

## **Who is Thinking Experiments for, and what makes it useful?**

*James:* I guess the primary function of the book is to help teachers who are curious about philosophy, so that they can understand what philosophy is and why it is important, and also how to teach it — not just what to teach but how to teach. It can also be used by students in a few different ways. One way it can be used by students is to continue or to deepen discussions that we have in philosophy class. I often try to encourage the students to take their curiosity home with them and bug their parents with it. I also like to think that part of the idea of philosophy is to blur the distinction between the student and the teacher, so another thing that the students can do using the book is create their own ideas for a philosophy lesson by imagining that they are teachers setting the questions. Finally, students can use the book to craft philosophy essays.

*Alex:* It's a book that was designed to be used in an educational setting, rather than an everyday reader — though it can be definitely be used as a conversation starter! The book was written to contain a method to engage students in group discussions. It starts with the basics — even someone who hasn't tried a group discussion before, or tried one but wasn't comfortable with the result — can use the materials in this book as a framework to generate focused discussions. So there's interesting content and an enriching way to deliver that content. We've also tried to emphasise the way in which philosophy sessions can be surprising and unpredictable; they are student-led and based on the general idea of following wherever the good reasoning or good reasons lead, and enjoying that process.

*James:* Yes, I like the idea that it can be a conversation starter, and we have designed the lessons to be surprising for the students, because surprises increase curiosity and make the students want to think more. The lessons are designed to 'hook' the students and give them their own reason for going deeper into the topic.

## **Much of the book is devoted to lesson plans exploring philosophical questions. What do students gain from thinking about these questions?**

*Alex:* They get the opportunity to enjoy thinking. Which sounds trivial but it's actually a very important thing! When students ask philosophical questions they are trying to relate their own experience to the question in order to formulate an answer; this is something that many students have never had the chance to do. Often students are just trying to learn subject content, understand it, and then regurgitate it under exam conditions. Just having the space to think, to stop and consider what they believe and why they believe it — I think that's enjoyable and if students just got that from philosophy, that would be enough. But... I would also say that by doing philosophy students pick up thinking tools — like reflexes or ways of responding to information, for instance learning to think more hypothetically. Suppose someone says, for example: "We can't stop hunting whales because it's tradition." A student who has done philosophy might be more likely to wonder if traditions can or ought to change over time. This way of thinking becomes a reflex. So, philosophy helps students explore their own thinking and go deeper with that than they might have otherwise.

*James:* One of the main things you get from philosophy is the ability to have fun and think at the same time. I'm still surprised by how surprised the students are that they can do these two things together. The default attitude seems to be that you're either having fun and being free or you're being serious and studying. Maybe it is hard to do both. But philosophy can make it easier. Philosophy as we teach it is a mixture of social and intellectual learning: learning to enjoy thinking together. Through philosophy you come to understand how learning together can be enjoyable at the same time as

learning that it can be productive. This has something to do with the fact that it's hard to learn passively when you're sat in a group. Philosophy is necessarily active and communal.

*Alex:* I think that's right. So much of education is solipsistic; students are together but alone in the classroom. Of course, that's changing in a lot of places nowadays. Philosophy is one way to contribute to that positive change. It's interesting to me that in Japan the group is considered to be very important. You might expect therefore that group learning, and therefore philosophizing, would also be highly prized.

**You mentioned about group learning in Japan. I think there's a little difference in group learning between Western and Japanese styles. What is the point of group learning in philosophy? In Japan, we often focus a lot on harmony, but how about in philosophy?**

*James:* When students have a philosophical conversation together they will be confronted with different answers and opinions. This exposure will help them to appreciate that multiple perspectives exist. It can help them to go beyond their first impression. In the beginning when students come to philosophy they often don't know how to imagine multiple perspectives or don't have a developed ability to hold multiple perspectives in mind. So, you present it to them first as something they do in a group — generating different perspectives. But after a while they learn how to have a dialogue in their own mind. They internalize the philosophical discussion. This is how it is different from the idea of the harmony of group opinion, I would say.

*Alex:* I also want to emphasize how thinking together lets students learn how to make mistakes in front of each other — because everyone makes mistakes and says things that are unclear or don't quite make sense, but when they all recognize this they start trusting each other and being open to making mistakes. There is a kind of harmony in this openness. You are going to be in a group with other people, and you are going to make mistakes, but you also understand that people are going to listen and be charitable with what you've said. That means students do philosophy tend to stop seeing other people and their opinions as a threat, and instead start seeing them as a source of insight or stimulation.

**Two of the questions in Thinking Experiments are 'Will science ever end?' and 'Is inequality bad?' Is it possible for students to reach an answer in response to these questions? Is there a right answer?**

*Alex:* The first question (Will Science ever end?) is a question about knowledge and the future, so obviously it will be difficult to know. The other question is an ethical question (about right and wrong). They are both questions that permit multiple answers. It's not the case that students will find one answer and that will end the discussion. (In response to the second question) One student might say that people have different abilities and some work harder and have more talents, or have a better home environment — hence inequality isn't bad because it's natural. Another possible answer is that it is really bad because some people live on a couple of dollars a day, whereas others have more money than they could ever spend. Both answers are *prima facie* plausible. But we can go further, for instance by asking: if people have different talents and skills, then *should* we limit the inequalities that result from that? We can start talking about what we should do rather than just about what is the case.

