

BEING HUMAN

Applied Philosophy

JAN - MAR 2023

first philosophy 

*No matter how hard we try to
ignore it, the mind always
knows truth and wants clarity.*

- Toni Morrison

Our Philosophy



Improve the Self | Benefit the Society

In response to the pressures of financial rationalisation, universities are increasing course fees while cutting funding, particularly in the Arts & Humanities. Academia is increasingly judged by financial performance and student 'reviews', rather than edification, knowledge, or the pursuit of Truth. In 2020/21, the Australian government increased Arts course fees by 113% while decreasing prices for STEM courses, similar to trends in the USA, UK and Canada. Research commercialisation is another example of neoliberal thinking permeating academia and hindering our institutions of knowledge.

As Universities focus on vocational 'career-ready' skills, they award qualifications based on repetitive 'data driven' assessments at the expense of a holistic education: one that develops humane and knowledgeable critical thinkers, well educated into a mode of reasoning distinctly human. This 'siloes' approach to education, inspired by the division of labour to which it seeks to conform, often leaves graduates with numerous blindspots.

This is why First Philosophy focuses on a holistic and multidisciplinary approach often absent from the university. Connecting the dots between seemingly independent and distinct fields gives us a wider perspective in understanding ourselves and the world around us. Connecting ethics with economics, philosophy with science, literature with psychology, provides us insight into the human condition, the multifaceted creatures we are.

Our Philosophy



More importantly, we inculcate a desire to care about an internal change that knowledge brings to our lives, one inevitably missing in the corporatisation of academia. Thus Knowing affects Being.

The current public discourse around topical issues requires clear reasoning, sound knowledge, and a critical comparative study of worldviews. Our courses are developed to fill this gap by providing the substantive knowledge, clear-headed thinking, and rigorous analysis that we should come to hope and expect from the Humanities.





Course Outcomes

Tackle the Big Questions

Hone and develop the intrinsic capacity to ask and seek answers to life's Big Questions by critically engaging the works of the greatest minds. What is truth? What does it mean to live or be educated? How do we envision a life and death of meaning and purpose?

Cultivate Existential Intelligence

Cultivate existential intelligence through collective values and intuition to understand others and the world around us. Thus, not only see the big picture but also couple vision with action, in order to address the individual, collective, and social issues that life throws at us.

Develop Intellectual Rigour

Develop how to think deeply by expanding your ability to conceptualise, define, and reason. A lifelong pursuit of knowledge enriches and rewards like no other, where ideas connect the dots to provide a detailed understanding of the world and ways of questioning, thinking, and solving problems.



Course Delivery



The Course covers:

- Content: 10 weekly seminars on 10 topics
- Dates: 2 January to 12 March, 2023.

Each week, students complete:

- 2-hour live seminar (for standard participants), and,
- A set of readings. or lectures or short video before the seminar.

Please note:

- **No Assessments:** There are no assessments for this course. Students may request to present on a topic should they wish to be assessed.
- **Readings:** Readings, videos, and other resources are divided into Essential (will greatly aid in participating in the class) and Supplementary (for further interest).
- **Seminars:** Weekly 2 hour seminar which can include lectures / presentations, discussions, and group readings.



Course Structure

Ten topics | Ten weeks

1. **WONDER:** All pursuit of truth begin with intellectual curiosity, a question to answer or a problem to solve beginning with wonder.
2. **TRUTH:** Knowledge of reality as it truly is; how can we know and affirm Truth in an age of relativism?
3. **HUMAN BEING:** The human being has a capacity to question, ponder, and reason, like no other. What makes the human *human*?
4. **KNOWLEDGE & EDUCATION:** We spend time and money on education. But what does it mean to know or be educated?
5. **PURPOSE:** What does it mean to have a purpose in life, and how do we find it?
6. **DESIRE:** Humans of all ages desire something. What is it that we desire? How do we understand our needs, wants and desires?
7. **FREEDOM:** We often take freedom for granted. Yet with and without freedom - political, economic, moral - we suffer greatly.
8. **BEING WITH OTHERS:** How do we relate to the Other - be it the human or non-human relationships we have?
9. **SCIENCE & THE FUTURE:** What is science and how did it evolve? How is scientific truth manifested, affirmed, and rejected?
10. **THE EXAMINED LIFE:** "The unexamined life is not worth living" said Socrates. What is an examined life and why bother with it?

