Philosophy

History of Philosophy from Descartes to Kant

Course Description
The purpose of this paper is to enable you to gain a critical understanding of some of the metaphysical and epistemological ideas of some of the most important philosophers of the early modern period, between the 1630s to the 1780s.

This period saw a great flowering of philosophy in Europe. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, often collectively referred to as "the rationalists", placed the new "corpuscularian" science within grand metaphysical systems which certified our God-given capacity to reason our way to the laws of nature (as well as to many other, often astonishing conclusions about the world). Locke wrote in a different, empiricist tradition. He argued that, since our concepts all ultimately derive from experience, our knowledge is necessarily limited. Berkeley and Hume developed this empiricism in the direction of a kind of idealism, according to which the world studied by science is in some sense mind-dependent and mind-constructed. Kant subsequently sought to arbitrate between the rationalists and the empiricists, by rooting out some assumptions common to them and trying thereby to salvage and to reconcile some of their apparently irreconcilable insights.

Pedagogical Notes
- This is one of the core papers for Oxford undergraduates studying philosophy (101). Accordingly, studying this paper might help you feel part of the resident undergraduate community.
- For a four week course, typically it is taught by focussing on just one major philosopher’s works.
- For an eight week course, you would typically focus on two philosophers, one empiricist, one rationalist.
- If you wish to take this paper for longer than 8 weeks, you could do so by selecting from the individual philosophers option

Skills and Prerequisites
- No prerequisites. Good as a paper in your first term here.
- As a history paper, close reading the primary texts is of great importance. You are trying to study a whole system of thought, not just a single problem at a time as you might do in other parts of philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, mind, ethics, religion, aesthetics papers).

Preparatory reading
- R.S.Woolhouse, The Empiricists
- J.Cottingham, The Rationalists (both O.U.P. Opus series).

Individual Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Kant

8 weeks history from D to K (or the equivalent course in your home university) as a prerequisite. This option is a way to extend the D to K paper. For example,
- You could focus on an additional philosopher for another 4 weeks
- Take 4 more weeks on a philosopher you’ve already studied
• Take 8 weeks on a philosopher you have not yet studied.
• Take 8 weeks to specialise on rationalist philosophers (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz)

Knowledge and Reality

Course Description
The purpose of this subject is to enable you to examine some central questions about the nature of the world and the extent to which we can have knowledge of it. In considering knowledge you will examine whether it is possible to attain knowledge of what the world is really like. Is our knowledge of the world necessarily limited to what we can observe to be the case? Indeed, are even our observational beliefs about the world around us justified? Can we have knowledge of what will happen based on what has happened? Is our understanding of the world necessarily limited to what we can prove to be the case? Or can we understand claims about the remote past or distant future which we cannot in principle prove to be true? In considering reality you will focus on questions such as the following. Does the world really contain the three-dimensional objects and their properties - such as red buses or black horses - which we appear to encounter in everyday life? Or is it made up rather of the somewhat different entities studied by science, such as colourless atoms or four-dimensional space-time worms? What is the relation between the common sense picture of the world and that provided by contemporary science? Is it correct to think of the objects and their properties that make up the world as being what they are independently of our preferred ways of dividing up reality? These issues are discussed with reference to a variety of specific questions such as 'What is time?', 'What is the nature of causation?', and 'What are substances?'

Pedagogical Notes
• This is one of the core papers for Oxford undergraduates studying philosophy (102). Accordingly, studying this paper might help you feel part of the resident undergraduate community.
• For a four week course, typically it is taught by focussing on either knowledge or reality
• For an eight week course, you would typically spend 4 weeks on knowledge topics and 4 on reality ones.

Skills and Prerequisites
• You should have studied an introduction to philosophy course in your home university.
• This is a problem based paper, not a history paper. We are interested in what you think are the problems and the best ways to deal with them, rather than what other people have said about them.

Preparatory Reading
• Jonathan Dancy, Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology (Oxford), chs. 1-3;
• Michael J. Loux, Metaphysics (Routledge)

Ethics

Course Description
The purpose of this subject is to enable you to come to grips with some questions which exercise many people, philosophers and non-philosophers alike. How should we decide what is best to do, and how best to lead our lives? Are our value judgments on these and other matters objective or do they merely reflect our subjective preferences and viewpoints? Are we in fact free to make these choices, or have our decisions already been
determined by antecedent features of our environment and genetic endowment? In considering these issues you will examine a variety of ethical concepts, such as those of justice, rights, equality, virtue, and happiness, which are widely used in moral and political argument. There is also opportunity to discuss some applied ethical issues.

