



Department  
for Education

# Philosophy

**GCE AS and A level subject content**

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# The content for philosophy AS and A level

## Introduction

1. AS and A-level subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all AS and A level specifications in a given subject.

## Aims and objectives

2. AS and A level philosophy specifications will introduce students to a set of philosophical modes of thinking. Students will ask philosophical questions, explore and critically engage with ideas, while making and sharpening distinctions and criticising and reinterpreting the arguments of philosophers. AS and A level specifications must ensure that students:

- consider and develop an understanding of the ways in which philosophers have engaged with traditional philosophical issues and philosophical approaches to problems, through the detailed study of the arguments of philosophers in identified texts
- develop an understanding of the core concepts of philosophy and begin to develop their own skill of conceptual analysis, through the study of the ways in which philosophers have analysed concepts and have, through conceptual analysis, identified subtle differences which have a wider impact on philosophical arguments
- develop their ability to identify argument forms, and analyse and evaluate arguments appropriately, through the study of the ways in which philosophers have analysed and evaluated the soundness of arguments by considering the validity of the argument and/or the truth of the premises
- develop and refine their ability to identify and distinguish argument within a source/text, ask thoughtful, relevant and penetrating questions; analyse and evaluate arguments of others, and present and defend their own arguments clearly, logically and cogently
- develop and refine their writing skills, demonstrating the ability to be precise, concise and accurate, correctly using the technical vocabulary of philosophy

## Knowledge understanding and skills

3. Specifications for AS philosophy must comprise the topics of epistemology and moral philosophy, equally weighted.

Specifications for A-level philosophy must comprise the topics of epistemology, moral philosophy, the metaphysics of God and the metaphysics of mind, equally weighted.

4. Any specification for AS and/or A-level philosophy must ensure that, in addressing all of the subject content which follows, students are required to:

- understand the ways in which philosophers have analysed the core concepts of philosophy, and be able to identify how subtle differences in analyses can have wider impacts on philosophical arguments
- understand the main philosophical arguments within topics, through the works of philosophers, and articulate those arguments in appropriate forms, correctly, clearly and precisely
- understand the philosophical claims which are made within each topic and be able to articulate those claims correctly, clearly and precisely. Students must also articulate how those claims might relate to other topic areas
- understand the ways in which philosophical arguments are developed, issues are raised, and arguments are reformulated in response to those issues
- understand the similarities and differences between the forms of reasoning used in different philosophical content areas, including the similarities and differences between different kinds of knowledge
- generate responses using appropriate philosophical formats, to a range of philosophical questions. These responses must include: articulating definitions; articulating arguments and counter-arguments; and selecting, applying and evaluating appropriate material to generate their own arguments

5. AS and A-level philosophy specifications must require students to engage with philosophical texts in relation to the content specified in 7 and 8. The required texts for each of the content areas are listed in appendix A.

6. Specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

## **Epistemology**

### **Analysis of knowledge**

- the distinction between acquaintance knowledge, ability knowledge and propositional knowledge and the nature of definition
- the tripartite view of propositional knowledge as justified true belief, and criticisms of the tripartite view, including the view that the conditions are not individually necessary; Gettier-style problems and alternative formulations in response to those criticisms, including 'no false lemmas', infallibilism, reliabilism and epistemic virtue

### **Perception**

- direct realism: that the immediate objects of perception are mind-independent objects, and their properties and issues arising from direct realism, which must

include the argument from illusion, the argument from perceptual variation and the time-lag argument and responses to those issues

- indirect realism: the immediate objects of perception as mind-dependent objects that are caused by and represent mind-independent objects, and issues arising from indirect Realism, which must include the possibility that it leads to scepticism about the existence and/or nature of the external world, and responses to those issues
- idealism: the immediate objects of perception as mind-dependent objects, and issues arising from idealism, which must include: that it could lead to solipsism, that it might not give an adequate account of illusions/hallucinations, and whether God can be used to play the role He does, and responses to those issues

## **Scepticism**

- the particular nature of philosophical scepticism; the contrast with normal incredulity; the application of philosophical scepticism to classes of propositions and its (possible) global application
- the role/function of philosophical scepticism within epistemology
- the application of sceptical arguments to a range of knowledge claims, including: both a priori and a posteriori claims; implications of that application and issues arising; approaches to addressing those issues

## **Origin and nature of knowledge**

- empiricist accounts of the origin and nature of knowledge, including: the mind as a tabula rasa, the nature of impressions and ideas; simple and complex concepts; and innatist (rationalist) accounts of the origin and nature of knowledge, including: arguments for innate ideas; the intuition and deduction thesis
- the approaches taken by empiricist and innatist accounts to different kinds of knowledge
- arguments in favour and against empiricist and innatist accounts of the origin and nature of knowledge

