Philosophy Course Catalogue

Philosophy offers four Level 1 courses, which run every year, and a variety of Level 2 and Level 3 courses. Note that some of our upper level courses are not taught on a regular basis. For an indication of what we have offered in the last few years please see our online course outlines.

Level 1 Courses

PHIL 1101 Argument and Critical Thinking
We all engage in argument, with varying results. Over the last two millennia philosophers have developed powerful methods for classifying arguments, and identifying common errors in reasoning. Argument and Critical Thinking teaches these methods and applies them to real-life arguments. It is thus an introduction to communication and applied logic. Among the topics we cover are legal argument, and the science-pseudoscience debate, which gives us a chance to discuss UFOs, parapsychology, Bigfoot, the Bermuda Triangle, and alien abductions!

PHIL 1102 Mind and World
Humans are highly intelligent, language-using organisms, who build complex systems of knowledge, are conscious of themselves and their world, and able to freely choose a path through life. As far as we know this combination of abilities is uniquely human. But each is somewhat puzzling. How can we be free if everything we do is determined by earlier events? How can words and symbols, which are mere scribbles or noises, have meanings? And how do organisms with bodies made of physical materials get to be conscious knowers? Philosophers have thought long and hard about these questions. Mind and World is an introduction to some of the answers they've discovered.

PHIL 1103 Morality, Society and the Individual
Morality plays a part in everyone’s life. But what exactly is it, and why is it important? Are there any objective, universal moral truths? Or are moral rightness and wrongness in some way relative to societies or to individuals? What is the relationship between morality and religion? This course is an introduction to some of the most important answers that philosophers have given to these questions, and to some of the arguments that they have developed to defend their views. Our aim is not just to understand these views, but also to start down the road of critical evaluation: How plausible are these views? Are the arguments for and against them persuasive?

PHIL 1110 Introduction to Logic
Logic is the study of argument. We argue to convince others of our views or to discover what follows from things we already believe. Introduction to Logic teaches the basics of formal logic, providing symbolic tools that are used to represent the logical structure of arguments and assess them for validity. The course will teach you the difference between good and bad arguments and, in the process, improve the clarity of your reasoning. No previous experience with symbolic methods is assumed, but you may find Argument and Critical Thinking a useful preliminary.
Level 2 Courses

PHIL 2030 Cognitive Science: Minds, Brains and Computers
Cognitive Science is a multi-disciplinary enterprise that seeks to explain human intelligence by drawing together the insights from psychology, computer science, neuroscience, and philosophy. This course is an introduction to the philosophical and theoretical foundations of this field. Topics will include the computational model of the mind, classical (digital) and connectionist (analog) approaches to cognition, embodied and distributed cognition, and dynamical systems theory. While there will be discussion of computation and computational accounts of cognition, the course is introductory and does not assume a background in computing or mathematics.

PHIL 2031 Crime and Punishment
Crime and Punishment is an introduction to the philosophy of criminal law. The course critically engages with philosophical ideas and principles that have shaped liberal legal theory. We consider the nature and scope of law, the role of the community in sentencing, and the justification of punishment. A special focus will be areas where liberal theory encounters controversy, e.g., pornography (free speech conflicts with harm to women), the criminalization of drugs (moralism conflicts with autonomy). The course would suit law students interested in the foundations of their discipline, and anyone with an interest in legal or moral theory.

PHIL 2032 Naturalising Morality: Evolution, Ethics and Meaning
What bearing does the fact of our evolution have on our understanding of ourselves as moral agents? This course will explore this general question by examining evolutionary psychology, the cognitive science of human emotions, and the so-called "new science of morality". In doing so it will confront contentious debates such as the respective roles of genes and culture in making us the way we are, and whether moral responsibility can survive the encroachments of neuroscience. It will also consider whether it is appropriate to employ new technologies to engineer human happiness. The general aim of the course will be to examine whether there is a naturalistic foundation for ethics, values and even the meaningfulness of life.

PHIL 2035 Foundations of Modern Philosophy
Western philosophy was shaped by a series of challenges that occupied philosophers during the 17th and 18th centuries. Philosophers in this period tried to come to grips with the consequences of an emerging scientific approach for our understanding of the world and our place in it. Ethics, political philosophy, the theory of knowledge, philosophy of language, philosophy of religion, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind would never be the same again. In this course we look at the work of philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Hume on these themes, with particular emphasis on tracing connections between their arguments and those of the present day. Many present day conundrums over, for example, the nature of political obligation, the role of experience in our knowledge of the world, the nature of the mind and our knowledge of ourselves, were anticipated and discussed by these thinkers.
PHIL 2039 Philosophy of Mind
This course is an introduction to philosophy of mind. First, we will consider how minds can fit into the physical world, and the relation between mind and body. Next, we will discuss how mental phenomena can cause physical phenomena. Then, we will look into how our minds can represent the world, and whether the content of our thoughts depends on our environments or is determined by our physical make-up. Finally, we will turn to the fact that mental phenomena are conscious phenomena; they feel in a particular way. We will discuss different approaches to this aspect of the mental.

