

✓ *Thoughtings: Are You Free?*

Source: 'The Three Laws' from Isaac Asimov's *Robot* stories.

Philosophy: Kant and the categorical imperative, moral absolutism, Mill and the harm principle.

The Otherwise Machine

Peter Worley

Starting age: 10 years Advanced

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if you had done something differently?

Saheela has. And she has been busy. She has designed and built a machine, a very special machine, and it is also very big. She has had to build a huge laboratory under her house, as big as a football pitch, to house the giant and complicated super-computer with its thousands of memory banks and wires.

She got some help from her dad.

The machine enables her to see what would have happened if things had been different. She just points a special camera at something that happens, then, when she is in her laboratory, she programmes in the change and it shows her what *would have happened* on a video screen. Saheela and her dad call their machine 'The Otherwise Machine'.

She wonders if small changes would make as much of a difference as big changes. She thinks that they might, but her dad doesn't think so. To decide, Saheela makes a bet with her dad. One morning her brother leaves for school wearing a blue sweater. She says, 'I bet that a small change like the colour of his sweater will make a big difference to his day.' But her dad replies, 'He would just have a red sweater on instead of a blue one. Everything else would have been the same.'

Start Question 1 Do you agree with Saheela or with her dad?

Questions to take you further

- ◆ Do small changes matter?
- ◆ Do big changes matter?
- ◆ Would everything have been the same, as her dad suggested?
- ◆ Would it be a small change or a big change if his favourite colour was blue?
- ◆ What sort of effect do you think you have on the world?
- ◆ Do the things you do matter?
- ◆ Is it possible to know what might have happened?

Next morning her brother gets up and puts on his usual blue sweater again and sets off for school, but this time Saheela had secretly pointed her special camera at him when he put on his sweater. That night, after dinner, she and her dad go into their secret workshop under the house and programme in the change. She types, 'My brother puts on a red sweater instead of the blue one.' Then she presses 'return'.

Activity Can you construct a story of what could happen?

Questions to take you even further

- ◆ What do you think the machine will show?
- ◆ Do you think her brother's day will be different just because he has a different coloured sweater on?

Meanwhile, when her brother had got up and put on his usual blue sweater here's what happened:

He had been selected for the blue-sweater team in a class football match. 'The blues' had won. Having been in the winning team he had come home full of confidence and happiness. This had resulted in her brother being in a good mood so he completed his homework. Because he had completed his homework his teacher gave him a commendation. He went home in a good mood again and continued to complete his homework all week ...

Start Question 2 If he had worn the red sweater, do you think anything would have happened differently?

Questions to take you further

- ❖ How much of his future could these changes affect?
- ❖ What will happen differently?
- ❖ Could he still win the football match?

Works well with

- ✓ Other entries in the 'Freedom' section
- ✓ Nick of Time
- ✓ The Butterfly Effect
- ✓ The Wicked Which
- ✓ Charlie's Choice
- ✓ What Zeus Does When He's Bored
- ✓ *Thoughtings: Are You Free?*
- ✓ *The If Machine: The Happy Prisoner, The Frog and the Scorpion, The Little Old Shop of Curiosities, Billy Bash, The Robbery*

Philosophy: Contingency and causation.

What Zeus Does When He's Bored

Peter Worley

Starting age: 10 years Advanced

The gods of Mount Olympus are able to watch the world from their stage, high up above everything, outside of the world, separate from it.

One day, whilst entertaining himself by lining up thousands of dominos and then watching them cascade down again upon flicking the first one over, Zeus – king of the gods of Olympus – begins to wonder to himself. He wonders if yesterday were to happen again whether it would happen differently or exactly the same. *Well, seeing as I'm a god*, he thinks to himself, *why don't I find out?* So, Zeus, being extremely powerful, makes everything in the world go back to yesterday morning. All the people of the world start to move quickly but in reverse like a film being rewound

until they reach yesterday morning again. Then Zeus makes them all stop, frozen where they stand.

