

Information and reading list for those starting PPE in October 2025

Dear student,

Welcome to the incoming PPE cohort at Somerville! We hope that you are excited to join us at Oxford and we look forward to meeting you in person!

At Somerville, you will be following in the footsteps of some of the most illustrious philosophers of the 20th century, including Philippa Foot (the inventor of the trolley problem), Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, and Onora O’Neil.

This letter outlines Philosophy-related information about your course, as well as advice about what you should read before coming up to Oxford in October. You will receive information and advice about Politics and Economics separately.

In your first year, you will study each of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. This will be in preparation for the Preliminary Examinations in PPE that you will sit at the end of your third term.

a) Course description of first-year studies in Philosophy

The purpose of the Introduction to Philosophy course in your first year is to introduce you to some central philosophical issues, concepts, and ways of thinking. These will be useful to you regardless of whether you continue studying Philosophy in your second and third years.

The course has three parts:

- I. **General Philosophy.** An introduction to some topics in epistemology and metaphysics.
- II. **Moral Philosophy.** An introduction to some topics in ethics, studied in connection with J. S. Mill’s *Utilitarianism*.
- III. **Introductory Logic.** An introduction to logic, studies alongside a specially written logic textbook available once you arrive in Oxford.

You will study all three of these parts in your first year. In the first term, you will start with classes to introduce you to **Logic**, as well as tutorials in **General Philosophy**. In the second term, you will study **Moral Philosophy**.

Part I, General Philosophy and **Part II, Moral Philosophy** are taught in *tutorials* consisting of pairs or triples. Students are introduced to central issues in philosophy, studied through reading classic texts in conjunction with more contemporary writings, including critical responses and modern treatments of the same issues. You will learn how to read and to evaluate philosophical writings, how to identify the author’s arguments and conclusions, and how to think critically and write lucidly about the issues discussed. Students are required to write essays and complete assignments on a number of topics to help develop these skills.

General Philosophy introduces students to issues such as the foundations of knowledge, scepticism, the nature of the mind and its relation to the body, personal identity, and free will.

Moral Philosophy involves the study of an influential but controversial moral theory, with discussions of subjects such as happiness and pleasure, the criterion of right action, the role and foundations of moral principles, and justice.

Part III, Logic is taught in college classes. Logic involves the study of patterns of valid inference and involves some study of formal systems. Students are required to complete exercises and proofs in these formal systems, and to understand the relation between the elements of formal systems and the kinds of inferences and arguments used in ordinary language. Even if you do not plan to pursue Logic beyond the first year, you will find it useful in further philosophical study to have some familiarity with formal logical languages and the ability to use them to investigate logical relationships and to understand their uses by others.

b) Recommended reading

You are not expected to have undertaken any formal studies of philosophy before coming to Oxford, but your studies will be fast-paced once you get here – so it is a big advantage if you have done a bit of reading ahead!

To this end, **we expect you to have read** the following texts before you come up to Oxford:¹

1. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, **Meditations 1 and 2**
2. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Oxford Philosophical Texts, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: OUP, 1998), **Chapters 1 and 2**
3. Plato's *Republic*, **Book 1** (Any good edition will do.)
4. Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives', *Philosophical Review* 81(3): 305–316 (1972)

For **Logic**, you will use a textbook specially written for the Oxford course. If you would like to consult it ahead of time, it is as follows:

- Volker Halbach, *The Logic Manual* (Oxford: OUP)

If you haven't studied philosophy before, and want a general introduction to some central philosophical topics, we recommend you tackle the following books:

- Simon Blackburn, *Think* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999)
- Earl Conee and Theodore Sider, *Riddles of existence: A guided tour of metaphysics* (Oxford: OUP, 2005)

We look forward to welcoming you to Somerville in October!

Karen Margrethe Nielsen (karen.nielsen@philosophy.ox.ac.uk)

Dale Dorsey (dale.dorsey@philosophy.ox.ac.uk)

¹ (1) is freely available on Early Modern Texts (<https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1641.pdf>); (2) is freely available here (<https://www.utilitarianism.com/mill1.htm>) and here (<https://www.utilitarianism.com/mill2.htm>), but purchasing the specific OPT edition is highly recommended; (3) is freely available at, e.g., MIT classics (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>); and (4) is freely available here (https://sites.pitt.edu/~mthompso/readings/foot_mshi.pdf)