Welcome to Philosophy

A guide to studying philosophy at UCD for first-year students 2016-2017

Minerva, goddess of wisdom

We're delighted that you've decided to study philosophy at UCD. This little brochure will tell you more about the subject and how we teach it.

1. What is philosophy?

Notoriously, it's not easy to say exactly what philosophy *is* until you start reading it, writing it and doing it. But a lot of you have already 'done' philosophy without knowing it! For example, you've probably been involved in — or at least witnessed — debates about whether someone or something is *beautiful*, or whether some behaviour is *ethical*, or whether some action or decision is *fair*, or whether some act was undertaken *freely*, or whether someone was being *genuine*, or whether gods or ghosts or angels *exist*, or whether J. K. Rowling's account of time travel in *Harry Potter and Cursed Child* is consistent with the version of time travel introduced in the earlier books. If you've had experience of these kinds of debates — or even thought about them at all — then you've done philosophy. And if you've ever thought about the best way to *conduct* these sorts of debates — what sort of arguments are *good* arguments, and what sort of arguments are *bad* arguments — then you've also done philosophy. But even if you've *never* thought about any these things, it doesn't take much to start thinking philosophically. For instance, consider this: it seems natural to be a bit sad about the fact that you won't exist in the future, after you die. But it would be weird to be sad about the fact that you didn't exist in the past, before you were born. Why is that? (Now you're doing philosophy!)

We offer you a way to start thinking about big questions such as those described above, about the nature of beauty, goodness, ethics, freedom, authenticity, our relations with others, existence, time, logic, knowledge, alienation, oppression, and more. In doing so, we offer you a path to developing your own answers to many of life's toughest questions: how ought I live? What makes for a good life? What

exists? How much do I know? What can I hope for? We also help you to learn to express yourself more clearly and precisely, both in speech and in writing, and to read and listen more critically and intelligently. In short, we'll help you to become a *clear and nuanced thinker*. This skill will benefit you both in your other studies at UCD and throughout your life.

UCD has the biggest and most philosophically diverse philosophy department in Ireland, and the largest range of philosophy modules on offer. There really is something for everyone. At the end of this guide, we've provided short descriptions ('descriptors') of the seven modules available to first-year students.

See also our webpage "Why study philosophy?" — just click on the top left corner of the homepage www.ucd.ie/philosophy.

2. Some practicalities about all first-year modules

Your SISWeb will give you details of the assessments for each module, and it is important to study this carefully so that you know what you'll have to do. Each module has a *Module Outline* — i.e. a syllabus — which will be made available to you through the module page on the Blackboard system. This should provide all the details about the content, structure, and assessment for each course. Some things to note:

- ï All the first-year modules have a two-hour <u>exam</u>, held during the exam period in December (for Semester 1 modules). The precise exam timetable is not available until late October.

- ï Most of the modules require at least one <u>essay</u>, and some require two essays. Make a note of the essay deadlines when you are planning your semester.

- ï Some of the modules have an <u>attendance requirement</u>, so you should check this. For example, 10% of the final mark for a course might be based on your attendance at tutorials (more on which below).

3. Essays

A philosophy essay usually consists in an *argument*: that is, a set of *reasons* given for believing some *conclusion*. And one of the great things about philosophy is that your lecturers won't mind at all if they disagree with your conclusion — what they really care about is whether you give *good reasons* for believing your conclusion. In other words, what really matters is *how you arrive at* your conclusion, not what you conclude. If you study philosophy then we'll spend lots of time teaching you how to reason well and how to write philosophy essays.

To get a sense of what a philosophy essay might look like, here are two *very* short sample arguments about the ethics of *lying*:

- ï It is never morally permissible to lie. The reason is that moral rules – such as the rule that one oughtn't lie – are just the rules of behavior that we would want everyone everywhere to follow. So it would not only be wrong but *unreasonable* to break such a rule.

- ï It is sometimes morally permissible to lie. The reason is that lying sometimes produces the best overall consequences, and the *right action* is always the action that produces the best overall consequences.

Suitably expanded, either of these arguments could be at the core of a good philosophy essay. How

could they be expanded? Well, both essays would be better if the reasons given for the relevant conclusions were supported by further reasons. For example, in the case of the first argument we need to say *why* we should believe that moral rules are rules of behavior that we would want everyone everywhere to follow. In the case of the second argument, we need to say why we should think that the right action is always the action that produces the best overall consequences.

