

BIG QUESTIONS AND  
DEBATES IN PHILOSOPHY:  
**WHAT DO  
YOU THINK?**



# WHY STUDY PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy is about freedom: the freedom to think carefully about things that matter.

What you get out of studying philosophy isn't just greater knowledge about this or that topic, philosopher, or philosophical system. Studying philosophy enlarges your ways of seeing and relating to the world – it expands your abilities as thinkers, arguers, researchers, and advisers. Philosophy is about bettering you as an individual and enhancing your confidence and transferable skills.

So, studying philosophy doesn't just make you a philosopher – it can make you a better scientist, mathematician, historian, writer, journalist, actor, filmmaker, poet, politician, lawyer, and so much more.

Think of a philosophy degree as a stepping stone towards a diverse range of possible futures and careers. Through philosophy, your potential can be endless.

The intention of this booklet is to give you a taste of the range of questions that we ask in the study of philosophy. These questions vary from traditional problems in ethics to problems in feminist epistemology, from debates about democracy to the nature of religion. These are questions which have shaped our thinking here at UEA and are questions which you can help answer – or possibly add even more questions.

So, have a read – see if the questions posed by this booklet stimulate your thinking or change your relationship to the world.

**AND THINK... WHAT CAN PHILOSOPHY DO FOR YOU?**

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## Q1.

HOW CAN  
PHILOSOPHY BE  
APPLIED TO THE  
REAL WORLD?

Our ethical systems and philosophies come into play in the fascinating questions and dilemmas that confront us in many applied fields, including biological sciences and medicine.

APPLIED PHILOSOPHY  
TACKLES IMPORTANT  
QUESTIONS SUCH AS:

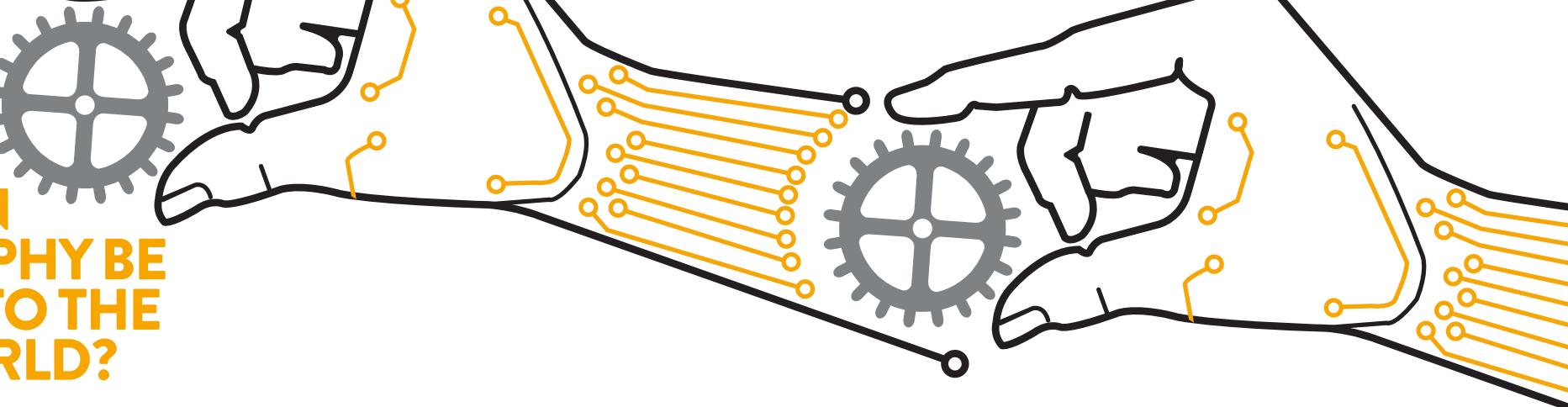
- Is it morally wrong to genetically engineer foetuses?
- Is it okay to experiment on some humans if doing so will improve the lives of many?
- How does race shape the attitudes and measurements of medical practitioners?

## THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Thought experiments and case studies can help prepare us to apply philosophy in new real-world cases.

