

## Tutorials in Philosophy

### Aesthetics

Is beauty in the eye of the beholder merely, or does it exist in some more objective sense? If it does exist, what is it? Must works of art be beautiful, and if so who decides whether they are or not? What is the relationship between beauty and truth? What is the relationship between beauty and goodness? These are some of the many questions this tutorial will raise and grapple with. Students will analyze primary texts which provide varied answers to the problems of aesthetics and will thus develop an understanding of the history of aesthetic thought, from Plato and Aristotle through Christian ideas of art (particularly in the Eastern Orthodox tradition) to the Enlightenment (when 'Aesthetics' as an area of philosophical enquiry was explicitly inaugurated) and to such figures as Hume and Kant to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Students will consider these questions on the abstract philosophical level but will also consider how such ideas relate to the actual production of works of art, including literature and visual art, following the practical lead of Socrates (who advocates expelling poets from the ideal state) and Aristotle (who investigated how to write the best tragedy). There will be the opportunity to respond to the artistic riches of Oxford's museums as part of the tutorial; in addition, students who wish may also compare the distinctive but allied aesthetic theories of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien which underlie their literary productions.

### Aristotle's Ethics and Metaphysics

This tutorial provides an opportunity to engage in critical study of key works by Aristotle, with a particular focus on his ethics and/or metaphysics. The core text for Aristotle's discussion of morality is *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this work, he is primarily concerned with the question of what the best possible sort of human life looks like. Possible topics for study include the nature of human flourishing (or *eudaimonia*), responsibility and character, the moral and intellectual virtues, the structure of human action, weakness of will, justice, pleasure, and friendship.

The core text for Aristotle's metaphysical views is his treatise *Metaphysics*, in which he writes about being and substance, the natural world, unity, matter, and form. However, to understand this, one needs to familiarize oneself with his earlier work, the *Categories*, where he introduces key notion of 'beings' (what things are) and the ten different categories they can be divided into. Possible topics for study include the nature of beings and why substances are independent, while all the other categories are said to be 'in' something else; how matter is prior to form; different types of causation; and the relationship between universals and particulars.

Aristotle was a pioneering thinker in these fields, and although over two millennia have passed since these works were first written, much of what he says remains significant for philosophical debate today.

Students taking this tutorial may opt to divide their attention equally between Aristotle's ethics and his metaphysics, or (subject to tutor availability) may choose to focus on one of these.

Students taking this tutorial may opt to divide their attention equally between Aristotle's ethics and his metaphysics, or (subject to tutor availability) may choose to focus on one of these.

## **Business Ethics: Moral Reasoning in a Business Context**

This tutorial will introduce you to the fundamental ethical issues that arise in modern business and train you in moral reasoning. You will practise the professional decision-making skills that are now regarded as necessary for successful management and leadership. Through the lens of various ethical frameworks, including utilitarianism and rights-based theory, this tutorial will consider a variety of selected case studies that involve a diverse array of stakeholders (for example, consumers, employees, government, and civil society). Challenging issues such as employee privacy, consumer protection, environmental obligation, corporate social responsibility, and more will be analysed from a moral perspective, considering both widely held moral beliefs and more recently developed and innovative arguments. While this tutorial is designed as essential training in the type of reasoning that allows one to appreciate the moral complexity of professional life in business management and offers the tools to be an active participant, it will also be of interest to those who wish to understand some of the key concepts that shape our world.

## **Ethics: Normative Theories and their Application**

In this tutorial, students will have an opportunity to focus on either normative or applied ethics, or both. In the case of the former, you will explore major ethical theories on both sides of the value/utility spectrum — from virtue ethics, through ethics of duty and principle-based theory, to utilitarianism. The aim will be to try and understand these theories by exploring their historical background and their role in the history of ideas. You will also explore the link between these theories and ontology, religious ethics, and political philosophy.

In the applied version of the tutorial, you will learn how to use these normative theories to approach various ethical dilemmas. This will range from issues concerning the value of life (like suicide, euthanasia, abortion, and genetic engineering) to those of a practical nature, whether in socio-political contexts (e.g. gender, education, war, population ethics) or in the world of business (worker and other stakeholder rights, the complicity between multinational corporations and corrupt regimes, etc.).

