

# Introduction

This A level may represent the first time you have formally studied philosophy, although you may well have debated many philosophical issues with friends, family or even with yourself. Unlike other A levels such as Mathematics, History, Business Studies or Biology, the nature of the subject is not immediately clear from the name alone. This is because the term *philosophy* is used to cover a great many things and is used differently by different people. To see this, you only have to wander into the philosophy section of your local bookshop or library, where the chances are you will find books covering such diverse topics as UFOs, tarot cards and personal therapy.

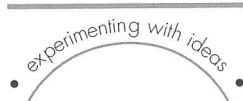
Even amongst philosophers themselves there is no clear consensus as to what the subject involves. Indeed John Campbell in his book *Philosophers* photographed over fifty philosophers and asked them each to describe the subject. Perhaps not surprisingly over fifty different answers were given. For example:

*Philosophy is thinking in slow motion. It breaks down, describes and assesses moves we ordinarily make at great speed – to do with our natural motivations and beliefs. It then becomes evident that alternatives are possible*

John Campbell, *Philosophers*

To add to this confusion, or possibly in an attempt to make things clearer, we sketch in this introduction our own account of the nature of the subject.

## What is philosophy?



Below are six different human inventions or theories or techniques (we've called them discoveries) which have helped humans to make sense of the world. Read through these discoveries then think about, or go and find out, what each discovery is, when the discovery was made and how it might have helped us to learn about the world.

## Discoveries

- A** The discovery and analysis of fossils and relics
- B** The invention of ground lenses
- C** The use of dissection on animals and humans
- D** The discovery of DNA
- E** Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism
- F** The theory that the earth's crust is divided into plates

Humans have long looked up at the stars in wonder and asked difficult and probing questions about the world we live in: where did we come from, why are we here, where are we going? Below are a list of some of the other puzzling questions about ourselves and the universe that humans have sought to answer:

## Puzzling questions

- 1** Do other planets have moons?
- 2** What causes diseases?
- 3** What is it that all living things have in common?
- 4** What is light?
- 5** What happens to us when we die?
- 6** Did strange creatures ever walk the earth?
- 7** Why do earthquakes occur?
- 8** How does blood move around the body?
- 9** Have humans always existed?
- 10** Why does anything exist at all?
- 11** Why do children resemble their parents?
- 12** Why do certain metals attract one another?
- 13** Can we know anything for certain?
- 14** How old is the earth?
- 15** Why are kangaroos only found in Australia?
- 16** Why are certain diseases unavoidable?
- 17** Have humans always lived together?
- 18** Does every effect have a cause?
- 19** Should we dissect animals?
- 20** How do animals move?
- 21** How are mountains formed?
- 22** What is existence?
- 23** Why do batteries affect a compass?
- 24** Can a person think without a brain?
- 25** Is the earth the centre of the universe?
- 26** What is everything made of?
  - a)** Now ask yourself for each puzzling question: 'could one of the discoveries help me to answer this?'
  - b)** If you think one of them could help, then jot down on a bit of paper which discovery (from A–F) might help you to answer that question.
  - c)** What questions do you have left over after considering all the puzzling questions listed above – i.e. which questions cannot be answered by any of the discoveries?
  - d)** What do these left-over questions have in common?

This activity is designed to tease out a notable feature of philosophy, namely, how philosophical questions differ from other types of question. In Ancient Greece philosophy had a meaning very different from the one it has today. *Philos*, meaning ‘love of’, and *sophia*, meaning ‘wisdom’ gave rise to the word *philosophy* meaning ‘love of wisdom’. But this love of wisdom encompassed nearly all fields of knowledge. If you were studying philosophy at Plato’s Academy or Aristotle’s Lyceum then you might find on your timetable maths, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, psychology, law, politics (although most of them would be grouped under the heading ‘philosophy’). Philosophy was the study of everything that humankind wanted to gain knowledge about.

