

Philosophy: An introduction

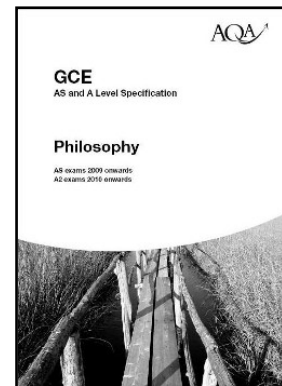
Thank you for downloading this FREE lesson from That Philosophy Website. We hope you enjoy it and find it useful.

[Slide 1] Philosophy: An introduction

This lesson introduces the subject of philosophy by first considering the value of undertaking philosophical studies and then looking at ways our knowledge of the world is challenged by asking a few basic questions about the things that we see around us. We will also be learning about the terms epistemology, ontology, phenomena and noumena, The Age of Reason (aka The Enlightenment), Immanuel Kant's theory of knowledge and drawing insight from Bertrand Russell's discussion of a table in chapter 1 of his 1912 book *The Problems of Philosophy*.

[Slide 2] Introduction

- **[Image #1]** This lesson is the first in a series of many looking at different aspects of Philosophy. Our lessons are written with an emphasis in assisting those individuals teaching and studying the new AQA Philosophy specification. If you are working on the AQA Philosophy course, we suggest you download a copy of the subject specification so that you are familiar with the topics in which you will be examined. This will not only help you as you undertake your studies, but it will also be an invaluable tool when you come to revise.



[\(Click on the image above to access and download the AQA Philosophy specification\)](#)

[Slide 3] Why study philosophy?

- **[Image #1]** It is common to find people asking whether there is any point in studying a subject such as Philosophy. The assumption is that unless you are going to become a teacher of Philosophy, the subject has a rather limited appeal and application in the *real world*. In fact, many people I have spoken to tend to think that Philosophers sit in ivory towers, are rather detached from the 'real world', and that discussions about whether we can know the true nature of something or whether anything exists outside of our mind are somewhat irrelevant to most people on a day to day basis.

[Slide 4] The influence of philosophy

However, despite the fact that some topics in Philosophy have limited appeal, (E.g. Philosophy of Logic) it may surprise you that for all its complexity, specialism and idiosyncrasies, philosophers have had a dramatic and positive effect on the world we live in today.

- **['The Age of Reason']** For example, during the 17th and 18th centuries, a movement began in Europe whereby people began to question the nature and foundation of truth. This period in European history has come to be known as The Age of Reason, or The Enlightenment.
- **['(aka The Enlightenment ']**
- **['Questions, questions, and questions...']**
- **['How do I know x is true?']** Up until The Age of Reason, what people believed about the nature of the world and everything in it had been largely grounded in what the Church (and its priests) believed the Bible taught about these matters.
- **['What is the basis of truth?']** However, during The Enlightenment, men such as John Locke, David Hume and Immanuel Kant (amongst many others) began to question this assumption and explore the notion that maybe reason, or experience, or what was reasonable should be the basis of truth instead.
- **[Image #1 – John Locke]**
- **[Image #2 – David Hume]**
- **[Image #3 – Immanuel Kant]**

[Slide 5] The influence of The Enlightenment

- **[Image #1]** The Age of Reason has had a tremendous effect on the world in which we live today. For instance, we have democratic forms of government in the Western world because of philosophers such as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau began to argue that people should have a say in how they were being governed and by whom. This challenged a popular notion at the time when Kings (or Queens) were the only ones justified in ruling, and that they were appointed to their position by God. It was also widely believed that the Royalty was only accountable to God (something popularly known as the Divine Right of Kings). However, the political philosophy of Locke and Rousseau began to change people's opinion on this matter.

Also during The Age of reason, people began to question the nature of religious truth. Whereas in the past people had been content to simply accept that what they were being told each week in church was true (because why would anyone doubt a priest), people now wanted proof that these things were actually true! Thus we find that many of the debates about the nature and existence of God, the relationship between religion

and society, the age and origin of the world and the universe, and even the relationship between religion and morality can all be traced back to things people began write about during The Enlightenment.

Time does not allow us to explore other ways philosophy has influenced the world we live in, but for the interested reader you may wish look at how Plato and Aristotle's philosophy has been influential in the Christian Church (notably through the work of Thomas Aquinas), and also the role Postmodernist philosophies have played in our understanding of the relativity of truth and the relationship between power and knowledge, the latter being particularly important for the work of many racial and gender equality movements.

[Slide 6] Epistemology and ontology: The key issue

Having considered some of the ways philosophers have made a difference to the world we live in, let's now consider ways that they have challenged and changed our understanding of things.

Many philosophers believe the relationship between **epistemology** and **ontology** is a fundamental issue in philosophical studies, and one can see this theme being discussed in many of their works.

- **['Epistemology – The study of knowledge']** In short, epistemology considers how we know what we know – or in other words - it is the study of our knowledge of things.
- **['Ontology – The study of the true nature of things']** Ontology is the study of what things are, or what a thing is in itself (aka Being).
- **[Interactive element - 'The key issue in philosophy?']** The reason why the relationship between epistemology and ontology is considered so important to many philosophers is because it concerns the very nature of what we claim know, what we can actually know, and how we might know anything at all.

[Slide 7] Phenomena/Noumena (Kant)

Immanuel Kant's phenomena and noumena distinction is probably the most well-known, influential, and modern analysis of the relationship between epistemology and ontology.

- **[Interactive element – 'Categories']** Kant argued that our knowledge of things in the physical world is shaped and formed by certain cognitive *categories* in our mind. For instance, we are able to distinguish between different objects around us because our minds contain the category (or concept) of space, and as such, this acts like a 'lens' through which we experience, understand and make sense of the world.
- **[Interactive element – Arrow]**

- **[Interactive element – ‘Phenomena’]** *Phenomena* is the word Kant used to define the things that we experience in this way.
- **[Interactive element – ‘Noumena’]** However, as each of us has our own unique ‘lens’ through which we experience the world around us, this means that we are all experiencing things in a personal and unique way and most likely, none of us are seeing the world as it truly is. Kant called this realm, the realm which he believed lay beyond our personal and collective experiences, the *noumenal* realm.
- **[Interactive element – Arrow]**
- **[Interactive element – ‘?’]** Of course, Kant’s epistemological model begs two questions as to whether:
 - (1) is anyone capable of seeing things as they truly are, and
 - (2) what is the relationship between what people claim to know about something and what this thing actually is?Kant’s model also forces us to re-consider how anyone can understand what others claim to know about the world, especially if everyone is experiencing things in a unique and personal way.
- **[Interactive element – ‘Relativism’]** Kant’s epistemology can also lead to the uncomfortable conclusion (for some) that all knowledge is *relative* to the knower.

[Slide 8] Appearance and reality (Bertrand Russell)

Before we get too bogged down with Kant, let’s turn to a passage from Bertrand Russell’s 1912 book *The Problems of Philosophy*, which also considers the relationship between epistemology and ontology.

For the rest of this lesson we will be referring to passages from the opening chapter from Bertrand Russell’s 1912 book *The Problems of Philosophy*. A page with a selection of numbered readings from this chapter has been added to That Philosophy Website. A link to this reading has been provided [here](#) as well as on the page you downloaded this lesson from. You may find it useful to have this passage in front you as we continue. PLEASE NOTE: The original text is not numbered. We have added this as a referencing aid.

- **[“Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?”]** In paragraph [1], Russell writes, “Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?”
- **[Interactive element – Image #1]** If we accept Kant’s notion that knowledge is a human construct, then on the basis of this, we might suggest that there is nothing which cannot be doubted. This is because if none of us are seeing things in the world as they truly are, then our knowledge is simply an expression of personal opinion and perspective, which we are all entitled to have.

However this seems a rather strange state of affairs, for surely most people believe there is *true knowledge* of things.

[Slide 9] Appearance and reality (Bertrand Russell)

- **[Interactive element – Image #1]** For instance, don't we all know what a table is and don't we all understand what other people mean when they talk about 'tables'? Logically this would appear to be the case as Russell goes onto say in paragraph [2]...
- **[“I believe that, if any other normal person comes into my room, he will see the same chairs and tables and books and papers as I see, and that the table which I see is the same as the table which I feel pressing against my arm. All this seems to be so evident as to be hardly worth stating...”]**

[Slide 10] Appearance and reality (Bertrand Russell)

However, Russell then makes this striking comment, “All this may be reasonably doubted”.

[Slide 11] Appearance and reality (Bertrand Russell)

Now in what way might our knowledge of a table be 'reasonably doubted'? Have a look around you now – you can see things and no doubt somewhere near you is a table. Surely your knowledge of this object cannot be 'reasonably doubted' as Russell suggests it can?

Well, let's continue to follow Russell's train of thought on the matter of 'tables' in paragraph [3]:

“To make our difficulties plain, let us concentrate attention on the table. To the eye it is oblong, brown and shiny, to the touch it is smooth and cool and hard; when I tap it, it gives out a wooden sound. Any one else who sees and feels and hears the table will agree with this description, so that it might seem as if no difficulty would arise; but as soon as we try to be more precise our troubles begin. Although I believe that the table is 'really' of the same colour all over, the parts that reflect the light look much brighter than the other parts, and some parts look white because of reflected light. I know that, if I move, the parts that reflect the light will be different, so that the apparent distribution of colours on the table will change. It follows that if several people are looking at the table at the same moment, no two of them will see exactly the same distribution of colours, because no two can see it from exactly the same point of view, and any change in the point of view makes some change in the way the light is reflected...”

