



DECISION-MAKING AND MORALITY

Learning about moral reasoning through the philosophical work of
Philippa Foot

Learning Objectives	The primary learning objective of this lesson plan is to acquire basic knowledge of moral reasoning. Students will also learn to be more objective when studying historical events.
Subjects	History, Politics, Art
Recommended Age (10-12 or 12-14)	12-14 years old
Number of students involved	Maximum 25 students, divided into groups.
Duration	90 minutes
Skills Developed	Critical thinking, decision-making, moral reasoning
Material Needed	Flipcharts, comic strips, pens and coloured pens/markers
Inclusion Best Practices	It is important to note that this lesson plan will discuss some sensitive topics, including war, physical harm and death. It is, therefore, essential to make the students feel comfortable and safe to share their opinion. For young students, you could use drawings, short stories, and other interactive activities. More information about talking to children about war and sensitive topics can be found on UNICEF's website. Link: https://www.unicef.org/parenting/how-talk-your-children-about-conflict-and-war .



Instructions for implementing the lesson plan

This lesson plan aims to introduce students to the philosophical work of Philippa Foot, a philosopher well-known for introducing the 'Trolley Problem'. Students will be introduced to the 'Trolley Problem', and they will use it to discuss the Peloponnesian War.

The objective of this lesson plan is to help students enhance their soft skills and understand the importance of moral reasoning in decision-making. This lesson plan uses the Peloponnesian War as the basis to explain the philosophical work of Philippa Foot, but it can also be applied to other historical conflicts or significant events.

Step 1: Introduction to the philosophical topic (25 minutes)

The first part of the lesson plan is the introduction to the philosophical work of Philippa Foot who is considered one of the greatest moral philosophers, and she was the first woman to take up the position of a Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at Somerville College in 1949 ([King, 2019](#)).

In one of her philosophical papers in 1967, Philippa Foot used the 'Trolley Problem' to establish the doctrine of the "**double effect**".

The Trolley Problem is a thought problem in moral philosophy. In this fictional scenario, there is a train which is about to hit five persons. An overlooker has the choice to press a switch that will divert the direction of the train and kill only one person instead. The overlooker faces a moral dilemma and must choose if it is acceptable to sacrifice the life of one person to save the five.

Philippa Foot argues that there is a moral distinction between taking an action and allowing something to happen. In simpler terms, it might be permissible to cause harm as a side effect of your intention to bring a good result, but it might not be permissible to cause such harm, as a means of getting a good result. This argument is known as the doctrine of the double effect.

To make your lesson plan more interactive and help your students familiarise with the 'Trolley Problem', you can use the 'Trolley Problem' online game, which includes different variations of the Trolley problem asking the players what they would choose. The game is currently only available in English.

Link to the game: <https://neal.fun/absurd-trolley-problems/>.

The game has different levels, and at each level, there is a different variation of the Trolley Problem. In some of the versions, the students might have to sacrifice themselves or their friends to save more people. It is important to explain to your students that each time they choose whether to change the train's direction, they will be making a **moral decision** based on the data and the information they have



each time. However, there is no right or wrong answer to the Trolley Problem and it is normal for students to make different choices at each game level.

You should give approximately 10 minutes to your students to play the game. While they are playing, give them some questions to think about:

- Would you change the direction of the train in any of the cases?
- Does your opinion change when you know the people on the track?
- How do you feel each time you choose to change the train's direction?
- Would you sacrifice yourself?

Step 2: Introduction to the Peloponnesian War (20 minutes)

With these questions in mind, you should start discussing the Peloponnesian War. The Peloponnesian War was fought between the two leading powers of ancient Greece, Athens and Sparta. The war lasted for 27 years and it was described in Thucydides book 'History of the Peloponnesian War' which is considered one of the world's finest works of history ([Britannica, 2023](#)).

The Athenian alliance included most of the Greek islands and coastal states of the Aegean Sea and resulted in Athens having the strongest navy, while Sparta had the stronger army formed by most Greek independent states (ibid.). In addition, and as argued by Thucydides, the Peloponnesian War was not just a conflict between two great powers, it was also a clash between two different political institutions ([Lenses of Analysis, 2001](#)). Athens is set to be the birthplace of democracy, while Sparta was an oligarchic state.

The Peloponnesian War ended with Athen's defeat and it caused significant political, economic and cultural casualties for all the powers and states that were involved.

Once introducing the Peloponnesian War to your students, you should link this concept with the 'Trolley Problem'. Ask your students to think about how many moral dilemmas Athenian and Spartan soldiers had to make on a daily basis.

