Philosophy and contemporary issues

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Philosophy · HL

IB Diploma Programme Philosophy HL (first assessment 2025; current guide). This topic is the COMPULSORY HL EXTENSION – *Philosophy and contemporary issues*: two contemporary issues studied philosophically, examining the NATURE, FUNCTION, MEANING and METHODOLOGY of philosophical activity itself. The extension has two sides: the issue-content (the contemporary debates, each run with the core's craft) and the meta-questions (what philosophy IS when it does this – its method, its limits, its public role). This handout kits the issues the extension rewards and teaches the meta-craft, with worked framings. All examples are original.

Must-know for the HL extension:

Family	Content
meta	what philosophy is: conceptual analysis, argument, the a priori
method	philosophy vs science; thought experiments; intuitions
AI and technology	mind, personhood and machine intelligence
environment	obligations to future generations and non-humans
public role	applied ethics, consulting, the philosopher in the city

The nature of philosophical activity

The extension's first question is what philosophy IS when it engages an issue. Three answers shape the course: philosophy as **conceptual analysis** (the unpacking of the concepts the issue runs on – what is a person? a cause? a right?); philosophy as **argument** (the discipline of topic 01: premises, validity, the suppressed premise exposed); philosophy as the **a priori** study of what is possible (not what is the case – that is science's business – but what could be, what must be, what is consistent). From these follow the METHOD questions: how does philosophy relate to SCIENCE (does ethics need neuroscience? does philosophy of mind need AI? – the autonomy-of-philosophy debate); what **thought experiments** are for (intuition-pumping or disguised science fiction?); and what weight **intuitions** carry when they clash (across cultures, across centuries – the experimental-philosophy challenge). The meta-skill the paper marks: doing philosophy ABOUT doing philosophy – naming the method while using it.

Worked meta-framing. On AI and mind: the question "can a machine think?" splits into a conceptual part (what would COUNT as thinking – the personhood criteria of topic 01 applied) and an empirical part (what the system does – science's part); philosophy's function is to keep the split visible, and the contemporary debate confuses itself wherever the parts blur.

The contemporary-issue kits

Artificial intelligence and technology: machine minds (the Turing test's behaviourism; the Chinese room's reply; the criteria of personhood applied to systems), machine ethics (can a system be a moral AGENT – or only a tool?), and the technology of the self (algorithmic choice and freedom: is a recommendation engine's nudged choice still mine? – compatibilism's "right way" tested by design).

Environment: obligations to future generations (the non-identity problem – our policies determine WHO exists, so whom do we harm?), to NON-HUMANS (sentience as the criterion – animal ethics from personhood's toolkit), and the value questions (is nature intrinsically valuable, or instrumentally? – the aesthetics kit applied to wilderness).

Identity, culture and the public world: the socially constructed self (de Beauvoir's othering in the algorithmic age – which selves do systems amplify?); post-truth and knowledge (testimony, epistemology of the feed: whose justification counts when the sources are chosen for me?); and philosophy's PUBLIC ROLE – applied ethics in institutions (bioethics committees, technology councils): does the philosopher advise, or merely tidy?

Worked issue-framing. Environment, non-identity: a policy choice determines the timing of conception, so the future people affected would not exist otherwise. Harming them seems impossible (no particular person is worse off than they would otherwise have been – there is no otherwise). Yet depletion feels wrong. The analysis runs: the conceptual claim (harm requires a counterfactual), the argument (it makes depletion harmless), the objection (rights of whoever lives: each future person has a right to a liveable world, whoever they turn out to be), and the meta-point – the case shows philosophy doing its distinctive work: the paradox is conceptual, and no data settle it.

Checklist

- Philosophy as analysis, argument and the a priori; the autonomy debate (does ethics need science?); thought experiments and intuitions; the meta-skill of naming the method while using it (meta).
- AI: the Turing test and the Chinese room; personhood criteria on systems; machine moral agency; algorithmic choice and compatibilism (AI).
- Environment: non-identity; future generations' rights; sentience and non-humans; intrinsic vs instrumental value (environment).
- Identity and public world: algorithmic othering; the epistemology of the feed; philosophy's advisory role (public).
- The worked meta-framing and issue-framing; the paper names method and issue together. All framings original.