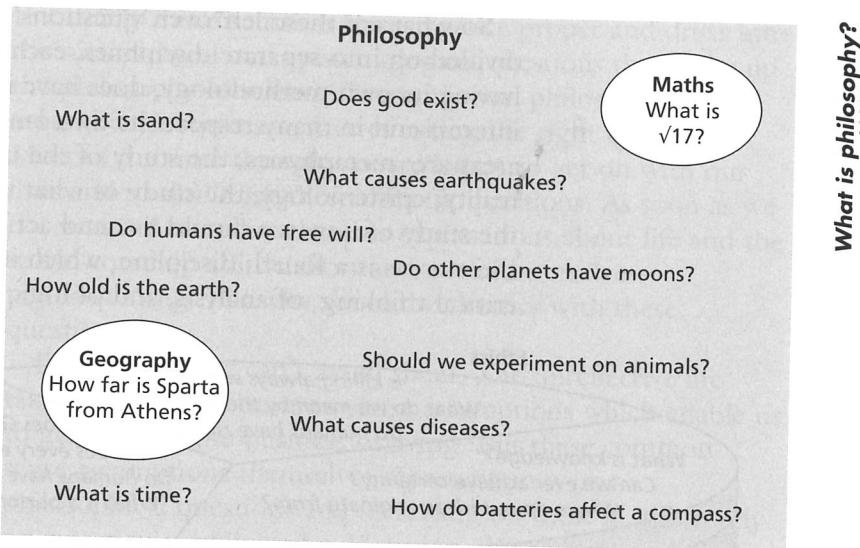
Over the centuries, from 400 BCE to the present day, many areas of thought have peeled away from philosophy and developed into separate disciplines: for example, chemistry, physics, biology (once termed ‘natural philosophy’), and recently psychology, all became subjects in their own right, not merely subsidiaries of philosophy. Why was this so? Well, as the activity above might have shown, many subjects developed their own methodologies, their own tools and techniques enabling their own specific ways of answering the questions they were interested in.

How does this help us to understand philosophy? We could say that philosophy has always been the subject that asks the questions that humans cannot yet answer. In Greek times these included questions like ‘what is light?’ and ‘do other planets have moons?’ as well as questions like ‘what is existence?’ and ‘can we know anything for certain?’ As thinkers discovered and agreed upon techniques and tools that could address questions about the planets and light, then these questions became scientific rather than philosophical. So nowadays we think we have an answer for the first two questions, but philosophers continue asking questions like the last two.

Philosophy is therefore very difficult to define because it deals with the stuff left over – the questions which have no agreed method by which we can answer them. It can also appear frustrating, after all why are we asking the same questions that Plato and Aristotle asked over two thousand years ago – why hasn’t there been any progress in philosophy?

### ■ Figure 0.1 The categorisation of questions in ancient Greece

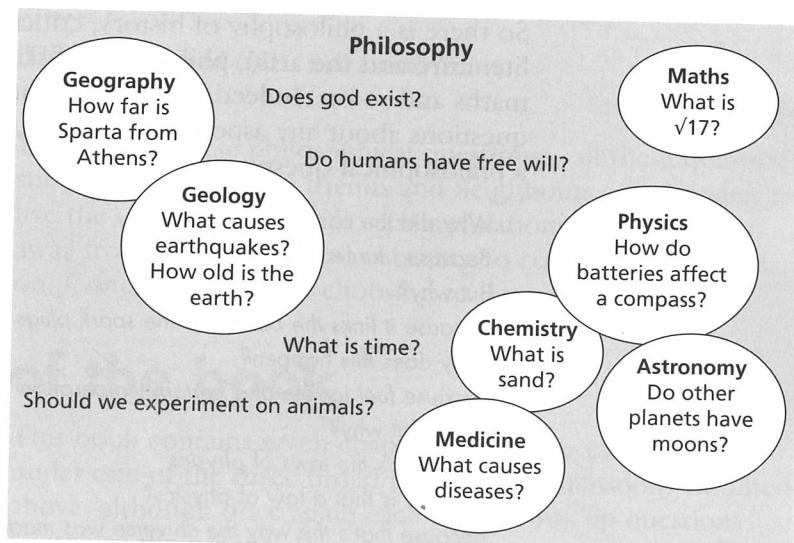
In the beginning most questions were philosophical as there was no agreed method for solving them.



