BYU COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE:

PHILOSOPHY

The BYU Department of Philosophy breaks the mold set at other universities: they are young, collaborative, gospel oriented, and focused on preparing students to face today’s challenging questions.

Remember The Princess Bride?¹ As no ordinary children’s story, it provides a fascinating look at overcoming adversity by using one’s wits. In order to rescue Princess Buttercup, Westley faces a number of distinct, daunting foes.

In the first, Westley duels the talented Inigo Montoya in one of the greatest fencing matches in cinematic history. To defeat Inigo, Westley mirrors his opponent’s fighting style, fighting left-handed at first, then switching after Inigo does to gain the advantage. Later, when fighting the giant of incredible strength, Fezzik, Westley quickly forgoes a head-to-head fight and climbs on the giant’s back to knock him unconscious. To defeat the arrogant yet brilliant Vizzini (who called Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle “morons”), Westley uses Vizzini’s arrogance against him by duping Vizzini into accepting an intellectual battle Westley could not lose.

Westley’s use of logic and argument continue to avail him throughout the film (coming up with the plan to storm the castle without a fight, and later bluffing his way to causing Prince Humperdinck to yield), allowing him to achieve victory by using sound reasoning to evaluate the weaknesses in each opponent’s metaphorical armor. In short, Westley is an excellent philosopher.

The study of logic, reasoning, argumentation, creative problem solving, and analytical thinking are key elements in the discipline of philosophy. It stands as the parent discipline for nearly every area of human inquiry. Linguistics, literary theory, political science, law, psychology, sociology, all of the hard sciences (once collectively known as natural philosophy), and even computer science all began as branches of the philosophy tree. Philosophy today encompasses a wide range of subjects and ideas, with nearly as many schools of thought as there are philosophers. However, philosophers unite in their dedication to thinking about thinking and asking honest questions about fundamental ideas and principles. The study of philosophy entails a systematic search for truth using the tools of reason and logic. In the face of increasingly difficult questions and controversial issues in our society, studying philosophy at BYU equips students with the ability to stand by their convictions and effectively evaluate the weaknesses in opposing arguments, using logical and persuasive thinking with open-minded compassion to come to spiritually and logically based conclusions.

A YOUNG YET DIVERSE DEPARTMENT

Compared to when many universities established their philosophy programs, the Department of Philosophy at BYU is relatively new. Philosophy classes had been taught on and off through various departments over the years from BYU’s inception; however, BYU did not introduce its first philosophy degree program until 1950, when it was a secondary major degree offered through the Department of Theology and Religious Philosophy. In 1979, the Department of Philosophy moved to the College of Humanities, with David H. Yarn (Philosophy and Theology), serving as the acting department chair.³ Yarn previously served as the first dean of the College of Religious Instruction and was one of the major contributors to the early philosophy program. In 1985, BYU approved philosophy as a primary major option, and in 1991 the program added its first minors.

In recent years, many of the original faculty members who laid the groundwork when the department was first established have retired.
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Most of the current faculty in the department are early in their careers, an unusual circumstance at BYU. Between 2016 and 2022, two faculty members from other departments served as visiting department chairs—Joseph Parry (Interdisciplinary Humanities) and David Laraway (Spanish and Philosophy). This service allowed the newer faculty members to focus on scholarship and teaching to help them prepare to achieve continuing faculty status (BYU’s version of tenure). In 2022, Associate Professor David Jensen (Kant, Ethics), a member of the department, became the new chair.

According to Associate Professor Katie Paxman (Hume, Philosophy of the Mind), “The picture of the philosopher is a person alone in their room reading books and writing things and thinking their deepest thoughts.” Counter to this common perception, enthusiastic faculty at BYU have brought a spirit of collaboration and cooperation. Several professors, including Paxman, have co-written publications with colleagues in and out of the department, and often with students. In summer of 2023, Assistant Professor Nathan Rockwood (Locke, Descartes, Philosophy of Religion) spearheaded a regular “work in progress” workshop where faculty members could receive feedback from colleagues about their ongoing projects.

BYU’s philosophers engage with a staggeringly broad range of research topics, each specializing in different—sometimes almost completely unrelated—areas of study. Current research specialties not only include studying historical philosophers like Kant, Locke, Descartes, Hume, Kierkegaard, and many others, they also encompass everything from contemporary ethics to the philosophies of emotion, perception, art, and religion.

For example, Associate Professor Travis Anderson studies the philosophy of art as well as phenomenology and contemporary ethics. Paxman’s work on the philosophy of the mind and the works of David Hume delves into questions of human nature, empathy, and emotion. Assistant Professor Mike Hansen also works on philosophy of the mind, but with a focus on the nature of perception, as well as studying topics in rationalism and epistemology (the study of knowledge). Assistant Professors Taylor-Grey Miller and Derek Haderlie both research metaphysics and philosophy of religion and have collaborated on a paper about divine hiddenness—the question of why many find it difficult to know if God exists.

Recently, philosophy of religion in particular has gained a greater focus at BYU. Beginning in 2021, members of the department developed the Latter-day Saint Philosophy Project, which Paxman describes as “a formalized effort to get Latter-day Saint thought into philosophy of religion discourse.” The project hosts an annual workshop to help researchers—from BYU as well as other universities—develop their ideas for publication in professional and academic journals focused on the philosophy of religion. The emphasis on publishing and scholarship in the department means that more Latter-day Saint voices are represented in the philosophy world, not only in the realm of religious philosophy but also in other research areas like ethics and moral philosophy.

**WHY STUDY PHILOSOPHY AT BYU?**

Today’s philosophy degree programs include the primary philosophy major and minors in philosophy, logic, and theoretical and applied ethics. The department also offers a wide range of general education electives. In fact, students find BYU philosophy classes so valuable and interesting that word has spread across campus, and many classes garner waitlists of hundreds of students each semester. Jensen has had many students who say they enjoyed a philosophy GE class so much that if they had taken the class sooner, they would have added a minor or even switched majors. The department offers enough GE classes, says Laraway, that “if you’re strategic in how you plan out your GE courses, you can get a philosophy minor at the same time.”

Like many students in the humanities, philosophy majors often get asked what kinds of career opportunities they can find with their degree. Paxman says, “Philosophy students develop a skill set that can be applied in pretty much any sphere. There is a ton of empirical data highlighting how philosophy students do really well in a huge variety of careers.” Much of this data comes from the American Philosophical Association (APA). For example, by mid-career, philosophy majors typically earn more than any other humanities majors. According to the APA, 77% of those with bachelor’s degrees in philosophy find employment or are accepted to graduate programs within six months of graduating. Philosophy majors also tend to receive excellent scores on graduate school exams such as the LSATs and GREs. The APA reported that among GRE test takers between 2019 and 2022, philosophy majors had the highest average scores of any major on the Verbal Reasoning and Analytical Writing sections of the GRE.⁵

To help students along their desired career paths, the department requires them to participate in experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and study abroad programs, to further develop the competencies philosophy students have learned through their course work. Students are also encouraged to participate in research and publish their work, either with their faculty mentors in professional journals or in the department’s student journal, Aporia.

The department has recently added a number of new courses, which have been shepherded along by younger faculty. For example, Associate Professor Gordy Mower (Korean and Chinese Philosophy) has helped introduce a course
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focused on non-Western philosophy with sections covering topics like Buddhism, Hindu philosophy, and Confucius. Assistant Professor Angela Wentz Faulconer (Moral and Political Philosophy, Medical Ethics) teaches a new course on medical ethics, which is especially relevant right now because, in her words, “A lot of the more controversial topics in medical ethics are on the ballot. As members of the Church, we have a responsibility to be good citizens, and that means to be informed and to vote on these issues.”

SPRITITUALLY & INTELLECTUALLY

Of course, there are other, more intrinsic reasons to study philosophy at BYU. As previously mentioned, philosophy students gain excellent skills in reasoning and logic, textual analysis, argumentation, persuasive writing, and cultural navigation. They understand the value of asking smart questions and learn how to deal with the complicated issues that come from living in a global society. Jensen explains, “We live in a diverse world now. Everyone says, ‘oh, diversity is good.’ Well, it is good, but it’s complicated. We have more opinions that are in tension with each other, because we have a lot more points of view. And philosophy helps you navigate, organize, think about, appreciate, but also be thoughtful of all this diversity that we encounter.”

In an increasingly secular world, such training continues to become ever more important. Some might wonder why BYU, a school focused on learning by study and also by faith, would invest resources in a department such as philosophy where one would expect the emphasis to be logic and reason at the expense of spiritual matters. However, BYU faculty see no need for conflict. In fact, faculty and students alike find that a study of logic and reason combined with spiritual matters not only strengthens faith and testimony, but also provides the skills and training to see through the many logical fallacies others use to weaken or harm faith. Faulconer says, “Our faith is really important to us, and the faith of our students is really important to us. We see our stewardship as critically valuable as they’re ready to explain why they believe what they do, why their position is what it is.” Rather than being spiritually harmed by such arguments, or using their logic and rhetoric to fight against gospel teachings, BYU philosophy students will be less easily persuaded by arguments that superficially sound reasonable and will also be more capable of expressing their faith and defending their positions.

Studying philosophy also helps students gain additional tools to employ in their search for truth because it engages with the same kinds of questions they encounter as they study the gospel. Jensen says, “Philosophy engages the fundamental questions of life: What is truth? What is beauty? What is knowledge? What is reality? What is morality? How should I live my life? Those are gospel questions. We ask questions about how you can know The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true. Well, we know through the Spirit. So, that’s a new way of knowing that’s different than other ways of knowing.”

AN ETHICAL VISION

BYU’s philosophers remain committed to researching and deepening their own understanding while teaching students how to think, analyze, and use reason in their search for truth in conjunction with the guidance of the Spirit. As Paxman says, “The ethic of the philosopher and the ethic that we’re taught as seekers of truth in the gospel, especially in the restored gospel, are consistent with each other.”

ENDNOTES