# Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) at Hertford College

*Sept 2026 Open Day – Meeting in Baring Room, Hertford College: 13:15*

Welcome to Hertford College! This document tells you a lot about PPE at Hertford, and we hope also that you will also find our website resources helpful. Please feel free to email us if you have further questions either during the Open Days or subsequently.

NOTE: Don't be put off by the length of this handout, which aims to answer all the main questions that we get asked at Open Days. It suggests preparatory reading (because prospective students often ask for that), but *most of our applicants won't have read anything in our reading lists, and that doesn't matter*!

Hertford College makes nine offers per year in PPE (including one reserve "open offer"), and each year-group of PPEists will get to know each other, and us tutors, very well over the three years of the PPE degree. Some of the current PPEists are likely to be available to chat during the Open Days, so you can get a feel for the place from them. Hertford has a relaxed and unstuffy character, socially very mixed, but is high performing academically (e.g. in PPE and other Philosophy-related subjects, anything less than a 2:1 is very rare, and over the last decade or so our students have won twelve University prizes, including two "Gibbs Prizes" for best performance in PPE across the University). Hertford is especially active in PPE, thanks in part to our recent Principals, Will Hutton and Tom Fletcher, who have built up and maintained a strong tradition of related activities, including "Hertford Conversations" – jointly organised with students – that include debate, discussion, and dinner/socialising with prominent politicians, economists, and journalists.

Details about the application process, including school qualifications, the PPE Test, and interviews are given at the University PPE site: https://www.ppe.ox.ac.uk/applying-ppe. You may apply for PPE having done any combination of subjects at school; *it is not necessary to have studied Philosophy, Politics or Economics previously*. A strong background in Mathematics, while not a prerequisite, is very useful and *we strongly urge applicants without A-level Mathematics (or equivalent) to consider taking AS Mathematics* (e.g. in your final year at school), to ensure that you maintain those skills.

All candidates are required to *register for*, *book a date for*, and *take*, the **Test of Academic Reasoning for Admissions** (**TARA**), at a Test Centre. There are strict deadlines for registering and booking – see https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/guide/admissions-tests for details, and *note that these deadlines fall in September, well before your application to Oxford is due*. Each of the first two sections of this test lasts 40 minutes and includes 22 multiple choice questions designed to assess your ability in critical thinking and problem solving respectively. The third section, also 40 minutes, requires you to write a short essay on one of three specified topics. More details, including specimen papers and preparation advice, can be found through the website above.

Usually each candidate who comes to interview at Hertford will have three interviews, one in each subject, each lasting approximately 20 minutes, and normally preceded by some form of "pre-interview exercise" that provides material to discuss so as to make the most of the limited time. Your interviewers will want to find out if you can think clearly and analytically (and, in the case of Economics, mathematically). They are less concerned with what you know than with your academic potential, your level of interest, and the way in which you think about issues and are able to discuss them critically.

The following pages of this handout aim to give you more detailed guidance on PPE at Hertford, and on preparation for application and interview, including reading suggestions that we hope you will find enjoyable as well as useful.

# Philosophy at Hertford College

Philosophy plays a role in no fewer than eight degree programmes at Oxford, which is probably the world's most important centre for the subject. Hertford College welcomes applications in four of these programmes, with *PPE* being by far the largest (typically nine offers aiming for eight places per year), followed by *Computer Science & Philosophy* (five offers aiming for four places), *Physics & Philosophy* and *Philosophy & Modern Languages* (in both of which we admit up to two places per year).

## *Philosophy Teaching*

Most teaching in Philosophy at Oxford takes the form of lectures (which are organised centrally by the Philosophy Faculty) or tutorials (which are organised within the College, but often involve specialist tutors from other colleges). The tutorials and lectures are complementary, but their scheduling may depend on your choice of courses (so you might study a course through lectures in one term and tutorials the next). In the first year these are more coordinated, so for example in your very first term you will study a mixture of Logic, General Philosophy and Ethics in both lectures and tutorials. If you'd like to get a flavour of the General Philosophy course, you might want to look at Peter Millican's online recordings at http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/general-philosophy-2018. Peter has been Tutor in Philosophy at Hertford College since 2005, and gave the General Philosophy lectures from 2006 until 2018 inclusive.

