.



Attribution: Juan Bastos.

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## Art and Moral Meanings

### *Art and Moral Improvement*

Ethics and aesthetics each deal with the assessment of kinds of value, and the two areas have intertwined throughout their history.

As we have seen, artworks such as *Guernica* may seem to impart clear moral messages. But should we find persuasive the moral stance taken by a work of art?

*Guernica* is often spoken of as an internationally recognised anti-war symbol. Yet for its artist to be seen as any kind of moral leader would strike many as horrifying if not obscene. Picasso's personal life celebrated selfish excess, infidelity and exploitation. His misogyny was well known. Two of his former lovers killed themselves and several other mistresses languished in poverty despite his immense wealth.

But, as any committed anti-intentionalist will object, an artist's biography is irrelevant when assessing the meaning and impact of the artwork. The work must stand alone.

Aristotle believed art had an important place in society for its capacity to purify emotions. *Catharsis* could be achieved, and extreme emotions and passions brought into healthy balance, by witnessing tragic narrative – in an epic poem or play, for example.

For Russian novelist and art theorist, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), art should be assessed on the basis of its transmission of feelings of brotherhood. In *What is Art* (1897), he argues, in essence, that art ought to make us better people:

*The destiny of art in our time is to transmit from the realm of reason to the realm of feeling the truth that well-being for men consists in their being united together, and to set up, in place of the existing realm of force, that kingdom of God – that is, of love.*<sup>54</sup>

Along not dissimilar lines, the writer C.S. Lewis argues that the imaginative world of literature enables us to get beyond our own limited worldview and see things through the experiences of others, thus fostering empathy:

*We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own... One of the things we feel after reading a great work is 'I have got out'. Or from another point of view, 'I have got in'; pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside.*<sup>55</sup>

For novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch (Famous Philosopher File p.560), great art has edifying powers – that is, the capacity to improve us morally – on many levels. She argues that by taking us into experiences outside our everyday concerns, art ‘pierces the veil’ of our selfishness, and expands our perspective. We are led by art to greater clarity of vision, while cultivating certain virtues such as loving attention to others. In addition, the wisdom and insight of great artists can redirect our moral compasses towards an absolute Good. Murdoch is aligned with Plato is arguing that we can appreciate absolute concepts of Truth, Beauty, and moral rightness, and she believes that great art offers special insights to these things:

*Art and morals are, with certain provisos...one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love... Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.*<sup>56</sup>

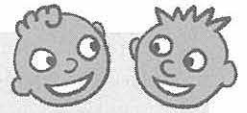
History tells us that art has indeed made important moral contributions. Artwork and aesthetics played key roles in the case against slavery in Britain, for example. Sometimes art makes us think about entrenched dogmas and unexamined assumptions, and for many people one of the primary functions of art in society is to challenge the status quo. Perhaps you can reflect on examples in your own life, when seeing a film, reading a book, or viewing a piece of graphic art, has influenced your thinking on some moral question.

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54 Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art*, [http://archive.org/stream/whatisart00tolsuoft/whatisart00tolsuoft\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/whatisart00tolsuoft/whatisart00tolsuoft_djvu.txt) (accessed September 3rd, 2013)

55 C.S.Lewis, 2006, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 137.

56 Iris Murdoch, ‘The Sublime and the Good’ 1959, in Conradi 1997, p.215.



## DISCUSS

1. Can art make us better people? Consider examples such as *Guernica* and other relevant songs, books, plays, films or images with which you are familiar.
2. Which arguments considered above do you find most convincing on the question of whether art makes us better people?



## TEXT STUDY: Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good and Other Concepts* (1970)

[see Useful Resources]

READ from pp.84-89.

1. What does Murdoch mean by ‘unselfing’?
2. How can appreciation of good art assist us to ‘unself’?
3. What does Murdoch mean when she suggests that much art is actually ‘self-consoling fantasy’?
4. What does Murdoch mean when she describes the ‘pointlessness’ of human life? Why does she think a realisation of this pointlessness is embodied in great art?
5. To what extent is Murdoch’s account of the links between ethics and aesthetics a convincing one?

## FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER FILE

### Iris Murdoch (1919–1999)

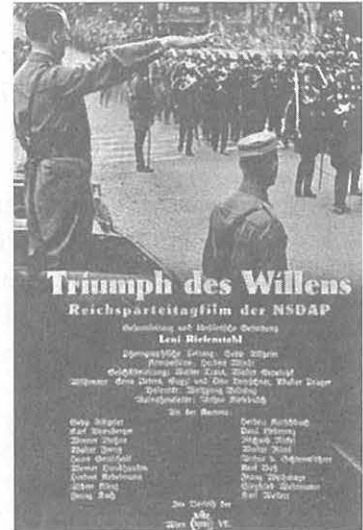
Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin but grew up in London and attended Oxford University, where she studied philosophy and classics. In her twenties she worked for the United Nations in Europe, assisting refugees, before commencing postgraduate studies in philosophy at Cambridge University. She then took up the academic post at Oxford which she would retain for the next two decades. At age 35 she published the first of her 26 novels, having also published numerous articles in philosophy, and the first English-language book on French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Murdoch married English literature professor and novelist John Bayley, and their life together was chronicled in the film, *Iris* (2001), including her tragic degeneration in the grip of Alzheimer’s disease from 1995 onwards.

Murdoch is often spoken of as a neo-Platonist, such was the influence of Plato on her work. Other influences included Simone Weil, Wittgenstein and Sartre. Murdoch's novels explored sexual relationships, morality and the unconscious, and she also wrote several plays. *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) are her most celebrated works of philosophy.

## Art and Moral Depravity

*Triumph of the Will* (1935) is a film made by Leni Riefenstahl, depicting the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, which was attended by hundreds of thousands of cheering Nazi supporters. The film presents Adolf Hitler as a mighty and heroic figure. Indeed, as Hitler commissioned the film and was its unofficial executive producer, it may be considered Nazi propaganda.

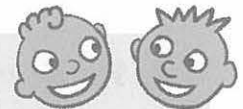
Yet *Triumph of the Will* is also widely praised for its brilliance as an example of cinema for its era: it is full of original techniques such as moving cameras, distorted effects, aerial photography, and showcases a revolutionary marriage of music and cinematography, all of which have been highly influential. These elements would be sufficient in other cases for a film to be described as 'great art' and perhaps to place this film among the greatest in history. Certainly the film won a multitude of international awards in its time. But can a work which valorises the evils of Nazism be considered 'great'?



Brilliant, depraved or both? Movie poster for Nazi film, *Triumph of the Will*, crediting its director and cameramen.

### DISCUSS

1. Should *Triumph of the Will* be considered a great work of art?
2. We are all familiar with films and stories which depict reprehensible characters in appealing ways (for example, *Silence of the Lambs*; *The Sopranos*... Can you think of more?). Is art which reflects 'good' more worthy than that which reflects 'evil'?



## Aesthetics and Ethics

Are works of art commendable when they advance moral insights? Literary critic I.A. Richards (1893-1979) disagreed. He argued that you if you read a poem in terms of its ethics, you cease to read it as a poem. This is **autonomism** – the view that works of art should be considered completely independently from ethics. Art for its own sake – *l'art pour l'art* – was a phrase used by art critic Theophile Gautier (1811-1872). Writing in the midst of the French Revolution in 1848, Gautier wrote,

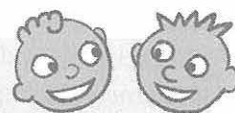
*A dynasty has been overturned and the Republic proclaimed: but art pays no heed to such events. Art is eternal because it is human; systems of government may change but it endures. ...Smoke from the fray fills the public squares and hides the plunging perspectives; but soon enough a wind comes up and blows away the whiff of powder, sweeps away the opaque clouds, and the temple of art appears again in its white serenity cast against the unalterable azure of the sky.*<sup>57</sup>

This is in line with the Romantic/Kantian artist-as-genius view, situating the artist beyond the everyday concerns of the rest of humanity. Meanwhile, the New Critic and formalist views, in banishing the artist from consideration, regard the work of art as separate from moral contexts.

However, Marxist and feminist interpretations have stressed that the conditions a work is created under are critical to its meaning. Post-structuralist positions similarly emphasise that we can never be truly disinterested or unsituated – morally, politically, economically or otherwise.

