Everyday philosophy

Andrea Monteath

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Everyday Philosophy

by

Andrea Monteath
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

Everyday Philosophy

My thesis is a work of creative non-fiction, in the form of an introductory, philosophy workbook. The workbook, tentatively named *Everyday Philosophy*, is intended to appeal to upper secondary students aged sixteen to seventeen, and contains a broad cross-section of information about the philosophy tradition. The workbook is loosely constructed around the new Western Australian Certificate of Education 'Philosophy and Ethics' curriculum, due to be launched in 2008.

The aim of my thesis is to provide an introduction to Philosophy and Ethics that is thought-provoking yet easy to understand, employing examples, analogies and illustrations that are relevant and current to the intended readership. In order to achieve this I have employed a mixture of non-fiction and fictional scenarios to illustrate philosophical themes. The scenarios range from the commonplace to the ridiculous, in order to effectively promote the curiosity and enthusiasm of a sixteen or seventeen year-old high school student. The language and tone are friendly, grounded, conversational and, at times, amusing. I believe this strategy to be a necessary antidote to the perception that the study of philosophy is academic, lofty and inaccessible to mere mortals.

The workbook contains:

- topical, essay-style discussions of the main themes of philosophy.
- historical information regarding key philosophers and their contributions.
- creative and anecdotal scenarios to illustrate fundamental tenets.
- in-chapter, journal exercises.
- recommendations for supplementary reading and viewing material.
- interesting quotes by philosophers.
- profiles of famous philosophy students, and their impact on the world today.

The rationale behind *Everyday Philosophy* is to create an innovative and interactive introduction to the sometimes daunting discipline of philosophy, in a style that specifically addresses the needs and interests of upper secondary students.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

i. incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

iii. contain any defamatory material.

I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

Andrea Monteath

December 11, 2007
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In the summer of 1978, a mysterious circle of flattened wheat was discovered in a field in Hampshire in southern England. The circle appeared overnight and measured forty feet in diameter. Locals were baffled as to how this perfect circle came to be, as there were no apparent tracks leading in to, or out of, its location.\footnote{Because I said so} Speculation grew. It seemed as though the circle had been 'pressed' into the field from above. A helicopter, perhaps? Or maybe some rare, cyclonic wind pattern? Many theories were put forward over the next thirteen years as hundreds of these pictograms, or ‘glyphs’, bloomed during dark summer nights, later to be spotted from airplanes, crop dusters and passing cars. The media dubbed these phenomena ‘crop circles’ and, with a gleeful absence of hard evidence, were delighted to report on some of the more titillating, supernatural explanations on offer. Cereologists, a name for the new breed of ‘circle-chaser’, were dedicated to finding answers. Everything was considered from ball lightning to freakish wind formations called ‘plasma vortices’. Some believed that the crop circles were created by extra-terrestrials in order to communicate with humans. Other paranormal interest groups thought that the flattened areas were merely a by-product of extreme heat, the crops damaged by microwaves from parked space ships. ‘Ear’ witnesses to crop circle events claimed to have heard scream-like, high-pitched trilling sounds at the time the circles would have been forming. Still others claimed that the magnetic structure of everything within a crop circle is ‘changed’, and that the chromosomes in the crops are ‘severely mutated’.\footnote{Because I said so}
In 1991 two Southampton men, Doug Bower and Dave Horley, admitted to the crop circle hoax. The idea, they said, was inspired by UFO-lore from the Australian town of Tully in Queensland. Over a drink at a local pub, the pair conspired to create something that looked like a 'UFO landing site'. Armed with a four-foot metal bar, some rope and a sense of humour, Bower and Horley created not only the first of many crop circles, but also an interesting subculture that continues to thrive. Despite the confessions of pranksters Bower and Horley, and a well-publicised movement of ‘wheat graffiti’ artists and imitators in the last sixteen years, a strong contingent of ‘croppies’ continue to argue that crop circles are genuinely, non-human phenomena. Daniel Pinchbeck of Wired magazine writes, ‘In England, as many as ten thousand believers spend their summers tromping across the verdant hills of Wiltshire and Glastonbury prospecting for new formations. They include not only the expected druids, dowsers, and Deadheads but also more level headed types – engineers, astronomers, laser scientists, and biophysicists.’ It seems that sometimes the truth is simply too mundane or ordinary to accept.

Philosophy has always been interested in how we gain knowledge. In fact, this particular pursuit has its own branch. Called epistemology, this area is concerned with the nature of ‘truth’ and how we can get to it. Early Greek philosophers, Socrates and Plato, made it their business to find a system where they could be certain they were not being deceived by nature, their senses or the opinions and so-called ‘wisdom’ of other people. In particular,
Socrates looked at defining the world around him. His insistence on precision and absolute clarity was unequalled in his day, earning him a reputation as a master of argument as well as a painfully exacting taskmaster to his students.\(^5\)

Plato was perhaps the most famous student of Socrates. Following the execution of Socrates, he continued to develop the work of his teacher. Plato was not content simply to regurgitate his master's theories without adding a few of his own. Like all good scientists and researchers, philosophers devise, test, modify and sometimes abandon their theories as new information and ideas present themselves. Plato was no exception, building on the foundation of Socrates' work, to develop his own theories on the question 'What is knowledge?'

By now you might be wondering exactly what Plato and crop circles have in common. After all, if you were to study the writings of this famous philosopher there would be no mention of plasma vortex theory or cereologists. But crop circles are examples of exactly the sort of phenomena that intrigued and frustrated Plato, and many philosophers to follow who were interested in consistency, completeness and pragmatism. While it is unlikely he ever witnessed an actual, flattened wheat imprint, Plato would have been very familiar with the flawed and contradictory thinking that followed such events. Plato's era, like ours, was riddled with unsubstantiated opinion, superstition, and the tendency of people carelessly to accept what they saw, as uncontestable truth. If a plague of locusts stripped away a season's grain, for example, a minor god could be blamed. If a new bride failed to conceive a
child within one year, she must be cursed with the Evil Eye. Had a crop circle mysteriously appeared in an ancient Greek field, aliens might well have been held responsible. Plato may not have seen a crop circle, but recognised the one-eyed, 'croppie' mindset when he saw it.

You've probably heard the expression, 'You are what you eat.' As a child, these may have been the words of your mother when you asked for yet another cheese sausage. As a teenager, the words would echo inside your head, sounding eerily like an ad for pimple cream, while you considered another can of Coke. As an adult, 'You are what you eat' often translates to a warning from Weight Watchers. Regardless of how you hear this expression, it refers to the idea that what you feed your physical body today is directly related to the quality and quantity of flesh you can expect later.

Similarly, you are what you believe. Some of your beliefs stem from personal observation and experience, some from the teachings and opinions of your parents, teachers and friends. Still more beliefs are formed from the images and information we absorb through television, movies, advertising, books, magazines, the internet, art and music. That's a lot of mind-food going in, and not all of it mentally nutritious! Nonetheless, what we put in will become a composite of everything we believe to be true. And, as most of us do not spend our lives immobile, our behaviour will reflect our beliefs. We will act on what we believe. For some of us this could (and should) be a little scary, because every decision we make, and will make in the future, depends on what we believe to be true.
So, nobody's perfect. Why should we care too much about a few buried half-truths, superstitions and misconceptions in an otherwise presentable human being? Isn't it enough to be mostly rational, fair and consistent? After all, who is to say what is right and what is wrong, anyway? Why? Because the actions we take, based on these 'primary beliefs', are eventually going to affect someone, somewhere. At a personal level it might be you, or a friend. It could be something relatively small, like buying a Harley-Davidson motorcycle when you really need a station wagon or a ute. The belief that beautiful bikini models are attracted to the growl and grunt of a hot-looking motorcycle drove you to make this error, but now you hardly ever get to the beach anymore because you have nowhere to put your surfboard. Contrary to the effect you thought this would have, the ladies now avoid you altogether. When you do get to the beach it is either

A. with your bike, but without your board — severely lessening opportunities to impress with your awesome surfing skills, or

B. with your board, but without your bike— contributing to the impression you are too poor to own your own transportation.

This, of course, is a minor, but reparable problem. At a societal level, however, flawed beliefs, and the actions that flow from them, can be more serious. A flawed action may negatively influence a great many people.
On November 18, 1978, nine hundred and nine members of the Peoples Temple Christian Church committed mass ‘revolutionary suicide’ in the South American jungle camp of Jonestown in Guyana. Led by Jim Jones and his self-styled mix of religion and social justice, the members reportedly lined up to drink cups of purple, ‘Flav-R-Ade’, laced with poison. Conditioned to believe that their vision of a ‘promised land’ had ended, and that they and their children would likely be tortured by the American government, members dutifully ended their lives in a final act of loyalty to the cult. What we believe is what we are, and what we do. What we believe also determines how and where we can be led.

So, how can we know the difference between reality and appearance? How do we know that a crop circle is not some kind of alien pothole? After all, there is no proof that it isn’t. Just because we haven’t actually captured an image of one on camera doesn’t mean that aliens are not the perpetrators. Isn’t anything possible?

Of course, this is quite true. The spacecraft may be invisible. Our timing may simply be unlucky. However, to say that ‘anything is possible’ is simply to give up on the difficult task of separating fact from fiction. In order to inch our way more closely to the truth could we, perhaps, modify the question to something like, ‘Given what we know and understand about the world, is it likely that aliens are responsible for this phenomenon?’ After all, we may not now (and maybe never) possess clear proof of the cause, but this does not mean we cannot make an informed judgement of its likelihood.
This tendency to fill gaps in our knowledge often invites a variety of fallacy – the argument from ignorance. The argument from ignorance is commonly used when key information is unavailable in an argument. In this instance, we lack definitive visual evidence (film footage, a photograph, etc) clearly to provide the cause of crop circles. Hoaxers have claimed responsibility for the majority, and have supplied some evidence of their activities, leaving a relatively small number of so-called ‘genuine’ circles unexplained. The argument from ignorance highlights that, just because we cannot prove something, it must be false and, equally, just because we cannot disprove something, it must be true. In the case of crop circles the strongest statement you can make, given the evidence, is that it is highly unlikely that crop circles are made by spaceships, or mutant elephant feet, or coins dropped from the pockets of nocturnal giants.

Many philosophers have wrestled with the idea of illusion and reality, but few with the personal dedication of French philosopher René Descartes. Often considered to be the founder of modern philosophy, Descartes was a man convinced that we must rely on reason alone to know the truth of anything. A gifted scholar of physics, mathematics, philosophy and astronomy, Descartes abandoned the accumulated ‘wisdom’ of earlier
philosophers to devise a method of enquiry that relied purely on what was clear, distinct and evident in the world. While he was a natural leader in the scientific revolution sweeping Europe at that time, his discoveries and theories also proved valuable to those who resisted the march of science over religion. This is because, as well as being a scientist, Descartes was also a devout Catholic. At a time when the Church’s authority was beginning to give way to the ‘vast, cold, inhuman and mechanical’ world of science, Descartes simultaneously strove to include faith and the existence of God in his work. This was not an easy feat using a scientist’s methods, but one that earned Descartes (and other ‘scientists’ of his time) valuable latitude and the opportunity to explore the world outside the Church’s doctrines, without being tried for heresy. After all, it is difficult to be creative when you are running from the law.

