

Proposal for Philosophy as a Leaving Certificate Subject

**Submitted to the
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment**

**Prepared by the Royal Irish Academy National Committee
for Philosophy and Ethics**

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Summary

This document sets out the case for Philosophy as a school subject in the Senior Cycle curriculum.

- It proposes that the capacities that Philosophy enables and develops are much needed in Irish society. These capacities, if maintained, provide students with a power to think freely on their cultural values, to become critical thinkers and engaged, reflective citizens.
- An education in Philosophy can enable students to integrate and make more overall sense of their learning experiences in areas as diverse as history, natural science and literature.
- Philosophy as a discipline, this document explains, directly and in fundamental ways meets the ideals of the NCCA's vision as set out in *Towards Learning: An Overview of Senior Cycle Education* (2009).

It is our understanding that Philosophy can make its most effective contribution as a Short Course in the Senior Cycle. Our case is set out firmly on that basis.

The RIA National Committee for Philosophy and Ethics is entirely at the disposal of the NCCA, if required, in developing the objectives of this proposal.

(1) General Context

This document proposes the introduction of Philosophy as a subject in the Senior Cycle. The educational advantages of such a development will be articulated later. First, however, with reference to the context in which the case is being made, let us say something about why we think it is appropriate to make such a case today.

The last 2 or 3 decades have witnessed substantial cultural changes in Ireland. Creed and patriotism no longer form the bedrock of shared value systems. As if to underline that development, the process of secularization is reflected in current Government educational policy. These changes will continue to have major implications, especially in the areas of morality and politics, raising in new contexts abiding questions about personal responsibility and the nature of civic values.

Establishing for oneself what one ought to do – as a person and as a citizen – has become more challenging in the absence of old authorities. It is not at all clear that Irish society at large has been well equipped to meet that challenge. The question of whether we have been excessively credulous with regard to our central institutions continues to be asked. In the context of ongoing social transformation the country now appears to be in great need of critical, reflective and deliberative capacities.

This proposal argues that the capacity of the Irish educational sector to respond to this challenge – of a society deeply uncertain of itself and of how it is going to think its way into the future – will be enhanced with the availability of Philosophy as a curricular subject in the Senior Cycle.

Philosophy enables individuals both to reflect deeply on and to defend important human values, opposed as it is essentially to all entrenched prejudice and partisanship.

In section (4) below concrete examples of possible topics within a Philosophy course will illustrate the ways in which Philosophy provides its students with distinctive new capacities and knowledge of rich educational and personal significance.

It is worth pointing out that its introduction to the Senior Cycle would bring Ireland into line with established practice in almost all member countries in the European Union. Philosophy, notably, is a core requirement of the International Baccalaureate. (The Appendix contains a résumé of the position of Philosophy in the Senior Cycle of some of these European countries.)

We should like to observe that significant numbers of qualified and practicing teachers in the Secondary Level School sector hold degree level qualifications in Philosophy or a closely related cognate subject.

(2) The Value of Philosophy as a Subject for the Senior Cycle Student

An earlier ESRI study has revealed that whilst over 75% of school leavers were satisfied with their schools' efforts in basic areas such as reading, writing and mathematical calculating, the majority were unhappy with the outcomes of schooling under a range of other headings.¹ Consider, for instance, the following responses:

¹ D. Hannan and S. Shorthall, *The Outcome of their Education – School Leavers' Views of Educational Objectives and Outcomes* (Economic and Social Research

Heading	Satisfaction rating
Helped you to apply good values in life	14%
Prepared you for understanding politics / to make social political decisions	6%
Prepared you to play a responsible part in your society	19%

Whilst *CSPE* and the new *Politics and Society* subject can address some of these issues we believe that a philosophical education at the Senior Cycle can, in the most fundamental way, equip young persons to meet the intellectual deficits outlined in the ESRI study. At the very centre of philosophical practice is the business of thinking through and attempting to justify the beliefs one holds and wants to defend.

Philosophy is particularly appropriate for the life stage in which the Leaving Certificate programme is usually undertaken. This stage in the personal development of many young persons is marked by styles of thinking, problems and concerns to which philosophical work is especially relevant. There is a prevalent scepticism about the knowledge and expertise of others, about received wisdom and the prescriptions according to which one has been brought up. *How do you know?* (that this is true) and *Why should I?* (do this or give my allegiance to that) are questions of awakening personal significance to teenagers in particular. Frequently, such questions are interpreted by adults as simply reflecting adolescent rebellion, though they might also be seen as legitimate demands for justification. In short, they are genuine and legitimate intellectual questions.

