

What are Philosophy Cafés?

Philosophy Cafés have been around for a while; there are others in the UK, though the idea originated in France* (of course!). They offer convivial spaces for philosophical discussions, accessible to everyone, engaging them in intelligent conversation about the “big questions”.



*The original Philosophy Café? *
Sartre and de Beauvoir don't really look as if they're having much fun...*

In the streets of Athens in the fourth century BCE, Socrates discussed philosophy and questioned received ideas and beliefs with anyone who was interested. Since then, there's been a tendency for philosophy to retreat into the universities and academic journals and conferences, and consequently to acquire a reputation for being very difficult and abstract, far removed from real life and ordinary mortals (a reputation fostered by some, though not all, philosophers). Philosophy Cafés are an attempt to bring philosophy out of the academy and back to the streets, to demonstrate that everyone philosophises to some degree, that you can talk seriously and meaningfully and enjoy yourself at the same time, that you can have a really good argument without it turning into a personal quarrel, and that you can learn about new ideas and change your mind at any age.

About Kingston Philosophy Café

There's no fixed, correct way to run a philosophy café. Some are very structured, others have no fixed programme and the topic is decided ad hoc at each meeting by participants. Kingston Philosophy Café will continue to experiment with different formats, explore what participants want and are prepared to do, what works and what doesn't, and occasionally, at the end of the year, review how things are going and plan future sessions. We anticipate that every discussion will be a bit different, depending on the topic, who leads it, and the format they choose. For example, a few topics may spread over two meetings, to give everyone a chance to gather their thoughts, to maybe read a bit and think of all those questions and comments that usually come too late – this way it won't be too late and there will be a second chance, an opportunity to build on the introductory session. You can see more about some possible topics and ways of discussing them [here](#).

But the intention is always to be both convivial and philosophical, sociable and serious, and most meetings will involve at least some discussion. Like a café, people will usually sit informally round tables, there will be refreshments for sale (in the café or pub), and participation will cost no more than a drink or two. Like a café, you don't have to join and you can come along or not, though we do have regulars; like all cafés

these days, even on the Left Bank, there is no smoking. Unlike most cafés, though, you will probably talk to people you don't know, and unlike most cafés our meetings will last only an hour or two, beginning and ending at pre-arranged times, though discussions often continue afterwards in a nearby pub or bar.

Our sessions are not philosophy lessons or lectures or a coherent, structured course in philosophy (you can get those at Kingston Adult Education or the OU if you want), though we may run the occasional more formal, un-café-like talk or debate or ticketed lecture with a visiting speaker, questions and comments.

We hope that experts among us will speak in plain English, explain specialist terms and not assume too much prior knowledge, as we are bound to have a range of philosophical experience. We hope that participants will introduce themselves to those sitting near them and carry on talking afterwards. We hope that participants will enjoy themselves and come back for more (and many do). For more about our discussions see [How? When? Where? When?](#)



Kingston Philosophy Cafe discuss environmental ethics in the Rose Culture Cafe.

Kingston Philosophy Café is run on a shoestring and we were very lucky to begin life in the lovely Rose Theatre - it was pleasant and central, and cost us nothing unless we needed to book a quiet room for one of our more formal evenings. There were disadvantages, however, and as the Rose Culture Cafe became more popular and busy, noise levels rose and it became increasingly difficult to hear ourselves speak - good news for the Rose but less good for us! So Thursday evening discussions moved to the riverside Bridges cafe, which opens specially for us, thanks to manager Carlene. The format of Thursday evenings (organised by [Marilyn Mason](#)), tried and tested in the Culture Café, remains similar: usually a relatively brief introduction and Q & A session, followed by a lot of informal group discussion round tables. On Wednesday evenings (organised by [Filiz Peach](#)) in the Grey Horse pub we also have a room to ourselves, and these evenings tend to consist of slightly more formal talks and plenary discussions. See also [Recipe for a Philosophy Cafe](#).

Our constitution and finances

We communicate with participants electronically because it is free, so it's worth

signing up to our email list, all our publicity is very low cost or free, our venues are free, and we have never requested or had a grant from anyone to run Kingston Philosophy Cafe. But, having run on a shoestring since 2008 and not asked for any donations or subs from participants, we have somewhat reluctantly had to acknowledge that our speakers occasionally have expenses and that there are other costs involved in running Kingston Philosophy Cafe that the organisers cannot cover by themselves. So are now asking participants to make voluntary donations at each meeting they attend and we have set up a community group bank account with a Committee and Treasurer to administer it and a [Constitution](#). Though this is more cumbersome and bureaucratic than we would like, we intend to keep membership, constitution and finances as simple and transparent as we can, it seems fair to ask participants to contribute towards costs, and having a Committee may have the advantage of ensuring continuity and longevity for Kingston Philosophy Cafe. See [Formalities](#) in Our Files for more on this.

Philosophy Café and free speech

Most philosophers have seen freedom of speech as a benefit to humanity and to the development of ideas, for example, John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*:

"If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

And

"There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right."

And of course, the famous quotation attributed to Voltaire: "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Kingston Philosophy Café supports free speech and we do not censor speakers or invite only ones we agree with - but we do ask all speakers and participants to engage and argue with ideas and each other in a civil, reasoned, philosophical way - and to stay within the law. We cannot, of course, host or publish anything libellous, slanderous, racist etc.



