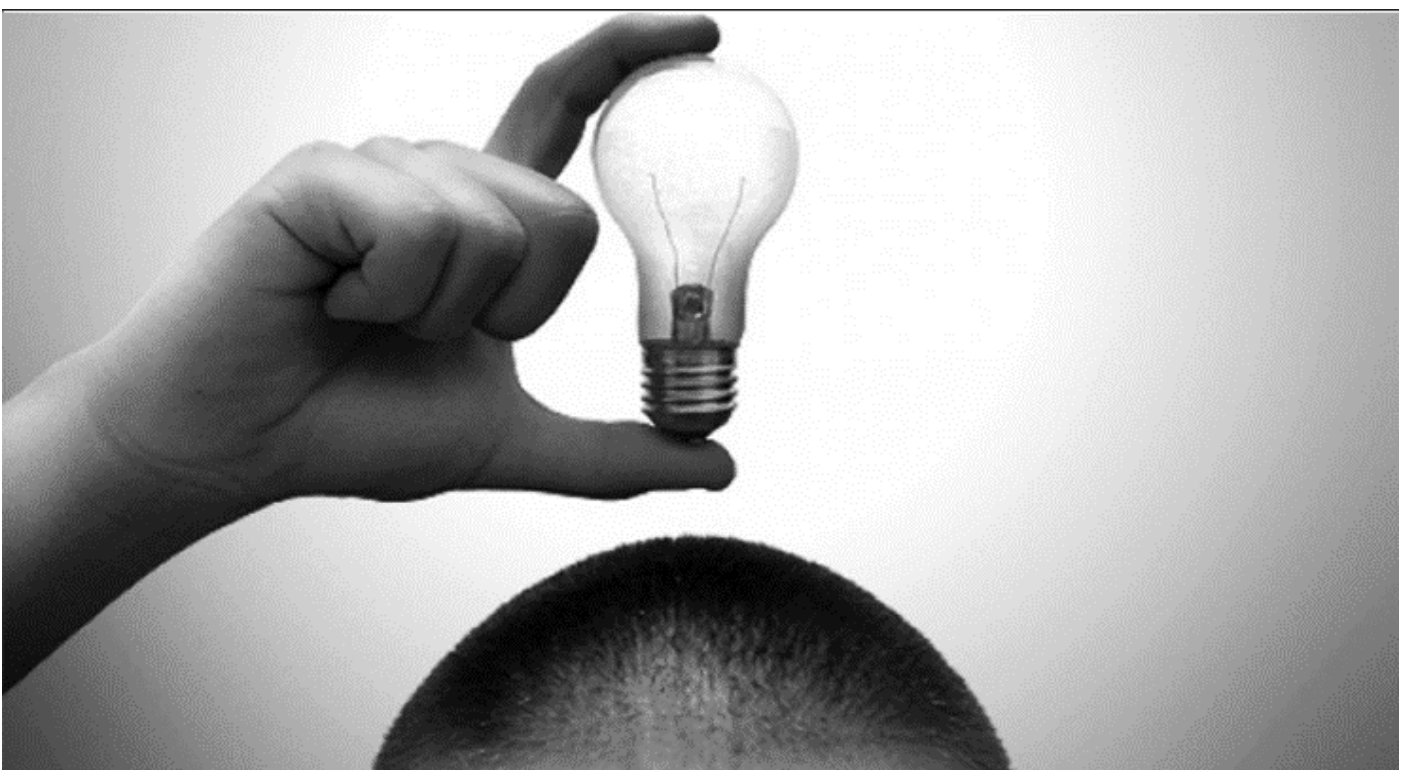


# TRANSITION MATERIALS

## A LEVEL PHILOSOPHY



# Philosophy A-Level Introduction

Welcome to wonderful world of Philosophy! This very ancient yet contemporary subject is all about questioning the assumptions we make about what we know and believe about ourselves, each other and the world around us, in order to help us to a better understanding. A very famous Philosopher called Socrates once said “**The unexamined life is not worth living**” and by taking Philosophy you are choosing to not hide away from some of the biggest issues and questions we can ask about our existence and purpose. So congratulations for choosing to ‘live the examined life’.

