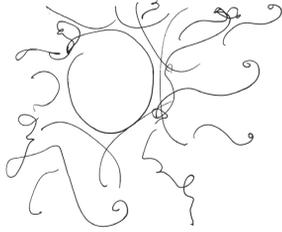


# Provocations

Philosophy for Secondary School



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Foreword by A. C. Grayling



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## Foreword

In philosophy, as David Birch aptly states in his introduction to this book, no one is an expert and no one is smarter than anyone else. Philosophy is conversation, exploration, experiment (with ideas) and, in general, an effort to achieve greater understanding of whatever topic is under discussion. Everyone has a right to express a view, and the only rules are: do one's best to think clearly and honestly, listen to other points of view and bravely follow where the best arguments lead.

The exercises in this book – again with great aptness called *provocations* by their author – are designed to invite reflection and generate debate. They do both these things wonderfully well. The principles that lie behind them, set out by David Birch in his preface and introduction, are excellent. He notes that teaching should not be about handing down knowledge from on high, as a professional such as a lawyer or doctor might do for a client or patient, but instead should be a response to the student's curiosity, interest and desire to learn – and should provoke these things by being inspirational and by listening; especially by listening to students as they work out their own answers to the questions prompted in them by the world around them and their experience of it.

It is a common view, and one much acted on, that education consists in the transfer of knowledge and skills from teachers to pupils. This is indeed the case for at least part of what is involved in schooling, given that basic information and ways of handling it have to be imparted before students can become more independent as thinkers. But it is also important that students should understand how partial, incomplete and open-ended almost all enquiry is; and that in many areas of enquiry, there are no right and wrong answers, only better and worse reasons for taking this view or that, subject always to scrutiny and challenge.

Philosophy is *par excellence* the enterprise of being open and exploratory, of accepting that certainties are hard to come by and that complexities often remain after much debate. It also *par excellence* teaches the important lesson that this openness, uncertainty and incompleteness can nevertheless be highly productive, for as Paul Valery says, 'a difficulty is a light; an insurmountable difficulty is the sun'.

This book is a superb provocation to philosophy itself. The exercises challenge us to do philosophy, to think philosophically, to generate and test ideas, to try to make sense of what is at stake and to gain deeper insights. It should be in every schoolroom, and every teacher's hands, as an instrument that will transform students' interest and capacity across the whole range not just of their studies but their lives.

**A. C. Grayling**

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*There are more idols in the world than there are realities.*

**Friedrich Nietzsche**

*All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols.*

*And that means not creating a new one –  
for instance as in 'absence of an idol'.*

**Ludwig Wittgenstein**

# Introduction

*It is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.*

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

The lessons in this book are based on talking. It's a simple yet peculiarly radical approach. Children spend little class time speaking and listening to one another, yet the best (and worst) thing about school is the opportunity to make friends and discover new people. It is this aspect which is obviously the most important to the pupils.

PE and drama are the only subjects that cannot be done solo, where the class itself is internal to the lesson, where the pupils become a group rather than a random assembly of separate individuals. Philosophy is asking to join these subjects. As well as playing and performing together, it suggests we talk together. This book is made up of questions; a question is an invitation; the best questions are the questions that multiply. In philosophy the class does not take, but rather becomes, the subject. That is to say, if these lessons have a topic, it's not so much philosophy as other people.

Listening is odd. It is porous and strange. Other people's words, like their smells, are emanations we cannot remain indifferent to. To listen is to be involved, and it's to be involved without ever quite knowing what we are involved in. Though we can suppress our own thinking, it is rather more difficult to defend against the thoughts of others, to shore ourselves up against their influence; 'shut up' is never said politely. Listening opens us up to ourselves. It permits the mind to be moved in ways we cannot will. The solipsist, in other words, is a creature of habit.

Schools harp on about respect and the necessity of boundaries without also promoting the pleasures of togetherness. The emphasis is on how it can go wrong when we are with other people, not on the

available goods. We need to respect in order not to hate. Other people are the enemies we mustn't make. But if that's all they are, what is the point of them? An education that isn't concerned with this question is an education palpably unconcerned with the good life.