On the one hand, soldiers were fighting to protect their city and not necessarily to kill each other. Yet, the Peloponnesian War led to the death of many people all over Greece and it destroyed financially both leading cities, Athens and Sparta.

On the other hand, taking another look at the daily conflict, soldiers were also fighting to save their own lives.

At this stage, you should explain to your students that there are different viewpoints within a war, and there isn't one common moral decision that can be considered right or wrong. This however does not mean that wars should be justified.

You should try to explain some of the negative consequences of wars, using the Peloponnesian war and its results as an example.

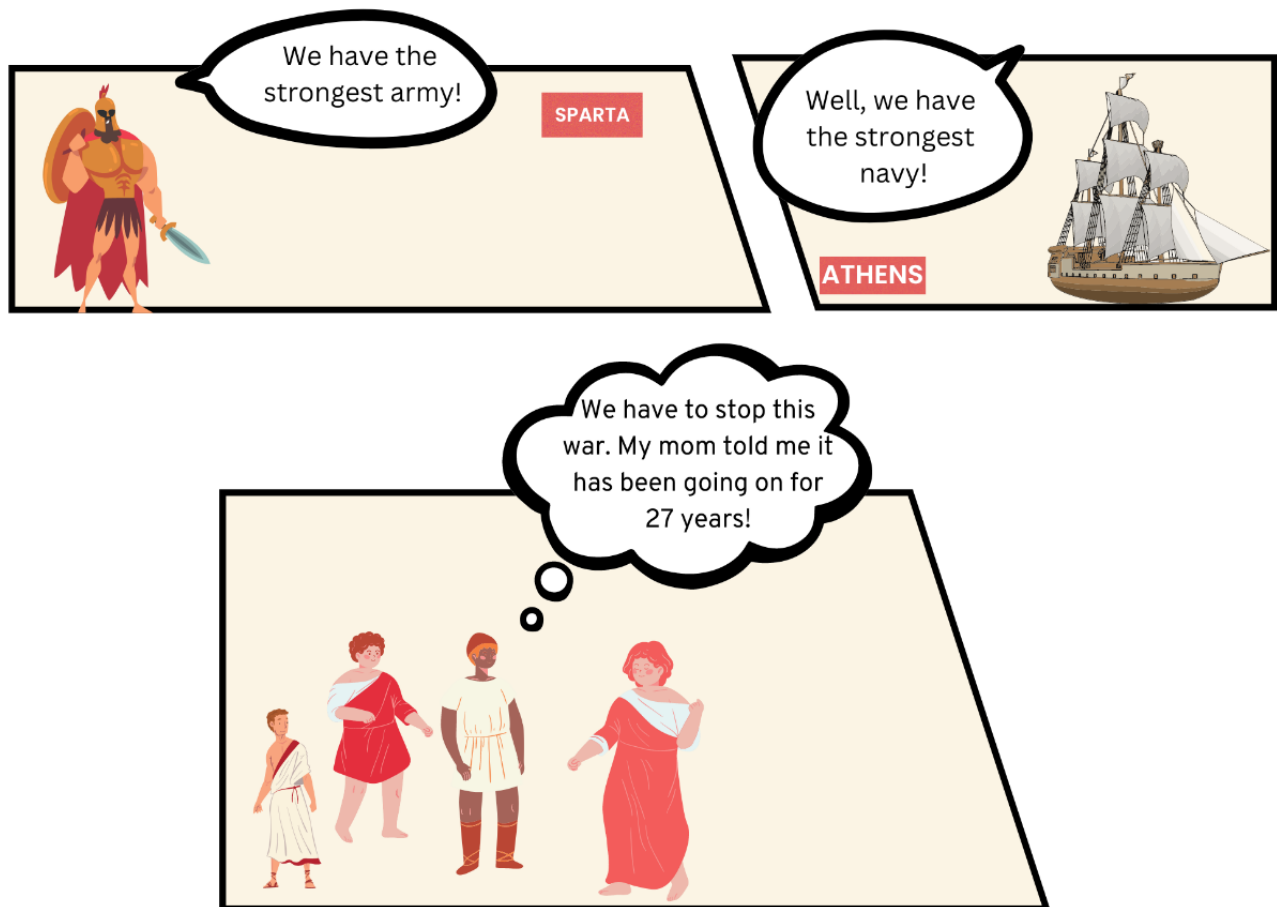
Step 3: Creation of a group project (45 minutes)

After the short group discussion, you can divide your students in groups and ask them to create a short story in which they take up the role of stopping the Peloponnesian War, using their knowledge of moral thinking and the philosophical work of Philippa Foot.