Complete the following tasks to give you a good introduction to Philosophy, especially **Epistemology** and **Metaphysics of God**, which you will be studying in year 12. Please do not worry at this stage if you find some of the ideas/concepts discussed challenging – they are meant to be! One of the keys to being a good philosophy student is the desire to explore and think more deeply about important issues, even if at first they are confusing. The tasks included in this booklet are designed to help you start doing that. Once you start the course in September your understanding and ability to interpret and evaluate key ideas will develop quickly.

This introductory work is based around the work of one of the most influential Philosophers- Rene Descartes, and one of his most famous texts – ‘**Meditations on First Philosophy**’. In this book Descartes seeks to lay the foundations for the whole of human knowledge (no small task!). His work sets the agenda for debate in much of modern philosophy.



## **TASK 1**

**Write a short biography of the life of Rene Descartes (use the internet to help)**

One of the key events in Descartes life was a series of 'visions' that he had in Germany whilst serving in the army of Prince Maurice of Nassau. It was these 'visions' that he interpreted as guiding him to seek the truth through using his reason (the power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgements logically)

Descartes writes:

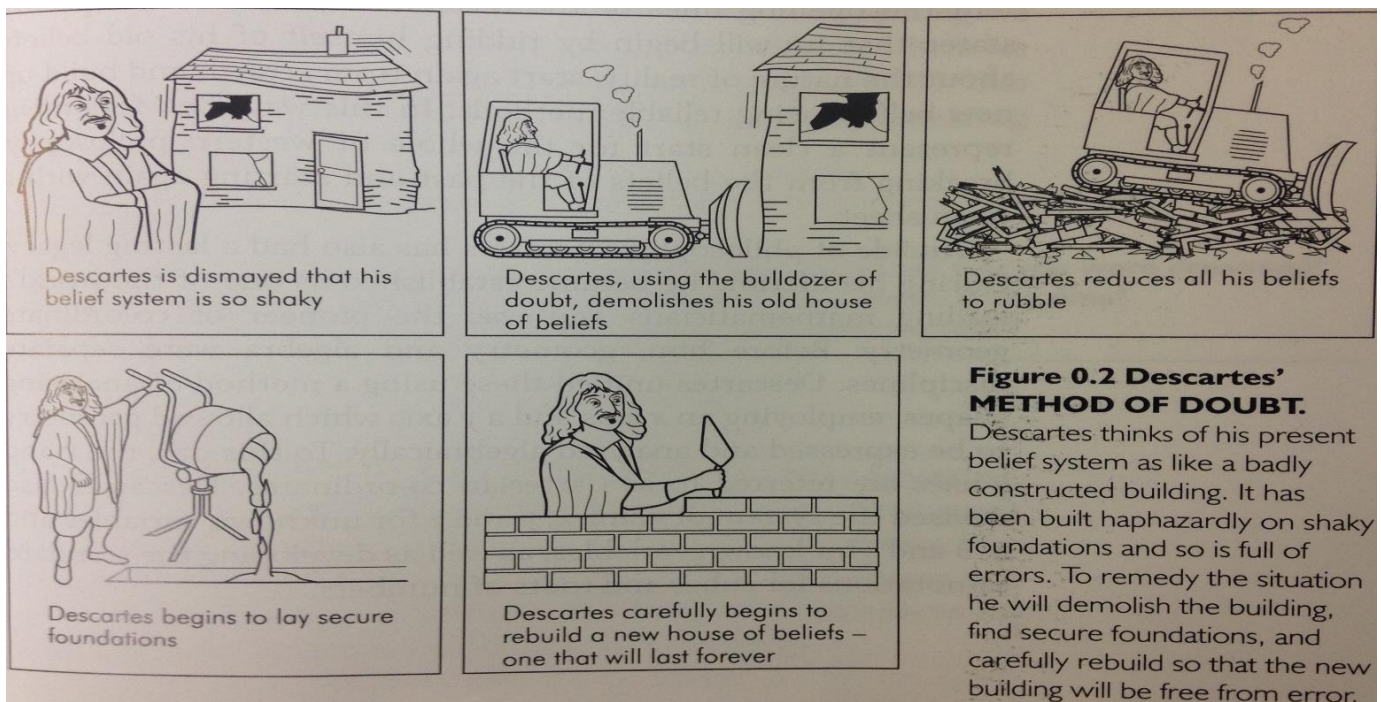
*Some years ago I was struck by how many false things I had believed, and by how doubtful was the structure of beliefs that I had based them on. I realised that if I wanted to establish anything in the sciences that was stable and likely to last, I needed – just once in my life – to demolish everything completely and start again from the foundations*

What Descartes meant was that many things that he believed to be true about life were based on assumptions (a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof).