Descartes was a very rigorous sort of scientist. The story varies, but it is said he once spent an entire day sitting in a stove in his search for a universal method for uncovering the truth about anything. It may be that he actually spent the day in a small room, next to a stove or fire, but this author prefers the drama and dedication of the former story. Regardless of where the event took place, from this event Descartes produced his first, major philosophical work entitled ‘Discourse on Method’. Although not the most compelling name for some of the most influential writing ever produced, Descartes’ theories have endured for centuries.
A man who preferred to keep things simple where possible, Descartes offered four, blessedly uncomplicated 'steps' for being as sure as you can be about anything at all. Later dubbed the Cartesian Rules, these simple steps have been further condensed here. Originally written in French, an already popular departure from traditional Latin, they appear here in convenient English.

**Cartesian Rules**

*The Rule of Clear and Distinct Ideas:* Accept nothing as true unless the evidence for it is irrefutable.

*The Rule of Analysis:* Divide the problem into smaller, manageable 'parts' in order to solve it.

*The Rule of Progression:* Start with the simplest ideas to understand and work systematically towards the most difficult.

*The Rule of Synthesis:* Review the evidence completely and often to make certain you have not overlooked anything.
'Wow', you say. 'This set of rules is pretty much common-sense. I can't believe he spent the whole day in a stove to come up with these!'

Fair comment. Today, most of us would employ all or some of these rules everyday in order to solve problems. Consider this scenario. You receive a brand new portable media centre for your birthday. Your friend has one just like it, so you know you should be able to load all of your favourite songs, movies, television shows and photographs onto it. So, you sink quietly onto the carpet and begin the task of unravelling its mysterious capabilities. You...

1. assume that the slick black plastic box in front of you does nothing at all until you read the instruction manual;

2. feel a little overwhelmed by its magnificence, so you resolve to tackle each of the features — audio, video, radio, photos — separately, mastering each in manageable chunks;

3. start by exploring the user-friendly menu system because it looks easier than everything else in the manual. Then you identify those sub-menus you are familiar with — the audio files and playlists — because they remind you of your old MP3 player. Next, the less familiar video and photo files. And lastly, the most difficult of all, how to use the wireless Bluetooth technology to transfer files to other people;
4. finally, after working out how to use all of the features, you thoroughly re-read the instruction manual to ensure you haven’t overlooked some stylish feature your friends are likely to be incredibly envious of.

Congratulations! This may well be a world first. You just have used seventeenth-century guidelines to master the cutting-edge wizardry of a Toshiba Gigabeat. Regardless of whether René Descartes visualised a ‘box where small people sing and dance from within...’ in 1637, his handy, pocket-sized skills still managed to bring order to the messy world of technology today. Or was that the messy world of thinking? Imagine applying Cartesian Rules to, say, global warming? Or finding a cure for breast cancer? Now, wouldn’t that would be worth a day in a stove.

Epistemology can be mind-bendingly hard. When it all gets too difficult...go to the movies. In fact, some of the biggest, eye-popping, CGI-loaded blockbusters have – in the middle of blowing things up – addressed some of philosophy’s most persistent questions. So, where better to immerse all of the senses – tastebuds included - than the filmmaker’s vision of ‘Why are we here?’ or ‘What does it all mean?’

In the 1999 science fiction film The Matrix, the question of ‘How do we know what is real?’ is painfully answered when the blissfully unconscious main character, Neo, is purged from the only existence he knows. Neo is ripped from his nutrient-filled pod and literally flushed into the bowels of a world now dominated by artificial intelligence. Naked, flailing, and gasping for air he experiences, for the first time, an awareness of his own body. It’s not pretty.
His shocking ejection from the Matrix calls into question everything he has ever assumed to be ‘real’.

If you prefer your philosophy chilled, try M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* for creepier Cartesian mind games. Here, Descartes’ theory that the senses can deceive, and everything must be doubted, is given a supernatural twist.

Both films operate on the premise that we cannot be certain that everything we experience is not simply a dream. And, if we cannot say for certain that we are not dreaming, then how can we say for certain that our whole existence is not just a dream? Furthermore, how can we be sure we exist at all?

Unlike philosophical questions, however, the reassuring thing about movies is that eventually *they end*. You can pack up, take your bleeding forehead and empty popcorn box and go home. That is, if home really exists.
If you have one, examine your hand. What do you see? Assuming the usual number of fingers, the average human hand we can see is largely composed of bone, muscle, blood vessels and a covering of skin. It can grip, point, shake hands and wave hello. At a molecular level, your hand is primarily made up of oxygen, hydrogen, carbon and nitrogen atoms, in a sophisticated collection of millions of cells that live, work and die according to the body's intricate time clock. In all likelihood, your hand looks pretty much the same, give or take the odd scar, as it did last year. Most of us would feel confident to say, 'Yes, that's the same old hand I've always had.' But is it?

Human cells die at an alarming rate, with all the drama of a crime thriller. Some are pushed. Some jump. Biologists have estimated that the human body replaces approximately ninety-eight percent of all its cells every six months. We accumulate these atoms from our environment and from the food we eat. So, the hand you are looking at now is, in fact, nothing like the hand you had six months ago. And, if this is true of your hand, what about the rest of you? If the very atoms we are composed of keep changing, then how can we define who, or what, we are at any given time? How can we say with any certainty that we are not simply the sum of our atoms? And how are we any different from any other 'arrangement' of atoms in the universe?
‘What are we?’ is a question philosophers have argued and agonised over for centuries. The seventeenth century, a period of rapid and often explosive scientific and intellectual discovery, fathered radical changes in the way in which human beings defined themselves and their place in nature. Thinkers everywhere began to search for answers to the mysteries of the natural world around them by turning to the sciences of mathematics, geometry, chemistry and physics. Scientists searched for ways to ‘quantify’ their environment and to find a pure and universal language to express, and build upon, their findings. What they discovered was atoms. Microscopic, seemingly indivisible, uniform, colourless, tasteless building blocks. Perfectly suited to the language of mathematics, the atom became the handy, all-purpose unit for exploring and explaining nature. A kind of scientific baseline.¹²

Not everyone was happy about this ‘new’ science. In particular, the Church, who, until this time, had been the definitive authority on the origins of mankind. They had good reason to be nervous. After all, if we can define who and what we are all by ourselves using science, why might we need answers from anyone else? This was a thorny issue that threatened not only the institution of religion but, in many cases, the new scientists themselves whose faith was being challenged daily by their own discoveries. So, how to reconcile the two? How could a seventeenth-century scientist continue to quantify the universe, down to the last atom, and still have room for religion? The answer, it seemed, was all in the mind.
Human beings have always had difficulty when it comes to defining the mind. The brain is easy. The brain is a greyish lump of soft tissue located in the skull. Unless you are a neurosurgeon, the sophisticated chemical and electrical activity that takes place in the brain is a little mysterious. It is an amazing and complex piece of equipment and, mostly, we believe its incredibly speedy signalling system is responsible for everything we do, think and feel. But here lies the problem. Imagine for a moment that we flip open the skull, remove our brain and hold it carefully in our two hands. What might it feel like? Soft? Squishy? A little like a small, unroasted pork without the crackling? Probably. So, we have this jelly-like blob of grey matter in our hands and, staring down at it from above, we wonder how it is possible that this uninspiring-looking structure could be responsible for some of the most significant moments of our lives. Moments like the electric sizzle you felt when she looked your way. Or, the breathless, giddy joy of coming first in the relay race. Or the heat in your cheeks when he caught you telling a lie. Or maybe, the empty feeling in the centre of your chest when they told you the dog had died.

And what about thoughts? Like the inspired moment you added vinegar to the fruit salad and no one at the table could figure out what made it taste so delicious. Or the way you understood quadratic equations straight away, while other students struggled for weeks. Or the time it occurred to you that no one really cared about the way your hair looked, except you.

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It just doesn’t seem to add up. All these emotions, feelings, thoughts and ideas supposedly emanating from this one, quivering mass of tissue, blood and chemicals? How can that be? We must be missing something.

René Descartes thought so too, and applied his formidable brainpower to this disturbing problem. This tireless French philosopher and mathematician determined that human beings are, essentially, thinking beings. ‘Cogito, ergo sum’ – I think, therefore I am. He reasoned that while the senses (the body) could not always be relied upon for the truth, the mind (or thinking) was the only thing we could be certain of. If you are thinking, you must exist! To Descartes, it seemed that the mind and body were totally independent, working alongside each other, but without connection. He reasoned that we are more than the sum of our atoms, more than the biological material our bodies are constructed from, with a separate and distinct mind (or soul) that had nothing at all to do with the physical, quantifiable ‘stuff’ of science. In philosophy, this position is called dualism – the notion that human beings are composed of two materials, of earthly matter and a non-physical mind.14 Descarte’s reasoning allowed the scientific community some breathing space, not only from an increasingly suspicious Church, but also from their own discomfort at the notion that religion may not have all the answers.
The idea of dualism, however appealing, had its own problems. It gives us nothing to work with. We might like to believe it but we cannot, using scientific investigation, prove something that is not physical. It's like trying to prove that a ghost exists somewhere inside our heads, responsible for our thoughts and feelings. This special mind-ghost can't be captured on video, examined under a microscope or even isolated, somewhere in or around the body, in order to observe it. We are simply told that it is there, and that the very fact we are self-conscious is proof enough of its existence. Nice, but not neat. Dualism appears to contradict the basic scientific principle that the cause of a physical event is a prior physical event. How can the non-physical thought of eating ice cream, for example, lead to a late-night snack-fest? Where is the link? The proof? In fact, if we are to accept the dualist theory of mind we might just as well invent theories of our own. We might, for example, like to believe that our minds are constructed of non-physical, alien essence and that our bodies are simply biological vehicles for a civilisation from the dimension-next-door. Or, possibly a 'friendlier' theory, perhaps the spirit of Santa Claus is responsible for our heartaches, ability to do trigonometry, and rampaging lust for the girl in the home loan advertisement? Each of these theories is unlikely, but theoretically possible. They are also equally unprovable.

Descartes was not the only philosopher on the block with theories about the mind. A little over ten years following his death, a Jewish philosopher, mathematician and scholar started publishing his own thoughts on the matter. Born in 1632, Benedict de Spinoza lived most of his life in Holland. Compared to many other parts of Europe at that time, Holland was a fairly safe and liberal place to challenge the beliefs and ideas of society. Despite this, he
still managed to shock the neighbours and get himself expelled from the synagogue for his radical views on the role of the religion.\textsuperscript{16}

Spinoza was a firm believer in God and, simultaneously, a scrupulously logical and scientific man. Spinoza was also a rationalist, a person who believes we get many of our concepts from experience, and later use reason ‘logically’ to determine that they are what they appear to be. Not the first philosopher to say it, Spinoza believed that the world was purely physical and wrote ‘that everything is governed by total logical necessity.’\textsuperscript{17} His ideas differed from Descartes’ in that he was a materialist, someone who believes that the world is composed purely of physical matter - including thoughts and feelings - and that everything in the universe can be explained in terms of physical laws.