There are other things that could be done to make the essays better. For example, the essays would be better if the concepts involved in the arguments were clearer. For instance, what is it to be 'unreasonable' in the context of the first argument? And what exactly are 'good consequences' in the context of the second argument?

The essays would also be better if some further relevant arguments were brought into play. For example, either essay could begin with a brief summary of *another* philosopher's argument for the opposing view (in the case of the first argument, that lying is sometimes morally permissible). We could then offer our own reasons as to why we think that that argument fails. That would strengthen the case for our conclusion. (Indeed, we don't even need to find an *actual* opposing argument: describing and responding to *possible* objections is a very important part of philosophical thinking.)

Finally, it would be better if the arguments were supported with *examples*: real or imagined scenarios that either support the relevant conclusion or undermine possible objections. Again, thinking of relevant examples is an important philosophical skill – and it's fun as well!

Here are some other essay topics that invite you to develop and support an argument:

- The brain is not like a computer

- Civil disobedience is justified

- Existence with others always leads to alienation

- I can make any word mean whatever I like

- People should not be punished for crimes they commit whilst drunk

- My freedom requires me to recognize the freedom of others

- Private schools should be outlawed

- Fictional characters don't exist

- Euthanasia should be legalised

- God cannot be all-good and all-powerful, because if they were they would not allow so much evil in the world

More advice about writing essays is available from the School of Philosophy website, in the 'Undergraduate' section. UCD also has an excellent resource for helping you to develop your general academic writing skills: the UCD Writing Centre.

Essays have strict deadlines. For each essay, you have to submit two versions: (i) a paper version to Margaret Brady, the Philosophy Administrator in room D504 of the Newman Building, and (ii) an electronic version through the 'Assessment' section of the module's Blackboard pages. If either of these are late, penalty points will be deducted from your final mark as follows: if the essay is submitted up to a

week late, then two grade-points are deducted (e.g. a B+ becomes a B-); and if the essay is submitted between a week and two weeks late, four grade-points are deducted (e.g. a B+ becomes a C).

Finally, the exam: typically in a philosophy exam you will have to write three short essays, but the same broad approach applies. Each exam essay should consist in an argument for a certain conclusion, and should make good use of the reading that was assigned in the lectures. The best way to get a good mark in your exams is to prepare the outlines of your exam essays in advance.

4. Reading

The Module Outline (Syllabus) for a given module will also describe the weekly readings for that module. Usually, these will be PDF documents that you can download and print off. But you might also be asked to consult books in the library, or to buy a book from the UCD Bookshop.

It is very important that you look at some of the readings as soon as the module begins, so that you know what is in store. But don't worry if the reading seems hard at first — going to the lectures should help to make everything clear. And of course you should feel free to ask the lecturers about the readings — questions are always welcome!

If you decide to stay in the module (you have time to change your enrolment up to the end of the second week of term), then you will get into the habit of doing the assigned reading each week. Very often the lectures, the tutorials and even the essays will be about the weekly reading. So doing the assigned reading will really help you to get the most out of the course!

And note that 'doing the reading' doesn't just mean reading the assigned text — it means *thinking* about it as well! In most cases, the author will be a philosopher who is trying to convince you to believe something, by giving you some reasons for believing it. You should always approach the assigned reading like a sceptical judge listening to the arguments of a slick lawyer, or a savvy shopper listening to a salesperson's pitch — you *might* be convinced in the end, but you're going to think very carefully about the arguments that the author is presenting before believing anything they tell you. And if you can think of any reasons for *not* believing them — if you spot any holes in the arguments, or think of counter-arguments, or notice that the author is using *rhetoric* rather than proper argumentation — then make note of them! They might just form the basis of your next essay.

5. Tutorials

As part of the enrolment process for any module you will join a *tutorial group*. Each first-year module offers about ten tutorial groups at different times during the week. Each tutorial group meets eight times over the term, from weeks 3 to 10 consecutively. Each tutorial group is led by a *tutor*, who will probably be someone who either has, or is studying for, a doctorate.

(Note that in philosophy modules there is no *reading week*.)

It is *very* important that you attend all of your tutorials, because they are your main opportunity to discuss the week's lectures and the weekly reading. After all, discussion is the very heart of philosophy. In the lecture, your lecturer will do most of the talking — but the tutorial is *your* opportunity to discuss the ideas and arguments that the lecturer has raised. The tutorials also provide an invaluable opportunity to discuss your essays and exams. And, finally, they are a great place to get to know your fellow students!