The focus on listening dissolves the dichotomy of child-centred or teacher-led learning. It dissolves the idea of a source, an originator. Speaking and listening mixes and merges. Conversation makes a farce of supply and demand (a question is a demand that doesn't know what it wants, an answer is the supply that doesn't know what it is giving). To put the cards on the table, this book believes in liberalism without the individual and collectivism without the cult; the individual may not be sovereign, but neither should they be pressured to participate, which brings Oscar Wilde to mind. His line about the weather seems just as applicable to education: whenever people talk about it, one feels quite certain that they mean something else.

Education can serve as a distraction from social injustice – it is, among other things, the state's attempt to drum the family out of the child – and it is always at risk of utopianism, always in danger of converting our dissatisfaction with adults into a wish to create new ones (a wish that never works; the utopian teacher inevitably ends up more like Prospero to Caliban than Pygmalion to his statue).

Education, in other words, is plagued by its desired ends, which is perhaps why there are many more books on philosophy for primary school than there are for secondary. Children are believed to be more pliant than adolescents, they are pre-lapsarian, easier to bewitch; their eventual nature is still up for grabs. The effort to produce tolerant citizens, rational individuals or sceptical atheists is a race against time.

The adolescent is a lost cause; they are a kind of underclass. Though we can imagine a situation in which a child might protest that they should be treated more like a child, or an adult like an adult, it is rather more difficult to imagine an adolescent asking to be treated like an adoles-

cent. Whatever it is about adolescents that makes adults envy them, it is not the trust and understanding they receive (these are, of course, things which the adolescent seeks to sabotage; it might be worth acknowledging that adolescents present us with impossibilities, such as the need to maintain our understanding while not forestalling their resourceful attempts to shatter it).

If we dropped that other dichotomy, the one of knowledge or skills, and approached education with an old-fashioned belief in virtue – our dispositional paths to self-actualising pleasure – we might think of the project as being to encourage, or bring out, the virtues of the pupil. When teaching children we would encourage their childhood virtues and when teaching adolescents we would seek out and inspire their adolescent virtues.

What, then, are the virtues of adolescence? Unless we are interested in this question, I would suggest, provocatively rather than prescriptively, we should not be teaching. The idea is simply that we cannot live well unless we are living as ourselves.

Of course, for us to see these adolescent dispositions as virtues we must be free to consider them as options, and aspirations, for ourselves.

## Set-Up

The classroom should be arranged in whatever way will be conducive to conversation. These are three options: horseshoe, circle and desks.

Having pupils seated in a horseshoe creates the sense of a shared space where everyone can see everyone. The opening also gives you access to the board. But if you don't wish to use the board, sitting in a closed circle is often better.

# World

*'It'*



*The proofs of deaths are statistics  
and everyone runs the risk  
of being the first immortal.*

**Jorge Luis Borges**

# Imperialism and Magic

*We can be competent but we are always helpless.*

***Adam Phillips***

Until the 15th century the Americas did not exist as far as Europeans were concerned. These continents could not be found on their world maps. There was no knowledge of them.

This changed, however, when, starting with Portugal and Spain, Europeans started to explore the oceans. They discovered the Americas, Australia, and ventured further into Africa and Asia. Europe wanted to colonise the world.

It was through this imperialism that Europeans began encountering people belonging to cultures and societies seemingly very different from their own. They called these people 'savages' and their societies 'primitive'. One recurrent practice they found was magic.

In the 1920s, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, an English anthropologist, went to live with the Azande people in Central Africa to observe and document their use of magic. He found that the Azande believed that magic could be used, among other things, to make them invisible while hunting, guide the aim of a spearman, protect against witches, obtain wives, prevent rain from falling and delay the sunset.

