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 faculties. 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 major consists of nine courses, which must include three required core courses: Ancient Philosophy (Philosophy 2111), Modern Philosophy (Philosophy 2112), and Logic (Philosophy 2223). Of the remaining six courses, there must be at least one course with a primary focus on epistemology and metaphysics (courses numbered 1040-1049, 1400-1499, 2400-2499, or 3400-3499); and there must be at least one course with a primary focus on value theory (courses numbered 1030-1039, 1300-1399, 2300-2399, or 3300-3399). At least two classes must be from the group numbered in the 3000s.

The Minor

The minor consists of five courses, which must include Philosophy 2111 and 2112, one other course from the group numbered in the 2000s, and one course from the group numbered in the 3000s. The fifth course may be from any level.

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 On the Power and Limit of Persuasion, A Philosopher’s Dozen, Love, and Personal Identity. Other introductory courses focus on broader issues. Examples include Moral Problems, Death, and Philosophy of Religion. Still others focus on a historical period. Ancient Philosophy, which is offered every fall, covers the pre-Socratists, Plato, and Aristotle. Modern Philosophy, which is offered every spring, looks at the methodological and epistemological theories of such seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers as Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant.

Intermediate Courses—those with numbers in the 2000s—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 subfield: Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Law, The Nature of Scientific Thought, Metaphysics, Language and Reality, Epistemology, African Philosophy, Bioethics, 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 about late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German philosophy (Kant, Hegel, and Marx).
Advanced Courses—those with numbers in the 3000s—are small seminars populated mainly by philosophy majors and minors. Frequently these courses are in-depth examinations of a single philosopher or work: Aristotle, Locke's Essay, Hume, Kant, Quine, Ryle and Dennet, Heidegger, and Davidson. Other advanced courses deal with a familiar philosophical theme, but in greater depth. Recent offerings include Free Will and Moral Responsibility, The Origins of Analytic Philosophy, Topics in Feminist Philosophy, Advanced Topics in Environmental Philosophy, and Contemporary Ethical Theory.

Independent Study and Honors

Intermediate and advanced students are encouraged to pursue independent studies in topics of interest that may not be covered by current course offerings. Students doing independent study for credit work closely with a member of the department during the course of a semester and produce a significant piece of writing at the end. Recent topics of independent study projects include Gödel's incompleteness theorem, ethics of patenting genetic information, moral skepticism and evolutionary theory, and neurotheology.

Philosophy majors with a departmental grade point average of 3.3 or better at the end of their junior year are eligible to undertake an honors project in philosophy. Honors students write a project proposal in September, and then carry out a two-semester independent study culminating in an honors thesis.

Independent Studies and Honors Projects

Recent honors projects in philosophy include:
- The Meta-Ethics of Simon Blackburn:Taking Morality Seriously on Naturalistic Grounds
- An Examination of Michael Ruse's Darwinian Approach to Philosophy
- Role Utilitarianism
- Normative Epistemology
- Free Will
- Philosophy of Mathematics
- The Ethics of Patenting Genetic Information
- Moral Skepticism and Evolutionary Theory
- Rule Consequentialism
- Modal Logic
- Neurotheology
- Moral Realism and Moral Relativism

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.

Kristi A. Olson, assistant professor of philosophy, B.A. (Indiana), J.D. (Duke), A.M., Ph.D. (Harvard), specializes in political philosophy and applied ethics. Her courses include the morality of war, philosophical issues of gender and race, and egalitarianism. Her research focuses on distributive justice.

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 universities of Pittsburgh, Chicago, Arizona, and CUNY. Some of our majors have gone on to do graduate work in other academic fields. In the last several years, Bowdoin philosophy majors have pursued graduate study in English literature, political science, public health policy, 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, Columbia, Yale, and the University of Colorado. One former Bowdoin philosophy major 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, and one is playing professional basketball in Israel while pursuing an M.B.A.