All these views have implications when it comes to classifying morally or politically infused artworks. Is something a work of art when it clearly aims to advance a message, or should we instead consider it propaganda or advertising? Formalism has the clearest answer here: when the artistic elements are all subordinate to the ethical ones, we should cease to regard the work as art. But even when adopting a formalist stance, such matters can still be tricky to decide.

## DISCUSS



1. Should *Guernica* be considered art, or is it better described as anti-war propaganda? Justify your view.
2. Does art transcend morality? Why or why not?

## Art, Truth and Forgeries

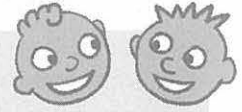
In 1937, one of the world's most authoritative art historians, Abraham Bredius, was called to examine a painting. In the 'art bible' of the times, Bredius wrote with enthusiasm, 'It is a wonderful moment in the life of a lover of art when he finds himself suddenly confronted with a hitherto unknown painting by a great master!'<sup>58</sup> Bredius pronounced the work to be an untouched original masterpiece called *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus*, by none other than the great seventeenth century Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer of Delft.

In May 1945 a relatively mediocre and unknown Dutch artist named Hans van Meegeren was arrested and charged with collaborating with the Nazis, an offence punishable by death. He had been traced to the sale of a Vermeer painting to the Nazi, Hermann Goering. Van Meegeren's defence took everyone by surprise.

57 Theophile Gautier, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1235/1235-h/1235-h.htm> (August 9, 2013)

58 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3654259/The-forger-who-fooled-the-world.html> (August 13, 2013)

He claimed that the painting was not a Vermeer but rather a forgery by his own hand. Indeed, because he had traded the false Vermeer for hundreds of original Dutch paintings seized by Goering, Van Meegeren claimed he should be considered a national hero rather than a criminal. He also confessed to having painted several other 'Vermeers' including *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus*. Van Meegeren spent 12 months in prison.



## DISCUSS

1. What – if anything – do you consider to be wrong about van Meegeren's actions?
2. How should we regard van Meegeren's forgeries? Should they be considered significant works of art in their own right?

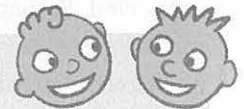
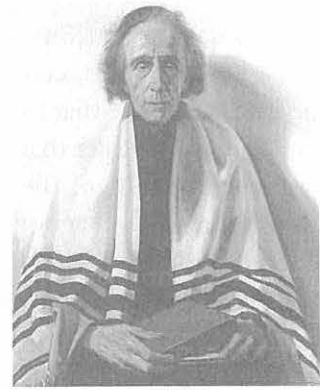
Most would say that it is the deception and profit involved that makes forgery morally wrong. Copying the style of another artist can be a mark of respect – as in China, where making replicas of art is routine. However the Western artworld prizes highly something of which there is only one original. Known as the Sotheby's Effect, the more copies there are of an artwork, the more its price will drop. Collectors enjoy owning a unique object and pay for the privilege.

Van Meegeren's paintings were not replicas of Vermeers; they were his own works in the *style* of Vermeer. If you do an internet search for Vermeer and van Meegeren's images, you will see that van Meegeren created works which were similar, but not identical, to Vermeer's work. Therefore, shouldn't we give him credit as a talented artist in his own right? Against this, it may be argued that Vermeer himself initiated a whole style and set of artistic practices. Copying a painting or style is inferior to originating it.

Painting by Vermeer  
Johannes Vermeer [Public  
domain], via Wikimedia  
Commons



Painting by van  
Meegeren  
By Han? van Meegeren  
(drawing) / Primasz  
(scan) (Self-scanned)  
[Public domain], via  
Wikimedia Commons



## DISCUSS

1. How important is originality in art?
2. How would an intentionalist analyse cases of forgery compared with anti-intentionalists? What can you conclude about ethics and the interpretation of art?

## Censorship

Plato famously offered the first argument for censorship when he outlawed art from his ideal city, the 'Republic'. Dismissing art as mere imitation, Plato argued that art could give us only the dimmest hint of reality and is therefore something akin to a lie. Secondly, art appeals to the non-rational part of the soul and therefore may disconnect us from reasoned and just choices.

In more recent times, famous examples of calls for censorship abound. In the 1950s, rock n roll music was blamed for every kind of corruption of young people. Elvis Presley's gyrating hips were considered obscene. In the same era, it was feared that comic books may encourage violent acts, in the same way that violent video games are questioned today. In the 1990s, singer Marilyn Manson was blamed for events from youth suicide to the Columbine school shootings, and banned from some festivals and concert venues.

It would seem that only the most spurious links existed between Manson's music and these tragic occurrences. Then in 2007, the perpetrator of the Cleveland school shootings was reportedly wearing a Marilyn Mason T-shirt at the time of his crimes. But at what point should an artist be blamed for the actions of their followers, particularly if it is unclear that the artist's work actually encourages such beliefs or behaviour? And at what point – if ever – should the content of a work of art justify its public censorship? What should be accepted in the name of art? Actual murder? Child abuse? Torture? The promotion of violence, racism, sexism or cruelty? In many countries, to make material of this kind is against the law and therefore a punishable offence. For example, 'snuff' films, which include actual killing, cannot be shown in most countries.

In democratic nations where freedom of speech is among the most prized values, censorship is a controversial issue. Extreme libertarians argue that free speech should be exactly that. But many philosophers counter that the presumption of liberty should in many cases be overridden. The good sometimes conflicts with the right, they argue, and the good for all should always override rights for a few. On this view, laws and censorship are means of preserving principles of 'good' in society.

However, conflicts arise when artistic merit is considered one of society's goods that should be supported. Perhaps if a work of art is brilliant or by a particularly well respected artist, its artistic merit should override moral concerns. But it can be argued that skilful execution may make the work even more dangerous and offensive.

There are of course shades of grey when it comes to censorship. Many artists, galleries and artworks receive state sponsorship. In some cases of controversy, the funding is withdrawn even while the work itself is still tolerated. Classification systems are another softer form of censorship, perhaps allowing access to adults but not to children.



American singer Brian Warner, better known by his stage name, Marilyn Mason. Should he be held responsible for the views and actions of his fans?  
By Patrick Whitaker [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Sexual content is an obvious area where most people seem to view some level of censorship as appropriate. This raises the question of the line between pornography and erotic art. Some argue that pornography has characteristics that make it inherently bad – for example, that it degrades women and exploits its participants – or that it is instrumentally bad – for example, that it promotes violence against women and supports assumptions about male domination and superiority. But these things may not be true of all pornography. One rationale for classification as pornography rather than art is whether the work is solely designed to arouse sexual response. If all elements (colour, design, music and so on) serve the primary aim of arousal (rather than, say, beauty, or a political or philosophical message, or some other aesthetic value), then it may be deemed pornography rather than art. However, this may be a fine line indeed! Sometimes pragmatism wins out, with the reasoning that yes, pornography has all manner of terrible consequences but to ban it would produce a black market with even worse outcomes.



## DO

### CASE STUDY: HELENA

Consider the following example and discuss in small groups the questions that follow.

*Helena is the title of an installation originally displayed in Denmark's Trapholt Art Museum. It consisted of ten water-filled blenders, each of which contained a live goldfish. Visitors were invited to push any of the on-buttons, if such an action appealed to them. The installation's creator, Marco Evaristti, wrote in the notes which accompanied his work, that his idea was to divide visitors into three categories: the 'idiot' who pushes the button, the voyeur who likes to watch, and the moralist who finds destruction of goldfish offensive. At least one visitor pushed the on-button and the gallery owner was fined for cruelty to animals.*

*After taking the case to court, the fine was dropped because the fish was killed instantly. It was argued that the artwork, the gallery and the artist should be considered out of reach of moral judgement. It was tendered, too, that the whole point of the installation was to make a moral point (despite the contradiction between this and the argument that art is beyond morality!).*

*After public outcry, the work remained at the gallery but with blenders unplugged. When it moved to Austria's Kunstraum Dornbirn Gallery, the blenders were plugged in again. Again a visitor pressed the on-button, fully aware she was being video-taped.*

1. Where does the moral culpability lie in this scenario – with the artist, the visitor who turned the blender on, the voyeurs who watched, or the gallery owner?
2. Should *Helena* be considered morally wrong? Why or why not?
3. Would *Helena* be immoral if no-one had pushed the button?
4. Should *Helena* be banned or censored in some way? Why or why not?
5. Is *Helena* art? Why or why not?
6. Is *Helena* philosophy? Why or why not?



## RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: CENSORSHIP AND THE ARTS

1. Research a local and/or recent case of censorship in art. For example, in 1997 Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ* was removed from the National Gallery of Victoria after Catholic Archbishop George Pell sought a Supreme Court injunction and two teenagers attacked it with a hammer. In 2008 in Sydney, Bill Henson's photographic exhibition was closed after complaints were made about nude teenage girls depicted in the photographs. Police seized a number of the images with intentions of laying criminal charges against Henson. In June 2013, works by the artist Paul Yore were raided from St Kilda's Linden Gallery by police. As part of the 'Like Mike' exhibition, these works featured adult bodies engaged in sexual acts, with children's faces allegedly superimposed on to them.
2. Consider one or both of the following questions in relation to the censorship case you have investigated:
  - a. If something causes offence, does it lose legitimacy as a work of art?
  - b. Is this a case where censorship was justifiable? Why or why not?

## Assessment Tasks

*The following Assessment Tasks are suggestions only. Teachers should always consult the VCAA Study Design for Philosophy before setting tasks to ensure coherence with the appropriate Outcome descriptors.*

### Assessment Task One: Written Reflection

Here are some possible questions to prompt a journal entry for this Theme. You may wish to tackle one or more of these. Depth of exploration is more important than breadth. Refer to the list of assessment criteria for Reflective Responses on page 584.

1. Are the intentions of an artist important when we try to interpret works of art?
2. Were the Romantics right in supposing artists to be individuals gifted with particular insight into life and the human condition?
3. When looking for meaning in a work of art, where does the authority lie – with the artist, in the work itself, or with the audience? Defend your view.
4. 'The meaning of any work of art will always resist capture.' Do you agree?
5. 'There is no such thing as a disinterested interpretation of a work of art.' Do you agree?
6. 'A work of art should speak for itself; it shouldn't require *theory*.' What is your response to this view?
7. 'The most interesting works of art are those which do more than mimic reality.' Do you agree?
8. 'Anything at all can be considered art.' Do you agree?
9. Do you consider art to be a form of symbolism? Why or why not, and in what way/s?
10. Is there any point trying to find meaning in music?
11. Is it possible to 'over-analyse' works of art? Why or why not?
12. Does art have the power to make us morally better or worse? Use examples to defend your view.

13. If something is aesthetically good, is it also ethically good? If something is ethically good, is it also aesthetically good? Justify your responses.
14. 'If an artist is skilled enough to get away with forgeries, he should receive praise, not condemnation.' Do you agree?
15. 'An act of censorship is a worse moral wrong than any offensive content could be.' Do you agree?

### ***Assessment Task Two: Essay***

TOPIC: Select at least two theories considered in this Theme, and critically compare their usefulness for the interpretation of art works.

Refer to advice on How to Write a Philosophy Essay on page 585.

### ***Assessment Task Three: Dialogue***

Write a dialogue between two or more people who are visiting a gallery and debating ways of interpreting various items on display. Your dialogue should give a fair airing to the strong points of at least three considered in this Theme, as well as challenging the problems of each theory.

### ***Assessment Task Four: Research Task and Oral Presentation***

The Relevant Contemporary Debate activity on page 566 can be used as the basis of written analyses or oral presentations.

### ***Assessment Task Five: Short Answer Responses***

Complete a task which asks for short-answer explanations of the various theories outlined in this Theme.

### ***Assessment Task Six: Written Analysis***

Answer a series of medium-answer questions relating to one of the primary texts you have studied in this Theme.

# Useful Resources:

## Further Problems in Value Theory

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### General Secondary Resources for Themes 1 and 2

- Cahn, S. (ed) 2005, *Political Philosophy: The Essential Texts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Lipset, S. (ed) 2001, *Political Philosophy: Theories, Thinkers, Concepts*, CQ Press, Washington.
- Miller, D. 2003, *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Swift, A. 2006, *Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians*, Polity, Malden, Massachusetts.
- Woolf, J. 2006, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Zwolinski, M. (ed) 2009, *Arguing About Political Philosophy*, Routledge, New York.

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### Specific Resources for Themes 1 and 2

#### ***Theme 1: On Rights and Justice***

- Griffin, J. 2008, *On Human Rights*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org))
- Marx, K. 1843, 'On the Jewish Question' in Tucker, R. (ed) 1978 *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Norton & Company, New York, pp.26-46.
- Also online at (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>)
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/](http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/))
- Wollstonecraft, M. 1791. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3420/pg3420-images.html>

#### ***Theme 2: On Liberty and Anarchy***

- Berlin, I. 1958, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, online at <http://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de>
- Hobbes, T. 1651, *Leviathan*, online at <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/hobblev1.pdf>
- Locke, J. 1689, *Two Treatises of Government*, online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/>
- Mill, J. 1859, *On Liberty*, online at [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john\\_stuart/m645o/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645o/)

- Nozick, R. 1977, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Basic Books, New York.
- Rousseau, J. 1762, *Of the Social Contract*, online at [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/r/rousseau/jean\\_jacques/r864s/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/r/rousseau/jean_jacques/r864s/)
- Smith, A. 1776, *The Wealth of Nations*, online at <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN.html>

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## General Secondary Resources for Themes 3 and 4

- Cahn, S. & Meskin, M. (eds) 2007, *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Eldridge, R. 2003, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Herwitz, D. 2008, *Aesthetics: Key Concepts in Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Hudson-Hick, D. 2012, *Introducing Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Continuum, London and New York.
- *Pollock*, Harris, E. (dir) 2000, Umbrella Entertainment (DVD).
- Taliaferro, C. 2007, *Aesthetics: A Beginner's Guide*, Oneworld, Oxford.

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## Specific Resources for Themes 3 and 4

### Theme 3: On Aesthetic Value

- Aristotle, trans Sachs, J. 2006, *Poetics*, Focus, Massachusetts.  
And online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp41-56.
- Bell, C. 1914, *Art*, Chatto and Windus, London.  
And online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16917/16917-h/16917-h.htm>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.261-269 and Hospers 1969, pp.87-99.
- Cahn, S & Meskin, M (eds) 2007, *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Collingwood, R.G. 1945, *The Principles of Art*, Clarendon Press, London.  
And at <http://www.berniephilosophy.com/files/49779048.pdf>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.282-295.
- Dickie, G. 1974, 'What is Art? An Institutional Analysis', in *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, New York, pp.19-52.  
Also in Cahn 426-437.
- Hospers, J. 1969, *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, The Free Press, New York.
- Hume, D. 2013, *Of the Standard of Taste*, Birmingham Free Press, Birmingham.  
And online at <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/htaste.pdf>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.103-112.
- Kant, I. (Meredith J. trans) 2009, *Critique of Judgment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.131-160
- Plato, *Symposium* in Fowler, H.N. trans. 1925, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, Heinemann, London. And online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>

