

Markscheme

May 2026

Philosophy

Higher level and standard level

Paper 1

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How to use the Diploma Programme Philosophy markscheme

The assessment markbands constitute the formal tool for marking examination scripts, and in these assessment markbands examiners can see the skills being assessed in the examinations. The markschemes are designed to assist examiners in possible routes taken by students in terms of the content of their answers when demonstrating their skills of doing philosophy through their responses. The points listed are not compulsory points, and not necessarily the best possible points. They are a framework to help examiners contextualize the requirements of the question, and to facilitate the application of marks according to the assessment markbands listed on page 4 for the core theme and page 9 for the optional themes.

It is important that examiners understand that the main idea of the course is to promote *doing* philosophy, and this involves activity and engagement throughout a two-year programme, as opposed to emphasizing the chance to display knowledge in a terminal set of examination papers. Even in the examinations, responses should not be assessed on how much students *know* as much as how they are able to use their knowledge in support of an argument, using the skills referred to in the various assessment markbands published in the subject guide, reflecting an engagement with philosophical activity throughout the course. As a tool intended to help examiners in assessing responses, the following points should be kept in mind when using a markscheme:

- The Diploma Programme Philosophy course is designed to encourage the skills of *doing* philosophy in the students. These skills can be accessed through reading the assessment markbands in the subject guide
- The markscheme does not intend to outline a model/correct answer
- The markscheme has an introductory paragraph which contextualizes the emphasis of the question being asked
- The bullet points below the paragraph are suggested possible points of development that should *not* be considered a prescriptive list but rather an indicative list where they might appear in the answer
- If there are names of philosophers and references to their work incorporated into the markscheme, this should help to give context for the examiners and does *not* reflect a requirement that such philosophers and references should appear in an answer: They are possible lines of development.
- Students can legitimately select from a wide range of ideas, arguments and concepts in service of the question they are answering, and it is possible that students will use material effectively that is *not* mentioned in the markscheme
- Examiners should be aware of the command terms for Philosophy as published in the Philosophy subject guide when assessing responses
- In Paper 1, examiners must be aware that a variety of types of answers and approaches, as well as a freedom to choose a variety of themes, is expected. Thus, examiners should not penalize different styles of answers or different selections of content when students develop their response to the questions. The markscheme should not imply that a uniform response is expected
- In markschemes for the core theme questions in Paper 1 (section A) the bullet points suggest possible routes of response to the stimulus, but it is critical for examiners to understand that the selection of the philosophical issue raised by the stimulus is *entirely at the choice of the student* so it is possible for material to gain credit from the examiner even if none of the material features in the markscheme.

Note to examiners

Students at both Higher Level and Standard Level answer **one** question on the core theme (Section A). Students at Higher Level answer **two** questions on the optional themes (Section B), each based on a different optional theme.

Students at Standard Level answer **one** question on the optional themes (Section B).

Paper 1 section A core theme markbands

This task presents students with an unseen stimulus in the form of either a short text extract or an image. Students are required to explore a philosophical issue related to what it is to be human, the focus of the core theme, that arises from this stimulus. Within their critical exploration of their chosen issue, students are required to make explicit reference both to the stimulus and to their wider knowledge from their study of the core theme.

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–5	- A philosophical issue raised by the stimulus is implied but not explicitly identified. There is minimal explanation of how this issue relates to the stimulus. Few, if any, references to the stimulus are made in the response. - The response demonstrates little relevant knowledge of the core theme. Philosophical vocabulary is not used or is consistently used inappropriately. Points made are poorly organized and frequently unclear. - The response is mostly descriptive and any analysis present is superficial or incoherent. Examples are included but are irrelevant and ineffective. There is little or no discussion of different points of view. Where a conclusion is included, this is very superficial or is not consistent with the rest of the response.
6–10	- A philosophical issue raised by the stimulus is identified but is imprecisely or vaguely stated. There is some limited explanation of how this issue relates to the stimulus. Occasional references to the stimulus are made in the response. - The response demonstrates basic knowledge of the core theme, but this knowledge lacks accuracy and/or relevance. Philosophical vocabulary is used, but often inappropriately. There is some attempt to organize the points made, but it is often unclear what the response is trying to convey. - The response contains limited analysis and overall is more descriptive than analytical. Examples are included but are ineffective. There is awareness but limited discussion of different points of view. A simplistic conclusion is included.
11–15	- A philosophical issue raised by the stimulus is explicitly identified. There is a basic explanation of how this issue relates to the stimulus. Specific references to the stimulus are made during the response, although these are sometimes ineffective or unclear. - The response contains some relevant knowledge of the core theme. Philosophical vocabulary is used, sometimes appropriately. There is an attempt to organize the points made, although there is some repetition and a lack of clarity in places. - The response contains analysis, although this analysis lacks development. Relevant examples are used to support the discussion. There is some discussion of different points of view. A conclusion is included.
16–20	- A philosophical issue raised by the stimulus is explicitly identified. There is good explanation of how this issue relates to the stimulus. Specific references to the stimulus are made regularly throughout the response. - The response contains relevant and accurate knowledge of the core theme. Philosophical vocabulary is used, mostly appropriately. Points are generally clear and organized, and the response can be easily followed. - The response contains critical analysis, although this analysis may lack development. Relevant examples are used to support the discussion. There is discussion of different points of view. The response argues to a conclusion that is consistent with the arguments presented.
21–25	- A philosophical issue raised by the stimulus is clearly and explicitly identified. There is a well-developed explanation of how this issue relates to the stimulus. Clear, effective and specific references to the stimulus are made regularly throughout the response. - The response contains relevant, accurate and detailed knowledge of the core theme. Philosophical vocabulary is used accurately and precisely throughout. The points made are clear, coherent and effectively organized. - The response contains well-developed critical analysis. Relevant examples are used effectively to support the discussion. There is critical discussion of different points of view. The response argues to a reasoned and clearly stated conclusion that is consistent with the arguments presented.

