

# Nasty, Brutish, and Short

Adventures in Philosophy with Kids

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Also available in e-book and audio formats

## GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Before beginning *Nasty, Brutish, and Short*, what did you think philosophers thought about? When you thought of a philosopher, what kind of person came to mind? Did you think of children? How has this book changed those preconceptions?
2. In the Introduction, the author writes that “every kid—every single one—is a philosopher.” Is there a philosophical puzzle you remember pondering as a child? If so, what was it? If not, can you remember any questions a child has asked you which have genuinely stumped you?
3. Time and again, the author gains philosophical insight from talking with people who aren’t like him—his children, people of different genders, and people of different races. How frequently do you collaboratively think with people different than you? What value do those conversations bring to your life?
4. Which story about the author’s children was your favorite? Why did it resonate with you?
5. After finishing the book, do you see new ways to bring philosophy into your life?
6. What surprised you about this book? Did you discover that you held philosophical views you didn’t know you had? Did any of them change throughout your time with the book?

## PART ONE: MAKING SENSE OF MORALITY

7. The first few chapters of *Nasty, Brutish, and Short* examine morality and arguments for what is right and wrong. Think back: where did you get

“Amazing . . . a journey through classic and contemporary philosophy powered by kids and their questions.” —Ryan Holiday, *The Daily Stoic*

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- your moral intuitions from? When was the last time you changed your mind about a moral or ethical principle you had? What made you change your mind—an experience, an argument, or something else?
8. In the first chapter, the author describes the Trolley Problem. What were your intuitions about the various trolley cases? Did you think there was a moral difference in Fat Man, Transplant, Bystander at the Switch, or Looped? See if others in your group share your views and try to see if you can pinpoint exactly where you disagree.
  9. The author says that “rights are relationships.” Does this seem right to you? Think of the many different relationships in your life. What kinds of rights do you have in virtue of those relationships? What kinds of responsibilities do you have? How do you manage when your rights and responsibilities come into conflict?
  10. Did your parents, guardians, or role models ever tell you that “two wrongs don’t make a right?” After reading Chapter Two, did you change your mind about this saying?
  11. Imagine you lived in a society where “an eye for an eye” was enforced. Do you think you’d be more or less likely to commit wrongs against other people? Do you think that society would be better or worse than the one we currently occupy (more/less fair, more/less just, more/less oppressive, and so on)?
  12. There are many reasons why we might punish wrongdoing: to express our societal disapproval of a particular act; to deter people from acting wrongly in the future; to give wrong-doers their just deserts; to rehabilitate those who have come into conflict with the law and help them learn better ways of acting; and so on. In light of Chapter Two, which of these does the US criminal justice system currently seem to operate on? Which of these *should* we operate on, and why?
  13. In Chapter Three, the author describes a humorous incident in which he and his wife Julie, were “Shamu-ing” each other by rewarding the others’ behavior according to a method described by an animal trainer in a popular op-ed. How would you feel if you found out your loved ones had taken this kind of “objective stance” toward you? Do you think that it’s ever okay to take the “objective stance” toward others? If so, when?
  14. How do you think about authority in your day-to-day life? Do you think there are real moral reasons to comply with the orders of authorities, or are you more like a philosophical anarchist who denies that such authorities exist? Why?
  15. Who are the people in your life who (claim to) have authority over you? Are there any people who you yourself have some kind of authority over, such as your children or a coworker? Which account of authority in Chapter Four (Wolff’s, Raz’s, or Hershovitz’s) most closely matches your personal experience?
  16. Some people think that swearing is always wrong, even if no one is around. Others happily swear loudly, in public. Is one side of the debate right? Both? Neither?
  17. In Chapter Five, the author describes *conventional morality*, the idea that some things (like swearing, or wearing a hat in church) are wrong just because we think they are. Do you think there are moral reasons to follow conventional morality? Or do we just do such things to avoid conflicts with others? Does it matter?
  18. Different words can cue different ideologies. Can you think of words or phrases that you come across in your own life which cue certain ideologies, either good or bad? Is it ever possible to say a sentence without cueing some ideology or another?

