PHILOSOPHY MAJOR

MAJOR DESCRIPTION

Doing philosophy means reasoning about questions that are of basic importance to the human experience—questions like, What is a good life? What is reality? How are knowledge and understanding possible? What should we believe? What norms should govern our societies, our relationships, and our activities? Philosophers critically analyze ideas and practices that often are assumed without reflection. Wesleyan’s philosophy faculty draws on multiple traditions of inquiry, offering a wide variety of perspectives and methods for addressing these questions.

Three broad categories organize our curriculum: history, value, and mind and reality. Historical courses focus primarily on classical philosophical texts, tracing the path of a particular philosopher’s work, a conversation within a historical period, or a series of related conversations. Courses in the value area engage critically with ethical, political, aesthetic, cultural, or religious practices and norms. Mind and reality courses consider philosophical questions about language, mind, reasoning, knowledge, and the nature of reality. Though each course is associated with one thematic area for organizational purposes, these three kinds of inquiry overlap significantly in practice.

Introductory

| History: PHIL 201-210 | Values: PHIL 211-229 | Mind & Reality: PHIL 230-249 |

Intermediate

| History: PHIL 250-265 | Values: PHIL 266-285 | Mind & Reality: PHIL 286-299 |

Advanced

| History: PHIL 301-330 | Values: PHIL 331-360 | Mind & Reality: PHIL 361-399 |

Our introductory courses (200-249) are intended for both prospective majors and non-majors. (General-Education-only courses, with course numbers below 200, do not count toward the major.)

Intermediate courses (250-300) are generally not appropriate for first-year students, and some have explicit prerequisites. Intermediate-level classes tend to introduce students to a particular area of philosophy or to the discipline’s historical development at a higher level and in more depth than introductory classes.

Advanced courses (301-399) are typically organized as seminars for majors and other students with significant related preparation. In many cases, students participate with a professor in exploring an area of particular relevance to that professor’s research program. Advanced classes may focus on a particular figure in the history of philosophy or on a topic of contemporary importance.

ADMISSION TO THE MAJOR

All students planning to major will submit a major request form. Prospective majors should pay particular attention to the prerequisites for intermediate and advanced courses when planning their schedules. Among other courses, PHIL201, PHIL202, PHIL205, PHIL212 and PHIL231 are required or recommended for a variety of subsequent courses.

Because philosophy ranges over subjects in other disciplines, such as economics, government, mathematics, physics, psychology, and religion, students considering philosophy as a major field are strongly advised to choose a balanced combination of solid liberal arts courses conforming to Wesleyan expectations for generalization.

Students who intend to apply for the social justice track will work with an advisor to submit a concentration proposal by the end of drop/add during their fifth semester.

MAJOR REQUIREMENTS

The philosophy major at Wesleyan offers two tracks: a general philosophy track and a social justice track. Both tracks require at least ten courses, including eight PHIL courses.

- The general philosophy track encourages students to explore a range of issues and approaches from various historical periods and cultural traditions.
- The social justice track emphasizes philosophers’ roles not only as theorists but also as agents of social and political change. Philosophical methods of conceptual and contextual analyses and careful argumentation provide important tools for grappling with real-world injustices. The social justice track supports students in tailoring their philosophical understanding and skills around a particular concern in an area of social justice, such as human rights, equality, social responsibility, environmental justice, etc.

GENERAL TRACK

Distribution

| 1 History |
| 1 Value |
| 1 Mind & Reality |

Concentration

None required

Advanced

| 2 seminars taken as juniors/seniors |

Electives

| 5 electives, including up to 2 non-PHIL |

Thesis Project

Optional

Of the ten courses counted toward the general-track major, at least eight must be offered by the Philosophy Department; as many as two may be given in other departments or programs (e.g., College of Letters, Religion) that are relevant to the student’s program of studies in philosophy and are approved as such by the philosophy faculty.

In addition, students must satisfy the following:

- Distribution requirement. Students must count at least one course from each of the thematic areas (history, values, mind and reality).
- Advanced course requirement. All students must complete at least two advanced philosophy courses, in any philosophical area, during their junior or senior years.
SOCIAL JUSTICE TRACK

Distribution

- 1 History -or- 1 Mind & Reality

Concentration

- 5 - course concentration, including 2 beyond PHIL

Advanced

- 2 seminars taken as juniors/seniors

Electives

- 2 electives from PHIL

Thesis project

Optional

At the core of the social justice major track is a social justice concentration that brings together a student’s specific interests in social justice. Majors will submit proposals for acceptance to the track that will include three philosophy courses and two non-philosophy courses that fit together in a coherent concentration.

