“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

PL111f  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

PL113s  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, and the role of race or gender in human identity.  Four credit hours.  S. SUDAN

PL114f  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. BEHUNIAK

[PL117]  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. 

Four credit hours. W1.

[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.

[PL126] 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.

PL138f Shattered Certainties: Philosophy in Transition The quest for certainty had defined modern philosophy since Descartes, but the early 20th century put too many roadblocks in the way: The Great War upended the old political order; relativity and quantum theory did the same for our notions of space and time; and Godel proved that even mathematics was not safe. We will focus on the emergence of Logical Positivism and American Pragmatism as the major philosophical responses to these upheavals in thought. Part of a three-course Integrated Studies cluster. Prerequisite: Concurrent enrollment in English and History 138. Elect Integrated Studies 138. Four credit hours. S. COHEN

PL151f 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.

[PL213] 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.

PL215s 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. GORDON

PL216s Philosophy of Nature Ancient philosophers contemplated the natural world, modern philosophers and scientists sought to instrumentalize it, and recent thinkers are gaining an appreciation of nature's often unruly complexity. As they consider varied historical and current accounts of nature, students will also engage with the questions how, by whom, and under what conditions knowledge of nature is produced, providing opportunities to question their own fundamental beliefs about nature. Readings range from Aristotle to current philosophy, history, and social studies of the sciences. Four credit hours. S. U. PETERSON

[PL217] 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.

PL218f Philosophy of Law A philosophical investigation into such topics as natural law, legal positivism, the nature of legal systems, fundamental concepts of rights and duties, and the persistent question of where law and morality join. We engage with specific legal themes like punishment, property, and sexual consent against the background of classics of socio-political philosophy like Hobbes' De Cive and Rousseau's Social Contract while attending to contemporary applications and problems. Four credit hours. S. SUDAN

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: Sophomore or higher standing. Four credit hours. H. GORDON

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. SUDAN

[PL234] 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.

[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.

PL240f Ethics on the Continent: From Kant to Levinas An examination of some of the prominent ethical theorizing and metaethical discourse on the European Continent from Kant to the present. Topics include Kantian deontological moral theory, Nietzsche's critique of "slave morality," phenomenological value ethics, Existentialist, dialogical, feminist, and discourse ethics, among others. Examination of these alternatives provides students ample opportunity to reflect on their own moral beliefs in an informed way. Four credit hours. PETERSON

[PL243] 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, animal liberation, food issues, and sustainability, but also through civic engagement with local community partners. Four credit hours.

[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 these 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.

PL258s 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. COHEN

[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.
PL265f  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.  BEHUNIAK

PL274s  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.  BEHUNIAK

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

PL297Jj  Taking Philosophy Public  Like other disciplines, philosophy has turned recently to urgent conversations about how we might extend what we do in the academy out to the public sphere and contribute to public life. In this humanities lab, students will first read philosophical texts about public philosophy, they will follow one or more philosophers on social media, and they will Skype with philosophers who are currently engaged in public philosophy activities. Students will then design, organize, and carry out public philosophy events or activities. Those may include a Socrates cafe, writing op-ed pieces for local papers, engaging local students or the elderly, or something else of their choosing. Prerequisite: A prior course in philosophy.  Three credit hours.  GORDON

[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.

[PL317]  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.

PL328f  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 eco-socialism. Prerequisite: One philosophy course.  Four credit hours.  PETERSON

PL338f  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.  COHEN

PL352f  American Philosophy  An introduction to classical American philosophy (roughly 1870-1945), with a focus on pragmatism as a response to European forms of empiricism and idealism. Begins with the transcendentalist thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson and concludes with contemporary neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty. Features close study of thinkers most representative of the "classical" period: 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.  BEHUNIAK

PL353s  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. COHEN

[PL355] 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.

[PL357] 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.

[PL374] 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.

[PL378] 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.

PL380As Recent Continental Realisms  In recent years, a group of philosophers has thrown the widespread dogma of "social construction" into question. Is the world really nothing but a social construction? Does humankind really play such a significant role in the constitution of the world through its consciousness, subjectivity, language games, discourse, praxis, being-in-the-world, or embodiment? Students will explore some very recent work by a handful of philosophers who argue that in order for philosophy to be rescued from its condition of being unable to respond to current world problems, it has to return to some form of realism. Prerequisite: Philosophy 232 or two philosophy courses. Four credit hours. PETERSON

PL381s Philosophers in Focus: Plato  A concentrated study of a selection of Plato's dialogues and some scholarly articles, centered around a given theme. Students will gain deep understanding of the theme, as well as its connection to Plato's larger philosophical project. Prerequisite: Philosophy 231. Four credit hours. GORDON

PL386f Philosophers in Focus: Immanuel Kant  Kant developed his metaphysical system not only as an austere account of purely rational determination of knowledge and action but also as an intervention in the lively and tumultuous milieu of the Enlightenment. In this course, we study Kant's critical philosophy to acquaint ourselves with the principles of his metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics before turning to popular and scholarly polemical pieces in which he engages with a variety of socio-political views of the day, including the topic of race. Prerequisite: One course in philosophy (not including Philosophy 151). Four credit hours. SUDAN

[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.

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, 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, PETERSON

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PL483f  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.  FACULTY

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