## **Heidegger**

A major representative of modern European Philosophy, Heidegger is often described as the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, on the basis of his contributions to a range of schools of thought in metaphysics and onto-theology, including Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Hermeneutics. In this tutorial, students will have the opportunity to focus on either Heidegger's early magnum opus, *Being and Time*, or on a series of his later works where he addresses the notions of truth, homecoming, deities, and technology. For the former, the tutorial includes an outline of the relation

between Heidegger's Existentialist Phenomenology and Husserl's 'Pure Phenomenology'; while for the latter, we explore traces of non-Western influences on Heidegger, in particular links to Buddhist and Daoist sources. Irrespective of whether you take this as a primary or secondary tutorial, you will probably focus on the Heideggerian view of the self, the world, truth, and technology, as well as art and philosophy itself.

## **History of Philosophy: Ancient Greeks**

In this tutorial students will explore the ideas and debates of Ancient philosophy. The possible questions to be studied include: How can philosophy be a way of life? Does happiness consist in pleasure, political life, virtue, or contemplation? If one knows the good, will one do what is good? Are virtues found in one or many parts of the soul? What is the soul? Do forms exist on their own, in natural things, or in the mind of the first principle? Can the first principle be an intellect? Are substances composed of atoms or of form and matter? Is matter, form, being, one, or the good more fundamental? The tutorial will examine such questions by either focusing on a few philosophers (like Plato or Aristotle) or investigating how certain questions were addressed by the Pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Epicureans, and Neo-Platonists.

## **History of Philosophy: Rationalists and Empiricists**

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the rise of two major movements in European philosophy: rationalism and empiricism. This tutorial provides an opportunity to gain a critical understanding of some of the key metaphysical and epistemological ideas associated with these two schools of thought.

Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz are often known collectively as the continental rationalists. These philosophers took the new 'corpuscularian' science and placed it within a metaphysical system which gave pride of place to our God-given reason. The many possible topics for study include: Descartes's method of doubt and his arguments for the existence of God; Spinoza's monism (the idea that everything that exists is one single substance); Leibniz's work on necessity and possibility, and his claim that this is the best of all possible worlds.

The British empiricists — Locke, Berkeley, and Hume — followed a little later, and took a different approach. A key tenet of empiricism is that all our concepts are ultimately derived from experience, and hence that our knowledge is limited accordingly. Once again, the range of possible topics is vast, including: Locke's concept of primary and secondary qualities, and his work on the nature of substances and persons; Berkeley's idealism, according to which the physical objects we perceive are actually mind-dependent bundles of ideas; Hume's challenge to our understanding of causation, and his scepticism about belief in the external world.

The tutorial provides a chance to explore a key period in the development of philosophy, which still informs many major debates today.

## Introduction to Logic

This tutorial provides an introduction to formal work in both propositional and predicate logic. Propositional logic deals with propositions or statements, and the relationships between them, while predicate logic provides a way of breaking down propositions into their component parts so that their structure can be analysed in more detail. A key aim of both branches is to facilitate rigorous examination of arguments. Learning a formal system for representing arguments will provide you with a valuable tool for grasping exactly how they work: it will help you to identify patterns of valid inference, to spot any ambiguities, and to gain a better understanding of the relationships between elements of the system. You will also have an opportunity to explore the varieties of argument and inference used in everyday language. This tutorial is suitable both as a starting point for students who intend to undertake further work in philosophical logic, and as a standalone tutorial for students who would find a basic grounding in formalization helpful in their wider study of philosophy.

