

American Philosophical Association Statement on the Philosophy Major

The Following is extracted from

Proceedings and Addresses of the APA 80:5 (May 2007), pages 76-89.

STATEMENT ON THE MAJOR

An earlier version of this statement was prepared by an ad hoc committee appointed by the APA Board of Officers, under the chairmanship of Robert Audi of the University of Nebraska, and was published as the committee's report in the Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Volume 64, Number 5. The present version was subsequently prepared at the Board's request by Richard Schacht of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, then Chair of the APA Committee on the Status and Future of the Profession, and was approved for publication and distribution under the Board's auspices at its 1992 Annual Meeting.

“Philosophy”?

Dictionary definitions of “philosophy” are of little help when it comes to considering what the “major” in philosophy does or should involve. Philosophy has meant and means many different things, even among philosophers themselves; and the philosophical community in our country embraces a number of quite diverse traditions. This rich and enriching diversity precludes the imposition of any orthodoxy or rigidly uniform structure upon “philosophy major” programs. Institutions as well as individual faculty and students further have differing characters and interests, for which allowance must also be made. Yet some meaningful generalizations can be made with respect to the study of philosophy and the philosophy major that should be broadly reconcilable with disparate institutional missions and circumstances, as well as with differing student interests. This statement addresses these matters for the information and guidance of students, faculty, administrators and others who must for various reasons arrive at decisions regarding philosophy major programs.

In our colleges and universities, philosophy is one discipline—and one undergraduate major—among many. Its place among the disciplines and majors is not easily specifiable. In its concerns and ways of pursuing those concerns, it differs not only from the natural and social sciences but also from the humanities disciplines with which it is commonly grouped. Yet it is related in significant ways to all of them. What it is today is intimately related to its long and rich history.

The discipline philosophy has become has been shaped by an intellectual and historical tradition that began some 2500 years ago in the Greek culture of the eastern Mediterranean region, although similar developments also occurred independently elsewhere in other cultures, both earlier and subsequently. In the language of the ancient Greeks, “philosophy” literally meant “love of wisdom.” Certain pioneering thinkers among them sought to put this “love of wisdom” into practice in a form of disciplined reflection about ourselves, our world, the good life, our dealings with one another, and an expanding range of other matters of interest and importance to them. The earliest Greek philosophers experimented with comprehensive interpretations and

explanations of the world in which we find ourselves, replacing myths with theoretical reasoning about its nature.

Socrates, mindful of the Delphic injunction “know thyself,” then drew attention to the importance of reflection upon human life and conduct.

Contending that the unexamined life is not worth living, he set an example of inquiry that has inspired countless others ever since.

Philosophy has developed and changed in many ways, but it fundamentally continues these kinds of thinking. Its problems and materials are drawn from every aspect of our lives and experience, and its deliberations extend to every subject admitting of disciplined reflection. It once embraced nearly all forms of inquiry, as can still be seen in the title of the degree granted in most scholarly and scientific disciplines—“Doctor of Philosophy.” The emergence of the various sciences and humanities disciplines as autonomous fields of study has removed many particular sorts of inquiry from its immediate concern. Yet philosophy retains a larger interest both in the nature of these other forms of inquiry and in their subjects. It further continues to deal with many issues of fundamental human importance which other disciplines may raise but do not themselves resolve, ranging from the mind-body relation and the idea of God to the nature of truth and knowledge and the status and content of morality and value.