Calendar



Week 1 - January 2nd: **Wonder**

Week 2 - January 9th: **Truth**

Week 3 - January 16th: **Human Being**

Week 4 - January 23rd: **Knowledge & Education**

Week 5 - January 30th: **Purpose**

Week 6 - February 6th: **Desire**

Week 7 - February 13th: **Freedom**

Week 8 - February 20th: **Being with Others**

Week 9 - February 27th: **Science & The Future**

Week 10 - March 6th: **The Examined Life**

Course Completion: March 12th

MODULES OUTLINE

BEING HUMAN



Introduction

THE ART OF
LIVING WELL
AND THE ART
OF DYING
WELL, ARE ONE

- EPICURUS

An aspiring undergraduate philosopher at the University of Melbourne once quipped: “Philosophy is what everything else becomes when you think about it hard enough”. This is not a bad definition.

When we look closer, the world of appearances gives way to another world of sometimes obvious and sometimes not-so-obvious things, along with the obvious and not-so-obvious relations between those myriad things.

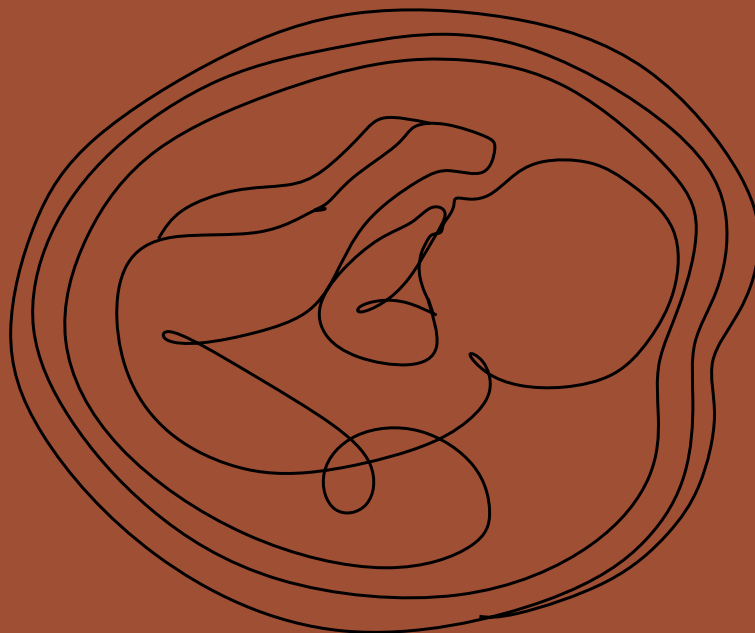
It was to this end that the 20th century philosopher Wilfrid Sellars stated “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”. An intuitive follow up question would seem to be: why even the interest in ‘things’ and the way they ‘hang together’ in the first place? Sellars’ definition, while getting at that background structure of philosophy, leaves out the philosopher who does the philosophy, the person doing all this thinking, and the essential lifeblood that must course through such person’s veins if they are to be true seekers of Wisdom, the highest goal of the task. Philosophy after all is philo-sofia, love-of-wisdom, and like any form of love, requires a lover, a beloved, and the untiring work that joins the two.

*There are times for those in the art of teaching where a long enough engagement with a student interweaves enough threads of thought to give rise to a pattern and a path of intellectual discovery. In these moments of discovery and finding of intellectual insight - both as learners and teachers - we find the fulfilment of that timeless truth articulated by Aristotle in the opening of his Metaphysics:
“all men by their nature, desire to know”.*

The reality is though that most courses and programs are not designed to see that we see things through, or even that we are given the tools and experiences to, in the course of our lives, see things through. In other words, they fail to adequately bring us to the object of our natural desire: knowledge; nor do they clearly direct us on how attain this aim. To this point an academician will retort that knowledge, of anything, is a long time coming, and the structure of conventional academic programs reflect this drawn out arc.

I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'

Alasdair MacIntyre



No doubt there is truth to this and it is, of course, not *that* truth that is contested. What is contested is that the particular starting points, assumptions, methods and aims of much contemporary philosophical study denies the everyday person their natural thoughts, concerns, and troubles, those that they are aware of and those that they are not, the deep reflection they stand to benefit from. This school, method, course, however you like to conceive it and however it will in time come to be conceived, aims to make the hard-thinking that characterises the philosophical endeavour a first act, close at hand and encouraging to all in its participation.

What follows are the overviews of four of the ten themes that we will be exploring in the course. You may notice that the course structure breaks from the standard academic practice of neatly compartmentalising philosophy into subjects such as 'Introduction to Political Philosophy' or 'Introduction to Ethics' and so on. We have intentionally stayed away from dividing it along these lines. Here we'll discuss a literary philosophy, aptly once described as 'not an ism but a prism, through which intellectual light would shine in many colours'. This is an attempt to think broadly about some fundamentally and universally interesting and applicable questions about the human condition, bringing together cultural critique and analysis of art such as film and song, the exploration of human themes through literary passages, and old-school scrutinising philosophical analysis.



TOPICS

1 WONDER

Some years ago, a doctor in a small town in rural Australia was carrying out his rounds at the local hospital when he was visited by a friend. The visit was prompted, in part, by questions that were on the doctors mind, questions of the sort that could only be made sense of in those conversations where “ever wonder what this is all about man?” pivots and centres the whole discussion. On one morning, as they sat on the grassy slope that led down to the town lake staring at the sunny waters, talking about their lives and those questions that impinged upon the understanding of the meaning of the doctor's own, his friend raised the inevitable topic, or rather, mood, of Metaphysics: “imagine, if some monster was to rear its head out of that lake right now” he said “we’d all be amazed, shocked, in a state of wonder... but if you really think about it, there’s no difference between something like that happening, and this grass here, except we’re more familiar with the grass and less familiar with the monster”. The doctor regarded the point, and from what crossed his face, his friend saw that, somewhere, it had landed. The world, that vastness that spreads itself immeasurably far beyond our own personal horizons, is a thing unto itself.

The substance of this intuition is a timeless truth which first appeared upon the consciousness of the very first of our kind. Staring upon the plains, the skies, the seas, they must have soon realised: we are strangers in our own world.

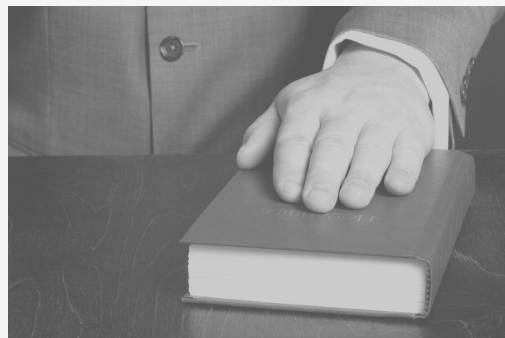
Wonder connotes that emotion of amazement that we feel when we perceive something rare or unexpected, and in taking from the anecdote above, something unfamiliar. The familiar, for most, borders on the mundane. And the mundane is that every-day place wherein we breed and are bred into boredom. Boredom however should not be confused with a state of weary and apathetic inactivity - no. There are many busy folk with impervious timetables pencilled to the margins with meetings and movements, who are bored. They brim with 'energy', carefully curate their lives, and are constantly given to self-help guides to reach their 'life goals', all the while accompanied by the thin din of boredom in the backdrop of their lives. This is not entirely their fault, given the sort of thing the human being is, and given the fact that the lives we are (mis)educated into living is not all too conducive to nurturing those faculties and capacities that make up who and what we are - but more on this later. Boredom, we'll say for now, is the negative opposite of Wonder, and so we must first come to terms with this 'first philosophical stance' towards the world; we must learn how and why to wonder.

In this first theme we will explore the philosophical mood of Wonder and its primary object: the world, existence, 'Being' itself. We will ask if whether the familiar must be tediously so. Is it inevitable that that which we have become accustomed to is our permanent state, for better or worse, or is there a way in which we can continuously see the world anew thereby seeing it under a new light that discloses to us new possibilities of being? We will explore theories of intelligence that make sense of how we are sensitised into this existential disposition and how and why it is important that we continue to cultivate such sensitivities. In doing all this we are laying the essential foundations for a systematic program in philosophical thinking upon which we can build a coherent and expansive understanding of our world.

2 TRUTH

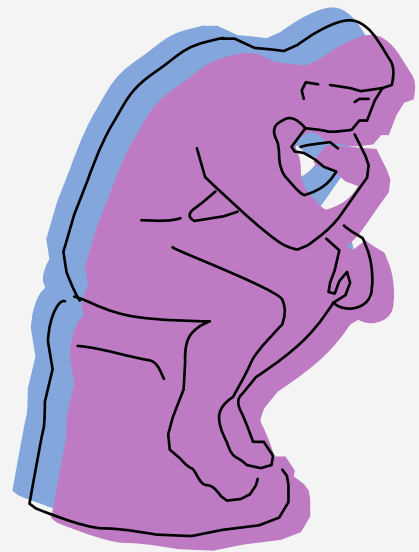
Having set the mood we now turn to the traditional quest of philosophy: the search for Truth, and ask how and why this search remains as new and as pressing as it always has, and always will be.

Human beings are truth seeking by nature. We ask someone for the time, in order to know the actual time, the time as it really is, the true time. We enrol in subjects at university in order to learn what we hope are true accounts of the world. We step into our lab and attempt to work out the physics of the world in order to work out true theories of how the world is. We praise someone for his moral character of being truthful and are hurt when we find ourselves the victim of his lie: the truth, we see, is everywhere.