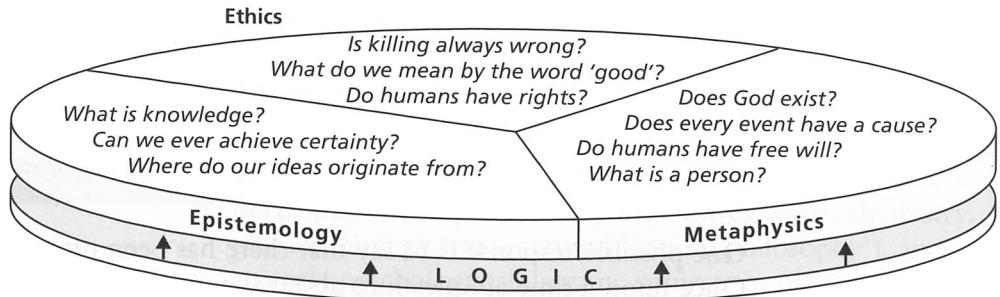
One possible response is to say that there has been progress. Once upon a time all questions about the universe might have been classified as philosophical (see Figure 0.1); but we now have meaningful answers to around two-thirds of the questions in the activity above. Another response is that philosophy, by its very nature, addresses the questions we cannot answer. If we could definitively answer them, or at least agree on a methodology, then they would cease to be philosophical questions and would become scientific ones (see Figure 0.2). Yet another answer is to say that there has been progress in terms of the rigour with which philosophers answer questions, the critical testing from peers to which their answers are put, and the expanded knowledge base from which philosophers can begin their investigation.

### ■ Figure 0.2 The categorisation of questions in the twenty-first century

Over the centuries, aided by discoveries, we have agreed methods of answering certain questions. These are no longer considered philosophical but form part of a new discipline. Philosophy deals with the questions left over.



So what are these left-over ‘questions’? Philosophy can be divided up into separate disciplines, each of which, even if not having its own methodology, does have its own area of interest and in many respects its own language. The three key areas are: metaphysics, the study of the ultimate nature of reality; epistemology, the study of what we can know; ethics, the study of how we should live and act. Underpinning all of these areas is a fourth discipline, which includes the skills of critical thinking, of analysis, and of logic.



■ **Figure 0.3 The different areas of philosophy**

Within these key areas there are further subdivisions: in metaphysics we will find questions grouped around the philosophy of mind (Do I have a soul? How does my mind work? What is consciousness?) and within this the question of persons (Who am I? Am I the same person I was ten years ago?). However, some of this categorisation is artificial, for example the concept of personhood will also raise epistemological and ethical issues. Some other subdivisions of philosophy include: philosophy of language, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, logic, and political philosophy.

Philosophy also deals with the cutting edge and abstract questions at the forefront of most other fields of knowledge. So there is a philosophy of history, critical theory (in English literature and the arts), philosophy of science, philosophy of maths and so on. Indeed, if you ask enough difficult questions about any aspect of the world, you will end up with a philosophical question.

Why did the car start?  
Because I turned the key  
But why?  
Because it links the battery to the spark plugs which ignited the fuel  
Why does this happen?  
Because fuel ignites at a certain temperature  
Yeah, but why?  
Well that's the laws of physics  
But why is that a law of physics?  
Because that's the way the universe was made  
And why was it made this way?

Eventually this discussion leaves science proper and drifts into the metaphysical and epistemological questions that make up the philosophy of science. Seen this way, philosophy is all around us; it's just a matter of asking the right questions. Most of the time though, we are happy to get on with our lives and so don't ask these difficult questions. As soon as we do, we start to realise that our explanations about life and the world come up a little short and we find ourselves philosophising. But why should we bother with these questions?

In one sense we can't avoid them. The unreflective life takes for granted common-sense assumptions which enable us to get on with the business of living. But these common-sense assumptions themselves represent answers to philosophical questions and so relying on these is still to rely on a particular philosophy. However, the common-sense approach is just one possible view of things and one which is often beset with inconsistencies that we ignore. If you scratch beneath the surface, problems can arise.