PHIL 2040 Metaphysics: Identity, Time and Freedom
Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that asks the most general questions about the nature of reality. It deals with the nature of what there is, abstracting away from the particular details of goings on in our world, in an attempt to uncover the underlying structure of fundamental classification and of reality. Traditionally, metaphysics has been concerned with issues such as the identity of objects through time, the existence of abstract entities, the freedom of the will, the existence of God, the reality of time and the nature of causation. In this course, we will approach these issues by examining discussions of them in contemporary analytic philosophy, with an occasional look discussion in ancient and modern philosophy.

PHIL 2042 Moral Problems
Living in the modern world means having to engage with many complex moral questions, not only in our personal lives but also when thinking about public policy. This course is devoted to in-depth discussion of a variety of problems in moral philosophy raised by current ethical controversies. Possible topics include abortion, euthanasia, self-defense, capital punishment, torture, terrorism, war, poverty, genetic engineering and our treatment of animals and the environment. The aim of the course is to identify and understand the main philosophical issues raised by these topics, and to help you develop and defend your own views about them.

PHIL 2045 Professional Ethics
Professionals in any field need an understanding of the ethical problems and principles they face. But anyone, no matter what their job, must deal with various professions too. This course will examine the general principles of professional ethics, and the distinctive problems of various professions. It will be taught in six modules of four lectures and two tutorials each, covering each of the following: Business Ethics, Media Ethics, Police Ethics, Medical Ethics, Legal Ethics, and Research Ethics. Topics covered will also include: the nature of a profession, professional codes of ethics, confidentiality, whistle-blowing, the responsibility of business to the environment, uses and abuses of human research, and animal ethics in research.

PHIL 2050 Philosophy of Science
Science has a significant impact on our lives. Some have criticized it for being "reductionist" and part of a general dehumanization of society. Others argue that the sciences are our only means of avoiding the many dangers we currently face. Philosophy of Science will examine these and other central issues in the contemporary philosophy of science, including: the objectivity of science, the nature of scientific method, the status of scientific knowledge, and the character of scientific explanation. The course will also explore the general picture of reality that emerges from modern science.
PHIL 2051 Art, Perception and Creativity

This course will examine the historical development of theories of art and the conditions which they were designed to serve. This will lead to a number of topical problems concerning art, such as: form and expression; autonomy; authenticity and censorship; creativity and plagiarism; reproductions and multiple instances; artistic intention and indiscernibles. The work of a number of philosophers and writers on art will be considered. We will consider many examples from a variety of media including music, film, architecture and dance but with a particular focus on visual art forms. Among the learning outcomes will be an ability to write and speak on the possibility of objectivity in aesthetic or artistic evaluation.

PHIL 2112 Beauty: Pleasures and Principle

This course introduces students to the central concepts and themes of philosophical aesthetics such as beauty, the sublime, disinterested pleasure, aesthetic judgment, aesthetic form, aesthetic ideas, the ugly, imagination and style. We will study the origin of these notions through the writings of Plato, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, and then apply them to contemporary culture through the writings of more recent philosophers. We will assess the potency and relevance of these concepts and themes for understanding the way value and meaning are conveyed through popular art forms like television soap operas but also more challenging art works, including novels, visual art and film. The course will culminate in an analysis of the relation between the narrative of a film and its artistry. This will involve a study of film theory that draws upon research on perception and the emotions in order to understand the way films can be constructed to elicit complex emotions such as those associated with experiences of beauty and the sublime.

Level 3 Courses

PHIL 3014 Epistemology: Knowledge, Truth & Justification

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, the study of the nature, sources and limitations of knowledge. In studying the nature of knowledge, we will discuss the conditions that a belief must meet to qualify as knowledge. Thus, we will explore what it takes for a certain belief to be justified and the connections between being justified in believing something, being right in believing it and knowing it. In studying the sources of knowledge, we will address the extent to which perception, memory, testimony and reasoning give us knowledge. Finally, while we study the limitations of knowledge, we will consider the challenge known as skepticism. This is the challenge of showing that, strictly speaking, we know anything at all.

PHIL 3018 Existentialism

The distinctive focus of existentialism, at least in its popular representations, is the nature and meaning of human existence. Any conception of the nature and meaning of human existence has implications for a number of more specific questions, such as the nature of the self, the relation with others, and ethical ideals such as altruism and self-creation. The course will focus on two prominent existentialist philosophers: Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both attempt to address the question of the meaning of life. The central concern of Nietzsche’s philosophy is nihilism and the conditions of its overcoming. The main problem of Sartre’s philosophy is the absurdity of existence and its implications.
PHIL 3019 How Should I Live? Contemporary Ethical Theories

How should I live my life, morally speaking? One of the key debates in moral philosophy is between consequentialist and deontological answers to this question. In the first part of this course we will examine these two approaches, and look at some of the ways in which they have been developed by contemporary philosophers. In the second part of the course we will step back and look at some more general questions about the nature of morality (questions in so-called “meta-ethics”). How does morality fit into the natural world described by science? Is there such a thing as moral knowledge? How do we acquire it? Can we have evidence for or against a moral claim? What would such evidence look like?