## **Theme 4: On the Interpretation of Art Works**

- Aristotle, trans Sachs, J. 2006, *Poetics*, Focus, Massachusetts.  
And online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp41-56.
- Barthes, R. 1967, *Death of the Author* in Heath, S (trans and ed) 1977, *Image-Music-Text*, Noonday Publishing, U.S.A.
- Bell, C. 1914, *Art*, Chatto and Windus, London.  
And online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16917/16917-h/16917-h.htm>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.261-269 and Hospers 1969, pp.87-99.
- Collingwood, R.G. 1945, *The Principles of Art*, Clarendon Press, London.  
And at <http://www.berniephilosophy.com/files/49779048.pdf>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.282-295.
- Cooke, D. 1959, *The Language of Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Danto, A.C. 1964, 'The Artworld' in *Journal of Aesthetics*, 61/19 (1964), pp.571-84.  
And at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/visualarts/danto-artworld.pdf>  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.417-425.
- Danto, A. 1981, 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 33, Issue 2 (Winter, 1974), pp139-141.
- Derrida, J. 1967, 'Ellipsis' in Alan Bass (trans and ed) 1978, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London, pp.295-300.  
And online at [http://webdelprofesor.ula.ve/humanidades/anderzon/materias/materiales/Writing\\_and\\_Difference\\_\\_Routledge\\_Classics\\_.pdf](http://webdelprofesor.ula.ve/humanidades/anderzon/materias/materiales/Writing_and_Difference__Routledge_Classics_.pdf)
- Eaton, A. 2008, 'Feminist Philosophy of Art' in *Philosophy Compass*, 3(4), 2008.
- Eliot, T.S. 1921, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in Kermode, F. (ed.) 1977, *Selected Prose of T.S.Eliot*, Harcourt, Orlando.
- Foucault, M. 1969, (trans. J.V.Harari), 'What is an Author?' in P. Rainbow (ed.) 1984, *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon, New York, pp.118-119.  
And online at <https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/download/attachments/74858352/FoucaultWhatIsAnAuthor.pdf>
- Goodman, N. 1978, 'When is Art?' in Cahn 2007, pp438—444.
- Hanslick, E. 1954, (trans Geoffrey Payzant 1986), *The Beautiful in Music*, Hackett, Indianapolis.
- Hegel, G.W.F., trans F.P.B. Osmaston 1920, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, G. Bell and Sonss, Lodon, included in Cahn 2007, pp 180-192.
- Kant, I. (Meredith J. trans) 2009, *Critique of Judgment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.  
Also in Cahn 2007, pp.131-160.
- Langer, S. 1942, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Langer, S. 1953, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, Scribner, New York.
- Lewis, C.S. 2006, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Murdoch, I. 1959, 'The Sublime and the Good' in Conradi, P. ed. 1997, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Penguin, London.
- Murdoch, I. 1970, *The Sovereignty of Good and Other Concepts*, Schocken, New York.
- Nochlin, L. 1971, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' in *ARTnews* January 1971: 22-39, pp.67-71.
- Tolstoy, *What is Art?* in Cahn, pp.233-242.  
Also online at [http://archive.org/stream/whatisart00tolsuoft/whatisart00tolsuoft\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/whatisart00tolsuoft/whatisart00tolsuoft_djvu.txt)
- Wimsatt, W.K. and Beardsley, M.C. 1946, 'The Intentional Fallacy' in Wimsatt W.K. jnr. (ed) 1954, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, University of Kentucky Press, Lexington. Also in Cahn 2007, pp.547-555.

# Teaching and Learning with this Book

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## Designing Your Units 1 & 2 Course

### **General Remarks**

*VCE Philosophy: A Student Text for Units 1 & 2 Third Edition* is specifically written to reflect the knowledge and skills described in the VCE Philosophy Study Design (2019-2023), available at [https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/philosophy/PhilosophySD\\_2019.pdf](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/philosophy/PhilosophySD_2019.pdf).

This book is intended as a *companion* to the course. One of the great joys of philosophy is that it is as much about process – about philosophising – as it is about content. A philosophy course that simply involves reading a textbook and doing set exercises risks becoming little more than comprehension. **The most important aim of any philosophy lesson is to get students to *think*.** If students are extending their skills of independent and critical thought, and engaging in challenging dialogue with each other, the lesson is a success. We therefore urge teachers to use this book not as a complete and sufficient course in philosophy, but as stimulus for lively, engaged and intellectually rigorous exploration of ideas.

We also stress that this book is a starting point only. Each Theme described in the Study Design covers a huge amount of philosophical ground. It is impossible in a book of this size to cover all the concepts, ideas, viewpoints, arguments and theories relevant to each Area of Study, or even all of the questions suggested by each Theme. We therefore encourage teachers to use the ‘Useful Resources’ lists at the end of each Chapter, as well as further resources from bookshops, libraries and online.

That said, the Study Design does not demand that every Theme be covered, nor that every question under chosen Themes is addressed. Satisfactory progress is deemed to occur in VCE when the Key Knowledge and Key Skills are satisfied. This can often be achieved by introducing less rather than more material, while recognising that there are minimal requirements for each Outcome.

Teachers will have to make tough decisions about how many Themes to cover and how long to spend on each. We imagine there will always be more material in a Theme than weeks to address it. Of course, there are many ways to cover the material. For example, the whole class may address just one or two sections from a Theme, and then further material can be investigated and reported on by different groups. There will always be ample scope for extension work for those keen to read beyond the pace of the majority. However, we would caution against a superficial survey of material. Real study of philosophy is about close and rigorous examination of arguments – those of other people as well as one’s own – and close guidance from a teacher is usually required for students to get the most out of their studies at this level.

Furthermore, we wish to highlight the importance of primary texts in any Philosophy course. The VCE Philosophy Study Design prescribes a text-based course for Units 3 and 4, and provides lists of thinkers whose work may be suitable for study alongside the Themes of Units 1 and 2. This book includes a multitude of suggestions for excerpts from primary texts for each Theme, as well as numerous exercises in textual analysis.

Students benefit from plenty of exposure to primary texts, and long extracts are not always needed. Undoubtedly there is merit in building the kind of intellectual stamina required to work through an entire article. Therefore teachers may choose to set one lengthy extract per Unit or per Area of Study. However, there is also benefit in exercising philosophical muscle in shorter bursts. We recommend exposing students to as many passages of philosophical reasoning as possible, including a diversity of styles and approaches. Sometimes a single paragraph can be rich in ideas and argument, and the ideal length for discussion and analysis.

Finally, enjoy. Philosophy teachers have the great advantage of teaching a subject everyone will find something of interest in, particularly adolescents. Armed with some useful tools and a good grasp of the material there is no reason that your class can’t be a joy to attend and a pleasure to teach. Good luck!

## ***Planning A Course***

When planning your Units 1 and 2 Philosophy course, you should work closely with the VCE Philosophy Study Design accredited for 2019-2023. The Study Design describes the thematic content that *must* and that *may* be covered in Units 1 and 2, the knowledge and skills students *must* acquire to satisfactorily complete the Units, and the options for assessing these.

### **UNITS 1 AND 2 PHILOSOPHY CONSISTS OF SIX AREAS OF STUDY:**

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| UNIT 1 | Area of Study 1: Metaphysics                      |
|        | Area of Study 2: Epistemology                     |
|        | Area of Study 3: Logic and Reasoning              |
| UNIT 2 | Area of Study 1: Ethics and Moral Philosophy      |
|        | Area of Study 2: Further Problems in Value Theory |
|        | Area of Study 3: Techniques of Reasoning          |



## UNITS 1&2, AREA OF STUDY 3: 'INTRODUCTION TO LOGIC AND REASONING' AND 'TECHNIQUES OF REASONING'

Area of Study 3 in both Units addresses aspects of logic and reasoning, and lists the skills and techniques which students should use themselves and observe in the work of others.

We address the Key Knowledge and Key Skills specified for these Areas of Study in Chapter 2: Logic and Reasoning of this book.

Teachers can combine two approaches in order to cover this material:

1. Set aside some lessons for specific teaching of logic and reasoning; and
2. Address remaining skills and ideas incidentally, interspersing them throughout the study of the Themes.

Teachers should be alert to opportunities to teach and assess material from Area of Study 3 throughout the course. Presumably there will be some assessments which exclusively test this material. However, all assessment tasks will implicitly test skills of logic and reasoning, and teachers may deliberately embed questions or criteria to address Area of Study 3, within Theme-related tasks.

It should also be noted that because reasoning skills continue through the whole course, it is the only element of the course whose study is cumulative. Therefore, students who are newcomers to Philosophy in Unit 2 may be referred to Chapter 1 to fill gaps in their understanding. This material is also assumed knowledge for Units 3 and 4.

### UNIT 1, AREA OF STUDY 1, METAPHYSICS

- At least two Themes, of the five offered, must be studied.
- A range of material, not necessarily limited to the questions listed in the Study Design, and not necessarily including all the questions listed in the Study Design, should be studied, in order to meet the Key Knowledge and Key Skills listed under Outcome 1.
- A minimum of one primary text should be studied.
- Links should be made between metaphysics and at least one relevant contemporary debate (see Outcome 1, Key Knowledge and Key Skills).

### UNIT 1, AREA OF STUDY 2, EPISTEMOLOGY

- Theme 1: On Knowledge – must be studied, plus at least one other Theme of the remaining three offered.
- A range of material, not necessarily limited to the questions listed in the Study Design, and not necessarily including all the questions listed in the Study Design, should be studied, in order to meet the Key Knowledge and Key Skills listed under Outcome 2.
- A minimum of one primary text should be studied.
- Links should be made between epistemology and at least one relevant contemporary debate (see Outcome 2, Key Knowledge and Key Skills).

## UNIT 2, AREA OF STUDY 1, ETHICS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

- **At least two Themes**, of the three offered, must be studied.
- *A range of material*, not necessarily limited to the questions listed in the Study Design, and not necessarily including all the questions listed in the Study Design, should be studied, in order to meet the Key Knowledge and Key Skills listed under Outcome 1.
- A **minimum of one primary text** should be studied.
- Links should be made between ethics and at least one **relevant contemporary debate** (see Outcome 1, Key Knowledge and Key Skills).

