

The *Big Questions* philosophy mentoring program

Sample philosophy curriculum materials for upper primary school,
prepared by The Philosophy Club

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Just lucky, I guess...

Themes: The existence of luck; destiny; coincidence; probability

(10 minutes) "A Very Lucky Wind"

This session uses audio clips from the podcast episode 'A Very Lucky Wind' from Radiolab, produced by WNYC: New York Public Radio. Online at <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91686-a-very-lucky-wind/>
Speakers are Jad Abumrad (JA) and Robert Krulwich (RK), Laura Buxton #1 (L1), Laura Buxton #2 (L2), and Jay Koehler (JK).

Play first audio clip (0:55 – 7:43 in the podcast), accompanied by a slide show created by The Philosophy Club. The clip is transcribed below.

- JA: I want to start the show today with a truly remarkable story, which begins with this girl.
- L1: Hello! I'm Laura Buxton
- JA: Let's do it like a movie, OK? It's June 2001. We're in a little town in northern England called Stoke-on-Trent. There is Laura Buxton standing in her front yard. She's ten years old.
- L1: Well, almost ten...
- JA: In her hand she's holding a balloon...
- A red balloon. She has written her name on her balloon.
- L1: "Please return to Laura Buxton." And then on the other side it had my address.
- JA: So there she is standing in her front yard with her balloon. And she holds her balloon up to the sky...
- L1: I just let it go and the wind took it. We were laughing and joking because we thought it would just get stuck in a tree a bit further down the road somewhere.
- JA: That's not what happened. The balloon kept going. Now, I'm looking at a map here... Stoke-on-Trent is north is up towards the top of England... I'm looking here and it would have had to float up, and went past Stratford, kept going past Walsale, Wolverhampton, then past Birmingham, past Kitterminster past Worcester, past millions and millions of people, past Gloucester. It begins to descend. And of all the places where it could land, it touches town in the yard of this girl.
- L2: I live in the countryside in a little village called Milton Lilbourne. The balloon got stuck in our hedge but our next-door neighbor found it in the hedge and he thought that it was just a bit of rubbish. And he collected it up so the cows wouldn't eat it. And he was about to put it in the in, literally. And then he saw the label: 'please send back to Laura Buxton' and he was like 'Oh my god.'
- RK: Why? Why'd he say 'Oh my god'?
- JA: Okay so check this out. Remember how I told you the first girl who sent the balloon was ten?
- JA: The second girl? Who received it?
- L2: Ten years old.
- JA: She's ten. Remember I told you the first girl's name was...
- Laura Buxton? Well ... girl number two, can you introduce yourself.
- L2: Hi. I'm Laura Buxton.
- RK: What??!
- JA: Girl number one:
- L1: Hello I'm Laura Buxton.
- JA: Girl number two:
- L2: Hello I'm Laura Buxton.
- RK: They're BOTH Laura Buxton?

- JA: A ten-year-old girl named Laura Buxton lets go of a balloon. That balloon floats 140 miles lands ...in the yard of another ten-year-old girl named Laura Buxton. I think it might be the strangest thing I've ever heard in my life.
- L2: It's pretty weird.
- JA: So weird, we had to get them both into a studio...
...Both Lauras are now 18 and they've actually become really good friends. What did you think at that point?
- L2: Well, I was quite young, so I didn't know what to think. I'd better write the letter, because there's someone else out there called Laura Buxton! I must see them! ...
- JA: So Laura # 2 wrote a letter to Laura #1.
- L2: "Dear Laura", I think I put. "I'm ten years old and I live in Wiltshire and I found your balloon. And the thing is, my name is Laura Buxton as well, so lots of love, from Laura Buxton."
- JA: Laura # 1? You get the note.
- L1: Got it through the post.
- JA: Do you remember reading it?
- L1: I remember reading it because I opened it up whilst I was in the kitchen. And it was really quite confusing actually.
- JA: A short while later the two Lauras meet. And at that moment, things get even weirder. They realize not only do we have the same name, and are the same age, but ...
we look the same. Skinny and tall, brownish hair.
- L2: The weirdest thing is we were both wearing similar clothes... pink jumpers and jeans.
- L1: We'd both got a 3-year-old black Labrador. We'd both got a grey rabbit. We'd both got guinea pigs.
- L2: And they both brought their guinea pigs with them that day. They were identical. They were both brown with a sort of beigey-orange patch on their bum. Like, completely the same.
- L1: I was just like, oh my gosh, how is this happening?
- JA: Do you believe in miracles, either of you?
- L1: I don't know, would you call this a miracle?
- L2: I'm not sure, I guess it could be but it's more of a case of fate.
- L1: Yeah, I'd say it's more fate than a miracle.
- JA: So you don't think that wind that blew the balloon was *just* wind?
- L1: Well if it was just wind, it was a very very lucky wind. The chances are just so unlikely there must be some kind of reason.
- L2: Maybe we were meant to meet.
- JA: But meant by whom or what?
- L1: Who knows?
- L2: Only time will tell. Maybe it's preparing us for something later in life...
- RK: Jad, you know what you are? You're a destiny bully. You want them to act like they are somehow the subject of a miracle.
- JA: ...The question I was trying to get at, was how should we think about that story? Do we live in a world where there's magic and meaning or is it all just chance?