Moral and ethical attitudes at this stage are often idealistic. This can be seen as part of the search for a stable sense of identity as a basis for relating to the world as an adult. There is a consistent interest in the 'values of equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy, and respect for human dignity' (*Towards Learning*, p. 14). What is generally absent is an ability to sustain those values through argument and justification. Such endeavours are absolutely central to Philosophy.

In striking ways, a committed student of Philosophy is intellectually resourceful in those ways that the NCCA identifies (*Towards Learning*, p. 12) as achievable outcome for students who have completed the Senior Cycle: they are – they must be – curious, enquiring, open-minded, reflective, synthesizers of ideas, innovative, problem-solving
 Institute, 1991).

and conceptually creative. These abilities are central to any genuinely philosophical activity. Through Philosophy students gain confidence in their capacities to find solutions to the challenges of their learning and to the broader issues of their social lives. They engage passionately in reaching informed decisions and in developing ‘moral/ethical and political understanding’ of the world around them. They gain the experience of intellectual autonomy. (See Appendix below for the description of these skills offered by the International Baccalaureate.)

Hence our claim that an education in Philosophy can enable students to integrate and make more overall sense of their learning experiences in areas as diverse as history, natural science and literature

(3) Principles of a Curriculum – Short Course at Senior Cycle

Philosophy would richly complement a number of existing Leaving Certificate subjects, such as *Classical Studies*, *Religious Education* and *Politics and Society*. But it provides its students more fundamentally and directly than any other subject with the key skills identified in *Towards Learning*. In this section it can be seen why Philosophy contains that possibility.

There are at least 2 dominant trends that guide professional philosophers in the selection of curricula for their courses: they may be called ‘analytical’ and ‘historical’ for convenience. In general, the analytical approach tends to focus on the central philosophical problems that currently engage philosophers. By contrast, the other approach tends to treat the problems and thinkers of each epoch within their own historical contexts. For Philosophy – in line with international practice – we suggest that the Senior Cycle curriculum should combine these 2 approaches. This means, for the student, critically reflecting on the specific ways in which philosophical ideas have been expressed by leading philosophers.

Working through selected texts in Philosophy (historic and contemporary) students have the opportunity to develop critical and reflective considerations in a focused way. Given that we live in a textual world – written media, electronic or otherwise, are all around us – the ability to analyze the rhetoric and arguments of our times is an empowering skill that Philosophy can provide.

We propose the following principles for the construction and teaching of a curriculum:

- (a) that it begin with familiar contemporary problems, and then critically consider solutions proposed across epochs by leading thinkers;
- (b) that selections from original texts of philosophers be used, where possible, to elucidate a philosophical problem;
- (c) that selections of readings should exemplify and encourage the dialectical (debate oriented) activity of Philosophy, so far as possible;
- (d) that foundational questions in Philosophy be seen as relevant to other subjects on the curriculum.

(4) Examples of Possible Topics and their Rationales

The following are examples of topics and questions that might be suitable units to be included in a prospective curriculum for philosophy:

Critical Thinking / Informal Logic – knowing what a good argument is

The capacity to make valid arguments is a vital skill for a citizen proposing and defending a point of view. The ability to recognize false inference, bias and assumption enables individuals to resist manipulation. This unit would focus on those skills, introducing students to the essential elements of logical thinking: distinguishing between argument and rhetoric, evidence and assumption, impartiality and bias, inference and assertion.

Ethics – thinking about what we ought to do

Students will be introduced to the basic concepts of the ethical life: respect and toleration for others. They will consider philosophical approaches to the question of what it means to be a good person. They will develop the capacity to reflect on the values they hold and how they might defend those values. The skill required for this reflection can be developed, in part, through the analysis of concrete ethical questions: e.g. punishment, violence and pacifism, abortion, euthanasia, animal rights, environmentalism.

The Human Condition – what it means to be a person

The key issues of this unit are human freedom, the distinction (if any) between human beings and the rest of nature, and human needs (love, community, and meaning in our lives). An appreciation of these issues enables us to think in richer and deeper ways about how we want our societies to develop and what risks to us, as human persons, some of those developments might involve (e.g. the dominant prevalence of technological forms of communication: social media, email).