## Kantian Philosophy

This tutorial focuses upon the ideas of the great German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). His ideas have been highly influential in many fields — and yet they still seem startlingly fresh today. Kant published his most important work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in 1781. Many tutorials in the tutorial will explore ideas from this book, which is widely considered one of the greatest works in all philosophy. Kant tries to establish that we can have metaphysical knowledge — beyond that of the physical sciences. In doing so, he attempts to resolve the dispute between the Rationalists and the Empiricists, forging his own new way. He argues that space and time are not outside of us, but rather in us; they give rise to our a priori knowledge of geometry and arithmetic. Rather than trying to fit the human mind into the world (which Kant thinks most philosophers vainly attempt), he turns the problem on its head and claims that instead the world itself conforms to us. In this way, he puts forward his theory of Transcendental Idealism. This, he believes, is the key to solving all the great questions of philosophy. These include: What is the self? Can we be free, in spite of living in a deterministic world governed by scientific laws? Does the world in which we live have room for God and religion? Is true morality possible for us humans — or are we always destined to act on selfish motives? There will be an opportunity to explore, beyond the *Critique of Pure Reason*, other books by Kant on morality, religion, and politics.

Introductory reading

Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (2003), vol. VI, part IV

## Medieval Philosophy

This tutorial engages the philosophical ideas and arguments of medieval thinkers by focusing on the major questions they recurrently raised and debated. The tutorials will address such disputed questions as: Can God's existence can be proven? Is divine simplicity compatible with God's freedom to create? Do humans or angels have free

will? Can the immorality of the human soul be demonstrated? Is 'being' analogical or univocal? What are the transcendentals of being? Are universal essences real or merely conceptual? Can the human intellect know natural things apart from divine illumination? Are matter-form (hylomorphic) substances comprised of one or a plurality of substantial forms? Is the moral law known by reason or by divine revelation alone? Can the cardinal virtues be harmonized or connected without divine grace? There will be the possibility to focus on one or two thinkers' answers to these debates or to consider a range of medieval thinkers' responses to some of these disputed questions, including Augustine, Boethius, al-Kindī, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, Abelard, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. Those taking this as a secondary tutorial will study only one of the philosophers and most likely specific aspects of their philosophy.

## **Metaphysics and Epistemology**

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of being and reality. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. Thus this tutorial provides an opportunity to explore some key questions about the nature of the world we find ourselves in, and our knowledge of it.

Your study of metaphysics will encourage you to consider what sort of things the world is made up of. Specific questions to be explored may include the following: What is the nature of being? What is the nature of causation? Do we have free will, or is the course of events predetermined? Is it possible that the world might have been other than it actually is? What is the relationship between objects and their parts? What does it mean to say that an object has certain properties? What does it mean to say that it persists through time? What is time? What does it mean to say that someone is a person? Some of these questions may also prompt discussion of the relationship between our ordinary, commonsense conception of the world and the rather different picture offered by contemporary science; and they may also provide an opportunity to explore some common ground between metaphysical and religious beliefs.

Epistemological questions that may be covered include: What is the nature of knowledge, and how does it differ from belief? To what extent is it possible to have knowledge of the world: are our everyday beliefs about the way things are justified? Can we have knowledge of things we have not observed to be the case? Is our knowledge of what has happened in the past a reliable guide to what is likely to happen in the future? What is the relationship between our perception or our memory of an object and our knowledge of it?

Students taking this tutorial may opt to divide their attention equally between metaphysics topics and epistemology ones, or to focus on one of these.

## **Non-Western Philosophy**

In this tutorial, students will explore non-Western schools of thought. This includes (but is not limited to) philosophy that originates from Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, east Asia, and south-east Asia. Depending on your interests and tutor availability, you can focus on Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese, Japanese philosophy, or

other non-Western thought worlds.

## **Oxford Philosophy: Recent Debates in Ethics**

How do you tell the difference between right and wrong? How do you evaluate your own opinions and the opinions of others? This tutorial explores the application of ethical theories that have been recently developed at Oxford University to these perennially contentious and troubling real-world questions that everyone faces. By being introduced to these ethical debates, in an approachable way, you will better understand the dilemmas that confront us. You will see how various Oxford philosophers have recently been focusing on challenging ethical issues. Derek Parfit investigated the core issues around our collective obligations to future generations, framing the Non-Identity Problem, the Repugnant Conclusion, and how different moral theories might be reconciled. Nick Bostrom considers the various existential risks that pose threats to humanity's future, such as artificial intelligence, global pandemics, and thermonuclear war. William MacAskill offers a practical solution to global problems through his concept of effective altruism. Amia Srinivasan provides a challenging and frank philosophical exploration of human sexuality and moral behaviour. No prior knowledge of moral philosophy is required for success, and this tutorial is offered to all those who are intellectually curious, especially those who wish to know more about the recent developments in the long tradition of Oxford philosophy.

