



PHILOSOPHY IN THE SIXTH FORM



Philosophy is the detailed study of arguments. It aims to clarify human thought, and to find truth among the mess of hopes, delusions, lies and misunderstandings that fill our minds.

This requires a study of the writings of the best thinkers of the past two and a half thousand years, and an intense effort to think carefully about the basic problems and theories of life.

Careful thought about a theory means:

- clarify it, and break it down into component parts
- spell out things that have been taken for granted
- weigh up the obvious evidence
- examine extreme cases
- invent problem situations
- check for contradictions
- check consistency with other theories
- compare our intuitions about it

If the course is successful, it will make you a wiser human being, and turn you into a high-powered problem-solver.

The Lower Sixth course (AS)

Module 1: Theory of knowledge

- What is reality?
- How do we know it?
- If it depends on our senses, are they reliable?
- Suppose we had different senses (e.g. X-ray vision)?
- Is reason involved in knowledge?
- Do earthworms know anything?
- Can you know things (like maths) by *pure* reason?
- Would aliens agree with us about maths?
- Is knowledge actually impossible?
- Might we be in a virtual reality machine right now?
- Is 'truth' just someone's point of view?

Module 2: Moral philosophy

- Are there any fixed rules for good behaviour?
- Can we work out moral rules from pure reason?
- Is morality simply a matter of making people happy?
- Is a state of non-stop ecstatic pleasure the perfect life?
- Can we be both selfish *and* moral?
- Is bravery a virtue? What's wrong with cowardice?
- Have all these theories anything to do with real life?
- Is it ever right to kill the unborn, or the sick, or animals?
- Is morality just in our minds, or is it a fact of nature?
- Are some cultures (e.g. us!) morally better than others?

Module 3: Set text - Plato's *Republic*, or Descartes' *Meditations*

- **Plato** (*top right*) proposes a theory that ideas are more basic to nature than physical objects. Geometry was true even before anyone thought of it. Horses live and die, but the idea of a horse stays the same. The world changes, but basic ideas don't. Understanding these unchanging ideas is the only real knowledge.
- **Descartes** (*top left*) explores all the reasons why we might doubt reality (we might be dreaming, say), and then tries to deduce something totally reliable, such as the existence of his own mind, or God. He compares reason and sense experience, and tries to show that we can achieve truth, even though we obviously make mistakes.

The Upper Sixth course (A2)

Module 4: Philosophy of Mind

- What *is* a mind?
- Is it physical?
- If not, what is it made of?
- Is an 'out-of-body experience' possible?
- Can we survive death?
- Could a machine have a mind?
- If so, is the mind hardware or software?
- Could an animal or a robot be a 'person'?
- Could a brain scan reveal your secret thoughts?
- Must thinking obey the laws of physics?

Module 5: Set text - Aristotle's *Ethics*, or Hume's *Enquiry*, or Russell's *Problems of Philosophy*

- **Aristotle** offers a major theory of morality, arguing that there are natural excellences for a human being, which are the virtues of different parts of your soul. A happy life is a well-rounded and full developed one.
- **Hume** offers a view of human knowledge based on sense experience. All ideas can be analysed into component experiences. The basic principles of science, such as laws and causes, are all built up in this way.
- **Russell** surveys our ability to know things, comparing the claims of reason and of senses. He explores the way doubt can eat into our most basic beliefs, and tries various strategies for regaining faith in truth, knowledge and science.

Module 6: Course work (20% of the total marks)

A personal essay of about 4000 words, either comparing two philosophers, or showing how one philosopher contributes to a debate about a particular problem.

Requirements and Skills

- This course suits people who *enjoy* arguments, whether participating or listening.
- It is an essay-writing subject, and an ability to express yourself clearly is highly desirable (e.g. a good grade in GCSE English).
- Lessons involve studying parts of set texts, and handouts with summarised ideas. These are then mercilessly criticised to see whether they will survive the attack. Participation by members of the class is actively encouraged.
- Essay work is done on topics currently being covered in class, over a period of about two weeks.
- Reading of original texts is gradually encouraged, but without undue pressure (because they are often difficult).
- The subject will fit well with *all* other sixth form subjects.

The teacher

- The course is taught by Mr P.M.A. Gibson.
- He is an English graduate (with science A levels), who taught A Level English in the RGS for twenty years.
- He has studied Philosophy for 25 years, including a full-time M.A. and Open University courses, and has been Chairman of the Philosophical Society in Oxford.
- Philosophy courses have been offered at the RGS since 1984, and over 250 Old Wycombiensians are qualified in the subject.