Lectures provide a general understanding of an area, and the chance to hear a personal perspective from someone at Oxford who is likely to be a world expert and author of books and research papers on the subject. Tutorials get you thinking *for yourself* at a much deeper level, in response to your own reading (for which recommendations are provided, though you are welcome to seek out more for yourself). Usually you will be expected to write an essay which is submitted in advance and then discussed – often together with another student's work – at the tutorial (usually 1 or 1½ hours). Most tutorials are paired, and most students seem to prefer this, but we are always happy to give individual tutorials to students who want to work more intensively, or to explore in different directions. Hertford students who really get the Philosophy "bug" have sometimes chosen individual tutorials for specialist courses in their upper years, often leading to keen and extended discussions!

For PPE, the Philosophy courses available are extremely flexible, starting with a first year which gives a broad background through introductions to "General Philosophy" (theory of knowledge and metaphysics, and giving historical background to current debates), "Moral Philosophy" (taught largely by reference to critical study of John Stuart Mill's famous book *Utilitarianism*), and "Logic" (covering some essential terminology and methods). In the upper years, students can either continue with all three of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, or (more commonly) specialise in two of them. Those who specialise in Philosophy have a very wide choice, thanks to the breadth of the Philosophy Faculty. They can choose between three and five Philosophy courses (out of the eight they take in PPE as a whole) from a list of around 25 which ranges over the entire discipline.

## *What Makes Oxford Special*

The workload at Oxford is demanding, both for students and tutors. In PPE you will typically be expected to do the equivalent of 36 essays a year (three every two weeks of term), and the tutorials will give you swift detailed feedback on every one of them. This is far more work, and vastly more feedback, than you would get at almost any other university. So if you love learning and thinking, then Oxford is a wonderful place to be. Oxford is also very unusual (perhaps unique) in the extent to which teaching is done by *senior academics*: most Philosophy tutorials are given by established Faculty members, who will generally be world-leading researchers. At Oxford a small proportion of your teaching may done by Philosophy postgraduate students (most likely in non-core areas), but these are all extremely good – likely professors of the future – and are allowed to take on undergraduate tutoring only after they are well on the way to achieving their doctorate.

*The Hertford College Experience*

Being at Hertford combines a friendly and relaxed environment (for which the College is well known) with all the opportunities of Oxford University. Here you will quickly get to know most of the other students in your year through our Fresher's events, but also, you will soon meet those studying Philosophy in the upper years (and as postgraduates) through joint events, including discussion meetings and dinners with speakers. Also once a year, just before the summer term starts, we have a Cotswold Retreat (for Philosophy-related subjects), staying at holiday cottages in the lovely countryside for three nights, eating, drinking, walking, chatting, discussing and playing games. Old members often remember these Retreats as a prominent highlight of their time at Oxford, where they have widened and strengthened their friendship groups, with these often enduring into the future. The Retreat sadly had to pause during the Covid pandemic, but it has since been revived, with active participation of old members which has further enriched it (e.g. enabling students to learn from their experiences).

The senior member of the Hertford Philosophy team is Peter Millican, Gilbert Ryle Fellow and Professor of Philosophy. He has published in artificial intelligence, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of religion, but most of all on topics related to David Hume, generally reckoned the greatest ever English-speaking philosopher (see www.davidhume.org/papers/millican.html for these publications, and www.millican.org/research.htm for a selection in other areas). Peter teaches General Philosophy to first-years, and for upper-year students, he tutors Early Modern Philosophy, Knowledge and Reality, Philosophy of Logic and Language, and Philosophy of Religion. A fair amount of his teaching is done for students of other colleges, as a "swap" arrangement so that Hertford students are able in return to study their preferred papers with many of the world's top experts.