## Consider the following:

- 1: Suppose you are due to have a child, but the doctor tells you that the child will probably have a serious disability.
  - Do you have a right to allow that child to be engineered to be biologically 'healthy'? Do you have a right to determine the existence of the child for it?
  - Do we have the responsibility to ensure the best possible future for our children, or are there things that we must not tamper with?
  - What if the disability will cause harm – are we obligated to prevent this?
  - If you think, 'it depends' – on what?



- 2: Suppose we could potentially create cures to devastating diseases, or otherwise enhance the human species in general, but only through a process of conducting invasive experiments on some individuals.
  - Is the harm and possible death caused through experimentation worth the goodness or pleasure that those experiments may entail?
  - Is this a risk worth taking?

- 3: Medical doctors, scientists, and psychologists cannot avoid letting some of their preconceptions influence their practice and research. This might include racial prejudices or conceptions of race as a biological construct. This can, and has had, adverse effects on people
  - Is a conception of science as aiming at 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' itself part of the problem?

from ethnic minorities. Psychology, for example, has historically been informed by racist, misogynistic, and classist prejudices (why is it that the best psychological services are locked behind high costs?)

- Is the supposed objectivity of science and scientific methods corruptible by pre-formed or habitual racial prejudices?
- Does this undermine the supposed neutrality of scientific method and as such create problems in the distribution of scientifically informed health care?
- Is a conception of science as aiming at 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' itself part of the problem?

WHAT WILL YOU APPLY  
PHILOSOPHY TO?

If you choose to study applied ethics and philosophy at UEA, you will confront scenarios which demand and challenge our thinking. Philosophy equips us with the techniques and the confidence in our own values so as to make life – and the myriad of dilemmas and controversies we face – more navigable. Debates in applied philosophy show the immense value that philosophical thinking can have in the real world, which ultimately shows how utterly necessary philosophers are. Philosophy readies us for the big decisions we will have to make in life.

## Q2.

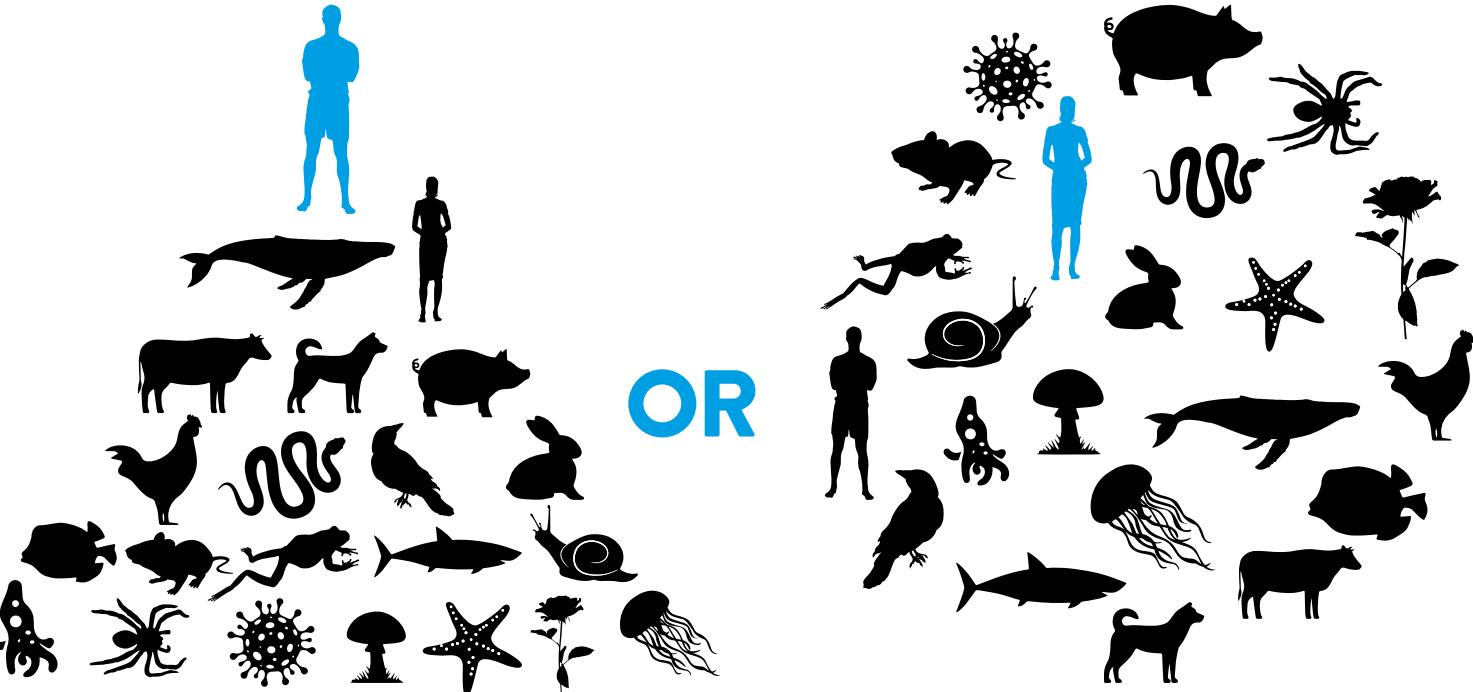
HOW CAN  
PHILOSOPHY  
HELP US TO AVOID  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
CATASTROPHE?

