

# Associate and Fellowship Awards

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## **From the Director of Studies**

Pathways and the Associate and Fellowship programs seem in many ways ideally suited to one another, with Pathways offering the option of a structured program in philosophy for those who need it, while the Associate and Fellowship offer the freedom to pursue your philosophical inquiries in whichever direction your interests take you.

In Pathways, Associate and Fellowship students gain the option of a structured course in philosophy, which can be used as a launch pad for pursuing one's own philosophical inquiries. While some students feel happy simply following the direction of their philosophical interests, others prefer the more traditional form of distance learning course that Pathways provides, with course units coming in at regular intervals for the student to follow and respond to.

What Pathways students gain from the Associate and Fellowship, meanwhile, is the opportunity for further, self-directed study of topics covered in the Pathways program, or any other topics that take your interest. Having followed a formal philosophy course, you will be clearer about the direction you wish to take, and more confident in pursuing it.

The Pathways and Associate and Fellowship Awards are offered side by side. You can do one without doing the other. What is important is to have the choice. If you start on one and later decide you want to switch – or do both – that can generally be accommodated. The result of the link up is a philosophy distance learning course of great flexibility, that can be as challenging as you choose to make it.

These pages are designed to be complementary to the Pathways information pack, and together form a miniature introduction to philosophy. Whatever you may decide to do in pursuing your philosophical studies, I hope you find the materials useful, as well as stimulating and enjoyable to read. If you have any further queries, or comments about the materials, please write to: The Director of Studies, International Society for Philosophers, 45 Wolseley Road, Sheffield S8 0ZT or e-mail:

G.Klempner@sheffield.ac.uk

Enjoy!

*Geoffrey Klempner*

# 1 Two Societies

Back in 1913, a society dedicated to philosophy – whose name has been lost in the mists of history – was re-constituted under the title, 'The Philosophical Society of England'. Its founding charter was 'to promote the study of practical philosophy among the general public'. While one may question the implied sharp division between practical and theoretical aspects of philosophy, the advocacy of the practical relevance of philosophy continues to be its primary aim. More than ever, a healthy society needs philosophers in order to stimulate the process of criticism and debate. As individuals, each of us can benefit from being aware that insofar as our sense of who, or what we are involves unstated – and possibly incorrect – philosophical assumptions, we should strive to be good philosophers rather than bad ones.

Unlike other philosophy societies sponsored by the big academic institutions such as the Royal Institute of Philosophy or the Aristotelian Society, the Philosophical Society of England has from its earliest days steadfastly maintained its independence from the universities.

The Society has its own well-established magazine, *The Philosopher*, which members receive twice a year, containing lively and informative articles accessible to the non-professional and to students just starting out in philosophy. The *Philosopher* has recently undergone a major face lift under its new Editor, Martin Cohen, currently a Research Fellow at the Centre for Applied Ethics, Queensland University of Technology, Australia who welcomes contributions from members or non-members alike.

The recent launch of the International Society for Philosophers, a sister organization of the Philosophical Society of England, reflects the massive increase in interest in the Pathways correspondence courses from overseas. Pathways students and mentors are now scattered in over 40 countries around the world. The International Society has its own electronic journal, *Philosophy Pathways*.

The International Society has now taken responsibility for running the Pathways and Diploma programs. You can apply for membership of either or both Societies using the blue form included with this pack. The Philosophical Society of England continues to welcome members from overseas, while the International Society for Philosophers is also open to applicants from the UK.

In one of our recent brochures, it states: 'The Philosophical Society aligns itself with no particular school of philosophy, nor is it a cover for any political, ideological, religious or esoteric movement or interests.' For someone who is seeking to stimulate their appetite for rational inquiry, the occurrence of the word 'philosophical' in the title of an organisation or society is, sadly, no longer any guarantee that the goods on offer have any connection with the real meaning of that term, that is to say, the meaning defined by the Western tradition of philosophical thought over the last two and a half thousand years. While respecting the philosophical contributions made by other traditions – for example, Chinese or Indian thought – it is the procedure of rational inquiry that began with the Presocratic philosophers and Socrates in Ancient Greece that sets our particular agenda.

