

Philosophy undergraduate modules

Module descriptions for the following programmes:

- [BA Philosophy \(/undergraduate/courses/phil/philosophy.aspx\)](/undergraduate/courses/phil/philosophy.aspx)
- [BA Philosophy of Religion and Ethics \(/undergraduate/courses/phil/philosophy-religion-ethics.aspx\)](/undergraduate/courses/phil/philosophy-religion-ethics.aspx)
- [BA Politics, Philosophy and Religion \(/undergraduate/courses/phil/philosophy-modules.aspx\)](/undergraduate/courses/phil/philosophy-modules.aspx)

First year

Problems of Philosophy

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This module introduces a range of key philosophical problems most of which practically everyone with a philosophical temperament has puzzled over before:

- Scepticism. (how can I know anything at all about the world?)
- Free will. (how can I think and act freely, if all my thoughts and actions are determined by the laws that govern the Universe?)
- The existence of God. (does S/He exist?)
- Realism vs antirealism. (to what extent is reality distinct from how it appears?)
- The mind/body problem. (is the mind just the brain?)
- Personal identity. (what is it about you that makes you the same person as you were years ago?)
- Utilitarianism vs. Deontology. (are actions morally right and wrong 'in themselves', or are they so just because of the effects they have on people's happiness etc?)
- Ethical obligation. (do we have obligations to others?)
- Moral relativism. (Are moral values absolute or do they vary from one culture/person to others?)

The requirements of justice. (Who should have what?)

Philosophy of Science: Methods, Ethics, and the Limits of Science

Science has shaped every aspect of the modern world, through technological innovation and through an increased understanding of ourselves and of our environment. This module is an introduction to the philosophical issues surrounding science.

Reasoning

Modern life bombards us with information meant to convince. Unfortunately a great deal of it is what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt calls 'bullsh*t'. To a rough first approximation, bullsh*t is information meant to sway both opinion and action which is put forward independently of its relation to reality or evidence. This module investigates the nature of bullsh*t. And the aim is two-fold: to increase your capacity to spot bullsh*t and its propagators, but to develop intellectual tools useful in counteracting bullsh*t: avoiding it in your own work, and identifying it in the arguments of others.

Ethics: How Should We Live?

This module is an introductory course on moral philosophy. It will introduce some of the most important views and debates in moral philosophy, focusing on normative ethics and ethical theories. The module addresses the basic questions of moral philosophy, for example:

- How should we live?
- Which actions are right and wrong?
- What makes actions good or bad?
- What is a good life?
- What kind of a person should I be?

Epistemology: What and How do We Know?

Epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge. Topics to be covered include: the definition of knowledge; scepticism; internalism vs. externalism and justification; coherentism vs. foundationalism and justification; perception; the problem of induction.

Philosophical Traditions

Departments of Philosophy within Britain tend to fall within the 'analytic tradition', exclusively examining the views of Western philosophers. This module breaks with tradition and gives an introduction to alternative views (which we continue to examine in later years) and giving students a chance to get a taste for different – sometimes less conventional – approaches.

Political Philosophy: Can Power be Legitimate?

This module introduces some of the fundamental issues of Western Political Philosophy. In particular, it will discuss the nature of political authority and obligation, the role and function of the state, and the purposes and justification of government. This will pave the way for a discussion of what is arguably the central question of political philosophy: 'Why should I obey the state?' The module will be taught through an examination of four of the key texts of Western political thought.

Moral Problems: An Introduction to Applied Ethics

Fundamental ethical disagreements in our society just do not seem to go away. These disagreements often concern matters of life and death and in many cases they lead to intense and emotional debates and sometimes even to violence. This module (in applied ethics) explores whether philosophy can offer us tools to make progress in debates about some of the most interesting ethical questions today. The topics covered include terrorism, treatment of animals, euthanasia, immigration and affirmative action.

Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy of religion is the rigorous philosophical study of religious beliefs, doctrines and arguments. In this module we will discuss such central questions in the field as:

- Are there successful arguments for the existence of God?
- Are there successful arguments against the existence of God?
- What attributes does/should God have?
- Is it rational to believe in God without evidence?
- Are religious doctrines coherent?
- Is there life after death?
- Is religion compatible with science?
- Can there be miracles?

