



## Philosophy Circles

# What's Your Constitution?

*Inspired by our recent training in South Africa, the challenge is to create a personal "Constitution" – What are the rules that you would set for yourself, so that in the future, you do the right thing even if it is difficult?*



The challenge is introduced, explained, and set in this video - <https://vimeo.com/242727168> - but if you can't broadcast it, it's also in the attached document.

Creating a personal constitution is a task that lends itself to individual, independent work. However, I would recommend starting discussions in groups on questions like...

- What would make a good personal constitution?
- What should a good personal constitution avoid?
- What would be easy about sticking to a constitution? What would be hard?

...so they engage in some energetic and collaborative pre-thinking before they get to work on something that reflects their own values. Critically analysing others' ideas will also enrich their own thinking, as they may decide to incorporate some but steer clear of others.



After this pre-thinking, invite everyone back into a big circle and ask for some suggested constitutions. You might want to record them on mini-whiteboards and put them in different corners of the space. Then, encourage them to critically analyse what's now in front of them. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these particular suggestions?

As the question was about 'personal' constitutions, you could ask whether judging others' constitutions is even possible, or if their merits are always relative to the intentions and willpower of he/she who has created them.



They might also decide that it's an impossible task to create any kind of constitution – that you need to make a judgment on each situation and that it's impossible to create a set of rules in advance that will capture everything; or that any rule might have to have exceptions. I never advertise the possibility of "breaking the rules" of the task in advance, otherwise it becomes a way of "wussing out" of the challenge; but if people decide, for good reason, that they can't decide, that's an assertive step that should be respected.

### NEXT STEPS

Having explored the concept of 'Constitution', they could now be set a research task to discover existing constitutions (that of the USA, for example). How far do they agree with the content?

## World Philosophy Day 2017 Challenge

Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president, is one of the great heroes of recent times. He was imprisoned for x years for fighting against the apartheid system, in which white people had special privileges and the black majority in the country had very little of the money or power. But when he was released and became president, he did his best to govern for the whole country, not just to replace white oppression of blacks with the opposite. He is regarded very fondly by most South Africans of all races, who are tremendously proud of him.

No country can have a Nelson Mandela in charge all the time, so something else South Africans are very proud of is their constitution. A constitution is a special collection of laws about how all governments in the future have to work. It sets out the rights of citizens, how leaders are chosen, what they can and can't do, and how they make new laws and take decisions.

An important job of a constitution is that it is "the law about laws". If you knew that all future leaders were going to make the wisest judgments all the time, you probably wouldn't need a constitution. You could just leave it to the politicians of the day to make the best laws for everybody and follow them.

But when people are writing a constitution, they know that politicians are not always perfect, and that in the future they might want to do bad things. Sometimes, it might be popular to put in place a bad law – for example, if a minority group have become unpopular, you could win votes by creating laws that discriminated against them. Sometimes, a politician might be corrupt, and he or she might want to make it easier to give public money to their friends and family, or to accept bribes, by taking power away from the people whose job it is to stop that from happening.

Or it might suit the government of the day to stop people criticising it. This is one of the reasons why most constitutions protect freedom of speech. Sometimes the government and a majority of people might all want to break the constitution – when a country feels under threat, it can be very tempting to forget about people's rights and just lock up the people who are seen as a danger, but constitutions put a limit to what you are allowed to do, even when you want to. They are a sort of promise to stick to doing the right thing, even when it is difficult.

That's the challenge I have for you. Not to create a constitution for the country you live in, but to create a constitution for yourself. What are the rules that you would set for yourself, so that in the future, you do the right thing even if it is difficult?

It's harder than you might think, because there are three problems it has to overcome:

- 1) It has to be clear – it's no good if it's vague and doesn't tell you what you can and can't do.
- 2) It has to be broad – it needs to cover all sorts of situations, including ones that happen in the future that you haven't imagined yet.
- 3) It has to be consistent – if one part of it could contradict another, it needs to say which part is more important. For example, if your constitution included the rules, "Don't lie" and "Keep yourself safe", what happens if you need to lie to keep yourself safe?

That's your challenge. Let me know what you come up with!