Today, we are largely free to decide for ourselves what ‘conception of self’ seems most reasonable. In the western world we may explore the questions, ‘What am I?’ and ‘What is life?’ with little more than the pressures and influences of our parents, our education, the opinions of our communities and our own biases to get around. Easy! At least we won’t be burned at the stake, right? Well, like most philosophical questions, the short answer is maybe.

Separating what you believe, from what you know, can be like a fly floating in your morning coffee. Disturbing. Uncomfortable. Not what you wanted to see.
So, why do it, then? Why dismantle a perfectly good belief system when it is working just fine? Worse, what if you examine the system, find holes, and then can't get it up and running again? Can't think of a reason? Consider this futuristic scenario...

Part One: Orphan Ayla

Twenty years from now you are the father (or mother) of Ayla, a six-year-old girl with huge brown eyes and a tendency to stutter. Ayla thinks you are 's-s-s-s-stronger than a lion' and waits at the window for you to come home at night. At thirty-six years old you are fitter than you have ever been. You run every morning before work and eat a low-fat diet. You hardly drink and, of course, no one smokes anymore. You are Ayla's only carer and are therefore horrified to learn that you have developed a terminal illness. This disease is guaranteed methodically to rob you of all your bodily functions. You will lose the ability to move, see, hear, eat and, eventually breathe. Your life expectancy is one month. There is no hope of a cure.

This situation is tragic. Luckily, it is set in the future and some radical new treatments have become available to you. In order to make a decision, however, you will need to be as sure as you can be of your concept of 'self', and what it means to be a human being. The doctor describes your options.
Part Two: The Unthinkable

He tells you that the problem is neurological. Your brain is sabotaging your body, sending suicidal, chemical instructions to every cell. You have a choice. With recent advances in medical technology you can either

A. replace your brain, or
B. remove your body.

If you choose Option A, your memories and sensory experiences will be transferred to an artificial, non-organic brain and reimplanted into your old body. The new brain will be faster and more reliable than your old, organic one. You will then be free to live out the natural life of your body, estimated at another fifty years. Without your body, your old, diseased brain will quickly die, and be disposed of.

If you choose Option B, your diseased brain will be detached from your body and placed in a nutrient-rich holding tank. Your brain will be connected to an audio-visual interface that will allow you to communicate with your daughter and the outside world, study online, watch movies, listen to music, surf the internet and place bids on Ebay, without the aches, pains, or sleep required of a body. The strictly controlled environment of the tank will extend the life of your brain by up to a century. Theoretically, with new technologies being developed daily, you could live forever.
Can you imagine ever making such a choice? If you can, which would you choose? If we are, as the materialist asserts, no more than a cluster of physical matter destined to die at some predetermined, biological moment, then option A or B might be attractive. Compared to certain death without treatment, you could delay (perhaps indefinitely), the moment when the last of your physical self ends – permanently ending you.

As a dualist, however, the idea of preserving the contents of your original 'mind' would be crucial. You wonder if the mind and the brain are inextricably linked. Will my mind/soul be diminished by the download process? Doctors deal with the physical. Will I lose something non-physical and irreplaceable in the process? Hmmmm.....maybe option B.

'How ridiculous', you say. 'We are not even close to that kind of technology!' Possibly not. But then again, Descartes may not have imagined the 'singing, dancing box' we now use to watch episodes of Big Brother on the bus ride home from work either.
In 2007, an Italian synthetic biology firm called Protolife announced it was experimenting in the area of 'wet artificial life'. If they are successful, they hope to create the first man-made life form in the next three to ten years. Admittedly, this life form is unlikely to be much more than a single-celled organism, unfit to survive more than a few hours outside a Petri dish, but, once it is here, what will we do as a society to cater for what comes next? The first artificial life may be a weak and harmless curiosity. The second may not. Do we allow scientists to continue experimenting with the fundamental building blocks of life, possibly finding ways to improve our health and longevity? Or do we ban them from tinkering in an area that might one day lead to our destruction? Does it violate our religions? Are we sure? Maybe we should meet them halfway, formulating strategies to license and monitor and control the direction of their work. Amongst all the uncertainty, of one thing we can be sure. One day, we will be forced to decide.

Sometimes, when we have difficulty drawing a nice sharp line between what we think is right and what we think is wrong, we adopt an all or nothing mentality. This happens not only with the moral concept of right and wrong, but with lots of other properties as well. For example, on some days you are certain your sister's eyes are blue. On other days they are distinctly green in colour. So, what colour are they? If the passport office, for example, asks her to tick a box describing her eye-colour, should she simply decide on blue and ignore the incidences of green? Is that an accurate way to draw the line between the two colours? What if, on the day of travelling out of the country,
your sister’s eyes are clearly blue and, on returning, they are green? Can she (with a green-eyed stare) argue with the customs officer that since there is no clear point at which they changed, her eyes must always have been blue? Unlikely. Not without enduring a full body and baggage search for being so annoying.

This is called ‘arguing from vagueness’. It is another type of informal fallacy worth watching out for in others, and in your own arguments. Arguments from vagueness crop up when there is no sharp distinction to be made between two properties and, because of that, we decide not to make a distinction at all. Obviously, there is a clear difference between the colours blue and green; a caterpillar and a butterfly; a human being’s organic-based system of intelligence and a robot’s silicone-based system of intelligence; a child and an adult; and a multi-celled foetus and a fully-formed baby. The fact that there is no clear point where one ends and the other officially begins is not an argument for denying that each end of the spectrum is different. These are examples of vague concepts.

There are, of course, situations when using vague language to describe your position is acceptable or even useful. Describing your holiday plans as ‘spending a few weeks wandering around the Middle East’ is fine when discussing them with the taxi driver on the way to the airport. At the Customs Desk in Baghdad, however, you may need to be much more specific.
Vague language is a fact of life. It can save time, and the tedium of being precise in situations that do not warrant quite so much detail. Vague concepts are different. Many of the world’s messiest arguments are vague, unable to be divided into black and white, right or wrong. When someone asks, ‘Where do we draw the line?’, they would often prefer you didn’t draw one at all. Prepare to dive in.

New discoveries in science and technology are being made every day. The rate of change we are experiencing today is higher than at any time in history. We can only guess which direction the world is going in. What we can do is be prepared, in a philosophical sense, for anything. We do this by questioning who we are and what we believe right now, before society confronts us with decisions we are not prepared for.

The Who In Philosophy

Carleton (Carly) Fiorina was the president and CEO of Hewlett-Packard from 1999 to 2005, and chairman between 2000 and 2005. She was made an honorary fellow of the London Business School and received the Concern Worldwide Seeds Of Hope Award ‘in recognition of her worldwide efforts to make global citizenship a priority for business’.

Carly was the first female CEO of a Fortune 20 company, and was named one of Time Magazine’s ‘100 People Who Shape Our World’ in 2004. She has received numerous awards for her leadership skills and her contribution to government and the business community.

In 1976, Carly Fiorina earned a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Medieval studies from Stanford University. She later gained an MA in business studies from the University of Maryland.
Is a bad deed ‘bad’, if nobody catches you doing it? Imagine, for a moment, you are strolling through a local park.

When you left home the sky was clear but now the wind is whipping through your thin, cotton shirt, fat drops of rain are soaking into your hair, and you begin to shiver. On the far side of the park you spot the blind, one-legged elderly woman who lives in the retirement village across the road. You’ve never met her, but you have seen her here before. She, naturally, has never seen you. The woman is wearing a common navy raincoat and is carrying a pink umbrella. She looks cosy, protected from the biting wind and rain. You, on the other hand, are cold and jealous. Goosebumps the size of Smarties dot your blue arms. It occurs to you that the park is empty, except for the two of you. You could, you daydream, quietly mug the woman and steal her coat and umbrella. Just before arriving home, you further imagine, you could offload the stolen items by depositing them into a neighbour’s rubbish bin. In fact, you could choose the bin of your most annoying neighbour, the one with the two incessantly barking terriers, ensuring that he gets the blame if the stolen items are ever discovered. There would be no witnesses to your crime. Would you, could you, do it?

Most people would be horrified at the suggestion of robbing a blind and defenceless old woman. After all, most of us know a few elderly people ourselves. Our grandparents. The flabby-armed ladies at water aerobics. The old man who pushes his trolley along the footpath each afternoon. The grey-
haired, newspaper-readers on the bench outside the grocery store, waiting for their wives to finish the shopping. They're everywhere. They are recognisable to us as a group within society but we don’t, however, have a personal connection to all of these people. So, if we don’t individually know and like every one of them, what prevents us from using the elderly people we see around us to satisfy our own personal needs and desires? Apart from coats and umbrellas, they probably have cash, cars, cruise tickets and polished walking sticks that might also come in handy. In fact, why stop with the elderly? There are plenty of other people in society who we could easily take things from without getting caught. Infants, for example. The mentally challenged? Quadriplegics? Homeless street kids? Easy pickings, if your morals are negotiable.

But most of us won’t do it. We choose, instead, to go home cold and wet, with our consciences intact. Often, we feel guilty even thinking such a thing. Here, in the park, your morals clearly dictate that it is ‘just plain wrong’ to steal. Assault and robbery, you decide, marks you as a ‘bad and immoral’ person. Society would usually agree with your choice. The blind lady is particularly pleased with your decision.

The ability to avoid punishment is often portrayed as the supernatural power of ‘invisibility’ by philosophers, novelists, filmmakers and comic book writers. Invisibility provides the writer with an opportunity to test a character’s ‘moral scaffolding’ to its limit, while simultaneously exciting the reader’s imagination with the limitless possibilities of complete freedom from punishment. While invisible, characters can eavesdrop, manipulate and terrorise their way
through society’s rules if they wish. They are unseen and potentially unstoppable, a thrilling antidote to the restraint of an ordered world.

Invisibility has remained a favourite ‘testing ground’ for morality, not always in the form of a superpower. Anywhere a person may reliably detach themselves from their identity becomes a kind of invisibility. At one level, a fancy dress party or a masked ball allows us to ‘act’ a little differently than usual because our identity is obscured or hidden. Behind the costume we can be uninhibited, bolder, rowdier, or just shockingly rude, if we choose. If the costume was permanent, would we stay that way?

The Internet allows us to be invisible. Alone, we can connect ourselves to almost anything, if even for a few seconds, randomly web-shopping for that perfect photo, or person, or quote, or club, or whatever it is that satisfies our curiosities. When we are surfing the Net we are invisible and, if we erase our tracks well enough, free from disapproval and punishment. In a less passive way, we are also free to assume different identities. In chat rooms, on forums, as bloggers and in emails we have the opportunity to alter our name, personality, age and
even gender. Through anonymity we are free to shape and reshape other’s perceptions of who we are, for pleasure and personal gain.

In a recent information technology newsletter, it was reported that in an online ‘phishing experiment’, eighty seven out of two hundred Facebook users, an online social networking site, responded with personal information to a faked identity. Freddi Staur- an anagram of ‘ID fraudster’ managed to gain dates of birth, names, addresses and photographs, while masquerading as a green plastic frog. The experiment was simply an Internet security exercise designed to highlight how easily users can be fooled and manipulated into parting with sensitive personal information, but it also demonstrates how comfortable we are within an environment of invisible identities and flexible truth. Does anonymity change the rules, or does it simply expose the ‘real’ us?

The Who In Philosophy

Born in Louis Park, Minnesota, Ethan Coen is a film producer, screenwriter and moviemaking icon. Together with his brother, Joel, he has received twelve Academy Awards and thirty-three nominations for his distinctive style of filmmaking. His work is insightful and eccentric, often with a dark blend of humour and violence. His films include Barton Fink, Miller’s Crossing, The Man Who Wasn’t There, Bad Santa and The Big Lebowski. Ethan Coen began writing his screenplays shortly after his graduation from Princeton University, where he majored in Philosophy.
In one of the earliest tales of invisibility, Plato used his allegory *The Ring of Gyges* to demonstrate how invisibility and the power to avoid punishment, results in the corruption of a poor shepherd. The tale is a bitter comment on the character of human beings. The shepherd murders his King, rapes the Queen but, ultimately, becomes a rich and powerful ruler. In Plato's story, the shepherd does precisely what he wants, reaps the rewards and goes unpunished by society. Invisibility is a recurring theme in questions of human morality. Do you recognise either of these stories?

In the final battle for Middle Earth, the Dark Lord Sauron loses his power, and his physical body, to Isildur on the slopes of Mount Doom. With nothing more than a broken shard of his father's sword, Isildur cuts off Sauron's finger, separating Sauron from his Ring of Power. The ring offers power and invisibility to the wearer and, when given the opportunity, he refuses to destroy it. Isildur dies. The ring is lost and found again, each time bringing with it power, corruption and immorality.

Brilliant scientist, Sebastian Caine, has discovered a way to make animals invisible. The invisibility technique has not yet been perfected when Caine's funding is threatened. Desperate to continue his research, he arranges for his team to use the experimental invisibility process on his own body. The hideously painful experiment is successful, but irreversible. The brooding and increasingly psychotic Caine is lured to the dark possibilities of invisibility. He moves from voyeurism to assault to murder with chilling ease.
Flexible truth might also mean flexible morals. But what does it mean to be moral? If the sweet, green face of Freddi Stauer represents deception and immorality, how moral are we as a society? Anyway, exactly who decided that using others for your own gain is immoral? We weren’t born with some in-built compass for good and bad, so who made the rules? We have laws, of course, and police officers to enforce them, but long before we had a formal structure or code there was a moment when someone, somewhere said, ‘This isn’t working, let’s lay some ground rules or we’re not going to survive.’

Well, perhaps not as eloquently delivered as that. Imagine that ‘someone’ was you, dressed in nothing more than a fierce expression and a hairy attitude. You share a cave with your mate and her three offspring. Life is hard. You considered eating the youngest last winter but, thankfully, stumbled on an injured woolly mammoth and the meat saw your family through the harsh winter months. One day, as an unusually ‘progressive’ cave man, you choose not to club the cave man next door, in the hopes that your hairy neighbour might also refrain from clubbing you whenever you met while hunting. It seemed to work. Later, you gruntingly agreed that stealing each other’s food, firewood and women was also counterproductive. After all, it takes a great deal of energy to steal back the woman you stole from your neighbour, who stole her from you at the last full moon. Dimly, you both understand that
neither will remain at the peak of knuckle-dragging, physical perfection forever. Finding food and defending the family from predators is already dangerous and soul-sapping. Similarly, you would both like to live long enough to see your sons wield the 'family' club. So, you agree to ignore each other and respect each other's physical boundaries in exchange for some peace of mind.

One afternoon, your neighbour takes these unwritten rules one step further, and leaves a carved, mammoth-tusk whistle at your door. When you blow into it, it makes a delightful tooting sound. In return, you cook up some of the excess mammoth meat you've grown quite sick of, on an outdoor stone fire between your caves. You toot your whistle until your neighbour becomes curious and joins you at the camp fire. It is a pivotal moment. This is the moment you regard each other with your low-browed stares and decide not to seize what the other possesses. You decide that life is happier and less painful if you agree on certain niceties. There is peace and music and a barbecue. If the mammoth meat holds out, you could do this again tomorrow.

The early Greek philosopher, Plato, had a theory about morality and wrote about it in *The Republic*, as part of his vision for an ideal state. His ideas were pretty radical. Amongst other plans, Plato imagined a society where children were communal property, marriages were arranged by ballot, and the dangerous language of poets would be disallowed. Plato believed that morality was an idea constructed by men, and just as likely to deconstruct as soon as the threat of punishment disappeared. Not only did he argue that injustice is more profitable to the individual than justice, but even suggested
that the person who did not take his opportunities when they came his way, was a bit of a fool. Believing as he did in the generally weak character of men, it was little wonder that Plato's idea of an ideal society was also built on the ideas of firm justice and a strong and visible military.

Plato was not the only philosopher to take the position that people ultimately make self-interested decisions. According to English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, the life of a person living in a society without rules and laws would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Hobbes, like many philosophers of his time, was a scholar of many talents. In addition to his work in the area of philosophy, he was also a scientist, a gifted mathematician, a translator of the classics and a writer of laws. Like many philosophers before him, Hobbes frequently found himself on the wrong side of religion, asking difficult questions and posing controversial theories. Hobbes is most famously known for his work in the areas of ethics and morality, and is often referred to as the founder of modern political philosophy.

Hobbes' view of the human condition was not a particularly flattering one. He believed that our capacity to understand the world around us was limited and prone to error. According to Hobbes, we often act selfishly, or emotionally, or without sufficient knowledge. We are tempted into doing what we think we ought to do, rather than what is reasonable to do. In short, we are fragile, dependent and easily led astray. To Hobbes, the worst condition for human beings was one 'in a state of nature', where our lower instincts would prevail.
He reasoned that we would live in a constant state of violence and imminent danger. The only remedy he could see for this certain misery was to live in a highly regulated and ordered society where all members submitted to a higher authority than themselves. Follow the rules, he advised, or suffer punishment.

This theory of morality is sometimes called *social contract theory*. Its simplicity is, and has been, very attractive to governments and social policy makers in our history to date. But does it provide a *complete* explanation for why human beings should behave morally towards each other? True, we often behave in a morally responsible manner when the consequence is prison, but is this the *only* reason we do so?

Philosophy offers two broad categories of reasons for doing what we do. The first kind is called a *prudential* reason. The prudential reason for eating a complete stranger's cheesecake while she's visiting the toilet, for example, is that you were hungry and wanted her cake. Simple. You wanted the cake, you took the cake. A *moral reason* is different from a prudential one in that we do something because we believe it is the 'right thing to do'. For example, a moral reason for eating the woman's cheesecake might be that you noticed she was overweight, reasoned that she had suffered an apparent breakdown of willpower in ordering the cheesecake, and felt *compelled to do the right thing* and save her from the calories.

Moral reasons often appear superior to prudential reasons. But are they? According to social contract theory, it would be a breech of the rules to take a stranger's cake simply because you wanted it. If the cake was, instead, a
sports car or a gold watch you might even go to jail for your action. But, of course, it isn’t. It is a piece of cake. The victim is someone you do not know or care about. In this instance, there is likely to be little consequence for your action. Depending on the woman, she may quietly purse her lips in disapproval or deliver a barely audible hiss of angry words across the table. If you are particularly unlucky, she may shout loudly and tip the contents of her water glass over your head. The consequence of social embarrassment, small as it, may be just enough to deter you. Or not.

It is here, in the ‘or not’ zone that the real problem with social contract theory appears. The woman with the cheesecake is not a friend, a relative, your boss, your neighbour, a member of your tennis club or Prime Minister. In a world with more than six billion people she is, to you, no one in particular. From your perspective, she is neither important or a serious threat. This is an important point. The whole reason for ‘contracting with other people’ is to further your own interests. Cooperation only makes sense if

A. others are a threat, or

B. others are a help.\textsuperscript{25}

The cheesecake lady is neither. Under social contract theory, it must be acceptable to steal her food. Fine for you, but a frustrating system if your ‘worth’ falls somewhere between A and B, and you happen to be hungry.
So, perhaps social contract theory is not a good enough explanation for why we choose to be ‘team players’ in society. Not only does it fail to accommodate those members of society who have little or nothing to bargain with, but it also fails to explain why some people choose to be nice to others when they clearly have nothing to gain.

Take Marta, for example, an aid worker for Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). Marta is Oxford educated and comes from a wealthy family in Berlin. Theoretically, she could take her wealth, education and social connections and use them to work anywhere in the world. But she doesn’t. Instead, she employs her considerable advantages to help those living in squalid conditions at Zhare Dasht, a transit camp for displaced Afghans, a few kilometres west of Kandahar. Marta endures the extreme heat and cold of this isolated desert camp, where towering dust clouds routinely cause eye inflammation and respiratory problems for the forty thousand refugees who live here. Marta works in the camp’s only clinic, where the medical team struggle to contain outbreaks of infectious disease, like diphtheria and tuberculosis. The pay is modest, and Marta often ends up using her own money to help fund desperately needed resources for the children of the refugees. The road between the camp and Kandahar is not always safe. Outbreaks of violence and civil unrest occur frequently. Many of Marta’s colleagues have died since she began working at Zhare Dasht. She never travels alone.
Why does she do it? Why does she sacrifice her comfort, career, health and, potentially, her very life? Is the reward for working under such perilous conditions purely a sense of satisfaction at having helped fellow human beings less fortunate than herself? Could it be that Marta is simply a nice person with a genuine empathy and fondness for the refugees she cares for? If this is so, then Marta's choices appear to contradict the idea that we are all essentially self-interested cavemen, whose morality is determined by the simple question, 'What's in it for me?' In fact, some philosophers have used this argument to demonstrate that, because of the uncomfortable, moral choices of some 'good' people, in the face of overwhelmingly easier, prudential ones, we cannot say that the morality of human beings hinges only on getting what we want and avoiding punishment. The argument does punch a sizeable hole into social contract theory, but does it provide a solid reason why we should take into account the needs of others, while we are busy looking after ourselves? Not really. Telling someone 'bad' to be 'good' because a lot of people are 'good', is not really a justification. It is an explanation.

*If Anyone Can, Kant Can.*

So, does anyone have an answer? Is there anyone who can prevent the blind, one-legged woman from being mugged next time? If someone can, perhaps Kant can. That is, the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant claimed that 'morality is objective and universal if it is founded on pure reason' and that 'moral laws are universal and categorical because of the form they take, not because of their content.' Immanuel Kant was, amongst many things, a logician and a mathematician who believed that to be immoral was
the same as being inconsistent. To Kant, it made no logical sense to act immorally. He reasoned that ‘the consequences or results of your actions have nothing at all to do with their rightness or wrongness!’ What mattered to Kant was the intent of an action – what you thought you ought to do – rather than where action ended. And not just any old ‘ought’. The ‘ought’ Kant refers to is one that says, ‘I choose this action because it is what I must do to carry out my duty, and my duty is to act in a way I understand to be right.’ Hmmm. This explanation appears to go around in circles. Does this mean that Kant would approve of cheesecake theft, as long as you believed it to be your duty? Probably not. Cheesecake theft is, generally, unlikely to be an activity which Kant would find moral, because it is inconsistent. If the policy of cheesecake theft was adopted by everyone, there would be no cheesecake left to steal. It would undermine the entire cheesecake-eating culture. Kant would call this activity illogical, immoral and simply bad mathematics. But does it give us a fail-safe justification for being moral? Maddeningly close, but not quite.

