

# TONIGHT'S DINNER DILEMMA

115 philosophical dilemmas to explore together

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Dear Young Philosopher

*There are no wrong answers in this book. Truly. Each of the 115 dilemmas you'll find here presents a situation with no obvious right answer. The kind that makes you lean forward and say "ooh, that's a tricky one." That's exactly the point.*

*You don't need to read this book from beginning to end. Pick any dilemma at dinner tonight, or at breakfast, or on a long car journey. Read it out loud. See what happens.*

*When someone shares their answer, don't judge it. Instead get curious about it. Ask "why do you think that?" or "what would change your mind?" You might be surprised by what the people around you believe. You might be surprised by what you believe.*

*At the beginning of each dilemma you'll find a short note connecting it to a real philosopher - someone who spent their life thinking carefully about exactly this kind of question. These notes are there for the curious. You don't need to read them to enjoy the conversation.*

*The families who ask big questions together raise children who think for themselves. That's the whole idea.*

*Now - what's for dinner?*

*Ps. There's no scoreboard. The real prize is becoming a better thinker.*

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Chapter 1

# Who Am I?

*We step and do not step into the same rivers.*

*We are and we are not.*

— Heraclitus

# **You have lived with yourself your whole life. But do you actually know who you are?**

This matters because

In a world where we present different versions of ourselves online, change our opinions, grow older, and sometimes feel like a completely different person from who we were last year, the question of identity has never been more urgent. Who are you when no one is watching? Who are you when everything around you changes?

The Philosophers

Socrates believed that questioning yourself was the highest form of wisdom. John Locke argued that your identity is made of your memories, you are whoever you remember being. Derek Parfit went even further, asking whether personal identity even matters as much as we think. These dilemmas invite you to join one of the oldest conversations in philosophy.

There are no right answers here, only more interesting questions. Let's begin.



# The Magic Lego Ship

This dilemma is based on the 'Ship of Theseus' paradox, a famous thought experiment about identity and change. Greek historian Plutarch first wrote about it about 2000 years ago. Look up 'Ship of Theseus' to learn more.

001

**You build an awesome Lego ship. Over time, pieces get lost or broken, and you replace them one by one. Eventually, every single brick in the ship is different from the original. Is it still the same ship you built at the beginning?**

*If you saved all the old pieces and rebuilt the original, which ship would be the 'real' one?*

What makes something the 'same' thing?

*Is it the pieces, or is it the design and memories?*



What about YOU?  
Are you the same person as when you were a baby, or a totally different person?



# The Clone Machine

This dilemma explores questions about personal identity and consciousness. Philosopher Derek Parfit wrote about similar problems in his work on 'Reasons and Persons,' exploring what happens to identity when a person is copied or duplicated. Search for 'Parfit personal identity' to explore more.

002

**Imagine a machine that makes a perfect copy of you - same body, same memories, same everything. The copy thinks it's you and has all your memories. Are there now two 'yous'? Which one is the real you?**

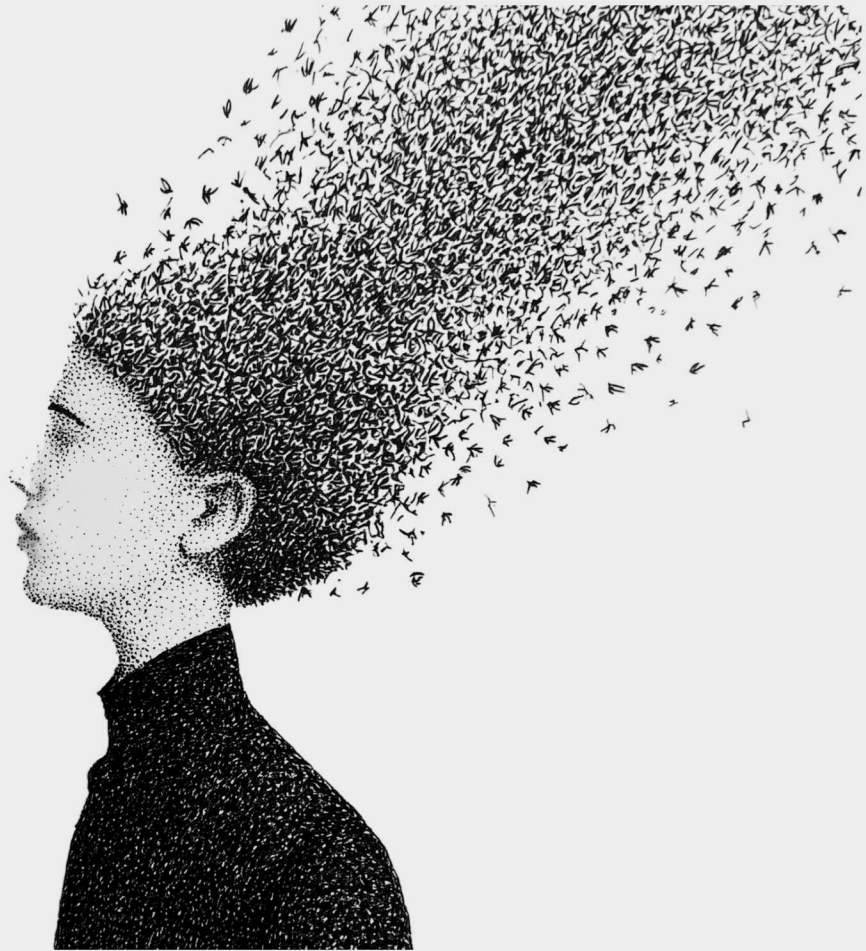
*What makes someone a unique person?*

*Would you treat the copy as a separate person or as you?*

*From the copy's perspective, are they the original?*



Would you and your copy still make the same decisions, or would you start to become different people?



# The Memory Eraser

This dilemma relates to John Locke's theory of personal identity, which emphasised memory and consciousness. Search for 'John Locke personal identity' to learn more.

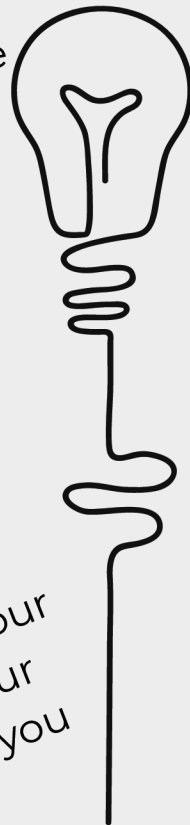
003

**Imagine you lost all your memories, but your body stayed exactly the same. You don't remember your family, your friends, your favourite foods, or anything that ever happened to you. Would you still be you?**

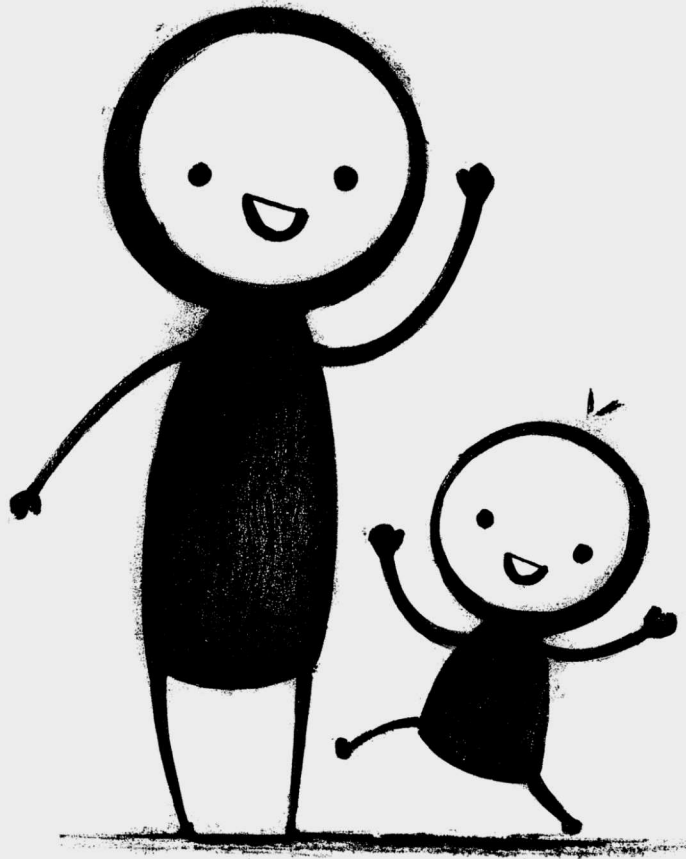
*If your family told you everything about your past, would you become more like 'you' again?*

*Is there a difference between forgetting everything slowly and losing it all at once?*

*What if you kept all your skills but lost all your memories, would you still be you?*



Are you your memories, your body, or something else?



