Year 11 – Philosophy Transition Work

Philosophy is a subject that involves thinking. Some people think that Philosophy has no correct answers. While this is true, there are good and poor ways of thinking in Philosophy. Learning this can sometimes be a challenge, but the good news is that the skills you learn in Philosophy can be used in any subject. If you have noticed in the RE corridor, there is a board with people who have studied Philosophy and you might have noticed that they include comedians, politicians, lawyers, scientists, etc. The most important skills you will learn in Philosophy is how to think and how to put your ideas across in a coherent way.

The reading and exercises in this booklet will introduce you to some Philosophy and help you to start thinking about things. Don't worry if you don't get it all straight away, this is not a test!

There are 4 short written tasks to complete – these are highlighted in green.

Epistemology (What can we really know?)

Watch this video (don't worry about the big words!):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L45Q1_psDqk

In the video he mentioned the Matrix. This film uses ideas from the book *The Republic* written by Plato, the first Philosopher to start writing down his ideas. Watch this video to see how the film plays with this idea:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGZiLMGdCE0

Read the excerpt on 'The Problem of Perception'. It explains why using the word 'know' based on what we see, hear, feel, touch or taste can be a problem because we cannot always trust our senses.

The Problem of Perception

A great deal of our knowledge of the world is gained via perception—that is, via our sensory faculties such as our sense of sight, hearing, touch, and so forth. My knowledge, if that's what it is, that I am presently at my desk writing these words is itself largely perceptually gained. I can see the computer before me, and I can feel the hard touch of the computer keyboard on my fingers as I type. If we know much of what we think we know, then we must have a great deal of perceptual knowledge. As we will see, however, it is far from obvious that we do have widespread perceptual knowledge of the world around us, at least as that knowledge is usually understood.

Part of the problem is that the way things look isn't always the way things are; appearances can be deceptive. There are familiar examples of this sort of deception, such as the way a straight stick will look bent when placed underwater, or the mirages that result from wandering dehydrated through a barren desert. In these cases, if one were not suitably refining one's responses to one's sensory experiences, then one would be led into forming a false belief. If one did not know about light refraction, for example, then one would think that the stick really is bending as it enters the water; if one did not know that one was experiencing a mirage, then one would really believe that there was an unexpected oasis on the horizon.

There are also less mundane cases of perceptual error where the illusion is more

widespread.

One could imagine, for example, an environment in which one's sensory experiences are a completely unreliable guide as to the nature of the environment. This could be achieved by hiding the real colours of the objects in the environment by employing fluorescent lights, or by using visual tricks to distort one's sense of perspective in order to give the impression that objects are closer or farther away than they really are. The existence of perceptual error of this sort reminds us that, whilst we must depend upon our perceptual faculties for much of our knowledge of the world, the possibility always remains that these faculties can lead us into forming false beliefs if left unchecked.

Given that we can usually correct for misleading perceptual impressions when they occur— as when we make use of our knowledge of light refraction to account for why straight sticks appear bent when placed in water—the mere possibility of perceptual error is not that worrying. The problem posed by perception is not, then, that it is a fallible way of gaining knowledge of the world; instead, it is its apparent indirectness.

Consider the visual impression caused by a genuine sighting of an oasis on the horizon, and contrast it with the corresponding visual impression of an illusory sighting of an oasis on the horizon formed by one who is hallucinating. Here is the crux: *these two visual impressions could be exactly the same*. The problem, however, is that it seems that if this is the case then what we experience in perception is not the world itself, but something that falls short of the world, something that is common to both the 'good' case in which one's senses are not being deceived (and one is actually looking at an oasis) and the 'bad' case in which one's senses are being deceived (and one is the victim of an hallucination). This line of reasoning which makes use of undetectable error in perception in order to highlight the indirectness of perceptual experience is known as the **argument from illusion**.

The argument from illusion suggests an 'indirect' model of perceptual knowledge, such that what we are immediately aware of when we gain such knowledge is a sensory impression—a seeming—on the basis of which we then make an inference regarding how the world is. That is, in both the deceived and non-deceived 'oasis' case just considered, what is common is a sensory impression of an oasis on the horizon, which leads one to infer something about the world: that there really is an oasis on the horizon. The difference between the two cases is that whilst the inference generates a true belief in the non-deceived case, it generates a false belief in the deceived case. In the former case, one is thus in a position, all other things being equal at least, to have perceptual knowledge that there is an oasis before one; whilst in the latter case perceptual knowledge is out of the question because one's visual impressions are deceiving oneself.