Dr Carissa Véliz recently joined the College as our second Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy, teaching courses in Ethics, and especially AI and Data Ethics, which is her main research focus (see https://philpeople.org/profiles/carissa-veliz). Her Penguin book *Privacy is Power* came out in 2020, making a huge impact (so lots of interviews and discussions with her can be found on the web). She is also the editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Digital Ethics* (2021), and has more recently published two further books, *The Ethics of Privacy and Surveillance* (2024) and *Prophecy* (2026).

Dr Nick Tasker, Lecturer in Philosophy, teaches General Philosophy, the first year Logic courses (for both PPE and CS&P etc.), and core upper-year courses in Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Philosophy of Language. His research has a particular focus on language and linguistics in relation to the social world, aiming to explain how language can be both a biological and a cultural phenomenon.

Dr Emma Curran, Lecturer in Ethics, teaching courses in Ethics, Practical Ethics, and the Ethics of AI and Digital Technology. Her research primarily focuses on the ethics of helping and harming, as well as the ethics of risk. She also publishes in medical ethics, with work on topics including vaccination, abortion, and bioweapons (see https://www.emmajcurran.co.uk/research).

To find out more about all of our team, go to "Our People" on the Hertford College website (https://www.hertford.ox.ac.uk/our-people) and select "Philosophy" from the subject dropdown menu.

Although College teaching teams are small (giving a friendly environment in which your tutors will know you well through the years, and you them), there is plenty of access to tutors in other colleges, through college "swaps" which ensure that you are taught by experts on every single course. All of the first year PPE Philosophy teaching is done within College, as are the core second-year courses in Early Modern Philosophy, Knowledge and Reality, and Ethics. Once you get to the upper years, however, it's likely that most of your other Philosophy courses will be taught by tutors in different colleges, and you are encouraged to express your own preferences (if, for example, you find a set of lectures particularly inspiring, we can try to arrange for you to be tutored by that lecturer). The College is firmly committed to placing our students with the best people, and generally very successful in doing so (exploiting our own reputation as committed teachers and desirable "swaps").

## *Discovering Philosophy – Books*

Many students come to PPE without a very clear idea of what Philosophy is, so don't worry if you're in this position! Perhaps the best way into the subject is to spend time thinking for yourself about philosophical problems in the company of books like those below. Law's book is particularly good as an introduction, offering short (but substantial) chapters on 25 varied topics:

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| Stephen Law | *The Philosophy Gym* (Headline, 2004) |
| Simon Blackburn | *Think* (Oxford, 2001) |
| Nigel Warburton | *Philosophy: The Basics* (Routledge, 1992) |
| Thomas Nagel | *What Does It All Mean?* (Oxford, 1987) |
| Edward Craig | *Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002) |

For a more historical perspective, here are two classics from the British Empiricist tradition:

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| David Hume | *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), edited by Peter Millican, Oxford World's Classics, 2007 |
| Bertrand Russell | *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1912) |

Hume's *Enquiry* features in the *General Philosophy* course, with very interesting things to say on knowledge, scepticism, free will, and God. My introduction sets Hume in historical context, so you can learn a lot about the early modern period when so many classic problems were framed.

On the ethical side, the following are highly recommended. Blackburn gives an excellent overview, Edmonds introduces the subject through discussion of the notorious "Trolley Problem", while Singer provides a wide range of readings from Plato to the modern world.