# The Growing Person

This dilemma connects to the philosophical concept of 'diachronic identity', how things remain the same over time even as they change. Search for 'personal identity over time' to dive deeper.

004

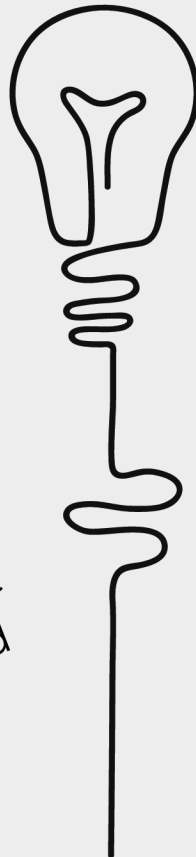
**Think about baby photos of yourself. That baby looks different, thinks different thoughts, and likes different things than you do now.**

**Scientists say many of the cells in your body are replaced over time. Are you still the same person as that baby?**

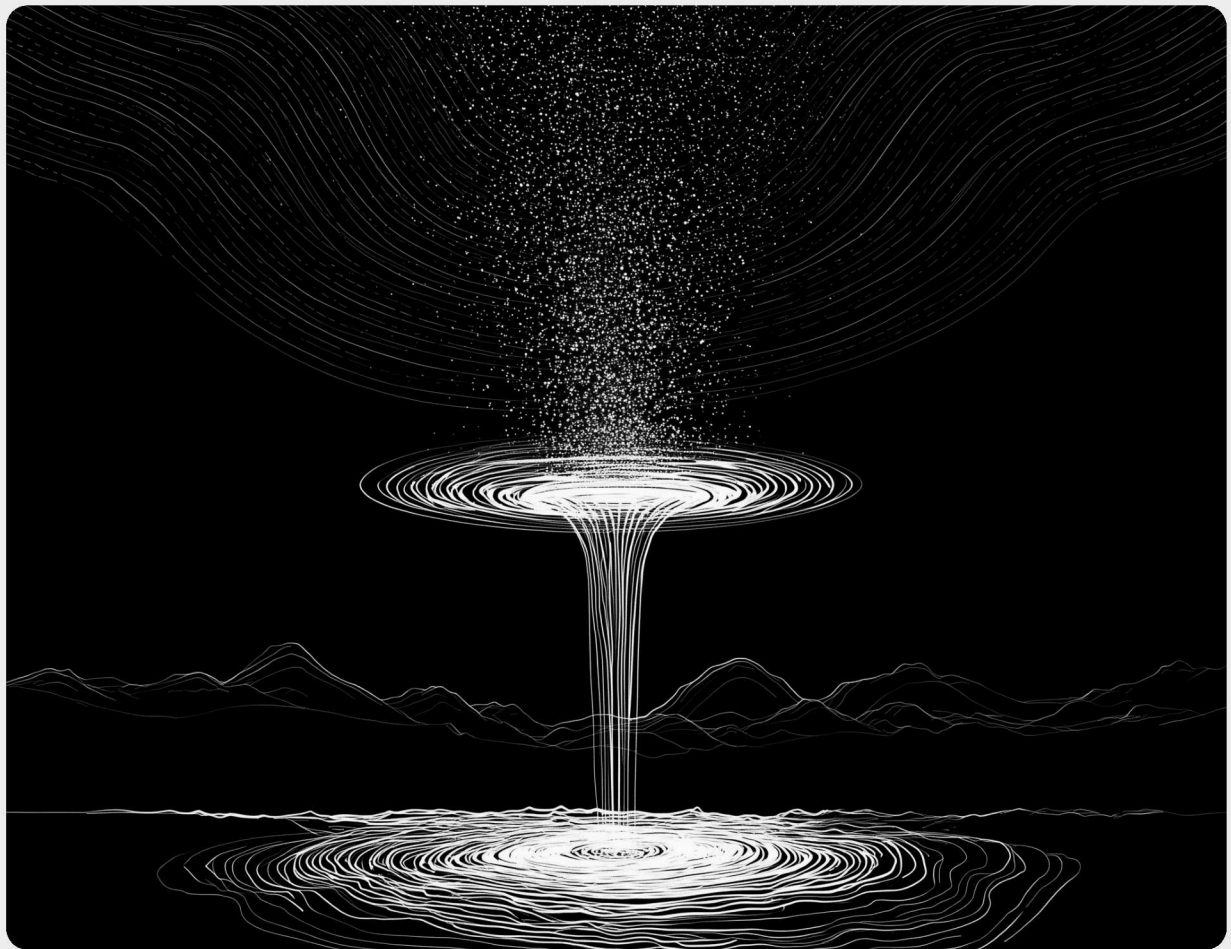
*What stays the same as we grow and change?*

