PHILOSOPHY

Chair, Associate Professor Keith Peterson
Professors Daniel Cohen and Jill Gordon; Associate Professors James Behuniak, Lydia Moland, and Keith Peterson; Faculty Fellow Michael Dacey

“Philosophy,” as William James put it, “is an attempt to think without arbitrariness or dogmatism about the fundamental issues.” Colby’s philosophy program challenges students to understand what it means to live morally in an often unjust world, to deliberate rationally about knowledge, freedom, and meaning, and to appreciate deeply the natural and aesthetic dimensions of our lives. Our courses provide the historical depth, cosmopolitan breadth, and multiplicity of perspectives necessary for participating in the philosophical conversation that spans human history and reaches around the globe. The Philosophy Department cultivates skills in effective writing, close reading, clear reasoning, and creative thinking, enabling students to join this ongoing conversation. Philosophy prepares students for professional careers and a lifetime of intellectual engagement in a complex and changing world.

Requirements for the Major in Philosophy

To complete the major in philosophy, a student must take a minimum of 10 courses, including Philosophy 151, 231, and 232. The remaining seven elective courses must include at least one that satisfies the metaphysics and epistemology area requirement (M&E); one that satisfies the values area requirement (V); and one that satisfies the diversity requirement (D). Among the seven electives, only one from the 100 level may be counted, at least three must be at or above the 300 level, only one from 483/484 may be counted, and only one from 491/492 may be counted. In addition, in their senior year students must enroll in two semesters of the philosophy colloquium (401 and 402). No courses taken satisfactory/unsatisfactory may be counted in fulfillment of major requirements, nor may any courses counting for fewer than three credits.

Honors in Philosophy

Students majoring in philosophy may apply during their junior year for admission to the honors program. Permission is required; guidelines are established by the department and posted at colby.edu/philosophy. Successful completion of the work of the honors program and of the major will enable the student to graduate with “Honors in Philosophy.”

Requirements for the Minor in Philosophy

To complete the minor in philosophy, a student must take a minimum of six courses. These must include at least one course that satisfies the metaphysics and epistemology area requirement (M&E); one that satisfies the values area requirement (V); and one that covers a historical period in philosophy (H). At least one must be at or above the 300 level, and no more than one may be at the 100 level with this exception: both Philosophy 151 and another 100-level course may be counted. No course taken satisfactory/unsatisfactory may be counted in fulfillment of minor requirements, nor may any course counting for fewer than three credits.

Course Offerings

PL111fs Central Philosophical Issues: Self and Society An introduction to philosophy by consideration of two of its central branches: social and political philosophy and ethics. Issues addressed are moral absolutes, the social contract, political power, individual rights, economic justice, the good society. Readings from Plato, Locke, Mill, Marx, and Malcolm X. Four credit hours. S. GORDON

PL113fs Central Philosophical Issues: On Being Human Combines readings of classic philosophical texts on the subject of human nature with current incarnations of these debates in the contemporary world. Possible topics include the extent to which human nature is natural as opposed to cultural, the question of what differentiates humans from animals, the ethics of genetic enhancement and our treatment of other animals, the role of race or gender in human identity, humor as a unique human characteristic, examinations of human nature in post-apocalyptic literature. Four credit hours. S. DACEY, MOLAND

[PL114] Central Philosophical Issues: Nature and God An introduction to philosophy approached through issues in the philosophy of religion. Stress will be on epistemological questions (regarding how we can have knowledge) in connection with metaphysical questions (regarding the basic features of the universe). Designed to introduce students to the history of Western philosophy; to improve skills of critical reading, writing, and thinking; and to promote thinking on some big-picture issues, such as education, happiness, wisdom, God, spirituality, and knowledge. Readings include Plato, Aquinas, Bacon, Descartes, Hume, and James. Four credit hours. L.