## **TASK 2**

**Can you give two examples of things that you believed to be true but turned out to be false? What were the assumptions behind these beliefs?** e.g. Santa Claus (sorry if that's news to you!) – Assumptions – my parents do not lie, the carrot I left out must have been eaten by Rudolf.

These shaky beliefs he compared to a badly built house. – see illustration below.



So Descartes set about building a more secure system of knowledge. To do this Descartes started by using doubt. Descartes explored each of his beliefs with scepticism (doubting its truth) to see if he could reach any infallible (incapable of being wrong) beliefs that he thought could be beyond any possible doubt.

Descartes started with his senses and identified that sometimes his senses have deceived him – for example he had at times been the victim of illusions. Therefore he came to the conclusion that he could doubt his senses and therefore they could not be trusted.



### TASK 3

Answer the 3 questions below

Can you think of any occasions when your senses have deceived you?

Is Descartes right not to trust the senses because we are sometimes deceived? Why or why not?

Some claim you only know your senses are deceiving you because you then go on to see/hear/taste properly. Is this an effective argument against Descartes view that our senses are unreliable and cannot be used to base our beliefs on? Why or why not?

Descartes would argue that we are right to not trust our senses because when we dream we often believe ourselves to be people, and to be in place that we are not. So how can you be sure you are not dreaming now? If this **could** be a dream, then surely you cannot be sure that anything appearing around you is actually real.

#### **TASK 4**

Try to evaluate Descartes arguments about dreams.

**'I could be in a dream right now'**

**Why might someone agree with this?**

**Why would others disagree with this?**

**What do you think and why?**

Descartes develops this idea further by introducing the scenario of the **Evil demon**

**He said**

*So I shall suppose that some malicious, powerful, cunning demon has done all he can to deceive me.....I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things are merely dreams that the demon has contrived as traps for my judgement. I shall consider myself as having no hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or senses, but as having falsely believed that I had all things.*

Descartes is using the idea of this demon to further make the point that we cannot use our senses as a basis for what we believe to be true. In theory it could be possible that a powerful demon has created an illusionary world and that your life is a work of fiction created by the demon.

Seem far-fetched? Has Descartes gone too far? Descartes may have been writing 400 years ago but this idea has been expressed in recent popular culture.

## **TASK 5**

Watch the film 'The Matrix' and explain how the plot of the movie links to Descartes idea of the Evil demon. If you can't watch it search online for an overview of the plot.

How does the Matrix relate to Descartes concept of the demon?



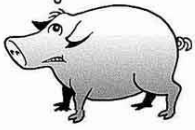
Perhaps you may at this point be thinking how can I be sure of anything ever again? Could I be living in the Matrix? Do I even exist? If so....good! However Philosophy is not just about asking questions and posing challenges (that would be very annoying!) Philosophy is also about trying to solve problems, and suggesting answers to questions raised.

**Descartes responds to his own problem in two ways.**

Firstly he would say that we do not need to doubt our own existence (pew). Why? Descartes makes the point that when I attempt to doubt my own existence, I must recognise that there is 'something' doing the doubting, and that 'something' is me, and therefore must exist. Descartes has discovered the first certainty that he has been searching for – it also known as the **cogito ergo sum (or Cogito for short)**. This is possibly the best known Philosophical argument of all time, in English it is,

**“I think, therefore I am”**

I THINK,  
THEREFORE,  
I HAM



Descartes argues it is impossible to doubt your own existence, for the very fact of doubting implies that you exist. We can know this **a priori** (this means before experience). We do not need to use our senses to know that we exist.

### **TASK 6**

**What do you think of Descartes solution, is it a successful way to defeat the sceptic (the one who doubts our existence)?**

One of the weaknesses of Descartes solution (and he would accept this) is that in terms of what we can know for sure, the list is very short. Descartes may have successfully shown that I (you) exist – but what does that mean? Descartes realises that he has not yet been able to demonstrate the existence of himself as a human being with a body etc., as the evil demon could still be tricking him about this. Most of us are probably not going to be satisfied by accepting that the only thing we can know for sure is that we (as some kind of thinking being) exists.