Section A

Core theme: Being human

1. Text

With explicit reference to the stimulus and your own knowledge, explore a philosophical issue related to the question of what it is to be human.

[25]

The following paragraphs provide only a framework to help examiners in their assessment of responses to this question. Examiners should be responsive to a variety of philosophical perspectives and approaches. Examiners should be aware that students might respond to this passage in a variety of ways including ones not mentioned in the summary below.

The stimulus consists of a short text extract which focuses on introspection, perception and mental states. While the stimulus highlights introspection as an important avenue to self-knowledge, students might also consider a variety of other philosophical perspectives to these themes and examiners should be open to these possibilities. It is important that responses include specific references to the stimulus.

The stimulus may prompt discussions of issues related to the self, self-knowledge, consciousness, personal identity and personhood. For example, students might explore the relationship between how we come to acquire knowledge of the external world and of others through perception, and how we come to acquire knowledge of the self and an internal world through introspection. Students can explore the notion of *qualia*, i.e. the phenomenal subjective property of internal experiences. Students might discuss how introspection, over time, produces an evolving model of the self and a personalised representation of the external world. They can explore the extent to which our subjective awareness of inner states of mind leads to increased self-awareness that contributes to meaningful interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the fallibility and/or infallibility of introspective knowledge can be discussed.

The stimulus may also prompt discussions of how philosophers over the ages have examined introspection as a means of answering questions of self-knowledge. Students might explore, for example, Socrates's exhortation "Know thyself", William James's view of the self as a "stream of consciousness", or David Hume's sceptical position on the very existence of the self. The contributions of phenomenology and the notion of "*qualia*" might be considered. Students might also discuss how non-Western philosophical traditions try to answer the question "Who am I?", for example, meditation and introspection in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism.

Students might explore:

- Philosophical approaches to understanding the self, personal identity, consciousness and personhood: dualism, physicalism, phenomenology, Buddhism, postmodernism
- Perception, sensory experience and experience of the external world as the basis for understanding the self, for example, John Locke, David Hume, Martin Heidegger
- Introspection as a means of understanding the self and of self-knowledge: direct awareness of the contents of the mind, internal experiences, emotional tendencies, for example, René Descartes, William James, Simone Weil
- Introspection as a mental faculty or as a combination of mental faculties
- Introspection focused on current states of mind versus retrospection focused on past states of mind
- Introspection exposes the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of the contents of the mind, for example, Susanne Langer
- Introspection as privileged access to one's mental states: fallible and infallible information about personal identity, for example, Sydney Shoemaker and Ludwig Wittgenstein; communicable versus non-communicable information about mental states; introspection and the danger of solipsism

- The notion of “*qualia*”. What it is like to have inner conscious experiences; “*qualia*” as qualitative phenomenal experiences of the self; for example, Frank Jackson
- Phenomenal consciousness as subjective, personal, internal and qualitative versus access consciousness as the cognitive, objective quantitative use of knowledge of the external world, for example, the views of David Chalmers
- Introspection, “*qualia*” and a first-person perspective: unique, personalised view of personhood, for example, Thomas Nagel
- Stream of consciousness, for example, William James
- Introspection as access to embodied, subjective experiences which facilitate interpersonal relationships, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty
- Contributions of neuroscience, cognitive science, neurophilosophy in understanding conscious experiences of the external world and of the inner workings of the mind, for example, the work of Patricia and Paul Churchland.

2. Image

With explicit reference to the stimulus and your own knowledge, explore a philosophical issue related to the question of what it is to be human.

[25]

The following paragraphs provide only a framework to help examiners in their assessment of responses to this question. Examiners should be responsive to a variety of philosophical perspectives and approaches. Examiners should be aware that students might respond to this passage in a variety of ways including ones not mentioned in the summary below.

The stimulus consists of a woman in what appears to be an office environment wearing a virtual reality headset, i.e. a head-mounted device which produces computer generated virtual 3-D experiences. She is inspecting her environment via the headset and reaching out to an unidentifiable object. The stimulus prompts a discussion of a diverse range of philosophical issues and students can choose to explore these issues from a variety of philosophical perspectives and approaches. Examiners should be open to these possibilities. Students should make specific and explicit references to the stimulus.

The stimulus may prompt discussions of issues related to the self, consciousness, personal identity and personhood within the context of AI, virtual and digital technologies. Students might explore how these technologies produce immersive, virtual experiences and environments that replicate the real world. The issue of the relationship between the real world and a virtual version of it can be discussed. The question of how a person might potentially operate in these two realities can be explored. The question of what kind of person we might be in each world can be addressed. Given the possibility of technologically transferring our authentic self into a digital “metaverse”, students might consider not only philosophical, but also psychological, moral, legal and social issues. Students might consider how the challenges of developing and protecting our authentic self in the real world would be handled. Students might consider the place and forms of interpersonal relationships, the possibility and nature of face-to-face interaction and the development of a social life in a digital world. Students might also wish to consider some of the potential problems that arise in a digital, virtual environment, for example, privacy, escapism, isolation, alienation, desensitisation, addiction and anxiety. The globalisation of virtual reality technologies can also be addressed.

The stimulus may also prompt discussions about the nature of reality, our ability to distinguish a digitalised world from the real world, the quality of life-experiences in a virtual world, and the possibility of finding meaning in a digitalised, virtual reality. The work of contemporary philosophers who have explored the ontological, epistemological and moral aspects of virtual reality can be discussed, for example, the work of David Chalmers, Jason Lanier and Michael Heim.