## **Philosophical Theology**

This tutorial provides an opportunity to consider the philosophical assumptions and implications of key Christian beliefs and practices. You will be encouraged to use the methods and approaches of philosophy to examine some central Christian doctrines: these may include the Trinity (in what sense is God both three and one?), the Incarnation (what does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man?), and the Atonement (can we make sense of the idea that the life and death of Jesus atoned for the sins of the world?). We may also explore the nature of the qualities traditionally attributed to God (for example, omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, and necessity), some of the ways in which God is said to interact with his creation — and some of the ways humans might respond. Specific topics that we may address include the question of whether faith can be rational, whether we can talk meaningfully about God, whether God's knowledge of the future is compatible with human free will, how we might assess whether a purported divine revelation is genuine, whether it makes sense to suggest we might change God's mind through petitionary prayer, whether belief in miracles can be justified, the relationship between religion and morality, and the possibility of life after death.

## **Philosophy in Literature**

Many novelists and playwrights engage with philosophical ideas in their writing: they grapple with what it means to be human, how we make sense of the world, and how

we ought to live our lives. Fiction offers major advantages as a vehicle for philosophical exploration: it can help make very abstract concepts more concrete, and provides vivid case studies or examples for discussion. This tutorial provides an opportunity to explore the ideas found in the writing of a number of great authors, and to use their work as a way in to a number of key philosophical questions. These questions may be drawn from a range of branches of philosophy, including (but not limited to) metaphysics (for example, what makes us who we are, and is the course of events predetermined, or can we cause meaningful change?), epistemology (what do we know?), ethics (how do we decide what the right thing to do is?), and philosophy of mind (what does it mean to be a thinking being?). Alongside novels, short stories, and plays, you will also be encouraged to consider some of the scholarly philosophical literature, to provide context and comparisons. The precise authors and works covered will vary depending on your interests (and on tutor availability), but may include Franz Kafka (*The Trial*), Jorge Luis Borges (*Fictions*), Fyodor Dostoevsky (*The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*), Victor Hugo (*Les Misérables*), and Tom Stoppard (*Arcadia*, *The Hard Problem*, and *Jumpers*).

## Philosophy in the Works of C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis is best known as a fantasy novelist and Christian apologist. However, he also taught philosophy early on in his academic career, and many of his works deal with philosophical themes. This tutorial delves into both his fiction and his non-fiction, and uses the ideas and events found there as a starting point for discussion of philosophical questions. Alongside this, you will also explore some of the wider philosophical literature, which will provide additional perspectives for comparison. Topics will be drawn from a range of areas in philosophy, including metaphysics and epistemology (for example, the definition of knowledge; the nature of personhood; free will and determinism; and the philosophy of love); ethics (for example, the difference between doing and allowing harm, and just war theory); and philosophy of religion (for example, the problem of suffering, the trilemma, the ontological argument for the existence of God, divine foreknowledge, the problem of divine hiddenness, and the nature of religious faith).

Note: if this tutorial is taken in combination with a British Culture course focusing on C.S. Lewis, tutorial topics will be selected to minimize overlap.

## Philosophy of Mathematics

Is mathematics a human invention or, rather, have we discovered it? Is it a game — with rules set by us — or is mathematics a body of objective truths which would have still held even if humans had never existed? If it is the former, then shouldn't universities around the world let mathematics students study chess as one of their course options, alongside arithmetic, calculus, and geometry? If it is the latter, how do we make sense of these objective truths? Do numbers and triangles exist in a realm beyond us? If so, how do we obtain our knowledge of this realm of objects? Do we see numbers and triangles in anything like the way that we see chairs and tables? What is the relationship between mathematics and empirical science? In particular, should geometry be classified as part of mathematics or as part of science? What is the relationship between proof and truth in mathematics? There seem to be infinitely

many numbers; should we regard infinity itself as a very large number or would that be a mistake? What, if anything, explains the remarkable applicability of mathematics to the world we live in? This tutorial explores fundamental questions like these.

