

This is a book to help your students experience the wild flight of thinking. Its fun, hands-on lessons are filled with questions and activities designed to baffle and befuddle. Suitable for both primary and secondary students, they can be used to fill a pocket of time in your day or serve as the basis of a philosophy curriculum. The lessons are conversational and work perfectly as whole-class activities. Their metamorphic powers will turn your class of students into an intermingled thinking organism, and what happens next is entirely unpredictable. That is the joy of thinking beans: you can never be quite sure what will grow out of them.

'This is a marvellous resource for teachers looking to inject some creative thinking into the school day. David Birch is a remarkable curator of curiosities, packing in many rich and stimulating ways of engaging students in philosophical enquiry.'

*Steven Campbell-Harris, Pimlico Academy*

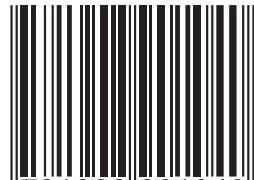
'The ideas and approaches Birch presents never fail to challenge and excite me as a teacher and my students as philosophers.'

*Philip Gaydon, St Paul's School*

'I am jealous of the fun that writer and students must have had in creating these sessions. The quirkiness and memorability of the stimuli makes them a great focus that has been an especial boon on Zoom – you can see and in a few instances, even lick or eat the philosophy!'

*Jason Buckley, The Philosophy Man*

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# THINKING BEANS

## A YEAR OF CLASSROOM PHILOSOPHY LESSONS

DAVID BIRCH

# HOMEWORK PROJECT

I developed this for my students during the coronavirus lockdown, but it can also be used more generally as a homework project. The project, entitled *Journey to Earth*, invites students to imagine themselves as aliens exploring earth for the first time.

In many ways the philosopher experiences herself as an alien (or in the words of David Hume, a ‘strange uncouth monster’) as someone whose mad compulsion to think estranges her from common sense and shared belief. There is, therefore, a degree to which this project can serve as a primer or complement to your students’ broader philosophical investigations.

I’ll outline the structure and various prompts. Feel free to tinker and adapt. The preamble –

*You’re about to embark on a journey to a distant galaxy where you will visit a small and unassuming planet named earth. We know that there is life on earth. We just don’t know what it is like. Your mission is to explore this foreign planet and record your findings. This will be our first contact with these alien life-forms so we are eager for your observations. We want to understand how they live and behave. We want an insight into their minds, their bodies and their actions. You may only have the opportunity to explore a house, or garden, or street – that’s good enough. At this stage we only need a small sample size.*

## (a) Preliminary Stage

Experiments in alien thinking –

*This project will require you to look at your familiar surroundings in a new way. The aim is to try to see it as though you were seeing it for the first time, as though you came from outer space. To help you mentally prepare for this strange exploration of your environment, work through the experiments and exercises below.*

*Choose at least five of these. After conducting an experiment, note down your findings.*

1. **Look down at the sky:** Lie on the ground and imagine that the sky is beneath you. Imagine that your body is stuck to the ground and that you are looking down at the passing clouds and endless blue. (The indoor version: lie on the floor and look down at the ceiling.)
2. **Up and down:** In your head try to count up to 10 and down from 10 at the same time.
3. **Touch and Touched:** With the fingers of one hand stroke the palm of the other. Try to notice the two separate sensations of touching and being touched. What do you feel? One sensation or two?
4. **Become invisible:** Invisibility is easy to achieve. It only requires darkness. To fully experience your invisibility, find a very dark place, a cupboard for instance (you may need to do this at night). Climb into the dark place and take a hand-mirror with you. Hold the mirror up to your face and look at the blackness before you. Keep looking until you start to feel that you are looking at yourself, that you have become the darkness.
5. **Enter the mirror:** Look at yourself in the mirror and imagine that you are the reflection. You are the one inside the mirror. The real you is on the other side looking at you.
6. **Stand over an abyss:** Imagine that your household is suspended over a massive abyss. Just beneath the floorboards is a bottom-

**20. Dream while awake:** Dreams are the effortless free-flowing stuff of the uninterrupted mind. We don't make dreams, we have them. They are experiences that happen to us when we relax our control of the mind and let it do its own thing.

Try to achieve this effortless state of imaginative freedom while awake. Close your eyes and imagine a sycamore seed spinning towards the ground from a great height. From this image let your mind wander, not guiding it in any particular direction, but allowing any manner of strange image to arise and evolve. Try to have a waking dream.

For at least five of these exercises students are asked to record the results i.e. to answer the following questions:

*Could you do it? Yes / No.*

- If you couldn't do it, say why you think this was.
- If you could do it, describe what it was like.