Students might explore:

- What a person is and what a person might become in the context of current technology, for example, the views of Nick Bostrom and Catherine Malabou
- The real self, the authentic self, the artificial self, the digital self, and the virtual self; for example, the views of Sherry Turkle and Donna Haraway
- The real world as a physical, perceivable world of concrete objects and other persons; the virtual world as a digitalised representation of this real world; criteria for determining what is a real, physical or virtual world
- Creating, managing and operating multiple selves in a variety of virtual environments, for example, the work of Jean Baudrillard
- Multiple selves as a challenge to a unified view of what it means to be a person
- Avatars as representational persons in a virtual universe, for example, the views of Paula Sweeney
- Abandoning our real self in favour of a virtual self or in favour of a notion of virtual personhood
- Notions of immersion, participation, and coordination as constitutive of the self, for example, the work of Jonardon Ganeri

- The notion, scope and applications of a computer mediated environment (CME), for example, the views of Luciano Floridi
- Virtual interpersonal relationships in a virtual universe vs. existential face-to-face encounters in a physical world
- The autonomy, freedom, integrity, moral responsibility and legal accountability of a person in virtual reality
- Computer generated environments and the absence of phenomenal experiences (qualia) and their role in defining personhood
- Developments in AI hardware and software in the creation of different types of realities: virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality and extended reality
- The notion of the “metaverse” as opposed to the universe or multiverse, for example, the views of Neal Stephenson
- Integrating AI technology in global, multicultural contexts: applications to education, health and medical care, political awareness, social issues, tourism
- Philosophical approaches that explore the nature of reality, personhood and personal identity, for example, existentialism, phenomenology, realism, idealism, empiricism
- The flight into the image and the digital swarm as a set of isolated individuals, the views of Byung-Chul Han.

Paper 1 section B optional themes markbands

This task requires students to write a thematic essay on the optional theme they have studied (SL) or two optional themes they have studied (HL). Students are presented with a choice of two questions per theme, with each question relating to one of the points of “required content” specified for that theme. Students are required to undertake a critical and explicitly philosophical discussion of the question posed, selecting and using specific examples drawn from their study of the optional theme to support their points.

Mark	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–5	- There is minimal focus on the question. Points made are poorly organized and frequently unclear. - The response demonstrates little relevant knowledge of the optional theme. Philosophical vocabulary is not used or is consistently used inappropriately. - The response is mostly descriptive and any analysis present is superficial or incoherent. Examples drawn from the study of the optional theme are included but are irrelevant and ineffective. There is little or no discussion of different points of view. Where a conclusion is included, this is very superficial or is not consistent with the rest of the response.
6–10	- There is some focus on the question, although the specific demands of the question may only be partially addressed. There is some attempt to organize the points made, but it is often unclear what the response is trying to convey. - The response demonstrates basic knowledge of the optional theme, but this knowledge lacks accuracy and/or relevance. Philosophical vocabulary is used, but often inappropriately. - The response contains limited analysis and overall is more descriptive than analytical. Examples drawn from the study of the optional theme are included but are frequently ineffective. There is awareness but limited discussion of different points of view. A simplistic conclusion is included.
11–15	- The response is focused on the question. There is an attempt to organize the points made, although there is some repetition and lack of clarity in places. - The response contains some relevant knowledge of the optional theme. Philosophical vocabulary is used, sometimes appropriately. - The response contains analysis, although this analysis lacks development. Relevant examples drawn from the study of the optional theme are included. There is some discussion of different points of view. A conclusion is included.
16–20	- The response is focused on the question, showing engagement with the specific demands of the question. Points are generally clear and organized, and the response can be easily followed. - The response contains relevant and accurate knowledge of the optional theme. Philosophical vocabulary is used, mostly appropriately. - The response contains critical analysis, although this analysis may lack development. Relevant examples drawn from the study of the optional theme are used to support the discussion. There is discussion of different points of view. The response argues to a conclusion that is consistent with the arguments presented.
21–25	- There is a sustained focus on the question, showing clear engagement with the specific demands of the question. The points made are clear, coherent and effectively organized. - The response contains relevant, accurate and detailed knowledge of the optional theme. Philosophical vocabulary is used accurately and precisely throughout. - The response contains well-developed critical analysis. Relevant examples drawn from the study of the optional theme are used effectively to support the discussion. There is critical discussion of different points of view. The response argues to a reasoned and clearly stated conclusion that is consistent with the arguments presented.

Section B

Optional theme 1: Aesthetics

3. Evaluate the claim that the function of art is to generate awe and wonder. [25]

This question invites an evaluation as to the function of art. The claim suggests that art should generate awe and wonder which can be seen perhaps as positive emotions. However, it could be argued that art has more purposes than just generating positive emotions. Art could also produce negative emotions, and in fact “shock”, as some would say early art of the 20th century did. Art can also be seen as having a function to stir social or political change and this can be quite subtle through forms of poetry, satirical plays or even music. The latter of which could stir nationalistic tendencies or patriotism, and art being used as propaganda. The visual arts might raise the nature of humanity both good and bad. Equally architectural structures might create awe and wonder. In evaluating the possible functions of art it would become necessary to make a judgment as to which might be the higher or greater function of art. This process of evaluation could then be affected by cultural backgrounds and personal biases – what is wonder to one might be “shock” to another. In-contrast the claim might be interpreted as declaring that the artist can reveal aspects of human perception and insight that would surprise an audience, and this then begins to suggest the importance of the audience. Here arises a tension between intention and interpretation. Contrasting theories of expressionist ideas might be explored to compare with instrumentalist theories along with institutional theorists as to whether creating the “awe and wonder” is in fact art. Equally a formalist approach might completely dismiss the emotional impact of art as composition is more important.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- Collingwood’s ideas on art having to trigger emotional responses
- Whether art should be a vehicle for generating political and /or social change
- Art as propaganda
- The use of art by political regimes could create awe and/or shock. An example could be the propaganda posters of the actions of Germans in the invasion of Belgium during the First World War
- Art as a means of revealing aspects of humanity
- The role of an audience and its disposition
- The intentions of artists and possible unintended consequences in terms of the effect of art
- Is the purpose of art restricted to just allowing the artist to express their own feelings?
- The interplay of the imagination and emotions of both the creator and perceiver
- The contrasting of an expressionist and formalists approach to art – Aristotle’s view on play construction or Cezanne’s painting compared to the emotions created by listening to Chopin or reading Coleridge
- Kant’s view on the disinterestedness within the artistic encounter -the impartiality of the observer.

