

Philosophy A Level

Course Information

About Philosophy

'Fire / is in all things' – Heraclitus, 525-475 BC

Philosophy is the oldest intellectual discipline our civilisation possesses, the mother of all sciences.

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 civilizational understanding of many issues. This conversation has been ongoing for the last 2600 years yet as a beginning philosopher you can immediately join in. What is knowledge? What does it mean when we say we know something? How can we tell the difference between our good and bad moral choices? Should we think about their consequences, the acts themselves, how we feel emotionally about what we do, or what kind of people we might become? What is the nature of the mind, and how does it interact with our bodies? Does God exist, and what would follow from any of a range of answers to this question anyway?

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 plenty of modern thinkers who aren't 'pale, male and stale'...

Be warned: humility and hard work are a must. This is a difficult subject and students who don't work steadily from the get-go can do really badly.

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 a selection 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 for 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, or are they subjective or 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 issues 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 substantial written papers taken in June of Year 13.

Possible career paths

Philosophers are trained to think in absolutely straight lines and with tremendous creativity, and to be good at clearly stating assumptions, reasons, and conclusions (where these are possible). 'What if...?' are their watchwords. Philosophers also learn to read difficult written material, and to write with great clarity and force about their own ideas and those of others.

They 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.