6. Philosophy in Second-year

If you find you like philosophy, there's plenty more! We offer *Joint Honours* and *Single Major* programmes with most large schools in the College of Arts and the College of Social Sciences. Or you can take one-off philosophy modules as *electives*. All the details of the philosophy undergraduate schedule are on the *Undergraduate* page of our school website: www.ucd.ie/philosophy.

There are no core modules in philosophy, you're allowed to mix and match modules just as you please. However, there will usually be recommended *pre-requisites* (courses you ought to have taken before taking a given course). If in doubt, you should contact the module co-ordinator in order to do some advance reading.

And on the same *Undergraduate* webpage we also offer suggestions about *curricular streams*: ways of combining various modules into a coherent programme, depending on your overarching interests, e.g. 'Mind and Language' and 'Ethics and Society'.

All the details of the individual philosophy modules are available through https://www.ucd.ie/modules/ *(and type in keyword 'PHIL').*

7. Philosophy links

There is plenty of philosophy on-line to get you thinking.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: This is a very important resource — searchable by keyword — that summarises core philosophical debates, concepts, arguments, and authors. Each article is written by a professional philosopher who is an expert in the relevant area and lists extensive further reading. This should be your first port of call for every philosophy essay you write; however, note that the articles usually provide 'neutral' summaries of different possible positions, rather than sustained arguments for one position or another. When you write an essay, it's your job to decide which position to argue for!

PhilPapers: An incredibly useful and comprehensive database of published philosophy articles, searchable to by title, author, and topic. Basically the 'Google' for philosophy. When you find an article listed in a Stanford Encyclopedia 'further reading' list, you can look for it here.

Philosophy Compass: Slightly higher-level articles than those contained in the Stanford Encyclopedia. Very useful when you want to go a bit deeper into a topic.

Philosopy Bites Podcasts: popular philosophy podcasts.

The Philosopher's Magazine Blog: popular philosophy blog.

The Community of Thinkers: more philosophy blogs.

Meta-blog of philosophy blogs: blogs blogs blogs. Blogs are blogs. (This is actually incredibly useful. Just start searching and see where it takes you.)

8. First year modules

In this final section, we are quoting from the SISWeb descriptors of the seven first-year modules we offer: three in Semester 1 and four in Semester 2. If you're already enrolled in one of these, come along to another one in your first week of classes. If you like it, you can change your enrolment up until the

end of the second week of classes. In Semester 2, you should also "shop around" in your first two weeks of the semester (space provided).

Semester 1

PHIL10020: Introduction to the Problems of Philosophy (Thursday @ 1-2 Theatre L & Fri @ 2-3 Theatre M)

This course focuses on three classic problems of philosophy: (1) free will and determinism; (2) personal identity; (3) miracles and the existence of a supernatural power. As with all philosophy, the task is for students to work out their own structures of argument in response to the arguments in the philosophical literature. Selected weekly readings will be made available on Blackboard during the semester. A good guide for writing essays and learning to think philosophically is the following: Jay F. Rosenberg, The Practice of Philosophy: A Handbook for Beginners, 3rd ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1996), in UCD library. The style of the lectures will be highly interactive, with students expected to do some thinking during the lecture periods. The course will be assessed mainly with weekly online assignments, though tutorial attendance will be assessed, and there is a final exam.

PHIL10030: Introduction to Modern Philosophy (Tues @ 9-10 & Thurs @ 9-10, Theatre M)

Can I be certain that there is a world outside me, or am I confined to my own mind alone? What can I know reliably about the world, if there is one? And if it exists knowably, how can I live with other people within it? Are we naturally selfish and dangerous? Or do we have a compassionate and gentle nature brutalised by a corrupt society? These are some of the questions to be discussed in this introduction to early modern philosophy of knowledge and social and political philosophy. The way of approaching the questions will be through a critical and historical treatment of selected writings by Descartes (1596-1650), Hobbes (1588-1679) and Rousseau (1712-1778).