Philosophers continue to debate the question of morality today. It is a little like walking ‘halfway to the wall’ - they appear to get closer to a definitive answer, but can never quite touch it. Perhaps it is not a task that can be finished. There are many reasons we can offer the world (and ourselves) for doing whatever it is we do. One thing is clear. The choices we make at the beginning, define who we are at the end.
Kwaku pounds the fufu until his arms throb with pain. He takes turns with the other young men in his household, beating the glutinous mass of starchy yams to a smooth and chewy paste. Kwaku uses a long-handled paddle while his mentor, Thomas Kusi, holds the mortar still. The process will take two hours. It is gruelling work at the end of a long working day, but fufu is their staple food. There is no takeaway restaurant in the noisy, Magazine district of Kumasi. Like everyone else in their neighbourhood, the men must work hard for their evening meal. There is little variety. Tomorrow, if they are lucky, perhaps they will have a bit of fish with their fufu. Tonight it will be eaten plain - small balls of dough pinched between the fingers, dipped in a sauce of okra. Kwaku dreams of fish and chips, and 'meatlovers' pizza.

Thomas is nineteen and was born in Ghana. From Monday to Friday, he works as a mechanic, a challenging job in a city where money is scarce and spare parts are few. He is resourceful, and proud of the quality of his work. On Saturdays, he walks several kilometres to a small, unmarked patch of land where he spends the day alongside his extended family. Together they work the stubborn, local soil. Little grows, but what few vegetables the dry earth does yield are carried to market and sold for a little extra income. On Sunday, Thomas attends church and also receives lessons from Koo Nimo, a Royal
Court Drummer and teacher of Ashanti music, dance and customs. As an Ashanti tribesman, Thomas believes it is his duty, and an honour, to learn about his tribal heritage.

Kwaku Adjei is also nineteen years old. He studies engineering at RMIT University in Melbourne, loves football, cars and nightclubbing with his friends. Kwaku lives with his parents in a large, suburban home on the outskirts of Melbourne. He has a comfortable life with few responsibilities. Kwaku is a good-natured, happy Australian teenager who agrees to a ‘cultural adventure’ provided by the makers of a four-part, television documentary called *Family Footsteps*. Kwaku spends two weeks immersed in the lifestyle of a typical young Ghanian man, living the life his parents left behind when they migrated to Australia in 1989. Kwaku lives with Thomas, sharing a hallway with several other people, and a communal pit toilet. By Kwaku’s standards, the living conditions are appalling, the work ethic is backbreaking, the food is barely edible and entertainment non-existent. By Thomas’ standards, Kwaku is ungrateful, self-absorbed, rude and lacks honour. They are, for a while, two young men with nothing but their ancestry in common. And, while they eventually find some temporary common ground in performing for the Ashanti King, they part company having gained surprisingly little admiration for each others’ values and lifestyles. Thomas was happy to be rid of his lazy and spiritually-disappointing visitor from the
West, and Kwaku was happy to be leaving the physically-challenging, daily ‘grind’ of life in Kumasi.

So, who has the better life? And what makes one life better, or happier, than the next? Is it even possible for us to detach ourselves sufficiently from the kind of life we are used to having, to imagining and understanding happiness and fulfilment in a completely alien setting? Does it even make sense to compare? The branch of philosophy dedicated to these questions, as well as questions of morality, is called ethics. All early philosophers, in their own unique way, have struggled to apply what they have learned about the world around them, in order to make their society a better place in which to live.

Within every society there are inequities and differences to negotiate. There is the disparity between rich and poor. There are cultural and religious differences to navigate. Regardless of which combination of these qualities a society is dealt, matters of fairness, justice and happiness affect everyone.

Unfortunately, there is no one ‘universal plan’ for the fairest and best world. The rules are always changing. Opinions, attitudes and values are constantly shifting. Technological discoveries force us into new modes of thought. Globalisation and advances in communication erase the traditional borders of nation states, exposing us to a multitude of different cultures. We travel more. We work overseas. We make friends with people who think differently from ourselves. And, somewhere in the middle of this tidal wave of change, our societies must also balance and adjust to the new order. Ethics is a tool for
sorting out what we really care about, and how best to shape our societies, in order to reflect those cares. It is not a search for a one-size-fits-all, blueprint for the happiest place on earth. That title belongs to Disneyland.

One of the most influential philosophers in the field of ethics was Aristotle, a student of Plato’s. Aristotle lived, taught and wrote in ancient Greece. He opened his own school, called the Lyceum, around 335BCE. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle was reputed to be more of a systematic researcher of the world, an intellectually energetic man who famously preferred to walk, talk and think in the halls of his school, rather than sit at a desk.

Aristotle was interested in people being happy. He reasoned that a good life, or a life well-lived, is one where we maximise our opportunities for happiness through the activities we choose. So, just how do we achieve this, and is it possible to have too much of a good thing? According to Aristotle - yes. Amongst the most influential of Aristotle’s ethical theories was a doctrine called The Golden Mean. Aristotle believed that in order to be happy, it was important to act moderately and avoid extremes. To act in an extreme manner was considered a vice, a character flaw to be avoided. He reasoned that as each person was different, it was up to the individual to decide where their own, personal middle-ground existed, a point that could not be calculated in any universal or mathematical way.  

To strive for balance seems a good plan. Drink and eat sensibly; find your mean between shyness and over-confidence; hold an opinion but don’t be stubborn; enjoy a bet, but don’t risk your life savings on a single game of
poker. If you want, the idea itself can be taken to ridiculous extremes. For example, what is the 'mean' between smart and stupid? Should we aim to be mediocre? In art, should we strive for the 'mean' between beautiful and ugly? Despite some criticism, Aristotle's doctrine of The Golden Mean, perhaps more familiar as the Golden Rule, remains a fundamental model for 'good' Christian behaviour, and continues to be used as a way to navigate conflicting demands between people and societies. It isn't perfect, but it has endured.

As we've discussed, happiness is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. What makes one individual happy is often significantly different from another individual's idea of happiness. So different can they be, in fact, that one person's happiness can be another's abject misery.

**An Indian Fairytale**

Hita is a seventeen-year-old girl living in the province of Bihar, in India's North-East. Hita, like many other teenagers in her village, likes dancing and parties. Unlike her older sister and brothers, she is about to complete her high school certificate in a few weeks' time. She knows that if she receives an examination score within the top two percent of her school she will be eligible for a rare university scholarship. No one in Hita's family has ever finished high school. One day, she would like to study medicine and work overseas.
Hita’s father, Anish, is the floor manager for a clothing manufacturer in Vishna. He supervises a team of more than sixty machinists. The machinists work around the clock, in twelve hour shifts, producing two thousand garments every day. Anish works extremely long hours to ensure that his staff meets the company quotas. As well as scheduling and overseeing the shifts, he is also responsible for the maintenance of a factory full of seriously aging machinery. Breakdowns are common. Anish’s position is highly sought after and he lives with the constant worry that a younger man will be given his job. He keeps a folding cot in his office. There are many nights when Anish does not go home to his family.

Anish has received an offer of marriage for his favourite daughter, Hita. The factory owner’s brother, a kind and well-groomed man in his late fifties, has noticed Hita when she visits Anish after school. Never married, the man has decided that Hita would make an excellent wife. She is young, reasonably attractive and much better educated than the average young woman in the village. And, at only seventeen, Hita has many good childbearing years ahead of her. He sees Hita as an asset to his career and a mother for his future sons.

Hita is appalled at the suggestion of marriage. The suitor is three times her age and a complete stranger to her. If she agrees to the marriage, her dreams of being a doctor, and travelling the world, will come to an abrupt and permanent end. She will lose the opportunity to marry for love and is likely to be thrust into the responsibilities of motherhood.
before she is twenty years old. To Hita, happiness is definitely not located in an arranged marriage to a local businessman.

Anish, on the other hand, is hopeful that Hita will change her mind soon, before her suitor senses her reluctance and changes his. Anish worries for the financial security of his large family. A marriage between his daughter and the factory owner’s brother would merge the two families. Anish’s job would be secure, and his prospects for the future guaranteed. As a father, he also knows that Hita’s chances of gaining the scholarship she hopes for are slight. Competition is fierce. The brightest and best young men in Bihar have headed to the south to better their fortunes. Most of those whom remain will struggle to earn a living all of their lives. If Hita does not accept this marriage proposal, Anish fears his sweet and clever daughter may well face a bitterly disappointing life in Bihar. To Anish, happiness is definitely located in the arranged marriage of his daughter to a local businessman.

So, what happens next? Under modern Indian law, it is no longer legal for a father to force his daughter into an unwelcome marriage. In their little village in Bihar, however, the custom remains strong. Her family could insist. With no support available to her, Hita would find it almost impossible to live independently of them. Without the financial support of her family, her prospects are bleak. From a western perspective, the answer might seem perfectly clear. Hita should be allowed to make her own choices and no one should force her into a marriage she does not want. She is an individual and she has a right to her own happiness.
But what if Hita’s choices directly affect the happiness of others around her? Doesn’t Anish also have a right to be happy? After all, he sacrifices many of his hours so that Hita can eat, attend school and pursue her dreams. Does Hita not have some reciprocal responsibility towards her father’s desire for happiness? And is it right that we, living in hugely different conditions and circumstances than Anish and his family, condemn a father for imposing an arranged marriage on his daughter?

The question that this Indian Fairytale poses is this: ‘If different societies have different moral codes, how can we possibly determine whose morality is right and whose is wrong?’ This question represents a philosophical theory about the nature of morality called cultural relativism. Cultural relativists basically say that it is not possible to determine a single, objective standard when it comes to right and wrong because the customs of different societies are so different from one another. To impose our society’s ideas of right and wrong on another’s, according to this theory, is arrogant and intolerant. To answer the dilemma of the Indian Fairytale, then, the cultural relativist might say that if Anish forces Hita into an arranged marriage, in a society where arranged marriages are considered culturally and morally acceptable, then Anish has made a perfectly moral choice. Whether we agree or disagree with his decision is of no consequence. Exactly who appointed ‘us’ moral guardians of the planet anyway?’
There are several claims made by cultural relativists. They are

1. Different moral codes exist within different societies.
2. There is no objective standard by which we can judge one code better than another.
3. Our moral code is no better than someone else’s moral code.
4. There are no universal moral ‘truths’ that apply to all societies at the same time.
5. An action is morally right if the moral code of a society says it is and the action takes place within that society.
6. It is arrogant for one society to judge the moral code of another.

Has anyone ever stopped you, mid-argument, to say, ‘Well, everyone’s entitled to their own opinion! Who are you to judge?’ And, for a while, you were left with no defence and a nagging feeling that, on that basis, nothing could ever be decided. You are not alone. If the study of ethics amounts to no more than a collection of differing moral opinions that cannot ever be proven, why not shut the book now and turn our attention to questions we can solve?

