Hi everyone!

I’m Eliot, a third year philosopher here at Downing.

Congratulations-- you’ve made a great choice of university, college and course! As I’m sure you already know, philosophy is a great subject: challenging at times, but (almost!) always utterly fascinating. And Cambridge is one of the best places in the world to study it. It’s a lot of work, but within the first few weeks you’ll already be learning about some really amazing philosophers and their ideas about us and the world.

Philosophy is quite small at Cambridge and especially small at Downing, where there are rarely more than two philosophers in any single year, and often there’s only one. The upshot of this, though, is a tight-knit group of Downing philosophers who know each other well and are always willing to lend a hand if needs be.

It is worth spending some time here to outline a little of the nitty-gritty of the structure of the Philosophy Tripos at Cambridge. The first year of the course is called ‘Part IA’, the second ‘Part IB’ and the final year ‘Part II’. For Part IA you have five ‘papers’ (think of them as the equivalent of A level ‘units’): Metaphysics, Ethics, Logic, Set Texts and the General Paper. Each of these is assessed with an exam at the end of the year. In Parts IB and II you have more control over what papers you do, but all first years must do the same five papers. (NB: Don’t worry about the General Paper for now-- it’s an extra exam that you can’t really revise for, and you probably won’t even think about it until the third term).

In first year your contact time is split between lectures, logic classes, discussion groups and supervisions. One of the pros (or cons, depending on how you look at it!) of studying philosophy at Cambridge is that the vast majority of the time you spend on your degree is time you spend doing independent study. Most likely, you will only have one supervision, logic class and discussion group a week, and fewer lectures than many other humanities students. By and large, then, Philosophers have more flexibility with how they divide up their time than the average Cambridge student, so if you’re eager to dive into Cambridge’s famously wide range of extracurriculars then Philosophy was a great choice!

The vast majority of your self-study is devoted to preparing essays for your supervisor. Philosophers only get one essay a week, but it does tend to be longer than many other subjects’ essays. It’s important that I mention one thing that can confuse people: unlike in most other subjects, there is no correlation between when you are supervised on something and when you are lectured on it. Let us say the first paper you prepare in supervisions is Set Texts (in fact, this is normally the case for Downing philosophers). For weeks 1-4, then, you will spend the overwhelming majority of your independent study time on Set Texts. Meanwhile, the lectures you go to could be on something completely different. It could be that one of your weekly essays is not lectured on until weeks down the line. Or vice versa: it could be that you write an essay in term two that you were lectured on in term one.

Before finishing, let me try to alleviate three common worries people have before starting Philosophy at Cambridge. Firstly: supervisions. Yes, supervisions for philosophers are normally one on one (although often to begin with you have them with the other philosopher(s) in your year if there are any). Although supervisions might look daunting at first, you really should not worry too much about them! Another advantage of studying philosophy (at least in my experience) is that supervisions tend to be relatively low pressure. As long as you understand the basics, have done a decent amount of reading, and can talk a bit about your essay, you’re most of
the way there. It is totally acceptable not to understand some of the readings. In fact, not understanding some of the readings on first encounter is to be expected: often these are tricky, technical bits of philosophy. Supervisions are the perfect opportunity to get clear on those bits of the course that are the hardest.

Secondly, many come to Cambridge worried about learning formal logic. It’s new to everyone, though. More or less no one in first year has studied formal logic before coming to Cambridge. Lectures and logic classes will guide you through slowly and methodically. Many in my year (including me) went on to really enjoy it, and pretty much everyone is confident with the key concepts by the end of first year. If you attend all the lectures on logic, and give each weekly logic worksheet your best shot, you will be absolutely fine.

Finally, you might be confused about what to do over the holidays. The short answer is don’t worry too much about it. There are, however, some things that might be useful to take a look at. The faculty has a list of ‘preliminary reading’ on each paper’s reading list (you can find the reading lists here: http://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/curr-students/IA/IA-outlines-reading-lists). In my experience, most people only read a couple of things from these before term began, and some read none. No lecturer or supervisor will assume you have made a start on the reading list before coming to Cambridge. So perhaps pick a couple of texts that look interesting to you and give them a read, but it really is not essential. There is, however, an important exception to this: I would highly recommend reading each ‘set text’ before term starts. At the time of writing (August 2016), the four set texts for Part IA are: Plato’s Meno (can be read in a couple of hours); Descartes’ Meditations (quite short, and an enjoyable read); and J.S. Mill’s On Liberty and The Subjection of Women (both of which are a bit longer and wordier, but probably require a less focused read than either the Plato or Descartes). I’d recommend buying your own copies if you can, as you’ll need to refer to them throughout the year, but you could probably make do with a library copy or an online copy if needs be. Reading the set texts now is by no means mandatory, but will make your life much easier in Michaelmas Term.

I hope this has been useful! If you have any questions at all (no matter how silly you might think they are) feel free to contact me at emw57@cam.ac.uk.

Looking forward to seeing you in October!

Eliot