But why is the indirectness, in this sense, of perceptual knowledge a problem? Well, the worry is that on this model of our perceptual interactions with the world, it seems that we are never actually perceiving a world external to our senses at all, strictly speaking, since our experiences are forever falling short of the world and requiring supplementation from reason. But isn't this conclusion more than just a little odd? Think of your perceptual experiences just now as you read this book. Aren't you *directly* experiencing the book in your hands?

Moreover, notice that this picture of the way we perceive the world, and thus gain perceptual knowledge, seems to have the result that our perceptual knowledge is far less secure than we might have otherwise thought. We normally regard our perceptual knowledge as the most secure of all. We often say, for example, that seeing is believing, and if we do indeed see something in clear daylight with our own two eyes, then this will tend to trump any counter-evidence we might have. For example, suppose that those around you assure you that your brother is out of town, and yet you see him walking towards you in the high street. Surely the testimony of your peers would be quickly disregarded and you would immediately believe that he is in town. According to our ordinary conception of perceptual knowledge, then, it is epistemically privileged relative to (at least some) other types of knowledge. But if perceptual experience does not put us in direct contact with the world, as the argument from illusion suggests—such that perceptual knowledge rests in part on an inference—then it appears that

our perceptual knowledge is no more privileged than other 'indirect' knowledge that we have of the world (e.g., through testimony). In short, our knowledge of the world when we see that things are so is no better than it is when, say, we are merely told that things are so. But why, then, are we so confident in our perception-based judgements about the world?

Here are some examples of and explanations for things we see differently or incorrectly.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHeYxzJFVKM

Epistemology asks the question – what can we REALLY know, and what does it mean for other subject areas? If we say we can't know anything, can we KNOW what is right or what is wrong? If right and wrong depend on what we think, is it right to perhaps punish or jail someone for something they don't think is wrong? If there is no right or wrong, does the idea of a globally recognised list of basic human rights make sense, or should human rights be culturally defined?

Use the internet to help you answer the following questions.

1. What does the word 'Epistemology' mean?
2. What does Epistemology study?
3. Name 5 Philosophers who have written about Epistemology.
4. Write a paragraph to summarise what you have learnt from this short introduction. Include things you already knew, new things you have learnt, things that surprised you, further things you would like to know about the theory of knowledge, etc.

Moral Philosophy (How can we know what is right or wrong?)

The link below will give you a brief outline of the main topics studied in Moral Philosophy.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TqJrvtt9ws

Our own legal and moral systems have been influenced by several different ethical theories. During the time when the Church and State were closely linked, we would have been influenced by Divine Command Theory. This theory states that if God commanded it, then it is right. We still have laws based on commandments such as Do not kill, Do not steal and paying compensation if we have harmed others. Situation Ethics is based on a religious principle, asking what is the loving thing, or the kindest thing, to do. Some modern changes to the law, such as the abortion law and current debates around euthanasia and animals rights are based on this theory. Our laws are also heavily influenced by Utilitarianism which asks, 'What is the most useful thing for the greatest number of people?' Laws about not smoking in public places or not fly-tipping have been developed around this kind of thinking.

Click on the link below for a simple introduction to Utilitarianism. Just a quick note – the words 'happiness' and 'utility' are often used as though they mean the same thing. A closer look at Bentham, who first developed Act Utilitarianism, and Mill, who was his pupil and developed Rule Utilitarianism, shows that these are not the same. I hope you know what 'happiness' means, but

'utility' means 'the state of being useful, profitable, or beneficial'. Don't worry about this too much at the moment, but think about the difference when you answer the questions below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrZp12isYb4

Read the extract on Utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism philosophy

Written By: Brian Duignan, Henry R. West

Utilitarianism, in normative ethics, a tradition stemming from the late 18th- and 19th-century English philosophers and economists Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill according to which an action is right if it tends to promote happiness and wrong if it tends to produce the reverse of happiness—not just the happiness of the performer of the action but also that of everyone affected by it. Such a theory is in opposition to egoism, the view that a person should pursue his own self-interest, even at the expense of others, and to any ethical theory that regards some acts or types of acts as right or wrong independently of their consequences (*see* deontological ethics). Utilitarianism also differs from ethical theories that make the rightness or wrongness of an act dependent upon the motive of the agent, for, according to the utilitarian, it is possible for the right thing to be done from a bad motive. Utilitarians may, however, distinguish the aptness of praising or blaming an agent from whether the act was right.

