

PHILOSOPHY

FOR **TEENS**

QUESTIONING
LIFE'S BIG IDEAS

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INTRODUCTION

Do you ever think about weird things?

For example, have you ever wondered whether everyone else sees colours the same way as you? What if they all see grass and trees as purple, even though they call it “green”? How would you ever know?

Have you ever wondered what animals would say if they could talk? Maybe they would talk just like us about everything happening around them. Or, maybe they don’t understand what’s happening and therefore wouldn’t have anything to say even if they could talk.

Have you ever wondered what would happen if all of the world’s problems were suddenly solved? Would people’s hair stop turning grey? Would we be happy? Would we get bored and demand to have our problems back?

Maybe you’ve never really thought about things like that before. But, if you have, you’re not the only one. These thoughts aren’t really weird, they’re philosophical, and that is what this book is about.

Philosophical thinking is good for you. Some people like it and some people don’t, but everyone should learn how to do it, because philosophy helps you figure out what life is all about. It helps you come to understand what living a good life might mean, and it helps you answer tough questions about who you are.

When you think about what colours look like to other people, you’re considering what it’s like to see things from someone else’s point of view. We all get along better if we remind ourselves that not everyone sees things the same way. Likewise, when you form an opinion about how animals would talk, you’re also forming an opinion about how they should be treated. Everyone needs to decide for him- or herself just how much respect we owe to our fellow creatures. Most importantly, when we dream about a perfect world, we give ourselves motivation for improvement. It feels good to know that things don’t have to stay as they are if we don’t want them to.

So, what do we want from life, how should we interact with others and what is life all about? People disagree about the answers to these questions. The goal of philosophy is not to identify final answers that everyone should accept, but to explore different answers. Because it's extremely unlikely that *you* are the only person who has the correct belief about every philosophical question, it is important to take a critical attitude about all philosophical positions. In most subjects, such as maths, history and science, there are right answers and wrong answers. The textbook contains the facts and the teacher corrects errors. For the most part, philosophy is not like that. There are no philosophical facts. Everyone has the right to disagree and develop his or her own philosophical ideas.

In addition to introducing you to a number of important philosophical concepts, a central aim of this book is to show that disagreements need not be a bad thing. Most people don't like to disagree. Two reactions are common: They either lash out or shut down. These reactions are unfortunate, because a disagreement is an excellent opportunity for personal growth.

Philosophers actually like disagreement. How else will you ever break out of the rut in your own mind and discover which of your opinions are worth having? How else will you keep your wits sharp? In order to stay fresh and alive you have to shake things up a little bit from time to time! There's no better way to shake yourself up than to listen to someone with opinions that differ from yours. And, when we say *listen*, we mean actually listen. This doesn't mean just letting them talk. Nor does it mean accepting whatever they say. It means hearing what they have to say and trying to understand their point of view and then deciding for yourself. It's a simple thing ... but it's huge.

In this book we look at a number of controversial opinions on interesting topics related to values. By studying a variety of perspectives, you should come to understand and express your own perspective better. As with all things, this is easier to do if you're having fun.

It's fun to experiment with new ideas, even though it may feel strange at first. We begin each chapter of this book with an exercise to help you get the hang of it. The exercise involves reading a dialogue between two fictional high school students and answering some questions about it. We encourage you to read the dialogues out loud with someone else, each of you adopting the role of one of the characters. Try to put yourself in your character's

mind frame and see what it might be like to actually hold the view he or she advocates. You may decide you agree, or you may decide you disagree. Either way, if you have entertained the view as your own, it will be easier for you to give reasons for your decision. At the end of each chapter, we challenge you to write a dialogue of your own on one of the themes discussed.

Somewhere in the middle of each chapter you will find another type of exercise known as a “thought experiment”. A thought experiment is an imaginary scenario designed to test the truth of a controversial claim. For example, suppose someone makes the claim that religion is a necessary feature of society. We could test this claim by trying to imagine a society that functions without religion. If we can imagine this, then the original claim is false. If we cannot imagine it, then the claim stands as a reasonable possibility. At the end of each chapter, we challenge you to construct a thought experiment to test one of the central claims made in the chapter.

Keep in mind that any book referred to in the text will be listed at the end of the chapter in the References section. You will also find a list of books and articles related to each chapter in the section marked Further Reading. These lists will enable you to pursue issues that interest you on your own. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter are designed to enhance your understanding of the concepts presented in the chapter, while the activities and community action steps are designed to help you apply these concepts to your daily life. Finally, there is a glossary at the end of the book to help you keep track of new philosophical terms.

Philosophy wakes you up and makes you think. Once you get used to it, you won't know how you ever lived without it.