Critics of this theory have argued that cultural relativism is a series of statements or propositions that ‘feel right’ when you group them all together, but contains a fundamental flaw. The flaw is a formal fallacy, that is, an error made because of the way the argument is constructed (its form). Basically, cultural relativists make the following argument:

1. Different cultures have different moral codes
2. Therefore, there is no objective ‘truth’ in morality.
Now examine this argument...

1. The Oceania tribe believe that the sixth son of a blind woman can breathe underwater and should be returned to the sea at birth.

2. The Nautica tribe do not believe it is possible for anyone to breathe underwater and are careful to keep the heads of all infants above water.

3. Each tribe is entitled to their opinion, so the practices of each tribe are correct.

What is wrong here? Could it be that the sixth son of every blind woman in Oceania does not survive his first ‘swim’? Quite likely. Does it logically follow that because the Oceania and Nautica tribes disagree in their beliefs that there can be no objective ‘truth’ about the way the human body gets its oxygen supply? Of course not. If the sixth son of a blind woman is human, he will be unable to breathe underwater. This ‘truth’ has been scientifically demonstrated. Based on the above argument it makes no sense to say ‘There is no universal ‘truth’ in human biology because we disagree about it.’

Similarly, we can disagree all we like about whether the earth is round, flat or triangular. But, we cannot conclude from our disagreement alone that there is ultimately no right or wrong answer. The conclusion that every society’s ‘opinion’ about morality is right, because everyone’s opinion is different, proves nothing. Cultural relativism is not considered wrong. It is a theory that simply hasn’t proven itself right!
So where do we go from here? How can we ever hope to bridge the differences between cultures and their unique moral codes if we cannot even agree to disagree? Are we really so different? Possibly not. There are some values and rules that show up in all societies, regardless of that society’s beliefs.

Take murder, for example. Nasty business. Imagine living in a community where murder is a perfectly acceptable expression of frustration, anger, or revenge? Just one week after your honeymoon, your new bride tries to kill you because you fail to put the toilet seat back to ‘neutral’, after she asks you nicely. You get her first, and now you live alone, in a heavily barricaded cottage on the edge of a cliff. The cliff edge is lonely but safe. Would-be assassins have limited access to your home. Trained guard dogs patrol your valuable vegetable garden and fruit trees. You rarely go into town. Last time you made the trip, an angry trolley-boy tried to stab you when you failed to return your trolley to the designated collection bay. You miss lamb chops, but do not think you have enough land to keep sheep on your property. You no longer work. Your job as a parking inspector became too hazardous. It is safer to stay at home, grow your own food and keep human contact to a minimum.
Murder is counter productive to any society. A society that permits its citizens to kill others freely is likely to be a short-lived one. Societies form because it is in the best interests of the individuals who comprise them. The ‘fear’ of being murdered drives people into isolation, a situation that is the very opposite of being a society. At the most basic level, we form groups in order to reproduce and to feed and protect our young. If we do not nurture our offspring, as with any species, humans will become extinct. So, regardless of the population, belief-system or technological sophistication of any society, there is at least one universal, moral ‘rule’ a society must adhere to if it wishes to survive. That is, that murder cannot be a generally acceptable activity. And, if we found one universal rule, could there be others?

It’s good to keep an open mind to the cultural differences and values of societies other than your own. It is difficult to prove that our way of seeing the world is morally ‘right’ and, until that day, it is reasonable to assume that others will also be thinking hard to demonstrate that they are the moral Mount Everests of this world! Not every moral viewpoint, however, is simply a matter of opinion. After all, Adolph Hitler had an opinion. That didn’t make it right.
From the moment it arrived, it was certain that Euphemia Servus Flavio would steal it. Not that she had stolen from her master before, or even contemplated such a terrible thing. But today, unknown to Euphemia, slave and property of Flavio the merchant, one final and irresistible motivation had soundlessly slipped into position. It was inevitable, her crime already carved into that one gleaming, black pearl, buried amongst two handfuls of cheap mosaic glass.

The seaman was underpaid, thought Euphemia. Flavio was a cunning negotiator. The glass would fetch four times what he’d paid for it. The trade complete, the merchant thrust the filthy roll of cloth into the young girl’s hands and ordered her to sort and count the pieces. He kept careful records, a precaution against the many slaves and freedmen whose greedy eyes roamed his shop for opportunity. But, most of all, Flavio recorded every stone, tile, mirror and chip of brightly-coloured glass against the inexhaustible appetites of his young wife, Livia, whose passion for silk and wine and rare gemstones was sucking the marrow from the family business.

Euphemia meticulously sorted the tiles into milks, cobalts, golds and some glass that when turned to the Pompeii sky, transformed it to the darkest, most treacherous red her eyes had ever seen. There were exactly one hundred and
sixty-one pieces. She tucked the large pearl, easily worth ten times the value of gaudy glass, into the thick, dark plait that encircled her head. Not quite the sum required to buy her freedom, she thought, but silver enough to escape a master and a city that roared and shook with increasing unpredictability.

Euphemia listened to the intermittent tap of grape-sized, pumice stones on the tile roof. She planned her escape as she gazed out into a strangely dark afternoon sky.

High above the city, another inevitable series of events is unfolding. Deep below the ground, a vertical column of ash is crumbling, large sheets of rock face losing grip to fall and then collide explosively with thick molten rock. For many months, a toxic cloud of grey ash, dust and sulphur dioxide has issued from a bulging lava dome. The pressurised pool of magma beneath is over one thousand degrees centigrade, swelling and straining as more and more debris cascades into its chamber from above. As one last, unremarkable sliver of rock makes contact, the final and irresistible motivation slips into place. Hot gas and dry rock erupt from the vent, and coarse fragments of super-heated rock are swept along the ground by a cloud of scorching ash. The resulting pyroclastic cloud surges down the mountain at over eighty kilometres per hour, burning or burying everything in its path.36 It will take just moments to reach Pompeii, Euphemia and her stolen, black pearl.

This event, some might argue, was as inevitable as breathing in and out, in order to stay alive. A series of events took place, each cause producing the effect that followed. Each new effect, in turn, causing something else to happen. In the case of Vesuvius, the volcano that entombed two thriving cities
in 79AD, a natural and scientifically-documented chain of events took place that led to its fateful eruption. Seismic pressure, a build-up of gases and, well, Boom! Most people are, more or less, content with a scientific explanation for volcanic eruptions. With sufficient time, money, research and observation, human beings are generally confident that natural phenomena can be conveniently broken down, compartmentalised and categorised into a tidy succession of causes and effects. If we spend long enough and look hard enough, we reason, the chain is there – we simply have to find it.

Of course, this is fine for volcanoes. And cyclones. And the life cycle of a Chinook salmon. But what about us? Aren't we 'natural' too? Can this idea apply to us? Is it possible that everything we do and think is simply the effect of something before it? And, if this is true, was it inevitable that Euphemia would steal a pearl, plan her escape and die before she had finished her working day?

Philosophers refer to this view as determinism. The argument for determinism can be summed up in the following way:

A. Everything that exists or happens has a cause.

B. All human decisions and choices are included when we say 'everything that exists or happens'.

C. Therefore, all human decisions and choices have a cause.

D. If all human decisions and choices have a cause, then they cannot be free.
According to the determinist, there wasn't anything Euphemia could have done differently from what she did do. In fact, if this theory is true, she was a slave to Flavio the merchant and a slave to the inevitable forces of cause and effect. In the case of Euphemia and Vesuvius, the chain of events that occurred was inescapably destined to happen exactly as it did. Slavery, treachery, and a pyroclastic avalanche.37

So, what does this mean to us? Does the determinist mean to say that our fates are already decided, that we are like robots simply carrying out what we are programmed to do? And, that regardless of how we act, or what we choose, our destinies are already fixed? Yes, but in a way you may not have imagined it. Determinists claim that the future is fixed because of the present and the past. What you do right now is the effect of what you did before it. What you did before, is the effect of what you did before that. And on, and on, in an unbroken chain reaching infinitely into the past. Assuming you are standing somewhere in the middle of this 'chain', the same is true of the future.

**The Pasta Effect**

*Imagine something a little less dramatic than an exploding volcano.*

*Visualise yourself in the kitchen. Keeping things Italian, you are cooking Spaghetti Bolognaise. Unknown to you at the present moment, you will be ordering takeaway Chinese food within the hour but, for now, you are filling a large pot with water and setting it on the stove to boil. First, you chop the onion, garlic and chillies. Music is playing on the radio and your body is jerking in a unique hybrid of tap, B-Boy and*
polka moves. You remove the plastic from the minced beef and toss it into the pool of olive oil to brown. You toss with too much gusto. A single drop of hot oil flies into your right eye causing you to rub it vigorously with your fingertip. That same fingertip is, unfortunately, smeared with chilli juice. Your eye begins to sting and swell. Your attention is momentarily diverted from the frying pan. The beef begins to burn, ripples of smoke reaching into the smoke detector, which is now screeching overhead. With your one good eye, you search the kitchen for a long-handled ‘something’ you can use to reach up to the ceiling and press the reset button on the detector. On the stove, the water is now boiling in the large pot. It has bubbled over and silently extinguished the flame beneath it. The kitchen is now filling with gas. When you finally silence the detector and arrest the swelling in your eye, you deal with the blackened meat. Your left eye notices that the water has still not come to the boil, but your nose, partially blocked by the overwhelming chilli reaction, does not register the smell of gas. You look around for a meat substitute. There is nothing in the fridge but, strangely, your canary is lying immobile on the bottom of her cage. You receive your first whiff of gas and your mind spins. Coal mines and Canary Bolognese? You turn off the gas and decide you have lost your taste for Italian food tonight.
What does the argument for determinism say about this scenario? Was the canary predestined to die regardless of which cuisine you chose to cook? Was it written somewhere that at that particular moment in time, your canary's death was inevitable, regardless of whether you were in the kitchen, skydiving or fishing in Alaska? No. A determinist would argue that the canary's death was inevitable based on the total causes leading up to that moment. Your decision to cook the Spaghetti Bolognaise, that led to oil spatter, that led to chilli in your eye, that led to meat burning, that led to smoke in the detector, that led to water boiling over, that led to gas inhalation by the canary were all inevitable effects of the causes that preceded them! Even your choice of 'that' meal was driven by causes, seen and unseen. Your audible stomach rumbles may have alerted you to your hunger, but a whole host of factors may have led to the choice of pasta. Subconscious visual cues like a poster on the back of a bus. The smell of onions and garlic emanating from a restaurant on the way home from work. Someone speaking in Italian on the bus. Perhaps the causes were even deeper. Maybe chemical ones, like hormones or enzymes, sending tomato-specific signals to your brain. Or, possibly, deep-rooted, psychological causes. Perhaps your grandmother always played heavy metal music whenever she cooked pasta and now, when you hear that kind of music, you develop an overwhelming desire for spaghetti. The possibilities are endless but, according to the determinist, every action we take as human beings is decided by the total cause that preceded it.38

So, do human beings possess anything resembling free-will? Are we really in charge of our decisions, or are we merely playing intricately orchestrated parts written by physics or nature or God, complete with bloopers, outtakes and,
what we believe to be spontaneity? Well, it certainly *feels* like we have free-will and, as we’ve seen so far, for every philosophical point of view there is always another one, just waiting to counter it.