4. Evaluate the claim that “all aesthetic judgment is really cultural evaluation”. [25]

This question seeks an evaluation as to whether aesthetic judgements are culturally biased. Another approach to responding to the question might be to discuss whether aesthetic judgments are not only an evaluation of a work of art, but also an evaluation of its cultural context. The quote raises questions as to the criteria to judge and who should be doing the judging. The role of the market, as much as personal taste, might be seen to play a part in the evaluation of the claim. If art does give humans a glimpse into another world or the world of the other, it might have cultural biases affect those glimpses. A pluralistic perception of values might be seen to challenge cultural hierarchies that could be seen as historical- historic western precepts concluding that non-western art forms are inferior or even bad. Market forces might be argued to override cultural orientations, but a subtle insight could conclude that the market is itself reflective of cultural bias. Distinction might be made between private encounters with art – “in-sight” / imagination - compared to the public responses. An exploration of the nature of criticism might arise and whether “artistic truth” goes beyond culture and reveals an inner irrational response to art in all its form.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- The role and backgrounds of the critic
- The role of the market in creating an environment of judgement, e.g. Benjamin, Heidegger
- The extent to which both value and emotional response are culturally controlled - Collingwood's theory suggesting that emotions are universal in nature, therefore aesthetic responses are universal
- The role of education and general experience in establishing cultural expectations. - what I like is a result of my cultural background
- Is art a window into the “other's” world and therefore by definition aesthetic judgement would be personally and /or culturally weighted – ideas of Buber or Feyerabend might be mentioned
- The degree to which the rapture created by experiencing an artistic creation is impartial –Kant's disinterestedness – the free play of understanding and imagination – suggested impartiality
- The interrelatedness of private judgement and public judgements. Are both culturally waited and are public judgements just collections of private ones or is there an objectivity to be found
- The extent to which separation of contextual background might remove cultural biases
- If art is seen as a language, does it then lead to non-comprehension by those outside of the language – consequently can art cross cultures?
- Wittgenstein's ideas that the rules within language games change, meaning that the perceptions of art might change with both time and location
- Whether our encounters with art are to create a dialogue or to impose a fixed narrative.

Optional theme 2: Epistemology

5. Evaluate the claim that “the true method for acquiring knowledge is experiment”. [25]

This question explores the route to knowledge, citing that a “method” for gaining it is formed on the basis of modern science, as articulated by Francis Bacon. Bacon posited that science was the route to knowledge and that the basis of science was testing hypotheses through experiment by observation. This was an empirical exercise and Bacon sought to discover the means to test a hypothesis wrong, in order to confirm whether something could be taken as reliable knowledge or not. Hume and the empiricists housed knowledge as being meaningful through reference to the verification principle, which asserted the use of testing a hypothesis empirically. Hume diminished the usefulness of ideas known “clear and distinctly” without testing, in disagreement with Descartes. Hume’s method formed the basis of the work of the Vienna Circle, who held that science offered the most authoritative method for philosophical activity. Popper countered the logical positivist verification principle with his method of falsification to determine the grounds by which a statement could be demonstrated to be meaningful on the grounds of what would count for it to be false. In this tradition, the testing of propositions is at the heart of the method of establishing knowledge or its meaningfulness. However, there have been criticisms of the bias – especially “confirmation bias” that affects the ability to perform experimentation neutrally – if this were even at all possible.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- Empiricism versus rationalism
- Bacon’s foundation of the method of science as the route to knowledge
- Hume’s articulation of the meaningfulness of statements using the verification principle
- Induction as leading only to provisional knowledge; e.g. Hume’s black swan example
- The difference between “clear and distinct ideas” and ideas tested through experience; see Hume’s fork
- The contrast with Descartes’s account of knowledge
- The role of doubt in Bacon, Descartes, Hume etc.
- The verification principle
- Logical positivism and the Vienna Circle
- Falsification and Popper
- Foundationalism contrasting with coherentism in accounts of knowledge acquisition
- Paradigms in knowledge; e.g. Kuhn,
- Denying method in scientific enquiry and knowledge acquisition; e.g. Feyerabend.

6. Evaluate the claim that “whoever can control knowledge can control people”. [25]

Plato famously conceived of rule by philosophers with his ontological and metaphysical view of truth, as depicted in similes in *The Republic*. At the start of the Enlightenment, Bacon famously exclaimed: “knowledge is power”, and with the development and rise of technology in spreading information (especially printing) and in experimental science in the European Reformation and subsequent Enlightenment, the hegemony of the established Church was first challenged. As literacy rates grew more broadly in populations, so knowledge moved out from its traditional base in the seminary, the local Church and the aristocratic, governing, owning class. However, publication of new knowledge posed dangers: Galileo had been forced to recant and Hume withheld the publication of his challenge to belief in God until after his death. The new science posed challenges for religion’s power and a critique of the power of religion to suppress the emancipation of the poor arose through Marx’s thesis. Spreading knowledge played a key role in the revolutions in America and Russia. Suppression of knowledge by those in power in colonial and revolutionary settings has been detailed by historians. Using or possessing “cultural capital” is a possible way of controlling people – or restricting options for them – by the affluent educated elite in a society. With technological and scientific commercialisation, further motivation for protection of knowledge (e.g. in medicine) exists. The explosion of communication through social media has caused challenge to orthodoxy and political or idealistic positions. Inequality both within and between nations is exacerbated by the dependence on technology for knowledge dissemination. Educational inequality is explored through Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” where he holds that through the impoverishment of education, the oppressed internalise “the image of the oppressor and [adopt] his guidelines” and become afraid of freedom.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- Plato’s role of the philosopher in *The Republic*
- Models of power in knowledge; e.g. the Church, the government, the school, the professor
- Nietzsche and his critique of science; the comparison of the person of science with the priest
- Foucault’s definition of knowledge as “power over others”
- Propaganda and the use of false knowledge for political purposes
- Conspiracy theories; e.g. QAnon, the anti-vaccination movement
- Social media and the challenge to truth; e.g. “fake news”
- Alternative means of knowledge, e.g. the Eastern tradition of enlightenment through meditation
- Artificial Intelligence
- Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed”
- The role of education in the acquisition of knowledge

