

University of Cambridge

Faculty of Philosophy

Course Information

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Introduction

Philosophers tackle some of the deepest questions. What is the nature of reality? What is consciousness? Can we ever have genuine knowledge? What is the morally right thing to do? How should we live together? The Cambridge Philosophy BA trains you to tackle these questions; at the same time, it trains you to think clearly, to analyse rigorously, and to argue forcefully. The Cambridge Philosophy BA is a three-year, single honours course. This means that over your time here you will study philosophy in great depth. You will not only learn *about* philosophy, you will also learn how to *do* philosophy.

Cambridge is a fantastic place to study philosophy. Our academic staff are both world-class researchers and committed teachers. While the Faculty bustles with talks, seminars and workshops, it is also small enough that you can get to know everyone by name. While the degree will push and challenge you, you will find yourself in an environment that is friendly and supportive, and in which everyone is excited about philosophy.

The research interests of our staff cover much of contemporary analytic philosophy and history of philosophy. There are logicians, working both in formal and philosophical logic. There are ethicists and political philosophers thinking about consent, justice, and feminist philosophy. There are metaphysicians, studying the nature of causation and reality. There are philosophers of mind, thinking about the nature of consciousness and the will. There are historians of philosophy covering anything from ancient philosophy, the Middle Ages, Kant, Wittgenstein, and the history of analytic philosophy.

Correspondingly broad are the options you have during your studies. After your first year, in which you will get a solid grounding in some of the central areas of analytic philosophy and history of philosophy, you will have increasing freedom to explore your interests: from ethics and aesthetics, to ancient philosophy, formal logic, philosophy of science, or metaphysics.

You will learn philosophy through different methods. Besides the famous Cambridge supervisions – small meetings, usually one-on-one, at which you and your supervisor discuss an essay you have prepared for that week – you will also attend lectures given by experts in their field, and you will hone your argumentative skills in discussion groups with your peers. And, of course, you will spend plenty of time in the library, too.

Our student body is very active. There are many student-run philosophy societies. The Amoral Sciences Club, the undergraduate philosophy group, hosts a weekly talk given by either undergraduates or visiting speakers. The Immoral Sciences Club promotes women and non-binary students in philosophy. Students also have a say on all important decisions about the course; student representatives sit on Faculty Board and the student body is consulted through the Student-Staff Committee.

Cambridge looks back on a rich philosophical history with many distinguished men and women philosophers. The Faculty is located on Sidgwick Avenue, named after moral philosopher Henry Sidgwick, who was one of the founders of utilitarianism (as well as a pioneer of women's education). In the early 20th century, Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein made seminal contributions to the philosophy of logic and language. More recently, Elizabeth Anscombe (who both studied in Cambridge and then returned as a professor) and Bernard Williams made wide-ranging contributions to moral philosophy, the philosophy of action, and many other areas.

If you are interested in applying, we encourage you to find out as much as you can about the subject and our course. You can find more information on our [website](#). You are also very welcome to attend one of our [Open Days](#). In addition, the Faculty also runs an annual 6th Form conference for year 12 students.

Members of Staff

The current academic roster can be found on our website:

<https://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/people/teaching-research>

The Philosophy Tripos

The Papers currently on offer are as described later in this document, but the Faculty regularly reviews the structure of the Tripos and the content of the papers. There may be some differences by the time you arrive.

The undergraduate course of study in philosophy at Cambridge is called the Philosophy Tripos. It is divided into three parts: Part IA, Part IB and Part II. The majority of our students study philosophy for all three years of their undergraduate course, taking one part of the Tripos each year.

Unlike many universities, Cambridge does not offer joint honours degrees in which philosophy can be studied concurrently with another subject such as Mathematics or English. It is, however, possible to take each part of the Tripos separately, and thus to combine the study of philosophy at Cambridge with that of another subject. A student could, for example, study Part I English (which takes two years) and then do Part II Philosophy in the third year.

Additional course costs

Philosophy, by its nature, does not generate large additional course costs. But, of course, there are sundry expenses involved in collecting materials for study, and in preparing and storing one's own work.

This prospectus describes the course as it is at the time of printing.