As children, when we are told to “tell the truth” and when we distort are asked “is that what really happened?” we find we are called on to make a connection between the real and the truth. This relation between that which is true, and that which is real will set the stage for much of our thinking in this and across the other themes. There is an intelligible mystery and a fascinating connection between the Real and the lives we live as creatures who search for meaning in all the things that we do, all of which in the end amount to the lives that we live and must live with.

Our time has been described as a 'post-truth' era, one in which facts, truthful statements about the world, hold little or less sway over the affairs of our lives than they purportedly used to. If our lives as individuals, as families, communities, societies, politics and ultimately as a globally interconnected human race is at the whim of forces other than Truth, what are we to make of this? What, if anything, have we lost, and where to from here? When we are disconnected from the Real we lose the one thing we all have in common: reality, a shared world, one that exists beyond any of our own individual existences. Such a world is one that preceded us in being and may well endure in being long after we are gone.



In this theme then we will wonder at the Truth and its connection to Reality. We will explore a range of issues such as the value of Truth and its relationship to *language*, the bridge that we use to bind our thoughts to the World beyond our minds. In doing so we can ask what happens when we burn this bridge: what implications for human survival let alone human flourishing - a supreme goal of philosophical activity - does this have? Last but not least, the central pursuit of truth in philosophy is inextricably bound up with our search for *meaning*: the meaning of things.

The meaning of life and living a meaningful life are two sides of the same everlasting human preoccupation, one that we cannot truly inquire into without a concomitant inquiry into Truth.

Enough said then; we want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

3 HUMAN

Writing for the BBC, Melissa Hogenboom notes:

Still, as far as we know, we are the only creatures trying to understand where we came from. We also peer further back in time, and further into the future, than any other animal. What other species would think to ponder the age of the universe, or how it will end?

Hogenboom's question is on point and poignant enough. The age and end of the universe is the subject matter of our cosmology classes, but the wherefrom, whatfor, whereto, and why is the subject matter of human life; the life we must all live. Existence's weight can only be felt under the right conditions. Moments in our lives we are tutored or involuntarily flung into reveal this gravity, and as we observed in our first theme, open our perception up to a kind of serious noticing.

This existential posture towards the world which lies before us is at the heart of something quite peculiar to the human. The biologist is apt to remind us that we are bipedulous, prefrontal cortex thinking, opposable-thumb wielding sapiens, while our friends in the chemistry and physics departments fill us in with all the requisite molecular and atomic structures. Yet in all of this the human being, the being human that we as humans are most familiar with, is conspicuously missing.

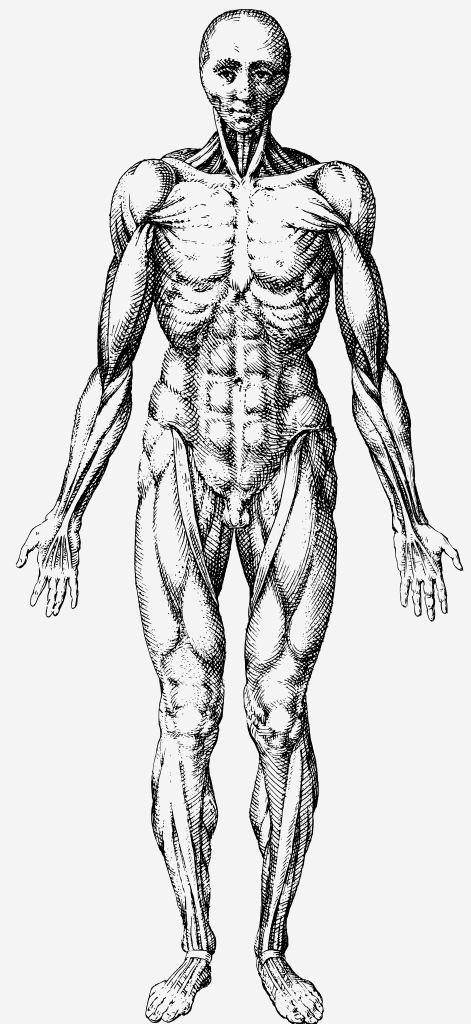


No other animal is confronted with the type of past, present and futures that we create. No other animal has done what we did, are doing, and will go on to do, for no other animal bears the burden, and the joy if succeeded, of a deeply rational and moral world. This rational and ethical aspect of humanity is another of our mysteries with which our lives are made sense of, one that we are continuously coming back to.