[PL117W] Central Philosophical Issues: Philosophical Anthropology What is human nature? What makes humans different from other animals? What is the significance of the divisions internal to human society, such as those of race, class, gender, and culture? What does it mean to be a self-interpreting, historical being? What is the place of human beings in the natural world, especially in the context of
global environmental crisis? Philosophical anthropology is the study of past and current responses to these questions and includes an understanding practice of critique as a philosophical method. Exposure to responses from past and present provides opportunities to question fundamental beliefs about human nature. A writing-intensive course. Previously listed as Philosophy 174.  Four credit hours.  W1.

PL126f Philosophy and the Environment An introduction to philosophy through prominent questions and themes in environmental philosophy. Topics include the historical context and causes of environmental crisis, anthropocentrism, animal rights, intrinsic value, biocentrism, ecocentrism, and radical social theories, incorporating core philosophical issues in ethics, philosophical anthropology, and nature philosophy. These provide resources for clear and creative reasoning on the philosophical aspects of creating sustainable communities, for reflection on value priorities, and for exploration of relationships between academic work and social responsibility. Part of the two-course Integrated Studies 126, "The Green Cluster." Prerequisite: Concurrent enrollment in Environmental Studies 126. (Elect IS126.)  Four credit hours.  W1.  PETERSON

PL151fs Logic and Argumentation Argumentation is a subject that covers the processes of reasoning, the communicative actions, and the dialectical exchanges that give form to our intellectual lives. Logic, the study of inferences, is a central component of good argumentation. Students develop the conceptual vocabulary and critical skills to argue effectively and to evaluate arguments intelligently. These include interpretive techniques, like diagramming and fallacy identification, as well as the formal, analytic tools of symbolic logic.  Four credit hours.  Q.  COHEN

[PL211] Moral Philosophy Should ethics be based on universal respect for human dignity, on an assessment of what would benefit society at large, or on what fosters desirable character traits in the individual? Our answers determine how we address difficult questions concerning life and death, the ethics of war, indigenous rights, and global poverty. We explore the historical basis of four major movements in current ethical theory: virtue ethics, deontology, moral psychology, and utilitarianism. In conjunction with each theory, we will consider a contemporary ethical issue. Students develop both written and verbal argumentative skills through essays and class presentations.  Four credit hours.  S.

[PL212] Philosophical Paradoxes There can be an air of paradox when thinking about thinking, as if thought gets its own way. We will tackle these "antinomies of reason" to help us develop strategies that can be applied to other, more traditional philosophical problems. In order to untangle these knots, we will need to learn important analytic techniques and strategies. Finally, we will discover something about the nature of philosophy from these peculiarly and characteristically philosophical problems. Credit cannot be earned for both this course and Philosophy 112.  Three credit hours.

PL213s Philosophical Inquiries into Race A philosophical treatment of several aspects of race and racism: ontological issues surrounding what race is; existential and phenomenological issues about embodiment as a visible racial minority; social and political issues regarding oppression, colonization, and discrimination; and ethical issues involving racial minorities in the American context.  Four credit hours.  S, U.  GORDON

[PL215] Feminist Philosophies Whether one views feminism as a philosophical school of thought, an interpretive strategy, a political movement, or a way of understanding culture and ideas, it has many faces; feminism is neither unified nor monolithic. Students examine several feminist frameworks (structures of political thought that shape feminism), their relationship to and difference from one another, and feminist issues that lie outside of those frameworks.  Four credit hours.  S, U.

[PL216] Philosophy of Nature What is nature? What is characteristic of the scientific understanding of nature? How does it differ from more traditional ways of understanding nature? Could the environmental crisis be the result of defective ways of thinking about and relating to nature? How could modern ecology be related to the tradition of nature philosophy? How and by whom is knowledge of nature produced at all? We will study past and current responses to these questions, providing students opportunities to question fundamental beliefs about nature. Readings range from Aristotle to current philosophy, history, and social studies of ecology. Previously listed as Philosophy 318.  Four credit hours.

