

# FOUNDATIONS IN PHILOSOPHY

## ***A programme for high school students***

### **Introduction**

Since 2007 the UCT Philosophy Department has offered an annual programme in philosophy for high school students from grades ten to twelve. Our programme, 'Foundations in Philosophy', is compact but wide-ranging: participants listen to, talk about, read and write philosophy. The programme exists because we believe that philosophy is an extremely – and perhaps uniquely – valuable activity, and that the offer of philosophy to bright and inquiring teenagers is a precious gift.

While members of English or Mathematics departments can be assured that teenagers have some exposure to their subjects, even if the approach of high school teachers differs from those at tertiary level, philosophers have no such assurance; our subject is not taught in South African schools, either as part of the curriculum or (with a few exceptions) as an extra-mural activity. As members of a university philosophy department, our energies are primarily directed towards tertiary research and teaching, but we are also glad to introduce our subject to younger students.

This is not to say that Foundations in Philosophy is a marketing exercise for the Philosophy Department. Rather, our aim is to introduce philosophy to teenagers. We regard this as important in itself, whether or not the participants go on to study philosophy further.

The remainder of this introduction sets out the format of the programme. Section 2 explains our view that philosophy is extremely valuable to teenagers, and Sections 3 to 5 discuss the partnerships involved in running Foundations in Philosophy, the content of the programme, and concerns – merited and unmerited – that we have had in offering it.

In the first part of Foundations in Philosophy, students listen to and discuss philosophy. For one evening a week over three weeks, students from a variety of high schools, government and private, in the greater Cape Town region meet at UCT for a philosophy session. Each evening begins with a talk from a member of the department. Then students split into small groups, led by departmental tutors, to discuss the topic. Finally, the participants all come together for a question session with the lecturer.

In the second part of the programme, students read and write philosophy. Every participant receives a course reader containing articles and questions covering the topics dealt with in lectures. Students complete the course by submitting a written response to one of the readings a few weeks after the lectures are over. A graduate student in the department then reads the

submissions and sends back written comments on each of them. Certificates are posted to schools for students who complete the course.

The response to the programme has been excellent: feedback has been extremely positive, and enrolment has more than tripled since inception, growing from about 85 students in 2007 to about 300 in 2009.

### **Why philosophy for high school students?**



One might wonder whether philosophy is appropriate at the high school level. Students are busy with school work, especially those working towards their matriculation exam. Surely bright students might have other extra-mural outlets for their interests – chess, for example, or debating – and students interested in the meaning of life and other deep questions could turn to religious groups? Couldn't these activities provide everything that philosophy could bring to high school students?

We think not. Philosophy offers an unusual, perhaps unique combination of three features that make it highly desirable for high school students.

*Broad range of fundamental concerns.* Philosophers are interested in a great variety of the fundamental issues of human existence. For example: Is there a God? Are colours and shapes part of the world, or imposed by our minds? When we say that a sentence is meaningful, what do we mean? Can we be free? Is the mind part of the body, or somehow distinct? Under what conditions can it be just to wage war? Students often awaken to these questions at an early age, and would like to engage with them. Also, one's reflection on these questions, even the more abstract of them, helps to inform one's values and orientation to the world. For teenagers, who need to consider how they plan to lead their lives, reflection on fundamental issues is most helpful.

*Careful, explicit reasoning.* The tools of philosophers are not esoteric; rather, they are the same tools we frequently use – or claim that we use – to reach conclusions in everyday life. 'I thought about it,' we say, 'and I don't want to buy a flat this year because...' In short, we offer reasons. Philosophers use the same methods of reasoning to approach fundamental issues as we employ in everyday life, but the philosophical practice is to make these methods explicit, to categorise them, to shine a light on them. For example, a philosopher who provides an argument will often list every premise and explain how the premises are employed to reach the conclusion. By seeing methods of reasoning made explicit, students not only get practice in using them for deep questions but also in using them well in everyday life. Reasoning is a fine skill to hone early in life.

*No sacred claims.* In philosophy no claims are sacred, in the sense that one may, in principle, deny anything. The field does not demand allegiance to particular claims about God, the mind, ethics, politics, aesthetics or any other area. As a consequence, philosophy is a liberating discipline. High school students who may regard some belief as dubious, but might also feel that questioning it is not permitted, can take courage from philosophical practice, which welcomes a reasoned approach without demanding any particular conclusion. Also, those students who hold some views without ever thinking about why they do so are implicitly challenged by philosophy to examine the roots of their beliefs.

One way to see the value of these three features of philosophy is to consider the qualities that they mitigate against. A concern with fundamental issues works against shallow values and decisions; a focus on careful and explicit reasoning undermines a tendency towards hasty or dishonest judgements; and the philosophical refusal to take any claim as sacred is both liberating and challenging. All this is valuable not only in adulthood, but also earlier in life, when deep-seated mental habits are being formed.

The value of philosophy to teenagers should now be apparent. To encourage deep, careful and open-minded reflection among young people is not only good for them, but also for a society in which these qualities are often lacking.

It should also now be clearer why the other extra-mural school activities mentioned earlier are not a complete substitute for philosophy. In the case of chess and religion, it will probably be intuitively obvious that they differ greatly from philosophy, but it is still useful to articulate these differences. In the case of debating, the distinctions may be less apparent.

- When we play chess, we think extensively, but not about a wide variety of the fundamental issues of human existence. Also, we are not required to set out our reasoning, as we are in philosophy; there is value in making explicit the direction of one's thought, in the way that philosophers do.
- *Religion* may deal with matters relevant to many deep issues of human existence, but not all religious organisations value reasoning highly. Also, many

religions do hold certain claims to be sacred, so that a reasoned denial is not genuinely welcomed (except as an opportunity to convince the denier otherwise).

- *Debating* does have some features in common with philosophy: topics of debate are sometimes similar to philosophical topics, especially in applied ethics and political philosophy, and a number of our philosophy undergraduates were keen high school debaters. But there are significant differences. One is that philosophy involves a broader range of topics. Another is that while debating teams are assigned a position to defend against opponents, philosophers are free to reach and justify the view they take to be best. A third difference is that debating involves a formal contest between opponents in which each team seeks to win, while philosophical discussions do not. Thus, those who are interested in considering and evaluating arguments may be attracted to philosophy even if they do not relish the formal adversarial element of debating.

## Participants and partners

The philosophy department is extensively involved in this programme. Lecturers have included Professor David Benatar, Dr Greg Fried (founder and facilitator of the programme), Dr Elisa Galgut, and Dr Jeremy Wanderer. Tutors for small groups have included a large number of students, from undergraduate to doctoral level. And the departmental administrator, Ms Cindy Gilbert, has been involved extensively since the first programme in liaising with schools and organising venues and tutorial groups. So Foundations in Philosophy is an activity that brings together many people across various roles in the department.

In order for this programme to work, we rely on the kind cooperation of the Western Cape Education Department's four Metropole Education Management and Development Centres (EMDCs). The Metropole EMDCs – North, East, Central and South – together cover several hundred schools within viable travelling distance of UCT. Each of the EMDCs kindly sends our invitation packs to the principals of schools in its ambit, either by email or as photocopies.

Participating schools compile a list of those students who wish to attend, and this list, together with the total attendance fee, is returned to the UCT Philosophy Department. (We keep the fee low enough just to cover our printing costs and tutor salaries; for 2009, it was R60 per student.)

We also require the details of a liaison teacher at the school who is prepared to be the contact between us and the students; we have learnt that it is difficult to keep in touch with high school students directly, and best to rely on their teachers.

Thus, Foundations in Philosophy involves the Philosophy Department (lecturers, graduate and undergraduate students, and administration), the four Metropole EMDCs, high school teacher liaisons, and of course high school students.

The benefits for high school students are obvious, but there are also benefits for the Philosophy Department and for high school teachers:

- Our lecturers find satisfaction in the challenge of communicating complex ideas to those without an academic background, and in philosophical interactions with inquiring, interested students who are fresh to the subject. Our graduate and undergraduate tutors not only enjoy this benefit but also gain valuable teaching experience.
- Some high school teachers have incorporated the themes of Foundations in Philosophy in their classes; for instance, after the 2008 programme on freedom, an English teacher expressed her gratitude for a stimulating discussion of freedom in her class, sparked by the ideas of participants in the programme.

## Details of the programmes

We have offered three programmes so far. In our first year, 2007, we did not attempt to unify the programme with a theme, but rather tried to cover philosophical topics that would be of interest to high school students and that would display something of the range of the subject. We discussed (i) whether punishment can be justified, (ii) what a person's identity consists in, and (iii) a question made famous by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt: what it is to be a bullshitter.

In 2008, for coherence, we introduced a theme. The aim was to find a subject of interest to inquiring teenagers that accommodated diverse philosophical topics and the interests of the teaching staff. The theme for 2008 was freedom, which we took to encompass both freedom of speech and freedom of the will. Participants considered (i) whether determinism is compatible with free will, (ii) John Stuart Mill's arguments for free speech, and (iii) the Danish cartoon crisis, and whether the cartoons of Prophet Mohammed went beyond the legitimate bounds of freedom.

The theme for 2009 was God. We discussed and evaluated (i) the divine command theory of morality, which claims that actions are made right or wrong by God's will, (ii) St Anselm's medieval ontological argument, which purports to establish God's existence solely by reflection on the nature of God, and (iii) Pascal's Wager, a seventeenth century pragmatic argument that we ought to believe in God based on the possible consequences of belief versus non-belief.

In 2010 the theme of the programme is love and sex. Thus, apart from the first year, for which we chose no theme, the topics for the successive years of Foundations in Philosophy are freedom, God, and love and sex – all intended to be of interest to the teenage participants.

## Concerns, merited and unmerited

We have had four concerns about the Foundations in Philosophy programme. Two concerns have turned out to be unmerited; two of them, however, deserve further attention.

*Intimidation.* When lecturing, a philosopher can take at least two approaches. One is to weigh the advantages and problems of each possible view without committing

to any of them. Another is to argue for the superiority of one position over the others. In the second case, we expect students to be critical listeners; to weigh the positions for themselves and object where they think the lecturer is mistaken. While undergraduate students quickly learn to do this, our concern was that high school students might be intimidated by the university environment into thinking that opposition automatically amounts to impertinence. However, this has turned out not to be the case; students are frequently willing to object where they disagree. One possible reason is that the lecturer's approach provides a model for the audience: when a lecturer carefully criticises an alternative view, participants realise that in this arena courteous criticism is not merely permissible but desirable, and that they are free to raise objections to the lecturer's view in the same way. For those students who find the lecture theatre too grand to risk posing questions or objections, small group sessions with tutors, some of whom are just a few years older, offer an inviting place to air their views.

*Apathy.* Since no claims are sacred in philosophy, there may be contending voices about the fundamental issues of human existence. Philosophers do disagree about many of these issues. Our concern was that once high school students realise that there is disagreement on these issues, they could hastily come to believe that there are no right answers to deep questions, or that the right answers can never be found. This might lead to an intellectual apathy, a lack of interest in applying one's mind to deep questions. However, so far as we can see, Foundations in Philosophy does not have this consequence; if anything, it lends intellectual vigour to students. Perhaps bright high school students tend to have the opposite experience from that which concerned us: they might come to realise, through a philosophy programme, that one can reason about deep questions (rather than simply, say, accepting a particular view without reason, or taking all opposing views to be equally right), and that this raises the possibility of discovering the best answer.

*Size.* On one hand, we welcome extensive participation in the programme. On the other hand, as the programme grows, it becomes more difficult to provide tutors for all the students, to coordinate the participants' movements between the lecture venue and tutorials, and to find markers for the written submissions. Also, we have found high school students in large groups to be less disciplined than university students; noise in lectures was sometimes a problem in the 2009 programme. We might request that each school place a cap on the number of students it sends.

*Access.* From the beginning of the programme, we have been concerned that some interested high school students in greater Cape Town would find it difficult to attend and participate in Foundations in Philosophy. Our concern has involved fees, transport and language.

- Students from poorer families may not be able to afford the fees. Our solution has been to offer bursaries for those who enquire. We have had a small take-up of bursaries, but we've also found that students have other financial sources; in 2009, a church group sponsored a group of students who did not request bursaries from us.
- Students who live far from UCT and do not have private transport options find it difficult to attend three evening sessions on campus. Here we have no solution yet. If the programme were offered during the day, or as a single long session, then transport might be easier for students. However, our lecturers have other commitments during the day, and we believe that more than one session is important, since students then have time to mull over and discuss topics between sessions. In future, we may be able to employ the services of organisations that have appropriate transport capacities.
- We do not, of course, assume any background in philosophy. But philosophy does rely on strong skills in the language of instruction. Although the lecturers set out to explain concepts without convoluted language, and to choose readings at an appropriate level, there may be students whose home language is isiXhosa or Afrikaans and whose English language skills are not up to following the material. One possibility here is to provide translations or paraphrases of key terms.

It may be valuable to ask participants (and their liaison teachers) to evaluate the Foundations in Philosophy experience, and to suggest possible improvements. There may be areas of concern other than those we have considered, and we may also come to understand our areas of concern better by requesting evaluations.

## Conclusion

Many students have expressed their appreciation for Foundations in Philosophy. When submitting their written assignments, for example, they have described the programme as 'mind-stretching', 'highly engaging and a breath of fresh air', 'very enlightening' and a 'great opportunity to look into the world of philosophy'. Encouraged by such responses, the Department is committed to the continued hosting of Foundations in Philosophy: our teaching, administrative and tutoring staff prepare annually for the programme, which has become a permanent item on the departmental agenda. For us, the chief impetus of the programme is that philosophy encourages depth, care and willingness to entertain alternative views. All these qualities benefit not only individuals growing towards adulthood, but also the society to which they will contribute.

## References

*Information for this case profile was provided by Dr Gregory Fried of the UCT Philosophy Department.*