## UNIT 2, AREA OF STUDY 2, FURTHER PROBLEMS IN VALUE THEORY

- **At least two Themes**, of the four offered, must be studied.
- *A range of material*, not necessarily limited to the questions listed in the Study Design, and not necessarily including all the questions listed in the Study Design, should be studied, in order to meet the Key Knowledge and Key Skills listed under Outcome 2.
- A **minimum of one primary text** should be studied.
- Links should be made between problems in value theory and at least one **relevant contemporary debate** (see Outcome 2, Key Knowledge and Key Skills).

### ***A Sample Course Plan***

Outlined below is a sample course design which responds to these requirements. This design is based on typical term lengths and approximately 50 hours of lesson time for each Unit.

Of course this design is only intended to be illustrative. When constructing your own course alongside the Study Design, you will consider your school's calendar and the nature of your class (is it a small or large group? do a large proportion study art? are they politically minded? what contemporary debates might intrigue them? how many of your students will be going on to Units 3 and 4 Philosophy?), along with a host of other factors.

## UNIT 1

### OUTCOME 1

#### Key knowledge

- O1KK1** Central viewpoints and arguments associated with the chosen metaphysical questions as represented in at least one primary text
- O1KK2** Debates and questions that arise from exploration of at least two metaphysical themes
- O1KK3** Definitions of key terms and concepts associated with the chosen metaphysical problems
- O1KK4** Reasons for the diversity of metaphysical viewpoints
- O1KK5** Viewpoints and arguments central to the chosen metaphysical problems
- O1KK6** The relationship between metaphysical problems and relevant contemporary debates.

#### Key skills

- O1KS1** Formulate philosophical questions arising from metaphysical problems
- O1KS2** Identify key philosophical concepts and questions related to metaphysical problems in the context of contemporary debates
- O1KS3** Outline philosophical viewpoints and arguments associated with metaphysical problems
- O1KS4** Analyse viewpoints and arguments presented in a primary philosophical source and the implications of these
- O1KS5** Offer justified critical responses to viewpoints and arguments associated with metaphysical problems
- O1KS6** Reflect critically on student's own viewpoints and arguments relating to metaphysics
- O1KS7** Formulate informed responses to metaphysical problems, and explain, defend and refine those ideas in philosophical exchanges with others.

### OUTCOME 2

#### Key knowledge

- O2KK1** Debates and questions that arise from exploration of the theme 'On knowledge' and at least one other epistemological theme as outlined above
- O2KK2** Central viewpoints and arguments associated with the chosen epistemological questions as represented in at least one primary text
- O2KK3** Definitions of key terms and concepts associated with the chosen epistemological problems
- O2KK4** Reasons for the diversity of epistemological viewpoints
- O2KK5** viewpoints and arguments central to the chosen epistemological problems
- O2KK6** Criticisms that can be raised in response to the viewpoints and arguments central to the chosen epistemological problems
- O2KK7** The relationship between viewpoints and arguments on epistemological questions and relevant contemporary debates
- O2KK8** The implications of adopting a particular epistemological position for relevant contemporary debates

#### Key skills

- O2KS1** Formulate philosophical questions arising from epistemological problems
- O2KS2** Analyse definitions of key philosophical concepts related to epistemological problems
- O2KS3** Analyse definitions of key philosophical concepts in the context of relevant contemporary debates
- O2KS4** Outline philosophical viewpoints and arguments associated with epistemological problems
- O2KS5** Analyse viewpoints and arguments presented in a primary philosophical source and explore the implications of these
- O2KS6** Offer justified critical responses to viewpoints and arguments associated with epistemological problems
- O2KS7** Reflect critically on student's own viewpoints and arguments relating to epistemology
- O2KS8** Formulate informed responses to epistemological problems, and explain, defend and refine those responses in philosophical exchanges with others
- O2KS9** Explain the relationship between an epistemological position and a relevant contemporary debate.

### OUTCOME 3

#### Key knowledge

- O3KK1** The roles of reasoning and argument, intuition, imagination, metaphor, emotion and experience in philosophical thinking about metaphysical and epistemological problems
- O3KK2** Key terms associated with philosophical reasoning, including argument, deduction, induction, reason, premise, conclusion, validity, invalidity, soundness, unsoundness, consistency, contradiction, implication, entailment, assumption, standard form, syllogism, analogy, example, counterexample, counterargument, objection, refutation, proposition, claim, assertion, definition, probability, criteria
- O3KK3** Techniques of reasoning and argument
- O3KK4** Cognitive biases that undermine reasoning and investigation, such as gamblers' fallacy, attribution bias, confirmation bias, Dunning-Kruger effect and any implications of these for approaching debates in epistemology and metaphysics.

#### Key skills

- O3KS1** Analyse the roles of reasoning and argument, imagination, emotion and experience in examples of philosophical thinking
- O3KS2** Apply philosophical thinking, including techniques of reason and argument and knowledge of cognitive biases, to analysis of philosophical viewpoints and arguments, including those in metaphysics and epistemology and related debates
- O3KS3** Analyse simple arguments to identify the premises and conclusions, and the relationships between the premises and conclusion, including 'standard form' presentation
- O3KS4** Identify and describe errors in reasoning such as cognitive biases
- O3KS5** Use appropriate terminology when analysing and evaluating arguments.

WEEK/TOPIC	KEY KNOWLEDGE AND KEY SKILLS	QUESTIONS	CONCEPTS/IDEAS/ VIEWPOINTS/ARGUMENTS/ THEORIES	TEXTBOOK: VCE PHILOSOPHY: A STUDENT TEXT FOR UNITS 1&2 SECOND EDITION	TEXT STUDIES AND RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATES	ASSESSMENT TASKS
1 Introduction to Philosophy	O3KK2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is philosophy?</li> <li>What are the main branches of philosophy?</li> <li>What are some techniques of philosophical discussion? (e.g. Community of Inquiry)</li> <li>What is expected of students in this course?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nature of philosophy and its main branches</li> <li>Nature of philosophical discussion and associated techniques</li> <li>Key terms associated with philosophical discussions including argument, reason, consistency, contradiction, implication, example, counterexample, counterargument, objection, claim, assertion, definition, distinction</li> </ul>	Chapter 1: Welcome to Philosophy		
2 – 3 INTRODUCTION TO LOGIC AND REASONING	O3KK2 O3KK3 O3KS3 O3KS5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is an argument?</li> <li>How do arguments differ from other forms of reasoning?</li> <li>How can arguments be constructed and re-presented?</li> <li>How do we evaluate arguments?</li> </ul>	Argument / premise/ conclusion / rhetoric (various rhetorical ploys) / explanation / unstated premise / inference indicator / standard form / truth / cogency / validity / inductive / deductive / ...	Chapter 2: Logic and Reasoning		SHORT ANSWER RESPONSES
4 – 6 METAPHYSICS On materialism and idealism	O1KK1 O1KK2 O1KK3 O1KK4 O1KS1 O1KS3 O1KS4 O1KS5 O1KS6 O1KS7 O3KK1-4 O3KS1-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is Metaphysics?</li> <li>Is there some deeper reality behind the appearance of reality?</li> <li>What theories about the nature of reality have been proposed by philosophers such as: the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley and Kant?</li> <li>Are material/physical objects the only things that exist?</li> <li>To what extent does the mind make its world?</li> <li>How have philosophers since Kant divided into realist and anti-realist camps?</li> </ul>	Ontology/ cosmology/ Pre-Socratic philosophy / Plato's Theory of Forms / universals / particulars / Aristotle's Forms and Substances / Cartesian dualism / Locke's primary and secondary qualities / Berkeley's Idealism/ Kant's transcendental idealism / realism v non-realism	Chapter 3, Theme 1: On Materialism and Idealism	<p>TEXTS: Plato: The Cave Myth</p> <p>Descartes' <i>Meditation 1</i></p>	DIALOGUE: representing different views on the nature of reality