**Pedagogical Notes**
- This is a compulsory paper for PPE (Philosophy Politics Economics) students taking philosophy (103). Accordingly, studying this paper should give you much in common with the resident undergraduate community.
- For a four week course, you would focus on either normative ethics or metaethics
- For an eight week course, if you have not previously studied ethics, you would typically spend 4 weeks on normative ethics (including consequentialism, Kantianism, virtue ethics) and 4 on metaethics.

**Skills and Prerequisites**
- No prerequisites. Good as a paper in your first term here.
- This is usually taught as a problem based paper rather than looking at historical texts. However, it is possible to treat some weeks historically, looking at Aristotle, Kant or Hume.

**Preparatory reading**
- Timmons, Mark "Moral Theory" 2012 (Rowman & Littlefield) Earlier edition would also be fine.
- McNaughton, D. "Moral Vision" 1988 (Blackwell)
- Pettit, P., Baron, M., Slote, M. "Three Methods of Ethics" 1997 (Blackwell)

**Philosophy of Mind**

**Course Description**
The purpose of this subject is to enable you to examine a variety of questions about the nature of persons and their psychological states, including such general questions as: what is the relation between persons and their minds? Could robots or automata be persons? What is the relation between our minds and our brains? If we understood everything about the brain, would we understand everything about consciousness and rational thought? If not, why not? Several of these issues focus on the relation between our common sense understanding of ourselves and others, and the view of the mind developed in scientific psychology and neuroscience. Are the two accounts compatible? Should one be regarded as better than the other? Should our common sense understanding of the mind be jettisoned in favour of the scientific picture? Or does the latter leave out something essential to a proper understanding of ourselves and others? Other more specific questions concern memory, thought, belief, emotion, perception, and action.

**Pedagogical Notes**
- This paper is taken by most PP (philosophy and psychology) students. It is also taken by other philosophy students as a special paper.
- Typically students should take 4 weeks to get to grips with the mind body problem, ensuring they understand the terrain of behaviourists, substance dualists, type identity theorists, functionalists of different stripes and property dualists. After that they can focus on special topics.

**Skills and Prerequisites**
• This is a problem based, not a historical paper. It is conceptually challenging and students often find they only really start to understand how the pieces fit together in the second half of term. Students find it worthwhile eventually but you need to be prepared to stick with it in the first few weeks.

• You should have already studied quite a bit of analytic philosophy before attempting this paper. For example, you might have already taken one of knowledge and reality, history of philosophy or ethics in your first term here or have taken equivalent second year courses in your own university.

Preparatory Reading

Kim, J. "Philosophy of Mind" 3rd Edition (get at least 2nd edition) 2011 (Westview)
or Braddon Mitchell, D. and Jackson, F. "Philosophy of Mind and Cognition" 1996 (Blackwell)

Philosophy of Religion

Course Description
The purpose of this subject is to enable you to examine claims about the existence of God and God’s relationship to the world. What, if anything, is meant by them? Could they be true? What justification, if any, can or needs to be provided for them? The paper is concerned primarily with the claims of Western religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), and with the central claim of those religions, that there is a God. God is said to be omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation and so on. But what does it mean to say that God has these properties, and are they consistent with each other? Could God change the past, or choose to do evil? Does it make sense to say that God is outside time? You will have the opportunity to study arguments for the existence of God - for example, the teleological argument from the fact that the Universe is governed by scientific laws, and the argument from people's religious experiences. Other issues are whether the fact of pain and suffering counts strongly, or even conclusively, against the existence of God, whether there could be evidence for miracles, whether it could be shown that prayer "works", whether there could be life after death, and what philosophical problems are raised by the existence of different religions.

Pedagogical Notes

• This is a compulsory paper for Philosophy and Theology students. Accordingly, studying this paper should give you much in common with the resident undergraduate community.

Prerequisites and skills

• No prerequisites

• This is usually taught as a problem based paper rather than looking at historical texts. However, it is possible to treat some weeks historically.

