Big Questions!

Syllabus, Timetable and Learning Outcomes

Each Wednesday: Online by BigBlueButton, 14:30 – 16:30 GMT



Theme: Sharp Boundaries - Thinking Clearly About Big Questions

Session	Date	Topic
1	*23/9/2026*	**The Epistemology of the Timeline** *How do we know what's true, and why does it matter?* Conspiracy theories, misinformation, and the collapse of shared factual consensus. We live in an age where competing claims to truth circulate freely, where 'post-truth' has entered the political vocabulary, and where the same evidence can produce entirely different convictions in different people. This session asks what knowledge actually is, how our cognitive biases shape what we believe, and what (if anything) can serve as a shared factual anchor in a fragmented public sphere. *Perspectives:* Philosophy (epistemology, the nature of knowledge and belief) · Sociology (how communities of knowledge form and collapse) · Psychology (cognitive biases, motivated reasoning, confirmation bias)
2	*30/9/2026*	**Who Owns Your Body?** *The contested politics of bodily autonomy* Trans rights, reproductive justice, medical autonomy, disability rights, and the seller's paradox: where do individual rights over one's own body end and society's right to intervene begin? This session examines how different political traditions (liberal, conservative, socialist, anarchist) answer the question of who has legitimate authority over the body, and why they arrive at such different conclusions.

		Perspectives: Philosophy (rights theory, the body, autonomy) · Politics (individual liberty vs collective welfare) · Sociology (how societies construct norms around bodies and health)
3	*7/10/2026*	**The Attention Merchants** *How the attention economy is reshaping public life* Since the early 2000s, the architecture of public communication has changed beyond recognition. Social media platforms, recommendation algorithms, and engagement-maximising design have reshaped how information circulates, how communities form, and how political discourse unfolds. This session examines what the attention economy is, how it works, and what its consequences are for democracy, mental health, and the quality of public debate. *Perspectives:* Sociology (media ecology, the public sphere) · Psychology (behavioural manipulation, addiction by design) · Politics (democratic theory, platform power)
4	*14/10/2026*	**Free Will: The Last Illusion?** *Modern science meets the oldest philosophical problem* Do we really make choices? Modern neuroscience suggests that many of what we experience as voluntary decisions are made unconsciously before we become aware of them. Meanwhile, quantum physics introduces genuine indeterminacy at the smallest scales. Does this mean free will is an illusion, or have philosophers been asking the wrong question? This session explores what physics, neuroscience, and philosophy together can tell us about agency, responsibility, and the self. *Perspectives:* Modern physics (quantum mechanics, determinism, and indeterminacy) · Philosophy (the free will problem, agency, moral responsibility) · Psychology (the phenomenology of choice, unconscious decision-making)
5	*21/10/2026*	**The Debt We Owe the Future** *Climate breakdown as an ethical and political problem* The science of climate change has been settled for decades. The politics remain intractable. This session examines the ethical dimensions of climate breakdown: who owes what to whom, across generations and across borders? What does climate justice demand of wealthy nations? And why is collective action so difficult even when the case for it is overwhelming?

		Perspectives: Politics (environmental policy, global governance, international law) Sociology (climate justice, movements, the politics of sacrifice) · Philosophy (intergenerational ethics, distributive justice, the commons)
28/10/26		***Half-Term Break***
6	*4/11/2026*	**The Categories That Construct Us** *How society builds the boxes we think we fit into* Race, gender, class, madness, criminality: these categories feel natural, but social scientists have long argued they are, to a significant degree, socially constructed. This session explores what 'social construction' actually means, how categories become self-fulfilling, and what the implications are for how we understand identity, disadvantage, and social change. *Perspectives:* Sociology (the sociology of categories, labelling theory, stigma) · Psychology (identity formation, stereotype threat, internalised norms) · Philosophy (essentialism vs constructivism, the metaphysics of social categories)
7	*11/11/2026*	***Ask your own Question! (and/or Variation 1 online)***
8	*18/11/2026*	**The Universe as Information** *What the weirdest corners of physics tell us about reality* Modern cosmology harbours some of the most startling ideas in human thought: that information is fundamental to physics; that the universe may be a hologram; that black holes destroy information paradoxically; that entropy points in one direction and defines the arrow of time. This session takes these ideas seriously and asks what they mean for how we understand reality, existence, and our place in everything. *Perspectives:* Cosmology (the universe's large-scale structure, entropy, time's arrow) · Modern physics (quantum mechanics, information theory, black holes) · Philosophy of science (what it means to explain, the limits of physical intuition)
9	*25/11/2026*	***Ask your own Question! (and/or Variation 2 online)***
10	*2/12/2026*	**The God Who Wasn't There** *The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith* The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith are not the same person. Between the Palestinian Jewish preacher who wandered the Galilee two thousand years ago and the incarnate Son of God worshipped in cathedrals and chapels lies an enormous amount of history, politics, theology, and imagination.