Show a slide with the following key phrases from the podcast:

More fate than a miracle	Preparing us for something else in life
Lucky wind	Destiny bully
Unlikely	Magic
Must be some kind of reason	Chance
Maybe we were meant to meet	Fate
Meant by who or what?	Coincidence

- (2 minutes) Question formulation: In pairs, children generate philosophical questions inspired by the story and key phrases.
- (15 minutes) Facilitator writes up questions. Children vote on which question to address, and then engage in a collaborative enquiry.
- (5 minutes) “A Very Lucky Wind” (continued).

Play second audio clip (18:08 – 20:51 in the podcast), accompanied by a slide show created by The Philosophy Club. The clip is transcribed below.

- JA: But there are some things, like the Lauras, that will never feel like coincidence... So we had to ask Jay [Koehler]. I ask you, Sir, is this a miracle?
- JK: This is not a miracle, it's a good story. But there are lots of little things I could pick at in the story. Laura Buxton didn't find the balloon, somebody else who knew a Laura Buxton found the balloon. You selected out the features that matched. And trust me, somebody checked to see if she was an identical twin, and said no, no, that's not a good one, skip the twin. And how many brothers and sisters? Oh, not the same number – skip that. Oh, they both have a rabbit. Let's put that one in the story.
- JA: To be totally honest, he's right. When I was interviewing the Lauras I was kind of scouting for similarities. What's your favourite colour, both of you?
- L1: Blue.
- L2: Pink.
- JA: Scrap that. And what do you guys study in school?
- L1: Biology, Chemistry and Geography.
- L2: Whereas I'm doing English and History and Classical Civilisation.
- JA: Hm. Scrap that.
- JK: What people do is they try to make the story better by showing more similarities.
- JA: So you're saying that somebody – I couldn't imagine who – *doctored* the story.
- JK: By the way I don't want to spoil anything, and this is a trivial comment, but I believe that one of the girls was actually nine.
- L1: *Almost* ten...
- JA: Nonetheless I will continue to tell the story every chance I get... Because, damn the statistics, it just makes me feel good.
- JK: First of all, we love stories. It connects us. It gives us insight into our own lives. And I think it also gives us a feeling that life is magical.
- JA: And maybe we don't have to call it magic to enjoy the experience. I was talking to the Lauras and I asked them: What if a statistician were to say to you, "This was bound to happen. Statistically this was bound to happen sometime, to someone"?
- L1: That's fair enough, because it just happens to be us, in those statistics.
- L2: If that's what the statistician thinks, fair game to him.
- JA: They don't really care. The way they see it, whatever was in that wind, whether it was fate or just wind – it brought them together, and now they're friends.

- (5 minutes) Free discussion inspired by the podcast.

(15 minutes) “Tyche” by Michelle Soweby, The Philosophy Club

In ancient Greece, people believed in a Goddess called “Tyche” which means “luck”.

Tyche was thought to be the goddess who governed the fortune and prosperity of a city. The ancient Greeks believed that cities had a destiny: to be wealthy or to be poor, for example. And Tyche controlled the city’s destiny, as well as the destiny of individual people.

According to ancient Greek mythology, Tyche had control over something called the Wheel of Fortune. How the wheel turned would determine whether a person was lucky or unlucky.