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| Simon Blackburn | *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2001) |
| David Edmonds | *Would You Kill the Fat Man?* (Princeton, 2015) |
| Peter Singer | *Ethics* (Oxford Readers, 1994) |

## *Discovering Philosophy – Podcasts*

There are a number of excellent podcasts on Philosophy, and here are some of them:

*Philosophy Bites*: from Nigel Warburton & David Edmonds, features an extensive series of discussions with leading philosophers, covering a huge range of topics

*In Our Time*: Melvyn Bragg's classic BBC Radio 4 series, has many episodes on philosophical themes

*Philosophy 24/7*: David Edmonds interviews leading philosophers about highly relevant moral issues

*The Public Philosopher*: Michael Sandel (Princeton) discusses contemporary moral problems

*Philosophy: The Classics*: Nigel Warburton reads from his book which introduces 27 key historical texts

*Philosophy and Science of Human Nature*: Tamar Gendler (Yale) relates classic philosophical writings to contemporary work in cognitive science

*Hi Phi Nation*: Barry Lam finds philosophical ideas, tensions and unquestioned assumptions in news stories

You might also be interested in Peter Millican's *Futuremakers* podcast, discussing key issues about the future (in the context of AI and environmental concerns etc.) with leading Oxford researchers.

We hope you decide to apply to Hertford College, and look forward to potentially meeting you online when interviews take place in December.

Peter Millican, Carissa Véliz, Nick Tasker, and Emma Curran

# Politics at Hertford College

Politics is a tremendously rewarding subject to study: on past experience, once PPEists start studying Politics, they tend not to stop! It is offered not only as part of PPE, but also History and Politics – the college welcomes applications in both subjects, and typically admits nine PPE applicants (including one "open offer"), and also a handful of History joint honours applicants, which can include Politics.

The Politics team at Hertford consists of Dr Rad Zubek, who specialises on the "empirical" side, and Dr Ian Carroll on the "theory" side. Rad is Fellow in Politics and Associate Professor of European Politics, with a PhD from the London School of Economics. His main research interests are coalition politics, politics of law-making, politics of institutional choice, minority governments, electoral pledge fulfilment, institutional measurement, and computational methods in political science. He has published in the *American Political Science Review*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly, European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, and in various edited volumes. He has also worked as a consultant to private and public organizations including Ernst & Young, OECD-SIGMA and the Office of the Polish Human Rights Commissioner. Rad teaches Analysis of Democratic Institutions to PPE first years, and upper-year courses with a focus on European politics and comparative government.

Dr Ian Carroll, our Lecturer in Political Theory, teaches the Introduction to the Theory of Politics paper for first years, and for upper years is available to teach the core Theory of Politics paper, as well as option papers in the history of political thought (Plato to Rousseau) and contemporary political theory (the Advanced Paper in Theories of Justice). Ian's doctoral research was on recent work in social contract theory. His other current interests include the nature and measurement of coercion, political liberalism, and political theory of money and monetary policy.

Rad and Ian between them teach the first year Politics course to Hertford students, but upper-year teaching – as remarked in the Philosophy section – will be taught by specialists who might be in any college (and we are very willing to do our best to meet student requests if they are keen to have specific tutors). One component of the first-year course is Comparative Politics, focusing mainly on the operation of democratic institutions within a comparative perspective. Typically, the course might start with a discussion of various theoretical claims, for example "Emerging democracies are more likely to succeed if they are parliamentary rather than presidential", or "Majoritarian voting systems tend to lead to two dominant parties". Then we consider how well these apply to, and explain, the politics of a wide range of democracies.

The other component of the first year Politics course is Political Theory. Students look at some key texts by Locke, Rousseau, and Mill, as well as studying some contemporary topics, such as rights ("Could you ever have a right to do wrong?"), liberty ("Could a totalitarian state protect and promote its citizens' liberty?"), and freedom of expression ("Where's the harm in hate speech?").

In the second and third years, Politics students take two core papers out of five (International Relations, Political Sociology, Comparative Government, Political Theory, and 20th Century British Politics), and there is a vast array of around 30 subjects, ranging from the Politics of Sub-Saharan Africa, through Statistical Methods, to Marxism, to International Relations during the Cold War. Amongst the most popular choices at Hertford have been Latin American Politics, West European Politics and Classical Political Thought, but students are encouraged to follow their own interests.