PL217f Feminism and Science An examination of new and challenging questions feminists and social theorists have raised about the content, practice, values, and traditional goals of science. Objectives include deepening the student's knowledge of feminist philosophy and familiarizing them with some of the diverse literature in the field of science studies. Topics include "standpoint" and social epistemologies: objectivity, value-neutrality, and universality claims of modern science; the social and historical character of science; how implicit assumptions about gender, class, ethnicity, epistemic, and social values affect research and reasoning; and how the language scientists use to explain phenomena conditions the production of knowledge.  Four credit hours.  S, U.  PETERSON

PL231f History of Ancient Greek Philosophy A survey of ancient thought that also examines the social and cultural contexts in which that thought arises. Study of the Greek world through the ideas of the pre-Socratics, the Sophists, Plato, and Aristotle. Prerequisite:
PL232s History of Modern Philosophy The philosophical period covered (roughly 1600-1800) includes some of the great transformations of Western philosophy: Descartes’s famous cogito, Spinoza’s radical monism, Hume’s sweeping skepticism, and Kant’s Copernican Revolution. Along the way, thinkers such as Elizabeth of Bohemia, Hobbes, Locke, and Mary Astell engaged in spirited debates about the origin of emotions, the nature of freedom, the status of knowledge, and the place of belief. We study each of these theorists in an effort to understand the questions they raised and the impact of their answers on the contemporary world. Four credit hours. H. GORDON

PL234s Philosophy and Art In 1964, philosopher Arthur Danto had a life-changing experience viewing contemporary art and concluded that we had reached the “end of art.” What could this mean? We will explore this and other questions, including, Why do humans create art in the first place? Is the aesthetic experience primarily cognitive or emotive? Should art merely entertain us or ennoble and improve us? Do artistic genres such as comedy evolve, or do they (and does art in general) articulate something constant about human nature? Will engage students in artistic events on campus and the Colby Museum of Art. Through written exercises and presentations, students’ written and verbal skills are developed. Prerequisite: Sophomore or higher standing. Four credit hours. A. MOLAND

[PL236] Critical Social Thought Critical engagement with questions about state formation, social relations, and economic justice. Readings from seminal texts in the field of social and political philosophy, accompanied by texts from contemporary critics of the tradition. Students will practice close, analytic readings of the texts, followed by brief writing assignments aimed at priming our discussion. They will also write philosophical papers aimed at sustained argumentation. Four credit hours. U.

[PL239] Epistemology An introduction to basic philosophical positions regarding Skepticism, knowledge versus belief, knowledge and the world, and epistemic justification as well as topics such as the nature of certainty, “naturalized epistemology,” and the ethics of belief. Four credit hours.

[PL240] Ethics on the Continent: From Kant to Levinas An examination of some of the prominent ethical theorizing and metaethical discourse on the Continent (primarily France and Germany), from Kant to the present. Topics include Kantian deontological moral theory, Nietzsche’s critique of “slave morality,” the phenomenological Value Ethics of Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann, the Existentialist ethics of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and the dialogical ethics of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Knowledge of these original sources is indispensable for a fair evaluation of their contemporary representatives. Four credit hours.

PL243s Environmental Ethics Beginning in the 1970s some philosophers began to seriously consider the ethical aspects of human relationships to the nonhuman natural world. Aims to familiarize students with the variety of philosophical ethics that has been developed to address the environmental crisis and its many dimensions. Students will accomplish this not only by reflecting theoretically on topics such as the value of nonhuman nature, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, environmental justice, food issues, and sustainability, but also through civic engagement with local community partners. Four credit hours. PETERSON

PL253] Skepticism East and West For as long as there have been philosophers engaged in passionate pursuit of knowledge, there have been skeptics critical of the entire enterprise. Can we really know the Truth about anything? For that matter, how important is it for us to know the Truth? Skeptical thinkers have appeared in all times and cultures. We will engage with three venerable texts: the Zhuangzi from ancient China, Nagarjuna’s writings on the Middle Way from ancient India, and the Outline of Skepticism by Sextus Empiricus from ancient Greece. Our goal is to put these authors into dialogue and then join in that dialogue. Prerequisite: A prior course in philosophy. Three credit hours. COHEN

[PL258] Advanced Logic Further investigations into symbolic logic and its extensions, with special attention to modal logic and some attention to metatheoretic results. Prerequisite: Philosophy 151. Four credit hours.

