

King's Student
Perspectives
Philosophy

Markus, 1st year
June 2012



Markus

How did you get interested in philosophy?

I started getting interested in philosophy when I was about fifteen, when I found lectures online about different conceptions of freedom. This sparked my interest, but I think that my enjoyment of the subject really came from my general appreciation of clarity. I always want to get to the very foundations of things and work with pure ideas. This year at Cambridge, I've come to love philosophy more and more.

Where are you from?

I'm from a small town near Stockholm, Sweden. Having gone through the Swedish educational system, my academic background is slightly different from that of many students here at Cambridge. Applying with qualifications from the Swedish system was not much of a problem though: I found guidelines on the King's website telling me what grades would be required.

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What are the main challenges for international students?

There might be two problems with coming here from another educational system. Firstly, English will probably be your second language, which might mean that you read slower or write with more awkward syntax than some of the other philosophers. This is not too big a problem though, as you have the whole first year to work on this stuff before you sit exams in the summer. The second potential problem is that you might not be used to being assessed purely on exam results if you are from some other system. This might mean that your exam technique is not as good as the British students, but that's about it. Again, you can work on

this throughout the year. You may find that you have some advantages coming in from a different system – depending on the strengths of your local education, you might be more used to writing argumentative essays or find that you have developed other useful skills.

The main reason that I decided to apply to a British univeristy, and specifically to Cambridge, was that I wanted to have a challenging education. I did not feel that I could get that by studying Philosophy in Sweden. In addition, it was a great bonus that a philosophy degree is recognised to be a good degree in Britain. Had I studied Philosophy in Sweden, I think that it would be difficult for me to go into many careers after graduation, whereas in Britain a philosophy degree will keep my options open.

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How confident did you feel about applying?

I never really thought I would get in, not even after I got my offer! Much like others I have met here, I applied thinking something along the lines of “why not? I’ll just give it a shot!”

Take the chance! If a Swede from a little Swedish town can get in, so can you!

At the interviews, I told myself that it was cool just to have got that far. I had an interview and a written test, both of which, in hindsight, I did not feel too good about, but it turns out that they must have been fine. Throughout the whole process I thought I would not get in, and I think it is the same for everyone, so take the chance! If a Swede from a little Swedish town can get in, so can you!

How do you feel now that you’re at King’s?

Coming to Cambridge has been great. In particular, I have found the academic parts very rewarding. Every week you have one supervision, for which you write an essay. Your supervisor will most likely set the essay question, but you will always be able to talk to them and say which topics you might like to write about. The topic and question will most likely - and should - be something you have not thought about or looked at in depth before. This is a good thing: you are here to learn new things.

It can be a little daunting in your first few weeks to read and learn about topics that are completely new to you then write an essay about them (my essays are usually about 2,000 - 3,000 words). However, the supervisors are incredibly understanding and it is very exciting to delve into these new topics. You are here because you love philosophy, so my advice is to

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just try to enjoy it.

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You do get used to things quickly. The actual supervisions, where you sit and discuss your essay

with your supervisor (who will usually be a lecturer at the University or a PhD student), are also great fun. Again, they might be a little bit scary at the beginning, but once you realise that a supervision is just a discussion where the two of you explore the topic together, they end up being fun and interesting.

What is your timetable like?

Philosophy is quite different from other courses, in that there is a lot of freedom. What is important is that you learn the material – how you do this is up to you. Thus, you will have a lot of choice as to how you spend your time.

For me in first year, there were about nine hours of lectures every week, which go over all of the material in the course. I found these lectures really useful, as the lecturers were very good at summarising whole topics. They give you a helpful overview which is great when you are trying to navigate the topic for yourself in your essays. On top of lectures, you have 1 hour a week where you either have a discussion group on a specific text, or you have a logic class. I've found that discussion groups, and discussions in general, are good tools for getting a proper understanding of a topic: I find that I only understand a topic if I can have a proper discussion about it. There are also logic classes, which I will get back to later.

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As well as lectures and classes, there are the supervisions. The supervisions will be what you spend most time working on. The supervision itself will be a one-hour session, but in addition to this, you must write your essay. This will require reading quite a bit – I spend between 20 and 30 hours reading normally. And then I write the essay in maybe 5 hours on average. All in all, there is quite a lot of work, but it is independent work, so you can do it at whatever time is most suitable for you, which is absolutely great.