This theme focuses on us, the human being, by asking what it means to be human. Consider this scenario regarding the way things turned out: The way things turned out is that there's all this stuff over there that we intuitively call 'animal', and then this thing over here that we differentiate within the genus 'animal' distinctively as human.

To what kind do we belong then? What makes us animal and what sets us apart? Rationality? Our emotions? The existential considerations of thinking about what purpose, and what our purpose is? Some superordinate category that unifies all these?

From these questions it seems that what we do know about us is that we can know, and yet other animals we know can also know. What kind of knowing, and consequently, being, can we do that they cannot? We here seek to resolve an antinomy. To familiarise ourselves further with the most familiar thing to ourselves: our self. And to unfamiliarise ourselves with the most familiar of things to our self: ourselves, pulling apart to come together.



4 KNOWLEDGE & EDUCATION

We have thus far laid out the mood, the goal, and the subject who engages in the investigation, we now turn to the means. If the human being is the 'rational animal', having the ability to reason about the world and our place in it, then an important practical question that arises is: How should we be educated into this practice? Or put from a different angle: How do we know when we are receiving a worthwhile education, and when can we say we are now educated?



It's quite obvious that we can have knowledge about ourselves, about others, and about the world around us. We know everyday things, like our names, the time, that cats are not dogs, and that 3 is bigger than 2. We also know some pretty out-there kinds of things, like electrons exist (probably) and can have this thing called a charge, "all men are created equal", that cats are not dogs is an instance of a deeper logical rule: not (p & not p), and that justice entails that there are some things worth fighting for.

But what is knowledge? Do we call someone 'knowledgeable' when they say something we find interesting? Something we agree with? Something that we find useful? Or maybe we say someone is 'knowledgeable' in the event that someone is educated? But what is 'education' then? The term is flung about everywhere and appended to a number of things we find valuable and are 'educated' into finding valuable.

Consider getting a job, along with the material and social provision and benefit we reap as a consequence of possessing one; is this not a key seller of 'education' nowadays? Such a vision consequently curates the contents of 'education' in a particular direction. This direction is often that of augmenting our GDP through the manifold of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. These four core constants and the various combined fields that emerge therefrom are hailed as the cornerstone of the future and any healthy economy in a highly technologized world. Consequently, we lose sight of the consequences of what we stand to lose in losing sight of other conceptions of 'education'.

In this theme then we build upon our search thus far by delving into knowledge and its institutionalisation as Education. We trace education to its root, educere: 'to lead out of' and ask what true education should lead one out of and into.

We analyse contemporary 'therapeutic' and 'commercial' forms of educational culture wherein schools and universities come to be defined in terms of these strange metrics of productivity, such that Principals are replaced by Chief Executives and student self-esteem comes to be defined as a measure of 'success', to name but a few of the fallouts.

To know what knowledge is and to know what it is for will play an important part in our study of what education is and what it is for.



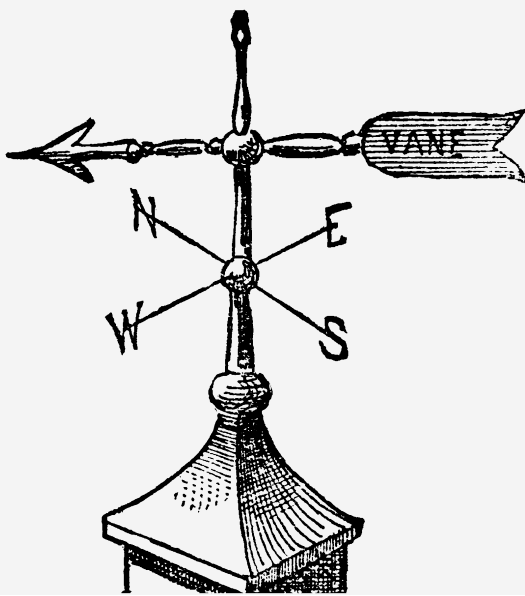
5 PURPOSE

Imagine living a life without purpose? That is to say a life that is not lived *for* anything. The very notion is difficult to comprehend. Today we are saturated with messages from a variety of mediums, social media, billboards, internet and television ads, all of which are telling us to *do this thing* or, *own this product*, or *be this kind of person*. A set of messages that permeate our minds and hearts and shape the purposes for why we live and die, often shaping our lives while we remain largely unaware.

Our psychologists tell us that a sense of purpose, a sense of "being onto something" is vital for our mental health, and consequently for our individual flourishing. Those who have sunk into a sullen pit of despair and depression have a nihilistic air about them, where things no longer have any meanings and therefore no purposes can be seen in or had towards them.