[PL264] Indian Philosophy An introduction to the diversity of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies in India, from roughly the fourth century BCE through the 11th century CE. Beginning from the earliest speculations about the nature of the human person in the Upanisads and Bhagavad Gita, we will consider arguments on the central topics of classical Indian philosophy, including knowledge and the means of knowing; the existence and structure of the external world; consciousness; the relation of mind and body; creation, causality, and the existence of God(s); and the search for meaning within, or liberation from, the everyday world. Four credit hours.

[PL265] Chinese Philosophy An introduction to major thoughts, texts, and thinkers in the “classical” period of Chinese philosophy, which covers roughly the sixth through the third centuries BCE (known as the Warring States period). We will cover Confucius, Mozi, Mencius, Zhuangzi, Laozi, Sunzi, Xunzi, Han Feizi, the Yijing or Book of Changes, and other important texts. Provides an overview of the philosophical questions that motivated thinkers in early China and aims to provide an appreciation for how various answers to these questions have shaped East Asian civilizations generally. Four credit hours.
[PL266] Buddhism Philosophy Examines the philosophical dimensions of the rise of Buddhism in India and its spread across East Asia. After an introduction to the historical Buddha and to Buddhist philosophies in India, we will examine the major schools of Buddhist philosophy in China and the dominant schools of Zen Buddhism in Japan, all in chronological order and with attention given to the development and transformation of key philosophical ideas. Questions pertaining to the nature of reality, time, causality, self, mind, truth, language, and the relation between theory and practice are explored. Four credit hours. L.

[PL274] Philosophy of Religion An examination of some principal philosophical issues in the area of religion, including the existence of God, divine attributes in relation to time, space, and the natural world, the origin and content of religious experience, issues regarding faith and its object, and the function of religious symbolism. Readings include both critics and defenders of the religious standpoint. Prerequisite: One course in philosophy. Four credit hours. S.

PL277fs Reuman Reading Group Faculty and students jointly select, read, discuss, and argue about a philosophical text in regular, intellectually rigorous, but freewheeling and informal sessions that provide an opportunity to indulge our passion for philosophy. Nongraded. Prerequisite: Philosophy major or minor. One credit hour. COHEN

PL297Af Philosophy of Mind An introduction to historical and contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind, focusing on questions such as: What is a mind? What is consciousness? How does the mind relate to the body and the brain? Could an artificial device—a computer or a robot—have a mind? How is it that our minds are able to contemplate and engage with the outside world? Four credit hours. DACEY

PL297B Philosophy and the Scientific Revolution At the start of the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, Western thought located humanity at the center of a harmonious, qualitatively defined, and purpose-filled cosmos. By the 18th century, the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic complex of theories had been replaced by Newton's mechanical, quantitatively defined universe. We will focus on the interaction of philosophic and scientific ideas that brought about those changes; on the debates that created the conceptual language of "revolution," and on how well the metaphor of revolution helps us understand this episode in intellectual history. Revolutions theme course. Four credit hours. H. COHEN

[PL311] Philosophical Approaches to Global Justice Recent philosophical theorizing regarding global justice. Topics include our responsibilities regarding global poverty, the definition and causes of terrorism, the nature of collective responsibility, the ethical implications of the nation-state. Gives particular attention to philosophers who have left the ivory tower by putting their theories into action such as Peter Singer, Thomas Pogge, and Martha Nussbaum. Students have the option of putting theory into practice through a civic engagement project. Prerequisite: Two courses in philosophy. Four credit hours. I.

[PL314] Karl Marx and Marxist Philosophical Thought Beginning with Marx's and Engels's primary texts, we then examine the influence of Marxist philosophical thought on economic theory, revolutionary theory, cultural criticism, feminism, and aesthetic theory. Four credit hours. S.