BELOW ARE TWO SAMPLE CONCENTRATIONS:

Sample Concentration 1: Human Rights in China

- PHIL272 Human Rights Across Cultures
- PHIL278 Political Philosophy
- PHIL375 Paternalism: Its Problems and Promise
- CEAS271 Political Economy of Developing Countries
- CEAS297 Politics and Political Development in the People’s Republic of China

Sample Concentration 2: Challenging The Carceral State

- PHIL214 Reasoning About Justice
- PHIL250 History of Political Philosophy
- PHIL268 The Ethics of Captivity
- ANTH302 Critical Perspectives on the State
- AMST296 Precarity in America

In addition to the five-course concentration, students must satisfy the following:

- One core course in either history or mind and reality.
- Advanced course requirement. All students must complete at least two advanced philosophy courses, in any area, during both their junior or senior years.
- Two other philosophy electives.

COURSES FOR NON-MAJORS

Courses numbered below 250 are designed to be appropriate as first courses in philosophy. In addition, many of our courses numbered 250 and above are of interest to majors in related departments. (For example, students majoring in neuroscience or psychology often take PHIL286.)

STUDENT LEARNING GOALS

A course of study in philosophy is successful if only three interconnected things can happen:

- First, students are encouraged to practice and refine essential skills. These include close reading, following and evaluating paths of reasoning, participating charitably in dialogue, articulating values and priorities, recognizing alternative ways of framing and addressing a problem, and extending all of these skills into clear written work.
- Second, students become familiar with multiple philosophical approaches, thinkers, traditions, and themes. Good philosophical education does not require any particular canonical content, but students should become adept at recognizing connections across the philosophy curriculum and beyond. In addition to comparing different approaches to the same theme, students should come to appreciate connections among inquiries in broad thematic areas (inquiry into values, inquiry into reality, inquiry into knowledge).
- Third, students come to understand how philosophical inquiry relates to their own perspectives and priorities, including background concerns and academic interests beyond philosophy. No course of study in philosophy is wisely chosen unless it is substantially responsive to the knowledge, experiences, and problems that matter for each student. Working closely with an advisor, each student should find a balance between venturing into multiple philosophical areas and weaving a web of interconnected courses around personally salient priorities.

Graduates will be well prepared not only for graduate work in philosophy, but also for law, medicine, and a range of other academic and professional endeavors.

LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT

Knowledge of foreign languages is particularly useful for the study of philosophy and indispensable for serious study of the history of philosophy. It is therefore strongly recommended that students achieve reading fluency in at least one foreign language.

PRIZES

The Philosophy Department annually awards the Wise Prize for the best paper written in philosophy in the current year. This prize is usually awarded to a senior thesis written in philosophy, but it is not restricted to philosophy theses.

TRANSFER CREDIT

Students who entered Wesleyan as first-year students may count up to two courses taken outside Wesleyan toward the 10 required to fulfill the major. These should be preapproved by the student’s advisor. Under special circumstances, such as a full year spent studying philosophy at a British university, it is possible to count more external credits toward the major. Students transferring into Wesleyan should review their academic histories with their departmental advisor as soon as possible after arriving to determine which philosophy courses taken at previously attended schools will be counted toward the major.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Philosophy colloquia. Every year the department arranges a series of public presentations of papers by visiting philosophers and, occasionally, Wesleyan faculty or students.
- Majors Committee and Philosophy Club. The department encourages its majors and other interested students to participate actively in the life of the
department by attending departmental talks and social events for majors. Students are also encouraged to organize student-led events and discussions organized by the Majors Committee and Philosophy Club.

HONORS

To qualify for departmental honors in philosophy, a student must achieve an honors level of performance in courses in the department, must declare the intention to work for departmental honors at the beginning of the senior year, must register for senior thesis tutorials in each semester of the senior year, and must write a thesis at an honors level. Theses must be submitted in accordance with Honors College procedures and will be judged by a committee made up of members of the department.