Philosophy and contemporary issues

IB DP Philosophy HL extension: philosophy and contemporary issues (Paper 3)

Philosophy and contemporary issues

- explain what philosophy does: **conceptual analysis**, argument and thought experiments;
- distinguish conceptual questions from empirical ones;
- discuss philosophical issues in artificial intelligence, the environment and technology;
- respond to an unseen text in Paper 3 in four steps.

What is philosophy doing?

- **Conceptual analysis** : making clear what our concepts mean (what counts as "thinking", "a person", "harm").
- **Argument**: testing reasons with the tools of topic 01 (premises, validity, hidden premises).
- **Thought experiments** and **intuitions** : imagined cases that test our concepts. But intuitions can differ between cultures and people, so how much should they count?

Contemporary issues

- The debate connects to personhood (topic 01): if an AI had a mind, would it have rights?
- And to responsibility: when an AI system causes harm, who is to blame?
- Derek Parfit's **non-identity problem** : our policies today change which people will be born in the future.
- If a careless policy leads to different people being born, none of them is worse off than they would otherwise have been, because otherwise they would not exist.

Answering Paper 3

- Issue and claim: whether passing the **Turing test** settles the question of machine thought.
- Method: the writer treats a conceptual question (what is thinking?) as if it were empirical (what can the system do?).

Answering Paper 3 (2)

- Evaluation: Searle's **Chinese room** shows that behaviour and understanding can come apart; but a functionalist would reply that understanding just is the right kind of behaviour.
- Reflection: science can tell us what the systems do; philosophy must decide what would *count* as thinking. The text shows why philosophy remains necessary even when the technology advances.

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Philosophy guide* (first assessment 2024), the **HL extension** and Paper 3.
- A. M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence", *Mind* 59 (1950).
- J. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (1980).

Sources for this lesson (2)

- D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (1984), part IV.
- P. Singer, *Animal Liberation* (1975).

Common errors

- Summarising the unseen text instead of responding to it as a philosopher.
- Treating a conceptual question ("can machines think?") as if new data alone could settle it.
- Mentioning the **Turing test** or the **Chinese room** without saying what each shows and where it may fail.

Common errors (2)

- Writing about a contemporary issue as a news report, with no argument or concept.
- Ignoring the second strand of the extension: what philosophy itself is and how it works.
- Ending without a judgement on the text's main claim.

Key terms

- **Conceptual analysis**: making clear what a concept means and what follows from it.
- **Thought experiment**: an imagined case used to test a theory or an **intuition**.
- **Empirical question**: a question that can be answered by observation or experiment.

Key terms (2)

- **Turing test**: a test in which a machine counts as thinking if a judge cannot tell it from a human in text conversation.
- **Chinese room**: Searle's **thought experiment** meant to show that following rules for symbols is not understanding.
- **Non-identity problem**: Parfit's puzzle that a policy can seem to harm future people who would not have existed without it.

Check yourself

- 1.
- Is "Can machines think?" a conceptual or an empirical question?
- Explain. 2.
- What did Turing propose in 1950 instead of answering "Can machines think?" directly? 3.