Optional theme 3: Ethics

7. Evaluate the claim that “action is the sole medium of expression of ethics”. [25]

This question offers the chance for a variety of responses, drawing on each section of the topic. Answers might explore normative ethical theories and how action is treated as a part of the particular approach to morality. Answers might look at the origins and nature of moral values, the foundations for moral judgements and what ethical language constitutes in relation to action and its relation to ethics. Answers might also explore the question using an applied ethical example, with no expectation of whether they use biomedical ethics, business ethics or the distribution of wealth, or a combination of these. In utilitarianism and deontology it is the consequences or intentions of the action respectively that is focussed upon. However, virtue ethics looks not at the action so much as the character of the agent, and in Aristotle’s vision of ethics, and for subsequent virtue theorists, morality is not to be understood as an atomising of individual actions. Meta ethics looks at the foundation of ethical language and addresses the way actions might be considered according to value or factual judgements. The link between the natural world where actions take place and have intentions behind them and consequences could be explored.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- Normative ethical theories that investigate actions; e.g. act utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism
- Ethical theories that investigate the intentions or motivations behind actions; e.g. deontology or divine command theories
- The link between actions and self-interest; e.g. game theory, survival of the fittest
- Existentialist approaches to ethical action and the role of authenticity
- Nietzsche’s account of the development of ethics
- Nihilism
- Ethical language and naturalism; the naturalistic fallacy
- The relation between ethics and the law
- See ethical action in one or more applied ethical issue of biomedical ethics, business ethics or the distribution of wealth – how is action an expression of ethics in these spheres?
- Ethical theories that concentrate on the development of the character of the agent, where the same action will be judged according to differing contexts and personal circumstances, e.g. virtue theory and Aristotle’s ethics.

8. Evaluate the claim that “with morals we correct the mistakes of our instincts, and with love we correct the mistakes of our morals”.

[25]

This quote by Ortega y Gasset offers the chance to explore the provenance of morality and its role in human affairs. It asks from where we get our morals and how we apply them in relation to human instincts and error. Answers might draw on the meta-ethics part of the programme, where the origins and nature of moral values, our possible foundations for moral judgements and ethical language are discussed. In relating morals to our instincts, we raise questions of cognitivism and non-cognitivism and the various objective and subjective theories around ethical language. Is ethics a vital part of human survival, or a tool which separates human animals from non-human ones, given the ability to overcome instincts or mistakes through morality. The issue of human agency and preference might be explored (see preference utilitarianism) and also human character (see virtue ethics). The approach to ethics in existentialism could be explored with its emphasis on the individual.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- Morality and human instinct; e.g. *The Selfish Gene*, behavioural economics, game theory
- Special duties; the treatment of duties towards particular people (like family) in utilitarianism, deontology and virtue theory
- Ethical language and theories of the development of morality, e.g. Plato, Nietzsche, Ortega y Gasset
- Subjective vs Objective theories of ethics; the issues arising with relativism in morality
- The role of rationality in ethical decision making
- The role of emotion in ethical decision making, e.g. Nussbaum
- Care ethics e.g. Noddings
- Wisdom and the figure of the wise man e.g. Seneca, Lao Tzu, Aristotle, Spinoza
- The impact of culture on moral sense and the importance (or not) of the situation (see situation ethics)
- The link between morality and the natural world, e.g. hedonistic approaches
- Existentialism and ethics
- Morality and the law; morality and conscience
- The role of love in ethics, e.g. Fromm.

Optional theme 4: Philosophy of religion

9. Evaluate the claim that “God should not be merely thought, since when the thought ceases, God would also cease”. [25]

The statement invites a critical exploration of the nature of divine existence and its relationship to human cognition. This assertion challenges classical theological views by suggesting that the existence of God might be contingent upon human thought, rather than independent of it. Such a claim provokes philosophical inquiry into whether God exists objectively, beyond human conceptualization, or if the reality of God is constructed through mental processes. To explore this issue, we can examine key debates within the philosophy of religion, particularly the tension between realism, which posits the independent existence of God, and idealism, which links existence to human perception. Furthermore, this issue touches on broader questions of divine necessity versus contingency, and the role of human reason in experiencing or knowing God. The complexity of this inquiry reflects deep-seated questions about the boundaries of thought, existence, and the divine.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- Ontological arguments for the existence of God and whether these arguments presuppose that God exists independently of human thought (e.g. Descartes, Anselm, Ramanuja, etc.).
- The distinction between philosophical realism and idealism and how each perspective addresses the relationship between thought and existence.
- The concept of God as a necessary being in classical theism (e.g. Aquinas).
- The role of human cognition in religious belief (e.g. Buddhism)
- How religious experience and revelation support or contradict notion of God’s existence.
- Implications of theological non-realism, where God is viewed as a metaphor or cultural construct rather than a literal being.
- Kierkegaard’s approach to the notion of God’s existence in relation to individual thought and meaning.
- The argument that the existence of God might be a projection of human desires or psychological needs.
- Comparative religious philosophies that examine whether non-Western traditions conceptualize God or the divine as something independent of human cognition (e.g. Taoism, Islam, etc.).
- The nature of faith in relation to reason, and whether belief in God requires continuous intellectual contemplation to sustain divine existence.
- How we come to know the existence of God and whether this process relies on active thought.
- The limits of human knowledge, and whether finite human minds can fully comprehend or sustain the concept of an infinite being.
- The relationship between time and eternity in theological discourse, and how this shapes the view of whether God could “cease” in any meaningful sense.
- Wittgenstein’s contributions to understanding religious language and experience.
- The concept of divine omnipresence and how it counters the notion that the existence of God could be limited to or dependent on individual thought.