Not happy to take our loss of freedom lying down, a few philosophers have argued that *some* of our actions are not caused by anything at all. These particular actions, they say, may be *influenced* by the events before them or occur completely at random. It’s an argument worth exploring. After all, if we can locate just one action that is not *caused by* another, then surely that action must be free! And, if we can find one, maybe we can find more.

The classic counter-argument to determinism is imaginatively called *indeterminism*. This argument says that

A. Some human decisions and choices do not have a cause, they just happen, and

B. Those decisions and choices that do not have a cause must be free.

This would, of course, be a neat argument if it were not for two ‘biggish’ problems. The first comes when we try to identify examples of decisions and choices that are not caused by something else.
Imagine for a moment, a hypothetical facial tic that causes a person to continuously blow small saliva bubbles with his or her lips. The sufferer has done this since childhood and, despite thorough physical and psychological investigation, no cause can be found. There is speculation that the tic may have been *influenced* in some way by too many childhood hours spent in front of the orphanage's aquarium, goldfish being the patient's only form of entertainment. But, there being no demonstrable, scientific link, we are left with no cause for the tic. Of course, there is still an excellent chance that we may...

A. be overlooking crucial information that would supply a cause, or
B. be unable to identify and understand the cause, given our level of scientific knowledge right now.

Assuming that none of the above applies and the indeterminist can show that our man's bubble-blowing tic really does have *absolutely no cause whatsoever*, exactly what does this prove? Does the facial tic then constitute an act of free-will? Not really. While it is true that the tic has no cause, it is also a spontaneous, random action over which the sufferer has no control. Indeed, that is why our subject has been visiting doctors and psychologists. To make it go away. If an action cannot be freely chosen (or not chosen) can we call it free? This not only puts the argument for indeterminism in peril, it actually *strengthens* the idea that human beings do not have free will. \(^\text{40}\)
The Dilemma of Indeterminism

Determinism says:
If our actions are caused, they are not free.

The failure of indeterminism says:
If our actions are not caused, they are not free.

Conclusion:
As our actions are either caused or not caused, they cannot be free.

So, what now? Should we give up and resign ourselves to an existence of saliva bubbles and cooking disasters, reacting helplessly to the soulless puppetry of ‘cause and effect’? What would a philosopher do?

Scottish Spin

The argument for determinism developed from philosophical discussions of cause and effect as well as the quest to define what it is that the world is made of. Benedict de Spinoza, the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher, reasoned that ‘[e]verything turns out the way that it must turn out ‘and that ‘[i]n the sphere of the mind there is no free will.’ Spinoza’s theory was later taken up by Scottish philosopher David Hume, who is often credited with developing the principle of empiricism. Empiricism is the idea that things are true only when we scientifically observe them to be true and that our senses and experience alone cannot be trusted to provide definite answers to any question. Hume believed that, as we cannot observe causes or demonstrate them in any scientific way, we cannot assume they have any particular ‘effects’. What we observe is a sequence of actions. The rest, according
to Hume, is an assumption. In *The Pasta Effect*, for example, the canary may simply have died of old age. The fact that the kitchen was filled with canary-killing gas may not have been the cause of death, merely coincidental. Hume’s point is that we cannot scientifically observe a ‘cause’, so why believe there is a connection between two events when there is no evidence? This argument is important to the argument about free will because it offers another way of looking at the problem.

Both determinism and indeterminism say that freedom is not compatible with causation, meaning if an action is caused by something else it cannot have happened freely. According to Hume, it is possible for an action to have a cause and still be free as long as the action was caused internally, rather than externally. Hume reasoned that what people often describe as a cause is actually a compulsion, a distinction that just might release many of our more cherished actions and choices from slavery. This argument, for at least some kind of free-will, is known as compatibilism. It sounds like a freedom-friendly theory, but does it work? Hume always encouraged a scientific approach, so let’s test the argument with the following examples of Euphemia Servus Flavia’s actions, decisions and choices, remembering that an internally caused action is a free one while an externally caused action is not.
## Compatibilism: The Bench-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Freedom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Euphemia sorts and counts the glass tiles.</td>
<td>An externally caused action. Flavio orders her to do it.</td>
<td>This action is not free.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Euphemia steals the black pearl. She devises a plan to escape her master.</td>
<td>An internally caused action. Euphemia was not compelled to make this choice.</td>
<td>This action is free.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Euphemia is thrown onto the street by her master. Her plan has worked. She still has the pearl.</td>
<td>An internally and externally caused action. Euphemia plotted to be expelled from her master's service and Flavio has physically compelled her to leave.</td>
<td>This action is free and not free.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Euphemia is immediately incinerated by a pyroclastic cloud.</td>
<td>This happens to Euphemia, it is not something she does.</td>
<td>This action is neither free or not free.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once again, it appears we have a problem. What began as a tidy theory has quickly become messy. In theory, the compatibilist idea of dividing the causes of an action into ‘internal’ or ‘external’ seems reasonable. But, in life, this division does not always neatly apply. Some actions, like Euphemia’s abrupt exit from her master’s shop, are a combination of factors. Other actions may have nothing at all to do with what human beings choose. Like a volcanic eruption.

Compatibilists, sometimes called ‘soft’ determinists, argue that it is our definition of free-will that is at fault. They agree that it was inevitable that Euphemia would steal the black pearl and that events could not possibly have led anywhere other than to where they did. They do not, however, describe the process of that choice – looking at all the criteria, weighing up the pros and cons – as being ‘unfree’. From the compatibilist point of view, Euphemia deliberated over the options and, coerced by no one, made her decision. Even though her decision was the inevitable outcome of ‘cause and effect’, Euphemia was responsible for making it. According to this theory, this is as free as free-will gets!

If your head is starting to throb, the time has come, once again, to escape to the movies. You might as well relax, because the side-trip was inevitable. The notion of free-will, and whether we truly have it, has been a popular theme with both fiction writers and filmmakers. Keep an eye out for time travel, a favourite partner to the free-will story. Many purpose-built time machines, abandoned alien gadgetry and powerfully mystical relics have been
Watch these films for a ride into the past, the future, and the metaphysical.

Déjà Vu 2006
The Butterfly Effect 2004
Minority Report 2002
Donnie Darko 2001
Frequency 2000
Twelve Monkeys 1995
The Terminator 1984

employed to propel their protagonists into the past, only to find that they have disrupted the fragile 'space-time continuum' that leads back to the future they left behind. These films popularly examine the idea of cause, effect, and determinism, often to devastating effect. Despite the obvious potential for pranks, profit and visual Armageddon, the time travel theme also offers an opportunity for storytellers to examine the concept of free-will, and our struggle to shake off the nagging feeling that we may have no more control over our destinies than shivering molecules and erupting volcanoes.
This essay aims to meet two distinct criteria. Firstly, it aims to provide an analysis of the proposed Philosophy and Ethics Curriculum, scheduled for introduction into Western Australian upper secondary schools in 2008. Based on the accredited course outline published by the Curriculum Council, this essay will examine the rationale for introducing philosophy and ethics subjects at secondary level, together with an explanation of the expected course outcomes, proposed course structure, content and intended methods of assessment. This analysis will form the framework upon which I intend to develop and write a philosophy workbook for upper secondary students.

Having analysed the curriculum, the second aim of this essay is to illustrate the methodology and rationale behind the philosophy workbook itself. At this point, I will discuss the state of current philosophy writing, together with considerations of teaching theory, language and writing style. The overall aim of this essay is to define the parameters of my project and its original contribution to the practical study of philosophy.

**Philosophy & Ethics - What's New?**

Philosophy and ethics are hardly new disciplines. Students have studied these subjects since togas were the height of fashion. What is changing, however, is the perception that philosophy and ethics are somehow too sophisticated, or abstract, to teach at primary and secondary levels of education. In Western Australia, this opinion has been successfully overturned, largely through the efforts of the Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA), together with the timely, and often controversial, transition towards outcomes-based
education. The change has led to the formulation of a two-year, upper secondary philosophy and ethics course, designed to introduce these subjects into Western Australian schools for students aged sixteen and seventeen. 'The developers of the course believe they have created an approach to Philosophy in upper secondary classes that honours the long traditions of philosophical inquiry while providing essential thinking skills for life in the 21st Century' (Millett, 2006, p. 22).

According to Philip Cam, an author and senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of New South Wales, it is never too early to introduce the thinking and reasoning skills provided by an education in philosophy. He, and like-minded academics, believe that society's diminishing perception and appreciation of the modern relevance of philosophy stems more from its under-representation in western education, than from any real erosion of its significance or importance today. He writes: 'Philosophy is taught in the upper secondary school in many parts of the world, of course, and the connection between philosophy and school education where it is taught no doubt helps to maintain closer ties between philosophy and society than in the English-speaking world, where philosophy tends not to be taught' (Cam, 2006, pp. 35-37).

In 2005, the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) was introduced. With the advent of WACE, the Curriculum Council determined that fifty new subjects would be phased into upper secondary schools over a period of five years. Some
subjects, for example Mathematics, Literature, History, Geography and English, have been intrinsic to our education system for generations. As one of the newest subjects, Philosophy and Ethics will take its place among a number of other courses, previously not accessible to high school students. Some of these include Psychology, Aviation, Marine and Maritime Technology, Media Production, Business Management and Enterprise, and Politics and Law. The lack of a pre-existing course upon which to base the new one provided particular challenges, as well as advantages, for the team involved in its development. Dr Stephen Millett of Curtin University, a key contributor to the curriculum, writes: ‘With no prior course, resource materials would be difficult and there would be few teachers trained to teach it. But, with no prior course the developers were in relatively uncharted waters and they could create something fresh and innovative’ (Millett, 2006, p. 24). Significantly, Philosophy and Ethics will be taught independently of religious content. A separate, Religion and Life course has been developed, allowing both courses to be free of constraints inherent in the other (Millett, 2006, p. 25).

**Course Outcomes & Content**

The Philosophy and Ethics course has been developed to encourage the achievement of four outcomes. The outcomes represent what students, as a result of their learning, should know and understand at the completion of the course. These outcomes are:
Essay: Philosophy and Ethics for Teenagers

1. Students are able to use investigative methods to think and argue philosophically.

2. Students understand that there are philosophical and ethical approaches to making meaning.

3. Students understand that philosophical and ethical thinking has a role in human affairs.

4. Students reflect on, evaluate and respond to a range of human issues by selecting from a repertoire of philosophical and ethical strategies.

These four outcomes, together with overarching learning outcomes determined by the Curriculum Framework, represent the aim of the Philosophy and Ethics course (Curriculum Council, 2006, p. 4).

The course is divided into three major content areas. Each area seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do we know?

2. What is real?

3. How should we live?

The first question, ‘How do we know?’, is designed to explore the fundamentals of critical thinking and to develop an awareness of the tools which we have for analysing and evaluating an argument. It encourages the student to identify different methods of inquiry such as observation, common-sense and the use of counter-examples and hypothesis formulation. ‘How do we know?’ also encourages the
close examination, debate and interpretation of those concepts which we consider
central to our understanding and thinking. For example, 'What is beauty?' or 'What is
intelligence?'