The study of philosophy serves to develop intellectual abilities important for life as a whole, beyond the knowledge and skills required for any particular profession. Properly pursued, it enhances analytical, critical and communicative capacities that are applicable to any subject matter, and in any human context. It cultivates the capacity and appetite for self-expression and reflection, for exchange and debate of ideas, for life-long learning, and for dealing with problems for which there are no easy answers. **In doing this, a good philosophical education also strengthens the ability to participate responsibly and intelligently in public life and the tasks of citizenship.**

The Major in Philosophy: Four Models

The purpose of many undergraduate major programs is to prepare students for specific professions involving the practice or application of the disciplines with which the majors are associated, either upon graduation or after further graduate-level study in these disciplines. Philosophy is in part a profession, consisting chiefly of academic employment in philosophy departments at colleges and universities, as teachers of philosophy and contributors to inquiry in the various fields of philosophy. The major in philosophy should serve, among other things, to provide those who may wish to enter this profession with a good start in that direction. At most colleges and universities, however, this cannot be the primary purpose of the major in philosophy, because it is not realistic to suppose that very many students will follow this path. The primary purpose of the major in philosophy is better conceived as a valuable and indeed paradigmatic “liberal education” major. Its basic purpose should be to introduce interested students to philosophy in ways that will serve them well—both professionally and personally—whatever they may go on to do after graduation. Provision must be made for those who aspire to graduate study and careers in philosophy, but they must be recognized to be the exception rather than the rule. A well-conceived major, however, can be at once a valuable liberal education major and a sound preparation for graduate study leading into the life of the philosophical profession. Highly specialized study in philosophy is in any event best left to graduate school. A flexible and broadly-gauged undergraduate program is thus desirable for both purposes.

Students majoring in philosophy should develop some knowledge of the history and current state of the discipline, a grasp of representative philosophical issues and ways of dealing with them, a capacity to apply philosophical methods to intellectual problems, and a sense of how philosophy bears on other disciplines and on human life more generally. Studies leading to a philosophy major should also develop a critical mind, a balance of analytic and interpretive abilities, and a capacity for the imaginative development of abstract formulations and their concrete applications.

These objectives may be pursued in different ways and through different kinds of programs. A variety of reasonable models, reflecting alternative sound approaches to philosophical education, may be distinguished. They can and perhaps should be combined, though each has its advocates and predominates in some college and universities.

The *historical model* emphasizes the history of philosophy. As applied to the major as a whole, it usually begins with the Presocratics or Socrates and Plato. It traces and critically discusses the views, problems and methods of these and subsequent important philosophers, often with attention to their wider cultural setting.

The *field model* stresses coverage of central fields and various subfields of philosophical inquiry. They generally include metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, the theory of knowledge; logic; and ethics and value theory, together with the history of philosophy. Beyond these central fields, attention may further be given to such areas of special inquiry as social and political philosophy and the philosophy of science, language, religion, and art.

There is also a *problems model*. Its emphasis is on understanding major philosophical issues, such as the nature and existence of God, the mind body problem, the nature of knowledge and the challenge of skepticism, the free will issue, and the problem of objectivity in ethics.

A related but alternative approach is represented by the *activity model*. On this approach, “doing philosophy” is primary. Methods and approaches are stressed, and the main focus is on ways of dealing with philosophical problems of various kinds. Here the process of inquiry is considered more important than the results or particular conclusions reached.

Philosophy major programs quite properly vary considerably with the kind of institution offering them; with the orientation, size, and scholarly commitments of the faculty; and with the needs and interests of the students served. All four of these models express worthy ideals of philosophical education, however; and a major program does well to reflect each of them in some way.

Central Elements of a Major in Philosophy

Even though they may agree on little else, philosophers of the most disparate interests and persuasions are united in their common recognition of philosophy’s intimate relation to its own history. The history of philosophy is neither a chronicle of past error gradually replaced by present truth nor a repository of sacrosanct masterworks. It is rather a changing variety of questions posed and responses offered to them, to be understood in context, applied to current concerns where appropriate, and challenged by argument. In the course of this history, certain texts and issues have attracted particular attention, affording philosophers of any orientation a means of common discourse and communication even if they know little of one another’s specific traditions.

These points of shared reference include the writings of certain philosophers whose historical importance is beyond dispute, such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume and Kant. They also include various problems central to the major areas of philosophical inquiry, pertaining to the world's and our own nature and existence (metaphysics), the knowledge we may have of them (epistemology), sound reasoning (logic), and human conduct (ethics).