For more up to date information consult the website: <https://www.phil.cam.ac.uk>

Be aware in any case that the course is revised annually and may be different by the time current applicants come to study it.

Part IA

Part IA of the Tripos is an introduction to the study of Philosophy and is normally taken in the first year. It consists of metaphysics, ethics and political philosophy, philosophy of language, formal methods, and some historically important texts in philosophy. The emphasis is on developing students' ability to articulate and defend their own treatment of philosophical issues.

1. Metaphysics

Metaphysics is at the foundation of virtually the whole of philosophy. This course examines a wide range of metaphysical topics of perennial interest. The first part of the syllabus asks about God and causation. Many students will have encountered arguments for and against the existence of God. These arguments will be discussed in detail and also the problem of reconciling the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient benevolent God with the apparent existence of evil in the world. The primary question about causation is simply what it is for one thing to cause another. Your alarm clock may go off every morning just before sunrise; but it doesn't cause the sun to rise. What is missing? The second part of the syllabus tackles the mind and minded beings, and includes questions about free will. Is anything we do ever up to us? Can we have any choice at all if everything we do is the inevitable result of things beyond our control, such as facts about the distant past and laws of nature? Then there is the mind-body problem: What is the relation between mental and physical phenomena? Finally, the question of personal identity asks about the metaphysical nature of minded beings: What does it take for us to persist through time? Can we swap bodies or brains or minds?

2. Ethics and Political Philosophy

This paper introduces a selection of the main problems in philosophical ethics and political philosophy. Can we know what is morally right and wrong, or is there nothing to be known because, in making pronouncements on moral matters, people are merely expressing their own emotions? Do people ever act completely altruistically, or is there a selfish element in all motivation? If we can act purely for others, why should we do so when it would be inconvenient for our own projects? One influential ethical theory, utilitarianism, prescribes that we should act so as to maximize the net balance of happiness over suffering. It faces a variety of objections, and has taken many forms, often in response to objections. The course aims to provide an understanding of the main variants, and to provide the necessary tools for evaluating them. The course also looks at the concept of Equality of Opportunity, and aims to get new students thinking about issues directly relevant to them, such as 'who should get into Cambridge?' Finally, it introduces a central topic in political philosophy, namely the question of political obligation and authority. With what right does the state rule over us? What are the conditions in which we are obliged to obey one political authority or another?

3. Meaning

The notion of *meaning* is central to the philosophy of logic and to the philosophy of language in general. This course explores meaning from several directions. We consider whether there is a stable distinction to be drawn between analytic truths, which are true solely in virtue of their meaning (e.g. *all vixens are foxes*) and synthetic truths, which require the world to be a certain way (e.g. *no fox has been to the moon*). We also ask how this relates to two other distinctions: between necessary and contingent truths, and between *a priori* and *a posteriori* truths. These distinctions were of central interest to the verificationist program, which tied meaning to the possibility of verification. We explore the successes and failures of their approach. We also consider whether we can think of meaning purely in terms of individual speaker's intentions, and/or conventions between groups of speakers and listeners. Finally, we consider several case studies of particular aspects of

language. For example: Under what circumstances is a conditional (an "if..., then..." construction) *true*? Can this come apart from the circumstances under which it might be appropriate to *assert* a conditional? What is the meaning of a given name? Is there a significant difference between names and descriptions? And how do names refer to their bearers?

4. Set Texts

This paper offers an introduction to the study of the history of philosophy. You will be required to develop a detailed knowledge of the texts you study and of relevant aspects of their historical background. At the same time, you will be encouraged to exercise your own judgment on the interpretation of the texts and the arguments and other materials they contain. You may be asked to study texts such as Plato, *Meno*; or Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*; or Mill, *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*. Currently students are asked to study two out of three set texts but remember that by the time you arrive in Cambridge these texts may have changed and they are only listed here as examples.