<p>7 – 10 METAPHYSICS On the material mind</p>	<p>O1KK1 O1KK2 O1KK3 O1KK4 O1KK5 O1KS1 O1KS2 O1KS3 O1KS4 O1KS5 O1KS6 O1KS7 O3KK1-4 O3KS1-5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of thing is a mind and what is the relationship between body and mind?</li> <li>• What are the mind, thoughts and consciousness?</li> <li>• What do the terms materialism and dualism mean in the mind/body debate?</li> <li>• Could the mind be the same thing as the brain?</li> <li>• What are some of the main arguments for a dualist view of mind and body?</li> <li>• What are some of the main arguments for a materialist view of the mind?</li> <li>• What are the arguments for materialism as proposed by behaviourism, identity theorists and eliminativists, and what are their strengths and weaknesses?</li> <li>• Does the notion of qualia pose a significant challenge to the materialist view of the mind?</li> <li>• What are some thought experiments to support the notion of qualia and thus a dualist view of mind, and how convincing are they?</li> <li>• How are views on the mind and body significant for contemporary debates (artificial intelligence)?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Mind / thoughts, thinking / consciousness / body / dualism / substance dualism / property dualism / monism/ physicalism /materialism /idealism / mind-body problem / interaction / Cartesian dualism /behaviourism / identity theory / eliminativism / thought experiment / qualia / Turing Test / artificial intelligence</i></p>	<p>Chapter 3, Theme 2: On the Material Mind</p>	<p><b>TEXTS:</b> Descartes: <i>Meditations 1 and 2</i></p> <p><b>DEBATE:</b> Could machines ever think?</p>	<p>WRITTEN ANALYSIS : on different views of the mind, and the possibility of thinking machines.</p>
<p>11 – 12 METAPHYSICS On free will and determinism</p>	<p>O1KK1 O1KK2 O1KK3 O1KK4 O1KS1 O1KS3 O1KS5 O1KS6 O1KS7 O3KK1-4 O3KS1-5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is everything we do determined by forces outside our control?</li> <li>• Can we be free if there are causes for all our actions?</li> <li>• What is determinism in nature, and does it help us to explain free will?</li> <li>• Do theories of compatibilism successfully reconcile freedom and determinism?</li> <li>• How is determinism linked to materialism and freedom to dualism?</li> <li>• How is freedom linked to notions of agency, responsibility, reward and punishment?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Free will / libertarianism / determinism / cause and effect / indeterminism / quantum physics / compatibilism / classical compatibilism / 'sphexishness' /moral responsibility</i></p>	<p>Chapter 3, Theme 3: On Free Will and Determinism</p>		<p>REFLECTION: Is it more likely that we are free or determined? What are some of the main arguments for and against each position?</p>

<p>13 – 15 EPISTEMOLOGY On knowledge</p>	<p>O2KK1 O2KK2 O2KK3 O2KK4 O2KK5 O2KK6 O2KK7 O2KS1 O2KS2 O2KS3 O2KS4 O2KS5 O2KS6 O2KS7 O2KS8 O3KK1-4 O3KS1-5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is epistemology?</li> <li>• What are the sources of our knowledge?</li> <li>• Is justified true belief the same as knowledge?</li> <li>• What is the difference between knowledge and belief?</li> <li>• Is certainty necessary for knowledge?</li> <li>• How helpful are theories of correspondence, coherence and pragmatism in determining the truth?</li> <li>• What are the sources of our knowledge in online media and how reliable are they?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Epistemology / knowledge / belief / certainty / opinion / justification / justified true belief / Gettier problem / necessary and sufficient conditions / correspondence / coherence / pragmatism</i></p>	<p>Chapter 4, Theme 1: On Knowledge</p>	<p><b>TEXTS:</b> Gettier: 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' Descartes: <i>Meditation 1</i></p> <p><b>DEBATE:</b> How reliable are online sources of knowledge?</p>	<p><b>PRESENTATION:</b> Online sources of knowledge</p>
<p>16 – 18 EPISTEMOLOGY On the possibility of a priori knowledge</p>	<p>O2KK1 O2KK2 O2KK3 O2KK4 O2KK5 O2KS1 O2KS3 O2KS4 O2KS5 O2KS6 O2KS7 O3KK1-4 O3KS1-5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the sources of our knowledge and how reliable are they?</li> <li>• What are the differences between rationalism and empiricism, <i>a priori</i> and <i>a posteriori</i> knowledge, analytic and synthetic truths, and necessary and contingent truths?</li> <li>• Is it possible to attain knowledge through the use of reason alone?</li> <li>• Is experience superior to reason in giving us knowledge of the world?</li> <li>• Should we trust our senses?</li> <li>• Is there any knowledge with which we were born?</li> <li>• What is Kant's notion of conceptual schemes and does it help to explain how we obtain knowledge?</li> <li>• What is Cartesian doubt and how does it work as a philosophical method?</li> </ul>	<p><i>rationalism / empiricism / a priori / a posteriori / analytic / synthetic / necessary / contingent / rationalism / empiricism / senses / innate ideas / Hume's Fork / conceptual scheme / noumenal world / phenomenal world / scepticism</i></p>	<p>Chapter 4, Theme 2: On the Possibility of A Priori Knowledge</p>	<p><b>TEXTS:</b> Descartes: <i>Meditation 1</i> (and up to the Cogito in <i>Meditation 2</i>)</p> <p>Hume: <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i> (small extract)</p>	<p><b>WRITTEN ANALYSIS:</b> On Descartes' <i>Meditation 1</i> and Cartesian scepticism</p>

## UNIT 2

### OUTCOME 1

#### Key knowledge

- O1KK1** Debates and questions that arise from exploration of two themes
- O1KK2** Definitions of key terms and concepts associated with the chosen themes
- O1KK3** Viewpoints and arguments central to the core problems within the themes
- O1KK4** Criticisms that can be raised in response to the viewpoints and arguments central to the themes
- O1KK5** Philosophical concepts, viewpoints and arguments related to selected ethical and moral debates
- O1KK6** The interplay between viewpoints and arguments informed by value theory and relevant contemporary debates.

#### Key skills

- O1KS1** Analyse definitions of key philosophical concepts and questions related to problems in ethics and moral philosophy and in the context of relevant contemporary debates
- O1KS2** Formulate philosophical questions arising from the problems central to the chosen themes
- O1KS2** Outline philosophical viewpoints and arguments associated with the problems central to the chosen themes
- O1KS3** Analyse viewpoints and arguments presented in a primary philosophical source and explore the implications of these
- O1KS4** Offer justified critical responses to viewpoints and arguments associated with problems central to the chosen themes
- O1KS5** Reflect critically on their own viewpoints and arguments relating to ethics and moral philosophy
- O1KS6** Formulate informed responses to problems in ethics and moral philosophy and explain, defend and refine those ideas in philosophical exchanges with others
- O1KS7** Explain the relationship between relevant contemporary debates and viewpoints and arguments arising in ethics and moral philosophy.

### OUTCOME 2

#### Key knowledge

- O2KK1** Debates and questions that arise from exploration of two of the themes in philosophy listed above
- O2KK2** Definitions of key terms and concepts associated with the chosen themes
- O2KK3** Viewpoints and arguments central to the core problems within the themes
- O2KK4** Criticisms that can be raised in response to the viewpoints and arguments central to the theme
- O2KK5** The implications of adopting a particular position for relevant contemporary debates associated with the theme.

#### Key skills

- O2KS1** Analyse definitions of key philosophical concepts and questions related to problems in value theory and in the context of relevant contemporary debates
- O2KS2** Formulate philosophical questions arising from the problems central to the chosen themes
- O2KS3** Outline philosophical viewpoints and arguments associated with the problems central to the chosen themes
- O2KS4** Analyse viewpoints and arguments presented in a primary philosophical source and explore the implications of these
- O2KS5** Offer justified critical responses to viewpoints and arguments associated with problems central to the chosen themes
- O2KS6** Reflect critically on their own viewpoints and arguments relating to value theory
- O2KS7** Formulate informed responses to problems in value theory, and explain, defend and refine those ideas in philosophical exchanges with others
- O2KS8** Explain the relationship between relevant contemporary debates and viewpoints and arguments arising in value theory.