## **Moral philosophy**

- meta-ethics: the origin of our ethical principles, the meaning of ethical principles and the roles of reason and emotion, including moral realism (ethical naturalism/non-naturalism) and error theory; emotivism and prescriptivism
- normative ethics: utilitarianism (act and rule; hedonist and preference forms); Kantian deontological ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics, including the definitions of good/bad/right/wrong within each approach and similarities/differences across approaches
- applied ethics: the use of the conceptual tools of meta-ethics and normative ethics to address/resolve issues within at least four specified controversial issues

7. In addition to epistemology and moral philosophy, A level specifications must include the following topic areas:

### **The metaphysics of God**

- the concepts of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence, and timelessness/being within time; issues arising from the attribution of these concepts to a being (God)
- at least two forms of the teleological argument, including one from regularity and one from purpose; at least two forms of the cosmological argument, including one causal and one contingency form; and any two forms of ontological argument
- empiricist challenges to the status of metaphysical language, applications of those challenges to the metaphysics of God, responses to those challenges and implications of those responses

### **The metaphysics of mind**

- the concept of dualism, considering property and/or substance dualism, including: arguments based on supposed differences between the mental and the physical; arguments based on issues relating to interaction; and issues around knowledge of other minds
- reduction of the mental, considering type and/or token identity, including: arguments against reduction, from both a dualist perspective and based on the multiple realisability of mental states
- functionalism and the attempt to characterise the mental functionally, rather than merely compositionally; the status of folk-psychology; the eliminativist materialist attack on the vocabulary and ontology of mental states

## Appendix A – philosophical texts

Students will be required to demonstrate an understanding of, and the ability to make a reasoned evaluation of, the arguments set out in the following philosophical texts: (Please note: where a whole text is specified, it is not expected that all of the texts listed must be studied in their entirety. Awarding organisations must specify which sections of each must be covered, in their specifications)

### Epistemology

Berkeley, G (1713), *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*

Descartes, R (1641), *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Gettier, E (1963), 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' *Analysis*, 23(6): 121-123

Hume, D (1748), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Leibniz, G (1705), *New Essays on Human Understanding*

Locke, J (1690), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Plato, *Meno*

Russell, B (1912), *The Problems of Philosophy*

Trotter Cockburn, C (1732), (attrib) 'A Letter from an anonymous writer to the author of the Minute Philosopher' Appendix to G Berkeley *Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*

Zagzebski, L (1999), 'What is Knowledge?' in John Greco & Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* 92-116

### Moral philosophy

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Ayer, AJ (1973/1991), *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, London, Penguin and/or

Ayer, AJ (1946), *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, New York, Dover

Bentham, J (1791), 'The Principle of Utility' in *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press

Diamond, C (1978), 'Eating Meat and Eating People' *Philosophy* 53: 465-479

Foot, P (1972), 'Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives.' *Philosophical Review*, vol 81, issue 3, 305-316.

Hare, R.M (1952) *The Language of Morals*

Hume, D (1739-40), *Treatise of Human Nature*

Kant, I (1785), *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Mackie, JL (1977), 'The argument from Queerness' in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin

Mill, JS (1863), *Utilitarianism*

Moore, GE (1903), *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press

Smart, JJC & Williams, B (1973), *Utilitarianism: For and Against*

## **The metaphysics of God**

Anselm, *Proslogium*, Chapters II-IV and Gaunilo, from the appendix to Anselm's *Proslogium*

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1: Question 25, Article 3; Question 2, Article 3

Ayer, AJ (1973/1991), *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, London, Penguin, 22-29 and/or Ayer, AJ (1946), *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, New York, Dover

Descartes, R (1641), *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3 and 5

Flew, A, RM Hare and B Mitchell (1955), 'Theology and Falsification' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, London, SMC Press

Hume, D (1779), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts II, V, VIII and IX

Midgley, M (1984), *Wickedness*. Routledge

Paley, W (1802/2008), *Natural Theology*, OUP, Chapters 1, 2 and 5

Plato, *Euthyphro*

Stump, E & Kretzmann, N (1981), Eternity. *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (8):429-458.

Swinburne, RG (1968), 'The Argument from Design,' *Philosophy*, 43 (165), 199-212

## **The metaphysics of mind**

Avramides, A (2001), *Other Minds*. Routledge

Block, N (1980), 'Troubles with functionalism,' in *Readings in Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol 1, Harvard University Press, 275-278 – section 1-2

Chalmers, DJ. (1996), *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Churchland, PM (1981), 'Eliminative Materialism and Propositional Attitudes', *Journal of Philosophy* 78, 67-90 (section 2, *Why folk psychology might (really) be false*)

Descartes, R (1641), *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 6

Jackson, F (1982), 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *Philosophical quarterly*, 32, 127-136 and

Putnam, H (1975/1986), 'The Nature of Mental States' In *Mind, Language and Reality*. *Philosophical Papers*, Volume 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryle, G (1949/2000), *The Concept of Mind*, London, Penguin Classics

Shapiro L (Ed) (2007), *The correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Rene Descartes*, edited and translated. University of Chicago Press.

Smart, JJC (1959), 'Sensations and brain processes', *The Philosophical Review*, 68 (2), 141-156



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