

JUST THINK

THE COLOUR BLUE

Debate with other Year 6 who like thinking. Ask an adult at home to email us if you want to join our Philosophy Group on Zoom enquiries@fundaysclub.co.uk

PHILIP AND PHOEBE

THE STORY



Philip and Phoebe, the terrible twins, were having one of their regular arguments the other day. It all started because they disagreed about the colour of the sky out of the window.

'Blue. The sky's blue. Everyone knows that, silly,' pronounced Philip.

'Well, it looks more like a greeny-grey to me,' responded Phoebe. 'The sky isn't always blue you know.'

'That's because you're not seeing it properly,' said Philip in his maddeningly superior way. 'It really is blue, you know, whether it looks like it or not.'

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PHILOSOPHY
PACK FOUR

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PHILIP AND PHOEBE

THE STORY CONTINUED

'But that's wrong!' protested Phoebe. 'The colour is what you see, not something that's "really there". If the sky looks greeny-grey to me, then it's greeny-grey, surely? How can it be "really" blue?'

'Oh, that's because you don't understand about Science,' responded Philip airily. 'Scientists say that "blue" is light with a wavelength of 0.000465 millimetres; so, if that light doesn't look blue to you, you're just wrong.'



WHO IS RIGHT?

THE QUESTION



Who is right, Philip or Phoebe?

WHO IS RIGHT? IS "BLUE" REALLY OUT THERE IN THE WORLD, WHETHER IT LOOKS BLUE TO YOU OR NOT? OR IS SOMETHING ONLY "BLUE" IF IT LOOKS BLUE TO YOU?

Discuss this with as many people as you can. When you've thought about this problem carefully, turn to the next page.

THE COLOUR BLUE

PHILOSOPHY BACKGROUND



What is colour?

Phoebe is correct that "blue" is an experience, not something really there outside our heads in the world. But Philip is also partly correct, because some objects (those that give out light of the wavelength he mentioned) usually give an experience named "blue" to most people.

How do we learn about colour?

We learn what "blue" means, as a young child, by other people pointing at various objects and saying 'blue!' Eventually, after some trial and error, we get the idea that they are talking about this strange experience of colour in objects, rather than something else like "good to eat", or "hot", and so on. So, we try pointing at things ourselves, and saying 'blue!' until the reaction of other people tells us we are getting it right.

This means that Philip is partly correct: you can be right or wrong about colour; it is not just a matter of opinion.

But there's a problem here. Take two young children learning their colours together. They both learn to say 'blue' when an adult points at certain objects. But we don't know whether they are having the same experience of the colour. One child may be having exactly the same experience as the other does when looking at green objects. It's just that he or she is learning to name that experience, whatever it is, "blue".

So, Phoebe is also partly right: "blue" may differ from one person to the next.

Can we share someone else's experience?

When you think about it, the answer to this question is clearly 'no'. You cannot climb inside someone else's head and see what they see. From what they say about their experience, you might guess you are both experiencing the same thing; but you cannot be sure. As we've seen above, if someone says, 'What a lovely orange sunset!' you can't be sure they are experiencing its colour the same way that you do.

So, "colour" is a complex matter. Maybe Philip and Phoebe weren't being so silly in disagreeing about it after all!

THE QUESTION

This debate is ongoing and will probably take you beyond philosophy. Good luck!

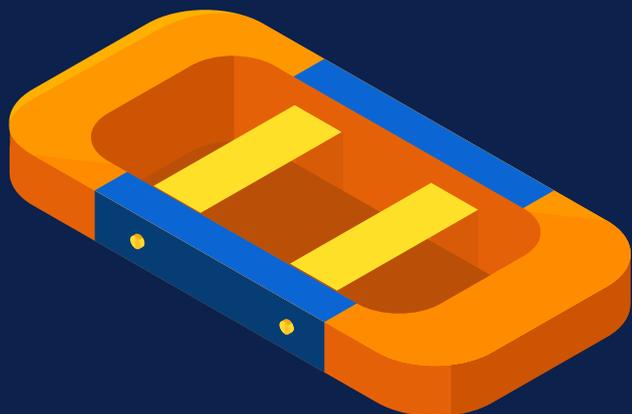
DISCUSS WITH AS MANY PEOPLE AS YOU CAN...

WANT THREE EXTRA TRICKY QUESTIONS?

1. A colour-blind person finds it difficult to tell red from green. Do we know how they experience these colours?
2. How would you explain "blue" to a person who was born blind and had never seen anything at all?
3. Some people like blue more than red, and vice versa. Is this because they are seeing the colours differently?



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NEXT PACK

THE LIFEBOAT

Who should we save?

LOOK OUT FOR PACK FIVE