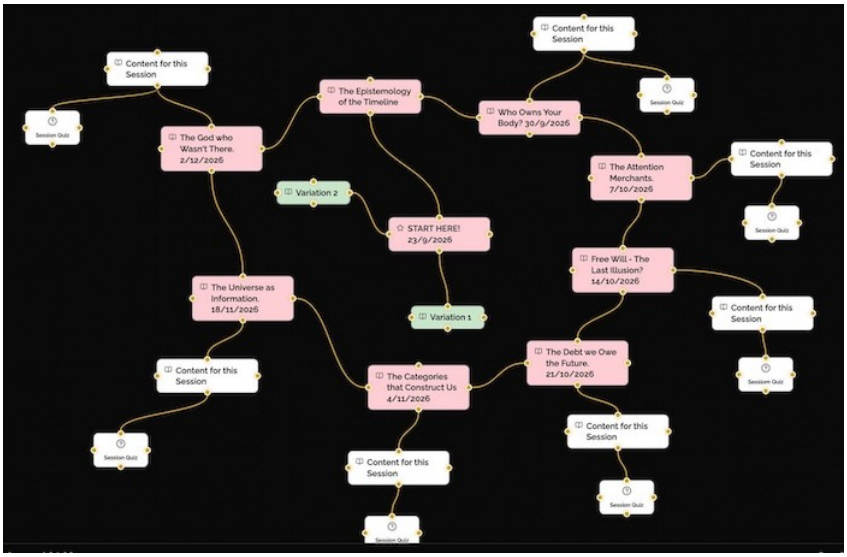
		This session separates what modern biblical scholarship can reasonably claim to know about the man from Nazareth. The quest to recover the historical Jesus is not new: it has been underway since the Enlightenment, and it has generated fierce controversy at every stage. Was Jesus a apocalyptist who expected the kingdom of God to arrive in his lifetime? A Cynic philosopher who preached a radical simplicity? A social reformer who challenged the economic order of his time? Or something else entirely? *Perspectives:* History (the Roman Palestine, Second Temple Judaism, the Jesus movement) · Theology (how Christology developed, the councils, the creeds) · Philosophy (the relationship between the historical and the transcendent; what 'revelation' might mean)

If you can't commit to doing all (or any) of this course in person, did you know you can do the same material via the Online Big Questions course?

All you have to do is go to https://learnmap.beagmcd.net/ and sign up for a student account with my NEW learning software, Learning Map!

Learning Map (illustrated below) was designed and developed by me from scratch, especially to allow you to take part without needing to attend the course via Big Blue Button. Of course, personal attendance is best, but Learning Map is a good second and excellent for those who want to study on their own.

Please remember to pay a fee for your course (however small) via PayPal, whichever way you're taking part. Thanks! See the next page.



So what will I achieve?

By the end of the course, each student should be able to:

1. **Discuss** how the work of individual topics might impact upon us today.
2. Generally **contribute** to group discussions in-course and elsewhere.
3. **Suggest** a new question for the course, or the future course programme

So what is the course meant to do?

The course will pursue the following concept:

Big Questions *"... aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries."*
(Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Here's Very Important Information:

Course Big Blue Button Meeting link:	**https://meet.beagmcd.net/rooms/zsr-q5f-unt-mjj/join**
The course info' Website:	**https://bq.beagmcd.net**
The **Learning Map** site:	**https://learnmap.beagmcd.net**
The Course **AI Support**: ('Super Sally' – Please ask Bea for the login!)	**http://asus1.sytes.net:3001/**
Contact Bea:	**bea@bgmcd.org** or in emergencies, text me on **07988 488 810**
Bea's PayPal (pay your fee!):	**https://paypal.me/beagroves**

Please pay what you can afford for this course using the above PayPal link!
All income goes towards my electricity, server, and AI costs. Thanks very much!