Why Philosophy at Brandeis?

The skills that analytic philosophy develops—critical thinking, enlightened use of one’s imagination, and the capacity to see the world from other peoples’ points of view—are essential in the pursuit of any discipline.

Curriculum Overview

Students may pursue philosophy as either a major or a minor. To become a major in philosophy, students are required to complete at least nine courses, five of which must be taught by faculty of the philosophy department. At least one course must be in the history of philosophy; one in logic; and at least four must be upper-level courses.

The philosophy program is divided into five basic fields: logic, ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and history of philosophy.

Logic is the practice of using sound methods to distinguish good from bad reasoning. It helps us assess how well our premises support our conclusions, see what we are committed to accepting when we take a view, and avoid adopting beliefs for which we lack adequate reasons. Logic also helps us find arguments where we might otherwise only see a set of loosely related statements, discover assumptions we did not know we held, and formulate the minimum claims we need to establish if we are to prove our point.

Ethics addresses the meanings of our moral concepts—such as right action, obligation, and justice—and formulates principles to guide moral decisions, whether in private or public life. What are our moral obligations to others? How can moral disagreements be settled rationally? What rights must a just society accord its citizens? What constitutes a valid excuse for wrongdoing?

Metaphysics seeks basic criteria for determining what sorts of things are real. For instance, are there mental, physical, and abstract things (such as numbers), or is there just the physical and the spiritual, or merely matter and energy? Are people physical beings through and through or do they have properties that cannot be reduced to anything physical?

Epistemology concerns the nature and scope of knowledge. What does it mean to know [the truth], and what is the nature of truth? What sorts of things can be known, and can we be justified in our beliefs about what goes beyond the evidence of our senses, such as the inner lives of others or events of the distant past? Is there knowledge beyond the reach of science? What are the limits of self-knowledge?
History of philosophy studies both major philosophers and entire periods in the development of philosophy such as the ancient, medieval, modern, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century periods. It seeks to understand great figures, their influence on others, and their importance for contemporary issues. The history of philosophy in a single country is sometimes studied separately, as in the case of American philosophy, as are major movements within a nation, such as British empiricism or German idealism. International movements with substantial histories, such as existentialism and phenomenology, are studied as well. The history of philosophy not only provides insight into the other subfields of philosophy, it also reveals many of the foundations of Western culture.

Other Benefits of the Program

In addition to the core courses, Brandeis regularly offers classes in a variety of subfields including environmental and biomedical ethics, and the philosophy of science, religion, math, education, law, language, and mind, to name a few.

Career and Education Options

Students from every discipline can find philosophy courses that supplement and enhance their studies. Our majors have pursued careers in medicine, law, computer science, business management, public relations, sales, and many other arenas. Both the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal have published stories about how employers in a variety of fields are looking for candidates who can solve problems, think and write clearly, organize ideas, question assumptions, sort through a mass of information and identify what’s essential, as well as find—in the midst of heated debate—some common ground. These are all talents that the study of philosophy cultivates and develops.

Faculty

Following is a list of department faculty members and their areas of specialization:

- **Andreas Teuber, chair**
  Political philosophy, moral philosophy, aesthetics, modern social theory, history of political thought

- **Alan Berger**
  Logic, philosophy of language, metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophical logic

- **Robert Greenberg**
  Metaphysics, history of philosophy, Kant

- **Eli Hirsch, undergraduate advising head**
  Metaphysics, epistemology, medical ethics

- **Sarah McGrath**
  Ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, feminist philosophy, philosophy of biology, early modern philosophy, philosophy of language

- **Jerry Samet, minors adviser**
  Philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychology and cognitive science, history of philosophy.

- **Marion Smiley, honors adviser**
  Moral, social, and political philosophy

- **Palle Yourgrau**
  Philosophy of language, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of time, Greek philosophy