A meaningless world, is a purposeless world. But what is *real* purpose? Does it exist in the fabric of nature or is it merely a projection of our minds? Or perhaps even to ask the question in this dichotomous way is to betray the question. Philosophers throughout the ages have had many takes on purpose.

This theme will involve an analysis of what purpose is, how we find it, and how we live with and for it.



6 DESIRE

To desire is to want, and to want, in the varieties of ways we do, and for the varieties of ends we pursue, is a deeply human act.

A person who lacks desire is a person who has no wants, who does not want anything. You can imagine what a person like this might be like. Listless and unmotivated, perhaps even deeply depressed. Such people find nothing worth doing, having, working for, and being. Sound familiar? Desire is intrinsically related to *purpose*, and to lack a purpose is to be cut off in this way so described.

If I am to answer the question 'What shall I do?' I had better first pause and pose the question 'What is it that I want?' Somewhat more reflection is needed to recognize that I also need to think critically about my present desires, to ask 'Is what I now want what I want myself to want?'

Alastair MacIntyre

Can you stop being hungry just by wanting to stop being hungry? How about breathing? There are things that we want that are bound up with what we are as human beings. That which we want as a result of the biological, chemical, physical creatures that we are. These are desires that we cannot avoid, nor reason our way out of having, and they are relatively few. Beyond such desires we are confronted with an endless landscape of malleable, conflicting, delightful and disastrous desires, many of which are instilled in us through a powerful economo-centric machine.

How many of these desires are desires that we desire to have? Otherwise put, how many of these wants are wants that we want to want?

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favour fire.*

ROBERT FROST



The Accommodations of Desire (1929) by Salvador Dalí

In this theme we explore desire, what it is, its place in the structure of human thought and action, and how we become master over it, or it over us.

7 BEING WITH OTHERS

Our radical dependancy on others as a species means that we have to be with others. Think of a human baby, there is no creature so utterly in need of such complete care and protection without which it would barely last a day. The way we come into the world is a powerful symbolic reminder of the strong bonds that bind us all together.

The urge to align our minds and emotions with those we care for, whether they are near or far, makes our species unique

Hayden Kee



To be with others is to explore the nature of our group existence, be it social, economic, political.

Recent and ancient history is a testimony to the myriad ways in which humankind split apart and divides amongst itself along real or imagined boundaries, borders, and beliefs. This otherness however should never be foregrounded at the cost of backgrounding the interspace of our shared, common, and unifying humanity. The *human* is recognisable anywhere and everywhere we go, and though the racisms, tribalisms, ethno-nationalisms of the ancient and modern world may cause us to lose faith in this truth we should keep in mind the many ways in which our capacity to be with others can be clouded by dark desires and misguided purposes.



In thinking about how we come together, we will explore in this theme the many ways in which we can as human beings be with others, such as as family, friends, lovers, employers and employees, country men and women, and even, as strangers crossing each others' path on the crossroads of life.

TILL I GET THERE

Huh? said a young boy in
the mirror

A young version of me, so
I started to tear up

He said "you need to cheer
up, your mind need to clear
up

you're already here, just be
yourself from here up"

Then he disappeared and I
felt something familiar

Something I was taught,
something I had lost

If you are afraid of the
fear that you gon' change
some

All you gotta do is just
remember where you came
from



8 FREEDOM

Pondering the nature of desire leads us inevitably to confront the nature -- and limits -- of our freedom.

It's midnight. You catch yourself opening your phone. News, messages, emails float by. You decide to open Instagram. But did you *really decide*? How do you distinguish between a free act and compulsion?

In so many ways, our freedom today is unprecedented. We talk of being free to speak our minds, attend university, move countries, cast a vote. We talk of being free *to be*. We make countless choices daily from ever more options.

Unsurprisingly, we hail freedom as a good thing. But what *is* freedom and in what sense is it good? How does it interact with our obligations?

Here we must contend with the realisation that *freedom* is not monolithic. We may have political freedom, or economic freedom, or religious freedom, or civic freedom. We may have positive freedom or negative freedom.