Consider someone who just wants to live their life and get on with things. Perhaps they want to get a job, earn some money, get a set of wheels and buy a house, and so on. But why does this person want to do these things? Is it because they think they will make them happy? Do they think happiness is a goal worth pursuing? Is it achievable? Is the term even meaningful? If the person hasn't asked themselves these questions then it would seem they are just going about their life with no clear idea of what it is they are ultimately pursuing. We might want to ask: although such a life is possible, is it a good life? The Greek philosopher Socrates would say not:



Socrates

*The unexamined life is not worth living.*

Socrates, *Apology*, 38a

By avoiding these philosophical questions – all these questions still left hanging – our friends and neighbours are choosing to live the unexamined life. So congratulations for not hiding away from these issues and choosing to confront them head on. Congratulations for choosing to live the examined life.

## Structure of the book

This book contains seven chapters which can each be placed under one of the three broad headings of philosophy outlined above, although once again each area throws up questions related to the other fields.

- 1 Why should I be moral – Ethics
- 2 The idea of God – Metaphysics
- 3 Persons – Metaphysics
- 4 Reason and experience – Epistemology
- 5 The debate over free will and determinism – Metaphysics
- 6 God and the world – Metaphysics
- 7 Knowledge of the external world – Epistemology

There is only one compulsory section in the AS Specification: the topic of ‘Reason and experience’. However, epistemology is a highly abstract field, full of technical terms; as such it does not always make the best introduction to the subject. As is obvious from the way this book is ordered we would recommend starting with the chapter on ethics, as this may relate more closely to some of the philosophical issues that are thrown up by everyday life.

Each chapter covers the areas specified in the AQA specification, usually in the same order. At the end of each chapter we have provided a summary of the key points made. There is also a glossary of terms at the back of the book. In each chapter, the first time you encounter a word that is in the glossary it will be in **SMALL CAPITALS**.

Finally, philosophy is an unusual subject to study compared with some of the more heavily populated courses at A level and university. However, remember you are not alone in your studies; here is a short list of famous people who have studied philosophy. Feel free to add your name at the end!

Moby (musician)	Bill Clinton (politician)
Philip K. Dick (novelist)	Ethan Coen (director)
J. Paul Getty (philanthropist)	Joan Rivers (comedian)
Martin Luther King (political activist)	Susan Sarandon (actress)
Woody Allen (comedian/actor/ director)	David Duchovny (actor)
Iris Murdoch (novelist)	Ricky Gervais (comedian/actor)
Wes Anderson (director)	Matt Groening (creator of <i>The Simpsons</i> )
Wes Craven (director)	Larry Sanger (co-founder of Wikipedia)
Harrison Ford (actor)	Bill Hicks (comedian)
Steve Martin (comedian/actor)	Bruce Lee (actor)
Jake Gyllenhaal (actor)	Bill Murray (comedian/actor)
	Leo Tolstoy (novelist)

# Why should I be moral?

## Introduction

Gyges . . . found that every time he turned [the ring] inward he became invisible, and when he turned it outwards he became visible. Having made this discovery he managed to get himself included in the party that was to report to the king, and when he arrived he seduced the queen, and with her help attacked and murdered the king and seized the throne.

Imagine now that two such rings existed and the just man put on one, the unjust the other. There is no one, it would commonly be supposed, who would have such iron strength of will as to stick to what is right . . . For he would be able to steal from the market whatever he wanted . . . to go into any man's house and seduce anyone he liked, to murder or to release from prison anyone he felt inclined, and generally behave as if he had supernatural powers.

Plato, *The Republic*, 360a-d

What would you do if you found Gyges' ring? A ring that meant that you could do whatever you liked without anyone discovering it was you. You would be unobservable whenever you chose to be: think of all the places you could go, the people you could spy on, the conversations you could eavesdrop, all the things you could take. Think of the power that such stolen knowledge and secret thefts would bring and what you could do with that power. Many of us would be tempted to follow Gyges' lead, and to use the ring to maximum advantage – for ourselves. But what reasons could someone give to us, or to Gyges, *not* to use the ring in a way that was purely selfish or that might harm others?

