

# Literature and Essential Philosophical Questions

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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**AMERICA *in* CLASS<sup>®</sup>**

*from the* National Humanities Center

## FROM THE FORUM

- How do novels, short stories, poetry, etc. relate to the larger questions of philosophy and humanity?
- How we can use literature to explain or clarify our own ideas about the world?



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*The Philosophical Child* (2012)

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## WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek, and is often translated as “love of wisdom.” In ancient times philosophy was understood as the search for wisdom.

Philosophy explores questions about fundamental aspects of the world. Philosophical inquiry is not restricted to any particular subject matter. What characterizes a philosophical question is not what it is about, but at what level it is asked.

For example, someone might ask whether some social arrangement is fair; a philosopher will ask, “What is fairness?”

## PHILOSOPHY AND QUESTIONS

Philosophy is all about questions. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once suggested that philosophy can be defined as "the art of asking the right questions."

Many of the questions philosophers consider have been explored for thousands of years: What is time? What is beauty? What is a good life? Is justice possible?

Philosophy demonstrates that some of the simplest questions we ask can also be the most difficult to answer.

## WHY INTRODUCE PHILOSOPHY IN K-12 SCHOOLS?

The question really should be, “Why not do so?”

The United States is one of the few countries in the world that do not include philosophy as a required subject for high school students. As a result, the subject is unfamiliar and seems esoteric to many people.

However, young people start asking philosophical questions early — Are numbers real? What’s the difference between thoughts and feelings? What makes someone a friend? They wonder about the world in which we live and about the meaning of human life.

Exploring philosophical questions is one of the most effective ways to develop the kinds of critical thinking, argumentation, writing and speaking skills required by the Common Core. Engagement in structured philosophy conversations can help students explore fundamental questions, articulate reasons for their own views, and follow the logical paths of ideas.

## WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY?

1. The class is engaged in an inquiry that:
  - Aims at constructing meaning
  - Functions in a collaborative structure
  - Seeks to acquire understanding through the examination of philosophical questions or concepts of interest to the participants.
2. There is acceptance of what historically has been called “epistemological modesty,” an acknowledgement that all members of the group, including the teacher, are fallible, and therefore hold views that could end up being mistaken;

## WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY?

3. The teacher demonstrates a reticence about advocating his or her own philosophical views and models a comfort with uncertainty, with there being no final and agreed-upon answers to most of the questions being explored;
4. The community fosters an intellectually safe environment, in which students:
  - Examine the questions that interest the group;
  - Listen to one another;
  - Challenge and build on each another's thinking; and
  - Appreciate that there are many ways to understand the world and that their own contributions are uniquely valuable.



- Enhance our awareness of the philosophical suggestiveness of literature and the ways literature can inspire conversations about essential questions;
- Explore social and political, ethical, and metaphysical issues emerging from three novels, all written in different decades: *The Book Thief*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *The Bluest Eye*.
- Develop some basic tools for spotting philosophical topics and facilitating conversations about philosophical questions;
- Engage in a community of philosophical inquiry in the chat.

# FRAMING QUESTIONS

- What is courage? What makes a person courageous?
- What kind of person should I be? What kind of life should I live?
- Who am I? What are the essential features that make me the person I am?

# *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak (2006)

The narrator of *The Book Thief* is Death.

Liesel Meminger is a child growing up in Nazi Germany, living in a town near Munich with foster parents Hans and Rosa Huberman.

The book portrays everyday life in an extraordinarily terrible time, and depicts the small choices made by ordinary people that carry great ethical weight.

The novel touches on many philosophical topics, including:

- The nature of courage
- The relationship between character and moral behavior
- The meaning of community and the extent of our moral obligations to others

# *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak (2006)

After lodging his form at the Nazi headquarters on Munich Street, he witnessed four men throw several bricks into a clothing store named Kleinmann's. It was one of the few Jewish shops that were still in operation in Molching. Inside, a small man was stuttering about, crushing the broken glass beneath his feet as he cleaned up. A star the color of mustard was smeared to the door. In sloppy lettering, the words JEWISH FILTH were spilling over at their edges. The movement inside tapered from hurried to morose, then stopped altogether.

Hans moved closer and stuck his head inside. "Do you need some help?"