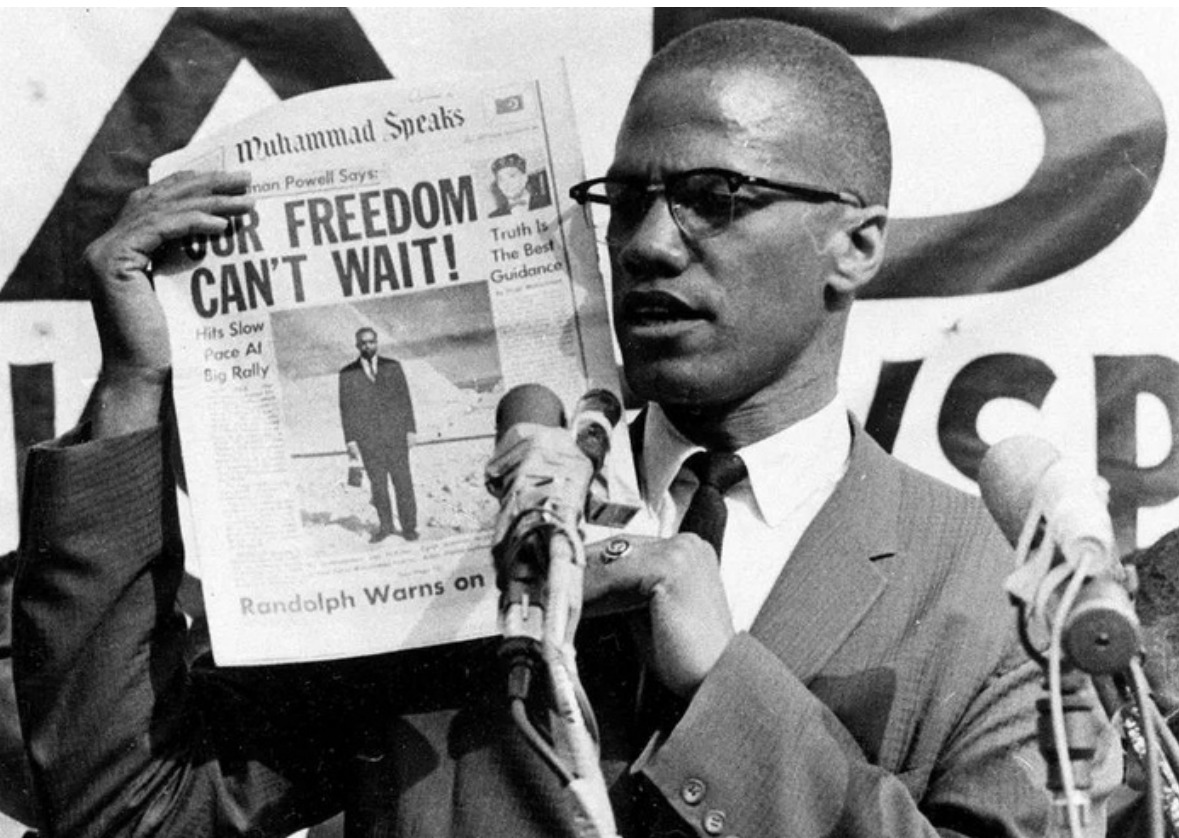


But there is also a freedom even more fundamental. *Free will*.

When you compulsively reach for your phone or purchase the latest gadget after seeing an ad, how free were your choices? How much control do we have over our actions? The answer forces us to grapple with questions about causation, laws of nature, desires, emotions, and -- more generally -- human beings.

*Anytime you beg another man to set
you free, you will never be free.
Freedom is something that you have
to do for yourselves.*