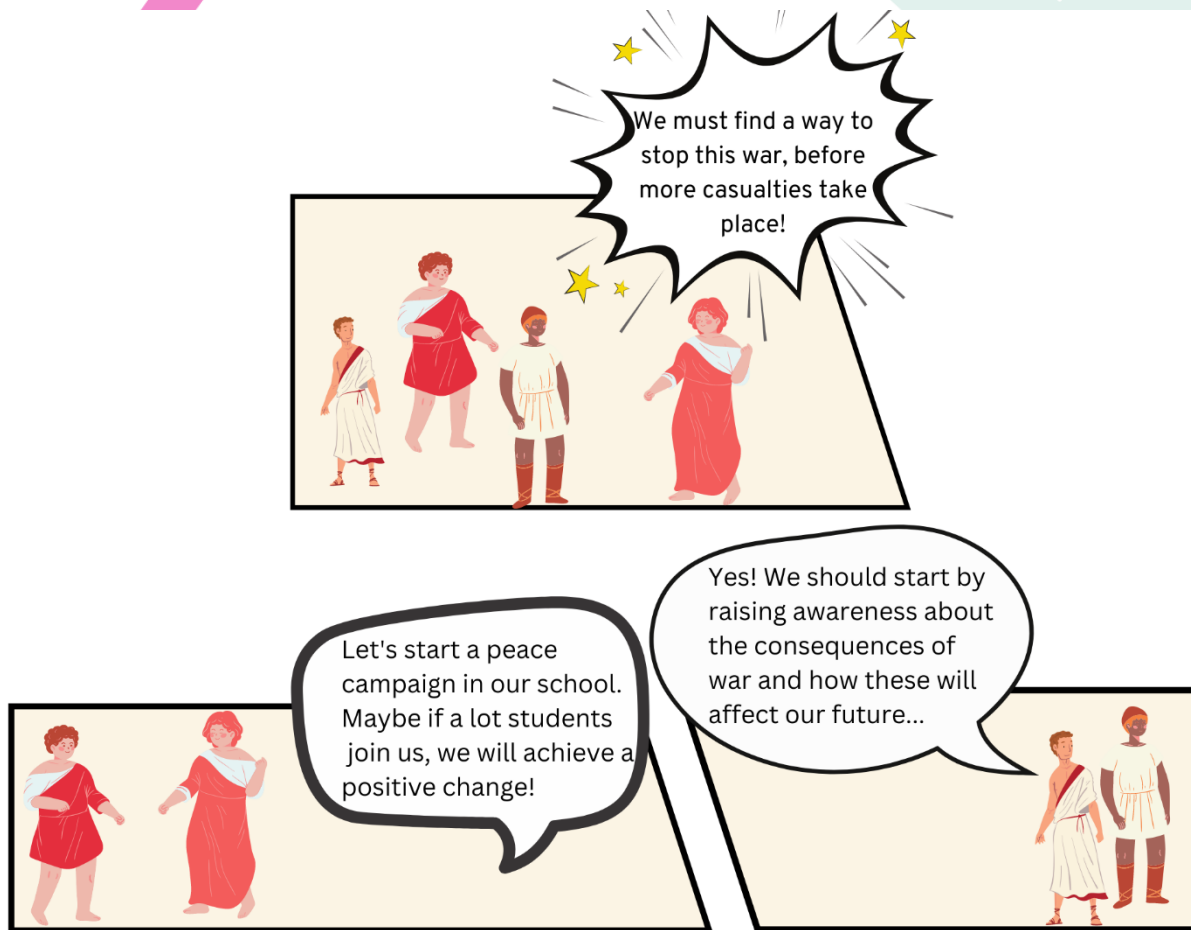
To make this process more appealing to your students, it is suggested to ask them to create their own comics. The students can either create the comics on their own, making drawings and paintings, or you can give them ready-made characters and comic strips to use.

You can also use **Canva** to create your comic strips and find ready-to-use characters and images. Link: <https://www.canva.com/>.

Here is an example of a comic strip created using Canva:







The aim of this group activity is to help students think of actions that will eventually end the conflict and bring peace between the two communities fighting. How would the soldiers convince their leaders to stop the war? Will women decide to step up and stop the fighting? Does it all start with a group of students that will run in the streets advocating for peace?

This is an activity that you could also ask your students to do as homework. In this case, the duration of the lesson plan will be shorter.



References:

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