



Initial scoping:

Workshops in collaborative philosophical inquiry

The Philosophy Club partners with schools and community organisations to build a culture of critical and creative thinking through collaborative philosophical enquiry. We have won accolades for our unique workshops and hands-on training programs, providing practical tools to extend people's thinking.

This document sets out some preliminary information about our workshops.

I look forward to speaking with you further about how The Philosophy Club may be able to support the development of collaborative inquiry, critical thinking and dialogic argument at your institution.

Best regards,

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Basic information

Outcomes	Students will learn: • how to structure their thinking well; • how to express their thinking clearly and confidently to others; • how to work collaboratively to address controversies and problems with open-mindedness, fair-mindedness and respect for different points of view; • how to use evidence in an argument; • how to question the assumptions underlying different points of view; • how to evaluate different ideas, and discern which ideas are the most helpful or true; • how to reflect on the quality of their own reasoning – and how to improve it.
Group size	I typically run workshops for small groups of 8 – 12 students. Larger numbers can be accommodated by running multiple groups (either sequentially, or concurrently with the help of my co-facilitator/s). In special cases I work alone with larger groups, or work alongside a class teacher.
Space requirements:	A classroom (or equivalent space) acoustically separated from potential distractions.
Furniture set-up:	• A circle of chairs for the students and facilitator. • A large whiteboard (or electronic whiteboard) for scribing.
Tech requirements:	Facilities to present audio-visual material. Typically, this would be a data projector, speakers, and an HDMI connection (or other method of connecting my Mac laptop).



Description

In these workshops, students consider a variety of challenging issues across the major fields of philosophy, including ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, politics and the philosophy of language. They contend with questions that don't have clear-cut answers; only more or less convincing arguments for different conclusions.

Wrestling with these sorts of questions is philosophy at its most vivid: a living, breathing practice that prompts students to refine their intuitions and worldviews.

Students enjoy the freedom to experiment with ideas – to propose, evaluate, reject or concede arguments as they see fit. Their dialogic exchanges are marked not by the urge to win a debate, but rather by the search for more rigorous arguments and deeper understanding.

We encourage students to engage each other in dialogue and practise thinking *together*, by clearly articulating their positions, building on each other's ideas, and disagreeing respectfully. We support students in improving the relevance of their contributions and developing greater consistency in their viewpoints. We also work together on developing more advanced thinking skills such as testing criteria, assessing arguments, weighing up conflicting evidence and making reasoned judgements. These valuable life skills help them develop more confidence in the validity of their beliefs, while remaining free to change their minds whenever they so choose.



Illustrations by Boris Schmitz, used with permission

Our original stimuli present complex themes in innovative ways. We use dynamic audio-visual materials, concept games, thought experiments and reader's theatre. These varied stimuli generate the kind of intense and nuanced discussions that help students develop increasingly sophisticated skills in collaborative thinking.

Workshop topics and key questions: Years 9 – 12

Workshop title	Key questions	Themes
Stuck in a Loop	Does the existence of automatic behaviours (like those displayed by the <i>Sphex</i> wasp) preclude the possibility of free will? Does the iterative questioning shown by patients with transient global amnesia imply that human behaviour is generally pre-programmed? Could an omniscient super-computer reliably predict the future?	Free will and determinism
More Than Human	What are the implications of transhumanism for our sense of identity? If you took the forgetting pill, would you still be you? If you interfaced your brain with someone else's, would you still be you?	Transhumanism and identity
The Real-Life Truman Show	If allowing dementia patients to continue believing falsehoods promotes their emotional wellbeing, is this a sufficient reason to sacrifice the norm of truth-telling? How do differing models of dementia care respectively impact on patients' dignity, epistemic autonomy, wellbeing and freedom?	Ethics of truth-telling in dementia care
Why Act Now?	What are the most important reasons for taking action on the climate and ecological crisis? What do we owe to future generations? Should we be hopeful about the future? How can we live well, whatever the future holds?	Ethics and the climate crisis
Good, Better, Best: Ethical Bioenhancement	Should we humans attempt to enhance our moral character, just as we enhance our ability to play sport and fight disease? If we could genetically engineer human embryos to create a generation of more ethical adults, should we do that? Who decides what 'more ethical' really means?	Meta-ethics
Entangled Life	Given that plants adapt, communicate, learn, remember, make decisions and provide mutual aid, should we conclude that they are intelligent? What about fungi, which additionally influence the behaviour of animals that eat them? What do mycorrhizal networks teach us about individual and collective identity? Should we think about biology in terms of <i>things</i> or <i>processes</i>?	Philosophy of plants and fungi