*James:* The first thing I say to students when they ask about this is "Even if there isn't one 'right' answer, there are plenty of wrong answers!" There are also answers that we think are right but are believed for bad reasons. The goal of being a student isn't to have right answers, at least not in the

way that a thermometer gives the right temperature. The thermometer is right about the temperature every time but it doesn't understand what is going on in the world. This example of the thermometer shows how philosophy is more interested in the process of belief formation — the way that we think — and how we can improve our ability to think.

**How does philosophy relate to subjects students learn at school, and how could it fit in with the existing school system?**

*James:* I have an example from high school. When I was in high school I really loved history, but I was frustrated because I would often come across different interpretations of the same event, and I would think 'How do I know which interpretation or which book is right?' History books tend to consist of series of facts embedded in a basic narrative, with all of the uncertainty swept under the rug to present you with the clean facade of an objective picture. I had good history teachers, but they there wasn't much time in class to pursue questions like this. Actually, for each subject I studied at school there was a layer of curiosity that I couldn't satisfy — until I discovered philosophy. I think students in Japan are exactly the same — there's this layer of natural curiosity bubbling under the surface and if you can tap into that then they really enjoy it and respond to it. The other part of the question is how philosophy relates to other subjects in the school system. Philosophy is about seeing the big picture — how does it all fit together. It's about the way that the world is and the sort of human being you should aspire to be.

*Alex:* Yes, I also wanted to say that philosophy is about seeing how it all hangs together. To give an example, in art class students might look at portrait painting and there might be, under the surface, a question about what portraits are for. Why do people have portraits done? A teenager these days might start thinking about selfies, which is the closest thing they have to a painted portrait. If they then shift over to a history lesson and are talking about a historical figure like Josef Stalin, they might see a portrait of him and wonder how that portrait influences the way people nowadays think about him. Why did he have it painted that way, and is it covering anything up? This example brings portrait painting out of the art class and connects it with the student's experience of selfies and knowledge of history. I want to say that practice doing philosophy would make these kinds of connection more frequent.

**How can each subject teacher deepen their lessons to tap into that layer of curiosity that you said students have? If the subject teacher wants to encourage students to think more deeply, how can philosophy help them do that? You, James and Alex, are used to doing it, but what about everyone else?**

*Alex:* It's absolutely not the case that only we can do that! That's why we wrote this book! Tapping into students' curiosity is in many ways just as easy as asking some simple questions. It's a matter of having a little toolbox of questions and being willing to use them. That isn't too big of a step for a willing teacher, in any subject.

*James:* In addition to simple questions like 'Can you say why?', 'What do you mean?', and 'Does anyone have a different idea?', there's also a process you can go through to create a philosophical exploration of a subject. Each lesson in the book is an example of this. You Present a piece of information about an event, or a disagreement about something, and then ask a Yes/No question that invites different answers. I suppose the most obvious one in the Japanese context as far as history is concerned is the use of the atomic bomb — a topic about which there is still considerable disagreement. What is the

correct interpretation of that event? Was it justified? Often students who are curious will wonder out loud in the lesson about questions that aren't being asked — really asked — in the textbook.

*Alex:* Yes. Even starting a lesson in the normal way and listening with an open ear, you might hear students disagree with something, which is the beginning of a fruitful and potentially productive discussion. Giving their disagreement or reaction room to breathe, and inviting comments from other students, rather than simply continuing with the material, will allow their latent curiosity to develop. You've got to let the conversation happen.

**Is there any practical advantage to studying philosophy? What do students who study philosophy tend to do afterwards?**

*James:* Students who choose philosophy as their only major will do so without caring whether it has a practical advantage or not. People who choose philosophy tend not to care about the practical advantage. So when we ask this question we're really asking how it will benefit students who want to study other things. And that connects back to the things we've discussed earlier about how philosophy can integrate and increase understanding in the high-school setting. Students who want a practical advantage from philosophy will often combine it with study at the frontiers of, say, computer science, or pure mathematics, or they might be students who are planning on becoming lawyers, and they want to develop the ability to be coherently argumentative and persuasive. For those students, philosophy is (in part) a means to that end.

*Alex:* If we're talking about high school, we can say a few things about practical advantages in relation with university entrance exams. If students do a few years of philosophy in high school, they develop a set of transferable skills like analysing complex texts, explaining ideas clearly and presenting arguments forcefully — all of which are a huge advantage for university entrance exams, particularly those involving interviews or other group tasks that call upon student's listening, reasoning, and argumentative skills. In general I think James is right that students with a deep, abiding passion for philosophy will choose to study it without thinking about the practicality of their choice, but I'd say it is a worthwhile thing for anyone to do, just because philosophical questions are fascinating, and thinking about them is pleasurable. In an ideal world, wouldn't all teachers want students to learn how enjoyable it can be to think?