Jeremy Bentham, detail of an oil painting by H.W. Pickersgill, 1829; in the National Portrait Gallery, London. *Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London*

The nature of utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is an effort to provide an answer to the practical question "What ought a person to do?" The answer is that a person ought to act so as to produce the best consequences possible.

Basic concepts

In the notion of consequences the utilitarian includes all of the good and bad produced by the act, whether arising after the act has been performed or during its performance. If the difference in the consequences of alternative acts is not great, some utilitarians do not regard the choice between them as a moral issue. According to Mill, acts should be classified as morally right or wrong only if the consequences are of such significance that a person would wish to see the agent compelled, not merely persuaded and exhorted, to act in the preferred manner.

In assessing the consequences of actions, utilitarianism relies upon some theory of intrinsic value: something is held to be good in itself, apart from further consequences, and all other values are believed to derive their worth from their relation to this intrinsic good as a means to an end. Bentham and Mill were hedonists; i.e., they analyzed happiness as a balance of pleasure over pain and believed that these feelings alone are of intrinsic value and disvalue. Utilitarians also assume that it is possible to compare the intrinsic values produced by two alternative actions and to

estimate which would have better consequences. Bentham believed that a hedonic calculus is theoretically possible. A moralist, he maintained, could sum up the units of pleasure and the units of pain for everyone likely to be affected, immediately and in the future, and could take the balance as a measure of the overall good or evil tendency of an action. Such precise measurement as Bentham envisioned is perhaps not essential, but it is nonetheless necessary for the utilitarian to make some interpersonal comparisons of the values of the effects of alternative courses of action.

Methodologies

As a normative system providing a standard by which an individual ought to act and by which the existing practices of society, including its moral code, ought to be evaluated and improved, utilitarianism cannot be verified or confirmed in the way in which a descriptive theory can, but it is not regarded by its exponents as simply arbitrary. Bentham believed that only in terms of a utilitarian interpretation do words such as “ought,” “right,” and “wrong” have meaning and that, whenever anyone attempts to combat the principle of utility, he does so with reasons drawn from the principle itself. Bentham and Mill both believed that human actions are motivated entirely by pleasure and pain, and Mill saw that motivation as a basis for the argument that, since happiness is the sole end of human action, the promotion of happiness is the test by which to judge all human conduct.

One of the leading utilitarians of the late 19th century, the Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick, rejected such theories of motivation as well as Bentham’s theory of the meaning of moral terms and sought to support utilitarianism by showing that it follows from systematic reflection on the morality of “common sense.” Most of the requirements of common sense morality, he argued, could be based upon utilitarian considerations. In addition, he reasoned that utilitarianism could solve the difficulties and perplexities that arise from the vagueness and inconsistencies of common sense doctrines.

Most opponents of utilitarianism have held that it has implications contrary to their moral intuitions—that considerations of utility, for example, might sometimes sanction the breaking of a promise. Much of the defence of utilitarian ethics has consisted in answering these objections, either by showing that utilitarianism does not have the implications that its opponents claim it has or by arguing against the opponents’ moral intuitions. Some utilitarians, however, have sought to modify the utilitarian theory to account for the objections.

Try it out in a situation

From what you have learnt so far, write a paragraph to assess what a strong or weak utilitarian might say about some of the restrictions and rules we are facing at the moment during the lockdown. Check the news to see exactly what those rules are, about working, shopping, exercising. Look at the ways in which people are breaking those rules and the reasons they are using as to why this is ok.

In your answer include specific examples and details, similar to the discussion about the pregnant girl in the video. Try and think through all the pluses and minuses, all the people involved, the consequences for individuals and for society as a whole. Speak to people at home or over social media or look through discussion blogs to get the views of others.

Philosophy of Mind (Do we have a brain and a mind, or just a brain?)

