Optional themes and the prescribed text

IB DP Philosophy: the optional themes (Paper 1 Section B) and the prescribed text (Paper 2)

Optional themes and the prescribed text

- explain the three main ethical theories and test them on the trolley cases;
- explain the analysis of **knowledge**, the Gettier problem, **rationalism**, **empiricism** and scepticism;
- state the key question and two positions in each of the other optional themes;

Optional themes and the prescribed text (2)

- plan a theme essay;
- read a prescribed text for its context, claims and arguments, and answer Paper 2.

Ethics

- **The trolley cases three ways.** A utilitarian pulls the lever *and* pushes the man: five lives outweigh one.
- A Kantian may pull the lever (the death is a side effect) but not push (that uses the man only as a means).
- A virtue ethicist asks what a good person could live with, and may say that pushing someone to his death is something a decent person would not do.
- An essay that compares all three, and then judges which explains our intuitions best, shows the analysis examiners reward.

Epistemology

- **Epistemology** asks what **knowledge** is and how we get it.
- A traditional answer: **knowledge** is **justified true belief** .
- In 1963 Edmund Gettier showed cases where a person has a **justified true belief** that is true only by luck.
- A simple example (from Bertrand Russell): you look at a clock that says 3:00 and believe it is 3:00.

The other themes

- Each of the other five themes turns on one big question, and on each question philosophers have defended clearly opposed answers.
- Learn the question and two positions well enough to argue between them; an essay that sets one position against another, and decides, is worth far more than a list of names.

Writing a theme essay

- A Section B essay discusses one question in depth:
- 1.
- Define the key terms and state your answer. 2.
- Explain two or three positions with named philosophers. 3.

The prescribed text

- Context: Victorian Britain; Mill feared that public opinion, not only governments, could crush individual freedom.
- Claim: the **harm principle** : "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."

The prescribed text (2)

- Argument: free discussion helps us find the truth, because even a wrong opinion may contain part of the truth and forces us to defend our beliefs.
- Critique: what counts as "harm"? Offence, or harm to oneself (such as drug use), may also affect others. Mill can reply that he means clear harm to others' interests, but where to draw the line remains debated.

Paper 2 questions

- (a) The best ruler acts through **non-action** : he interferes as little as possible, so that people hardly notice him (chapter 17). More laws create more crime (chapter 57), and governing a large state is like cooking a small fish: stir it too much and it falls apart (chapter 60).
- (b) For the claim: the text seems to trust that people left alone will live simply and peacefully; Hobbes, who thought life without a strong state would be "nasty, brutish, and short", would disagree. Against the claim: the text does not say people are good, only that heavy government creates the desires and conflicts it then tries to control. Judgement: the view is less naive than it looks, but it fits small, simple communities better than large modern states.

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Philosophy guide* (first assessment 2024) and the prescribed text list.
- P. Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect", *Oxford Review* 5 (1967); J. J. Thomson, "The Trolley Problem", *Yale Law Journal* (1985).
- E. Gettier, "Is **Justified True Belief Knowledge**?", *Analysis* 23 (1963).

Sources for this lesson (2)

- J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859).
- Laozi, ***Tao Te Ching***, translated by D. C. Lau (1963).

Common errors

- Describing an ethical theory without applying it to the case in the question.
- Treating **utilitarianism**, **deontology** and **virtue ethics** as a list instead of testing them against each other.
- Saying Gettier showed that knowledge is impossible; he showed that justified true belief is not enough for knowledge.

Common errors (2)

- Writing a theme essay that summarises philosophers without an argument of your own.
- In Paper 2, writing about the author's life instead of the text's arguments.
- Reading Mill's **harm principle** as "do whatever you like"; it limits the state's power to interfere, not all moral criticism.

Key terms

- **Utilitarianism**: the theory that the right action produces the greatest overall happiness.
- **Deontology**: the theory that some actions are right or wrong in themselves, whatever their results.
- **Virtue ethics**: the theory that ethics is about the character a good person has and shows.

Key terms (2)

- **Justified true belief**: the traditional analysis of **knowledge**: a belief that is true and well supported.
- **Gettier case**: an example of a **justified true belief** that is true only by luck, so it seems not to be knowledge.
- **Empiricism**: the view that knowledge comes mainly from experience.
- **Harm principle**: Mill's principle that the only reason to limit a person's freedom against their will is to prevent harm to others.

Check yourself

- 1.
- How would a utilitarian and a deontologist answer the two trolley cases? 2.
- A stopped clock shows the right time by chance, and you believe it.
- Why is this a problem for the **justified true belief** analysis? 3.