### OUTCOME 3

#### Key knowledge

- O3KK1** Techniques of reason and argument
- O3KK2** The roles of reasoning and argument, analogy, imagination, emotion and experience in philosophical thinking about ethical and other philosophical problems
- O3KK3** The role of reflective equilibrium as a technique for developing a philosophical position
- O3KK4** Key terms associated with philosophical reasoning; for example, argument, deduction, induction, reason, premise, conclusion, validity, invalidity, soundness, unsoundness, consistency, contradiction, implication, entailment, assumption, standard form, fallacy, syllogism, analogy, metaphor, example, counterexample, counterargument, objection, proposition, claim, assertion, definition, probability, criteria, necessary, sufficient, modus ponens, modus tollens, thought experiment, chained argument, denying the antecedent, affirming the consequent
- O3KK5** Recognised patterns of good and bad reasoning including some common syllogisms, and common fallacies; for example, begging the question/circularity, slippery slope, ad hominem, genetic fallacy, excluded middle, affirming the consequent, is/ought, undistributed middle, and fallacies of ambiguity

#### Key skills

- O3KS1** Analyse arguments to identify the premises and conclusions, and the relationships between the premises and conclusion, including 'standard form' presentation and chains of reasoning
- O3KS2** Apply philosophical thinking, including techniques of reason and argument, to analysis of philosophical viewpoints and arguments including those in value theory and related debates
- O3KS3** Identify and describe errors of reasoning including the identification of some common fallacies
- O3KS4** use appropriate terminology when analysing and evaluating arguments.

WEEK/TOPIC	KEY KNOWLEDGE AND KEY SKILLS	QUESTIONS	CONCEPTS/IDEAS/ VIEWPOINTS/ARGUMENTS/ THEORIES	TEXTBOOK: VCE PHILOSOPHY: A STUDENT TEXT FOR UNITS 1&2 SECOND EDITION	TEXT STUDIES AND RELEVANT CONTEMPORARY DEBATES	ASSESSMENT TASKS
1-3 TECHNIQUES OF REASONING	O3KK1 O3KK4 O3KK5 O3KS1 O3KS3 O3KS4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do we re-present extended arguments?</li> <li>What are confirmation biases?</li> <li>What are fallacies?</li> <li>What are some other flaws of reasoning?</li> </ul>	<i>Extended arguments / cognitive bias / confirmation bias / gambler's fallacy / predictable world bias / attribution bias / availability heuristic / availability cascade / belief bias / framing effect / formal and informal fallacies</i>	Chapter 2: Logic and Reasoning		SHORT ANSWER RESPONSES
4 – 6 ETHICS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY On the foundations of morality	O1KK2 O1KK3 O1KK4 O1KK5 O1KK6 O1KS2 O1KS3 O1KS4 O1KS5 O1KS6 O1KS7 O3KK1-5 O3KS1-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Where does morality come from?</li> <li>Is morality subjective or objective?</li> <li>What is the relationship between religious belief and morality?</li> <li>What is the relationship between nature and reality?</li> <li>What is nihilism?</li> <li>Do moral principles exist? Are they universal or are they relative to particular situations?</li> </ul>	<i>Morality / the relationship between morality and religion / ethical naturalism / moral relativism / moral absolutism / nihilism / reflective equilibrium / moral realism / natural facts / normative facts / emotivism / prescriptivism</i>	Chapter 5, Theme 1: On the Foundations of Morality	<p>TEXTS: Williams: Introduction to Ethics Mackie: Inventing right and Wrong</p> <p>DEBATE: How can the theories studied inform our understanding of a relevant contemporary debate?</p>	PRESENTATION/ RESEARCH TASK: PowerPoint or Prezi demonstrating how our understanding of a relevant contemporary debate may be informed by one or more of the theories we have studied.



<p>7 – 10 ETHICS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY On right and wrong</p>	<p>O1KK2 O1KK3 O1KK4 O1KK5 O1KK6 O1KS1 O1KS2 O1KS3 O1KS4 O1KS5 O1KS6 O1KS7 O3KK1-5 O3KS1-4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the major theories philosophers have offered about what makes an action morally right?</li> <li>• Does the motive or character of the person performing an action matter to the morality of an action?</li> <li>• Are acts right or wrong to the extent that they maximise pleasure or minimise suffering? What are the relative merits of various versions of utilitarianism?</li> <li>• Are there certain acts which should be considered right or wrong in themselves independently of their consequences? To what extent?</li> <li>• Is religious authority a legitimate source of moral principles?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Ten Commandments / Noble Eightfold Path / consequentialism / intentionalism / hedonic utilitarianism / hedonic calculus / ideal utilitarianism / preference utilitarianism / positive utilitarianism / negative utilitarianism / act utilitarianism / rule utilitarianism / deontology / categorical imperative / absolute duties / prima facie duties / virtue ethics / virtue / Mean</i></p>	<p>Chapter 5, Theme 3: On Right and Wrong</p>	<p>TEXTS: Mill: Utilitarianism Singer: 'All Animals are Equal' Kant: Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics</p> <p>DEBATE: Animals in Zoos</p>	<p>ESSAY: The ethics of keeping animals in zoos</p>
<p>11 – 13 FURTHER PROBLEMS IN VALUE THEORY On rights and justice</p>	<p>O2KK1 O2KK2 O2KK3 O2KK4 O2KK5 O2KS1 O2KS2 O2KS3 O2KS4 O2KS5 O2KS6 O2KS7 O2KS8 O3KK1-5 O3KS1-4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the basis and justification of rights?</li> <li>• What determines the content and extent of human rights?</li> <li>• To what extent are there and should there be constraints on our rights?</li> <li>• How are conflicts between rights to be resolved?</li> <li>• How are rights related to responsibilities?</li> <li>• Do only human beings have rights?</li> </ul>	<p><i>rights / natural rights / legal rights / liberty rights / claim rights / positive rights / negative rights / civil rights / political rights / human rights / will theory / interest theory / specificationism / prima facie rights / absolute rights</i></p>	<p>Chapter 6, Theme 1: On Rights and Justice</p>	<p>TEXTS: Griffin: On Human Rights Marx: On the Jewish Question</p> <p>DEBATE: Australia's response to asylum seekers</p>	<p>ESSAY: How just is the Australian response to asylum seekers?</p>
<p>14 – 16 FURTHER PROBLEMS IN VALUE THEORY On aesthetic value</p>	<p>O2KK1 O2KK2 O2KK3 O2KK4 O2KS2 O2KS3 O2KS4 O2KS5 O2KS6 O2KS7 O3KK1-5 O3KS1-4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is beauty and what is its relationship to art?</li> <li>• What is art? What are some major theories about what art is, and what are some strengths and weaknesses of these theories?</li> <li>• Are some aesthetic judgments better or worse than others?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Beauty / Platonic beauty / Plato's theory of forms / Plato's view of art / Aristotle's emphasis on 'form' / Hume and taste / Kant and the aesthetic attitude / representationalism / intentionalism / institutionalism / formalism / expressionism /</i></p>	<p>Chapter 6, Theme 3: On Aesthetic Values</p>	<p>TEXTS: Brief extracts from Plato, Aristotle and Hume on aesthetic value</p>	<p>PRESENTATION: How philosophical questions, viewpoints and arguments in this theme can be applied to students' chosen artwork examples.</p>

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## Suggestions for Student Assessment

### **General Advice**

In VCE Philosophy, the student's level of achievement in Units 1 and 2 is a matter for teachers to decide, with reference to students' overall performance on designated assessment tasks.

For each Area of Study outlined in the Study Design, the **Key Knowledge** and **Key Skills** for each Outcome should be referred to closely when designing assessment tasks. The lists of questions provided for each Theme provide some guidance to the kind of knowledge that might be addressed. However, teachers may reduce or add to these as they see fit, measuring student progress against the Key Knowledge and Key Skills.

Ideally, assessment tasks should be part of the regular teaching and learning program rather than onerous, additional work for students and teachers. There is considerable freedom in Units 1 and 2 to design creative tasks which exploit the varied learning styles of students and the diverse needs of different student cohorts.

Assessment tasks may be presented in any of the following formats. A mix of short and extended tasks may contribute to a student's overall assessment.

- Essay
- Written analysis
- Short-answer responses
- Written reflection
- Presentations (Oral, Multimedia)
- Dialogue (Oral, Written)
- Research task

An essay task is no longer mandated in Units 1 and 2, but teachers may consider it prudent to introduce essay writing in preparation for Units 3 and 4.

Many teachers encourage students to continue the flow of their rich and vigorous class discussions by keeping a regular reflective Philosophy Journal or by contributing to an online discussion which may be facilitated by a school's intranet. Such postings may be aggregated to produce an assessment grade for the student. *Philosophy: A Student Text for Units 1 & 2 Second Edition* contains topics for reflection at the end of each Theme and these may be used in a variety of ways, in and out of class time.

## ***Some Suggested Assessment Criteria***

This section offers suggestions for assessment criteria that may be helpful when approaching different styles of assessment task. Rubrics should always, in the first instance, be generated by the Key Knowledge and Key Skills described under each Area of Study. The suggestions below simply offer some more specific pointers as to how the Key Knowledge and Key Skills may be applied to specific task types.