In Philosophy of Mind, some Philosophers such as Descartes argued that the brain and mind were two distinct things, so that if the body died, the mind could survive. This idea has been explored in science fiction films such as Avatar, Surrogates and Possible Worlds, where the brain can live a life and have experiences apart from the body. Other Philosophers, such as Churchland, argue that there is no such thing as 'a mind' and that we should change our language so that we remove words such as pain, thirsty and panic from our speech. The arguments in this topic have connections to psychology and IT. In psychology, what does it mean when we talk about mental health, for example. Are we talking about the health of the brain or something else? In IT the discussions have links to ideas about artificial intelligence (AI). If the mind and thinking are just a series of functions, then can we program a computer to 'think' in the same way that humans think?

In this topic we use loads of thought experiments because we are often thinking about things we can't actually test. Below are links to 2 thought experiments, The Philosophical Zombies Argument which links to psychology questions about whether 'consciousness' is a thing, and the Chinese Room Argument which links to questions about whether we can program a machine to learn in the same way as humans. Don't panic if they seem a bit confusing, just try to understand what point they are trying to make about how our brains work.

Philosophical Zombies:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scEnHZzxp5I

In the video he asks whether someone blind who could suddenly see would have a different or new 'experience'. Watch this video to help you decide what you think.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWDDpc0HDBc

Chinese Room Argument:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TryOC83PH1g

In the video he mentioned the Turing test. Here is a link to explain more about this:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wLqsRLvV-c

Let's think carefully!

Below are two links that ask questions that use ideas from arguments about consciousness and ethics.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHyUYg8X31c

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjCytqku18M

Watch the videos and write a paragraph to explain what you think about the question: Should robots have rights?

Philosophy of Religion (Asks questions about our ideas concerning God and religion)

In this topic we will ask many questions, such as whether we can know that God exists, the problem of evil, what is meant by the religious language that people use, etc. The link below gives you a bit of an introduction to the difference between truth and beliefs. This is a very small part of the course, but hopefully you will see the link with Epistemology. Hopefully you will also see that even religious people do not necessarily agree about what they mean when talking about religion or God. The most important thing to note in the video is that Philosophy is not about defending what you already think. Good Philosophy looks closely at the arguments and can take ideas from those arguments, even if the philosopher does not fully change their mind.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJZ8ib93vSk

Read the excerpt about faith and reason below.

Argument or Blind Faith

Note: This is part of a free online course with the Open University. If you would like to do more on this subject, you can register and complete it here:

Introducing Philosophy of Religion

In asking whether 'religion is something that you can argue about' (Question (K) in the list in the previous section), I'm not asking whether it's possible to have a conflict or a row about religion. All too obviously, that's perfectly possible – history is full of such conflicts. What I'm asking is whether religion is something we can argue *philosophically* about. And in philosophy, **argument** doesn't mean having a row or a conflict between different viewpoints. Philosophical argument is about giving **evidence**, perhaps even proofs, for your viewpoint – evidence or proofs that you hope others might be convinced by.

> **argument**
>
> In philosophy, an argument for a claim is a series of statements that somebody makes or might make, giving reasons to believe that claim.
>
> **evidence**
>
> Evidence for a claim means facts or experiences or data or any reasonable assumptions that can be given to support a claim – the kind of things that someone might mention in a good argument for the claim.

So can there be successful philosophical arguments about God and religion? Here is a little dialogue between three people – Ada, Bert and Carl – who give different answers to this question. Which of them are you nearest to agreeing with?

> **ADA**
> Yes, there can be philosophical argument about God and religion. And the upshot of the philosophical arguments is to prove that God exists.
> **BERT**
> Yes, there can be philosophical argument about God and religion. And the upshot of the philosophical arguments is to prove that God doesn't exist.
> **CARL**

Well, one of you has got to be wrong! I think your arguments cancel out. There can't be a proof of God's existence such as Ada believes in, when some people, like Bert for instance, are so sure that there's a proof of God's *non*-existence.

ADA

Wait a minute, Carl. You think that just because Bert disagrees with me about religion, I can't be right? And just because I disagree with Bert, *he* can't be right? But that's ridiculous. People might disagree about whether the earth is flat. In fact, they *do*! That doesn't mean that no one can be right about whether the earth is flat. Same with religion. Just because people disagree about religion, that doesn't mean that no one is right about religion.

BERT

Exactly. Just because Ada thinks there is a God, it doesn't mean there is one. Ada is the one who's the flat-earther here.