Start Question 1 Before Zeus clicks his fingers to let yesterday play out again, do you think it will happen differently or exactly the same as it did the first time yesterday happened?

Questions to take you further

- ❖ For instance, if the wind blew a tree over the first time would that happen again?
- ❖ If a boy just missed a bus, and was late for school as a result, would that happen again?
- ❖ If a girl chose to stay in and watch TV instead of going out to play with her friends would that happen again?
- ❖ If a boy chose to do something naughty for which he got into terrible trouble would he be able to choose not to do it if yesterday happened again?
- ❖ Could people choose different things if yesterday happened again or would they just choose the same things?
- ❖ If you knew that this was the second time today was happening would you do things differently?
- ❖ If you knew what you did the first time would you do things differently?
- ❖ If you didn't know it was the second time today was happening do you think you would do things differently or the same?

Advanced extension activity:

Think back to the last time you made a choice, such as choosing which cereal to eat or what TV channel to watch. Now imagine that Zeus has 'rewound reality' to *just before* you made the choice.

Start Question 2 Is it possible that you would choose something other than what you chose when you first made the choice?

- ❖ What if you knew what you did the first time and you knew that reality had been 'rewound'? Would you choose differently?
- ❖ What if you didn't know what you did the first time and you also didn't know that reality had been 'rewound'? Would you choose differently?

Questions to take you even further (for older participants)

- ❖ What does your answer tell you about choices?
- ❖ Some philosophers think that for your choices to be genuine choices (for us to have a genuine *free will*) then it must be possible for you to have been able to *do something other than you did* at any given moment in time. What do you think about this?
- ❖ Do you think you could have done other than you did the last time you made a choice?
- ❖ If not, then you may be a *determinist* (someone who doesn't believe in free will).
- ❖ If so, then you may be a *metaphysical libertarian* (someone who believes in free will).
- ❖ Could you be both a determinist and a metaphysical libertarian?

Your Questions

- ❖
- ❖
- ❖

Works well with

- ✓ The Queen of Limbs
- ✓ Are There Cogs Beneath the Wind?
- ✓ The Clockwork Toymaker
- ✓ *The If Machine*: The Happy Prisoner, The Little Old Shop of Curiosities, The Frog and the Scorpion
- ✓ *Thoughtings*: Are You Free?

Source and Philosophy: Necessity and contingency and the problem of free will and determinism; Spinoza, Hume, Schopenhauer and Kant on free will and determinism; Simone de Beauvoir on 'situated freedom'.

Metaphysics: Personal Identity

Identity Parade

Andrew Routledge

Starting age: 12 years

The six entries included in Identity Parade can be run as discussions in the same way as the other entries in the book; however, below, the author offers a more involved – and fun – way for classes and groups to think about the issues involved.

Identity Parade activity

Starting

One pupil is to be selected randomly as 'the prisoner'. This can be done in any number of ways but it can serve as a useful icebreaker. One way of choosing the prisoner is to use a raffle: unbeknown to the participants when they first sit down, each chair in the room has a raffle ticket taped to the bottom of the chair. A number is then drawn and read out.

Having been chosen, the prisoner is given a 'scenario-card' (see the various entries in Identity Parade) and they must then sit in 'the cage' until a verdict is reached (the 'cage' could be a chair). The scenario-card should be read out by the workshop leader, who acts as a judge. The rest of the group should be split into 'prosecution lawyers' (who will argue that the prisoner is the same person as the criminal), 'defence lawyers' (who will work with and help the prisoner argue that they are not the same person and so should be freed) and – finally – a small panel of 'jurors' who will, at the end of the trial, weigh up the arguments and record a 'guilty' or 'not-guilty' verdict.

The exact numbers for each of these will depend on the number of the group. Again, there is flexibility here with only a small number essential for each. For very small groups, you need