### **ESSAY**

Note that advice on how to write a philosophy essay follows this section.

- Knowledge and understanding of relevant philosophical concepts
- Analysis and discussion of relevant theories and examples
- Evaluation and testing of arguments, including use of appropriate examples
- Processes of reasoning
- Synthesis and conclusions
- Clarity of expression and structural coherence

### **WRITTEN REFLECTIONS**

It is more important for students to achieve depth rather than breadth when completing written reflections. The emphasis should be on the development of philosophical skills in this kind of assessment.

- Reasoning skills
- Depth of exploration of topic
- Asking questions to probe the topic
- Balanced consideration of different views on the topic
- Critical rigour (may be demonstrated by: offering objections and counter-examples, detecting ambiguities, inconsistencies and hidden assumptions)
- Critical strategies (including: use of examples; relating theories to personal reflections, everyday life and contemporary issues; reconsidering personal views; shifting strategies to solve a problem; not giving up when a problem becomes difficult or confusing)
- Accurate use of philosophical vocabulary
- Clear and precise expression

### **WRITTEN ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY TEXTS**

- Knowledge and understanding of text, including its key concepts and vocabulary
- Identification of arguments and their premises and conclusions
- Evaluation and testing of arguments
- Clarity of articulation

## PRESENTATIONS

- Knowledge and understanding of relevant philosophical concepts
- Reasoning skills and analysis of arguments
- Evaluation and testing of arguments, including use of appropriate examples
- Processes of reasoning
- Synthesis and conclusions
- Clarity of explanations and structural coherence

## DIALOGUE

- Reasoning skills and critical strategies
- Depth of knowledge and understanding of topic and different views on topic
- Depth of interrogation of different views on topic
- Clear and precise expression and delivery

## ***How to Write a Philosophy Essay***

A philosophy essay differs in a number of respects from essays students may write in other subjects. For example, unlike English essays, philosophy essays may include subheadings.

Most importantly, a philosophy essay must demonstrate a *spirit of enquiry*. As with philosophical discussions, the purpose of a philosophy essay is *not* to win an argument or prove a point. The purpose of a philosophy essay is to *critically explore* one or more philosophical questions, and to make progress in this exploration by using techniques of logic and reasoning.

Given that this is our aim, we should note these implications:

1. The essay should demonstrate coherent processes of argument. If the author changes their view during the course of the essay, this is fine (and may indicate genuinely engaged thinking), but it must be clearly signaled rather than an incoherent accident.

For example: *'To this point all the evidence pointed to materialism being true beyond doubt. However, having now considered the notion of qualia, this essay will shift to the conclusion that the problem of mind and body is too difficult to resolve firmly one way or the other.'*

2. It is not required that the contention of a philosophy essay is stated with certainty at the outset. Indeed, to do this can unnecessarily restrict the course of the exploration. But if a student feels more comfortable stating a contention in the introduction, this is still acceptable practice.
3. It is permissible for the conclusion of a philosophy essay to 'sit on the fence' and for the problem to receive no firm, final answer, as long as the essay itself has supplied good reasons why a definite response cannot be given at this point.

A couple of further issues should be addressed. Firstly, the use of personal pronouns such as 'I' is permissible but potentially hazardous. It is often helpful to use 'I' in a performative sense, to signpost a process: for example, 'I will firstly address the arguments put forward by Descartes...' and 'I will now consider some possible objections to this view...'. While 'I' is not forbidden in other contexts, it can often distract students from the need to *provide reasons for every claim*. An opinion – 'I think...' – is worthless if not accompanied by detailed justification.

Secondly, while standard form is among the most useful tools one can use when analysing arguments, an essay usually demands more detailed treatment of an argument's interpretation and implications. It is best to use prose for the bulk of one's philosophical analysis in an essay problem. Students should not expect a few lines of standard form to suffice for 'analysis'. If point-form presentation is used, it should be to clarify further some point made in prose.

## THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction of a philosophy essay should set out what problem is being investigated. The meanings of any key terms should be made clear. The problem should be set in some kind of context. What are some of the main views to be considered? Are there particular philosophers or texts whose arguments are central to this debate? Some students will wish to set out the point of view on the problem that they wish to defend but this is by no means mandatory, as advised above.

## BODY OF ESSAY

All philosophy essays will be comprised mainly of two main types of writing: **analysis** and **evaluation**. In general, sections of analysis and evaluation should be roughly equal in length.

**Analysis** includes the identification of viewpoints and arguments, including the premises and conclusions of arguments. It is through analysis that students demonstrate that they understand, and have detailed knowledge of, viewpoints and arguments. They may need to interpret what a philosopher means in a passage of text. Deep analysis can lead to speculation about the **implications** of viewpoints and arguments.

**Evaluation** is the critical assessment of viewpoints and arguments. It involves identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as positive and negative implications. Skills of reasoning will be at the fore in this section of an essay. So too will strategies such as: offering objections and counter-examples; detecting ambiguities, inconsistencies and hidden assumptions; using examples; and linking viewpoints and arguments to everyday life and contemporary debates.

The best way to structure the body of an essay may depend on the topic. In general, it can work well to alternate paragraphs of analysis and evaluation, working through different viewpoints or arguments one at a time. Alternatively, some students prefer to complete all their analysis in a large block, followed by several paragraphs of evaluation in response. Both methods are fine, although repetition can be a problem with either method, depending on the topic.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of a philosophy essay should give an assessment of where the student has come to in the exploration. It should pull together the various threads which have weaved through the essay. It may be that a final response to the problem has not been arrived at. It is acceptable for the conclusion to be couched in personal terms; indeed a sense of personal voice and a student's own response to an issue are assets. A student may even confess to being more confused than when they began the essay! There is nothing wrong with this as long as intelligent consideration has been given to all key views and arguments in the course of the essay. A good conclusion will tend to keep the spirit of enquiry alive to the end, perhaps indicating further questions that need to be explored, and the next steps which could be taken to untangle the issue.

## CLARITY OF EXPRESSION

Clear and precise use of language is crucial in philosophy. Being able to *say what one means* and *mean what one says* are central skills to develop, both verbally and in writing. Florid language is *not* an advantage in Philosophy essays. Simple language and short sentences are much preferred over dense, hard-to-follow, jargon-ridden expression.

Along similar lines, students should not be led to believe that the longer the essay the better. The ability to explain ideas and express views *concisely* will be rewarded! A longer essay does not necessarily succeed in probing an issue in greater depth than a shorter essay, and *depth* of thought is the primary goal of all endeavours in this subject.

# Useful Resources: Teaching Philosophy

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## Resources for teaching philosophy and facilitating the CoI

- Fisher, R. 1998 *Teaching Thinking: Philosophical Inquiry in the Classroom*, Cassell, London.
- Golding, C. 2002 *Connecting Concepts*, ACER, Melbourne.
- Golding, C. 2005 *Developing a Thinking Classroom*, Hawker Brownlow, Melbourne.
- Golding, C. 2005 *Thinking with Rich Concepts*, ThinkShop, Nelson.
- Lipman, M, Sharp, A.M. & Oscanyan, F. 1980 *Philosophy in the Classroom*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Lipman, M. 2003 *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Splitter, L.J. & Sharp, A.M. 1995 *Teaching for Better Thinking: The Classroom Community of Inquiry*, ACER, Melbourne.

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## Resources for use in the classroom

- Baggini, J. 2005 *The Pig That Wants to be Eaten and 99 Other Thought Experiments*, Granta Books, London.
- Bowen, G, Michaels, M & Solomon, R (eds) 2000 *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, Harcourt Brace, Orlando, Florida.
- Clark, M. 2002 *Paradoxes from A to Z*, Routledge, New York.
- Cohen, M. 2001 *101 Philosophy Problems*, Routledge, London.
- Droit, R. (Romer, S. trans) 2003, *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life*, Faber & Faber, London.
- Law, S. 2003 *The Philosophy Gym*, Headline Book Publishing, London.
- White, D. 2001 *Philosophy for Kids: 40 Fun Activities that Help You to Wonder About Everything*, Prufrock Press, New York.

The VAPS (**Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools**) website also has a range of resources for use in the classroom, including lesson plans and activities, and provides information about workshops, lectures and network meetings for teachers. You can visit the site at [www.vaps.vic.edu.au](http://www.vaps.vic.edu.au)