Introductory reading

A.W. Moore, *The Infinite* (2018)

## Philosophy of Mind

The central issue of this tutorial is the relationship between the everyday view of ourselves and the scientific view of ourselves. Can one account be reduced to the other or do the two conflict with each other? If we do find that they conflict, which one should we retain and which one should we reject? What does the mind have to do with the brain? Are they the same thing or different? In tackling these questions, some of the following theories may be explored: Dualism, Type Identity theory, Token Identity theory, Behaviourism, Functionalism, Eliminativism, and Instrumentalism. Are reasons for actions the same as causes for actions? What is a basic action? How are actions to be individuated? Is your playing the piano the same action as your moving your fingers — or are they different? Are you the same person now as you were at ten years old? If so, what is it that allows us to claim this identity? If not, am I entitled to praise you or blame you for things that your past self did? Further questions about the nature of memory and perception may be explored.

Introductory reading

Colin McGinn, *The Character of Mind* (1982)

## Philosophy of Religion

This tutorial provides an opportunity to explore questions relating to the existence and nature of God, and the relationship between God and the world. The main focus of the tutorial is the claims made by monotheistic religions. You will investigate these claims (and some of the responses to them) via the works of major philosophers, including Aquinas, Hume, and Kant.

A key area of interest is the extent to which we are justified in believing in God's existence. You will have a chance to examine some of the central arguments: for example, the cosmological argument (which says that the world needs an initial cause or explanation), the teleological argument (which says that the world appears to have been designed), or the argument from people's religious experiences. You will also be encouraged to consider the nature of the God whose existence these arguments aim to prove, and other questions that arise from this. For example, what does it mean to claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, necessary, perfectly good, and so forth? Are these attributes consistent with each other? Does the existence of suffering constitute a compelling reason not to believe in a loving God? Does it make sense to suggest that God might intervene in the world through miracles, or answers to petitionary prayer? If God has infallible knowledge of what I will do tomorrow, does that mean my actions cannot be free? Can we make sense of the idea of life after death? There may also be the opportunity to consider some specifically Christian doctrines — for example, what would it mean to say that Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully



man? Can we make sense of the idea that his life, death, and resurrection atoned for the sins of the human race?

## Philosophy of Science

Scientific investigation raises a range of important philosophical questions about both methods and results:

- What are scientific theories about?
- Do scientists discover what there is in the world, or are scientific theories useful tools with which we predict, explain and build?
- What is science, and can we distinguish it from other forms of enquiry?
- Is there a specific scientific method and what does it involve?
- Can we trust inductive reasoning?
- How are scientific theories, models, or hypotheses confirmed or rejected?
- What counts as evidence? And what is the relationship between evidence and theory?
- Does science make progress, and if so, how can we measure it?
- How free is science from social, historical, and cultural influences?

During this tutorial, you will investigate some of these questions and more, drawing on the work of historical and contemporary philosophers, finding examples in contemporary scientific theories and in the history of science, and applying your own reasoning to consider the best responses. You will study the implications which different ways of understanding science have for empirical investigation and the interpretation of results. Topics covered will be selected from the following: empiricism, falsificationism, scientific realism and anti-realism, structural realism, scientific progress, induction, confirmation, laws of nature, the nature and use of probability, scientific explanation.

You don't need prior study of philosophy or science to take this option, but a curiosity about both is essential. If you have an interest in a particular area of science, it may be possible to look at some of the specific philosophical issues which it raises.