Read through the following scenario and answer the questions below.

A little fellow called Frodo Baggins has recently joined your philosophy class. He confides in you that, just like Gyges, he has a Ring of Power which, when he puts it on, makes him invisible. Frodo seems like a nice enough chap but he has a strange look in his eye; he admits that he sometimes uses the ring just to take what he wants. Whilst he's talking, his face becomes half-twisted into a horrific smile.

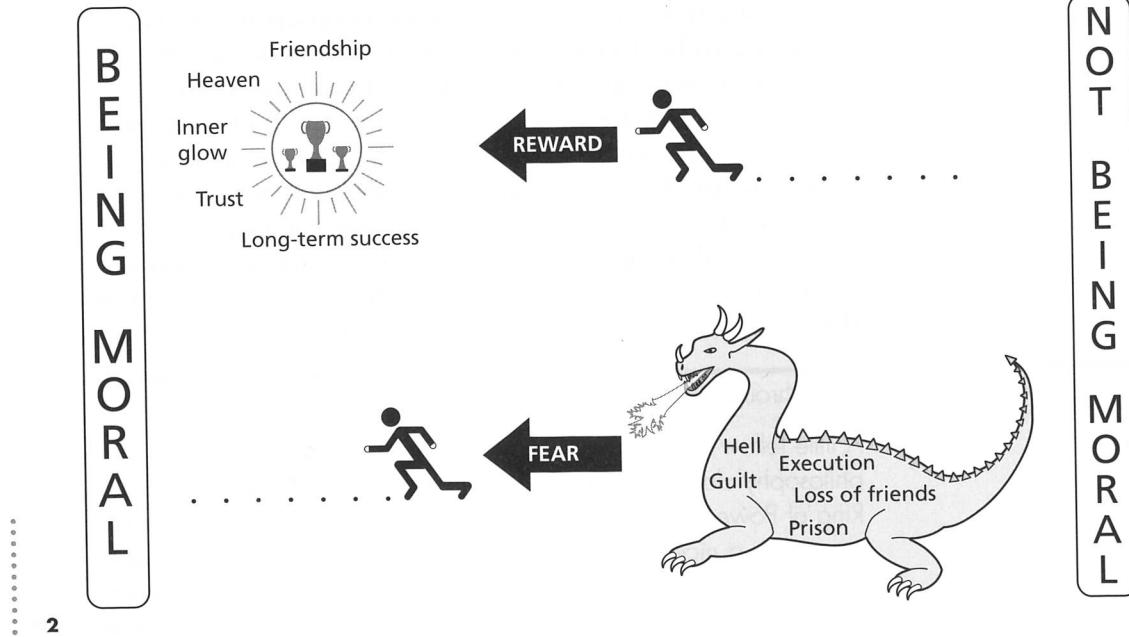
• experimenting with ideas

He whispers to you that he's started to use 'unsound methods' to satisfy his desires, whatever harm this causes to other people. You shudder at what he means by 'harm' and 'unsound'. You decide to intervene, to convince Frodo that he should act in a moral way.

- 1 Why should Frodo be moral? Write down as many reasons as you can (aim for more than five).
- 2 Are there similarities between some of the reasons you have written down – and if so can you group them into 'clusters' of connected reasons?
- 3 Which reason, or cluster of reasons, do you think is the most persuasive?
- 4 Unfortunately most of us don't have Rings of Power or Invisibility, and so our actions, unlike those of Frodo and Gyges, are more likely to be noticed by other people.  
What additional reasons could be given to the rest of us (i.e. those of us without magic rings) as to why we should be moral?