5. Formal Methods

A basic working knowledge of certain formal methods is presupposed in almost every other area of English-speaking philosophy. However, these formal methods also generate deep philosophical questions of their own (to be explored in other papers). This course introduces these formal methods. The most central notion in the course is that of a *deductively valid argument* (e.g. *all vixens are foxes; all foxes are mammals; so, all vixens are mammals*). On the one hand, we can ask about the validity of arguments in natural languages (such as English), but this is likely to be imprecise and intuitive. On the other hand, we can construct artificially simple formal languages, and ask precise questions about the validity of arguments in those formal languages. With this in mind, we consider two simple formal languages: truth-functional logic and first-order logic. We explore how to move between English and these formal languages, and how to approach both formal languages semantically (in terms of *truth*) and deductively (in terms of *proof*). We then apply these techniques to elementary reasoning about classes, relations, and probability. (For exam purposes, this paper carries only half the weight of the other four papers at Part IA.)

Part IB

Students normally take Part IB in their second year. One paper — Knowledge, Language and World — is compulsory: it develops themes and issues introduced in Part IA and introduces further concepts that are essential to the understanding of much current philosophy. In addition, students choose three other subjects from a range covering topics in ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of science, experimental psychology, aesthetics and philosophy of art and various areas in history of philosophy, including Greek and Roman philosophy (from the Faculty of Classics Tripos), early modern philosophy, and history of analytic philosophy.

1. Knowledge, Language and World

This compulsory course explores core questions concerning our place in the world.

We begin with broad issues concerning the relation between mind and world. Knowledge has traditionally been understood as requiring justification or warrant or reason for belief. But how should justification itself be understood? Does justification require foundations, or can coherence be sufficient? Equally, does knowing require awareness that one is justified? The threat of scepticism looms here too: construing knowledge in certain ways makes knowledge unattainable. How should we respond to this threat? Relatedly, this leads us to explore the (supposed) distinction between 'primary' qualities, which are quite independent from us, and 'secondary' qualities, which are somehow more subjective and therefore mind-dependent.

We also consider topics at the intersection of metaphysics and philosophical logic, beginning with truth. Does truth have a particular nature (perhaps correspondence), or is there nothing much in common between different truths, beyond their all being true? In exploring these philosophical questions, we introduce the bare elements of formal theories of truth. Such formal theories of truth are typically presented for languages with simple grammars: subject/predicate form, for example. But we should ask whether the grammar of our natural language is a guide to its logical form; and, indeed, ask whether there is even such a thing as logical form. Finally, we consider the metaphysics and semantics of possibility and necessity.

2. History of Analytic Philosophy

In the fifty years after 1879 a new way of studying philosophy (what has come to be known as the analytic method) was born. This paper studies the four figures – Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein and Ramsey – largely responsible for its birth. Much of their work was concerned with understanding the new logic which Frege devised. This paper therefore follows naturally from (and depends on) the Formal Methods paper in Part IA, introducing students to debates in philosophical logic that are still active today. The authors to be studied also drew significant (although controversial) conclusions about the nature of reality and our relation to it. The paper therefore constitutes an introduction to many issues central to modern metaphysics and philosophy of mind. More fundamentally, the paper aims to help students trace the origins of the way that philosophy has been pursued in the late 20th and early 21st century in much of the Anglophone world.

3. Ethics

This paper covers a wide range of issues in contemporary and historical moral philosophy, including helping and harming, early modern moral philosophy, and moral psychology and motivation.

4. Greek and Roman Philosophy

This paper aims to introduce the variety and scope of ancient philosophy within its historical and cultural context. Students are introduced to a wide range of ancient texts from the pre-Socratics, through Plato and Aristotle, to Hellenistic and Roman philosophy. This paper is offered from Part IB of the Classical Tripos.

5. Early Modern Philosophy

This paper provides an opportunity to study some of the central problems of early modern philosophy. This is approached through the works of central authors, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, David Hume, Anne Conway, and Margaret Cavendish, and through the study of central themes, such as freedom and agency, materialism and idealism, and early modern feminisms. It examines the way these problems developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and considers how some of the greatest philosophers of the period proposed to solve them. At the same time, it offers an opportunity to study key philosophical texts in depth. These aims are reflected in the examination, which includes both questions about individual philosophers and broader, comparative questions.

6. Epistemology and Metaphysics of Science

This paper considers a series of central questions in the philosophy of science. Topics covered include whether we should believe that our best scientific theories are true, whether there are fundamental laws and what they might be, the role of various forms of simplification and idealisation in science, the nature of hypothesis testing, the pretensions of science to reveal a mind-independent reality, and issues around the alleged unity of the sciences and of scientific method.