Show an image depicting Tyche and her Wheel of Fortune.

The other thing about Tyche is that she was blind. You can see her depicted here with a blindfold on. She couldn’t see whether somebody was deserving of good luck or bad luck. So she didn’t spin the wheel in a logical, reasonable or fair way. She just spun it at random.

And this is how the ancient Greeks explained to themselves sudden changes in people’s fortunes.

If there was a drought or a flood, or a heavy frost, and as a consequence the village lost its harvest, and people went hungry, then everyone would say: “That’s because of Tyche – she’s spinning her wheel of fortune again.”

If there was a political upheaval or a war between two cities, throwing people’s lives into disarray, then everyone would say: “Oh, that unpredictable Tyche, fickle and capricious as always – she must be spinning her wheel again.”

For each of the following discussion questions, a nominated child spins a ‘Lazy Susan’, marked with an arrow, to pick a respondent from the circle at random.

A Greek historian once said: “When we don’t know what caused an event, it’s fair enough to attribute that event to Tyche – to say that Tyche is responsible for that event.”

Was that a reasonable belief? Do you think it’s fair enough for the ancient Greeks to attribute changes in fortune to Tyche?

Does luck exist?

Are some people more lucky than others? For instance, is a person who is hit by lightning unlucky? Is a person who wins the lottery lucky?

Is it possible that when we use the words ‘lucky’ and ‘unlucky’, we’re just not aware of the real causes for why something happened (just like when the Greeks said “It’s Tyche”, they weren’t aware of the real causes of the floods and wars)?

The following further commentary, adapted for children by The Philosophy Club, is excerpted from “The Explainer: does luck exist?” by Neil Levy, *The Conversation*, 07/02/2013. Online at: <http://theconversation.com/explainer-does-luck-exist-5139>

To talk about luck is to talk about how things might easily have gone. Something is lucky (or unlucky) for a person if it matters (somehow) to them AND it might easily not have happened.

There is one way in which we can say that someone is lucky or unlucky. Rather than compare an event to what we would expect to happen, given roughly the same circumstances, we might compare a person’s circumstances or their traits to what is statistically normal for a group. Using this kind of measure, we can say that someone born severely handicapped is unlucky and someone born into wealth is lucky.

Think of an Australian adult who loses her job, through no fault of her own. We might say she is unlucky, comparing her to other Australian adults. But compared to humanity as a whole, she might be lucky if she remains able to feed and house herself.

Think of someone who misses her flight and takes another one, which then crashes. She is unlucky to be involved in a plane crash, given that she might easily have been on the earlier flight. But if she is the only survivor, she might be lucky, given that everyone else died.

That's why we can find ourselves saying of someone who has broken three ribs and both legs that they are lucky.

Media bias activity: "Sam Strange and the aliens" by David Urbinder, The Philosophy Club

(5 minutes)

Introduction:

Sometimes we see things through the filter of our preconceptions. Superstitions make us especially prone to view events in a particularly biased way. And depending on how you explain an event, you can make someone interpret it in one way or another – just like the radio journalist did in the first part of the "Laura Buxton" story, leading us to a particular conclusion.

This is an activity to get you thinking about bias in the media.

Divide the children into two small groups. Give each their own space to work in, butchers paper, costumes etc.

You are two teams of journalists, newsreaders and editors that produce a nightly news show.

Group 1: Ultimate Reality News Network

Group 2: Super Amazing Awesome News Network

Your task is to read through all the news items that have been collected for the day, and to decide which items to include in a news report for your viewers.

What sort of news shows do you present? You may think this is a silly sort of question. Aren't all news shows the same? Surprisingly, they aren't.

Some news shows try to be very entertaining and sensational, thinking that they will get more viewers if their news feels more like entertainment. Other news shows try their best to present the news in a thoughtful and serious way, in the belief that their reputation as a reliable news source will deliver a big audience.

You may have guessed that yours (*Ultimate Reality News Network*) is one of the serious, thoughtful news shows. Your editorial policy is to always tell the truth, and to tell it in a way that helps people understand what is really happening in the world.

And you may have guessed that yours (*Super Amazing Awesome News Network*) is one of the sensational, entertaining news shows. Your editorial policy is to present the most amazing version of the day's events. However, keep in mind that you are still a news service, and you must always stick to the facts.

Here are your missions:

- *Ultimate Reality News Network*: Your mission is to read through the day's news items and to select the items that give your audience the most sensible picture of the day's events. Remember that you must always be truthful. However, this does not mean that you must present everything that was said and done today. You may decide that some news items are more relevant in presenting a sensible picture of the day's news.
- *Super Amazing Awesome News Network*: Your mission is to read through the day's news items and to select the items that give your audience the most sensational picture of the day's events. Remember that you must always be truthful. However, this does not mean that you must present everything that was said and done today. You may decide that some news items are more relevant in presenting a sensational version of the day's news.

Distribute the 'News items' handout (see below).

(10 minutes) Children read through the news items, and work in their groups to decide which items to include in their reports.

News items:

Detective Inspector Harvey Clue says: "Hundreds of people reported seeing unusual lights flickering in the sky between 8pm and 8:15pm last night. Some of these people thought that they were seeing UFOs."

Sam Strange claims to be able to see into the future. For many years Sam has been saying: "I am the prophet of the Apocalypse! One day, our eyes will turn skyward, and we will see the End of Days arrive." Today Sam says: "My prophesy has come true! The End of Days has arrived!"

Miss Claire Sky from The Bureau of Meteorology says "We released several weather balloons between the hours of 6pm and 11pm yesterday. The weather balloons are disc-shaped and silver in colour."

Dr Hafiz Medson, a spokesperson for the public hospital reports that a lot of people have come down with a cold since last night. He says: "Thousands of people have consulted their doctors or visited the pharmacy to get some Panadol."

Sam Strange says "I have always said that the End of Days will begin with a plague. And so it has begun!"

Dr Medson, spokesperson for the public hospital, says "It is not unusual for many people to catch a cold at the same time. After all, this is a virus which jumps from person to person."

Mr Toby Gulbalil saw what he describes as "small, green men" just outside of the city at 9pm. He says: "I was mountain biking around in the National Park, when I saw two small, green men with really large heads. They looked exactly like Martians, the kind you see in movies all the time. I went up to get a closer look, but they ran off into the bushes."

Mrs Belle Eaves, spokesperson for the Citizen's Alien Brigade insists that Mr Gulbalil's report confirms that the lights seen in the sky must have been Martian spaceships. She says "How much more proof do you need that the aliens are right here in our country, getting ready to take over? Mr Gulbalil saw what can only be described as two aliens, just an hour after hundreds of people witnessed the UFO landings!"

Ms Hildergarde Longshorts, the park ranger, says: "The National Park is currently being used as a film set for a new science fiction film called 'Revenge of the Martians'. The little green men that the bike-rider saw were probably actors in costume."

(15 minutes) Children prepare their news broadcasts.

Facilitator provides props / costume elements.

You have 15 minutes to prepare your news show.

You will be able to present this in any way you like, but you might want to think about how the news is normally presented on TV, with news anchors, reporters and interviews.

You will be presenting the news to be broadcast on live television, and the rest of the class will be the TV audience.

(10 minutes) In their groups, children present news broadcasts on each of the two TV stations.

(5 minutes) Reflection time

It's time for us to reflect on everything we've been doing today, and celebrate the wonderful contributions that people have made, and the interesting ideas we've shared.

Choose a reflection question, and seek responses from around the circle.

What's one thing somebody said today that you found interesting?

What have you discovered or learned?

What is now more confusing than you first thought?

Pobody's nerfect

Themes: Human perfection, collective moral responsibility, moral bio-enhancement.

(3 minutes) Introductory stimulus: Play a recording of the song “Only Human” by Jason Mraz.

(15 minutes) “Perfect people” – story and discussion questions by Peter Worley, *The Philosophy Shop*, p. 186.

There was once an ambitious and brilliant magician who, one spring morning, decided she wanted to create a perfect person. She thought that by creating a perfect human being, everyone else would be able to learn from them, and improve themselves. A world of perfect people would be a perfect world, she thought.

What do you imagine this human being would be like?

Could there be such a thing as a perfect human being?

What is perfection?

What is a human being?

How might we learn from the perfect people? How might we improve ourselves from their example?

Would a world of perfect people be a perfect world?