Teaching is delivered in tutorials, usually in pairs though sometimes individually. Students are encouraged to collaborate outside tutorials, and lectures organised by the Faculty are also an important part of the course. There are numerous political societies in Oxford: political parties have their own student organisations, there is the Oxford Union society, which hosts debates and speaker meetings,

and the European Affairs Society – to name but a few! Hertford College also has its own Politics Society. Taking advantage of these sorts of talks and discussions can greatly enrich your study of the subject.

So what are tutors looking for in potential Politics students? First, a keen interest in the subject! We would expect students to be interested in current affairs – not just political trivia, but also some of the big questions underlying contemporary politics. Secondly, strong analytical skills are important: successful Politics students often enjoy a good argument, getting to the heart of issues, unpacking the case advanced by others and the assumptions on which it rests. Although quite a few students have done History A-level (and a handful have studied Politics before), for the Politics course this is by no means essential, and there are no compulsory subjects.

We will be looking, above all, for interest and potential at interview – an ability to think seriously about problems in understanding the world. There is no compulsory reading for the interview, although it would help to think about contemporary political debates. To get a flavour of the subject, you might find it handy to dip into books like:

Jonathan Wolff: *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (OUP, 2006)

William Roberts Clark, Matthew R. Golder, and Sona N. Golder: *Principles of Comparative Politics* (CQ Press, 2nd edition, 2012)

Rad Zubek and Ian Carroll

# Economics at Hertford College

Hertford College welcomes applications in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) and Economics and Management (E&M). We typically admit nine PPE applicants (including one “open offer”) and eight Economics and Management applicants. This gives us one of the largest cohorts studying economics in the university – a big advantage to choosing Hertford, as students spend far more time with their peers than they do with tutors.

Economics is a subject that gives students the tools to analyse a broad set of issues, ranging from the decisions of the UK’s Monetary Policy Committee, the high growth rates of China and India, financial crises, environmental policies, and the London congestion charge, to illegal downloading of music from the Internet. An appreciation of Economics and the general workings of the economy have become increasingly necessary to make sense of governmental policy-making, the conduct of businesses and the enormous changes in economic systems occurring throughout the world. Besides being highly valued by potential employers, our PPE students find Economics very rewarding, especially when they are able to analyse issues, interpret articles and examine human behaviour through the lens of economic theory.

Economics at Hertford is led by our two Fellows in Economics, Professors Elizabeth Baldwin (teaching Microeconomics) and Federica Romei (teaching Macroeconomics). Other first and second year courses are taught in college by our Economics Lecturers Dr Richard Povey (Macroeconomics and Microeconomics) and Talav Bhimnathwala (Quantitative Economics), while third year modules are organised by the Faculty, with tutors from all the colleges teaching in their research specialisms.

Elizabeth works in environmental economics: in recent work, she considers the importance of irreversibility of investment and endogenous technical change in determining the timing of policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. She also has more general theoretical work in microeconomics, on the "shape" of preferences between indivisible goods; this has surprising applications, for example in efficiently allocating subsidies for turtle dove conservation. Federica is interested in how fiscal and monetary policy can counteract adverse events such as the global financial crisis or the current Covid-19 pandemic. Richard's primary research is on the consequences of altruistic motivation in economic theory. He uses game theoretic modelling techniques and social welfare analysis to show that altruism can have negative as well as positive effects, and hence that there may exist a “socially optimal level of altruism” for society as a whole. He is also interested in evolutionary game theory and optimal taxation theory. Judith focuses on theoretical Econometrics, including time series analysis and regressions.

In their first year, PPE students take the Introduction to Economics course, with the relevant tutorials taking place in Michaelmas Term (October to December) and Hilary Term (January to March). The terms have a length of 8 weeks, so there are 16 Economics tutorials altogether in the first year.