*If everything about you changes, what makes you 'you'?*

*What if you could meet the baby you — would you be friends?*



Your values and interests have changed — what HASN'T changed about you?



# The Teleporter

This dilemma is related to Derek Parfit's teleportation thought experiment. It explores whether survival is about physical continuity or psychological continuity. Look up 'Parfit's teletransporter' to learn more.

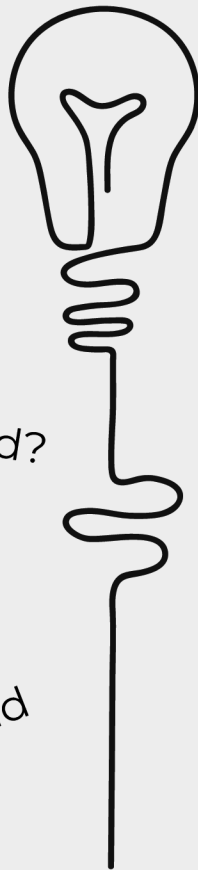
005

**You step into a teleporter that scans your entire body, destroys it, and rebuilds you exactly the same on Mars. Every atom is in the right place. Did 'you' travel to Mars, or did you die and a copy of you get created?**

*Is there something special about your original atoms?*

*Would you use a teleporter if one existed?*

*What if the teleporter made two of you by accident, what should happen?*



If the version of you on Mars has all your memories, should they go home to YOUR family?

Chapter 2

# Right & Wrong

*Only act according to a rule that you would be happy  
for everyone in the world to follow.*

— Immanuel Kant

## **Everyone has done something they knew was wrong. And everyone has wondered, how do we actually know what wrong means?**

This matters because

Every day we make choices that affect other people. Should you tell the truth even when it hurts? Is it ever right to break a rule for a good reason? These aren't just children's questions. They are the questions judges, doctors, politicians, and parents wrestle with every single day.

The Philosophers

Immanuel Kant believed that some actions are simply right or wrong, regardless of the outcome. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill disagreed as they argued that the right action is whatever creates the most happiness for the most people. Philippa Foot famously invented the Trolley Problem to test exactly where our moral instincts take us.

You might surprise yourself with what you discover you believe.



# The Runaway Bike

This dilemma is a kid-friendly version of 'The Trolley Problem,' created by philosopher Philippa Foot in 1967.

It's one of the most famous moral dilemmas in philosophy! Search for 'trolley problem' to see many versions.

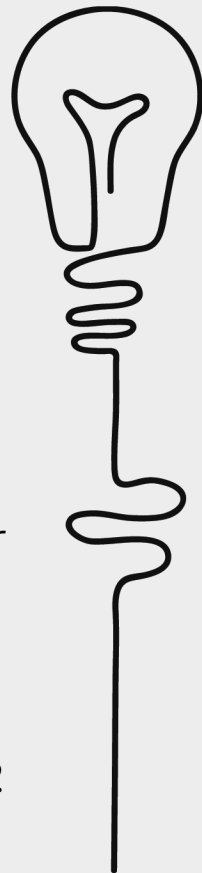
006

**You're on a bike going down a steep hill. You realise the brakes don't work! Straight ahead are 5 kids playing. You can't stop in time. But you notice that if you steer hard to the right, you'll hit only 1 kid who's standing alone. What do you do?**

*Is it better to do nothing or to make a choice that causes harm?*

*What if the 1 kid was your best friend?*

*What if the five kids were strangers but the one kid had once saved your life?*



Is there a difference between steering toward someone on purpose versus accidentally skidding into them?



# The Stolen bread

This dilemma relates to 'consequentialism' (judging actions by their results) versus 'deontology' (following moral rules). A famous example is Jean Valjean from 'Les Misérables' who steals bread. Look up 'moral dilemmas in Les Misérables'.

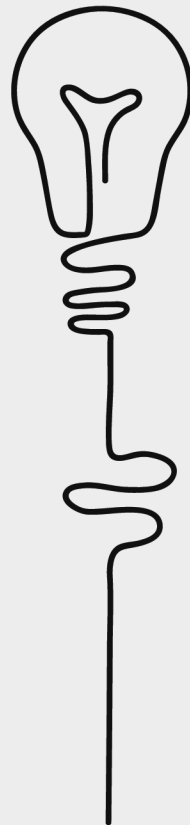
007

**A family is very poor and they're hungry. The parents steal bread and canned food from a wealthy person's house to feed their children. The rich person won't miss the bread or the canned food. Was it wrong to steal?**

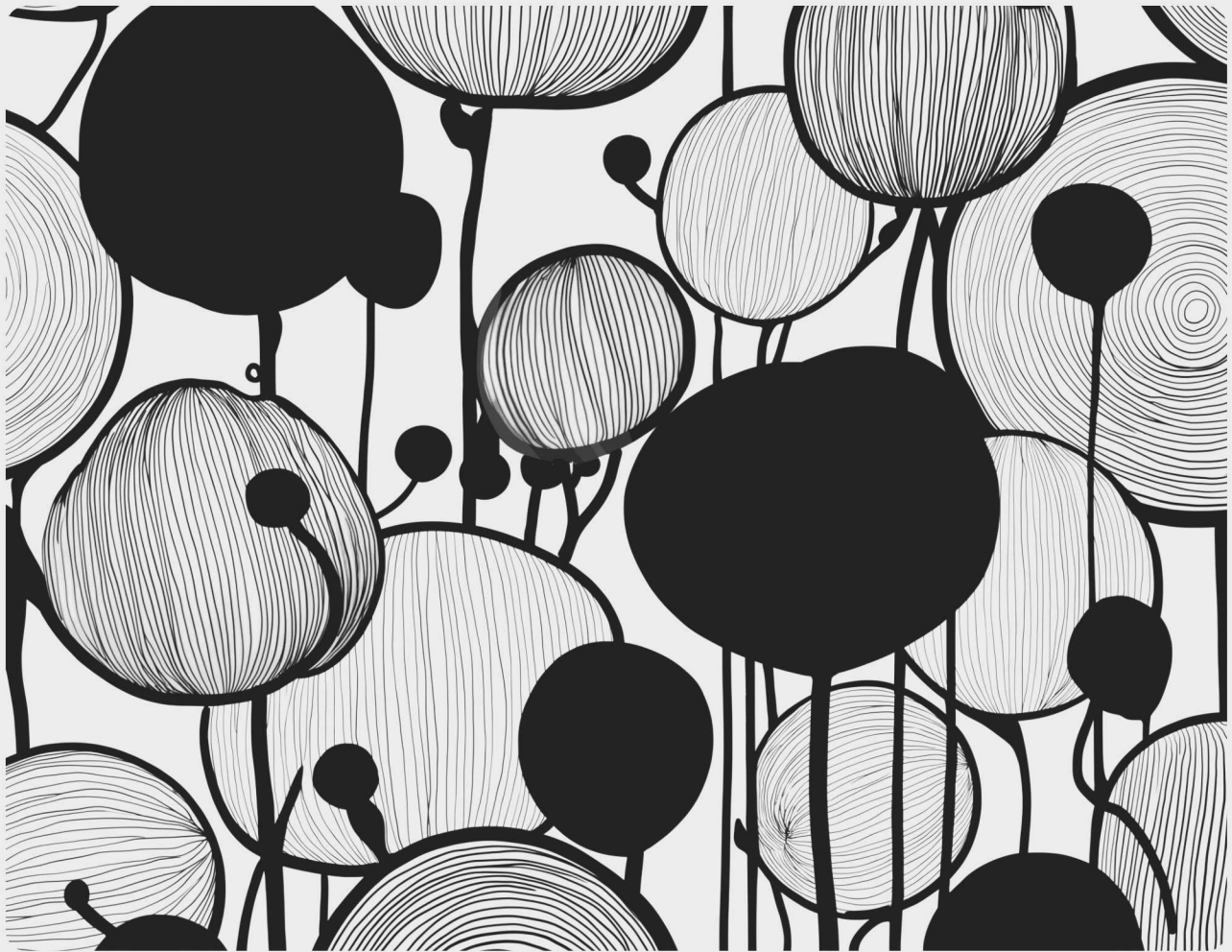
*Is stealing always wrong,  
or does the reason  
matter?*

*Should the parent go to  
jail?*

*What other choices  
could the parent have  
made?*



Would your answer  
change if the  
wealthy person had  
worked very hard  
for that bread?