These prominent figures, main kinds of inquiry, and basic issues should be encountered in any philosophy major. They can be studied in courses organized in a variety of ways (e.g., historically, or by problems, or by fields); and they can be introduced in a relatively modest number of initial courses, which typically form the core of the major. These courses commonly begin with a general introduction to philosophy, and include additional basic courses in ethics and in symbolic logic or logical reasoning, together with survey courses in the history of ancient and early modern philosophy.

Major programs with such a foundation and core can be filled out in many different ways, either through the addition of further requirements or by choices left to individual students. A particular course of study might go on to emphasize one or another general area or inquiry, historical period, or tradition; or the relation of Western to Eastern thought; or applied philosophy (e.g., applied ethics); or the interface between philosophy and some other discipline or interdisciplinary study (e.g., religious studies, **cognitive science**, **legal studies**, literary theory, or feminist theory); or the history and philosophy of science.

History of Philosophy. One way in which the courses mentioned above may be supplemented is through more advanced electives in the history of philosophy. Students should have the opportunity to become acquainted with the Stoics, Epicureans and other late ancient philosophers; with medieval thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas; with 19th-century philosophers from Hegel to Nietzsche; with the main philosophical developments of the 20th century, including those both in Europe and in the English-speaking world; and with the philosophical traditions of other cultures. It is also desirable to offer more specialized and advanced courses beyond survey courses of major areas or periods, dealing intensively with one or two important figures from them. There is much to be said for making the study of several of the great philosophers in depth a part of the major in philosophy.

Ethics. Courses in the history of philosophy may deal with the ethical thought of the figures considered as well as with their treatments of problems of knowledge, mind and reality. It is common, however, for ethics and its history to be dealt with separately. In either case, it is desirable for the major to include at least one course dealing specifically with problems of ethics. Students should also have the opportunity to pursue the study of applied ethics and related matters such as social and political philosophy, value theory and aesthetics.

Problems. Whether through courses dealing in depth with important figures or in separate and more advanced courses, students majoring in philosophy also should be provided with opportunities to pursue the study of the problems of knowledge, mind and reality, and other issues that they may first encounter in their introductory and historical survey courses. They should be encouraged to take several relatively advanced courses in which such problems are dealt with intensively. In many programs a variety of such courses bearing the names of the related areas of inquiry are offered: e.g., metaphysics, epistemology (or theory of knowledge), and the philosophy of mind, of language, of religion, and of science. This is not the only way of accomplishing this objective, however. A program structured primarily around the study of historically important figures and works may serve the same purpose.

Logic. Logic may be studied in a number of different ways. No one of them is essential to a sound major in philosophy, but a course of some sort dealing with the principles of logic and logical reasoning is highly desirable. One version of such a course is an introduction to symbolic logic, which may be supplemented by more advanced courses. Another is an “informal logic” or “critical thinking” course, emphasizing the study of forms of sound reasoning, inference and argument. For students who choose philosophy as a good “liberal education” major and do not intend to pursue its study beyond the undergraduate level, the latter may be sufficient. Those who intend to take advanced courses dealing with contemporary treatments of philosophical issues in the central areas of the discipline, however, will find familiarity with symbolic logic very helpful; and it is indispensable for those who contemplate going on to graduate study in philosophy.

The expanding agenda. While it is a matter of general agreement that the above areas of inquiry and kinds of problems are central to the discipline of philosophy, they are far from exhausting its scope and content. In ancient times and again in the early modern period, its agenda was virtually as broad as that of intellectual inquiry itself. During the nineteenth century its compass expanded in some directions, as new forms of inquiry were inaugurated, even as it contracted in others, with the separation from it of a host of emerging scientific disciplines. In recent decades it has expanded yet again. A variety of “philosophy of ” areas of inquiry have matured; interest in a range of “applied” areas has grown; attention has been drawn to issues at the intersection of philosophy and other disciplines; and questions about matters relating to gender, race, international relations, and differing cultural traditions have come into focus. These concerns are coming to be reflected in the discipline—in its literature, and also in the teaching of philosophy at many institutions. While few would argue that courses devoted to them ought to be incorporated into the philosophy major as requirements, the opportunity to pursue such studies within the general context of the major is highly desirable. Courses dealing with such subjects can be valuable supplements to more traditional offerings in the philosophy curriculum, for majors and non-majors alike.