**The relationship between human beings and the natural world is the basis of everything we are and yet we have failed to avoid destroying it, so far. Through philosophy, can we change our relation to our planet and save it from disaster?**

ENVIRONMENTAL  
PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS  
ASK QUESTIONS SUCH AS:

- What is the value of non-human species and the environment?
- Do you have an ethical obligation to change the way you live in order to save the planet?
- Do the needs of non-human species and ecosystems outweigh our perceived needs and pleasures?
- Are we ethically obligated to alter our present in order to secure the future for the next generations?

The best philosophy is critical and creative. It critiques existing ways of thinking and develops new ways of thinking where necessary. In environmental philosophy we



think about how changing our ways of thinking can contribute to the fight to avert environmental catastrophe. Consider the question, 'What is the value of the environment?' In the modern era, value has often been thought of as essentially human in two senses. Firstly, there is the idea that things get their value from the process of human beings valuing them. Human beings project their wants and desires onto nature and that is the only value that nature has. Secondly, it is often thought to follow from the idea that values are a human projection onto nature that all values must ultimately boil down to what is good for humans. After all, if value comes from the projection of

human desires, then valuing anything in nature is simply part of the process of trying to fulfil our own desires. That is why environmentalists have drawn on older ways of thinking, emphasising that things in the natural world have intrinsic value. The process of valuing is not one of projecting our desires onto nature, but of discovering the intrinsic value in nature. But there are still important questions to ask about this vision. If values are simply there in things, isn't any appreciation that humans and other creatures have of that value incidental? The natural world might be just as valuable, and perhaps far better off, without any creatures capable of appreciating its value.

An alternative, new idea attempts to forge a middle path. Value is not a static, intrinsic property of natural things, nor is it narrowly confined to the projection of human desires. Instead, value is itself 'ecological' – generated in the innumerable, dynamic relations between living creatures and their environments. Human beings and some other living creatures make ecological value possible through an open-ended appreciation of those relations.

WHAT ROLE CAN  
YOU PLAY?

At UEA, you will get a chance to engage with these debates in a newly developing field of philosophy that could prove integral to averting environmental catastrophe. Topics you may want to look at can include the ethics of climate change; value theory and nature; human-animal relationships; the ways science, art and politics affect our relationships with the natural world.

## D1.

DEBATE:  
IS IT WRONG TO  
EAT ANIMALS?

By comparison with the general population, a greater proportion of philosophers are vegetarians or vegans than you would expect.

Why might a philosopher think that one should be avoiding eating animals?

Are there considerations that make it irrational or immoral to do so?



YES

## OPINION #1

## It is wrong to eat animals

It is wrong to impose suffering or death on animals unless it is necessary to do so. There is no necessity to eat animal foods. Governmental and professional health organizations unanimously maintain that a sound plant-based diet is perfectly adequate (and may even be better) for human health. All the suffering and death we impose on animals is unnecessary.