# The White Lie

This dilemma explores Immanuel Kant's view that lying is always wrong versus more flexible ethical theories. Kant believed in the 'categorical imperative'—never do something you wouldn't want everyone to do. Search for 'Kant on lying' to learn more.

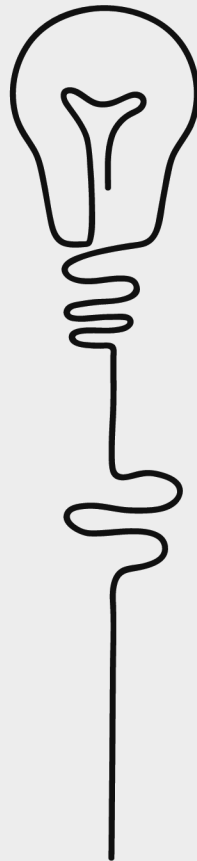
008

**Your friend shows you an art project they worked really hard on. Your friend is so happy with it! But honestly, you don't think it's very good. Your friend asks, 'Do you like it?' What do you say?**

*Is it ever okay to lie to protect someone's feelings?*

*Can you tell the truth in a kind way?*

*Would you want someone to lie to you?*



What if the lie stops your friend from practising and improving, is the kindness actually unkind?



# The Found Wallet

This dilemma relates to questions about property rights and moral obligations to strangers. Philosophers like John Locke wrote about ‘finders keepers’ and ownership. Look up ‘philosophy of property rights’ or ‘finder’s law’ to explore.

009

**You find a wallet on the ground with \$100 inside, but there's no ID or name. You really want to buy a new video game. What should you do with the money?**

*If you can't find the owner, is it okay to keep it?*

*What if there was an ID card in the wallet. Would that change the situation?*

*What if it was only \$5?  
What if it was \$1,000?*



Is the moral thing to do different from the legal thing to do?



# The Secret Promise

This explores 'prima facie duties' (duties that can conflict), a concept from philosopher W.D. Ross. He believed we have multiple moral obligations that sometimes conflict. Search for 'W.D. Ross prima facie duties' to learn more.

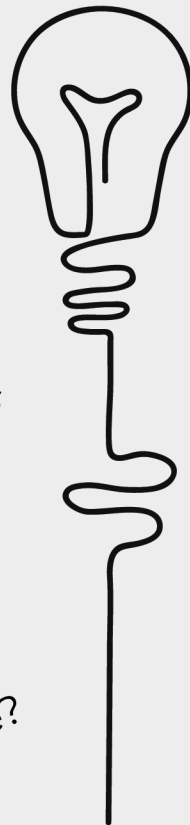
010

**Your friend tells you a secret and makes you promise not to tell anyone. But the secret is that your friend is being bullied at school and really hurting. Should you tell a trusted adult, even though you promised not to?**

Is keeping a promise always the most important thing?

What if your friend gets really mad at you for telling?

Is there a way to get help for your friend without technically breaking the promise?



Are there times when breaking a promise is the right thing to do?

Chapter 3

# Fairness

*Justice means equality, but equality for equals, and not the same for those who are not equal in the relevant way.*

— Aristotle

## **Is it fair to give everyone exactly the same thing, even when people start from very different places?**

This matters because

Fairness is one of the first concepts children understand, and one of the last that adults agree on. Debates about fair pay, equal opportunities, and what we owe each other sit at the heart of politics, law, and everyday family life.

The Philosophers

Aristotle drew a crucial distinction between treating people equally and treating them equitably ( giving everyone what they actually need). John Rawls invented one of philosophy's most famous thought experiments: imagine you had to design the rules of society without knowing which position you'd be born into. What rules would you choose then?

Fairness turns out to be much more complicated, and more interesting, than it first appears.