

THE MODERN AUTODIDACT COURSE SPECIFICATION

History of Philosophy & Western Thought

*A Comprehensive Self-Directed Study Program
Integrating Classical Sources with Christian Worldview Perspectives*

Duration: 12 Months
Daily Commitment: 1.5–2 Hours

Course Overview

This course specification provides a systematic pathway through the history of Western philosophy, from the Pre-Socratics to contemporary thought. Following The Modern Autodidact System, the curriculum moves from broad foundational reading through increasingly specialized engagement with primary sources, culminating in synthesis projects that integrate philosophical understanding with Christian theological reflection.

Learning Objectives

- Develop a comprehensive mental map of Western philosophical development across major historical periods
- Engage directly with canonical primary texts from each major philosophical era
- Understand the relationship between philosophical ideas and their historical, cultural, and religious contexts
- Articulate connections between secular philosophical traditions and Christian thought
- Cultivate the intellectual virtues of careful reading, charitable interpretation, and rigorous analysis
- Produce original written synthesis demonstrating philosophical competence

Course Structure

The course follows a six-phase progression over twelve months, with each phase building upon the previous. The pacing allows for deep engagement rather than surface coverage, with flexibility built in for following particular lines of interest.

Phase	Timeline	Focus
Phase 1	Months 1–2	Foundational Reading & Orientation
Phase 2	Months 2–3	Survey Courses & Broad Overview
Phase 3	Months 4–6	Subdiscipline & Period Deep Dives
Phase 4	Months 7–9	Canonical Primary Source Study
Phase 5	Months 10–11	Content Creation & Synthesis
Phase 6	Month 12+	Specialization & Continuing Study

Phase 1: Foundational Reading & Orientation

Months 1–2 | Establishing the Landscape

This phase establishes basic philosophical literacy and confirms your sustained interest in the subject. The goal is orientation: gaining a high-level map of philosophy's terrain before diving deep into any region. Read at a comfortable pace, focusing on comprehension and enjoyment rather than exhaustive analysis.

Primary Reading

1. *Philosophy in Seven Sentences* by Douglas Groothuis [\[From Your Library\]](#)
 - An accessible entry point connecting major philosophical ideas to one pivotal sentence each
 - Estimated: 1 week
2. *Looking at Philosophy: The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter* by Donald Palmer [\[From Your Library\]](#)
 - Illustrated survey providing a memorable visual framework for philosophy's major figures and ideas
 - Estimated: 2–3 weeks
3. *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* by James Spiegel and Steven Cowan [\[From Your Library\]](#)
 - Establishes the framework for integrating philosophical study with Christian faith commitments
 - Estimated: 3–4 weeks

Supplementary Materials

- **The Partially Examined Life Podcast** – Listen to 3–5 episodes covering thinkers who interest you
- **Academy of Ideas YouTube Channel** – Introductory videos providing accessible overviews
- **The Thomistic Institute YouTube Channel** – For orientation to classical philosophical tradition from a Christian perspective

Phase 1 Milestone

By the end of Phase 1, you should be able to name the major periods of Western philosophy, identify 10–15 major philosophers and their central contributions, and articulate your personal motivations and areas of greatest interest for deeper study.

Write a 500-word reflection on what draws you to philosophy and which areas most compel your curiosity.

Phase 2: Survey Courses & Broad Overview

Months 2–3 | Building the Framework

This phase provides systematic coverage of philosophical history through structured courses. The combination of video lectures and comprehensive written survey ensures multiple exposures to key concepts and thinkers, reinforcing retention through varied modalities.

Primary Course

Open Yale Course: Philosophy and the Science of Human Nature (Prof. Tamar Gendler)

- Free lecture series covering major philosophical questions through historical and contemporary lenses
- Watch lectures during commutes, walks, or dedicated viewing sessions
- Take brief notes after each lecture summarizing key arguments

Primary Reading

Choose one of the following comprehensive surveys:

Option A: A History of Western Philosophy and Theology by John Frame [\[From Your Library\]](#)

- Comprehensive survey from a Reformed Christian perspective
- Excellent for understanding philosophy in relation to theological development
- Best if your primary interest is the faith/reason intersection

Option B: A History of Western Philosophy by C. Stephen Evans [\[From Your Library\]](#)

- Balanced survey with Christian perspective but broader academic engagement
- More concise than Frame; good for establishing baseline before Copleston

Option C: The Dream of Reason + The Dream of Enlightenment by Anthony Gottlieb [\[From Your Library\]](#)

- Secular but exceptionally well-written narrative history
- Best for appreciating philosophy as intellectual adventure
- Coverage ends at Enlightenment; supplement with other sources for later periods

Supplementary Courses

- **Crash Course Philosophy** (YouTube) – 46 episodes providing accessible introductions to major topics
- **History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps Podcast** (Peter Adamson) – Begin with Classical episodes

Phase 2 Milestone

Create a one-page personal timeline of Western philosophy showing major periods, key figures, and their approximate dates. This visual reference will serve as your mental scaffold throughout deeper study. Additionally, identify 3–4 periods or thinkers you want to explore in greater depth during Phase 3.