Slideshow and narrative: Moral bio-enhancement

The following text – adapted for children by The Philosophy Club – is excerpted from “Moral Enhancement” by Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson, *Philosophy Now*, 2012. Online at http://philosophynow.org/issues/91/Moral_Enhancement

(15 minutes) Opening narrative / slideshow: the feeling of moral responsibility

For most of our 150,000 years on the planet, we lived in small villages or nomadic tribes. We worked hard with primitive tools to find enough food and shelter to survive. Thanks to evolution, we became very well adapted to that world. And evolution didn't just shape our bodies and our tools. It also shaped our sense of morality – our feelings about what's right and wrong. Here's an example: We naturally feel bad when we hurt other people in our social group. The more we feel we *directly caused* something bad to happen, the more we feel responsible for it.

Back in evolutionary history, when we lived in small groups, this feeling of moral responsibility was enough to keep us from hurting each other. But here's a problem. That feeling of moral responsibility that we evolved in ancient times is not very well adapted to our modern lives. It doesn't help us very well to cope with some of the biggest moral problems we face today, in a world of science and technology, where we live among billions of people in a global society.

Today, we're not only morally responsible for the neighbours in our local area (like our ancestors were). We're also morally responsible for things that affect the entire planet, like climate change, and weapons that can strike across the world. The problem is, we don't always FEEL morally responsible for these things.

Discussion:

Who should take responsibility for things like climate change and global wars?

Should we all take some responsibility? Why/why not?

Do people usually *feel* responsible for these global problems? (If so, why haven't we stopped climate change and wars from happening yet?)

Is there a difference between how responsible we *feel*, and how responsible we *are* or *ought to be*?

(15 minutes) Continued narrative / slideshow and discussion: individual responsibility and long-term impacts

We tend to feel responsible if we have individually caused a bad outcome – for instance, say, if I've left a big pile of litter in the park. But we feel less responsible if we are part of a large group causing the same outcome and our own actions can't be singled out. So for example, imagine that I drop just one bit of rubbish, but lots of other people have been littering too, so the park is a big mess. You can't point to which bit of the mess was caused by me, and other people were to blame, too – and as a result I don't feel responsible.

Has anyone here had the experience of *feeling less responsible* for your wrong actions, on account of other people around you all doing the same thing?

And here's another thing. We naturally focus on the immediate future. This means it's harder for us to feel responsible for things that will have long-term effects in the distant future. In countries like Australia, where we consume a lot of natural resources, and produce a lot of harmful emissions that pollute the environment, our lifestyle isn't going to cause immediate problems next week, next month or even next year. The effects of our behaviour will only become a terrible problem generations into the future.

Can you think of an example of where you've done something that's fun or convenient in the short-term but that has bad consequences in the long-term, and you've been tempted to ignore the future consequences and do it anyway?

(5 minutes) Continued narrative / slideshow: the evolution of human morality.

This [show image] is Julian. Julian thinks that he has identified the fundamental problem that underlies all these other problems like pollution, climate change, and global wars.

The fundamental problem, he thinks, is that our sense of morality – our sense of right and wrong – which evolved millions of years ago, just isn't effective enough to deal with the problems of our 21st century world.

He says that our science and technology has evolved much faster than our sense of morality has evolved. He says, our sense of morality is falling behind!

Does human morality evolve, the way human bodies evolve?

Julian has come up with a couple of suggestions about what we could do improve our sense of morality. He calls his idea "moral bio-enhancement".

(20 minutes) Discussion: Morality drug

Julian's first idea is that we could develop a morality drug. This drug would make us more motivated to behave ethically, and it wouldn't have any side-effects. We would have the option of making everyone take the drug.

If we were to develop a drug like this, what sort of specific effect should it have?
What exactly should it make us do or not do?

Would it be a good idea to develop drugs like this?

Would you take the drug?

Would it be a good idea to make everyone take the 'morality drug'?

Who should take it? Should criminals be obliged to take it?

(15 minutes) Discussion: Genetic engineering for morality

Julian's second idea is that we could use genetic engineering to create babies that are likely to grow up to become moral adults who will be inclined to behave ethically.

Would this be a good idea? Would it be a bad idea?

What would be the benefits or disadvantages?

Would it be fair to the babies?

Would the babies have free will?