Second year

Speaking of Things

When you speak, write or think, your sentences or thoughts are *about* particular constituents of the world. This phenomenon is *reference* and this module examines the most important attempts that philosophers have made to explain it. 20th century authors tended to regard this as primarily a question about the relation between certain *words* (nouns) and the objects they pick out, and so the topic forms the most natural introduction you could hope for to philosophy of language (an area you're likely to pursue in Third Year, even if only indirectly through modules in metaphysics, meta-ethics, etc.). But we also refer to objects in *thought*, so reference is an issue for the philosophy of mind (and further, to epistemology, meta-ethics, etc.) as well as one for philosophy of language.

Elements of Logic and Metaphysics

The aim of the module is to introduce students to some of the basic concepts of philosophical logic and metaphysics, and to begin to explore relationships between these concepts in a rigorous way. We shall begin by looking at the notion of logical consequence, and the related notions of logical possibility and logical necessity. This will lead us to investigate other notions of necessity, notably that of metaphysical necessity, and to trace relations between the various notions of necessity and other central philosophical concepts, such as knowability a priori. That in turn will lead us to investigate the closely linked notions of identity, essence, substance and existence. We shall also consider whether there is any sense in which a cause necessitates its effect; this will involve distinguishing between, and then analysing, different types of causal statement. If time permits, the module will also include a brief introduction to philosophical theories of truth. By the end of the module, students should have an understanding of the central concepts of, and of some basic theories in, philosophical logic and metaphysics which can underpin more advanced modules in these areas.

Feminist Philosophy

This module addresses some of the key debates in feminist philosophy. It begins with a general overview of feminism, of the agenda and interests that appear to mark out feminist philosophy in general, and of the breadth and diversity of feminist thought. The course may cover feminist approaches to, among other things, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, ethics, political philosophy, and applied issues.

The Ethics and Politics of Climate Change

Climate Change is one of the greatest ethical challenges faced by humans today. Most of the issues surrounding climate change are also highly controversial. This module will begin with a brief introduction to the most up-to-date science and economics of climate change. We will then explore the following sorts of ethical and political questions raised by climate change:

- What should we do as individuals about climate change?
- What should governments do?
- How should we react to uncertainty and controversy about the future course of climate change?
- Who should compensate the victims of climate change?

Logic: Its Limits and Scope

Is there any way to make a mathematics of reasoning? If so, what would it look like? What would be its scope, and what would be its limits? One set of questions concern the extent to which we can adequately represent the subtleties of natural language reasoning in a regimented, mathematical language. Another is whether we can make a system which gives all and only the right results. We will see that we can accomplish much of what we would hope to, but not all of it.

Experience and Reason: Early Modern Philosophy

This module examines the resurgence of philosophical theorizing and debate which took place in Europe in the 1600s and 1700s, alongside the 'scientific revolution'. It focuses on philosophers from the 'Early Modern' period broadly construed, including Descartes, Berkeley, Leibniz, Locke, Hume and Kant as well as a range of lesser-known figures. We will examine their views on a range of topics in metaphysics and epistemology, introducing the main themes of the era – particularly those that shaped the landscape of contemporary philosophy. These themes will include:

- Scientific developments and their impact on philosophy.
- Rationalism and empiricism.

- Perception and the external world.
- The nature of substances, essence and modality.
- Personal identity and the self.
- Attitudes to God and religion.

The Ethics of Killing

One of the Ten Commandments is 'Thou shall not kill'. But the Bible doesn't, of course, forbid all killing. And few of us, whether we have religious commitments or not, are strict absolutists about killing (people, in other words, who believe that taking a life is categorically never morally permissible). Indeed, most of us believe, at the very least, that it is permissible to kill a villainous attacker in self-defence to avoid being killed oneself. Someone might say that, while killing is not always wrong, it is always wrong to kill the innocent. But is even this true? What, for instance, of the woman who wants to end her pregnancy, thereby killing her innocent fetus? Or the doctor tending to a terminally ill patient who desperately wants to die, but cannot self-administer the lethal dose of morphine that would end his suffering? Or the pilot sent on a bombing raid to destroy an enemy military target, who knows that, if he completes his mission, nearby civilians will unavoidably be caught in the blast? This module examines when killing is wrong, why it is wrong when it is wrong, and how far these moral judgments can and ought to be taken into account in law and policy-making. Topics on which we are likely to focus include abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide, self-defence, terrorism, and war.