Café philosophers?

* According to Wikipedia the original idea for a Café Philosophique came from Paris, where Mark Sautet started Café Philo at the Café des Phares in 1992. But of course the cafes of Paris were popular with artists, intellectuals and philosophers well before that - the Café de Flore on the Left Bank was the favourite haunt of Jean Paul Sartre and the philosophical discussions he conducted there were the ancestor of all "cafés-philos".

See also:

<http://www.mail-archive.com/ctrl@listserv.aol.com/msg38904.html>

<http://www.philodialogue.com/history.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caf%C3%A9_Philosophique

<http://www.humanismesansfrontiere.com/>

Comments on Kingston Philosophy Café

"Thank you for your excellent presentation this evening on the Philosophy of Peter Singer. It s a tribute to the choice of subject and the quality of your presentation that so much valuable discussion was inspired."

"Thanks so much for inviting me to the Philosophy Cafe. I was very impressed by the size of the audience, and by the excellent - and sympathetic ! - discussion, and much enjoyed the visit."

"Great talk tonight at The Rose. Wonderful to hear my my ideas and philosophy of life put into words, and so eloquently."

"Although I have only come to one session of the Philosophy Café I found it a really enlightening experience – I loved it."

"Stimulating and thought-provoking, and free!"

"Although I have only come to one session of the Philosophy Café I found it a really enlightening experience – I loved it."

July and August 2009, on the Environment

"Very clear and well paced talk."

"Congratulations on developing such a thriving local philosophical community! I much enjoyed the event..."

"Big thanks for building up the philos café to the point where so many people can be attracted to Shaun's talk. It is a tremendous achievement."

May / June 2009

"Very interesting, enlightening. Worth coming! Will come again."

"Trolleyology, space travel, justice and equality"

"So much fun! I'm 17 and I thought it might be boring but it wasn't!!"

March 2009, Mark Vernon on "Philosophy and the Art of Living"

"This week's talk on Wellbeing....I really enjoyed it but would definitely like to have had more of a chance to discuss the issues at the end. I'm not sure the group were necessarily in broad agreement with the approach to wellbeing – they just didn't have much of an opportunity to express otherwise!! – Not a criticism – just that when you have had such an interesting talk it sets off all sorts of ideas and thoughts which, on this occasion didn't have the chance to be discussed..."

January 2009 - "Are you the same person you were 10 years ago?"

"I really enjoyed it but it was too noisy."

"We need a quieter venue."

"...congratulations are due to you for the success of the PC. I estimated that there were about 60 there at the start, which I think is an amazing number for a subject that does not have "mass appeal"- I think you will need to book the main theatre soon!"

"I thoroughly enjoyed the discussion and our table continued to talk and debate till the audience from the auditorium reappeared during the interval! The turnout was very impressive and it was great to see such a broad range of people participating."

April 2009

"People would think you mad if you talked about this kind of thing at home, but here it's fine!"

October and November - on art

"Fascinating."

"Very enjoyable dialogue."

"Loved it - thank you."

"Hi, Just to say I thought yesterday's philosophy cafe was great. Well done! Your intro was just right - short and pithy but thought-provoking. And at my table I was delighted to find such a mix of ages and such articulate youth!"

"Enjoyable session last night. Well done the organisers! I look forward to continuing the discussions on issues around art. I very much approve of discussions in manageable small groups as at Kingston; I've also been to a few Philosophy for All sessions, which can be intimidatingly large, in my opinion, for contributors from the floor."

"Thanks for an effective meeting tonight. We did lose some good people from the 1st meeting. But in the long run there are ways of winning them back."

"Would prefer a talk followed by a discussion among everyone rather than splitting into groups."

"I thought it would be more of a led session, but enjoyed the groups. Perhaps a summary might have been interesting."

September - on Philosophy

"At the first session there seemed to be a fairly large group who wanted to talk about philosophy and the modern/contemporary world and/or about a larger than a mainly Anglocentric tradition (with bits of Aristotle and Descartes thrown in and the odd reference to twentieth century French writers) of philosophy. Your current plans seem to be to devote two sessions to art, and then a third to what we might talk about beyond that (so that those of us with a fairly clear idea about what we want to do now can actually begin to forward that thinking only at a 4th session in the new year! I fear that many will have departed by then). I am more than reluctant to go along with that agenda and intend to argue the right of those present to choose what we do."

A good compromise would be to split into two groups: those who wish to adopt the arts agenda (which, of course, you may further subdivide); and others who wish to develop an agenda along the lines I have suggested. We could then report to each other towards the end of the session."

"Great fun! It is impossible for me to get to Kingston for 6pm. I really enjoyed the first session and a couple of friends were interested in coming along in the future, but neither would be able to manage 6pm either."

"More group discussions."

"More dialogue please."

"Difficult to understand. Difficult to comment."

"Excellent - I think most of the disagreement was about seeking discussion on specific topics, which will no doubt happen..."

"Try a circle next time in preference to the podium. Good session."

"A good start."

"Very much enjoyed the inaugural gathering and look forward to the next meetings. In agreement with one of the last speakers from the audience, the acoustics in the room weren't brilliant (but I guess we have to take what we're offered for now) but more importantly I agree more audience participation should be encouraged."