

HONORS THESES: DEPARTMENTAL PLAN
Philosophy Department
10.17.2024

Expectations:

An Honors Thesis in Philosophy is a substantial piece of work that is: 1. of very high quality, well beyond what would normally be expected of an undergraduate major in terms of scope, length (both of engagement and of outcome), and philosophical quality, and 2. is philosophically important, that is, that it makes a contribution and offers insight to the sustained, ethical and just dwelling together of living beings.

That is, we would expect an Honors thesis to meet our vision of scholarship (at a level appropriate to an undergraduate working in a deep and sustained way). Quoting from both our departmental scholarship statement and our “Unfinished Manifesto for Philosophy as Transformative Practice,” we explain that for us, scholarship emerges from a particular vision of philosophy and its possibilities:

“We wish to reclaim the spirit of philosophy that John Dewey described: as a ‘dramatic, restless, co-operative, inquiring’ practice in which even ‘the highest flight of metaphysics always terminates with a social and practical turn.’ We hold that philosophy as currently practiced has misplaced the function of thought by constructing it as an end in itself, rather than as a tool for social, civic, and personal enrichment.”

“We call for [philosophy that view’s its aims as being] a practical instrument or function for the reconstruction of daily life, as an articulation of and practice in human thriving, and as an antidote for the banality of evil.”

“We envision philosophy, then, as a form of meaning-making that simultaneously gives rise to and presupposes (but does not directly fabricate) self-awareness, social responsibility, and community engagement.”

Defining a work that meets those goals in the usual academic terms is, of course, tricky. The thesis would normally be a paper; of substantial length -- 40 pages or more; advancing a clearly articulated, carefully researched and developed thesis; a work that makes an original contribution to the field of inquiry; that arises from, is informed by, or directly leads to insights that would be of use in such practical engagement and, in all cases, engagement that sets the stage for continued and promising engagement of the same sort. A very wide range of thesis topics and directions are possible that could meet these desiderata, and how they would play out in each case could vary greatly. Honors students and their mentors are advised to work out specific expectations and exemplars for each project early in the process.

Relation to the existing Senior project: For a student who takes the Integrative Tutorial during her senior year, the Honors thesis will take the place of the Senior Tutorial project. Like other seniors, Honors students will take the capstone senior seminar, officially PHL 4970, Senior Integrative Tutorial, which Philosophy majors typically take in the Fall of their senior year. Central to the Seminar is the senior project. This project can take a variety of forms (it is usually but not necessarily a paper: we have also had students make films, write plays, etc.). All projects are presented to the full department and fellow senior majors in meeting during the Fall term.

In the rare case where a junior takes the Integrative Tutorial, the Honors proposal and a short (roughly 10-14 page) paper that is part of the Honors Thesis will take the place of the Senior Tutorial project, thus setting the student up well to complete the Honors thesis in a timely manner and of very high quality. The paper will be presented to the department and will receive public and formal comments from one of the faculty in the department.

Although all Honors students must take PHL4970, the 8 s.h. of research credit can count towards 8 s.h. of electives in the major.

