# Philosophy Course Information

Philosophy is the oldest intellectual discipline our civilisation possesses, the mother of all sciences. Philosophy students are explicitly taught to challenge, criticise, examine, explore, investigate, listen to, question, reason about and respond to difficult ideas. Make no mistake: philosophy is hard, abstract, vexing as a subject.
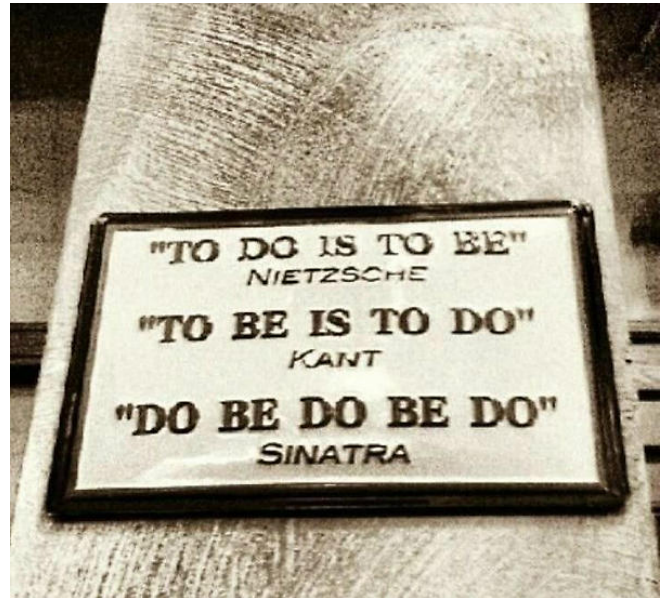
One way of thinking of philosophy is to think of it as conceptual engineering, since philosophy studies the tools we use to carry out the act of logical thinking itself. Philosophy analyses the concepts we think with, and through, and considers the form and nature of correct arguments. It uses a precise and difficult technical vocabulary to do this.

Another way of thinking of philosophy is to think of it as a series of encounters with the extraordinary minds of many of the most intelligent people who have ever lived, and who have formed our civilisational understanding of many issues. This conversation has been ongoing for the last 2600 years or more, yet as a beginning philosopher you can immediately join in, if you are prepared to struggle with, make sense of, read carefully, extremely challenging texts.

Another way of viewing philosophy is that since the discipline began in ancient Greece as the study of everything, the beginning student of it undertakes a fascinating survey of the entire history of human thought. Philosophy has given birth to mathematics, the natural sciences, psychology, sociology, linguistics, logic and the modern cognitive sciences. Almost every word used in the sciences, psychology, politics and ethics was coined by ancient philosophers. Even our names for the world-changing scientific disciplines, the words for the study of the human mind, the nature of our social arrangements, the rules whereby we conduct our lives, themselves are Greek in origin. Philosophy is the deep grammar of our culture.

Another way of thinking about philosophy is by way of a contrast: perhaps religious studies teaches you what to believe; philosophy, contrariwise, teaches you how to think. Religious studies examines what people believed about the nature of the universe a millennium ago or more and tries to apply these belief-systems to the modern world, whereas philosophy asks how we obtain and validate knowledge using logic and reasoning, and asks searching questions about the assumptions that underlie belief-systems themselves. Philosophers are trained to identify such assumptions, make them explicit and subject them to rigorous analysis, learning in so doing great patience and persistence with extremely challenging and open questions, and also coming to know that some questions cannot be entirely resolved.

Typical philosophical questions include: What is knowledge? How should we obtain and validate it? How can it be proved that we are not living in a simulation? What does it mean when we say we know something? What is the best society in which to live? What is the difference between knowing a thing and believing it? Are any truths necessary but not self-evident, or are all truths derived only from experience? How can we tell the difference between our good and bad moral choices? Should we judge actions by thinking about their consequences, the acts themselves, how we feel emotionally about what we do, or what kind of people we might become? What limits should there be to individual freedoms? What is a person, and why do persons matter? How responsible are we for each other? What is the nature of the mind, and how does it interact with our bodies? Is what exists composed purely of matter, or of ideas, or is there more than one substance in the universe? Does God exist,

and why would this matter, or not matter? What can we know about the nature of the universe that the physical sciences cannot tell us?

Be warned: humility and willingness to work are a must. This is a difficult subject and students who don't work steadily from the get-go can do really badly. Raw brain-power is not sufficient to succeed: you must be diligent, persistent, and willing to study extremely hard so that you grasp the complex issues under discussion. This subject probably involves more completely open-ended discussion than any other. There is a good deal of reading of seriously hard, abstruse and odd material, and a good deal of writing about the same. You'll need to be intelligent, open-minded, hard-working and imaginative, and to have intellectual tenacity as well. You'll also need to be at ease with very abstract ideas and very open questions. There are no easy answers in philosophy, and plenty of titanic intellects whose ideas have shaped the whole of human civilisation: Plato, Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant – plus many more, including many modern thinkers who aren't 'pale, male and stale'.

In the first year of the course, you will learn about some of the problems and issues that have been important in the history of the subject, learn how to write clear and logical argument and learn how to reason your way critically and constructively towards independent and evidence-based conclusions. You will almost certainly have the limits of your imagination reset and the boundaries of your mind stretched. This will happen through the study of the following topics within epistemology: What is knowledge? How can we be sure of what we think we know? How does perception lead to knowledge? Is our innate rational capacity a source of knowledge, or is knowledge derived only from our rich sensory experience? The first year of the course also covers the following topics in moral philosophy: How do we know the difference between right and wrong? Are only outcomes important? Can virtue be taught? Can moral truths be known? Are they objective or, alternatively, mind-dependent?

In the second year of the subject, students move onto questions concerning our concept of God, various intricate proofs of God's existence, and questions around how it is that God permits evil to happen. The other half of the course deals with problems in the philosophy of mind: What do we mean by this word 'mind'? Can minds exist independently of bodies, or are they in some manner tied to a physical substrate? Might mentality be computational, or is it best explained in some other way? Students also learn about Mary and the question of the Zombies. But that's for later…

Method of Assessment
Two three hour written exams taken in June of Year 13.

Possible career paths
Philosophers are trained to think in absolutely straight lines and with tremendous creativity, to be intellectually fearless, and to be good at clearly stating assumptions, reasons, and conclusions (where these are possible). Philosophers also learn to read difficult written material, and to write with great clarity and force about their own ideas and those of others. Philosophers have their power of critical thinking developed to an unusual degree, and whatever the future holds, this capacity will continue to be very desirable. Philosophy is training for the unknown, the uncertain, as a philosopher has a flexible, versatile and deft mind, one that is good at solving problems, at seeing a matter from a number of perspectives, at evaluating claims to truth, and at seeing parallels and differences between viewpoints.

Philosophy graduates are therefore in great demand for any job than involves thinking. Many jobs do, still! Because of the ferocity of philosophical argument, it is sometimes said that philosophers make excellent lawyers, but any career that involves very high-order conceptual and communication skills is open to them.