One of their main tools in magic was a whistle, of which they had several different types. One whistle was believed to give the wearer invisibility. Another was used to seek revenge against witches or enemies. The wearer would recite a spell: 'You came to steal my spear. I am going to blow my whistle. May thunder strike you. May a leopard seize you; or a lion also. May you cut yourself with an axe. Whistle, whistle, whistle, I send you after a thief.' Then they would blow the whistle and

continue, 'O whistle! O whistle! O whistle! May he cut his food on a large stump of wood.'

The Azande didn't only use whistles. If they were travelling home late in the day and did not want to be caught in darkness, they would place a stone in a tree in order to delay the sunset, saying, 'You, stone, may the sun not be quick to fall today.' Stones would also be used to stop the rain during the construction of buildings or huts, or on the day of a feast. The stone would be hung in the air accompanied with these words, 'May rain not fall, when rain appears as though it is about to fall may it remain firm like the stone.'

**Starter Question** Do you think their magic worked?

### **Questions to take you further**

- ❖ Is it appropriate to speak of magic as working?
- ❖ Is magic practical? Is performing rain magic an alternative to buying an umbrella?
- ❖ Why would the Azande practice magic if it weren't successful?

Having observed such practices, many Europeans believed that these societies were not as progressed as their own. They believed that these peoples used magic because they didn't yet know how nature really worked. These Europeans were certain that magic was false and that its practice revealed the undeveloped minds of primitive people. They saw magic as a kind of science, but a science based on a wildly incorrect understanding of nature and the forces that govern it.

**Task Question 1** Is magic primitive?

### **Questions to take you further**

- ❖ Is magic bad science?
- ❖ Is it possible for us to understand the Azande's practices?

- ❖ Does science show us how nature really works?
- ❖ Do those who practice magic have undeveloped minds? Are they less advanced than us?
- ❖ Could science and magic coexist within a single culture?
- ❖ Is there anything wrong with being primitive?
- ❖ Do we have our own forms of magic?
- ❖ Can we live without myth, religion or superstition?
- ❖ What is magic? Is it an acknowledgement or a denial of human helplessness?

Imagine that Evans-Pritchard felt he ought to help the Azande. Though he respected their customs and their way of life, he believed their lives could be improved. For example, if he replaced their magic with medicine, their lives would be longer and healthier. He could establish a school in order to teach the children and adults about the discoveries of science, build a hospital and introduce technology into their society.

**Task Question 2** Should he do this?

### **Questions to take you further**

- ❖ Do they need educating?
- ❖ Do their lives need improving?
- ❖ What things make a life better?
- ❖ Can we know what's best for other people?
- ❖ Are some cultures superior to others?
- ❖ Should he also build a church in order to save their souls?
- ❖ Is introducing them to his religion like introducing them to science?

# Others

'You'



*The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake.*

**Oscar Wilde**

# Animals

*Only man can fall from God.*

**D. H. Lawrence**

She is 4 years old with pure-black eyes. Her disposition is gentle. Despite her impressive bodily strength she would do you no harm. Most days she remains standing for hours in peace among her friends. Her friends are familiar to her and provide a sense of comfort. She needs this comfort for she is often fearful. Unfamiliar faces and scenes cause her heart to race, but she is intensely curious. Newness intrigues as well as terrifies her. She is always mindful of her surroundings. Her alertness can be put to rest with a tender scratch behind her ears. She is soothed by touch.

She is a mother and has twice given birth. Her young are always by her side. They feed from her milk, living through her body, nourished and sustained by it. She is admirably protective of them. If she senses they are in danger, she will do all she can to defend them. She is deeply aware of their vulnerability and this can be an acute source of worry for her. She would fight for their safety. She would throw herself into danger for them. Her young will depend on her stable care and attention for almost a year.

This is her last day of life.

Tomorrow she will be led onto a truck and taken away. At the journey's end, she will be guided from the truck down a snake of metallic passageways and forced into a tight container. The container will press down on her so that she cannot move.