Phase 3: Subdiscipline & Period Deep Dives

Months 4–6 | Exploring the Territory

This phase provides deeper engagement with specific philosophical periods and subdisciplines. Copleston's volumes become your primary resource, supplemented by focused courses in areas of particular interest. You will begin engaging with primary sources more substantially, though full canonical study comes in Phase 4.

Core Reading: Copleston's History of Philosophy

[Volumes 1–7 From Your Library]

Frederick Copleston's nine-volume history remains the gold standard for comprehensive philosophical coverage. Your collection of seven volumes provides extraordinary depth. Read selectively based on interest rather than attempting complete coverage.

Suggested Reading Sequence:

1. **Volume 1: Greece and Rome** – Pre-Socratics through Plotinus
 - Prioritize chapters on Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics
 - Estimated: 4–5 weeks for selected chapters
2. **Volume 2: Medieval Philosophy** – Augustine through Duns Scotus
 - Essential for understanding the integration of faith and reason
 - Prioritize Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas
3. **Volume 4: Descartes to Leibniz** – The Rationalists
 - The birth of modern philosophy
4. **Volume 5: British Philosophers** – Hobbes to Hume
 - The Empiricist tradition and its implications

Subdiscipline Courses

Select 2–3 of the following based on your interests identified in Phase 2:

Political Philosophy

- *History of Political Philosophy* ed. Leo Strauss [From Your Library]
- Open Yale Course: Introduction to Political Philosophy (Prof. Steven Smith)

Ethics and Moral Philosophy

- *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre [\[From Your Library\]](#) – canonical 20th-century work on moral philosophy
- *Ethics for a Brave New World* by John Feinberg [\[From Your Library\]](#)

Philosophy of Culture and Technology

- *The Technological Society* by Jacques Ellul [\[From Your Library\]](#)
- *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* by Jacques Ellul [\[From Your Library\]](#)
- *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* by Josef Pieper [\[From Your Library\]](#)

Epistemology

- *Personal Knowledge* by Michael Polanyi [\[From Your Library\]](#) – groundbreaking work on tacit knowledge

Phase 3 Milestone

Write a 1,500-word essay comparing two philosophers from different periods on a single theme (e.g., Aristotle and Aquinas on virtue, or Plato and Augustine on knowledge). This exercise develops your capacity for synthetic philosophical thinking.

Phase 4: Canonical Primary Source Study

Months 7–9 | *Engaging the Masters*

This phase centers on careful, sustained engagement with primary philosophical texts. The goal is not comprehensive coverage but genuine understanding through slow, thoughtful reading. Use secondary sources freely to illuminate difficult passages. Take extensive notes. Return to passages that perplex you.

Core Primary Sources

Read at least four of the following, selecting across different periods:

Ancient Philosophy

1. *Works of Aristotle – Nicomachean Ethics* (selections) [\[From Your Library\]](#)
 - Books I, II, and X are essential; others as interest directs
 - Secondary: Aristotle’s Ethics lectures from The Great Courses or Stanford Encyclopedia entries
2. *Plato: The Republic* [\[Acquire\]](#)
 - The foundational text of Western political and metaphysical philosophy
 - Recommended translation: Allan Bloom or G.M.A. Grube/C.D.C. Reeve

Medieval Philosophy

3. *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius [\[From Your Library\]](#)
 - Bridge between ancient and medieval thought
 - Profound meditation on providence, fate, and human flourishing
4. *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas (selections) [\[Acquire\]](#)
 - Focus on the Treatise on God (Prima Pars, Questions 1–26) and Treatise on Happiness
 - Recommended edition: Penguin Classics selected readings or the Fathers of English Dominican Province translation