PL317s Philosophy of Science A consideration of some major 20th-century conceptions of what scientists aim to do, what theoretical structures they employ in pursuing their aims, and what legitimates these structures. Science seems to be constrained by experience in distinctive ways, but it also ventures far beyond experience in pursuing its theoretical and explanatory aims. These issues are approached historically by examining the rise and fall of the project known as logical empiricism (or logical positivism). Four credit hours. COHEN

[PL328] Radical Ecologies Radical ecologies interrogate our everyday, scientific, and metaphysical conceptions of nature, they emphasize that environmental problems in human-to-nature relations originate in human-to-human relations (e.g., gender, class, and race relations), and they call for comprehensive social and cultural changes through their critiques of existing social forms. They critically explore the historical, cultural, ethical, political, economic, and technological aspects of the place of the human in nature. Readings from anarchist social ecology, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and ecosocialism. Prerequisite: One philosophy course. Four credit hours.

[PL337] Philosophy of Humor What makes something funny? Is there a logic to jokes? What unites puns, slapstick, and satire? Does saying "It's only a joke" excuse offensive jokes? Is a sense of humor a virtue? Is humor a proper subject for philosophy? Historically important theories from Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Freud will lead us to contemporary debates about the logic, ethics, and aesthetics of humor as well as its cultural and social aspects. Previously offered as Philosophy 398 (Spring 2013). Prerequisite: Three philosophy courses. Four credit hours.

[PL338] Philosophy of Language Philosophy took a linguistic turn in the 20th century: philosophers have come to suppose that reflection on the nature of language and the linguistic representation can help solve longstanding philosophical problems. The development of the philosophy of language and its success, with special attention to the role of metaphor. Prerequisite: Philosophy 151. Four credit hours.
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include poetics, politics, ethics, and rhetoric. The topic will change from time to time, depending on which work(s) we read. Texts most likely to be the focus in any given semester: Peirce, James, Dewey, Addams, Mead, and others. Students acquire a solid historical, cultural, and philosophical understanding of what is quintessentially "American" about American philosophy and how it relates to other philosophical traditions. Prerequisite: One course in philosophy. Four credit hours. H.

Contemporary Analytic Philosophy At the turn of the 20th century, G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell revolutionized the way we philosophize. Their new methods focused intensely on language, radically altering philosophy's agenda: old questions got new answers, new questions were raised, more attention was paid to the nature of philosophy itself. It culminated in Wittgenstein's extraordinary Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus—and a discipline in a crisis of self-identity. The first articulate responses in mid-century were Logical Positivism and Ordinary Language Philosophy, but the contours of contemporary philosophy and its main voices, such as Kripke's Realism or Rorty's Neo-Pragmatism, are still best understood against this historical backdrop. Provides context for entering contemporary philosophical debates. Prerequisite: Two philosophy courses. Four credit hours.

Kant and German Idealism The years between the publication of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1781) and Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (1806) are among the richest in the history of philosophy. Kant's work inspired ardent devotion and passionate protest: Fichte's Science of Knowledge, Schelling's Naturphilosophie, Schiller's essays on the tragic and the sublime, and Hegel's dialectical system all responded to Kant's critical philosophy. We will read parts of the above works as well as examples of German Romanticism, a movement that sought to undermine Kantian rationality through irony and aphorism. Prerequisite: Three courses in philosophy. Four credit hours. H.

Beauty and Truth: The German Age of Aesthetics Philosophers and artists during the German Age of Aesthetics (1770-1830) believed that art was among humans' highest achievements. Kant compared aesthetic insight with moral feeling; Goethe and Schiller paired their pathbreaking literary accomplishments with theories describing freedom in terms of the tragic and the sublime. The poet Novalis and critic Friedrich Schlegel articulated a new aesthetic they hoped would change the world; Hegel argued that art is one expression of absolute truth. These aesthetic theories are supplemented with plays and novels, as well as with the music and visual art that characterized the period. Prerequisite: Two philosophy courses. Four credit hours. A. MOLAND

19th-Century Philosophy Philosophy in the 19th century began with the assertion by great systematic philosopher G.W.F. Hegel that what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational; it ended with Nietzsche's virulent attacks on the entire Western rationalist tradition. Between these benchmarks we find Karl Marx's claim that philosophy's job is not to understand the world but to change it; John Stuart Mill's articulation of utilitarianism; and Kierkegaard's philosophy of existential renunciation. A survey of these and other philosophers along with a study of the social upheaval and scientific advances to which they reacted. Prerequisite: Philosophy 232. Four credit hours. H.

Existentialism An examination of the individual, freedom, death, meaning, value, nihilism, authenticity, responsibility, and faith in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Buber, and black existential philosophers. Prerequisite: One course in philosophy. Four credit hours. GORDON

Contemporary Continental Philosophy An exploration of the most significant themes and thinkers in French and German thought from the early 20th century to the present. Movements and schools of thought covered may include phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, French empiricism, psychoanalysis, critical theory, feminism, (post)structuralism, deconstruction, science studies, and recent speculative realism. Through close reading and practiced writing students will engage with the question "What is philosophy?" Prerequisite: Philosophy 232 or 359. Four credit hours. PETERSON

Recent Continental Realisms In recent years, a new metanarrative about contemporary philosophy has been adopted by some continental philosophers. It says that, despite appearances, 20th-century philosophers have not really talked much about objects or the world as such, but only about how human beings "access" the world by means of consciousness, subjectivity, language games, discourse, praxis, being-in-the-world, or embodiment. In order for philosophy to be rescued from this unproductive anthropocentric cul-de-sac, it has to return to some form of realism. Students will explore the recent work of a handful of philosophers. Prerequisite: Philosophy 232, 359, or 378. Four credit hours.

Philosophers in Focus: Aristotle A close examination of some text(s) of Aristotle's, along with relevant secondary literature. The topic will change from time to time, depending on which work(s) we read. Texts most likely to be the focus in any given semester include poetics, politics, ethics, and rhetoric. Prerequisite: Philosophy 231. Four credit hours.
[PL389] Philosophers in Focus: Ludwig Wittgenstein  A close encounter with Wittgenstein, one of the great minds and central figures of 20th-century philosophy, with attention paid to both his rigorous early work, Tractatus, and his enormously influential later work, "Philosophical Investigations," with its critiques of essentialism and foundationalism. Prerequisite: Two philosophy courses.  Four credit hours.

PL398s  Philosophy of Cognitive Science  Cognitive science is the interdisciplinary study of the mind, including psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, computer science, and philosophy, among other disciplines. We will discuss the conceptual foundations of cognitive science and approaches to integrating findings and perspectives from across disciplines into a coherent understanding of the mind. In so doing, we will address findings from each of the disciplines of cognitive science, along with issues in the philosophy of science and philosophical issues relating to the nature of mind, self, and agency. Prerequisite: One course in philosophy.  Four credit hours.  DACEY

PL401f  Philosophy Colloquium I  The first semester of a year-long series of presentations from invited speakers on topics of philosophical interest. Senior majors are required to attend all colloquia, read the papers, and prepare responses to the presentations. One credit hour for completion of two semesters of the series. Prerequisite: Senior standing as a philosophy major.  Noncredit.  COHEN, GORDON, MOLAND, PETERSON

PL402s  Philosophy Colloquium II  The second semester of a year-long series of presentations from invited speakers on topics of philosophical interest. Senior majors are required to attend all colloquia, read the papers, and prepare responses to the presentations. One credit hour for the year. Prerequisite: Philosophy 401 and senior standing as a philosophy major.  One credit hour.  COHEN, GORDON, MOLAND, PETERSON

[PL483] Philosophy Honors Program  Research conducted under the guidance of a faculty member and focused on an approved topic leading to the writing of a thesis. A 3.25 major average at the end of the senior year, a grade of A- or better on honors work, a public presentation, and final approval by the department are conditions of successful completion of this program. Prerequisite: Senior standing, a 3.25 major average at the end of the junior year, and permission of the department. The honors tutor must be a member of the philosophy faculty.  Four credit hours.

PL491f, 492s  Independent Study  Individual projects in areas where the student has demonstrated the interest and competence necessary for independent work. Prerequisite: Permission of the instructor.  One to four credit hours.  FACULTY