Challenges. Controversy about the nature and practice of philosophy is as old as philosophy itself, and indeed is a fundamental characteristic of the discipline. It is highly appropriate, therefore, for such controversy to be addressed and encouraged in the study of philosophy. The history of philosophy is in part a history of such controversies; and they continue today, not only in the ongoing debates between adherents of differing philosophical traditions (and within these traditions as well), but also in the form of new challenges from different quarters. So, for example, challenges are mounted to the hegemony of “analytical” philosophy, to the “classical modern” canon, and to other, more fundamental features of prevailing forms of philosophical thinking from the perspectives of feminist, post-structuralist, Marxist, and other critical theories.

While such critiques are not easily dealt with, they are better addressed than ignored, in the study of philosophy as in the discipline. Philosophy in the past has been transformed by some fundamental challenges to prevailing forms of inquiry, even as it has withstood others. It remains to be seen whether it will undergo further transformation in the course of coming to terms with these critiques. Philosophy is no body of doctrine or fixed set of procedures, but rather is open-ended inquiry of the most fundamental kind, in which even its own conduct is at issue. Acquainting students with the controversies associated with challenges that have been and continue to be mounted to previously established ways of thinking cannot be reduced to a particular component of the major, but it should be one dimension of a philosophical education.

Structuring the Philosophy Major

The sequencing of courses can be useful, and in some cases is a virtual necessity; but there is no single best way of ordering all courses to be taken in philosophy. Historically influential philosophers should be read, and important problems should be encountered, at every level in the curriculum. On the other hand, the ordering of certain sorts of courses is clearly desirable. Before taking courses dealing intensively with philosophers like Aristotle and Kant, students should be introduced to them in a more general way, in introductory or historical survey courses. It is also useful for students to be acquainted with some of the major texts by such philosophers as Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant before beginning advanced study in such areas as metaphysics or the theory of knowledge, in order to understand the context of the emergence of the issues to be considered. On the other hand, it is equally useful for students to first acquire a basic understanding of these kinds of inquiry as an aid to understanding the positions of these philosophers.

In general, no one kind of philosophy course—historical, field, problem, or activity—must logically or pedagogically precede any other. **Different kinds of courses contribute in different ways to the cumulative development of philosophical understanding, skill, and judgment, but there is no one best order that need be imposed on all students.**

In structuring a philosophy major, it should be kept in mind that most students will have had little or no acquaintance with philosophy prior to their first undergraduate courses. The decision to elect philosophy as a major thus may not be made until after the first or second year of undergraduate study, during which the student may have taken only a few philosophy courses; and the courses taken may not include any of those specifically required for the major. Such relative latecomers to the major are likely to be the rule rather than the exception, and are to be expected and welcomed. The major therefore should be so structured that it can be completed within a period of three years or less. (This provides a further reason to avoid any rigid sequencing of courses, and to keep specific prerequisites for advanced courses to a minimum.)

The primary aim of an introductory course should not be “coverage” of a period, a field, or a set of problems, let alone all of philosophy. Introductory work should cultivate the abilities to recognize philosophical questions and grasp philosophical arguments; to read philosophical texts critically; to engage in philosophical discussion; and to write philosophical papers involving interpretation, argument, and research. These skills can be developed in courses organized historically, by problems, or by field. They require contact with original sources, not merely textbooks; opportunities for discussion as well as lectures; and experience in writing papers, in addition to examinations.