Once she is fastened into place, a gun will be pointed at her head and a steel bolt will be fired into her skull. If she is lucky this will kill her instantly, but there is a good chance she will remain conscious. If she

does remain conscious, she will experience having her back legs tied in chains and being hung upside down, suspended. She will feel herself being carried by a machine to a room where her throat will be slit. She will remain hanging as the blood drains out of her body. If she is still conscious, she will know that she is dying, and she will struggle. She will fight for her life, but she will lose. It will take several minutes for the blood to drain away. After this her body will be skinned.

They will cut her flesh into plate-sized portions and wrap it in plastic. Her packaged flesh will be displayed in supermarket aisles and exchanged for money. Different parts of her hacked body will be sold in numerous supermarkets and end up in the mouths of numerous people. These people will never know or meet one another. They will never know that they share her flesh in common, that her juices are inside each of their bodies. They will wash her down with a drink.

Her body is her living being. It is through her body that she exists. Tomorrow her body will be mutilated and sold. Particles of her flesh will be picked from the teeth of those who purchase her, of those who have never seen her pure-black eyes or felt the constant beating of her beating heart.

*This story is shocking and ambiguous. Using the ambiguity to work through the shock, it would be good to open by asking what the class thinks the story is about. After letting the interpretations coalesce, you can then ask whether they think the story is opposed to what it describes, is against eating animals. If so, how can you tell? This question takes us into what the story feels and thereby raises the question of what it makes us feel, of the feelings it is trying to communicate, which leads into the Hermeneutic Question.*

**Hermeneutic Question** Is this story manipulative?

### **Questions to take you further**

- ❖ Should moral arguments be settled with reason?

- ❖ Do we learn what is wrong and right through reason?
- ❖ Is the story forcing you to feel anything? Is it possible to force others to feel?
- ❖ Is it wrong to force others to believe what you do, even if you are right?
- ❖ Can stories be arguments?
- ❖ What's wrong with being manipulated?

*The logical version of this question would be: Has the argument committed the argumentum ad misericordiam? This is Latin for 'argument to pity', and it is believed to be a fallacy, an attempt to reach a conclusion through irrational means, in this case through sympathy. Since it is not obvious that the story constitutes an argument, I haven't used the logical version. But you could ask the class to try and reconstruct the story as an argument (see Appendix 6). An analogous question to those raised in the bullet points would then be: is ad misericordiam really a fallacy?*

*To take a literary approach, you could ask the class to think about the rhetoric. Which words and sentences have the most power running through them? Then, to pose a philosophical question: is rhetoric a form of lying? Is there a more honest and less decorative way that the events could have been described? Is the emotion of the story in what is described or just in the description itself; is it in the events or the words, or is it impossible to separate events from words?*

**Task Question 1** Do animals have emotions?

### **Questions to take you further**

- ❖ Do animals experience similar emotions to humans?
- ❖ Is it possible to sympathise with animals?
- ❖ Are humans animals?
- ❖ Do animals have reason?

- ❖ Of course animals are living, but do they have lives?
- ❖ What is a life?
- ❖ What are emotions?

*If the story is inviting us to sympathise with the suffering of animals, it is pre-supposing that there are emotions there to be sympathised with. This is, in part, the pertinence of this question.*

**Task Question 2** Is it wrong to eat animals?

### **Questions to take you further**

- ❖ Is it wrong to kill things with emotions?
- ❖ Is it natural for humans to eat animals?
- ❖ Are humans entitled to eat animals?
- ❖ Is killing an animal an act of murder?
- ❖ Is a person's appetite more valuable than an animal's life?
- ❖ Why is meat important to us? Why do people feel they *need* it? Why do they not feel they *need* salad?

## **The Sacred**

*Don't play with what lies deep in another person!*

**Ludwig Wittgenstein**

**Starter Question 1** Can you think of something we shouldn't do?

*At this point take a somewhat trivial example of wrongness, say, littering or petty theft.*

“In the best tradition of the Socratic gadfly, David Birch challenges many current practices and assumptions in education, and provides an imaginative resource for stimulating debate, critical reflection and creative thinking on a wide and engaging range of topics. His emphasis on the importance of listening as well as speaking, for the teacher as well as the student, is refreshing.”

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**From the Foreword by A. C. Grayling**



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