CARL

But the thing is, if we were talking about whether the earth is flat, we could discuss the arguments. We could *prove* that the earth isn't flat, and that would be the end of the question. What happens with God and religion isn't like that. There aren't any proofs one way or the other. There aren't even any arguments.

ADA

No, there are arguments on both sides. I have arguments for believing in God, and Bert has arguments for not believing. It's just that my arguments are convincing, and Bert's aren't.

BERT

Well, they might convince you, but they shouldn't!

CARL

OK, so you do both offer arguments. But I don't think either of you believes what you believe *because* of your arguments. I think it's blind faith on both sides. Your arguments are just a pretence. They're an excuse for believing what you *want* to believe anyway. If you want a long word, they're a rationalisation!

ADA

Carl, I've spent years thinking about all this. I've been really careful and logical in examining the evidence. I believe in God because that's the position the evidence supports. There's nothing *blind* about my faith! Given the evidence, faith in God is the only reasonable position.

BERT

And I can say the same. I've spent years thinking about it, too, and I don't disbelieve in God just because I feel like it! I disbelieve in God because that's the position the evidence supports. There's nothing blind about my *lack* of faith! Given the evidence, disbelief in God is the only reasonable position.

So who's right: Ada, Bert or Carl?

Does any of this sound familiar? If you have ever listened to or taken part in an argument about whether God exists, it probably does. Lots of people (like Ada and Bert) advance arguments for and against God's existence, and many of them are clearly intelligent and reasonable people. But still we don't seem able to *settle* the arguments about God one way or the other. That leads many other intelligent and reasonable people to a conclusion like Carl's: there isn't any conclusive argument either for or against God's existence, and those who think they have found one only think that because they want to believe it.

So who's right: Ada, Bert or Carl? You might well think that there is something to be said for all three views. Ada (you might say) has a point, because there are some things in the world that don't seem to make sense unless there is a God. Bert has a point for the opposite reason – because there are some things that don't seem to make sense if there *is* a God. Meanwhile Carl, too, must be right to

point out that neither Ada nor Bert is being completely fair on the other, and that, sometimes at least, people are theists – or atheists – because that's what they *want* to believe.

On the other hand, you might say, both Ada and Bert go too far in talking about *proof*. There may be evidence for or against God's existence, but *proof* is a very strong word. If you have proof for a belief, that means the belief *must* be true, and surely (you might say) that is going too far with such a difficult question as God's existence. And Carl – you might add – goes too far as well. Just because neither Ada nor Bert can *prove* their beliefs, it doesn't follow that they don't have any evidence at all for them.

You might have different reactions from these, of course. Another possible reaction is to say that Ada is right to believe in God, but Carl is right to say that belief in God doesn't depend on reasons. Belief in God is good for us – it makes our lives go better than they do without belief – so we should believe in God even though we don't have very good evidence that he exists. This kind of view has been suggested by the seventeenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) and William James (1842–1910). Their view is often called fideism (from Latin *fides*, 'faith').

Conversely, you might think that belief in God is *bad* for us, and conclude that we have good reason not to believe in God, whether or not we have good evidence that he doesn't exist. This kind of view you will find in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and the twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970).

Some people even think that there can't be any real faith in God *unless* there is no evidence for God's existence. Faith is essentially trust, and there can't be trust unless there is something you don't know: I can't really *trust* that my daughter will recover from her illness, if I already know that she has recovered. Likewise with faith in God: we couldn't have real faith in God if we *knew* that God existed. This is the strongly fideist view that the nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) takes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846).

There is a lot in there. The most important thing to realise about Philosophy is that it can't be rushed (which means assignments can't be left to the last minute). You need time to reread things and to think things through. Look at the last 5 paragraphs – they summarise 5 different approaches to the Philosophy or Religion.

Write a paragraph to explain which view you currently agree with most and give your own reasons for this belief.

Final Words

Sometimes people change their minds after studying the different arguments in more detail – that's fine. Anthony Flew, who was called the Father of Atheism, changed his mind after studying questions for and against the existence of God for 50 years. And he is still not certain. The aim in all these topics is to be able to understand the ideas that people put forward and to be able to more clearly explain your views. And it is absolutely fine to agree with some part of an argument and disagree with another part. Personally I think Karl Marx described problems with our modern industrialised society really well – but I don't agree with his conclusions on how the problems should be resolved. But the important question is, can I explain clearly which bits I do and don't agree with and can I explain why?