Hertford College is committed to offering in-house tutorials for all first and second year courses, with students generally taught in groups of 2-3, and some additional class work in larger groups. Tutorials in Introduction to Economics are taught alongside weekly lectures, which form an important part of the introductory course and inform tutorial teaching. The lectures are for all students across Oxford University taking the Introduction to Economics course, and so they are held in large lecture theatres. Some of the lectures in the first term of the first year in microeconomics are given by Elizabeth. She and Federica also lecture 3rd year optional courses, while other lecturers come from across the university.

University-level Economics makes use of mathematical techniques (e.g. optimisation involving differentiation; use of partial derivatives etc.) that are taught alongside Microeconomics. While A-level Mathematics is not a prerequisite for application, it will certainly make your first year much easier if you have this qualification. For those without A-level Mathematics, we urge you to consider taking the AS at least. In the first term we will have a weekly maths class in addition to the tutorials, to consolidate the

skills students need for the rest of the degree, which go a little beyond A-level in some respects; those without A-level maths should be able to catch up via these classes but will have to work harder.

Some applicants voice concerns over not having done A-level Economics. But Economics is taught rather differently at University, so while those with A-level Economics may have a small initial advantage (through a familiarity with some Economics concepts and terminology), this is only short-lived. Elizabeth, who teaches in the first term, cannot generally tell which students do and do not have the A-level! However it is not a bad idea to read a popular introduction to economics, such as the *Rough Guide* mentioned below, in the summer before university.

In the second year, four courses are available, in microeconomics, macroeconomics, quantitative methods and economic history. Economics students have a free choice among these, but should be aware that the first three of these also play a role in preparing students for the third year. In that third year there are 12+ courses available, with topics ranging through Behavioural and Experimental Economics, International Economics, Economics of Industry, Money and Banking, Public Economics, Economics of the Environment, and Labour Economics and Inequality.

Applicants are naturally anxious to prepare as well as possible for their Oxford interviews. But we are not so much interested in the Economics you have been taught at school, but your powers of reasoning and your ability to think critically and discuss issues. So your best preparation is really a good night's sleep! We will set you some puzzles, and also look at your ability to reason with mathematics. Your interviewers will be aware of the fact that you may not have A-level Mathematics or A-level Economics, and the sorts of questions you will be asked will take this on board.

Showing a keen interest in Economics is obviously also important. We would expect students to be interested in the subject and to have taken the time to read about it, whether by reading *The Economist* regularly, newspapers more generally, or recently published books on the subject. While interviews vary, it is reasonable to expect to be asked whether there is anything you have read that has interested you in particular. Moreover, if your personal statement indicates that you have read a particular book, you may be asked to discuss some aspect of this book during the course of the interview.

Some popular books that can give you a flavour for Economics:


Harford, Tim (2007), *The Undercover Economist*, Little Brown, or any of his other books.

Mell, Andrew and Oliver Walker (2014), *The Rough Guide to Economics*, Rough Guides

Ariely, Dan (2009), *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape Our Decisions*, HarperCollins

Collier, Paul (2008), *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It?*, Oxford University Press

Coyle, Diane (2014), *GDP: A Brief but Affectionate History,* Princeton University Press.

Dilnot, Andrew and Michael Blastland (2007), *The Tiger That Isn't: Seeing Through a World of Numbers,* Profile Books

Heilbroner, Robert (1999), *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times And Ideas Of The Great Economic Thinkers,* Touchstone.

Kay, John (2004), *The Everlasting Lightbulb: How Economics Illuminates the World*, Erasmus Press

Krugman, Paul (1999), *The Accidental Theorist*, Penguin

Landsburg, Steven (1995), *The Armchair Economist*, Free Press

Dixit, Avinash and Barry Nalebuff (1993), *Thinking Strategically*, Norton