7. Political Philosophy

This paper examines a set of central issues in contemporary political philosophy. It is focused on the analysis of central political values, such as equality and liberty, and on the nature and justification of democracy.

8. Experimental Psychology

This paper covers human experimental psychology, human learning and memory, neuropsychology, intelligence, developmental psychology, reasoning, emotion, and abnormal psychology. It involves practical work in the Psychological Laboratory. A scientific GCE A level or equivalent is not a prerequisite but may be an advantage for some of the material taught in the course. This paper is offered from Part IB of the Natural Sciences Tripos.

9. Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art

This paper deals with central questions in the study of art and beauty. What makes something a 'work of art'? What is the nature of artistic representation and expression? What is the value of artistic originality? Can immoral works of art still be beautiful? Can things other than works of art be beautiful? Is beauty a real property of objects, or a property projected onto objects by those who view them? These questions are addressed through the study of recent literature, as well as through the study of key historical works by Plato, Hume, Kant and others.

Part II

This part of the Tripos is normally taken in a student's third year at Cambridge. There are no compulsory subject papers. Instead, there is a wide range of

options, some providing a more extended and sophisticated treatment of themes introduced in Parts IA and IB, others covering new areas. The papers currently taught are as follows:

1. Metaphysics

This paper continues the study of metaphysics and the nature of reality, including such topics as realism and its alternatives, the nature of properties, the abstract and the concrete, the nature and direction of time and of causation, and the nature of personhood.

2. Philosophy of Mind

This paper focuses on a range of questions in the contemporary philosophy of mind. Topics studied include what the mind is and how it works; how one knows about the mind (either one's own or others'); the nature of consciousness and intentionality, and the nature of the will, emotion, desire, and imagination.

3. Ethics

This paper provides an opportunity to study a wide range of issues in contemporary and historical moral philosophy, including animal ethics, environmental ethics, and the ethical status of future generations; questions of ethical realism, irrealism, expressivism and constructivism; Kant's Ethics and Kantian Ethics; and topics in moral psychology such as trust, the ethics of knowing and responsibility.

4. European Philosophy from Kant

This paper covers three of the most important – and revolutionary – figures in modern European philosophy: Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. The course provides background vital to any engagement with later movements in European thought.

5. Philosophy in the Long Middle Ages

This paper covers philosophy in the period from c.400 to c. 1700, in the Latin, Arabic and Hebrew traditions. The texts of some of the most significant philosophers in this period are studied in translation, focusing on core topics in epistemology and metaphysics (such as Universals, and Scientific Truth and Revelation).

6. Philosophy of Science

This paper offers targeted study of the philosophies of the various sciences, including physics, biology and the social sciences. There is also the opportunity to study one general topic in the philosophy of science (in recent years, Philosophy of Cognitive Science).

7. Mathematical Logic

The modern philosophy of mathematics has been shaped by technical results in mathematical logic, such as Gödel's incompleteness theorems and the Church-Turing undecidability theorem, which demonstrate the limitations of certain sorts of formal treatment of mathematics. This paper gives students a

chance to study these technical results in detail and reflect on their philosophical significance. Some background in mathematics (e.g. A-level mathematics or equivalent) is advisable.

8. Philosophical Logic

This paper includes advanced topics in logic and the philosophy of language such as truth and meaning; conditionals; and plurals. The paper also includes advanced topics in the philosophy of mathematics, including theories about the nature of logic and mathematics.

9. Wittgenstein and His Successors

Ludwig Wittgenstein was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. The paper focuses on his central later works, especially the *Philosophical Investigations*, as well as on the work of two of his most important successors: Elizabeth Anscombe and her book, *Intention*; and J. L. Austin and his works, *Sense and Sensibilia* and *How to Do Things with Words*. The interpretation of these works has proved controversial, and the course provides an introduction to exegetical cruxes in all the texts specified, as well as experience in relating those issues to ones in contemporary philosophy of mind and language.

10. Political Philosophy

This paper examines a range of advanced topics in political philosophy, including global political issues such as immigration, climate ethics, and international justice; multiculturalism and community; feminism; and radical political theory, including Marxism.

