A Level Philosophy

A transition guide for incoming students

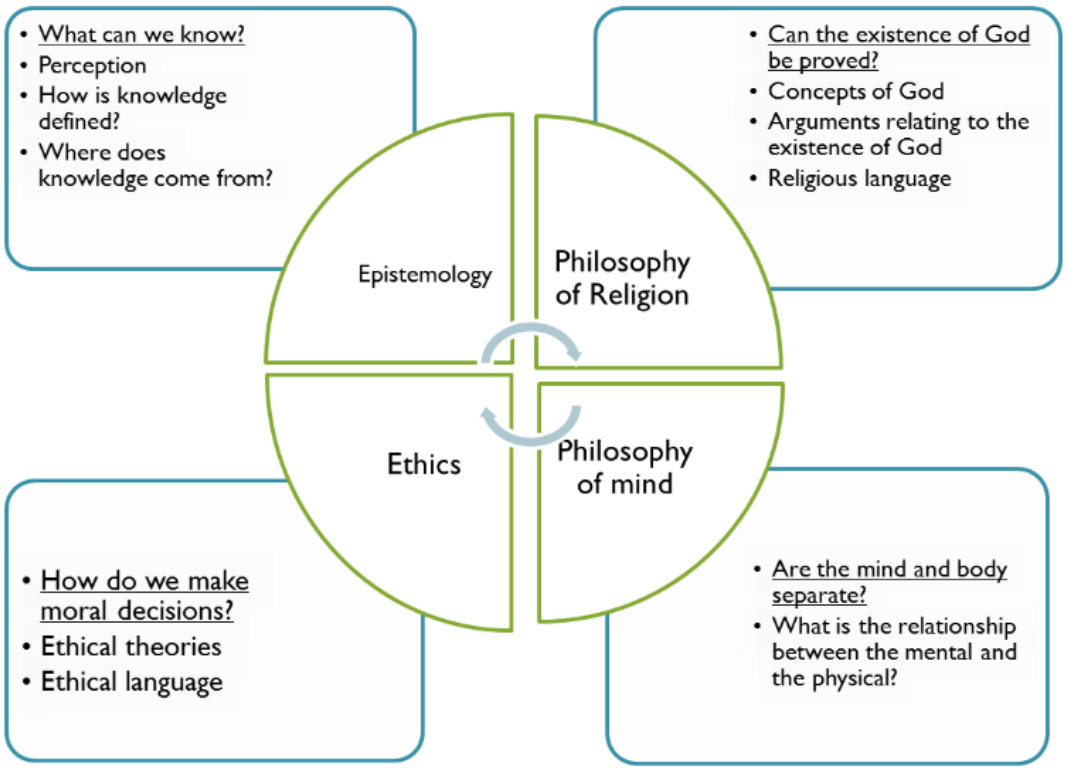
AQA

Welcome to Philosophy!

What is philosophy? This is a notoriously difficult question. It literally means "love of wisdom" and, while this captures a big part of what philosophy is, it doesn't capture everything.

In a nutshell, philosophy is an activity – it is often said that you do not *study* philosophy, you *do* philosophy. Doing philosophy involves asking certain types of questions. Questions like, "what can we know?", "How do we live a good life?", or "What is justice?" are philosophical questions (in fact, "what is philosophy?" is itself a philosophical question!)

These questions are of fundamental importance to human existence. As Socrates once said, "the unexamined life is not worth living".



PREPARING FOR A LEVEL

For philosophy at A level, the only thing that we expect you to arrive with is an open mind. However, engaging with some of the following resources would be beneficial.

INTRODUCTORY READING

NIGEL WARBURTON ***THE BASICS***

An excellent introduction to the major topics in philosophy. Warburton discusses questions related to ethics, knowledge, political philosophy, and aesthetics (the philosophy of art). He does so in an easy to read and engaging style that makes this a perfect 'way in' to the subject.

NIGEL WARBURTON ***THE CLASSICS***

Another work by Nigel Warburton. This time, Warburton takes a look at classic works of philosophy by authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hume. Warburton's style makes these intimating works accessible, and he teases out the key points clearly. If you are wanting to read philosophy but find it a little daunting, this is a great place to start.

SIMON BLACKBURN ***THINK***

An unintimidating introduction to the challenging and fascinating landscape of Western philosophy. Written expressly for "anyone who believes there are big questions out there, but does not know how to approach them," Think provides a sound framework for exploring the most basic themes of philosophy, and for understanding how major philosophers have tackled the questions that have pressed themselves most forcefully on human consciousness.

JULIAN BAGGINI ***THE PIG THAT WANTS TO BE EATEN***

The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten offers one hundred philosophical puzzles that stimulate thought on a host of moral, social, and personal dilemmas. Taking examples from sources as diverse as Plato and Steven Spielberg, author Julian Baggini presents abstract philosophical issues in concrete terms, suggesting possible solutions while encouraging readers to draw their own conclusions: Lively, clever, and thought-provoking, The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten is a portable feast for the mind that is sure to satisfy any intellectual appetite.

CLASSICS (THAT ARE NOT TOO DAUNTING!)

PLATO ***FIVE DIALOGUES***

Plato is one of the most influential people that has ever existed. It is sometimes said that the entire subject of philosophy is a response to Plato. These dialogues capture a huge range of the great thinkers ideas. From discussions about God to Justice, the soul to knowledge, not to mention an examination of the point of philosophy itself, this is a great way to start reading classic works of philosophy. Not only a great philosopher, Plato is a fantastic writer who makes his ideas engaging and accessible.

PLATO ***REPUBLIC***

Another from Plato. The Republic is often presented as the foundational work of political philosophy. However, it is so much more. Plato discusses knowledge, the soul, art, and focusses on the question "why live a good life?". His real aim is find the answer to the question "what is justice?". If you read one book by one philosopher, make it this one.

RENE DESCARTES ***MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY***

This book fits all the criteria of an introductory philosophy book. Firstly, it is easy to read and to grasp the ideas. Secondly, the arguments made in this book can be seen as fundamental in philosophy – the next three

hundred years of philosophy had to respond to Descartes revolutionary arguments. The question Descartes is interested in? "How can I be certain that the world exists?". If you have ever seen *The Matrix*, you already know some Descartes (and Plato!)

MARCUS AURELIEUS ***MEDITATIONS***

The private journals of a Roman emperor and stoic philosopher, Aurelieus can probably sum up his philosophy best:

"[Before making a decision] The first thing to do – don't get worked up. For everything happens according to the nature of all things, and in a short time you'll be nobody and nowhere even as the great emperors Hadrian and Augustus are now. The next thing to do – consider carefully the task at hand for what it is, while remembering that your purpose is to be a good human being. Get straight to doing what nature requires of you, and speak as you see most just and fitting – with kindness, modesty, and sincerity."

JOHN STUART MILL ***ON LIBERTY***

For those interested in political philosophy. Mill applies his ethical theory of utilitarianism (which is part of the A level) to the relationship between the individual and the state. He emphasises the importance of individuality and freedom.

EXTRA RESOURCES

Philosophy bites podcast

https://www.philosophersmag.com/games