Being moral means doing the right thing, being a good person and, according to our common-sense understanding, this is generally thought to involve helping others and avoiding causing them harm. Moral behaviour, conventionally understood, is essentially ALTRUISTIC: that is, it involves unselfish concern for others. But, behaving altruistically can take a lot of effort for which there may be little obvious personal gain. What *I ought* to do is often in conflict with what *I want* to do. So morality may appear like a constraint on the realisation of your desires and so it seems reasonable to ask 'What's in it for me? Why *should* I be moral?' In other

■ **Figure 1.1 There are push and pull reasons for being moral**



words, what possible reason could there be for acting morally?

In your answers to the activity above you might have given both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ reasons for behaving morally (Figure 1.1). The ‘pull’ reasons are ones that highlight the advantages of being moral and make it attractive to us: for example, people grow to like me; I feel good about myself; I might end up in heaven; people trust me; in the long run I’ll do better by being moral. The ‘push’ reasons are ones that highlight things which we fear, for example legal punishments such as imprisonment, other forms of retribution, loss of friends and family, feelings of guilt, the possibility of eternal damnation. These threats can be avoided if we choose to be moral.

Both sets of reasons, the positive (how can I benefit from being moral?) and the negative (what nastiness do I avoid by being moral?), operate on us as powerful levers that influence our thought processes and affect our actions.<sup>1</sup> However, the bottom line seems to be that they both appeal to our self-interest. In other words we find it reasonable to be moral, and have reasons for being moral, only insofar as behaving morally benefits us individually.

For many of us this seems a strange conclusion. You might wonder whether it can be moral to act only out of self-interest; or whether performing a good act because it benefits you actually counts as a ‘good act’ at all. A philosopher might say that there is a tension between self-interest and morality – between doing what is good for us, and doing what is good full-stop – and that these two ideas pull in opposite directions. Imagine someone rescued you from your house when it was on fire, a brave and fine thing to do. Imagine that you later discovered that your rescuer had stared at the house whilst it was burning in order to make an assessment about **a** his chances of being killed and **b** his chances of getting a reward; and had only decided to rescue you because he judged **a** to be low (a little smoke, but no flames) and **b** to be high (semi-detached, nice car in the drive). Would your views on the rescuer and his action change? Perhaps it would occur to you that, if the flames had been fuller, the house terraced, or the car a different make, then you wouldn’t have been rescued at all.

In the rest of this chapter we explore the tensions between self-interest, practical reason and morality. Our main goal is to examine some of the answers that philosophers have given to the question ‘why should I be moral?’ However, in the process, three subsidiary themes weave in and out of the narrative:

- i) Are we essentially self-interested creatures? Does human nature dictate the motives we can have for being moral?

- ii) Does morality conflict with self-interest? Are self-interested reasons the very opposite to moral reasons, or are the two connected in some way?
- iii) Is moral behaviour reached through reason? Is there another route to moral behaviour that does not depend on giving reasons?

The rest of this chapter is divided into three main parts, each of which looks at a different approach to the question of why we should be moral (see Figure 1.2).

- 1 *Morality as a social contract.* Here we look at those philosophers who accept that we are motivated by self-interest. However, my natural inclination to do what is best for me does not result in moral behaviour and leads to damaging conflict of interest for all of us. So we must come to some sort of agreement, or contract, which limits this conflict. Moral behaviour arises out of this agreement, which puts a limit on what we can do, but which ultimately optimises our self-interest. Morality, then, is like a social glue enabling society to function effectively. And, since we can all see the benefits of mutual cooperation, it is rational for us to adopt the moral code of society.
- 2 *Morality as constitutive of self-interest.* In this section we look at those philosophers, mostly from ancient Greece, who also believe that we are motivated by self-interest and should seek to satisfy this. However, it turns out that it is in our real self-interest to be moral and to develop a moral character. In this way we are able to flourish as human beings.
- 3 *Morality as overcoming self-interest.* In this final part we look at some philosophers who argue that self-interest has nothing to do with morality. The question then is what does motivate us to be moral? Duty itself is one possible motivator, as determined by reason. The final approach that we examine rejects reason altogether, claiming that it is our natural sympathy for others that motivates us to be moral.

In the conclusion to this chapter we look at the three subsidiary questions i)–iii) posed above and how the answers to these interconnect.