## Plato: *The Republic*

In this tutorial, you will explore one of the most influential works of philosophy. Plato's *Republic* brings together aspects of theoretical and practical philosophy. Primarily concerned with the notion of justice and the ideal society, Socrates and his main interlocutors (Thrasymachus and Glaucon) also explore truth, art, education, and what makes the Good the highest among the ideal Forms (or Ideas). You will study Plato's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics using both logical argument and literary devices like myth, simile, and metaphor. Key lines of enquiry include what makes a good leader (and the associated notion of the 'philosopher-king'); the implications of the state-soul analogy on both education and psychology; the role of women rulers; and ways in which Plato's view of the cosmos and afterlife might relate to science and religion.

## Post-Kantian Philosophy

The purpose of this tutorial is to introduce students to some of the major philosophies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, including Idealism, Phenomenology, and Existentialism. Many of the key topics discussed by German and French philosophers at the time — from Schelling, Schopenhauer, and Hegel to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre — are directly related to Immanuel Kant's work on metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics; while the influence on other thinkers, like Kierkegaard, was more nuanced — and often mediated by Hegel.

Fichte and Schelling sought to convert Kantian philosophy (especially his aesthetics) into a doctrine of absolute idealism, according to which reality is a mental construct (an infinite Self), and it is art more than reason, that can help us gain access to that realm of the absolute. Hegel builds an ambitious metaphysical system on the notion of this Absolute (or Spirit) that brings together subjectivity and objectivity, or conceptual and actual processes, and manifests itself in time (as History) and space (as Nature). In this view, art, religion, and philosophy are the highest forms of human activity, which help us knowingly achieve our freedom. The notions of self and freedom are central to both philosophies of the will (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard) and to Existentialism and Phenomenology. These schools take the Kantian themes of consciousness, experience, and judgement to new directions in both theoretical and practical philosophy. Indeed, Kantian influence extends all the way to Marxism and neo-pragmatism. Students typically focus on two or four of these philosophies (depending on whether they take this as a primary or secondary tutorial), exploring ways in which they engage with Kant's ideas in their respective historical context.

## Twentieth-Century Women Philosophers

A hundred years ago, British philosophy was dominated by a group of male scholars who would be later referred to as 'analytic philosophers'; more specifically, they were associated with 'ordinary language philosophy', because of their focus on logic and ordinary language. Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein in Cambridge, and Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Austin, and A.J. Ayer in Oxford, defined the remit and methods of philosophy for the better part of the twentieth century. One would have to dig deep into the footnotes of an elaborate history of British philosophy to find any reference to female intellectuals like G.E.M. Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, or Philippa Foot. And yet it was these women who redefined moral philosophy when it mattered most — in the post-war period. For them, defending the objectivity of morality was more than a matter of language, or argumentation. It was a matter of life and death. On the continent, women philosophers were equally active in the public domain, if not more so. Simone Weil was a political activist who had taken up work in a factory in order to better understand the life of working class. Simone de Beauvoir is a well-known feminist who also wrote on aging, war, and doctor-patient relationships. Hannah Arendt (born into a German-Jewish family) spent many years worked with refugee organisations in Paris, and would go on to become one of the world's leading political theorists.

In this tutorial, you will explore both the arguments behind these women's moral theories, and their practical implications. You will find out how they solved the problem of good and evil; how they defended the rational roots of morality; and what their relationship with God was. You will learn that, although they had different religious commitments (or none), they all took the notion of metaphysical goodness seriously. For Anscombe, the anchor was always her Roman Catholic faith; for Murdoch, it was a belief in metaphysical values; similarly, for Foot, it was a conviction that one ought to be able to make ethical pronouncements, because there were such things as fundamentally good, bad, right, or wrong behaviour. Weil was a mystic, while the tragedies that de Beauvoir witnessed made her abandon her Catholic faith. In addition, they all engaged with applied ethics, whether helping refugees (Murdoch and Arendt), supporting Oxfam (Foot), taking a stand on university policy (Anscombe), assisting in the trade union movement (Weil), or advocating on women rights (de Beauvoir).

Variations of this tutorial include:

- Oxford Women Philosophers, on God and the Good
- Twentieth-Century European Women Philosophers