



Philosophy  
Circles

# What's your scoop number?

*Morality comes down to working out how much what matters to others should matter to me. "What's Your Scoop Number?" invites one approach to that question through a thought experiment about ice cream.*



Start by getting pupils to write down their scoop numbers anonymously, and then work out the average. It's a good opportunity to do some maths for real, as the mean, mode and median may be very different.

*How much variety is there within a group? Is there a difference between girls and boys?*



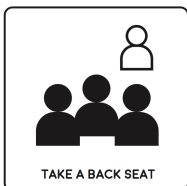
Pose a few of these to the group.

*Does it make a difference if the people getting the ice cream instead are people you know, or strangers? Or if they'll know it was your choice?*

*If they're alive now or will be living in the future?*

*What about non-human animals? What would your Scoop Number be for dogs... or for bluebottles?*

Any one could end up lasting the entire session as they develop into new areas of debate.



What I find most interesting is how we trade off our interests against those of others differently according to how close they are to us: family, friends, locality, nation, culture, world, now vs future generations, humans vs. non-humans. It's a good idea to let ideas flow freely, with little intervention.

It's such an accessible thought experiment that the wider moral questions will flow relatively easily. Only intervene if dialogue becomes fragmented and incoherent. There's so many avenues of enquiry, so try to keep them focused on one question at a time.

## NEXT STEPS

You could do an activity to look at how the Scoop Numbers match up with their real world actions. Perhaps they could write down the conclusions they have come to, and how they put this into action.

You can explore the ideas of different thinkers by considering what Scoop Number they advocate. "Love your neighbour as yourself", or Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian dictum that "each to count for one, none for more than one" seem to demand a Scoop Number of 1. At the other end of the scale, property-focused moral systems like Ayn Rand's rational egoism or libertarianism don't seem to require that you have a Scoop Number at all.

I'm going to imagine that you like ice cream. It's hard to imagine not liking ice cream, so that's easy.

I want you to imagine that I'm about to give you a scoop of ice cream. It's your favourite flavour. Mine is hazelnut. Yours can be any flavour you want.

But stop! Before you eat it, I'm going to give you a choice.

You can have your scoop of ice cream. Or instead, a number of people can have a scoop of ice cream each.

Either you get your scoop, and they get nothing. Or they get a scoop each, and you get nothing.

I didn't say how big the number was, did I?

That's because I'm curious to know how many scoops for others it would take for you to give up your own scoop. What is your Scoop Number?

Maybe your Scoop Number is 2. So if two other people could get ice creams, you'd be willing to give up your own.

Maybe your Scoop Number is infinity. So even if everyone who has ever lived, everyone alive now and everyone who is ever going to live could have an ice cream, you'd still want one for yourself instead.

I'm not sure if there is a right Scoop Number to have. Or maybe you can have whatever number you like, a bit like flavours.