Preparatory Reading

M. Peterson and other authors, Reason and Religious Belief, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (Oxford University Press)

The Philosophy of Logic and Language

Course Description
The purpose of this subject is to enable you to examine some fundamental questions relating to reasoning and language. Philosophy of language covers the very
general question how language can describe reality at all: what makes our sentences meaningful and, on occasion, true? How do parts of our language refer to objects in the world? What is involved in understanding speech (or the written word)? You will investigate more specific issues concerning the correct analysis of particular linguistic expressions such as names, descriptions, pronouns, adverbs, and aspects of linguistics and grammatical theory. The philosophy of logic is not itself a symbolic or mathematical subject, but examines concepts of interest to the logician. Central are questions about truth, vagueness, the status of basic logical laws and the nature of logical necessity. What, if anything, makes it true that nothing can be at the same time both green and not green all over? Is that necessity the result of our conventions or stipulations, or the reflection of how things have to be independently of us?

Pedagogical Notes

- Because of the research interests of many who teach it, the course often focusses on the philosophy of language rather than philosophical logic although if you do the 8 week course, you can expect to do 2-4 philosophy of logic options.

Skills and Prerequisites

- You must have completed and feel comfortable with an introductory formal logic course, covering at least propositional calculus, formalisation and translation, proof and model theory. A critical reasoning course will not suffice.
- You should have done knowledge and reality in an earlier term or the equivalent course in your home university.
- If you enjoyed logic, epistemology and metaphysics, you should enjoy this paper. Note that this course is relatively formal and abstract. It is not well suited to those whose interest in language is in metaphor or Post-Kantianism. If this is what interests you, study aesthetics or the post-Kantian paper instead.
- This is a problem-based, not a text-based paper.

Preparatory Reading

Lycan, W. “Philosophy of Language” 2nd edition 2008 (Routledge)

Aesthetics

Course Description

The purpose of this subject is to enable you to study a number of questions about the nature and value of beauty and of the arts. For example, do we enjoy sights and sounds because they are beautiful, or are they beautiful because we enjoy them? Does the enjoyment of beauty involve a particular sort of experience, and if so, how should we define it and what psychological capacities does it presuppose? Is a work of art a physical object, an abstract object, or what? Does the value of a work of art depend only upon its long or short-term effects on our minds or characters? If not, what sorts of reasons can we give for admiring a work of art? Do reasons for admiring paintings, pieces of music and poems have enough in common with one another, and little enough in common with reasons for admiring other kinds of things, to support the idea that there is a distinctive sort of value which good art of every sort, and only art, possesses? As well as general questions such as these ones, the subject also addresses questions raised by particular art forms. For example, what is the difference between a picture and a description in words? Can fiction embody truths about its subject-matter? How does music express emotions? All of these questions, and others, are addressed directly, and also by examining classic texts, including Plato’s

Prerequisites and skills
- No prerequisites as long as you have already done some philosophy at your home university.
- This is usually taught as a combination of problem based weeks and weeks focussed on a particular author and text.

Preparatory Reading
Malcolm Budd, Values of Art (Penguin)

Medieval Philosophy

Aquinas, Duns Scotus and Ockham are the most significant and influential thinkers of the Middle Ages. As this is a text based paper, you should focus on a close reading of the texts of those philosophers you are studying. You may, however, study the texts in translation. The purpose of this subject is to introduce you to the central ideas and arguments on a wide variety of theological and philosophical topics in these authors’ work.

For Aquinas, these topics include the proofs of the existence of God (the famous “five ways”), the concept of the simplicity of God (including the controversial issue of the identity of being and essence in God), the concept of the soul in general and of the human soul in particular, the proof of the immortality of the human soul, the nature of perception and of intellectual knowledge, the notion of free will and of happiness, the theory of human actions.

For Scotus, topics include the proof of the existence and of the unicity of God (the most sophisticated one in the Middle Ages) and the issues about causality that it raises, the theory of the existence of concepts common to God and creatures (the univocity theory of religious language), the discussion about the immateriality and the immortality of the human soul, and the reply to scepticism.

For Ockham, they include nominalism about universals and the refutation of realism (including the realism of Duns Scotus), some issues in logic and especially the theory of “suppositio” and its application in the debate about universals, the theory of intellectual knowledge of singulars and the question of whether we can have evidence about contingent properties of singulars, the nature of efficient causality and the problem of whether we can prove the existence of a first efficient cause.

Pedagogical Notes
- This paper is very rarely studied by undergraduates and there are a limited number of teachers available for it. You will probably find you can’t talk to others about this paper.

