

Philosophy, Politics, and Economics

Description

Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) emerged as a formal course of study at Oxford, almost one hundred years ago. There it was conceived as an especially apt interdisciplinary program for training civil servants or, as we might now say instead, leaders. The idea was to give students a broad range of analytical tools for the evaluation of public policies and institutions, ones that would hold them in good stead wherever they might take up their posts. The cultivation of these general analytical skills may be contrasted with a course of study that would emphasize the particular historical, cultural, and even bureaucratic contingencies that would also, of course, be important to a practitioner working on a specific political problem.

As PPE has grown and evolved, especially in the United States, economics and philosophy have played an increasing role providing the disciplinary tools for explaining, predicting, and evaluating human behavior and its consequences under various political, legal, and institutional frameworks. Political science contributes additional theoretical depth as well an appreciation for the concrete and particular obstacles political actors may face as they attempt to realize policy goals.

At its best, PPE aspires to integrate the serious use of social scientific models, a constant attention to empirical results, and forthright normative or ethical analysis. A hallmark of PPE research is thinking comparatively about the likely real world results of alternative policy choices and to bring to bear social scientific methods to assess these. At the same time, PPE research looks directly to the various ethical claims that might be made for or against particular policy choices. In ethical matters, PPE eschews orthodoxy, but does look to potential values beyond efficiency. Of course, claims of ethics and justice are subject to persistent, or even intractable, disagreement. Even so, it is critical that future policy-makers be able to understand and critically engage a full range of ethical claims, whether these be made in the currency of individual rights, appeals to the value of freedom and autonomy, or calls for equality.

An Example

It may help to consider an illustrative example where PPE research might be fruitful. Consider illegal markets, such as for prostitution, or heroin, or kidneys. Of course, the fact that these are commonly 'black markets' reflects a policy choice to criminalize transactions. Most people see such transactions as at least raising serious moral issues. Is prostitution wrong because it is inherently degrading? Is serious drug use wrong because it is self-destructive? Or does a choice to engage in such activity properly fall within the scope of a person's rights to control their own body? There are also normative issues that arise at a political level. Few think that the state has the authority to police any moral transgression. Might prostitution be morally wrong while also falling outside the state's authority to police? These normative questions deserve careful consideration but a policy choice that looked no further would be fatally incomplete. Making prostitution, or heroin, or kidney markets illegal will not eliminate them. Economists can help us understand why. Given that demand for sex, addictive drugs, and lifesaving organs is likely to be relatively inelastic, people will be willing to make significant sacrifices to obtain them. This implies a regime of enforcement which will have its own social costs while also creating new incentives, for example for police corruption. Without the tools of economic analysis, we are hamstrung to understand the likely implications of these PPE policy choices. Finally, it is misleading to frame the question simply as one between legalizing and criminalizing prostitution or heroin or kidney

purchases. Political scientists can help us to see that there are in fact many different ways to regulate such things as prostitution or heroin.

Draft Course Template: Interdisciplinary PPE major

Requirements: Ten courses, including a senior research capstone project of at least one semester (CIS 495). Graduating with honors requires a two semester research project (CIS 495 & CIS 496). Specific course requirements as follows:

Philosophy

PHIL 215: Ethics

PHIL 220: Political Philosophy

One additional philosophy course approved by the student's advisors.

Political Science

One course in Political Theory drawn from

POL 101: Contemporary Political Ideologies

POL 202: Classical Political Theory

POL 203: Medieval Political Theory

POL 204: Modern Political Theory

POL 304: Liberalism

One additional political science course approved by the student's advisors

Economics

ECON 101: Introductory Economics

ECON 105: Statistics and Basic Econometrics

ECON 202: Intermediate Microeconomic Theory or ECON 203: Intermediate Macroeconomic Theory

ECON 231S: History of Economic Thought **or** ECON 221: Economic History of The United States **or** an additional elective course in Economics approved by the student's advisors

Capstone:

CIS 495: Senior Research Thesis Capstone