PHIL10160: Reason and Paradox (Tues @ 12-1 Theatre Q and Thurs @ 11-12 Theatre M)

In this introductory critical reasoning course we'll learn how to argue well, and how to show when others are arguing badly. In particular, we'll learn to spot bad arguments – 'fallacies' – and rhetorical devices that can be used to trick us into accepting things we shouldn't. We'll also learn about 'inductively strong' and 'logically valid' arguments, which provide good reasons for accepting their conclusions. We'll learn how to check whether ordinary arguments are logically valid by translating them into a simple but powerful logical language. We'll think about some of the ways in which we might reason badly, even when we don't mean to (for example as a result of 'cognitive biases'). Finally, we'll think about paradoxes, such as that generated by the statement 'This sentence is not true'. How do we solve them? What if we can't? And do they show that we need to rethink our approach to logic?

Semester 2

PHIL10040: Introduction to Moral Philosophy (Tues @ 12-1 & Thurs @ 11-12, Theatre M)

This module will explore and clarify certain fundamental concepts of morality, for example obligation, respect, equality, responsibility, virtue, forgiveness. Our emphasis will be on the way these concepts are deployed in ordinary situations between ordinary people, and on the way people might disagree about their meaning and application. On what basis does one person feel a moral obligation toward another? What is the difference between someone being responsible, someone taking responsibility, and someone being held responsible? If I forgive someone unconditionally, does this condone the wrong and show a

lack of self-respect? The module is designed for students with no background in philosophy at all.

<u>PHIL10100: Existentialism and Humanism (Tues @ 9-10 Theatre L & Thurs @ 9-10 Theatre L)</u>

Existentialism and humanism are philosophical approaches that emphasize our freedom as human beings to take charge of our lives, holding that we have the capacities necessary to deal with the suffering and meaninglessness that sometimes affects us. This module explores texts by a number of philosophers who have argued for existentialist and humanist approaches. We will also see that there have been critical reactions to those approaches, which have generated an anti-humanist perspective. The concepts examined by this module include: individual freedom, human suffering, alienation, the death of God, the human construction of meaning and power. A wide choice of study material will be presented, including texts by: Kant, Schopenhauer, Marx, Adorno, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Barthes, Foucault, Arendt.

<u>PHIL 10110: The Search for Meaning (Mon @ 4-5 H2.22 SCH & Wed @ 2-3, L023 Sutherland Law bldg)</u>

What is the point of doing philosophy? Does philosophy have a role to play in our lives? Many famous philosophers, including the Buddha, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, argue that the study of philosophy makes us into better people. But is this true? Can virtue and critical thinking really be taught? This module concerns the significance of philosophy in human life and whether the study of philosophy can help us overcome our intellectual and moral limitations. It has two components: the first will look at Classical Philosophy from Buddhist India and Ancient Greece to see how these philosophical traditions approached understanding the mind, self, knowledge, the metaphysical world, ethics and the development of wisdom. The second component will look at philosophical concepts and ideals that have shaped the modern world such as feminism, Marxism, neo-liberalism and anti-racism. We will examine how these modern philosophical concepts define and critique systems of power and focus on how their theories of the mind, self, knowledge and ethics might relate to Classical conceptions of the liberated individual and the good society. The second component looks at a series of six fundamental philosophical concepts, considering the way they have developed throughout the history of the subject. They are: Being, Truth, Time, Subject, Freedom, and Justice.

<u>PHIL10070: Introduction to Greek Philosophy (Thurs @ 1-2 H2.22 SCH & Fri @ 2-3 Theatre Q)</u>

This module offers an historical and critical introduction to Ancient Greek Philosophy. The module charts the course of philosophy from the earliest Greek philosophers, such as Parmenides and Heraclitus, to Aristotle. But the central focus of this module is on the figure of Socrates, and his impact on philosophy. Socrates is something of a puzzle: because he himself wrote nothing, any attempt to piece together his thought and character must investigate what his contemporaries wrote about him. We will be examining in particular those writings that bear on the trial and death of Socrates. These include Plato's 'Apology', 'Euthyphro', and 'Crito', a series of short, lively dialogues that offer excellent introductions not only to Socrates, but to the practice of philosophy itself. But we will also consider the depictions of Socrates by the comic playwright Aristophanes and the historian Xenophon. As such, this module will include investigation of literary and historical issues, as well as more overtly 'philosophical' questions.

9. And finally…

We hope you enjoy studying philosophy at UCD. If you have any questions or suggestions, our First-year Co-ordinator is [Dr. Daniel Deasy](), who can be reached at [daniel.deasy@ucd.ie](). Please feel free to contact Dan with any questions, concerns or suggestions you might have about studying philosophy in first year.