Philosophy at Hertford College

(for subjects other than PPE, which has its own handout)

Sept 2026 Open Day *CS&P* *Meeting in Baring Room at 12:30*
PML *Ask for Peter Millican, Nick Tasker or Emma Curran in NB Quad*
PhysPhil *Ask for Peter Millican, Nick Tasker or Emma Curran in NB Quad*

Welcome to Hertford College! This document tells you a lot about Philosophy 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.

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 hope for two places per year). Some of our current students 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 terms of University prizes).

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 and General Philosophy – both in 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!

The Philosophy First Year

In PPE and PML (Philosophy & Modern Languages), the first year course consists of three parts: *General Philosophy* (theory of knowledge and metaphysics, and giving historical background to current debates), *Moral Philosophy* (taught by reference to critical study of John Stuart Mill's famous book *Utilitarianism*), and *Logic* (covering some essential terminology and methods). PPEists are examined on all of this within one three-hour examination (alongside two other three-hour examinations in Politics and Economics respectively), whereas PML have two three-hour examinations in Philosophy, one on General Philosophy, and one combining Moral Philosophy and Logic. Thus PML students need to prepare a broader range of General Philosophy, and receive more teaching accordingly.

In CS&P (Computer Science & Philosophy) and P&P (Physics & Philosophy), the first year course again consists of three parts, though differently weighted. One three-hour exam is on technical material, sharing the initial course with PPE and PML in the first term, and going on to *Philosophical Topics in Logic & Probability* in the second. Their other three-hour exam combines *General Philosophy* with a third more specialist component focusing on a classic contribution to the interface between their two disciplines. Thus CS&P students study Alan Turing's most famous 1936 and 1950 papers which introduced the Turing Machine and the Turing Test respectively (taught by Peter Millican), while P&P students study the correspondence between Samuel Clarke (Isaac Newton's philosophical champion) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (Newton's bitter rival), taught by a specialist from another college.

Upper Years

In the upper years, most PPEists tend to specialise in two of the three subjects, effectively becoming joint honours students (e.g. in Philosophy & Politics or Philosophy & Economics) – but see the separate PPE handout for details. Joint honours in Philosophy follows a broadly similar pattern in the second and third years, giving a wide choice of courses whose weighting is typically evenly split between the two subjects in the second year and then potentially more focused in the third. Courses in Modern Languages, Computer Science, and Physics do not generally carry the same weighting as Philosophy courses (e.g. most Computer Science courses are half the weight of a Philosophy course), but overall, the rules are set up so that over the second and third years combined, you can do:

3-5 split between the two subjects (i.e. THREE courses in Philosophy)

4-4 split between the two subjects (i.e. FOUR courses in Philosophy)

5-3 split between the two subjects (i.e. FIVE courses in Philosophy – not possible in P&P)

There are some constraints on your choices of Philosophy courses, but these make good sense (e.g. it is reasonable to expect that P&Ps will do Intermediate Philosophy of Physics and Philosophy of Science). The Philosophy Faculty is the largest in Britain – possibly the world – and offers around 25 different finals courses ranging over the entire discipline, most of which will be open to you.

PPE is a three-year degree programme, involving eight finals examinations at the end of the third year. PML is four-year programme – with a third year spent abroad – which again is examined for finals entirely at the end. CS&P and P&P are different, for two reasons. First, the examinations in Computer Science and Physics are split between the various years, so that CS&Ps, for example, will face several "core" Computing examinations at the end of the second year and then a mixture of Computing and Philosophy examinations at the end of the third (thus in practice the weighting of their teaching is likely to be slightly skewed in favour of Computing in the second year and in favour of Philosophy in the third, even if they have chosen an even split of modules). Secondly, CS&P and P&P both have the possibility of *an optional fourth year*, which generally allows you to focus exactly where you wish over your two subjects (i.e. anything from no Philosophy at all, to 100% Philosophy). Some students prefer to leave for the job market after three years, but most choose to stay on and take advantage of this opportunity for specialisation and further study.

What Makes Oxford Special

The workload at Oxford is demanding, both for students and tutors. In Humanities disciplines, for example, 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* and *Alan Turing on Computability and Intelligence* to first years, and for upper-year students, he tutors *Early Modern Philosophy*, *Philosophy of Religion*, and some parts of *Knowledge and Reality* and *Philosophy of Logic and Language*. 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. Most of the core Philosophy teaching is done within College (with the exception of the Leibniz/Clarke Correspondence for P&P, which will be taught by a specialist from another 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").

A Brief Word on Admissions

The first – and very important – hurdle is the Admissions/Aptitude Test (TMUA for CS&P; ESAT for P&P; TARA for PPE; PML no longer includes this). This usually takes place in October, but *you have to register and book well in advance*, so make sure you check the relevant website for these crucial dates. Your performance in this Test will largely determine whether you get asked for interview. So if you are thinking of applying, performing well in this should be your primary target until then! If this means neglecting Philosophy a bit, don't worry, because we don't expect applicants to have studied the subject before, so if you are strong at logical thinking, relative ignorance of Philosophy is not a problem. Hence it's fine to postpone any pre-interview reading until after the Test has taken place, but it's a good idea to come along to interview with some idea of topics that you would like to discuss, since we usually allow you to choose one of your own (e.g. if you've mentioned one in your personal statement).

Discovering Philosophy – Books and Podcasts

Many students come to Philosophy without a very clear idea of what it 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:

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)
Simon Blackburn	*Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2001)

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

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.

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 meeting you in December.

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