

Introduction to Philosophy

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This curriculum guide introduces the student to the basic problems, methods and theories of western philosophy. It looks at issues in the theory of reality, knowledge and ethics. This includes some of the main problems in the philosophy of mind, religion, and action. It begins with a look at some of the tools and methods of philosophy, such as deduction, induction, and definition. Images allow students to envision real and imaginary examples of the problems and theories in philosophy, as well as provide an engaging visual “anchor” to aid in their retention.



Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Socrates, 1787, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Section 1: Introduction

Portraits of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle help students consider questions such as “What do philosophers do?” and “What is philosophy?” Images in this group also help students envision philosophy as the original discipline, from which the sciences and other fields were developed.

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Section 2: Logic and Method

Images in this section illustrate examples of logic and method in philosophy. Use the example of Jack & Jill to illustrate disjunctive syllogism:

Either Jack or Jill went up the hill.
Jack did not go up the hill.
Therefore, Jill went up the hill.

Constructive Dilemma is illustrated by the example of the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building:

We will either draw the Chrysler Building or the Empire State Building.
If we draw the Chrysler Building then we will draw a spire.
If we draw the Empire State Building then we will draw a Zeppelin landing tower.
So, we will either draw a spire or a Zeppelin landing tower.

Modus Ponens can be explained using the Queensboro Bridge as an example–Modus Tollens using the Brooklyn Bridge as an example:

If we ride over the Queensboro, we will ride on the side of the bridge.
We ride over the Queensboro.
So, we ride on the side.

If this were the Brooklyn Bridge, it would be a suspension bridge.

This is not a suspension bridge.

Thus, this is not the Brooklyn Bridge.

Conditionals are explained using a number of examples: if lemons are yellow, then they have a color; if all whales are mammals, and if all mammals are animals, then all whales are animals. Discuss inference: after seeing many white swans we can infer that all swans are white—but there are black swans, too.

Students love the example of Sherlock Holmes as an illustration of inference to the best explanation.

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Section 3: Religion: the existence of God

Use depictions of various gods (Zeus, Vishnu-Shiva, etc.) to enrich understanding of the idea of a god. The image of the Bible is a wonderful aid to discussion of the role of sacred texts. Is the miracle of Jesus healing the blind proof of God's existence? Discuss Hume's arguments against miracles and design arguments while students view images of the universe. Did the universe have a beginning? Is nature so beautiful that it must have been made by intelligence? Illustrate William Paley's argument: If we find a rock in the desert we infer no intelligent designer, but if we find a working watch we infer that it must have had an intelligent designer. Use Darwin's portrait to explain the theory of evolution, an alternative explanation for the order we see in the world. For example, a panda's thumb is seemingly better explained by natural selection than intelligent design, since it seems so imperfect.

Finally, the image of a cruise ship can be used to illustrate Hume's argument that a person ignorant of all ship-and machine-craftsmanship would likely think the cruise ship was made by one super-powerful god or giant – but they would be mistaken.

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Section 4: Religion: the problem of evil

Images in this section demonstrate examples of the problem of evil. If the world is controlled by an omnipotent, perfect God, how do we explain its evils? An image of the earthquake of Lisbon invokes a specific calamity that inspired widespread philosophical discussion of the problem in Enlightenment Europe. The example of Job raises the question of how and why a good God could carry out terrible acts. Discuss Leibniz's best of all possible worlds defense. Consider images of punishment and temptation-as-free-will as they relate to standard theist defenses against the problem of evil.

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Section 5: Epistemology

Images in this section depict great figures in the development of epistemology and some notable problem cases. Hume is one of the great modern skeptics and took up strong positions on the nature of knowledge and the operation of reason and learning. Kant drew up important distinctions

among other contributions. Plato, a classic rationalist, is a primary target for empiricist criticism. Math is a difficult area to categorize in terms of its possible status as synthetic a priori knowledge. In the 20th century the case of something red not being green was hotly debated. Hooking wires to a brain calls up many thought experiments, including the well-known brain-in-a-vat case.

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Section 6: Perception and the spatial world

In discussing perception and the spatial-material world, Locke and Berkeley tower over the history of the discussion. Isaac Newton also represents important contributions, including his shaping of how we think of the theoretical picture of the world. Standard example cases can also be called up with Arthur Eddington's description of two tables, and Berkeley's analysis of what an apple is.

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Section 7: The mind-body problem: dualism

Important dualists include Descartes, Plato, Leibniz and Locke. Dualism can be illustrated and discussed with the amusing example of ghosts and all the ways we think of them.

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Section 8: The mind-body problem: materialism

J.J.C. Smart discussed the identity theory in terms of its simpler picture of the universe. Smart also used the examples of the morning-star-evening-star identity and the lightning-electrical-discharge identity. One can also think of other models for thinking of the mind including the brain itself, computers, robots, or behavior-producers like Pavlov's dog.

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Section 9: Personal identity

The mysteries concerning identity are many, including the problem of the Ship of Theseus. Locke set in motion much of the modern discussion of identity, using the example of rational parrot to make a point about the nature of being a man/human. Using images of historical figures such as King Tut or Napoleon, students can imagine the experience of soul transference and how it might affect their identity. We can also consider copies or clones of a person—what do we make of them? How do they affect identity?

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Section 10: Cultural relativism

Images of Roman slavery, Aztec sacrifices, medieval Mongol conquests, and Kwakiutl culture help students understand ideas surrounding cultural rela-

tivism. Use examples such as Martin Luther King and Mary Wollstonecraft to illustrate the role of reformers and initiate a conversation about moral progress.

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Section 11: Religion and morality

Can God's commands be the explanation for why things are right? If God commanded us to murder, would that make murder right? Discuss moral motivation. Is fear of religious punishment necessary for people to be good? What about the wisdom of religious sources – are they helpful guides for moral questions? Even with clear language (as against homosexuality, for example) can we go by the Bible when it says so many things we reject as morally repugnant? Consider God's several commands for the Israelites to annihilate other peoples.

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