10. Evaluate the claim that “the belief systems of all the world’s traditional religions are factually mistaken”.

[25]

The claim that all traditional religious belief systems are factually mistaken invites a profound inquiry into the nature of religious truth, the epistemic status of religious claims, and the relationship between religion and reason. This assertion suggests that religious doctrines make empirical or metaphysical claims that are demonstrably false when assessed through rational or scientific inquiry. However, beneath this claim lies a deeper philosophical debate regarding the scope and nature of truth in religious belief. One key issue is whether religious statements should be evaluated in the same way as scientific or historical claims. Scientific realism operates on empirical verification and falsifiability, while many religious traditions rely on faith, revelation, and metaphysical reasoning. Some argue that religious beliefs should not be seen as factual propositions but as expressions of a particular way of life (Wittgenstein). Others contend that certain religious claims—such as miracles or divine intervention—can be evaluated against empirical evidence and may be found lacking (Hume). Additionally, the claim raises the question of whether religious beliefs are inherently incompatible with reason. Figures such as Augustine and Aquinas sought to reconcile faith and reason, while thinkers like Kierkegaard maintained that religious belief requires a leap of faith beyond reason. Furthermore, some argue that religious belief may serve a pragmatic or existential function, rather than being dependent on factual accuracy (William James). Ultimately, evaluating this claim requires examining whether religious belief systems aim to make factual assertions about the world, whether these assertions are subject to empirical scrutiny, and whether religion serves a purpose beyond the pursuit of objective truth. The debate forces us to reconsider the limits of human knowledge, the nature of faith, and the role of religion in shaping human experience.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- If scientific discoveries necessarily contradict religious belief systems or can coexist with them (e.g. Darwin).
- The impact of Karl Popper’s falsifiability criterion on religious belief systems.
- Whether religious statements should be seen as expressions of a form of life rather than as empirical claims subject to scientific validation (e.g. Wittgenstein).
- David Hume’s critique of miracles and supernatural events.
- Immanuel Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena, asking whether science can truly disprove religious claims if religious belief is rooted in metaphysical realms beyond empirical observation.
- Descartes’s dualism and the possibility of non-material realities, exploring whether scientific materialism fully accounts for all aspects of existence, or whether religious beliefs about non-material realities (like the soul) remain valid.
- Scientific findings about the material world conflict with a more abstract or existential understanding of God (e.g. Tillich’s concept of God as the “Ground of Being”).
- Richard Dawkins’s critique against traditional religious belief systems based on evolutionary biology.
- Augustine’s and Aquinas’s integration of faith and reason.
- The pragmatic justification for religious belief, considering whether religious belief systems can still be rationally maintained, even in the face of scientific evidence, due to their existential significance (e.g. William James).
- Nietzsche’s proclamation of the “death of God” and its implications for modernity.
- Kierkegaard’s leap of faith, and whether religious belief requires a departure from reason and empirical evidence, standing independently of the scientific worldview.
- Modern scientific discoveries, particularly in biology and cosmology, have invalidated the teleological argument for God’s existence.
- Attempts to reconcile science and theology, assessing whether contemporary thinkers who engage with both science and religion offer a viable framework for integrating the two (e.g. John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, etc.).
- Charles Taylor’s critique of secularism.

Optional theme 5: Philosophy of science

11. Evaluate the claim that artificial intelligence can duplicate the experience of consciousness.

[25]

This claim draws on the theme of science and the self, and the possibility of replicating the human mind entirely physically. Eliminative materialists such as Patricia Churchland may agree that since the mind is physical, it could be duplicated using AI. However, philosophers such as Jackson and Nagel would argue that qualia, or the experience of consciousness could not be replicated in this way. Here, there is a gap between what we can explain physically and our full understanding of the mind. Students might draw on traditional distinctions between the body and soul, or mind and brain such as Descartes's substance dualism. They might consider how current AI models work, and draw comparisons with human cognition. The concept of intelligence could be explored, as could arguments that true artificial intelligence is possible e.g. Turing.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- Thought experiments such as Searle's Chinese Room which aim to show that machines cannot replicate the experience of consciousness, or Block's Blockhead thought experiment
- The idea of qualia, e.g. Jackson and What Mary didn't Know, or Nagel's What is it Like to be a Bat?
- Eliminative materialism e.g. Churchland
- Physicalism or materialism about the mind
- The explanatory gap between the physical brain and the mind e.g. McGinn
- What neuroscience can tell us about the mind and experience of consciousness
- Accounts of the nature of consciousness e.g. Locke, Dennett, Chalmers
- Arguments for the possibility of true artificial intelligence e.g. Turing's behaviourist account and the Turing test
- Substance dualism and the idea that the mind and body are separate i.e. Descartes
- Religious and spiritual accounts of the immaterial soul and the possibility of an afterlife
- The nature of intellectual work, and whether artificial intelligence could contribute to scientific or artistic progress
- Large Language Models and the extent to which current artificial intelligence mimics the human mind.

12. Evaluate the claim that what is crucial for science is the demarcation between science and pseudoscience. [25]

Students might note that historically, what we currently consider science was seen as part of philosophy. Aristotle's work on physics is a good example of this, where reasoning from first principles was seen as an appropriate scientific method. With Bacon's inductive method, observation and empiricism started to shape a distinctive scientific method. Students are likely to discuss Popper's account of the demarcation between science and pseudoscience, where scientific theories and claims are only scientific if they are falsifiable. This allowed Popper to class Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism as pseudoscientific on the one hand, and Einstein's theory of relativity as scientific on the other despite all three examples being based on observations. A demarcation between science and pseudoscience helps to shape normative guidelines for how science should be conducted, which claims to believe, and which schools of thought to be wary of.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- The history of science as a branch of philosophy, e.g. Presocratics such as Empedocles; Aristotle
- Bacon's suggestion that inductive logic and observation demarcate science from pseudoscience and define the scientific method
- Popper's criterion of falsifiability for demarcation
- The examples of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism as pseudoscientific
- The importance of predictions that can turn out to be either true or false when assessing a scientific theory
- Kuhn's point that observations are theory-laden, rendering theories difficult to falsify through observation alone
- The idea that science progresses through paradigm shift, rather than falsification and the prospect of demarcating scientific theories from non-scientific ones when we are living within a certain paradigm, i.e. Kuhn
- Feyerabend's theoretical pluralism
- The idea that scientific theories can at best hope to capture adequately the observations, rather than provide a single incorrigible explanation, e.g. van Fraassen
- The importance of demarcation criteria when it comes to misinformation and conspiracy theories
- Contemporary examples where demarcation is important e.g. climate science
- The risk of dismissing non-canonical theories because they come from minority groups and the call to decolonise knowledge
- How and whether demarcation criteria can influence the beliefs and actions of scientists.