PAPERS FROM PART II OF THE CLASSICAL TRIPOS THAT MAY BE TAKEN IN PART II

A candidate for Part II of the Philosophy Tripos may take one or two of the following papers:

Group B (Ancient Philosophy)

B1. Plato

The course will address issues in Plato's metaphysics, philosophical psychology and epistemology across various dialogues including, for example: *Parmenides* (first part), *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus* and *Timaeus*. Use the OCT for the Greek text; good translations of all the dialogues are available in the one volume edition edited by J. Cooper, Plato, *Complete Works* (Hackett 1997).

B2. Aristotle on soul and body

B3. A prescribed subject or period in Greek and Roman philosophy

Ancient philosophers continue to inform debates in political theory. This course explores some of the major works of the key ancient philosophers on politics.

How did the ancients envisage the nature of citizenship, community, justice and freedom? How do different thinkers conceptualize the nature of the state? What is the relationship between the individual and the state? Do ancient thinkers have a robust sense of human freedom and autonomy? What is it to be a citizen or a 'citizen of the cosmos'? What is a community? To what extent are their views on these issues informed by conceptions of human nature, and the world of which we are a part? How did their views relate to existing contemporary practices?

This course, through a mixture of lectures and classes, will look at the ancient philosophers' accounts of the nature and value of life in a political community from the early Greek philosophers through Plato and Aristotle to the Hellenistic period.

Teaching

Responsibility for the teaching of philosophy at Cambridge is divided between the Faculty of Philosophy and the individual colleges. The Faculty organises lectures, logic classes, discussion groups and seminars. The Director of Studies at each individual college organises tutorials (known in Cambridge as supervisions) for its students. This division of responsibility contributes to the diversity of philosophy teaching at Cambridge, since it allows the Director of Studies to tailor each student's teaching to his or her own abilities and needs.

Lectures

In the first two years of the course the lectures organised by the Faculty introduce students to the concepts and arguments characteristic of philosophical debates. At Part II level, some lectures are more advanced, and lecturers may take the opportunity to develop new positions rather than just explore the existing state of the debate.

Although the lectures are designed to provide adequate coverage of the content of each part of the course, they do not define the content of the course or any part of it. Students are free to approach the topics they study in their own way; equally, lecturers are not constrained by the need to cover all the topics of a paper in their lectures.

It is a general principle of Cambridge University that its lectures are open to all members of the University. This is especially useful for philosophy students because philosophical arguments have an important place in several academic disciplines and so there may be lectures relevant to philosophers in various departments of the University other than the Faculty of Philosophy – Classics, History, Divinity, Human, Social and Political Science, and History and Philosophy of Science. It is normal practice, therefore, for philosophy students to attend lectures organised by these departments.

Seminar (discussion) groups and classes

The Faculty organises logic classes for first year students, and seminar (discussion) groups for first and second year students. The latter provide an opportunity for students from different colleges to meet each other and compare and develop their responses to philosophical issues. The teaching for advanced Part II courses sometimes takes the form of seminar discussions rather than lectures, and can in some cases be open both to postgraduates and undergraduate students.

Supervisions

All students have a Director of Studies appointed by their college to oversee their work, give advice on the choice of papers and arrange supervisions. Most Directors of Studies will do some supervisions themselves; but philosophy students will have several different supervisors during their Cambridge careers, possibly including other Faculty teaching officers and advanced postgraduate students.

Philosophy students can expect to have one supervision each week. Probably the most distinctive feature of reading philosophy at Cambridge is that supervisions are usually one-to-one. The supervisor will set an essay on a topic covered by the syllabus and recommend relevant reading. The student will then hand in the essay prior to the supervision so that the supervisor can read and comment on it in advance. The supervision itself is then devoted to a critical discussion of the essay topic.

Meetings

The *Moral Sciences Club* is the University's main philosophical society. (Its name reflects the fact that until 1973 the Cambridge philosophy course was called the Moral Sciences Tripos.) It meets once a week during term to hear and discuss talks normally given by visiting philosophers. All members of the Faculty, from first year undergraduates to professors, are welcome to join.

The *Amoral Sciences Club* is run by undergraduates and puts on an alternative series of philosophy talks.