Prerequisites
- You should have studied some Aristotle either here or at your home university.
- As a history paper, close reading the primary texts is of great importance, as is an understanding of context. There is no requirement to read the texts in the original language.

Preparatory Reading
Kenny, A Medieval Philosophy: A New History of Western Philosophy, Vol 2 2007 OUP
Post-Kantian Philosophy

Individual Authors: Hegel, Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger

Many of the questions raised by German and French philosophers of the 19th and early 20th centuries were thought to arise directly out of Kant’s metaphysics, epistemology and ethics: Hence the title of this subject, the purpose of which is to enable you to explore some of the developments of (and departures from) Kantian themes in the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. Hegel delineates a global, metaphysical system out of which he develops his own distinctive vision of ethical and political life. Nietzsche’s writings less obviously constitute a ‘system’, but they too develop certain ethical and existential implications of our epistemological and metaphysical commitments. Heidegger and Sartre develop phenomenology. They bring that method to bear on such fundamental aspects of human existence as authenticity, social understanding, bad faith, art and freedom. As this is a text based paper, students should pay careful attention to the primary texts. They may look at texts in translation.

Pedagogical Notes
- You will study one author for 4 weeks so you can take this paper for anywhere between 4 and 16 weeks.

Prerequisites and Skills
- You should have studied some authors from the Descartes to Kant paper and ideally Kant himself.
- As a history paper, close reading the primary texts is of great importance.

Preparatory Reading

Ancient Philosophy

4 weeks on each of the Republic and the Nicomachean Ethics.

Plato
4/8 weeks on the Republic

Aristotle
4/8 weeks on the Nicomachean Ethics

Course Description

Plato’s influence on the history of philosophy is enormous. The purpose of this subject is to enable you to make a critical study of The Republic, which is perhaps his most important and most influential work. Written as a dialogue between Socrates and others including the outspoken immoralist Thrasyvulus, it is primarily concerned with questions of the nature of justice and of what is the best kind of life to lead. These questions prompt discussions of the ideal city -which Karl Popper criticised as totalitarian-, of education and art, of the nature of knowledge, the Theory of Forms and the immortality of the soul. In studying it you will encounter a work of philosophy of unusual literary merit, one in which philosophy is presented through debates, through analogies and images, including the famous simile of the Cave, as well as rigorous argument, and you will encounter some of Plato’s important contributions to ethics, political theory, metaphysics, philosophy of mind and aesthetics. You are expected to study the work in detail as it is a text based paper.

Like Plato in the Republic, Aristotle is concerned with the question, what is the best possible sort of life? Whereas this leads Plato to pose grand questions in metaphysics and political theory, it leads Aristotle to offer close analyses of the structure of human action, responsibility, the virtues, the nature of moral knowledge, weakness of will, pleasure,
friendship, and other related issues. Much of what Aristotle has to say on these is groundbreaking, highly perceptive, and still of importance in contemporary debate in ethics and moral psychology. You are expected to study the work in detail as this is a text based paper.

Prerequisites
- No prerequisites.
- As a history paper, close reading the primary texts is of great importance. You need not read the texts in the original Greek but you will need to comment on questions of translation.

Preparatory Reading
Plato: Republic, tr Grube, revised Reeve (Hackett).
J. L. Ackrill, Aristotle the Philosopher, ch. 10.
Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics translated and with notes by T.H. Irwin (Hackett).

Wittgenstein

Course Description
The purpose of this subject is to enable you to study some of the most influential ideas of the 20th century. The main texts are Wittgenstein’s posthumously-published Philosophical Investigations and The Blue and Brown Books. These writings are famous not just for their content but also for their distinctive style and conception of philosophy. There is much critical discussion about the relation between those aspects of Wittgenstein’s work. Wittgenstein covers a great range of issues, principally in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. In philosophy of language, one key topic is the nature of rules and rulefollowing. What is involved in grasping a rule; and how can I tell, in a new case, what I have to do to apply the rule correctly? Indeed, what makes it the case that a particular move at this stage is the correct way of applying the rule; is there any standard of correctness other than the agreement of our fellows? Other topics include: whether language is systematic; the relation between linguistic meaning and non-linguistic activities; whether concepts can be illuminatingly analysed. In the philosophy of mind, Wittgenstein is especially famous for the so-called ‘private language argument’, which tries to show that words for sensations cannot get their meanings by being attached to purely internal, introspective, ‘private objects’. Other, equally important, topics include the nature of the self, of introspection and of visual experience, and the intentionality (the representative quality) of mental states. Most generally, can we (as Wittgenstein thought) avoid Cartesianism without lapsing into behaviourism?