Modern Philosophy

5. *Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Descartes [\[Acquire\]](#)
 - The text that inaugurated modern philosophy
 - Short enough for multiple readings
6. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* by David Hume [\[Acquire\]](#)
 - Essential empiricist challenge to rationalism and metaphysics
7. *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant (selections) [\[Acquire\]](#)
 - Focus on the Prefaces and Introduction; Transcendental Aesthetic as able
 - Use a reader’s guide such as Sebastian Gardner’s Guidebook

Contemporary Philosophy

8. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt [\[From Your Library\]](#)
 - Landmark 20th-century political philosophy
 - You have the complete work plus its three constituent parts
9. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* by René Girard [\[From Your Library\]](#)
 - Accessible entry to Girard's mimetic theory
 - Supplement with *The Girard Reader* for broader coverage

Reading Method for Primary Sources

- **Pre-read:** Review a summary or introduction before beginning the text
- **Annotate:** Mark key arguments, questions, and connections
- **Summarize:** Write brief summaries of each chapter or major section
- **Secondary Sources:** Consult Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, reader's guides, or lectures freely
- **Commonplace:** Record significant passages in your philosophy notebook

Phase 4 Milestone

Produce a detailed study guide for one primary text you've read, including: chapter-by-chapter summaries, key arguments identified, difficult passages explained, and your own critical assessment. This document should be useful to someone else approaching the text.

Phase 5: Content Creation & Synthesis

Months 10–11 | Making Knowledge Your Own

This phase shifts emphasis from input to output. Creating content forces you to articulate understanding clearly, reveals gaps in comprehension, and transforms information into genuine knowledge. The goal is not public performance but personal synthesis.

Synthesis Projects

Complete at least two of the following:

1. **Philosophical Timeline & Intellectual Map**
 - Create a detailed visual timeline showing major philosophers, schools, and their relationships
 - Include influence arrows showing how ideas developed and responded to predecessors
 - Annotate with key concepts and works
2. **Thematic Essay Series (3–5 essays, 2,000–3,000 words each)**
 - Trace a single theme across multiple periods and thinkers
 - Suggested themes: the nature of knowledge, the good life, the just society, faith and reason, human nature
3. **Philosopher Comparison Studies**
 - Write 3–4 detailed comparisons of philosophers who addressed similar questions differently
 - Examples: Plato vs. Aristotle on forms, Augustine vs. Aquinas on faith/reason, Locke vs. Hobbes on social contract
4. **Integration Essay: Philosophy and Christian Theology**
 - A substantial essay (4,000–6,000 words) exploring how Christian theology has engaged with philosophical traditions
 - Draw on Frame, your systematic theology background, and primary sources
5. **Book Reviews and Reading Responses**
 - Write substantive reviews (1,000–1,500 words) of 5–7 books from your reading
 - Include summary, analysis, evaluation, and personal response

Ongoing Practice

- **Philosophy Notebook:** Continue recording significant quotations, arguments, and your reflections
- **Discussion:** If possible, discuss your reading with others—spouse, reading group, online community
- **Application:** Note how philosophical concepts illuminate other areas of study (theology, economics, etc.)

Phase 5 Milestone

Complete your chosen synthesis projects. Compile them into a personal portfolio documenting your philosophical education. This portfolio represents concrete evidence of substantial intellectual growth.

Phase 6: Specialization & Continuing Study

Month 12 & Beyond | Following Your Curiosity

Having established a broad foundation, you are now equipped to pursue deeper specialization according to your interests. This phase provides options for continued study rather than prescribed requirements.

Specialization Tracks

Select one or more areas for extended study:

Track A: Ancient and Medieval Philosophy

- Complete reading of Copleston Volumes 1–3
- Additional primary texts: Plato’s dialogues (Symposium, Phaedo, Phaedrus), Augustine’s *Confessions* and *City of God*
- Consider: The Great Courses lecture series on Plato, Aristotle, or Medieval Philosophy

Track B: Modern Philosophy (17th–19th Century)

- Complete reading of Copleston Volumes 4–7
- Additional primary texts: Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hegel (selected readings), Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*
- From your library: *The Road to Serfdom* (Hayek) for liberal political thought

Track C: Political Philosophy Deep Dive

- Systematic study of *History of Political Philosophy* ed. Strauss [[From Your Library](#)]
- Primary texts: Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Locke’s *Second Treatise*, Rousseau’s *Social Contract*
- From your library: Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Scruton’s *Conservatism*

Track D: Philosophy of Culture and Technology

- Complete Jacques Ellul study: *The Technological Society* and *Propaganda* [[From Your Library](#)]
- Add: Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *Technopoly*
- From your library: *The Sovereign Individual* for contrasting perspective