- **[Interactive element - 'What is the *true* colour of the table?']**
- **[Interactive element – Arrow #1]**

- **[Interactive element – Arrow #2]**
- **[Interactive element – Arrow #3]** Continuing with paragraph [4] he writes, “When, in ordinary life, we speak of the colour of the table, we only mean the sort of colour which it will seem to have to a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light. But the other colours which appear under other conditions have just as good a right to be considered real; and therefore, to avoid favouritism, we are compelled to deny that, in itself, the table has any one particular colour.”
- **[Interactive element – ‘We are compelled to deny that, in itself, the table has any one particular colour.’]** This is a quotation from the last sentence of the passage just read.

[Slide 12] Appearance and reality (Bertrand Russell)

- **[Interactive element – Image #1]**
- **[Interactive element – Image #2]**
- **[Interactive element – Image #3]**
- **[Interactive element – Image #4]** In paragraphs [5] and [6], Russell makes the same point about the shape of the table and the way it feels; from different perspectives and to different people, the table appears to exhibit a different shape and feels differently to them.

All this leads us to consider the following (as Russell surmises in paragraph [7]):

- **[Interactive element – ‘Is there a real table, and what sort of object is it?’]** Returning to comments we made earlier in this Podcast, we might say that the question of whether there is a real table is an *ontological* one, whereas the matter of how we know what sort of object this is, is an *epistemological* one.

[Slide 13] The main contenders...

NOTE: The following is just a snap-shot and does not take into account the complexities and subtleties of the following theories of knowledge. More detailed discussions of each of these positions will be undertaken in future lessons.

- **[‘Empiricism’]**
- **[‘Knowledge gained through the senses (E.g. touch, taste, smell etc.).’]** Most of us would say that we learn about the world around us through our senses and as we experience things. This way of attaining knowledge about the world around us is known in philosophy as Empiricism.
- **[‘An issue: We can experience have many *different* experiences of the same object.’]** Russell’s comments about the table suggest that

empirical knowledge cannot be relied on to give us accurate knowledge of things in the world, if at all.

- **['Rationalism']**
- **['Knowledge gained through reason (E.g. If x is the case then y.')** Although doubts have been raised by Russell over the reliability of sense-based knowledge, most of us would say that we still *believe* there is a table there. A Rationalist might argue that despite not knowing much about its true shape and color, it seems unreasonable (or irrational) to suggest that we are having dubious experiences of something which does not actually exist. Or to put it another way, although Russell is questioning whether anyone can know the true shape or colour of a table, he is not denying the fact that people are having experiences of something.
- **['An issue: 'We can imagine lots of things which might not necessarily exist.']** The biggest problem for Rationalists is the relationship between what we imagine (or reason) there to be and what is actually there. For instance, although a Rationalist might argue that logically there must be a table, they actually have no way of knowing this to be true without the involvement of their senses. Yet in doing this, they are then suggesting that true knowledge is attained through the senses, which is something we have just shown to be problematical.

We will explore the ongoing debate between Empiricists and Rationalists in future lessons.

***** THIS CONCLUDES THE POWERPOINT PRESENTATION *****

Revision quiz

As we end this lesson, I invite you to complete the short **revision quiz**, which can be found [here](#).

Revision quiz: answers

If you have completed the revision quiz, here are the correct answers:

1. The Age of Reason is also known as The... **Enlightenment**
2. The Age of Reason is when people began to particularly question the authority of what institution?... **the Christian Church**
3. What does the phrase the Divine Right of Kings mean? **It means that people believed Kings were appointed to their position by God, and were only accountable to God.**
4. Whose philosophy has been particularly influential in the Roman Catholic Church, through the writings of Thomas Aquinas? **Aristotle**
5. What do the terms epistemology and ontology mean? **Epistemology is the study of knowledge, whilst ontology is the study of what is actually out there, or what a thing is in itself.**

6. Briefly describe Immanuel Kant's epistemology. **Kant argued that all our knowledge of things in the physical world (phenomena) is shaped and formed by certain concepts in our mind (such as space and time).**
7. How does Bertrand Russell's discussion of the colour, shape and texture of a table, illustrate the problem of attaining true knowledge of this object? **Although we take for granted that we can know (and do know) what a table is, Russell's analysis of this object is intended to show us that we might not actually know the true shape or colour or texture of it, due to the fact that different people can have different experiences of these things in the same object.**
8. What is sense-based knowledge more commonly known as? **Empiricism**
9. If someone were to argue that logically a table must exist even though their experience of it might be dubious, for the reason that they cannot have dubious experiences of something which does not exist, what philosophical school of thought might their argument be associated with, and why? **Rationalism, because my argument for the existence of the table is based on logic and pure reason, rather than my experiences (which I have suggested are not a reliable basis on which to surmise that this object exists).**

Review

Hopefully you did well and answered most of the questions. If you have several answers wrong you may find it helpful to review this lesson again.

Conclusion

Thank you again for downloading this lesson, which has been brought to you by That Philosophy Website, and we do hope you will join us again for another journey into the world of philosophy.

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