Skills and Prerequisites
- This can be a difficult paper. You need to have an idea of what Wittgenstein is criticising to appreciate this paper. Accordingly, Knowledge and Reality, Logic and Language, Mind would be ideal companions. You should have studied one of these or Descartes to Kant before you attempt this option.
- As a text based paper, close reading the primary text is important. You will be trying to work out what Wittgenstein was claiming before you can work out whether he was right. However, there almost no weight placed on context in studying this paper. It is less historical than the other text-based papers.

Preparatory Reading
Philosophical Investigations paras 1-80; Blue Book pp. 1-17;

Theory of Politics

Course Description

In order to understand the world of politics, we also need to know which views of politics and society people have when they make political decisions, and why we recommend certain courses of action rather than others. This purpose of this subject is to enable you to look at the main ideas we use when we think about politics: why do we have competing views of social justice and what makes a particular view persuasive, possibly even right? What happens when a concept such as freedom has different meanings, so that those who argue that we must maximise freedom of choice are confronted with those who claim that some choices will actually restrict your freedom? Is power desirable or harmful? Would feminists or nationalists give a different answer to that question? Political theory is concerned with developing good responses to problems such as: when should we obey, and when should we disobey, the state? But it is also concerned with mapping the ways in which we approach questions such as: how does one argue in favour of human rights? In addition, you will explore the main ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism and socialism, in order to understand their main arguments and why each of them will direct us to different political solutions and arrangements.

Prerequisite

- No prerequisite

Pedagogical Notes

- Most PPEists study this paper. Accordingly it is an excellent way to get involved with the resident undergraduate students’ academic debates.
- This paper can be taught in a variety of ways – by concepts (liberty, equality, justice, obedience etc); by -isms (socialism, liberalism, feminism, conservatism etc) or, less commonly, by canonical texts (Mill, Rousseau, Rawls, Nozick, Marx etc)

Preparatory Reading

Will Kymlicka, Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction (O.U.P.)

Some sample combinations of options:

Philosophy via Canonical Texts
A full second year philosophy course.
1. 8 weeks on Descartes to Kant
2. 8 weeks on Ancient Philosophy
3. 12/16 on individual authors from Descartes to Kant, Ancient Philosophy, Medieval, Post-Kantian and Wittgenstein.
4. 4/8 on problems based philosophy courses e.g. knowledge and reality or ethics

Problem-based philosophy:
A full second year philosophy course.
1. 8 Ethics;
2. 8 Knowledge and Reality;
3. 4/8 Logic and Language
4. 4/8 Mind
5. 0/4 from other problem based philosophy courses e.g. Philosophy of Science,
6. 4/8 from text based papers e.g. Descartes to Kant, Wittgenstein.

Philosophy as a minor
A joint honours philosophy course
1. 8 knowledge and reality or 8 history from D to K
2. 8 ethics
3. 4 weeks of another philosophy option

Social Sciences and value theory:
12-24 weeks on politics or economics plus
- 8 weeks on ethics;
- 4/8 weeks on political theory
- Choice:
  o 4 weeks on Ancient philosophy with reference to political theory and ethics
  o And/or 4 weeks philosophy of social science
  o Or no further philosophy

Literature and Value theory
12-24 weeks on literature plus
- 8 weeks on aesthetics;
- 4/8 weeks on ethics;
- Choice:
  o 4 weeks on Nietzsche
  o And/or 4 weeks on Kant
  o Or no further philosophy

Classics:
12-20 on ancient history and literature plus
- 4/8 weeks on The Republic
- 4/8 weeks on The Nicomachean Ethics
- Choice:
  o 8 weeks on Knowledge and Reality
  o And/or 4/8 weeks on Ethics
  o And/or 4 weeks on Political Theory
  o And/or 4 weeks on Aesthetics
  o or no further philosophy

Humanities and Post Kantian:
12-20 other philosophy or another humanities subject
1. 8 Descartes to Kant;
2. 8/12/16 Individual Post Kantian authors;

Theology and Philosophy:
16-20 Theology options
1. 8 Philosophy of Religion
2. 4/8 Ethics
3. 4/8 Medieval or Post-Kantian