The Mind-Body Problem

This module introduces central issues in contemporary philosophy of mind, focusing on the problem of whether our mental experience, especially its subjective character, can be incorporated into the naturalistic, scientific picture of the world. The first part of the course will survey such philosophical theories of the mind as dualism, behaviourism, the identity theory, and functionalism. The second half of the course will discuss some more specific issues in philosophy of mind and cognitive science: Can we solve the mystery of consciousness? Can the contents of our thoughts depend on external factors about which we do not have authoritative knowledge? What is the nature of intentionality? Can computers think?

Sex, Ethics and Philosophy

This module covers issues in the Philosophy and Ethics of sex, including some of: liberal versus 'traditional' understandings of the function of sex; the harm principle; consent and competence to give it; what laws the state should/may impose relating to sex; the permissibility of contraception, homosexuality, pornography and prostitution. The module employs the topic of sex as a route into fundamental issues in ethics and philosophy concerning liberalism, the law, the nature of ethics and related issues.

History of Analytic Philosophy

The dominant philosophical tradition in the English-speaking world, including here in Birmingham, is the analytic tradition. The tradition grew out of attempts to understand the nature of logic and mathematics by thinkers such as Frege and Russell. This led to the development of powerful new logical techniques (now taught in first-year logic) that were subsequently brought to bear more widely, in the study of knowledge, language, science, the mind and morality. This module examines some moments in the development of this tradition, telling the story of the birth of analytical philosophy, through to the rise and fall of logical positivism. We will cover such thinkers as:

- Frege (on language: concept and object, sense and reference)
- Russell (on judgment, logical analysis, descriptions and truth)
- Wittgenstein (on logical atomism)
- Carnap and Ayer (on logical positivism)
- Quine (on analyticity, truth by convention, and necessity)

Final year

Philosophical Project

This module allows you to conduct independent research into and write on a particular philosophical issue of your choice, with assistance from a project supervisor with expertise in your chosen topic.

Virtue Ethics

This module will focus on one approach to normative ethics: virtue ethics. The module will introduce students to criticisms of other major forms of normative theory, specifically deontology and utilitarianism.

Minds, Brains and Computers

Philosophy of cognitive science sits at the intersection of different areas of philosophy and various sciences; as a result it is thoroughly interdisciplinary in character. In this module, we will consider foundational topics in the philosophy of psychology and cognitive science. First we will focus on the central idea of modelling the mind as an information-processing machine; a computer. Topics discussed include some of the following:

- The computational theory of mind
- Connectionism (a rival to the computational theory)
- Fodor's language of thought hypothesis
- The debate about whether or not the mind consists of modular sub-systems

The Puzzle of Existence

Why is there something rather than nothing? This course surveys contemporary philosophical attempts to address what William James dubbed 'the darkest question in all philosophy', encountering topics such as explanation, modality, and the relationship between science and philosophy along the way. More specific questions posed by course readings include: Could there be a complete explanation of absolutely everything? Must every fact have a non-circular explanation? Can an 'ultimate' explanation be 'naturalistic'? Could there have been nothing concrete? Might laws of nature necessitate (without causing) the existence of some contingent beings? Is 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' a bad question?

Prejudice, Race and Gender

We take ourselves to be rational agents, going about in the world in a fairly rational manner. Even if we don't always end up doing so, we assume that acting and judging rationally is within our reach if we try to do so. However, we also commonly recognise that our judgements and actions are sometimes prejudiced in various ways. This module is an investigation into the different faces of prejudice, its bearing on our conception of ourselves as rational agents, and its ethical and political implications. The guiding questions are whether the existence of prejudice undermines our capacity for rational judgement and action in significant ways, and what we might be morally required to do to address any shortcomings.

Global Bioethics

This course introduces students to the increasing number of dilemmas in bioethics that cross national boundaries and transcend domestic regulation. Bioethical dilemmas, whether arising from scientific and technological developments or from the research practices of pharmaceutical companies, raise issues which cannot be effectively addressed at national or regional levels. Bioethics clearly calls for global solutions to what are global dilemmas and students will be introduced to some of the key bioethical issues which arise in the contemporary global context.

