

Preparation for A Level RE

At GCSE the focus is mainly on how people who follow a certain religion live, the way in which their beliefs impact on life. At A level we look more at the philosophy, the deep thinking, behind beliefs, whether that philosophy links to a particular religious view or not. Thinking philosophically takes practice, and is difficult as so many of the questions and issues don't have definite answers.

Although the following are not vital to complete the summer task they help you move on from GCSE thinking and should help you to think philosophically.

On Philosophy:

'Sophie's World' by Jostein Gaarder - Sophie is a Norwegian girl who is introduced to various philosophers and their ways of thinking. It isn't always an easy read (it is philosophy!) but it gives an overview of some of the great philosophers from all times and cultures.

'The Matrix' and sequels, the original is a science fiction film from 1999 which gives a different take on Plato's cave and the nature of reality.

'The Truman Show', a film worth seeing more than once. What is real, what is fact, what is fiction? What is Christof's role in Truman's life? Is Christof evil? Is Christof godlike? To what extent can our lives be said to resemble that of Truman? Does Truman have free will? What can't Christof control?

'Brave New World' by Aldous Huxley raises issues about free will and perfect lives. Do we want to claim suffering as the savage does?

The Harry Potter series (books and films), what do they tell us about human nature and about death? What problems can't magic solve? What do they tell us about evil and about good?

Winnie the Pooh, the 'bear of very little brain' can be perceived as a philosopher in his attempts to make sense of the world... books such as 'Pooh and the Philosophers' by John Tyerman Williams explore this.

On Moral Philosophy (Ethics):

Keep up to date with the news via the BBC website or similar reliable news source. Ethics is always in the news, more so than ever at the moment, consider which businesses are dealing with the Coronavirus crisis in the most ethical way, and which are focusing only on profits. Consider the issues of selfishness, and of selflessness... who are the heroes and who are the villains? Look at side issues, sometimes buried by the main stories... what about abortion? What about freedom of choice? What about countries / counties closing borders?

If you want a break from the current situation so many films deal with ethical issues.

'Schindler's List' (also a book) is based on the real life story of Oskar Schindler, a member of the Nazi party and a businessman... he sets out to make money, but ends up saving lives. Is Schindler really a hero?

'Hotel Rwanda' is another film based on a true story, the Rwandan genocide of 1994. As with Schindler's List in the midst of horror some focus on saving lives. Why is the Rwandan genocide not talked about in schools in the way that the Holocaust during World War 2 is? If

this topic interests you 'The Killing Fields' considers the genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s... with all these films consider what makes someone good, and what makes us judge some actions to be good and others bad. 'Friedrich' by Hans Peter Richter is a children's book that deals with the build up to World War 2 in Germany and again raises questions about good and bad, about justice and about human nature. 'If this is a man' by Primo Levi focuses on life in Auschwitz, and the issue of survival. '12 Years a Slave' is a film from 2013 looking at slavery in America, that also considers the question of what it means to be a human. Disney's 'Pinocchio' is a classic exploration of what makes someone a real person, and raises the issue of conscience.

If you would rather films that don't deal with death / destruction on such a mass scale try 'A Few Good Men'. A young marine has died, two fellow marines are charged with his murder... but the situation is more complicated than it might seem. Is Colonel Nathan Jessop a villain? Is he right when he says people 'can't handle the truth?' Do we need people like him 'on the wall'? And what is a person's duty?

'The Hunger Games' raises a lot of ethical issues, especially during the games themselves as characters have to decide whether to just focus on themselves - and the attitude of the viewing public is also worth considering.

'Gattaca' is a very odd film about genetic engineering.. will the world ever be like this? Are there qualities that can't be created in a test tube? The first 'Jurassic Park' film raises similar questions about humans playing and meddling with nature.

'My Sister's Keeper' raises some real ethical issues regarding rights over our own bodies and freedom of choice... the film ending is different from that of the original book by Jodie Picoult, and the changes raise their own questions... but both will probably require a box of tissues...

'Chicken Run' is much lighter, but it raises issues about humans and animals... to what extent are we like the chickens? Is the film too anthropomorphic? Were the chickens right to want to escape?

'The Imitation Game' looks at the life of Alan Turing, and gives an insight into the way homosexuality has been viewed in the past, 'Wilde' is a film starring Stephen Fry as Oscar Wilde which again raises the issue as does the film 'Philadelphia'. 'Oranges are not the only fruit' by Jeanette Winterson looks at homosexuality and religion while Mary Wesley's novel 'The Camomile Lawn' shows characters with very different views of what is sexually acceptable, some of which we might be uncomfortable with today.

On Buddhism and eastern philosophy:

'Siddhartha' by Hermann Hesse considers the life of the Buddha.

'Freedom in Exile' is the autobiography of the 14th Dalai Lama, a winner of the Nobel peace prize. 'Kundun' is the film version based on the book. While we don't consider Tibetan Buddhism until Year 2 both these give a flavour of Buddhism and its beliefs.