### **TASK 7**

**What would the impact be on your life if you accepted that the only thing you could be sure existed was you (as a thinking being NOT as a human being with a body). Hint – Think about relationships, purpose, pleasure, morality**

Descartes would argue that the belief in our own existence is not the only thing that we can be sure of. He argues that there are other ideas that are as clear and distinct as our existence that must also be true, such as geometry and mathematics. Ideas that can be proved to be true intuitively / through the use of reason, without the need for observation or experience can be trusted. For example we can know that  $2+2=4$  is true, because it is logical, not because of any information our senses provide us.

Descartes believed he had found a new secure basis for his beliefs – that is, that the best way to achieve knowledge is to use reason not experience from our senses. This Philosophical theory is called **rationalism**.

### **Task 8**

Which of the following statements can we know to be true without using our senses?

- *A bachelor is an unmarried man.*
- *It will rain tomorrow.*
- *Haydon is a school in Hillingdon*
- *England were Euro 2016 Champions*
- *A square has four sides*
- *All metals expand when heated*

However there is still a problem, because this still limits what we can really know for sure. Even if there are a few ideas that could be seen as clear and distinct there is still the possibility that outside of these things we are still being deceived by a powerful demon.

**This is where we turn to Descartes' second response to the problems raised.** To remove the possibility that an evil demon could be deceiving you Descartes turns to God. If you could know for sure that God exists then you would know that God is good and would not be deceiving you.

### **TASK 9**

Do you think it is possible to know God exists? Why or why not?

Descartes would argue that it is. How? Well that's one of the things we will explore next year!



## Further Reading

### Books

Wider reading and study is essential to achieve higher grades. Below is a list of books and websites to help you to do this.

### Course textbooks (We recommend that you purchase a copy of these)

1. *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* – **Michael Lacewing** **OR** *AQA A-level Philosophy Year 1 and AS: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* – **Jeremy Hayward**
2. *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* – **Michael Lacewing**

### Links to these textbooks on AMAZON:

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/Books/AQA-level-Philosophy-Year-Epistemology-Moral/1510400257/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1496922721&sr=1-2&keywords=aqa+philosophy+cardinal](https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/Books/AQA-level-Philosophy-Year-Epistemology-Moral/1510400257/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1496922721&sr=1-2&keywords=aqa+philosophy+cardinal)

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/cka/Philosophy-As-Lacewing-2017/1138690392/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1496922660&sr=1-1&keywords=aqa+philosophy+2017](https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/cka/Philosophy-As-Lacewing-2017/1138690392/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1496922660&sr=1-1&keywords=aqa+philosophy+2017)

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/Philosophy-Level-Metaphysics-God-Mind/dp/1138690406/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1496922551&sr=1-1&keywords=aqa+philosophy+metaphysics](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Philosophy-Level-Metaphysics-God-Mind/dp/1138690406/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1496922551&sr=1-1&keywords=aqa+philosophy+metaphysics)

### Other recommended reading

#### General

What is this thing called Philosophy? – Duncan Pritchard

Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy – Simon Blackburn

Philosophy for beginners – Richard Osborne

#### Epistemology

Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction – Jennifer Nagel

Epistemology: The Theory of Knowledge – Gerald Jones

#### Metaphysics of God

A Thinkers Guide to God – Peter Vardy

Philosophy of Religion – Gerald Jones

### Websites

[www.peped.org/philosophicalinvestigations/](http://www.peped.org/philosophicalinvestigations/) - a great site with articles and key texts relevant for each topic

<http://www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk/> Lots of helpful notes and resources

[www.mel-thompson.co.uk/](http://www.mel-thompson.co.uk/) - free notes for A Level students from a well-respected author on the topic

### Podcasts

Moral maze – Radio 4

Beyond belief – Radio 4

In our time: Philosophy – Radio 4

The Philosophers Arms – Radio 4

A History of Ideas – Radio 4

Philosophy Bites – Edmonds and Warburton

The Partially Examined Life Philosophy Podcast - Mark Linsenmayer

Philosophy Now Radio Show

### Youtube:

Crash course philosophy videos - <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8dPuualjXtNgK6MZucdYldNkMybYIHKR>