Beyond the introductory level, intermediate courses may offer students the opportunity to become acquainted with various periods of the history of philosophy and areas of philosophical inquiry. Courses dealing with matters of interest to students majoring in other subjects also are often placed at this level—e.g., courses concerned with philosophical perspectives on religion, science, history, **law and politics**, the arts and literature. Advanced courses may then deal with issues and texts of all of these sorts, and with important figures in the history of philosophy and areas of philosophical inquiry, in more detail and with increasing sophistication. No area of philosophy is inherently more advanced than any other, and many major texts can be read at any of these levels.

For reasons indicated above, it is neither possible nor desirable to specify precisely what structure a sound major in philosophy should have or how it should unfold year by year. It is not even necessary that students majoring in philosophy should be required to begin by taking one or more introductory courses, and then to take several intermediate courses, followed by a variety of

advanced courses in their last year or two. This would be impractical as well, for many students arrive at the decision to major in philosophy after taking several intermediate courses as electives. Moreover, in view of the diversity of areas of philosophical inquiry, intermediate as well as advanced courses may properly be taken in the last few years of undergraduate study as well as earlier.

Generally speaking, however, students are well advised to take a number of introductory and intermediate courses before attempting those at the more advanced level, and to take whatever “core courses” (e.g., in the history of philosophy, ethics and logic) may be required as early as possible once they have decided to major in philosophy. Moreover, while there can and should be no strict rule, it is common practice in many departments to suggest a general pattern that might usefully be recommended to students seeking guidance in the planning of their studies leading to a major.

First two years: a general introductory course in philosophy and first courses in ethics and logic.

Second year: survey courses in the history of ancient and early modern philosophy, and one or two intermediate-level courses in areas of interest to the students.

Third and fourth years: further intermediate courses and a number of advanced courses, including several in central areas of philosophical inquiry as well as others of interest to the student.

Fourth year: Several advanced courses in which the student has close contact with faculty members, possibly including a senior seminar, independent study course or honors thesis.

Options and Supplements

Electives. It is possible for a philosophy major program to require not only certain core courses but also a number of other courses in the history of philosophy and various central areas of the discipline. However, many such programs quite appropriately leave the choice of courses beyond the core courses up to students and their advisors, specifying further only that a certain total number of courses or hours must be completed, of which some number must be at the advanced level. A sound major may be of either sort, or somewhere between these extremes—e.g., further specifying that at least one course in each of several central areas must be taken. In view of the very different interests and intentions of prospective majors, it would seem desirable to allow considerable latitude to students in their choices of courses at the intermediate and advanced levels.

Seminars. Seminars make possible a kind of interaction with faculty and other students that is highly beneficial. A major program may be enhanced both in its attractiveness and in its quality by affording students the opportunity to take seminars as well as regular courses. Freshman seminars can serve to get beginning students off to a good start, for example; and senior seminars can enable them to bring the abilities and sophistication they have developed to bear on special topics at an advanced level of study. Seminars are likely to be most successful if they are optional rather than required. Offering more than a few each year may be beyond the capacity of many departments. For practical reasons, therefore, it may be most feasible to offer one or several freshman-sophomore seminars, and one or several seminars for more advanced students. Another option is to offer special “capstone courses” for majors in their final year, in addition to or in place of senior seminars.

Internships. Internships and community outreach experiences are optional components of the philosophy major on some campuses.

Students may intern in law, government, journalism, schools, or other settings, and receive academic credit on the basis of related philosophical readings and written assignments. Examples would include placement with a state civil rights enforcement division with related readings in philosophy of law, work on a United Nations environmental education project with related readings in environmental ethics and justice, or teaching critical thinking in inner city schools with related academic work in critical thinking and philosophy of education. The number of credit hours awarded should be consistent with departmental norms for the academic content of regularly scheduled courses, and not predicated on work or community service experience as such. When the academic and work experiences are properly matched to each other, both are deepened and students come away with a valuable experience in using and testing the skills and understanding they acquire in philosophy.

Other study. Students majoring in philosophy should complement their philosophy courses with a balanced selection of courses in other departments throughout their undergraduate study. It is also desirable for them to explore at least one other discipline in some depth, and a substantial “minor” in another discipline has much to be said for it. Such study in other disciplines may quite appropriately be entirely independent of their work in philosophy. Alternatively, it may usefully supplement their philosophical interests. So, for example, those interested in the philosophy of science are well advised to take courses in the sciences. An interest in the philosophy of mind and human nature may be complemented by courses in psychology, **cognitive science**, biology, and anthropology. An interest in feminism can be complemented by studies in women’s studies and literature, political theory or psychology; and an interest in aesthetics is best pursued in conjunction with courses in the arts and literature.

Combined majors. The close relation between philosophy and other disciplines suggests the desirability of offering students the option of combined major programs (as well as double majors, in which the requirements of both are fully satisfied). In combined major programs—e.g., majors in philosophy and religion, philosophy and history, or philosophy and psychology—the requirements in each discipline are typically reduced, to permit their joint satisfaction within something like the same total number of courses or hours. Such combined majors may be educationally sound, rewarding, and attractive to many students. In programs of this sort, however, it is usually desirable for the philosophy core-course requirements to be preserved.

Honors and special tracks. The basic requirements of the philosophy major should be relatively modest and general, to be appropriate for students with very different interests and intentions. However, programs may appropriately include special options for those who wish to emphasize certain areas of philosophy in their studies, and also for those who desire to achieve recognition for more intensive study or special achievement. Options of the first sort may take the form of designated specializations in such areas as moral, social and political philosophy, the philosophy of science, and the history of philosophy, involving taking a specified number of advanced courses in these areas. Options of the latter sort may take the form either of an intensified major, involving a greater number of total and advanced courses or hours, or of an honors program leading to graduation with distinction. Honors programs may involve special honors courses, independent study, the submission of an undergraduate thesis, written comprehensive examinations, an oral examination, or some combination of these or other such requirements.

Advising. To the extent that the major in philosophy is not rigidly structured, and because it can and does serve many different sorts of student interests, good advising is essential. Such guidance is all the more important because most students know little about philosophy and its many areas of inquiry when they begin its study, and therefore need assistance to discern which courses are most relevant to their interests and long-term plans. They also need to be guided in selecting advanced courses, and in identifying courses in other disciplines that may be relevant to their interests. Other students, departmental informational materials and office staff can be helpful to them. There is no substitute, however, for good and timely advising by faculty. (In some departments this is done by one or two individuals designated as chief advisor(s) for majors; but the advising role is best performed if it is widely shared, enabling students to receive the benefit of the knowledge and perspectives of many of their teachers.)

Philosophical Development

An undergraduate major in philosophy should be characterized both by breadth of acquaintance with the history, areas and problems of philosophy, and by depth or intensiveness of study and reflection. The desirability of both objectives limits what can be achieved within a few years in either dimension. Generally speaking, while breadth should not be neglected, depth should be emphasized. A good understanding of a few important philosophers and central problems of philosophy is better than a mere acquaintance with many of them. Yet depth should be achieved within an intelligible framework that connects importantly similar phenomena while also drawing attention to significant differences.

Intellectual growth in philosophy is fundamentally cumulative and integrative, and is not achieved by a mere succession of isolated analyses of texts or issues. Knowledge of ideas and texts has limited value without the capacity to use it in addressing specific philosophical problems, and a capacity to use philosophical methods, if isolated from knowledge of the history, problems, **and applications** of philosophy, can be sterile in application.

The major in philosophy emphasizes effective and critical reading, writing, and speaking; and the study of philosophy deals with the interpretation of texts, the balanced exposition and examination of issues, the construction and appraisal of arguments and explanations, and the criticism of doctrines and things commonly taken for granted. Through the consideration and discussion of well-selected readings and problems, and through writing assignments that are carefully and constructively criticized, philosophy majors can and should develop all of these capacities.