The *Immoral Sciences Club* is run by undergraduates and provides support and collaboration for women and non-binary people studying philosophy.

Once a year the Faculty invites an eminent philosopher to give an Open Lecture, currently sponsored by Routledge Publishers. Recent lecturers include Amartya Sen, the late Sir Michael Dummett, the late Sir Bernard Williams, Professor Jerry Fodor, Professor Ronald Dworkin, Professor Thomas Pogge, Professor Richard Moran, Professor Philip Pettit, Professor David Luban, Professor Susan Wolf, Professor Michael Bratman, Professor Judith Jarvis Thomson, Professor Peter Singer and Baroness Onora O'Neill.



Baroness Onora O'Neill, who gave the Routledge Lecture in 2019, (photo by Martin Dijkstra)

Examinations

There are examinations for each part of the philosophy course in late May/early June, in the second half of the Easter (third) term.

Part IA students sit one three-hour examination for each of their four main subjects (excluding Formal Methods), in which they normally have to answer three essay-type questions. They will also sit one two-hour examination in Formal Methods.

Part IB students must sit a three-hour examination for the paper Knowledge, Language, and World. They may, if they wish, replace one of their three other written exam papers with two extended essays on appropriate topics, written in their own time earlier in the year. In addition, they sit a fifth paper in which they write one longer essay over three hours. The aim of this General Paper is to encourage students to reflect on broader issues than arise in the context of the subject papers, and to reward originality and flexibility as much as knowledge of specific areas of the subject. Students taking experimental psychology, however, are exempt from taking the General Paper.

Part II students, like IB students, have the option of replacing one of their papers with two extended essays. They may also submit one longer dissertation in place of the written exam for the General Paper: this can be on any philosophical topic of the student's choosing that the Faculty is able to teach and examine.

Each part of the Tripos is marked separately and independently.

The Faculty aims to detach undergraduate teaching, and especially supervisions, from the examination process. We encourage students to work through difficult points throughout the year with no fear that any misunderstandings will be counted against their final marks.

Faculty Resources and Support for Students

Libraries

The [Casimir Lewy Library](#) is the primary source of printed and electronic material needed for the study and teaching of philosophy in Cambridge. It covers all the areas taught in the Philosophy Tripos as well as most of the areas researched by postgraduates and teaching staff. The library stock, therefore, extends well beyond philosophy itself to cover the interdisciplinary subjects related to philosophy taught and researched in the University.



The Casimir Lewy Library

The [University Library](#), as one of Britain's five copyright libraries, holds every academically important book published in Britain since the early eighteenth century, as well as extensive stocks from overseas.

The Classics, Divinity, History, and History and Philosophy of Science libraries also contain much material useful to philosophy students, as do college libraries.

Language Learning

Various courses in languages useful to philosophers are open to students and the [University Language Centre](#) is open to all students.

Computing

All students are encouraged to use University Public Workstation Facilities (PWF) which are located in many sites around the University. Most of the computers in the Faculty Library are part of the Raised Faculty Building PWF. This service gives access to a number of electronic resources and word processing. Wireless networking is available in most areas of the Faculty.

E-mail is the normal method of communication between students and the Faculty's staff.

All colleges also provide computing facilities for their students. Many give access to electronic resources via wifi or ethernet sockets installed in students' study bedrooms.

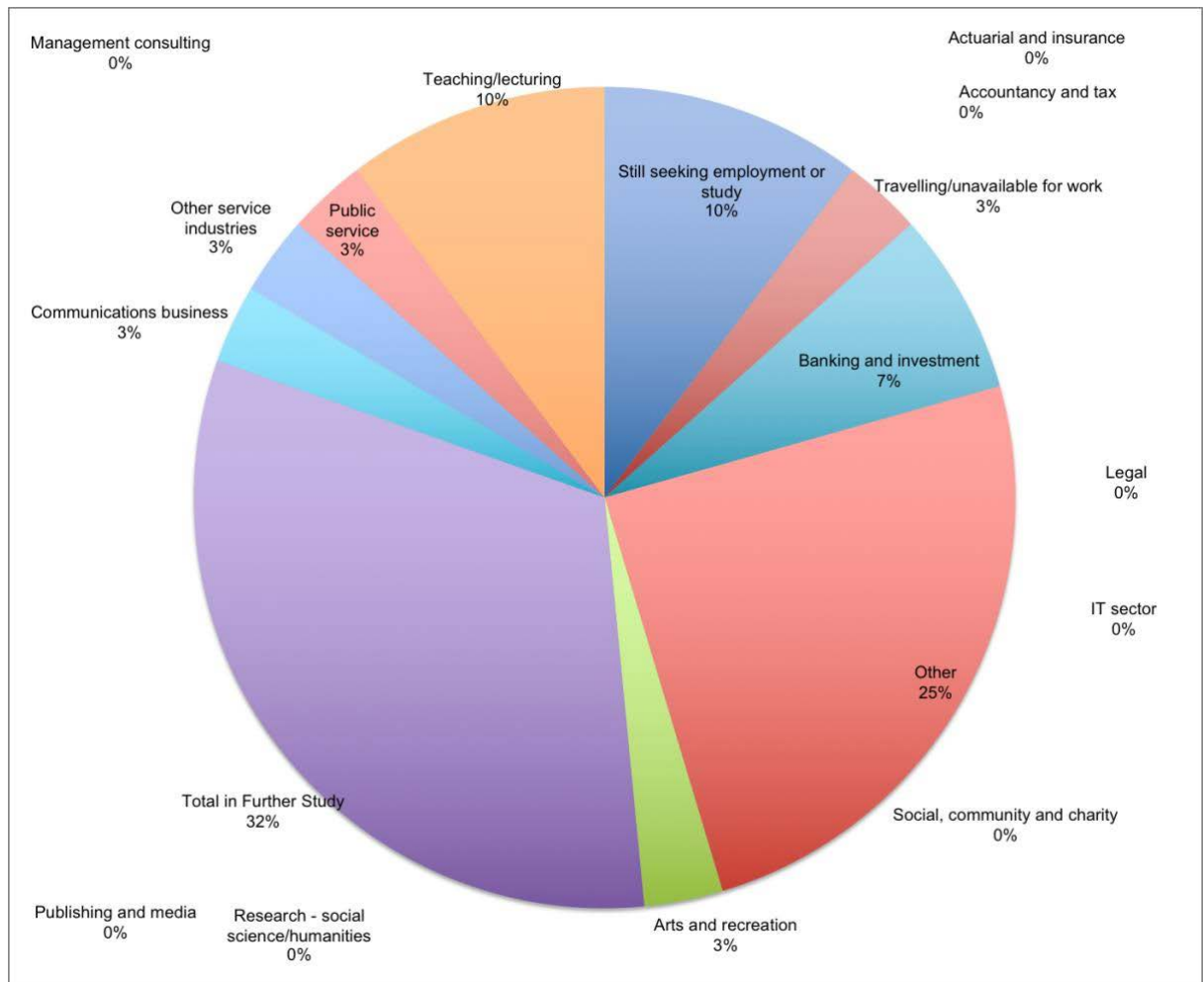
Disabled Students

Colleges judge applications from students with physical disabilities on the same academic terms as those from other candidates. However, they find it helpful to know in advance about the degree of a candidate's disability or impairment, so that they can offer advice on the suitability of their facilities. Prospective candidates with questions about the Faculty's own facilities should contact the Faculty Office.

Information on the University's Accessibility and Disability Resource Centre can be found at: <https://www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/>

Life after the Tripos

Studying philosophy at Cambridge equips you with a wide range of transferable skills, and enables you to pursue a broad range of careers. Our recent postgraduates include an RAF test pilot as well as IT consultants, management consultants, fund-raisers, civil servants, lawyers, arts administrators and teachers. In addition, many of our students choose to carry on with further study towards postgraduate degrees such as the MPhil and PhD in philosophy. For some of them philosophy will become their career: the last time we tried to count, there were 58 people holding senior posts in philosophy departments around the world who started their philosophical careers by reading for a degree in the Cambridge Philosophy Faculty.



*First employment destinations of Cambridge philosophy graduates
(2016–2017 survey – most recent data held by the
University Careers Service)*

Admissions and applications

Undergraduate admissions are handled by individual colleges and not by the Faculty of Philosophy. Prospective candidates can find a copy of the *Cambridge Undergraduate Prospectus* here: <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/find-out-more/publications>

Details of financial arrangements must be obtained from colleges. Some helpful information about costs is included in the [Cambridge Undergraduate Prospectus](#).

There is no formal quota for the annual intake of philosophy undergraduates, but in practice we admit about fifty students each year. A number of our applicants have been doing either Philosophy or Religious Studies at A-level, but this is by no means universal and the Faculty has no formal restrictions on the school subjects applicants should have studied. Although a mixture of arts and science subjects can be useful, many different combinations provide a suitable basis for studying philosophy. The one thing that is vital is for prospective applicants to read some books on the subject first, to give them an idea of what philosophy is like. These recent books (many by Cambridge philosophers) are recommended for the purpose:

Simon Blackburn, *Think* (OUP, 2001) and *Being Good* (OUP, 2002)
Edward Craig, *Philosophy: A very short introduction* (OUP, 2002)
Mary Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) and *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017)
Bernard Williams, *Morality* (CUP, 1993)

The following classic texts are also well worth reading to gain some idea of the flavour of the subject:

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*
George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*
René Descartes, *Meditations*
David Hume, *Enquiries*
Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*
J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, and The Subjection of Women* Karl
Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

Other suggestions are listed on the following web page:

https://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/prosp-students/Reading_list_for_prospective_students

The most frequently asked questions about admissions are listed on:

<https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/find-out-more/faq>

and

<https://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/prosp-students/prosp-ugrad-faq>

What our students say

A literature student will tell you that truth is beauty. A philosopher will ask you what the nature of truth is, what you think beauty is, and even what it means to say that one thing is identical to another. As a student of philosophy you'll often be asked by the uninitiated, 'what IS philosophy?'; and even after three years you may struggle to answer. Philosophy is defined more by its methods than by the topics which it covers, taking an in-depth and critical view on fundamental questions about the universe and our functioning within it. The questions may be about time, morality, justice, possibility, even the nature of philosophy itself.

Philosophy is hard work. There are always more books to get through, and philosophers are not renowned for their reader-friendly prose! But when you do get through your weekly reading or finally understand that argument you never really got before, it can be hugely rewarding. And Cambridge is a great place to study this exciting and challenging discipline. Even in first year, your lecturers will rarely just talk through the reading list. Instead, they will use lectures as an opportunity to investigate genuinely original ideas and discuss new ways of looking at old problems.

There are usually around 50 students in each year. Most people will not have had the chance to study Philosophy at school, and students come to Philosophy from all possible combinations of A-levels.

Supervisions are a big part of what makes philosophy at Cambridge unique. Each week you will receive feedback on an essay you have prepared, and engage in real, in-depth, philosophical discussion. While this may seem daunting at first, you soon realise how valuable it is. Getting the chance to discuss your ideas one on one with your supervisor (who may well have written the foremost book on your topic) allows you not only to develop your ideas but also to gain experience in defending your point of view and learning to anticipate objections.

Logic is central to the course at Cambridge. This will be different from anything you'll have studied at school, but is one of the most rewarding parts of the syllabus, providing you with a critical eye which will help you grapple with any area in philosophy. Despite what you might think, having done Maths A-Level is by no means a prerequisite for finding this part of the course fulfilling.

In your second and third years you have the option to take papers from other faculties, such as Classics and Psychology, which gives you a chance to gain a new perspective and learn a different way of thinking about and tackling problems. Philosophy in Cambridge also extends beyond the lecture room and the library, with philosophical societies from the prestigious Moral Sciences Club to the more casual Amoral Sciences Club and Immoral Sciences Club. More often than not, a fascinating supervision discussion or a really great

lecture will feed conversations with other students. Many a philosophical epiphany is had over coffee in the Sidgwick Site cafe.

Studying philosophy at Cambridge, you will learn how to argue, think critically and examine ideas, and gain skills that will be useful in any future career. The course is for anyone who loves to analyse in rigorous detail how arguments fit together or fail, who questions everything, and who wants to learn more about the field.

Ellen Judson, Trinity Hall
Matthew van der Merwe, Gonville and Caius