Experience and Reason: Topics in Epistemology

This module will concern contemporary issues in Epistemology. These include: the nature of epistemic justification (the internalism / externalism debate, the debates between foundationalists and coherentists), the analysis of knowledge, the role of contextual considerations in dealing with scepticism, social epistemology, virtue epistemology, a priori knowledge, epistemic naturalism.

Philosophy of Mathematics

After a brief look at the views of Kant and Mill, we shall focus for three weeks at least on Gottlob Frege's Foundations of Arithmetic. In this seminal work, a rigorous account of the nature of number was put forward for the first time, and we shall compare Frege's account with that of his contemporary, Richard Dedekind. If time permits, we shall also examine the controversy between Frege and Hilbert over the nature of geometry.

In the second half of the semester, we shall move on to examine challenges to Frege's approach by Russell, Brouwer, Weyl and Wittgenstein. We shall also look at Gödel's incompleteness theorems and the challenges they pose for the philosophy of mathematics. If time permits, we shall also look at more recent controversies in the foundations of set theory.

Philosophy of Language

In this course we will explore the nature of meaning, truth, and reference. We will develop and consider the philosophical import of a formal system for deriving certain aspects of the meanings of sentences about the way things are and ways things might be or might have been. Particular attention will be given to contemporary work in linguistic semantics on proper names, definite descriptions, quantifiers, attitude verbs, and modals.

Being Good and Doing Right

What is the good life? What moral requirements are there on us? Should we aim to do whatever our moral duty is, or should we aim to be good people? Questions like these are the subject-matter of moral theory. This module will examine issues found in recent work in moral theory, including some of the following:

- Should we think that the consequences of our actions are all that matters to the morality of those actions?
- If this view (consequentialism) is true, what form does the best version of consequentialism take?
- Is there a contemporary version of Kantianism that is a more plausible moral theory?
- Are there good objections to both consequentialist and Kantian theories, such as the objection that someone who lived the way those theories require would not be a good person, or would not have a good life?
- Can a Kantian or a Consequentialist be a friend?
- What philosophical account can we give of friendship and love, and how might these relate to ethics?

What there is: Issues in Ontology

The focus of the course will be on contemporary ontology. The issues that will be covered include:

- Methodology: How do we determine what things exist? How do we weigh up different theories when they say that different things exist? Is there a difference between what is the case and what is fundamentally the case?
- Metaphysics of mathematics: Are there numbers? If there aren't, how is mathematics to be carried out?
- Modality: We often talk not only about what is, in fact, the case, but also about how things must be or might have been; we think and speak 'modally', in terms of necessity and possibility. How are we to understand this talk, and what metaphysical commitments does it bring with it?
- Persistence and material constitution: The question of what circumstances small objects (like atoms) come to compose big objects (such as cars, tables, mountains etc.) is a popular contemporary topic. It connects to issues of whether or not objects are extended in time and have 'temporal parts'.
- Philosophy of Space and Time: Does spacetime exist? Do objects from other times exist?

Topics in Philosophy of Religion

This module is split into four parts:

1. Is there a God? (We'll examine contemporary arguments in natural theology such as up-to-date versions of the cosmological and teleological argument; as well as the problem of evil);
2. Can you be justified in believing that there's a God (examining, e.g., Flew's presumption of atheism, contemporary theories from Plantinga concerning theistic belief and Pascal's Wager);
3. What would the world be like if there were a God (examining God's alleged attributes, e.g. omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence etc., as well as whether He is in time or not; as well as examining whether we could make sense of God interacting with the world, say through miracles or petitionary prayer);
4. What would the world be like if the God were the God of Christianity (can we make sense of Christian views about the afterlife? does it make any sense to say there's only one God but three Divine People – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? does it make sense to say Jesus is God? does sin, original sin, or Jesus dying on the Cross for our sins, make any sense?)

Nietzsche

This module explores Nietzsche's views on naturalism and normativity. We will consider questions like: Are all properties natural properties? Are the methods of the sciences privileged? Should philosophical inquiry be continuous with the sciences, and, if so, how? Are there any facts about what is morally right or wrong, or evaluatively good or bad? What are the origins of our normative views? How should our answer to this question affect what norms and values we should accept?

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