Particularly as they advance in their studies, they should be asked to read and reread, to write and rewrite, to question and to develop arguments pro and con. Discussion opportunities in small classes and lecture course discussion sections are indispensable if these aims are to be realized.

As the level of philosophical study becomes more advanced, more can and should be expected of students. In introductory and intermediate courses, they may appropriately be expected to master basic **skills of philosophical thought, to understand philosophical arguments, analyses, theories, and texts**, and to grasp one philosopher's critique of another, e.g. Aristotle's of Plato, Kierkegaard's of Hegel, or **Nozick's of Rawls**. In advanced courses students may further be asked to develop their own critique, positions and arguments in support of them, and to place texts or problems in wider historical and conceptual contexts. Students in advanced courses should also be encouraged to reflect on the nature of the discipline itself and on the varied paradigms and methods that challenge one another.

After completing a philosophy major, students should possess developed skills in formulating questions, reading philosophical texts, constructing and evaluating philosophical arguments, and discussing philosophical ideas. They should have a reasonably extensive knowledge of at least some important figures, fields, and problems; and they also should have engaged in some self-conscious reflection on philosophical inquiry itself, its methods, and its role in human life, culture and society.

There is, however, no one kind of product that should emerge from the philosophy major, just as there is no single subject or style appropriate for all good science, art, or literature. Philosophical learning further is not properly measured by multiple-choice tests, and there is no specific content of a sort that might be covered in standardized examinations or that every student in philosophy should be expected to master.

Perhaps the most important outcome of philosophical study is the ability to engage in thinking that is at once disciplined and imaginatively creative. It goes to the heart of the nature of philosophy; but it is a highly general capacity, needed for success in any complex intellectual or practical endeavor.

A major in philosophy should develop the capacity for such thinking in at least three respects. One is the practice it affords in criticism—e.g., thinking of counter-examples to questionable generalizations, drawing out consequences entailed by a claim that reduce it to absurdity, and discerning the costs and consequences of practices and policies. Another is responsiveness to concrete cases; imagination is needed to give discriminating and illuminating moral and phenomenological descriptions of experience, to appreciate the thinking expressed in a text or theory, and then to discern its limitations. A third is interpretation and theorizing, which involve constructive justification and relating positions in one area of inquiry to those in another.

Students should be encouraged to engage in creative thinking of all these kinds. Particularly in advanced courses, they should learn to develop their own positions. While they may appropriately begin with the study of important texts, they should also extend, refine, and develop alternatives to views they encounter in them. For some, especially in their last year or two of undergraduate study, it may be desirable to undertake research projects, with early drafts criticized, revised and elaborated. More than one instructor might participate in guiding such projects, which may relate both to students' interests in the major and to other fields relevant to their philosophical interest.

Philosophical development is aided immeasurably by participation in a philosophical community—a group of students and faculty engaging in inquiry together. Students of philosophy should not be mere observers of it, but rather active participants in the give and take of interpretation and argument. Departmental activities such as lectures and colloquia can be helpful in developing a philosophical community. A common room where informal discussion among students and faculty may occur can also be of great value. The existence of such a community can help to make philosophy much more attractive to students who might otherwise not pursue it. (This applies particularly to students from groups now underrepresented in philosophy.) Philosophy applies in countless ways to the world outside the classroom, and should be practiced accordingly.

Concluding Remarks

Philosophy is a diverse and continually changing discipline, to which people with greatly differing interests are drawn. Institutions and their educational purposes also vary considerably,

and appropriately. Good undergraduate major programs thus may take many quite different specific forms, and should be flexible enough to reflect the diversity of both the discipline and the interests of different students as well. Yet they can and should also be designed to promote the various objectives of the serious study of philosophy discussed above.

It would be difficult—and perhaps unwise—to attempt to reduce the foregoing discussion of these objectives and ways of achieving them to a set of specific and concrete recommendations. A few general guidelines, however, may be helpful to the conception, perception and framing of the philosophy major.

Purpose. The major should not be developed primarily to preparing students for graduate study and subsequent careers in the profession, though a good major will in fact do this. Its primary purpose should be rather to provide students with one way of attaining a good liberal education; to foster the development of a variety of intellectual abilities that have application both in and beyond philosophical inquiry; to acquaint students with the nature of such inquiry; and to acquaint them with the nature of such inquiry, the kinds of problems with which it deals, and the thoughts of some of those who have contributed most importantly to it.

Balance. A philosophy major optimally will incorporate features of all four of the models described above—the historical, field, problems, and activity models—without allowing any to eclipse the others. It should ensure a measure of historical comprehension, emphasizing both significant periods and prominent figures and their connections and differences, while also attending to basic fields of inquiry (including epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and logic), to the kinds of philosophical problems with which they deal, and to various ways of dealing with them and other matters of human importance.

Diversity. The major should take account of the diversity of philosophical traditions and orientations; and in framing the major, account should also be taken of the students it is to serve, with their many differences. To the extent that faculty interests and expertise permit, course offerings should make it possible for students to become acquainted with this diversity of traditions, both within the history of Western philosophy and beyond it.

Unity. A good major coheres, developing a sense of historical and intellectual continuities as well as changes and differences. It compares different philosophers; treats various problems in relation to a variety of thinkers and periods, methods, and collateral fields; reflects upon their similarities and differences; and considers the methods and goals appropriate to philosophical inquiry.

Integration. The major should be internally integrated by patterns of content, methods of teaching and the abilities cultivated; and it should be externally integrated with the non-philosophical curriculum by complementary courses in related fields. Such external integration may be promoted by a required minor in another field, and by good advising.

Requirements and electives. The major should leave ample room for electives both within and outside philosophy. Philosophy electives should complement the requirements of the major by supplementing rather than simply reinforcing required courses, and by providing opportunities at different levels to explore topics not treated extensively in the required curriculum.

Depth. Philosophy majors should achieve an articulate understanding of at least some of the great philosophers, major philosophical problems, and methods of philosophical inquiry. They also should develop their ability to comprehend philosophical works, critically appraise philosophical

(and other) arguments, and develop their own interpretations and positions in dealing with philosophical and intellectual problems.

Communications skills. Special emphasis should be given to developing writing skills, in papers as well as essay examinations. Critical as well as expository writing should be taught; and some courses should require consulting the literature and documenting a paper accordingly.

Participating in class discussion and other forms of interaction and debate should also be encouraged.

Programs. Since philosophy is a dialectical discipline in which many of the rewards come from developing ideas through discussion, majors should have the opportunity to hear presentations and discussions of them, and to take part in such interactions themselves. It is helpful for some such presentations by resident and visiting faculty to be intended specifically for them rather than primarily for other faculty and graduate students. It can be especially valuable for students to have visiting philosophers as resources on major topics or subjects not adequately covered in their own departments.

There are many ways to adapt the foregoing recommendations to the interests, needs and situations of specific students, faculties, and institutions. It is the responsibility of each department to consider what sort of major program is best suited to it, to review it from time to time, and to ensure that all of those affected understand its general aims, specific requirements and options, and underlying rationale.

Philosophy is a basic field of inquiry. Its range encompasses ideas and issues in every domain of human existence; and its methods apply to problems of an unlimited variety. The major in philosophy can develop not only philosophical skills and sophistication but also intellectual abilities that are readily applicable to pursuits in everyday social and personal life. The study of philosophy can profoundly affect both the thinking one does and the kind of person one is. A well-conceived major in philosophy, pursued with genuine interest under the guidance of dedicated teachers, can and should enable students to benefit in many ways throughout their lives from the intellectual development it fosters.

Copyright 2000, The American Philosophical Association.

Last revised: May 30, 2006.