

PHILOSOPHY

Departmental Guidelines & Mission Statement

Philosophy asks some of the most fundamental questions about human existence. Philosophical inquiry leads students to recognize the potentially unnoticed assumptions that underpin even our most ordinary ways of interacting with other persons and engaging in human projects. Such assumptions concern, for example, the nature of human knowledge, action, and value. Philosophy challenges students to move beyond uncritical patterns of thought, to recognize problems, and to exchange a more naive worldview for a more considered and justifiable one. In doing so, students learn to think in ways that are simultaneously disciplined and imaginative. Philosophy Department faculty members cooperatively approach these concerns from diverse perspectives, both in studying the works of major philosophers and in their own creative activity. Students are encouraged to join with the faculty in this inquiry and to philosophize creatively on their own. The courses and seminars in the Department are intended to develop the abilities necessary for these activities.

Students without previous experience with philosophy will usually enroll in PHIL 101 - Introduction to Philosophy, PHIL 121 - Ethics: Philosophical Considerations of Morality or PHIL 126 - Social and Political Philosophy. Students who wish to continue in Philosophy and perhaps to major or minor in it will often take PHIL 231 - Greek and Medieval Philosophy or PHIL 232 - Modern Philosophy as their second course. These are required courses for the major and prerequisites for some of our upper-level courses. However, there are many ways to move through our curriculum depending on a student's particular interests and departmental offerings in any given semester.

Mission Statement

The Philosophy Department at Denison University sees our goals for student learning as three-fold. First, and perhaps most crucially in terms of the mission of the college, we understand ourselves as attempting to help students develop the sort of critical/self-critical perspective described earlier, teaching them to take nothing for granted and to raise questions about all claims to obviousness, truth, and authority – not, it's important to say, because we don't think truth exists, but because we think if it does exist the search for it must be undertaken rigorously and in a way that refuses to be short-circuited by premature claims of success. Second, we want to teach them to do philosophy: to think about some of the central (and arguably perennial) questions that philosophers examine, questions that should be live and significant ones for any reflective person, and to develop the skills of philosophical argumentation (and the meta-skills of thinking about the value of those skills, and of that argumentation, themselves) that seem crucial to understanding and answering those questions. And thirdly, we want our students – especially our majors and minors, but even introductory students as well – to have the opportunity to learn about some of the key thinkers and texts in the history of philosophy, precisely because the questions those thinkers and texts consider are indeed live and significant ones for all reflective people, but also because what's said about those questions by those thinkers and texts deserve our careful scrutiny, and because our own situation today – both intellectually and also concretely – is in many ways the product of those questions and those answers.

We have other goals, too, which cannot be easily separated from the main ones listed above. In order to develop the skills of critical and philosophical thinking and the understanding of great philosophical

ideas, our students must be able to read important but also often difficult texts, many written in a style (and in a context) that's unfamiliar to them, and we see teaching students to read, carefully and critically, again without accepting what's written as true but rather in a questioning spirit, as a very important part of our task. And to be a critical thinker – and a practitioner of philosophy as well – without being able to write, correctly and thoughtfully and persuasively, is impossible; all of our courses involve writing and we take instruction about writing – in particular the sort of persuasive writing in which arguments for a thesis are presented and counter-arguments against it are considered and answered – to be central to what we do in the department, both at the lower- and the upper-levels.