We reject human slavery because we recognize that human beings are not property. There is no reason to deny to sentient nonhumans the one right that we accord to all humans – a right not to be property. And that means we cannot eat, wear, or use them.

Animal agriculture is an ecological disaster. The argument that animal use may help us live more sustainably ignores the fact that animal agriculture accounts for a large proportion of global greenhouse gasses and has other devastating effects on the environment.

It takes many more tons of plants to produce a single ton of animal protein. We could eradicate world hunger if we ate plants directly rather than feeding them to animals.

If animals are property, we prioritise economic benefit over the interests of the animals themselves. We let animal welfare standards fall to make profits higher. We have seen this for years in factory farming. Farmers can't afford to care about whether their animals are healthy unless it affects yield and profits.

## OPINION #2

## It is morally okay to eat some animals

We shouldn't rank human interests above animal interests, but we shouldn't become vegetarians or vegans. We'd be unfairly taking space from animals if we gave up animal farming. Animals have a right to live where they've always lived. We shouldn't let the human population increase at their expense.

We mustn't privilege the human species over other species or deny animals the right to continue in their generations-old relationship with us. Rather, we should reduce our excessive and wasteful demand for food.

Natural animal products have many uses and are better for the environment than artificial petrochemicals. Animal dung is a natural fertiliser, whereas chemical fertilisers drive third-world farmers into permanent debt, and yield nutrient-deficient crops. Leather, bone, wool and so on make superior equipment, and (unlike the artificial substitutes) do not end up polluting the

land and sea. By pasturing sheep, shepherds make a living from land that's otherwise unproductive, both here and abroad.

You're living ethically if your diet and clothing are made by local producers from local products, supporting a varied local economy, with all the waste products ploughed back into the system. Somehow, in the West, affluent people seem to prefer to waste their grazing land, put their fishermen out of a job, throw plastic into the sea, and ferry their food from the third world using dirty fossil fuels. This is exploitation.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?  
HOW WOULD YOU WORK OUT WHICH OF THESE CONFLICTING OPINIONS IS CLOSEST TO THE TRUTH?

At UEA we tackle important questions concerning both how you live as an individual and how we organise our society. Recent years have seen significant shifts in lifestyles, opinions, and politics. Will a shift towards plant-based diets be next? Should it? And how can philosophy help steer our course?

NO

# Q3.

## WHAT IS FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY?

Feminism is a broad political, social, moral, and ethical project. At its core, feminism claims women and men are of equal inherent worth. But because many societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality. Hence, feminism is not just a body of theory. It is a real movement for social change. Feminist theory and practice provides important insights into issues of class, race, power, identity, and ideology—important issues for every kind of person there is.



### EQUALITY?

Feminist philosophy is a large and diverse family of philosophical theories and practices that draw on the feminist tradition. Feminist philosophies challenge and expose systemic power imbalances and inequalities – whether found in language, government, discourse, or other socio-economic structures. In this way, one can identify strategies for criticism and transformation, as well as a critique of the very tools used to stage criticism and enact transformation.

Our teaching covers many issues from feminist philosophers and philosophies. Just two of the many issues you might encounter are:

- 1: How can feminism inform our philosophical responses to problems and controversies in other academic fields?
  - Prejudices in male-dominated research fields can produce inequalities, misogynistic habits of thought and action, which further perpetuate power distinctions

from the humanities to science. What are the best arguments to fight against these prejudices?

- Similar concerns arise when considering the study of history. How may the sexist prejudices of a historical researcher impact readings and interpretations of history? Is history gendered? How would our understanding of history change if we were to pay more attention to voices that have been systematically marginalised?
- Are sex and gender one and the same thing? Is gender constructed? For that matter, is sex also a social construct?
- What impact do gendered norms have on how we construct our self-identities? How are gendered norms used in the service of oppressive power structures?

### HOW WILL YOU BE INSPIRED?

At UEA, you will be encouraged to engage with a diverse range of feminist philosophers who will have a real and profound effect on how you understand and decide to act in the world. Feminist philosophies offer new perspectives on both traditional and contemporary ethical, social and political debates. They also provide the foundations for understanding and defining one's place in the world by inspiring different forms of activism.

## Q4.

WHAT IS  
RELIGION?

The philosophy of religion examines the workings of religion and the meanings behind religious doctrines and concepts. It asks general questions about the nature of religion, such as, 'What is the relation between religious faith and philosophical proof?' And it asks questions about specific religious concepts, doctrines, and arguments that play a role in certain religions, such as, 'Which is the strongest argument for the Buddhist doctrine of non-self?'

Here we look at a general question:

**WHAT DISTINGUISHES RELIGION FROM OTHER SETS OF BELIEFS OR PHILOSOPHIES?**

It is difficult to specify a single set of characteristics that capture the nature of religion. One interesting challenge is posed by the Jedi in the *Star Wars* film franchise. Should our conception of what constitutes religion be broadened to encompass the Jedi?

One may ask a question like this: Can Jedi be followed as a religion? The *Star Wars* films are watched and enjoyed by hundreds of millions and have effectively taken on quasi-mythic status, prompting various philosophical debates and controversies as well as near-religious worship of figures and icons associated with the franchise. The Jedi religion

of the films has its own code of practice that champions the ethics of peace, non-violence, inner balance and harmony with all things, a renouncing of emotion, and eventual transcendence. We can ask similar questions about the Sith from the same films. The Sith Code celebrates the expression of passion, strength and violence, overcoming, self-improvement and empowerment—it ultimately desires freedom.

Could these paths be conceivably followed in the real world, regardless of the existence of the Force? As cinema becomes our dominant form of mythmaking, could a turn to modern myths like *Star Wars* as sources of faith and life-meaning be justified, even preferable?

**MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU**

At UEA philosophy of religion is about something much deeper than arguing for or against religious faith in order to establish the facts. Philosophy of religion must be more than that because religions are much more than collections of arguments and claims. Philosophy of religion can examine practices such as ritual and prayer. It can offer rich insights into our lives and societies. It equips the philosopher with the tools to understand the meanings of culturally significant ideas, faiths, practices and worldviews, and so can help cultivate the intellectual virtues of openness and understanding. And it can lead us to examine and rethink the role that religions, faith, ritual, and myths can play both in the lives of individuals and societies.



# Q5.

## WHAT IS ANIMISM?

**Philosophy is not the product of a single culture nor does it have a single historical trajectory. All cultures have their own philosophical traditions and it is important for philosophers to have a broad perspective and learn from many cultures and traditions. Until recently, many rich philosophical traditions tended to be overlooked by philosophy degrees. Fortunately, this is now changing. But there are important questions about how previously neglected areas of philosophy should be approached.**

### TAKE 'ANIMIST PHILOSOPHIES' FOR EXAMPLE

Looking outside the western philosophical canon, some environmental activists and environmental philosophers have encountered and co-opted certain 'animist' philosophies and practices. These philosophies and practices express an attitude towards the world, rather than a systematic doctrine, in which natural phenomena are imbued with a life-force and energy. In this sense, thinking becomes a living activity, a relational experience with a living world. For 'animist' practices, life is unified, and this informs attitudes towards it.

But 'animism' is itself a problematic term. Many so-called animists would not refer to their philosophies as animist philosophies. Moreover, 'animism' is an umbrella term that has historically been used by Western philosophers to group and systematise

'primitive' ways of thought, and in a way that is insensitive to the many important differences between the various different systems of philosophical thought the term is used to describe.

**This raises important questions such as:**

- Are the attempts of western philosophers to systematise and describe non-western philosophical beliefs problematic for our understanding of them?
- What implications do our views and perspectives on world philosophies and traditions have for our understandings of people from around the world?
- Is the appropriation of 'animist' beliefs to serve personal political and philosophical agendas, such as environmentalism, problematic?

### WHAT WILL YOUR APPROACH BE?

The study of non-western philosophies is essential to a philosophical education. By exploring the range of beliefs, philosophies, and religions from around the world, we can improve our cultural insight and sensitivity to diversity and inclusivity. But it is worth thinking carefully about how we do it!