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## Discussion Questions

- Why did Hans offer to help Mr. Kleinmann?
- Was Hans' offer of help courageous?

# *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak (2006)

“I can no longer join,” Hans stated.

The man was shocked. “Why not?”

Hans looked at the knuckles of his right hand and swallowed. He could already taste the error, like a metal tablet in his mouth. “Forget it.” He turned and walked home.

...

Innocuously, a man walked past. “Heil Hitler,” he said.

“Heil Hitler,” Hans replied.

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## **Discussion Questions:**

- When Hans tells the Nazi Party member, “Forget it,” and when he says “Heil Hitler” even though we know he doesn’t support Hitler, is he demonstrating a lack of courage?
- What is the relationship between courage and being careful? Between courage and recklessness?
- Does Hans have courage?

# *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak (2006)

When a Jew shows up at your place of residence in the early hours of morning, in the very birthplace of Nazism, you're likely to experience extreme levels of discomfort. Anxiety, disbelief, paranoia. Each plays its part, and each leads to a sneaking suspicion that a less than heavenly consequence awaits. The fear is shiny. Ruthless in the eyes.

The surprising point to make is that despite this iridescent fear glowing as it did in the dark, they somehow resisted the urge for hysteria.

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## **Discussion Questions:**

- Is “resisting the urge for hysteria” a kind of courage?
- What is the relationship between courage and fear? Can you be afraid and still be courageous?
- Does courage always involve action? Can it take courage to do nothing? To remain silent? To think in a particular way? To refuse to care what other people think?
- Can a community be courageous?

# *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)

In Harper Lee's classic novel, the narrator, Scout (five years old at the story's beginning), describes the events surrounding her father's defense of an African American man charged with raping a young white woman, portraying the world of the Deep South of the 1930s.

The novel can inspire exploration of many philosophical questions, including:

- What is the relationship between intellect and character?
- What is the meaning of justice?
- What is the nature of goodness?
- What role does moral imagination play in our efforts to define ourselves?

# *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)

“Do you really think so?”

This was the second time I heard Atticus ask that question in two days, and it meant somebody’s man would get jumped. This was too good to miss. I broke away from Jem and ran as fast as I could to Atticus.

Jem shrieked and tried to catch me, but I had a lead on him and Dill. I pushed my way through dark smelly bodies and burst into the circle of light.

“H-ey, Atticus!”

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## **Discussion Questions:**

- What makes Scout run to Atticus?
- Does Scout demonstrate courage in this passage, or does she act from instinct?
- Can acting from instinct involve courage?



# *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)

Atticus got up from his chair, but he was moving slowly, like an old man. He put the newspaper down very carefully, adjusting its creases with lingering fingers. They were trembling a little.

“Go home, Jem,” he said. “Take Scout and Dill home.”

We were accustomed to prompt, if not always cheerful acquiescence to Atticus’s instructions, but from the way he stood Jem was not thinking of budging.

“Go home, I said.”

Jem shook his head. As Atticus’s fists went to his hips, so did Jem’s, and as they faced each other I could see little resemblance between them: Jem’s soft brown hair and eyes, his oval face and snug-fitting ears were our mother’s, contrasting oddly with Atticus’s graying black hair and square-cut features, but they were somehow alike. Mutual defiance made them alike.

“Son, I said go home.”

Jem shook his head.

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## Discussion Questions:

- Why does Jem refuse to leave?
- What kind of person does Jem seem to be? Atticus? Scout?
- Do we decide to be certain kinds of people or are we made that way?

“I’ve been taking all these philosophy courses, and we talk about what’s true, what’s important, what’s good. Well, how do you teach people to be good?” And she added: “What’s the point of knowing good, if you don’t keep trying to become a good person?”

p. 1

**Discussion Questions:**

- What is the relationship between intellect and character?
- Is character higher than intellect?
- What makes someone a good person?
- Why do we do good things?

# From “The Ring of Gyges,” *Plato’s Republic*

In The Ring of Gyges, from *Plato’s Republic*, the character Glaucon tells a story about the shepherd Gyges, who finds a ring that allows him to become invisible. Once Gyges realized he had this power:

[H]e at once arranged to become one of the messengers sent to report to the king. And when he arrived there, he quickly became the queen’s lover. With her help he attacked the king, killed him, and took over the kingdom.