Optional theme 6: Political philosophy

13. Evaluate the claim that “nothing strengthens authority so much as silence”. [25]

The statement invites a critical examination of the relationship between power, dissent, and public discourse. Authority, in both political and social contexts, often relies on the passive compliance of individuals to maintain its legitimacy and control. To evaluate this claim, we can explore how silence—whether imposed through fear or chosen through apathy—enables the perpetuation of authoritarian structures. Philosophers like Foucault have emphasized that power is sustained not only by force but by the absence of resistance, where silence becomes complicity. Moreover, this inquiry raises questions about the role of free speech and civil disobedience in challenging unjust authority. The interplay between individual agency and systemic control reveals the philosophical importance of voice and dissent in the preservation of democratic values. Silence, in this context, becomes both a tool of oppression and a symbol of surrender, highlighting the necessity of dialogue and resistance in political life.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- How silence is a tool of social control that helps authority maintain power by preventing resistance and dissent (e.g. Foucault)
- How passive compliance and the lack of public debate strengthen authoritarian regimes, allowing power to operate unquestioned (e.g. Arendt)
- John Stuart Mill’s defence of free speech
- Rousseau’s social contract theory, and whether silence from the populace represents tacit consent to authority, raising questions about the role of active participation in maintaining legitimate governance
- Nietzsche’s critique of herd mentality, asking whether societal silence reflects a passive conformity that strengthens authority by suppressing individual critical thinking and autonomy
- The role of civil disobedience in the works of Thoreau and Gandhi
- Chomsky’s critique of media control and propaganda
- Kant’s concept of moral autonomy, and whether individuals have a duty to speak out against unjust authority, with silence representing a failure of moral responsibility
- Whether silence strengthens authority by keeping individuals in ignorance, preventing them from questioning or escaping oppressive structures of power
- Plato’s critique of democracy as a system driven by uninformed masses susceptible to manipulation
- Frantz Fanon’s critique of colonialism, and how silence within oppressed populations reinforces colonial authority by preventing the articulation of resistance and the assertion of cultural identity
- The role of fear in silencing dissent, particularly in authoritarian regimes, and how the fear of punishment or persecution keeps people silent, thus reinforcing the power of authority
- The influence of passive resistance in weakening authority, exploring whether silence, in the form of non-cooperation or withdrawal of support, can paradoxically challenge and undermine authority
- The concept of hegemony, and whether silence represents an internalization of dominant ideologies that strengthen authority by preventing alternative narratives from emerging (e.g. Gramsci)
- Sartre’s existential notion of freedom and responsibility, considering whether silence is a form of bad faith, where individuals deny their freedom to resist authority by choosing passivity.

14. Evaluate the claim that “the ground of democratic ideas and practices is faith in the potentialities of individuals”.

[25]

The statement invites a critical exploration of the philosophical foundations of democracy. Democracy, as a political system, rests on the belief that individuals possess inherent capacities for reason, moral judgment, and self-governance. To evaluate this claim, we can examine the historical evolution of democratic thought, from the Enlightenment’s emphasis on individual autonomy to modern theories of participatory democracy. Thinkers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill argue that the legitimacy of democratic governance stems from the ability of individuals to make informed choices about their own lives and the collective good. Moreover, this inquiry raises questions about the nature of human potential, asking whether democratic systems assume an optimistic view of human nature and whether this faith in individual potential is justified in practice. Ultimately, the statement challenges us to consider how democracy reflects not only political mechanisms but also a deep philosophical commitment to human dignity and capability.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- How Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau influenced the belief in individual potential as foundational to democracy
- The role of civic virtue in democratic societies, examining how faith in individual potential aligns with the expectation of citizens to participate actively in governance
- Implications of individualism versus collectivism, and how these differing philosophies shape democratic practices and the perception of human potential
- Confronting Plato’s account of democracy, which equates democracy with rule by the uninformed masses driven by desires rather than reason, leading to disorder and eventual tyranny
- The impact of education on democratic engagement, questioning whether faith in individual potential is supported by educational systems that encourage critical thinking and active participation
- The concept of social contract theory, exploring how the belief in individual potential underpins the legitimacy of democratic authority and governance structures.
- The relationship between political rights and individual agency, analysing how the protection of individual rights reflects a faith in the potential of every citizen to contribute meaningfully to society
- The philosophical underpinnings of political equality, considering whether a belief in individual potential justifies equal political participation for all members of society
- The critiques of democratic ideals by figures such as Tocqueville, who questioned whether faith in individual potential leads to a true understanding of democracy or results in mediocrity and conformity
- The role of marginalized voices in democracy, and how their inclusion challenges or reinforces the idea that all individuals possess the potential for meaningful contributions
- The philosophical implications of voter apathy, exploring whether a lack of faith in individual potential contributes to disengagement from democratic processes
- The relationship between democracy and economic systems, questioning whether capitalism, with its emphasis on individual achievement, aligns with or contradicts democratic principles
- The consequences of inequality on the belief in individual potential, examining whether systemic inequalities undermine the foundational faith in democracy
- The significance of civic education in fostering democratic engagement, and how it instils belief in the potentialities of individuals from a young age
- The interplay between law and individual freedom, questioning whether legal frameworks that protect individual rights enhance or restrict democratic engagement
- Capabilities and the potentialities of individuals e.g. Sen, Nussbaum.