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So Entitled!	Which human characteristics entitle us to human rights? Of these characteristics, which ones are shared by other animals? Should those animals therefore be awarded the same rights? If there is a difference of <i>degree</i> (i.e. humans possess the characteristic to a greater degree than other animals do) should that matter to the entitlement to rights? Should we grant legal personhood, and therefore rights, to non-human entities such as corporations, rivers, and chimpanzees? Where do rights come from? Is it contradictory to suppose that rights are both inherent <i>and</i> negotiated by international communities?	Human nature; legal personhood; rights and responsibilities
Is Seeing Believing? / Science is Real	Can we trust our senses? If we can't trust our senses (for instance in the case of perceptual illusions), how can we trust scientific observation and experiment? If our perceptual reality differs from objective reality, how can we know whether objective reality exists, or what it is really like? When our sense perceptions and our reasoning lead us to conflicting beliefs, which should we trust? What distinguishes science from pseudo-science? What role does hypothesis-testing play? (Case studies include the investigation of phenomena in coral island formation, bacterial growth, and lunar geology, clairvoyance, near-death experience, and prophecy.)	Philosophy of science
Computer Says No	Can we trust artificial intelligence to make accurate predictions about us –for instance, in the realms of musical taste, personality, sexuality, romantic partners, health or shopping? Who should be held accountable if a decision-making algorithm makes mistakes? Is it harder to contend with bias in AI than in humans?	Algorithmic decision-making and ethics
Time Slippage	How long is a moment? Is the flow of time an experiential illusion? Are the past, the present and the future equally real? Can 'Anthropocene unburials' (such as Ötzi the Ice Man) close the gap between the present and the deep past? How might we communicate with people in the distant future? Is it true that 'history never repeats itself but it rhymes'?	Metaphysics of time; our place in the temporal universe
Language, Truth and Meaning	What counts as language? Can you have a language of knots? – of whistles? – of dance? – of flowers? What sorts of things can words accomplish? What is the relationship between words and ideas? Does language reflect the world, or does it shape it?	Philosophy of language

The Camera Never Lies	Was it unreasonable for mid-19th century Americans to believe that 'spirit photographers' really captured ghosts in their photographs? Is reasonableness immutable, or does it change over time? How should we respond to the existence of 'deepfake' videos? Should we stop trusting what we see and hear on the news? Can there be truth in fiction? What is meant by 'emotional truth'? Can emotional appeals be ethical?	Epistemology and ethics of misleading images
Gull Eggs and Video Games	What are the harms and risks of normalising supernormal stimuli? How susceptible are we, and what capacity do we have to resist? Is control a mere illusion? How can we identify manipulative intent? Who is ethically responsible for adverse impacts?	Supernormal stimuli
Keeping Score	Is China's social credit system fair? Is it ethical for a government to surveil its citizens? Does surveillance necessarily silence dissent? Does privacy matter, and if so, why? And how should it be weighed up against other priorities? Do Western cultures place too much emphasis on individual rights and freedoms at the cost of community values?	Digital authoritarianism, privacy and cultural values
A Sonic Attack?	How can we best explain the mysterious sonic incidents at the US Embassy in Havana? How should we evaluate narratives? Is reality socially constructed? How should we weigh up recency of publication, number of converging studies, and quality of research practice in determining which scientific studies to believe? Is there any way to avoid seeing the world through the lens of your area of interest or expertise?	Rationality, plausibility and persuasiveness, decision-making with incomplete information
A Pretty Giant Unknown	What happens when our social reality becomes untethered from physical reality? How can we best manage confirmation bias? The Vinland Map exercise: What factors make a theory seem suspect, credible, or plausible?	Examining constructed social reality; choosing among competing explanations
A Bump in the Night	What makes people susceptible to believing conspiracies? How can we distinguish between real and baseless conspiracies? Is it a problem that emotions shape our reasoning, or that we become more invested in our beliefs over time? How reliable are our instincts?	Conspiracy culture, scepticism and epistemic humility