The second major content area asks the question, 'What is real?' This area focuses
on the scientific tradition of viewing the world and its particular methods of
observation, reason, experimentation and interpretation. 'The scientific tradition sees
the world as governed by forces, patterns and causal relations that are law-like,
rationally intelligible, and capable of being discovered by scientific methods'
(Curriculum Council, 2006, p. 5). This area also examines the ideas of ultimate
reality, including materialism and naturalism, as well as the question of the existence
of God or gods. These questions spill naturally into the notion of 'personhood' and its
related concepts. Students will be asked to consider ideas like perception, free will,
reason and consciousness.

The final content area poses the question, 'How should we live?' This area is
intended to explore and define notions of justice, rights, liberty and power, and how
these translate to the societal structures which we choose. Students will examine the
way in which we govern and how we decide and, as a community, what is best and
fair for all. It looks at cultural differences and value-systems, and examines concepts
like tolerance and cultural relativism. Perhaps one of the most important aims of this
question is to encourage recognition by the student that his or her individual choices
have an impact upon the community, and that the relationship between the individual
and society is worth consideration (Curriculum Council, 2006, pp. 4-5).
With these three questions in mind, the developers of the Philosophy and Ethics course have devised six units to sequence the syllabus content. The units are designed to enable student achievement at any level, increasing in complexity as they are completed. The units are:

1. Unit 1APA Reason and Actions
2. Unit 1BPA Reason and Happiness
3. Unit 2APA Reason and Persons
4. Unit 2BPA Reason and Culture
5. Unit 3APA Reason and Society
6. Unit 3BPA Reason and Meaning

The course will be assessed in three ways. Firstly, students will be required to demonstrate understanding through performance. This may include participation in role-play, talks, debate and other forms of community involvement. Secondly, students will need to provide written evidence of their critical reflection and evaluation of the course material. This may be demonstrated through journals, essay-writing or group writing projects. Lastly, an open-ended investigative project will demonstrate research, analysis and evaluation skills acquired during the course. For those students wishing to gain university admission, a two-hour WACE examination will also be required (Curriculum Council, 2006, pp. 6-17).

**Writing for Philosophy and Ethics**

One of the difficulties inherent in creating an entirely new course is the problem of locating suitable course materials. Unlike Mathematics or English Literature, there is
no evolving 'pool' of textbooks and other educational materials from which the new Philosophy and Ethics course can draw its resources. Neither is there an extensive body of experienced secondary school teachers from whose expertise this material can be developed. Lacking a pre-existing course, the developers were left to ‘...craft something original that had philosophical rigour, would be interesting to learn and to teach which fitted the construction matrix provided by the Curriculum Council’ (Millett, 2006, p. 24). Similarly, a gap exists for suitable resource material to be devised and written, with the new course and its particular demographic in mind.

Most philosophy texts are aimed squarely at an adult and/or academic readership. Exceptions to this include the work of noted educator and author Matthew Lipman and, more recently, Stephen Law, who has produced introductory philosophy resources for primary aged children. These texts use simple language and, in the case of Law's *The Philosophy Files 2*, cartoons to illustrate philosophical concepts. Broad questions like, 'Is time travel possible?' and 'Does murderous Mick deserved to be punished?' are illustrated as conversations between friends, employing a combination of dialogue, fact and gentle author 'contribution' (Law, 2006).

Many texts are designed purely to inform - compendiums of the thoughts, theories, historical backgrounds and achievements of prominent philosophers. Some examine traditional philosophy questions like, 'Is there life after death?' or 'Where does the universe come from?', while others present traditional problems in more current scenarios. Authors may examine questions like 'Is stem-cell research wrong?' or
'When does artificial intelligence cease to be artificial?' - modern incarnations of the long-debated question, 'What is life and when does it begin?' Steven Cahn's introductory anthology Exploring Philosophy, for example, provides a selection of essays, written by influential historical philosophers that offer differing viewpoints on a number of key philosophical topics. Included among these essays are works, often abridged, by Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Aquinas, Mill, and Hume. Cahn provides a preface, together with a short introduction for each essay. The aim of these introductions is to provide a brief historical background of the essayist, highlight other works and to discuss those views and arguments for which they are noted (Cahn, 2000).

Some philosophy texts are produced as practical, hands-on resource manuals, providing an array of critical thinking methods and devices to employ in everyday conversations, arguments and debates. These range from the academic style and language of Baggini and Fosl's The Philosopher's Toolkit, self-described as 'A compendium of philosophical concepts and methods' (Baggini & Fosl, 2003), to the 'teacher-friendly' 20 Thinking Tools by Philip Cam. Cam's choice of informal language, first-person point of view and imaginative analogies renders this book engaging and accessible. Golding writes: 'Cam outlines a selection of complex thinking tools that have enormous power but can be used even with 5 year olds. While these tools can be used by complete novices, they are more easily used by teachers who have already developed a level of expertise in inquiry learning, development of thinking or philosophy' (Golding, Inquiry is thinking in democracy, 2006, p. 85).
METHODODOLOGY

As illustrated, there is a variety of approaches that may be adopted when writing a philosophy text. Consideration must be given to readership, selection of content, format, language and tone, as well as, in the instance of the new Philosophy and Ethics secondary school course, specific learning outcomes. In selecting the format and style of my proposed philosophy workbook, considerations of intended readership are paramount in order for the material to be an effective teaching tool.

During my research of existing textbooks, it became apparent that some fundamental guidelines would be needed to keep the content of the workbook relevant and interesting for sixteen and seventeen-year olds. The following pedagogical guidelines are adapted mainly from current research on ‘in-class’ teaching experience:

1. Less student passivity: reading, receiving and absorbing information without action.
2. Less one-way transmission of information from teacher to student.
3. Less rote memorisation of facts.
4. More deep study of a smaller number of topics.
5. More cooperative, collaborative activity.
6. More emphasis on higher-order learning.

(Wilen, Bosse, Hutchison, & Kindsvatter, 2004, pp. 9-12)
Given these guidelines, together with a more general examination of the format of philosophy and other humanities texts, my methodology aims to address these issues in the following ways:

1. The creation of extended fictional narratives in a variety of styles in order to address a wide cross-section of learning preferences and personal interests. Some scenarios are farcical, others more sinister. Some of the narratives address issues of social morality, while still others are designed to be more cross-culturally stimulating. The aim is to address the issue of \textit{variety} in learning and to stimulate curiosity.

2. Each chapter is dedicated to a small number of core philosophical questions, approached in a variety of ways. The aim is to ensure that the fundamental philosophical notions and theories are witnessed from many \textquote{angles} and, therefore, more deeply and memorably experienced. Often, I have drawn on popular culture – films, music, technology – in order to provide academic subjects with a modern flavour.

3. The language chosen is casual and personal. Questions form an integral part of the text. Students are explicitly asked, \textquote{So, what now?} or \textquote{What about us?}
in a deliberate invitation to consider and develop their own opinions. They are also asked to consolidate their views and responses to particular ideas through the use of in-text journal entries. This aims to address the issue of student passivity, and to encourage a more collaborative, two-way learning experience.

One recurring theme among the developers of philosophy education systems for children and young adults is the notion that new ideas, understanding and opinions form firstly on a social level before they take hold on an individual level. Golding writes: ‘Following Vygotsky (1986), all cognitive functions appear first on a social and inter-psychological level before they become internalised as individual cognitive process’ (Golding, 2006, p. 9). This theory is used to support a teaching method called a ‘community of inquiry’ (COI), sometimes referred to as a ‘socratic circle.’ The COI is a student-centred, learning system designed to facilitate a reasoned line of enquiry. Copeland explains that, ‘as students construct their dialogue and their meaning of the piece of text, they are activating prior knowledge, making connections, and synthesizing new schemata in their quest for understanding. It is the students - not the teacher – who guide and direct the focus of the conversation in a search for meaning, understanding and knowledge’ (Copeland, 2005, p. 27).

Naturally, it is not possible to engage in a social exchange of ideas within a philosophy workbook. However, this theory does support the notion that students internalise information and ideas more efficiently the less passively they acquire that information. Opportunities to hear new ideas, discuss, debate and reflect are crucial to reasoning and understanding. In this light, I plan to incorporate reflective
'opportunities' within the workbook in order to encourage independent thought, as well as consolidation of content. Students will be invited to 'voice' their responses and opinions in writing and to make connections to their own personal experiences.

I believe that these guidelines provide a sound framework upon which a high school philosophy workbook can be built. It encourages constructivist learning, a term used to describe a student-centred approach to teaching and learning. Constructivism ‘...has its roots in the work of philosopher John Dewey and cognitive/developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, two of the seminal educational theorists of the twentieth century. In this mode, students become active searchers into knowledge, rather than passive receivers of it' (Wilen, Bosse, Hutchison, & Kindsvatter, 2004, p. 12). This is significant, because, in developing my philosophy workbook, I hope to provide an informative and motivational mix of information and ideas that encourage students individually to explore philosophical questions and themes, rather than passively absorb what is written on the page.

**LOOKING GOOD IN PRINT**

Finally, there is the matter of layout and design. To be effective and interesting, I believe the layout of the text must be readable, logical and sequential, visually varied and aesthetically pleasing. After examining several texts, I have identified eleven potential features to be incorporated into my philosophy workbook. These are

1. **Core Content:** Core philosophical concepts as outlined in the WACE Philosophy and Ethics course.
Essay: Philosophy and Ethics for Teenagers

2. Philosophers: Profiles and background on key philosophers, with particular emphasis on those personalities whose work best illustrates the concepts and themes contained in the course.

3. Key Historical Eras: A background to the historical context within which key philosophers lived and the factors that influenced them.

4. Fictional Analogies: Fictional narratives created to illustrate core philosophical concepts and questions.

5. Factual Analogies: Stories and profiles drawn from the real world that illustrate core philosophical concepts and questions.


7. Do It Now: Exercises designed to promote active thinking skills.

8. Spot the Fallacy: Short, fictional scenarios designed to test critical thinking skills.

9. Watch This Space: Book & magazine suggestions, movies and television programs that echo interesting philosophy topics.

10. Marginal glossary: Found throughout the text to define key terms on the appropriate page.

11. Photographs: Aesthetically interesting 'visual bookmarks' to support learning and to aid memory.

Some of these features are intended to address the WACE Philosophy and Ethics course. Many have been inspired by the layout of well-designed philosophy and critical thinking textbooks. Some features are a creative response to questions and conversations I've encountered when explaining to others what makes philosophy
relevant, or interesting, or even worthwhile. In all, my research indicates that a successful philosophy resource for sixteen and seventeen year-olds is one that strikes a balance between the aims of the education system and the needs of the imagination. Philosophy is a discipline that values thinking critically and creatively in order to answer some of humanity's largest and most persistent questions. Historically, philosophers have been prepared to endure the 'rules, guidelines and conventions' of institutions and society right up until the moment they developed better ones. I believe it is this methodology that best befits a philosophy and ethics workbook for emerging adults.


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Bibliography