(5 minutes) Reflection time

It's time for us to reflect on everything we've been doing today, and celebrate the wonderful contributions that people have made, and the interesting ideas we've shared.

Choose a reflection question, and seek responses from around the circle.

What's one thing somebody said today that you found interesting?

What have you discovered or learned?

What is now more confusing than you first thought?

Where's my jetpack?

Themes: Speculative futures; social evolution; utopias and dystopias; immortality.

(4 minutes) A possible future

Show a dystopian scene from the film Wall-E (in which obese people cruise around on hovercraft while staring at screens, mindlessly consuming beverages and being subjected to crude marketing campaigns). The scene is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1BQPv-iCkU>

(3 minutes) Question formulation: In pairs, children generate philosophical questions inspired by the scene.

For an example of the kind of discussion that may arise while children formulate their questions, see the video clip “Children raise philosophical questions about Wall-E”, online on The Philosophy Club’s youtube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5176AwVexkU>

(20 minutes) Facilitator writes up questions. Children vote on which question to address, and then engage in a collaborative enquiry.

Further questions for discussion:

What is a utopia? What is a dystopia?

How do we know whether a scenario is utopian or dystopian?

Can a utopia easily become a dystopia?

(25 minutes) Drawing activity: “Four sci-fi futures” by David Urbinder, The Philosophy Club.

Assign one of the following four scenarios to each pair / small group of children.

WATER WORLD

Sea levels have risen to the point that only a few tiny islands are left above the sea level. All the cities, farms and roads have sunk into the ocean. All our cars, trains, electricity grids and airports have become unusable.

FROZEN EARTH

The temperature of the planet has dropped so dramatically that every dry piece of land has been covered with a thick layer of permafrost (a kind of dense, permanently frozen ice). All the cities, roads and farms have been buried under the ice. All of our technology has become useless in these new conditions. When it isn't raining, it's snowing, and the temperature never rises above 3 degrees Celsius.

UNDERGROUND WORLD

The earth's temperature rises so dramatically that all the oceans evaporate and it becomes too hot to live on the surface of the planet. The only way for humanity to survive is to live underground, constructing a network of tunnels and tapping into the water-table under the earth's surface.

TECHNO PLANET

Every square inch of the planet is covered in human-made technology. All that is left of nature are humans and the stuff they grow to keep alive in their artificial farms. Everything is designed for our needs and wants. Whenever space becomes an issue, the humans just continue to build up, building skyscrapers until we are all living in cities way above the clouds.

For each scenario, children are to consider the following questions and draw (and/or write) their responses.

If humanity had a chance to evolve so that we could survive in these new conditions, how would we evolve?

How would we look?

How would society change? Would there still be the same sort of families? The same sort of schools and jobs? The same sort of nations?

Would people think and feel differently about their loved ones, their neighbors, strangers and enemies?

Would life be easier or harder for these future humans to live than it is for us today?

(15 minutes) Children present their responses, give reasons for their speculations, and respond to questions or objections from their peers.

(25 minutes) “The Pill of Life” – story and discussion questions by Miriam Cohen Christofidis, *The Philosophy Shop* (ed. Peter Worley), p. 214.

Scientists are always working away on medicines to prevent and cure illnesses and ultimately to keep people alive longer. Imagine if they were to discover the ultimate solution to the problem of death: a pill that could be taken to prevent the person from dying, ever! Sally has discovered it and is about to take it, but is then a bit concerned about what it will be like. She thinks it will be okay as long as everyone takes it. Is she right?

Would the world be better if no one ever died?

Would it be better if everyone took this pill, or would it be okay for it to be optional?

If the pill was scarce, would it be okay to let some people have it? None? And if some, would there be a way of selecting who should/would get it?

If death is bad, who is it bad for?

If death is not bad, why do we try to avoid it?

Should scientists be allowed to discover medicines and technology that can keep us alive forever?

Can we really imagine a life without death? Or would it be too different from the life we live?

Is the thought experiment impossible?

(5 minutes) Reflection time

It's time for us to reflect on everything we've been doing today, and celebrate the wonderful contributions that people have made, and the interesting ideas we've shared.

Choose a reflection question, and seek responses from around the circle.

What's one thing somebody said today that you found interesting?

What have you discovered or learned?

What is now more confusing than you first thought?