Aesthetics – thinking about beauty, defending matters of taste

By this stage of their secondary school education students have generally developed strong preferences on aesthetic matters: e.g. fashion, popular music, literature. Yet they are far from equipped to engage in productive discussions with peers about the reasons for their preferences. This should be addressed through education. Furthermore, an ability to analyze matters of beauty and of aesthetic taste enables individuals to participate within the artistic and cultural practices of the society in which they live. This module will introduce students to theories of what makes a work of art, of what supposedly separates art from non-art, and the ways art can affect our lives.

Knowledge – what do we know and how can we be certain of it?

In contemporary society we are constantly presented with different kinds of knowledge: e.g. scientific knowledge, economic knowledge, moral knowledge, religious knowledge. Each kind of knowledge claims to be objective in some way. In order to think our way critically through these various forms of knowledge we need to be able to distinguish the different kinds of objectivity, certainty and reliability that they possess. Their different methods also need to be identified. The ability to make these distinctions allows the individual to recognize what kinds of enquiry are appropriate in any given situation.

(5) General Learning Outcomes – Assessment

In keeping with the above remarks concerning the teaching of philosophy, the following points can be made about how it should be assessed. The assessment system needs to give a valid and reliable account of the range of benefits actually gained by the students. For instance, one would expect the students to gain the following benefits: to be incisive and consistent in tracing inferences and conclusions; to deal in a fluent way – in writing and in speech – with concepts and arguments; to discriminate between key issues and minor ones; to identify the focus of a genuine question and to keep that focus continually in view; to show fruits of purposeful co-operation with the fellow students; to advance a coherent and consistent case, supported by well-chosen evidence, to show that they understand the significance of what they have studied for their own emergent potentialities and aptitudes.

Appendix

Philosophy as a Second Level Subject in Other EU States

Italy

Philosophy is taught as a compulsory subject in all classical and scientific *licei* and training schools in the final 3 years (16-19 years old). The syllabus is confined to European philosophy and is taught historically, with standard text books. It is assessed in the final general examination before entry to university. (Oral examinations play a large part in the schools.)

France

Philosophy is taught as a compulsory subject in the final year of the *Lycee* (17-19 years old). The time given to it varies according to the specialist orientation of the student's overall programme: arts – 8 hours per week; science and economics – 4 hours; technical – 2 hours (with a differing programme). It is not taught in strict chronological sequence, the emphasis being, rather, on concepts and authors, with considerable discretion resting with the individual teacher. Examination combines essay(s) on concepts and commentary on/analysis of texts given on the exam paper.

Germany

There is much diversity, as each *Bundesland* has its own ministry of education. However, Philosophy is quite commonly offered as an optional 'ordinary' subject (i.e. one which, if chosen, is equivalent to History, English etc). The final grade (as in other subjects) is an aggregate of ongoing school assessment and terminal examination – with a follow-up oral test if there is any striking discrepancy between the 2 grades. In some schools Philosophy is available as an optional '*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*,' with no formal exam but carrying credit points in the final *Abitur* bulletin. Furthermore, ethics or 'practical philosophy' is a compulsory *Ersatzfach* (substitute subject) for those who do not take Protestant or Catholic religious instruction.

United Kingdom

For many years Philosophy has been a GCE subject at A level. Students usually take 3 A levels of their choice, with no subject being mandatory. There are several Examining Boards which set different syllabi. For example, the syllabus for the Associated Examining Boards has 2 sections; one comprising 4 historical periods (classical Greek [Plato, Aristotle], Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century [Descartes, Hume], Nineteenth Century [Marx, Mill], Twentieth Century [Nagel, Ayer, Sartre], whilst the other section comprises 6 themes (Knowledge and Doubt, Faith and the existence of God, Mind and

Body, Scientific Method, Ethics, and Freedom, Law and Authority); and students generally select 2 periods and 3 themes. By contrast, the Joint Matriculation Board divides Philosophy into 5 component disciplines. Students take Epistemology and Ethics in the first year and a choice of 2 from Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Mind in the second year. In each case, however, students have 5 hours of Philosophy per week for 2 years and sit a terminal examination comprising 2 3-hour papers.

International Baccalaureate

Philosophy has been a subject of the IB since 2002 and is now offered as *Theory of Knowledge*, a core course of the Diploma. The IBO describes this course as 'central to the educational philosophy of the Diploma Programme,' in that it 'offers students and their teachers the opportunity to: reflect critically on diverse ways of knowing and on areas of knowledge; consider the role and nature of knowledge in their own culture, in the cultures of others and in the wider world.' Furthermore 'it prompts students to: be aware of themselves as thinkers, encouraging them to become more acquainted with the complexity of knowledge; recognize the need to act responsibly in an increasingly interconnected but uncertain world.'