Malcolm X



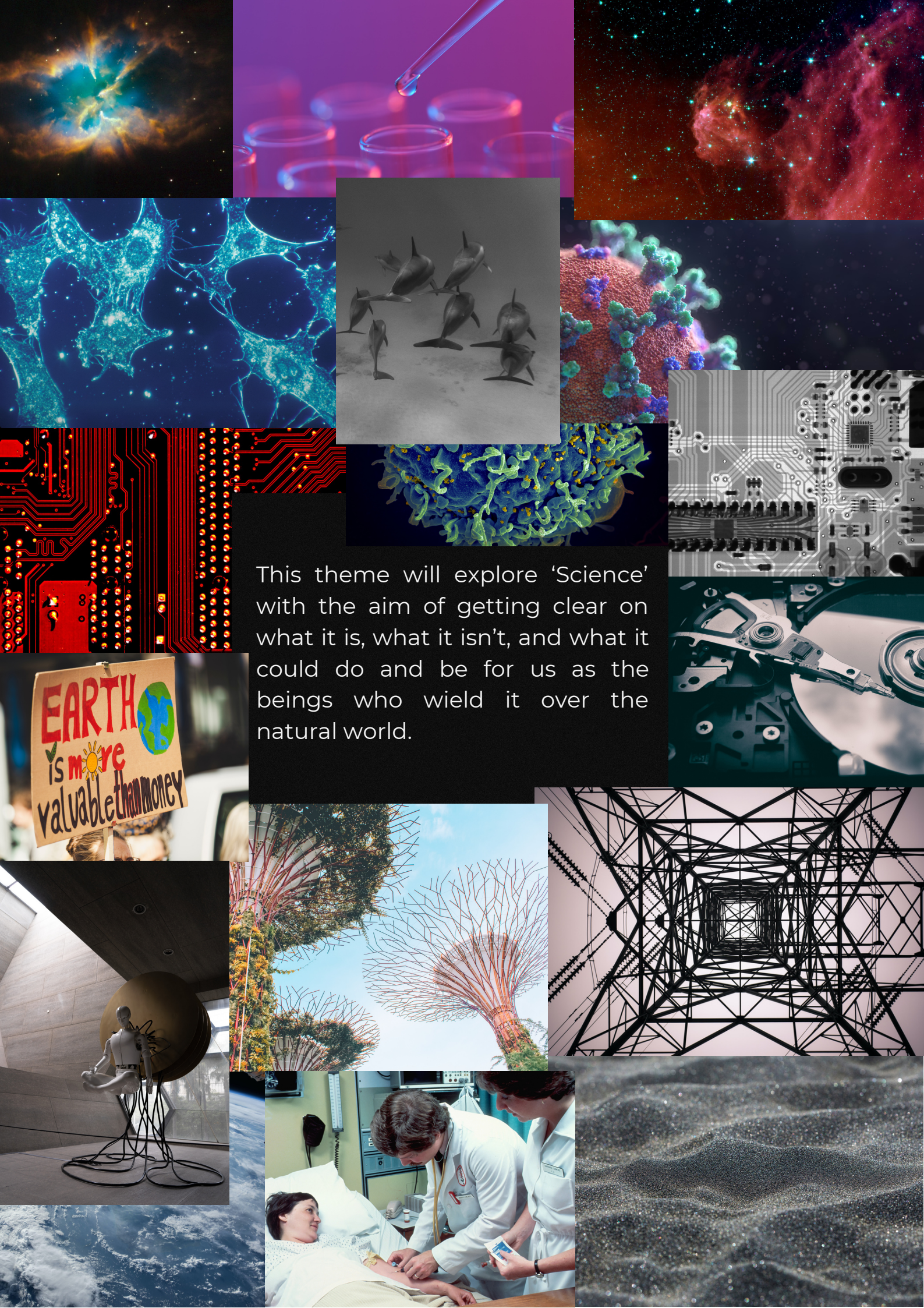
In this theme we explore the essence and contours of freedom. We ponder the different kinds of freedom while testing the limits of free will.

9 SCIENCE & THE FUTURE

The torchbearer of knowledge in the modern world is often thought and said to be the scientist. Undoubtedly, this thing called 'Science' has come to play an important part in the modern world, with its influence on our culture extending from our views on what truths we can know to its role in technologically reshaping the physical shape of world.

For those of us with moments to live beyond the present, the future is inevitable. What it will bring on the worldwide scale of massive and numerous changes too big and too many for us to keep track of, will affect our lives and the lives of those we care about to come after. Nature is an intelligible mystery, one which hides as many secrets as it reveals through scientific discovery. The hubris with which the world all around us is treated as a result of our claim to have exhausted the fundamental understanding of it is bound up with our exhausting it itself. Knowledge then, is power, and power married to arrogance, belligerence, and perspectives of radically otherising our fellow human beings could have near fatal global consequences, as our current global climate, war and refugee crisis, and nuclear proliferation situations attest to.

Getting clear on the forces that affect our present, as elaborated in the previous themes, plays an important role in the possible futures that we will give rise to.



This theme will explore 'Science' with the aim of getting clear on what it is, what it isn't, and what it could do and be for us as the beings who wield it over the natural world.

10 THE EXAMINED LIFE

What did Socrates mean when he said “The unexamined life is not worth living” ? We all examine our lives to some extent or the other. This Socratic statement, arguably, is asking us to take this mental activity seriously.

A growing understanding of ourselves and the world around us gives us the ability and the desire to continuously come back to our lives and question whether we are living as we want to and as we should. In the absence of any careful examination of our lives, we face the consequences of living a life less lived, a half life, one perhaps broadly directed by forces within and external to us that we would never have desired to have such control over us, had we known better.

In this last theme we bring it all together and delve into a final analysis of the life worth living.

What is the use of studying philosophy if all it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein



Philosophy begins by acknowledging our most basic human intuition -- the desire to know. Starting here, we engage in a systematic and rigorous analysis of us, the human being, and our world.

At first philosophy, we help you understand the difficult ideas shaping our world by meaningfully engaging with the humanities.

Our online courses are affordable, accessible, and rigorous.

Begin your journey today.



Love is an action, never simply a
feeling.

Bell Hooks

If you love what we do,
please spread the word.