Optional theme 7: Social philosophy

15. Evaluate the claim that governments have a moral obligation to intervene in social issues such as poverty and inequality to ensure a fair and just society. [25]

The claim that governments have a moral obligation to intervene in social issues such as poverty and inequality is deeply rooted in philosophical debates about justice and the role of the state. Drawing from the social contract theory of philosophers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Hobbes, one can argue that the primary purpose of government is to ensure the well-being and protection of its citizens. According to utilitarianism, governments should intervene in order to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number, which often means addressing disparities in wealth and opportunity. On the other hand, libertarian theorists like Robert Nozick would argue that government intervention undermines individual freedom and personal responsibility, advocating instead for minimal state interference. The philosophical question here revolves around the balance between individual rights and the collective good, and whether justice necessitates active state intervention in matters of poverty and inequality.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- How the state has a fundamental role in ensuring justice and equality, extending beyond the protection of individual rights to addressing social inequalities, as argued by social contract theorists like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau
- From a utilitarian point of view, how might government intervention maximize happiness or well-being for the majority, as expressed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- That failure to address poverty and inequality results in significant harm to societal well-being, but also how state intervention could limit freedom for the individuals
- John Rawls' stance based on the "veil of ignorance" and difference principle, and how this justifies redistributive policies and government intervention to correct social injustices, ensuring that the least advantaged members of society benefit from economic arrangements
- Robert Nozick's ideas in "Anarchy, State, and Utopia", and how he argues that state intervention in social issues violates individual freedoms and property rights. Nozick's libertarian view champions minimal government interference, opposing redistributive policies
- Communitarian thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel that argue that community values and collective responsibility should shape the government's role in addressing social issues, as intervention can strengthen social bonds and promote the common good
- How Karl Marx advocates for government intervention and redistribution to address inequality as essential to dismantling capitalist exploitation, while Friedrich Hayek argues that free markets, not government intervention, are better equipped to manage social disparities
- Martha Nussbaum's and Amartya Sen's emphasis on the importance of government intervention in protecting fundamental human rights; arguing that access to food, shelter, and healthcare are basic entitlements necessary for human dignity and flourishing
- John Rawls' and Iris Marion Young's ideas that support government intervention to ensure a level playing field by providing equal opportunities to disadvantaged individuals. For Rawls, this is rooted in the difference principle, while Young emphasizes eliminating structural injustice
- Isaiah Berlin's concept of "negative liberty" argue that excessive government interference can threaten individual autonomy, suggesting that the ethical limits of state power must be carefully balanced against freedom
- Amartya Sen's capability approach, that stresses how practical barriers, such as resource constraints, can hinder the effectiveness of government intervention. And meanwhile Friedrich Hayek, cautions that government attempts to manage social issues may create inefficiencies and unintended consequences
- Historical examples like Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and William Beveridge's creation of the British welfare state demonstrate successful government interventions in poverty, providing a philosophical basis for continued government action in addressing social inequalities
- Robert Nozick's and Friedrich Hayek's critique to government intervention in social issues for being inefficient, paternalistic, and infringing on individual autonomy. They argue that empowering individuals and communities through voluntary action is a more effective solution.

16. Evaluate the claim that social media influences contemporary understanding of community and personal identity.

[25]

The claim that social media influences contemporary understanding of community and personal identity reflects the profound impact digital platforms have on modern life. Social media connects individuals across geographic boundaries, enabling the creation of virtual communities based on shared interests rather than physical proximity. However, critics argue that these connections may be superficial, leading to fragmented or less meaningful senses of belonging. Additionally, personal identity is increasingly shaped by online interactions, where individuals curate their self-presentation and seek validation through likes, shares, and comments. Philosophers like Jean Baudrillard and Sherry Turkle have raised concerns about the blurring of reality and simulation in digital spaces, suggesting that social media may distort our sense of self. Conversely, thinkers like Manuel Castells highlight the empowering potential of digital communities to redefine collective identities. The philosophical questions that arise from this claim involve whether social media strengthens or weakens the concept of community and whether it enhances or diminishes authentic self-expression and identity formation.

In addressing these philosophical issues students might explore:

- How social media enables the creation of virtual communities that transcend physical boundaries, allowing individuals to form connections based on shared interests, reshaping the traditional understanding of community
 - Zygmunt Bauman's and Sherry Turkle's perspective that argues that social media fragments community by promoting shallow connections and weakening deep, meaningful bonds between individuals, leading to feelings of alienation and loneliness
 - Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation is relevant here, as social media allows individuals to curate and manage their identities, creating a tension between authenticity and performativity
 - Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality suggests that social media blurs the line between reality and simulation, leading to a distorted understanding of personal identity and community.
 - How social media fosters identity construction through external validation, where likes, shares, and comments shape individuals' sense of self-worth and how they perceive their identity in relation to others
 - If social media platforms can empower marginalized groups and individuals by providing a space for self-expression, helping people construct and assert their identities in ways that may not be possible offline
 - Cass Sunstein's work on echo chambers shows how social media can reinforce group identities by exposing individuals to like-minded perspectives, potentially leading to more polarized and homogeneous communities
 - Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concepts of identity as fluid and decentralized, and how this is amplified by social media, where users can adopt multiple identities and shift between different roles in various online spaces
 - Michel Foucault's ideas about surveillance and self-discipline apply to social media, where users constantly monitor and adjust their behaviour and identity based on perceived norms and expectations within their digital communities
 - How social media facilitates online activism, which can lead to the formation of collective identities around social causes, reshaping the idea of what it means to belong to a community in the digital age
 - Baudrillard's critique of consumer society, and if could be extended to social media, where personal identity can be commodified, with individuals presenting themselves as brands and consuming others' identities as products
 - Arjun Appadurai's theory of globalization and its relationship with social media, and identity. As social media allows for the creation of global identities that transcend national boundaries, influencing the way individuals perceive themselves within a larger, interconnected world
 - Manuel Castells' suggestion that social media enables new forms of community based on digital activism and shared political causes, reconfiguring traditional understandings of how communities form and interact.
-