The Real Deal	What (if anything) does it mean for a brand to be authentic? Is all commercial authenticity merely performative? Is government-led 'nation branding' any different? What can we learn from Oobah Butler's social experiment of launching London's top-rated but entirely fictitious restaurant? Is our entire reality 'fake' in this era of rampant misinformation?	Authenticity and virtual worlds
A Different Kind of Justice	What is the relationship between forgiveness and justice? Does imprisonment perpetuate the cycle of crime? Should justice focus more on punishment or on rectifying harm, reconciling parties, and promoting healing? What function does guilt serve?	Forgiveness and guilt

Workshop topics and key questions: Years 7 – 8

Workshop title	Key questions	Themes
Eternal Life	Would you want to live forever? Would you consider undergoing cryogenic preservation? Do we have a social responsibility to promote anti-aging? Will the availability of these technologies create an even more unjust and unequal society? Would life lose its meaning without death?	Longevity, immortality and transhumanism
A Charmed Life	Can you choose to feel lucky? Would you rather live in a predictable world, or in a world of chance? What kind of world do we live in? On what grounds (if any) can we appeal to luck, chance, probability, coincidence, miracles, fate or destiny?	Luck, chance, probability; causal and teleological explanations
Robots and Cyborgs: The future is here	What sorts of things have minds? Can machines think and feel? What is intelligence? What makes us human? Could a robot ever be a person?	Human and artificial intelligence
Intervening in Nature / Back from the Dead	When is it acceptable to intervene in nature? Do only sentient beings have rights? Are humans the only creatures that can violate nature? Is it morally responsible to seek to resurrect all the species that humans caused to become extinct?	Environmental justice; de-extinction



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Making the World a Better Place	What is the fairest way of distributing a limited resource? What kinds of fairness matter the most? Why are only some people troubled by unfairness that works to their own advantage?	Distributive fairness and inequity aversion
Is Nothing Sacred?	Is dark tourism a morally acceptable practice? What are the criteria for judging it to be praiseworthy or blameworthy? To what extent do these criteria apply in making moral judgements in other domains?	The ethics of dark tourism; ethical frameworks
Reasons to be Cheerful / The Paperclip Counter	What are the conditions for happiness? What kinds of happiness are there? What is true happiness? What makes for a good life? What kind of society should we strive for? What makes work (or life) meaningful? How do we know whether our aspirations are worthwhile?	The nature of happiness and the good life; meaning and purpose
Comprende? / Cross-species Communication	How can we communicate with those who don't share our language? Can we overcome the barriers to interpersonal and intercultural communication? Is cross-species communication a worthwhile project? Do Koko (the gorilla) and Penny (her sign language teacher and animal psychologist) truly understand each other? Is human-alien communication theoretically possible?	Human and interspecies communication
Children's Rights	Youth suffrage: Should we lower the voting age? Starting from what age should young people be granted the various 'rights of adulthood'? Which is more important: the right to a formal education or the right to cultural autonomy? Case study: The Wisconsin vs. Yoder court case concerning the Amish community's appeal to restrict school attendance for children in their community.	Ethics and political philosophy
Digital Technologies, Privacy and You	How do digital technologies shape our moral lives? Are we giving away our personal information too freely? Would you want to talk to an artificial-intelligence replica of someone you've loved and lost? Could a convincing simulation of a person be created from data in their social media profiles?	Authenticity, autonomy and identity