## PART TWO: MAKING SENSE OF OURSELVES

19. When did you first become aware of *gendered* expectations on you, whether they were in sports, at school, your home, your place of worship, or somewhere else? How did you react to them at the time? How do you think about them now?
20. Many elite athletes have statistically abnormal bodies—for example, top divers are frequently short, and NBA players are very tall. Do these differences in body types and athletic abilities make sports unfair? Why or why not?
21. What are the most important aspects of sports—both for those playing them and for society? Are there things that people can only get through sports, or are the good things about sports available in other activities as well?
22. Recall about a time that a word hurt you (in Chapter Two, the author recalls a time his son was hurt by being called a *flooferdoofer*, for example). Why do words sting? What might that tell us about language, ideologies, and the communities in which we live?
23. Think about your race. When someone says, “I’m white,” or “I’m Black,” what do they mean to communicate? When we’re thinking about race in society (for example, in racial employment discrimination), how should we think about race: as a biological feature, something socially constructed, or something else altogether?
24. Can you think of a time you *took responsibility* for something even if you weren’t actually responsible for it? What purpose did that action serve? When is it good for people to *take responsibility* for something even if they didn’t cause or intend it?
25. What groups are you a part of (either by choice, like a club, or not, like a family)? Are you responsible for what those groups do? If so, how, and in what cases?
26. What could reparations for past injustice look like on a national scale? An international scale? A local scale? What role could each of us play in helping take responsibility for past wrongs?

## PART THREE: MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD

27. Let’s say you found out that you were dreaming right now. How would this change your views about morality, other people, and society more generally? Can you know you’re not dreaming right now?
28. Philosophers use the word *epistemology* to refer to the study of knowledge. Why do we need a study of knowledge? How might it help us in the world?
29. Can groups lie? When Phillip Morris or ExxonMobil deceived the public about the health and environmental risks associated with tobacco and petroleum, respectively, were they lying? How should we hold groups accountable when they deceive?
30. AI-generated images and videos, known as “deepfakes,” can create life-like recreations of events which did not occur. Are deepfakes *lies*? Why might deepfakes be harmful in the ways that Shiffrin attributes to lying?
31. Some people say “truth is relative,” but what would this really mean? Is it even possible for truth to be relative? If so, try to explain how.
32. Find a topic that you and someone else in your group (politely and collegially) disagree upon. Exchange your reasons for believing what you do. Would you be satisfied in your disagreement if someone just told you that the truth of the matter was just relative?

33. What echo chambers and epistemic bubbles are you a part of? What could you do to dismantle those echo chambers or to pierce those bubbles a bit more?
34. Some people think that infinite things actually exist—that space, for example, could actually stretch on with no end. Other people think that *infinity* is just something in our heads—it’s a concept that humans invented to reason about limitless quantities. Which do you think is right, and why? Could we ever actually know whether infinite things existed? Why or why not?
35. In Chapter Eleven, the author writes that “the universe is unimaginably big” while we only “occupy a small patch . . . at best, we’re a blip.” What does this mean for the value of an individual human life? What about the value of all of humanity?
36. What does it mean for something to be absurd? What are absurd things you do, or that you care about? What motivates you to keep caring for them if they are absurd?
37. In his last chapter, the author describes his own view as a kind of “fictionalism” or pretending about religion. What reasons could someone have for participating in a religion if they were fictionalists?
38. What does it mean to have faith? Where do you have faith in your daily life? Why is faith important?
39. Many of us develop our religious beliefs through our parents—if we had been born to other parents, we may have been a part of a different religion. Does this give us a reason to doubt the truth of our religious beliefs?
40. Can we reconcile the existence of God with the amount of suffering in the world? How do you do so, if at all?
41. A lot of people say that morality “isn’t real” or that there’s no facts about right and wrong. But very few people live that way: we all make demands on other people, or complain when someone does something wrong. Does others’ behavior give us a reason to think that morality exists? Why or why not?
42. A theme throughout this book is that much of our lives are shaped by the relationships we have to other people and our place in a diverse society. Do you know think differently about your place in the world, and what it means for your life?

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