## D2.

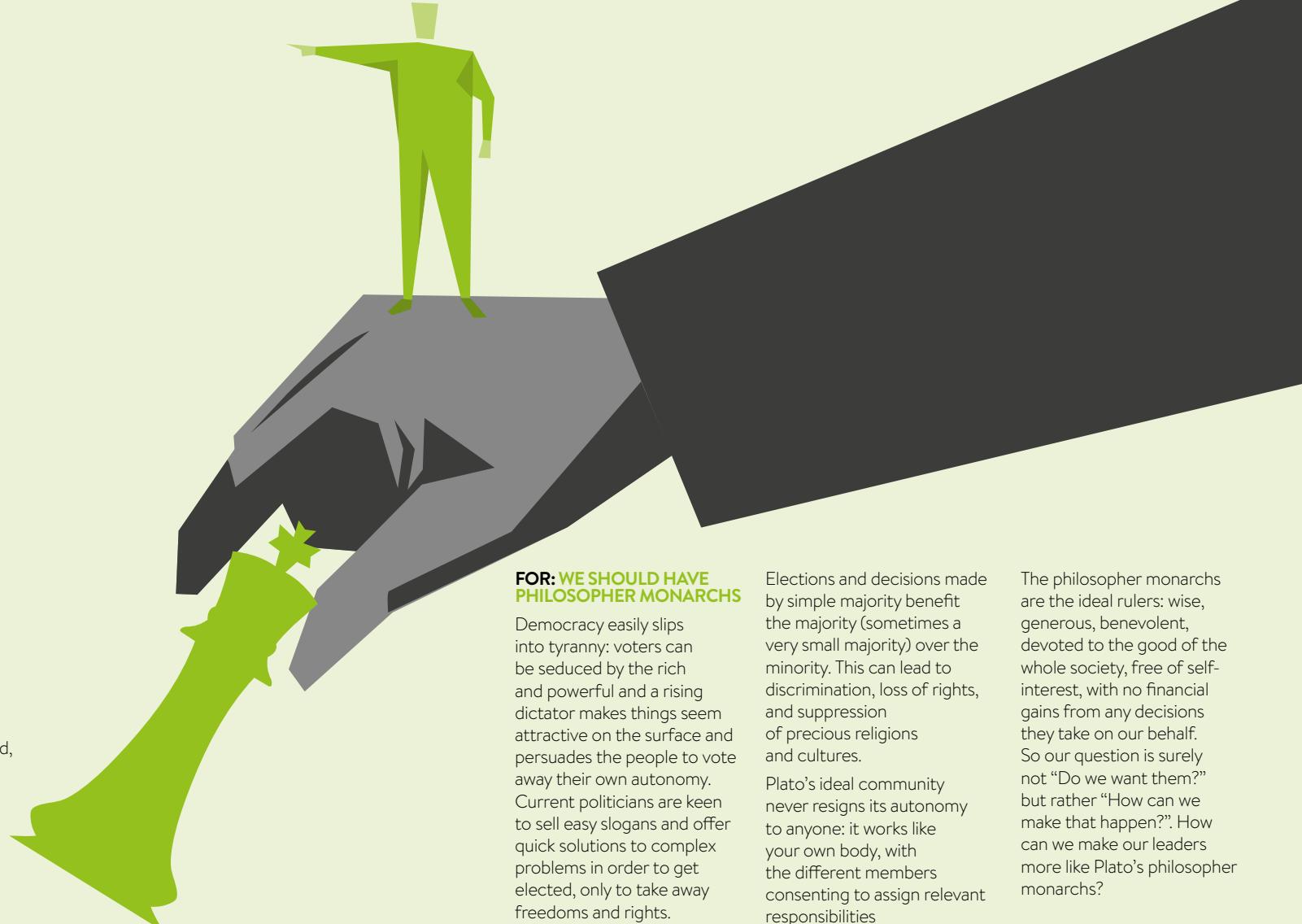
DEBATE 2:  
SHOULD WE  
BE RULED BY  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
DICTATORS?

**Philosophers challenge our conventional worldviews. As the world changes, old aspects of our society that we felt comfortable with need to be exposed to new scrutiny.**

Philosophy can help us analyse the pillars of our society and assess their contribution to making a fairer world. Philosophy can and should inform policy and evaluate possible changes and developments across a range of societal, political, and corporate spheres. For instance, philosophers typically ask controversial questions, such as: Is democracy harmful?

This question is crucial and timely, as we see the far right winning electoral successes and the use of dark money to influence voters during elections.

In Ancient Greece, Plato argued that the ideal political system would have 'philosopher monarchs' in charge, to avoid the risks that arise if ordinary people have a vote. Because in a democracy, corrupt or stupid rulers can get elected, and, indeed, people can be persuaded to vote for tyranny. Are we now seeing things that prove that Plato was right to be worried? Is democracy worth having, despite the risks? Perhaps democracy has a special value of its own, which outweighs the damage it can lead to? But is it just to allow a majority to make a decision that is hurtful to a disadvantaged minority? Perhaps democracy is intrinsically unfair?



**FOR: WE SHOULD HAVE PHILOSOPHER MONARCHS**

Democracy easily slips into tyranny: voters can be seduced by the rich and powerful and a rising dictator makes things seem attractive on the surface and persuades the people to vote away their own autonomy. Current politicians are keen to sell easy slogans and offer quick solutions to complex problems in order to get elected, only to take away freedoms and rights.

We shouldn't give decision-making power to people who lack expertise or to people with dangerous views. We've seen how easily bad and potentially harmful decisions get made in referendums, and that's also how dangerous and ignorant populist politicians get elected.

Elections and decisions made by simple majority benefit the majority (sometimes a very small majority) over the minority. This can lead to discrimination, loss of rights, and suppression of precious religions and cultures.

Plato's ideal community never resigns its autonomy to anyone: it works like your own body, with the different members consenting to assign relevant responsibilities to those best equipped for them.

Just as you'd take advice from the expert in any important decision, so also, when politicians make decisions on our behalf, we'd want them to think things through with wise advice and be people who understand the issues.

The philosopher monarchs are the ideal rulers: wise, generous, benevolent, devoted to the good of the whole society, free of self-interest, with no financial gains from any decisions they take on our behalf. So our question is surely not "Do we want them?" but rather "How can we make that happen?". How can we make our leaders more like Plato's philosopher monarchs?

**DEBATE 2:**  
**SHOULD WE BE RULED BY**  
**PHILOSOPHICAL DICTATORS?**  
*CONTINUED...*

**AGAINST: WE SHOULD  
NOT HAVE PHILOSOPHER  
MONarchs**

It's dangerous to concentrate power in the hands of a few. Who watches the watchmen?

What's attractive about philosopher monarchs is that they'd make decisions based on truth and right, not on the interests of parties or institutions. But who decides what's right or wrong? Who decides what's true and false? Is there some universal good that's good for everyone?

Politics is about finding a compromise between conflicting groups: rather than aspiring to truth or rightness, it tries to resolve conflict. A good deliberative democracy does not impose majority views on the oppressed minority. Realistically, we cannot expect impartiality in politics, but we can demand

accountability; but for that to work, all citizens need to be invited to understand the issues and all must have a voice. Philosopher monarchs would have no accountability because we'd have no power to decide on who rules us.

Are elite thinkers really incorruptible? Can any individual truly be free from individual self-interest? What happens when the philosopher monarchs disagree?

Rather than hope for philosopher monarchs, our best bet is to engage critically with our politics, to find a voice and channel the frustration we feel with current politics into activism, protest, making our views heard and insisting on the changes that are needed to make things better within, not without, a democratic process.

**DO YOU LOVE  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
CONTROVERSY?**

Philosophy at UEA is all about asking difficult, contentious, and controversial questions.

But these questions are crying out to be asked. In a world where truth is at risk from fake "information" and our institutions are corrupted with influence bought for money, we badly need citizens equipped with critical thinking skills and argumentation techniques.

We must expose what's rotten in politics, and in society more generally, including both the dangers and the benefits of democracy. We'd love to have you come and study with us and to develop these vital skills and attitudes that equip you to go out into the real world and change things for good.

# WHAT DO YOU THINK?

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit our course pages for more information on what we offer [www.uea.ac.uk/philosophy/undergraduate-degrees](http://www.uea.ac.uk/philosophy/undergraduate-degrees)

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