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Whose Body?	What are your obligations to your family? How much discomfort and risk should be tolerated for the sake of saving someone else's life? Is it acceptable for parents to decide what's best for their children, without seeking the children's informed consent? At what age should a child be allowed to have control over his/her own body? If you don't own your body, what do you own? Could there be anything more 'yours' than your body? Should the law be changed to recognise that your body parts are legally your possessions?	Genetic engineering, organ donation and body ownership
Go For Broke!	How should we distinguish between reasonable (or beneficial) risks, and unreasonable (or reckless) risks? What is the role of <i>calculated risk</i> in a flourishing human life? What questions about informed consent and personal responsibility arise from engaging in high-risk activities?	The ethics of risk-taking; the philosophical sublime
Spot the Fake! / But Is It Art?	Which is more important to an artwork's value: the artist's touch, or the artist's conception? What's the difference between forgery and mimicry? Should Andy Warhol's <i>Brillo Boxes</i> count as forgeries? If originals and replicas can't be readily distinguished, does this matter?	Artistic value, originality, mimicry, forgery and replication
Memory and Oblivion	Why is cultural heritage valuable? Are some types of cultural heritage more valuable than others? How should we decide what counts as cultural heritage? Why do we value human remains? Should <i>all</i> cultural heritage be preserved? When does cultural appreciation cross the line into cultural appropriation?	The value of cultural heritage; cultural appropriation; intellectual property appropriation
Blowing The Whistle	Is it ethical for government employees to reveal classified information entrusted to them in the public interest? What is the difference between privacy and secrecy? How do our values create ethical dilemmas for us? Case study: Is Edward Snowden a hero or a traitor?	Moral integrity and the public interest
What the Body Knows	Can memory exist beyond the brain? Case study: Heart transplant recipients whose personalities and appetites spontaneously changed, after surgery, to match their organ donor's. Would you accept DNA from a murderer? How does sensory experience shape our understanding of reality? Case study: Emilie Gossiaux, a blind visual artist who paints using an intra-oral device that translates visual information into electrotactile signals received on the tongue.	Perception, cognition and embodiment



Testimonials from clients and experts

"You are doing wonderful work that is insightful and transformative... You are a wellspring of creativity."

– Peter Ellerton, *University of Queensland Critical Thinking Project QLD*

"I have rarely come across a more gifted educator... Michelle's original, creative and detailed lessons were targeted precisely at specific age groups to pique their interest and inspire dialogue, questions, debate and critical thinking. Activities were carefully structured to ensure all could participate; students were encouraged to listen critically but with an open mind. They were challenged and inspired to question and extend their thinking and ideas, to provide evidence for those ideas, and to debate and argue in a positive and constructive way. The quality of her lesson planning (and the resources she so generously shared with the staff) was exceptional, both in terms of content and visual appeal. Michelle is adaptable and flexible, capable of thinking on her feet... Michelle's classroom practice is exemplary... Michelle is a highly motivated, hard-working, and independent professional, with excellent communication skills and the proven ability to work effectively on her own initiative as well as collaboratively."

– Dorothy Allan, *Former Director of Curriculum, Eltham College VIC*

"I feel like my philosophy barometer has been switched on."

– Anonymous teacher feedback, *Preshil: The Margaret Lyttle Memorial School VIC*

"Your deep philosophical knowledge, coupled with your wonderful facilitation skills, meant our teachers and students really got to see what is possible."

– Lynne Hinton, *Philosophical Inquiry Teacher Coach, Hillbrook Anglican School QLD*

"It was enlightening and thought-provoking. I learned that...even if you don't have the same opinion, you can still talk about it without getting into an [adversarial] argument. We were able to openly discuss our opinions on very relevant matters for us as a group, and for the current world we live in. We were able to talk a lot and develop our thoughts along the way while respecting the ideas of others."

– Senior high school student, *Albert Park College VIC*

"The experience was a resounding success! The student feedback ... affirmed the students' high degree of interest and perception of its relevance in their lives as interested and active citizens... The students engaged in open, democratic inquiry where they explored the strengths and weaknesses of different arguments in a safe and respectful environment.."

– Rebekah Keenan-Mount, *Lead Teacher – Liberal Arts, Northcote High School VIC*

"Since meeting Michelle [in 2010], I have been very impressed by her ideas, her professionalism, her drive and commitment, but most importantly, by the wonderful program she has designed."

– Greg Restall, *Former Deputy Head of Philosophy, University of Melbourne VIC*