PHIL 3029 Philosophy of Language

Language is one of the most distinctive and pervasive features of human life. But its theoretical foundations are still a matter of great controversy. These controversies often lie dormant in ordinary life, only coming to the fore we try to understand precisely how some piece of language works. The nature of meaning has been of interest to philosophers since Plato, but the development of precise theories of meaning really accelerated in the twentieth century, with contributions from philosophers, logicians, and linguists. We will investigate the meanings of interesting classes of English expressions, such as: proper names (‘Alice’), kind terms (‘gold’), descriptions (‘the most diligent student’), indexicals and demonstratives (‘here’, ‘there’), and modal auxiliaries (‘must’). We will look at the meaning of complex sentences, as well as whether there are any aspects what is communicated by a sentence beyond what it literally means. Finally, we turn to the relationship between language and thought.

PHIL 3030 Philosophy of Film: Classical & Modern Issues

This course will critically examine the nature and influence of realism in films, and explore aspects of our cognitive, emotional, and moral engagement with narrative fiction films. Questions about the aesthetic experience afforded by films, the meanings and emotions conveyed by films, and whether moral development or degradation is possible through films will be explored. Reading material will be mostly drawn from the tradition of analytical philosophy of film. The course will also include some film viewing, details of which will be provided at the commencement of the course.

PHIL 3031 Pragmatism and Value Theory

Reasons for action can be represented in terms of principles and states of mind. The latter are conceived for the purposes of philosophy in terms of the elements of background experience. However, the role of imagery as internalised through cultural artefacts such as popular media including television, video games and the internet, has been under-played. Recent developments in value theory provide a framework for understanding the role of imagery in the ethical outlook that shapes our action and attitudes, and in turn, the assumptions embedded in our moral judgments. Understanding this aspect of moral judgment, is relevant to understanding the nature of moral disagreement. Recent philosophical work on this topic has been influenced by pragmatism. We will begin with an outline of the early American pragmatists, William James, Charles Peirce and John Dewey, before considering the ethical theories of contemporary neo-pragmatists such as Habermas, Putnam and Cavell.
PHIL 3032 God, Faith and Infinity: Philosophy of Religion

Most people, historically and today, have religious beliefs of one kind or another. Those beliefs are often deeply important to their holders, providing the framework for their entire worldview. In this course, we will investigate issues about religious worldviews – about their content (Is religious language to be taken literally or metaphorically? What is the nature of God and its attributes?), as well as about their reasonableness (Are there good arguments for or against the existence of God? Do we have good evidence for belief in God – and what is good evidence anyway?). The focus of the course will be on the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), which share similar conceptions of the role of God and its nature. The course welcomes students both with and without religious commitments and is run in a spirit of respectful yet rigorous inquiry.

PHIL 3033 Key Texts in Philosophy

This capstone course for the Philosophy major will focus on a close reading and analysis of influential texts in philosophy. It is a suitable culmination to a major in Philosophy and a bridge into Honours/MPhil, with an emphasis on in-depth treatment of more narrowly focused topics and, in some cases, their historical origins. The content is not fixed but will be determined from year to year by a combination of available expertise and the latest research in the field.

PHIL 3034 Logic, Truth and Reason

Two conceptions of the nature of logic have held sway at various times in the history of the subject. The first takes logic to be the science of inference, so logic gives us what Boole called the “laws of thought”. The second takes logic to be the science of consequence; logic is the study of what follows from what, independently of what or how anyone thinks. This course discusses attempts to decide which of these conceptions is correct, with particular reference to whether classical logic is capable of modelling consequence in natural language or modelling rational thought. Dealing as it does with formal issues in logic, some use of logical symbols is unavoidable. Logic I, or some other first year course with substantial formal content (e.g., Mathematics I or Computer Science I), are highly recommended.

ANAT SC 3500 Ethics, Science and Society

This course aims to develop students' awareness of the ethical and social challenges in the health sciences. It is suitable for health science, science, and humanities and social science students. Topic areas may include ethical analysis of the following: research practice; reproduction and reproductive technologies; genetics; animal and human experimentation; use of human bodies in research and teaching. The focus on these topical issues in modern science will be underpinned by an introduction to the philosophy of science and methods in bioethics. Relevant NH&MRC codes are studied in detail. Note: Enrolments in this course can be at either Level 2 or 3.