## 2 Why study Philosophy?

Philosophy is the art of rational thought. Every branch of knowledge depends upon rational thinking, but philosophy is unique in that the application of reason and logic becomes the very source of knowledge - whether employed critically, in the examination of the assumptions underlying a field of inquiry or belief system, or constructively in the search for necessary truths about the nature of reality itself. Each individual who discovers philosophy repeats in his or her own life the story of the very beginnings of philosophy. The ability to theorise, to derive knowledge by a process of reasoning, struck the earliest thinkers in ancient Greece as an almost magical power. They constructed theories about everything in the universe. Then the doubts set in. Who is to say when one theory is true or another false, and on what grounds? If reason tells us that reality is utterly different from the way it appears to our senses, which are we to follow, our reason or our senses? What is the proper subject matter of philosophy, anyway? Is it the nature of the world, or is it rather the nature of our own selves? Should philosophers be more concerned with what is the case, or with what we ought to do? - These questions remain urgent to this day.

All that is needed to be a philosopher is the ability to reason. Yet for philosophy to exist at all something else is required, a faith that is not religious, but rational: faith in reason itself. That does not mean that philosophers have always agreed on the scope and power of human reason. There is a strong current of contemporary thought that holds that philosophy can only exist in a negative form, as a method of criticism, and never as a positive, constructive inquiry or source of 'theories' in its own right. Yet even when thus limited, the scope of philosophy remains vast, ranging over the entire spectrum of human thought and creative activity.

Philosophy is an expression, perhaps the ultimate expression, of human freedom. It is the determined attempt to shake ourselves free from all assumptions and preconceived ideas. Whatever else philosophy may be, it is not a safe activity. For those who become fully involved with it, grappling with the problems of philosophy can never be a mere hobby or pastime, for it enters into every aspect of one's life. Socrates said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' To some, that might sound arrogant. But we must remember that in making that claim he was speaking as a philosopher, expressing a discovery that each person makes for themselves once they have begun seriously to philosophise. If life seems more problematic for the philosopher, then life without philosophy becomes simply unthinkable.

The nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill, in asserting that it was 'better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied', was not the first to acknowledge that for all its well-advertised consolations, philosophy is not necessarily a path to contentment. For all the progress made in two and a half thousand years in clarifying the problems of philosophy, many - such as the definition of truth, or freedom of the will, or the nature of time - appear stubbornly to resist solution (although any list of supposedly 'unsolved' problems is likely to raise heated controversy amongst philosophers!).

But who would knowingly strive to be discontented? The philosopher searches for answers, while at the same time seeming to preach that the point of philosophy resides in the search itself, not in any 'object' - any secure belief system, or definitive solution to the problems of philosophy - waiting to be discovered like the Holy Grail.

More often than not the reward for our hard work is merely to see a problem or a paradox with greater clarity than one did before.

All this might sound rather heavy. Is there not a more light hearted approach one can take to philosophy? One of the great virtues of the Philosophical Society of England was that from its earliest days it encouraged the idea that philosophy is for all, and not just the select few. One can admire the philosopher, without aspiring to be one. If, unlike the brain teasers one finds at the back pages of the Sunday newspaper, there is no solution to a philosophical problem at the bottom of the page, still one can enjoy pitting one's wits against some of the greatest minds in history. It is indeed one of the more fascinating lessons of history that faced with the challenge of philosophy, the finest minds have proved all too fallible.

While one is being entertained by the thoughts of philosophers, one can take additional comfort in the thought that one's mental powers are being steadily improved. Philosophy teaches us to argue a case more forcefully, to express our thoughts better, and also to be more flexible and creative in our approach to the problems that face us in our work or our daily lives. Recently, much has been made of the contrast between logical and creative approaches to problem solving, between 'vertical' and 'lateral' thinking. One of the most significant features of philosophical problem solving is the way that both approaches are closely integrated. To make headway in philosophy one needs to see round problems, to treat with suspicion any starting points or assumptions; in other words, to think laterally as well as vertically. The philosopher prizes equally the faculties of logic and vision, yet also learns to appreciate the completely unexpected move, the gift of serendipity.

### 3 The Associate and Fellowship Diplomas

The Associate and Fellowship Diplomas offer a way of working towards an academic qualification in philosophy under the guidance and supervision of a qualified mentor. Whether you are a beginner to the subject seeking a goal to aim for, or are hoping to broaden and deepen your philosophical studies, or are thinking of applying to university and need to present evidence of your suitability for degree-level work, the Associate Diploma provides an ideal framework that will give direction and discipline to your studies.

For philosophy graduates as well as postgraduate students in other academic disciplines, the Fellowship Diploma offers the opportunity for sustained inquiry into a particular aspect of philosophy that interests you, or that is especially relevant to your research field.

The Associate is awarded for successful completion of a study plan devised with the help of your mentor, culminating in the submission of a portfolio of four essays. The essays are assessed by your mentor and by an independent academic referee. The standard set is sufficiently high to make the Associate a challenging and worthwhile goal to aim for – even if you have done philosophy before – yet within the realistic reach of someone starting upon the study of philosophy for the first time. The Fellowship, open to those who have gained the Associateship, is awarded for further

research culminating in a paper that is soundly and effectively argued, incorporating the candidate's own original thinking about the chosen topic.

As a rough guide, the Associate and Fellowship are awarded to work judged to be of a standard equal to writing that would earn a 2/i or 60 per cent in an undergraduate's first year. Of course, there is nothing to stop you aiming higher than that. As a student on the Associate or Fellowship program you will be given all the help and support you need to accomplish your objectives, whatever these may be. There are no minimum educational qualifications for admission to the Associate program, and no set time limits for submission of your portfolio or dissertation. (A beginner to philosophy starting on the Associate program might expect to take anything between, say, six months and three years to produce an essay portfolio to the required standard, depending on how much time he or she had available for study.)

For students who require a more formally structured plan of study, there is available a complete distance learning course, **Pathways to Philosophy**. At present, there are six, fifteen-unit programs to choose from: *The Possible World Machine*, an exploration of the central problems of philosophy using science fiction and dialogues; *Searching for the Soul*, which looks at the mind-body problem; *The First Philosophers*, tracing philosophy back to its very beginnings in Ancient Greece; *Language and the World*, which investigates the nature of meaning, and the importance of language to philosophy; *Reason, Values and Conduct*, which raises the question of the objectivity of moral reasoning; and *The Ultimate Nature of Things*, an introduction to metaphysics looking at attempts to define the nature of truth and existence.

Students working towards the Associate Award who opt for Pathways will be expected to write five essays in the course of their program, from which they will be able to choose four to work on for their essay portfolio. Fellowship students who wish to deepen their understanding of a particular area of philosophical inquiry, or who are looking to gain their bearings in a problem area new to them also have the option of following Pathways.

For Pathways students, the advantage of doing your course in conjunction with an Award is that of completing one's studies with a recognisable qualification. However, students who wish to do Pathways without registering for the Associate or Fellowship or who want to go straight into another Pathways program are free to do so. Each option merely provides the framework for pursuing your own individual philosophical interests. It is up to you to decide how to make the best of the choices available. Your mentor will be on hand if you need advice.

## 4 Devising a study plan

How does one go about choosing topics for study? – The scope of philosophy may seem at first enormous, but the arrangement of problem areas is relatively orderly and intelligible. To begin with, you can either concentrate your interest on the work of an individual philosopher, or study a particular problem area. However, this division is less important than it might first seem. Philosophy is unique amongst

academic subjects in that investigating the history of philosophy is a valid way of approaching the problems of philosophy. For one's interest is never merely historical. Engaging in an imaginary dialogue with a historical philosopher sharpens our understanding of the questions that they were seeking to answer, and which remain relevant to us today. While some problems do change over time, many remain perennial, and the techniques of philosophical argument are as valid when used to defend or criticise a historical philosopher as when they are applied in contemporary debate.

You may find yourself taking an interest in a philosopher after coming across them in a book on the history of philosophy, such as Bertrand Russell's. (While Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* deservedly remains the most popular, despite its many idiosyncrasies, there are a number of good histories by contemporary philosophers to choose from, e.g. David Hamlyn's sober and accurate *Pelican History of Western Philosophy*, or D.J. O'Connor *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, which is a compilation of the work of historians of philosophy, each an acknowledged expert on one particular philosopher.) Alternatively, you may have simply picked up a book on, or by a certain philosopher from the library shelf or a second-hand book shop. Do not turn your nose up at such chance encounters. They can change the direction of your life.

The rule of chance encounters applies as much to books on the problems of philosophy. On the other hand, you may have already cultivated an interest in a subject area that has philosophical aspects to it. Art, Psychology, Language, History, Religion, War, Science, Physics, Biology, Mathematics, Logic can all have 'Philosophy of...' tacked onto them. There is Political Philosophy and Moral Philosophy. You may come across books on Philosophy and Literature, or Philosophy and the Environment, or Philosophy and Psychoanalysis. What is so surprising and illuminating when you begin to explore the different fields is the way that certain kinds of problem or argument appear and reappear in areas that seem at first greatly separated.

Apart from this wide-ranging, critical application of philosophy, there remains a closely knit group of philosophical problems concerning the nature of reality and the scope and limits of human knowledge in general: or 'Metaphysics and Epistemology'. Metaphysics can justifiably claim to be the original core of philosophy, and remains to this day one of the most exciting and controversial fields, with battle lines drawn over its very legitimacy as a source of rational knowledge. Epistemology, which has strong links with the critique of different areas of human knowledge, is concerned with such problems as the nature of justification, reason versus sense experience as sources of knowledge, and, most famously, Descartes' notorious question of how one would defend our claim to know things against the arguments of the determined sceptic.

The first rule, then, for getting started is simply this: Begin with whatever topic most grips you, most excites your interest. You do not need to worry over 'whether I need to study X before I can study Y'. Questions of priority can come later. If you have done mathematics and are fascinated by the question of the existence of numbers, then start with that. If you like painting or music, then aesthetics may be your way into philosophy. Or you may have been led to philosophy by thinking about arguments for or against the existence of God. Or your starting point might be that book from the library or second-hand book shop that you find yourself struggling to understand, but which for some reason you just cannot put down. (In my case, the book was Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.) – The best way to get started

with philosophy is your way, just because it is yours. That is the seed from which your love for philosophy will grow.

When it comes to developing a program for study, the most important idea is that of networking. Once you have found your way into philosophy, look at topics that connect with one another and lead into one another, rather than just picking more topics at random. To a considerable extent, you will find yourself responding to a perceived sense of necessity. For example, questioning the existence of numbers or the nature of mathematical truth will lead you back to the general metaphysical questions of the nature of truth and existence. The problem of justifying standards of aesthetic criticism will lead you to the question of the objectivity of value judgements in general, and the relation between aesthetics and ethics. The philosophy of religion could point you in the direction of epistemology, or metaphysics, or indeed ethics. As you follow the leads back and forth, you will find that they begin to form multiple inter-connections. You have constructed a network.

If you follow this simple recipe, you will find, as your interests develop, that your most difficult problem with putting a proposal together for your essay portfolio is deciding what to exclude! But remember that any proposal is only provisional. Go out and explore the world of philosophy and trust your sense of direction. You will be surprised – and possibly amazed – by the treasures you bring back.