Glaucon asks Socrates to imagine two magic rings, one given to a morally good person and one to a person who is not morally good, and he contends that there would be no difference in the way the two would behave.

People only behave morally, Glaucon claims, because they are afraid of the consequences of getting caught if they behave badly.

## Discussion Questions:

- What would you do if you had a ring that made you invisible?
- Do you think that we are good only because we are afraid of getting caught if we’re not?
- What might be some other reasons people try to do what we think of as good things?
- What is the difference between someone who is morally good and someone who is not?

# *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)

“If you shouldn’t be defendin’ him, then why are you doin’ it?”

“For a number of reasons,” said Atticus. “The main one is, if I didn’t I couldn’t hold up my head in town, I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to do something again.”

“You mean if you didn’t defend that man, Jem and me wouldn’t have to mind you any more?”

“That’s about right.”

“Why?”

“Because I could never ask you to mind me again.”

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## **Discussion Questions:**

- Why does Atticus risk what he does to defend Tom Robinson?
- Why does Atticus think that if he didn’t defend Tom Robinson, he couldn’t hold up his head in town?
- What is the role of moral imagination in determining the person you want to be?
- How does Atticus see himself? Can the way we see ourselves influence what we do?

# *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970)

*The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's first novel, is primarily narrated by Claudia MacTeer, who is 9 years old at the time of the events described in the novel, but who narrates the story as an adult looking back on her childhood.

The novel's main protagonist is Pecola Breedlove, an 11-year-old African American girl who comes to live with Claudia and her family after Pecola's father burns down the family home. Pecola prays for blue eyes so that she will be beautiful and, therefore, she thinks, her life will be better. The novel portrays a violent world in which children face racism, violence, rape, and neglect and struggle with feelings of rage, hopelessness and invisibility.

Many philosophical questions are raised by the story, including questions about:

- The meaning of identity
- The impact of race, gender, culture and class on identity
- The nature of beauty
- The relationship between appearance, perception and reality
- The nature of community

# *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970)

There is a difference between being put out and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment.

p. 18

## **Discussion Questions:**

- What does it mean to “be outdoors”?
- Is having a home central to our identities?
- Does having a home become even more important when you are living “on the hem of life”?

# *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970)

Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals. . . .

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## **Discussion Questions:**

- What does it mean to be “beyond the reaches of human consideration”?
- How does being part of a community shape our identities?

# *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970)

I destroyed white baby dolls.

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me, the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww,’ but not for me.

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## **Discussion Questions:**

- What is the effect on identity of living in a culture in which your culture, race, gender or heritage is not valued?
- Is there a relationship between appearance and identity?
- Is it my physical self that makes me, me? My psychological make-up? My memories?
- Are we the same people we were when we were five years old? What makes us the same person over time?



# Ship of Theseus

This puzzle was first described by Plutarch in the first century A.C.E.

To keep it in good repair, a ship had each of its boards replaced, one by one over time, until at some point none of the original boards was left.

Is the ship still the original Ship of Theseus? If not, at what point did the old ship stop existing?

Let's say another builder saved all of the old planks and built a second ship using all the original planks and following the exact design. The two ships are now docked next to each other in the harbor, looking identical. Which is the original Ship of Theseus?

This latter twist on the puzzle was developed by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century.

PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization)  
is a national organization:

- Developing a national network of people engaged in K-12 philosophy
- Providing education for K-12 teachers about ways to introduce philosophy in their classrooms
- Supporting teachers, faculty and graduate students working in the field of pre-college philosophy
- Advocating in both the philosophical and educational communities for more pre-college philosophy instruction.
- Resource-rich website: <http://plato-philosophy.org>

**Next PLATO Conference:**

University of Washington, Seattle, Washington June 29-30, 2015

Keynote Speaker: Jonathan Kozol

**University of Washington Center for Philosophy for Children**

- Resource-rich website: <http://depts.washington.edu/nwcenter/>
- Free summer workshop for teachers
- Biannual newsletter
- Runs the Washington State High School Ethics Bowl
- Three fellowships for graduate students
- “Philosophers in the Schools” program in Seattle public schools

FINAL SLIDE

THANK YOU