### **(b) Homo sapiens**

Students are asked to investigate three behavioural oddities of Homo sapiens. This involves describing the quirks, documenting why the earthlings think they do them, and then offering their own analyses and understanding of these behaviours –

*Now you've landed, it's time to explore your foreign surroundings. Let's start with the alien inhabitants. To help you blend in we've given you the body of the most populous and seemingly dominant species, known as Homo sapiens. They'll be your first object of study.*

*By observing the aliens we've housed you with, try to notice three things they do which you find genuinely puzzling. This might be something as ordinary as watching TV or laughing or sleeping or singing or crying or talking or raising their voices or smiling. Or it might be specific to the individual you're*

*observing, a curious habit, like biting one's nails. Perhaps it's something the aliens do together, like eating opposite each other on a raised surface they call a table, or dancing, or pretending to gun each other down in video games.*

*Ask the aliens themselves why they do it, then conduct your own analysis and arrive at your own conclusions as to why you think they do it (after all, they may not fully understand why they do the things they do).*

(c) Gender

40 imaginative philosophy lessons, the complete lockdown project and other versatile ideas can all be found in “Thinking Beans: A Year of Classroom Philosophy Lessons”, price £11.99 or five copies for £50 at [www.thephilosophyman.com/shop](http://www.thephilosophyman.com/shop)

(d) Your new alien body

*This is possibly the strangest part of your journey. We have replaced your normal body, the body you've had your entire life, with a human body. This is to help you fully experience how these aliens experience the world. Please take the opportunity to explore your new incarnation, and please enlighten us on the following:*

*Now search the household and look for items whose purpose you just don't understand e.g. mirrors hanging in various places (why do humans constantly want to see reflections?), or paintings (why do humans frame and hang arrangements of colour and shape?), or beds (why do they sleep on raised surfaces suspended above the floor?), or cutlery (why don't they use their hands, which are themselves such marvellous instruments?), or houseplants (why do they bring the outside in?), or pets (why do they live with dependent animals?), and so on.*

*Finally, search your household and take an inventory of the following :*

- Strangest object*
- Ugliest object*
- Most beautiful object*
- Most ingenious object*
- Stupidest object*

#### **(f) Conclusion**

Students are asked to offer an overview of their impressions of earth and its human inhabitants. They are asked to recommend a course of action regarding the future relationship with earth: ignore it, learn from it or conquer it.

# PURPOSE

*Topic* Aristotle wrote that when an eye loses its sight it is no longer an eye. This comment invites two conflicting views. On the one hand, that objects are defined by their uses. And on the other, that they are defined by their purposes. According to the first view an object is defined by what it can do, and to the second by what it is for. That is to say, its nature is either changing and contingent or fixed and ingrained.

*Props* A fork, for illustrative purposes

*Action 1* Tell a story of three Chinese explorers who travelled to Italy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and encountered a new and unfamiliar object: something the Italians call una forchetta. The three explorers puzzled over what it might be. The first speculated that it was a back scratcher, the second a hairbrush (or ‘dinglehopper’ to aficionados of *The Little Mermaid*), while the third believed it was a tool for eating with.

- *Question 1* Which explorer was right?
  - When it is being used as a hairbrush, does it become a hairbrush?
  - Is it many things or just one thing?
  - Is it always a fork (a thing for eating with) no matter how it is used?
  - If it becomes the thing it is being used as, what is it when it’s not being used?
  - If one of the explorers is using one of the objects as a hairbrush while another explorer is using another one to scratch his back with, are they holding different objects?

Feel free to use different objects in the story. Anything will do. You could even present an uncommon kitchen utensil and ask the class to guess what it might be. The philosophical point you're addressing is whether a thing's nature and identity is determined by how it is used or by something else entirely; the intentions of its maker, for instance. There are implications for both views and the questions below address each. *Question 2* is tailored for those who answer that all three explorers were right and that use does determine nature, while *Question 3* is for those who believe that the intentions of a thing's maker, the purpose it is made to fulfil, determines its intrinsic nature.

*Action 2* Ask for two volunteers to role-play. One child (*x*) is in the park on all-fours looking for worms (a budding entomologist). The other child is a blind person out for a walk. The blind person becomes tired and wishes to rest. Mistaking the entomologist for a bench, he sits on her.

— *Question 2* Is *x* a bench?

- When being used as a bench, does *x* become a bench?
- When being used as a bench, is *x* still a human?
- Is *x* both a human and a bench?
- Can only *x* tell us what she is?
- If *x* consented to being used as a bench, would she then be a bench?

*Action 3* Tell the story of a lazy couple who hated washing up. So contemptuous were they of the chore, they decided to have a child just so they could raise it to wash the dishes. Since their surname was Washer, they naturally named the child Dish, and from her earliest years Dish was trained to wash up. That's all she ever did. She stood at the sink scrubbing and wiping. After all, that's what she was made for.

— *Question 3* Is Dish Washer a dish washer?

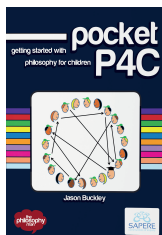
- Is Dish Washer the creation of her parents?



- Who is Dish Washer's creator?
- Does Dish Washer have a purpose?
- Do your parents determine your purpose?

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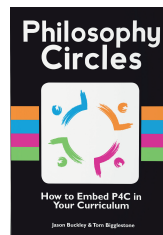
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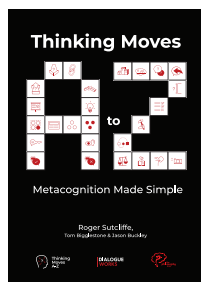
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