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How much freedom does the course give you?

In the first year, all the papers are compulsory. In second year, you choose two out of four papers, then in third year, you get to choose all of your papers. This in itself already seems like quite a lot of choice to me, but you have even more freedom than this because you have freedom within the actual papers. There are usually between eight and ten topics in each paper, and you only need to do about five of them.

Thus, even in first year, when all the papers are compulsory, you have a lot of choice regarding what topics you want to cover. I've found this choice really good, since even though most of philosophy is great, there are usually a few topics in each paper that you

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are not as interested in as others. The course allows you to focus on what you find most interesting.

What do you think worries people most about studying Philosophy?

Students are normally most worried about logic when they start the Cambridge Philosophy course. Trust me, it's not all that bad.

First of all, it is true that logic is compulsory both in first and second year, but it is only in first year that you are required to do formal logic. Formal logic is the part of logic where, for example, you translate arguments into a logic-language and then assess this argument to see if it is a valid argument. This part of logic is sort of like maths: it's mainly about knowing the rules well and applying them correctly. If you are good at maths you will be able to do well on this, as long as you remember that in logic, you need to be a lot more precise than when you have done mathematics.

Formal logic...is sort of like maths.

If you do not feel too comfortable with maths, you will still be fine. There are other parts of logic you can focus on more. For example, you can study philosophical logic. Philosophical logic is philosophical questions that have to do with logic, such as "where does the meaning of words come from?" and "can all of English be translated into some logic-language?"

These are the types of questions you will be focusing on fully in second year, although in second year the questions will be more interesting, such as "what is truth?"

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My main tip when it comes to logic is that you just keep up with the lectures throughout the year. If you keep up from the beginning, you will be fine by the end of it. So do focus on completing those logic sheets for the logic classes: it will really help you.

Is there time to do other things?

You will most definitely have time to get involved in tons of different things. In general, whatever activity you feel like taking up, you will be able to.

I've been involved in the environmental scene around Cambridge, being part of the committee of an environmental consulting society. I took the opportunity to go to a number of protests around Cambridge, such as demonstrations asking the University to become more of a role model in

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reducing its carbon footprint. I also took up ultimate frisbee at the beginning of the year, which has been a blast. All of these activities are university-wide, but there is always also a bunch of things going on at King's.

King's really is a great place to be, and I have really enjoyed it. At King's you can play for a number of sports teams, but also be a part of organising a load of parties and different events (otherwise you can just

go to the events!). All in all, I am sure that you will enjoy it. And you shouldn't feel bad about taking time off work to do these things: it's

important that you don't wear yourself out. Terms can be quite hectic, so it is good to take a break sometimes. Whether that involves playing ultimate frisbee or just having a pint in the college bar, that is completely up to you.

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Punting on the river Cam



Markus (in red) at the King's Funday

Did you find it easy to settle in at King's?

Settling in at King's was a breeze. The first few weeks were a little scary and you could get a little lonely, but then on the other hand, everyone was in the same boat. So when I felt a little lonely, it helped to remember that there were 120 or so other first years feeling just the same thing, and that made it a lot easier to get talking to people.

Being an international student did not really make a difference in terms of settling in. The main difficulty I had as an international was setting up a bank account, finding a doctor and the like when I got here. Other than that, I think I had the

same difficulties as everyone else. Even if I had met problems in terms of adjusting to the culture and the like, there are tons of internationals at Cambridge and especially at King's. Sometimes, it can make a nice break to go to a society with people from your

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part of the world. That's what I did from time to time over the year, going to events with the Scandanavian Society.

What about practical issues?

When it comes to practical issues, doing Philosophy at King's is great. The Sidgwick Site, where you have lectures, is just a few minutes walk from the college, and if you don't have the energy to walk to the faculty library (which is also on the Sidgwick Site) you will be able to find almost all of the books you need in the college library, all for free.

Also, your supervisions will most likely be just a few minutes from King's. And you have Sainsbury's (a UK supermarket) just down the road. So if you don't want to, you'll never have to walk for longer than 8 minutes to get anywhere you need to go.

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A note to current King's Philosophy students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying Philosophy at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details:
undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk