The study of philosophy has traditionally been regarded as an essential component of a liberal arts education. Philosophy deals with fundamental questions about the ultimate nature of reality, our place in the world, and our relations with one another. What sort of person should I be? What are my obligations to others? What can we know? What is the relationship between science and ethics? Between science and poetry? What is the relationship between the mind and the body? Do we have free will? Is there a God?

Students of philosophy confront these and other questions through close study of the great thinkers throughout history, thinkers whose work informs our common cultural heritage. By reading and analyzing philosophical texts, students also sharpen their critical facilities. Each course taught in the Department of Philosophy, no matter how advanced, is designed to train the mind, awakening students to the demands and satisfactions of clear reasoning, cogent argument, and accurate explanation.

The philosophy department does not require that students begin with any single “gateway” course. Instead, they are free to choose from a number of introductory classes: first-year seminars, surveys of the history of philosophy (ancient and modern), and introductory topics courses. Many intermediate-level courses are also without prerequisites, and most are small classes with many opportunities for discussion. Typically these classes cover philosophical subfields, such as epistemology, philosophy of science, environmental ethics, and the philosophy of mind. Upper-level seminars are usually focused on a single philosopher or philosophical problem.

The Major

The philosophy major consists of eight courses. These must include Ancient Philosophy, Modern Philosophy, and Logic. They must include at least one additional 200-level course, and two 300-level courses, but the remaining two courses can be from any level. Those majoring in philosophy are encouraged to enroll in the advanced seminar that is offered each spring, and which may be repeated for credit.

The Minor

The minor consists of four courses, including Ancient Philosophy and Modern Philosophy, and two other courses, at least one of which must be at the 200 level. At least three of the courses must be taken at Bowdoin.

Departmental Offerings

There are many routes into philosophy at Bowdoin. The department regularly offers first-year seminars on a variety of philosophical topics. Recent examples include Philosophy and Poetry (examining, among other things, Plato’s conception of poetry); Free Will (an exploration of the notions of freedom, determinism, and moral responsibility); How to Be Good (an introduction to ethics by way of questions about our obligations to relieve the suffering of distant strangers); and Science, Non-science, and Nonsense (an investigation of the nature of scientific knowledge, and of claims about the paranormal). Other introductory courses focus on broader issues. Examples include Moral Problems, Death, and Philosophy of Religion. Still others focus on a historical period.

The Advanced Seminar

Each spring the department offers an advanced seminar open to junior and senior majors and minors. This class is team-taught by two members of the department. Every year we pick a topic of current philosophical interest and read recent books and articles on that topic by two or three leading contemporary philosophers. The authors then visit Bowdoin, each giving a public lecture and joining the seminar for a three-hour class. Recent topics have included Color and Consciousness, Moral Theory, and Freedom and Moral Responsibility. Visiting authors have included Alex Byrne (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Daniel Dennett (Tufts), Shelley Kagan (Yale), Richard Moran (Harvard), Samuel Scheffler (California–Berkeley), and Susan Wolff (University of North Carolina).

Intermediate courses—those with numbers in the 200s—are typically a bit more focused and demanding, though most are still without prerequisites. These classes also tend to be smaller than introductory classes. Many survey contemporary work on one or another philosophical sub-field: Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Law, The Nature of Scientific Thought, Metaphysics, Language and Reality, Epistemology, The Philosophy of Space and Time, and Environmental Ethics. Other intermediate courses look at a particular slice of the history of philosophy. Examples include History of Ethics (focusing on the ethical writings of Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Mill); Philosophy in the Twentieth Century (with the emphasis on British philosophy mid-century); and a course called History, Freedom, and Reason that is
Independent Studies and Honors Projects

Recent honors projects in philosophy include:

- The Meta-Ethics of Simon Blackburn: Taking Morality Seriously on Naturalistic Grounds
- Incommensurability and Untranslatability: Incommensurability in the Works of Thomas Kuhn
- After the Implosion: On How to Read Wittgenstein's Tractus Logico-Philosophicus
- Gödel and Penrose: the Implications of Incompleteness of Arithmetic for Artificial Intelligence
- An Examination of Michael Ruse's Darwinian Approach to Philosophy
- The National Question in Marx's Theory of Human Liberation
- Personal Identity: An Inquiry into the Criteria of Survival
- Reforming Truth: Aristotle's Argument for Empirical Science
- The Nature of Natural Law

Facilities

The Department of Philosophy is housed in the Edward Pols House. Located across the street from Massachusetts Hall, this building is named after a respected member of the Bowdoin faculty. Each spring we also offer a special advanced seminar—Philosophy 399—that is team-taught, and that brings the authors of recent philosophical books to campus to discuss their works.

Faculty

Sarah O'Brien Conly, assistant professor of philosophy, A.B. (Princeton), M.A., Ph.D. (Cornell), specializes in ethics, including metaethics, normative theory, and applied theory. She is also interested in feminism, the history of philosophy, and African philosophy.

Denis J. Corish, professor of philosophy, emeritus, B.Ph., B.A., L.Ph. (Maynooth College, Ireland), M.A. (University College, Dublin), Ph.D. (Boston University), specializes in Greek philosophy; theories of time; and the relations between poetry, philosophy, and science. He has published in both literary and philosophical journals.

Scott Sehon, professor of philosophy, B.A. (Harvard), M.A., Ph.D. (Princeton), specializes in philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and philosophy of language. He also teaches courses in philosophy of religion, philosophy of law, and logic. He has published in philosophical and medical journals, and is the author of Teleological Realism: Mind, Agency and Explanation (MIT Press, 2005).

Lawrence H. Simon, associate professor of philosophy and environmental studies, B.A. (Pennsylvania), B.A. (Oxford), M.A., B.A. (Cambridge), Ph.D. (Boston University), specializes in ethics, environmental ethics, and political philosophy. He has published a number of articles in philosophical journals and encyclopedias and is the editor of Karl Marx: Selected Writings. Professor Simon is also on the faculty of Bowdoin's Environmental Studies Program.

Matthew Stuart, associate professor of philosophy, B.A. (Vermont), M.A., Ph.D. (Cornell), specializes in early modern philosophy. He also teaches courses in metaphysics, epistemology, and applied ethics. He has published in a number of philosophical journals, and is currently writing a book about John Locke's metaphysics.

After Bowdoin

A small number of philosophy majors go on to do graduate work in philosophy. In recent years, graduates have been accepted to doctoral programs in philosophy at the universities of Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Arizona. Some of our majors have gone on to graduate work in other academic fields. In the last several years, Bowdoin philosophy majors have pursued graduate study in English literature, political science, engineering, and divinity. Most of our majors, however, go on to careers outside academia.

The study of philosophy develops many skills that have wide application, including the ability to think logically, to formulate and evaluate arguments, and to write clearly. Quite a number of Bowdoin philosophy majors have used this training to prepare for law school. Recent graduates have gone on to the law schools at Stanford, Yale, and the University of Colorado. One former Bowdoin philosophy major recently clerked for Associate Justice Stephen Breyer of the United States Supreme Court. Others have gone on to careers in medicine, journalism, finance, dentistry, consulting, and secondary school teaching.