Track E: Ethics and Moral Philosophy

- Deep study of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* [[From Your Library](#)] plus his later works
- From your library: Oliver O’Donovan’s *Self, World, and Time* and *Finding and Seeking*

- Additional: Aristotle's complete Nicomachean Ethics, Kant's Groundwork

Maintaining Your Foundation

As you specialize, continue practices that reinforce broad philosophical literacy:

- Regular listening to philosophical podcasts (History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps, Partially Examined Life)
- Periodic review of your notes, timelines, and synthesis essays
- Reading philosophical book reviews and discussions to stay current
- Applying philosophical concepts to your other areas of study

Resource Appendix

Books to Acquire

The following primary sources are recommended for acquisition:

- *Plato: The Republic* (Bloom or Grube/Reeve translation)
- *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings* (Penguin Classics ed.)
- *Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy*
- *Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
- *Kant: Critique of Pure Reason* (with reader's guide)

Online Courses

- **Open Yale Courses:** Philosophy and the Science of Human Nature; Introduction to Political Philosophy
- **MIT OpenCourseWare:** Various philosophy courses with syllabi and readings
- **Hillsdale College:** Free courses on Western Heritage and related topics

Podcasts and YouTube

- **History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps** (Peter Adamson) – Comprehensive, episode-by-episode coverage
- **The Partially Examined Life** – Discussion-based exploration of philosophical texts
- **Academy of Ideas** (YouTube) – Accessible video essays on major thinkers
- **The Thomistic Institute** (YouTube) – Classical tradition from Christian perspective
- **Crash Course Philosophy** (YouTube) – Engaging introductory overview

Reference Resources

- **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** (plato.stanford.edu) – Authoritative articles on every major topic
- **Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy** (iep.utm.edu) – More accessible companion resource
- **Academic Influence** (academicinfluence.com) – Lists of influential books by field

Your Library: Course-Relevant Volumes

The following books from your personal library are directly relevant to this course and have been incorporated into the curriculum:

Comprehensive Surveys

- Copleston, Frederick – A History of Philosophy, Volumes 1–7
- Frame, John M. – A History of Western Philosophy and Theology
- Evans, C. Stephen – A History of Western Philosophy: From the Pre-Socratics to Postmodernism
- Gottlieb, Anthony – The Dream of Reason; The Dream of Enlightenment

Introductory Texts

- Palmer, Donald D. – Looking at Philosophy
- Groothuis, Douglas – Philosophy in Seven Sentences
- Spiegel, James and Cowan, Steven – The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy

Primary Sources

- Aristotle – Works of Aristotle
- Boethius – The Consolation of Philosophy

Political Philosophy

- Strauss, Leo (ed.) – History of Political Philosophy
- Arendt, Hannah – The Origins of Totalitarianism (complete and parts)
- Hayek, Friedrich A. – The Road to Serfdom
- Scruton, Roger – Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition
- Wootton, David (ed.) – Divine Right and Democracy

Ethics and Moral Philosophy

- MacIntyre, Alasdair – After Virtue
- O'Donovan, Oliver – Self, World, and Time; Finding and Seeking
- Feinberg, John S. – Ethics for a Brave New World

Philosophy of Culture and Technology

- Ellul, Jacques – The Technological Society; Propaganda

- Pieper, Josef – Leisure: The Basis of Culture
- Polanyi, Michael – Personal Knowledge

Contemporary Thought

- Girard, René – I See Satan Fall Like Lightning; The Girard Reader
- Davidson, James Dale – The Sovereign Individual

Study Principles & Final Notes

Pacing and Flexibility

This curriculum is designed for approximately 12 months of consistent study at 1.5–2 hours daily. However, the timeline should adapt to your life circumstances and learning pace. Philosophy rewards slow, careful reading over rushed coverage. If a text demands more time, give it more time. The phases are guides, not deadlines.

On Charitable Reading

Approach each philosopher with the assumption that they have something valuable to teach, even when you disagree fundamentally. Understanding an argument on its own terms precedes evaluation. This charitable disposition is both intellectually virtuous and practically effective—you will learn more by genuinely engaging with thinkers than by dismissing them prematurely.

Integration with Other Studies

Philosophy does not exist in isolation. Your studies in systematic theology, economics, and Biblical Hebrew will illuminate philosophical questions, just as philosophical training sharpens theological and economic thinking. Look for connections. The Western intellectual tradition is a conversation, and participants speak across disciplinary boundaries.

The Goal of Philosophical Education

The purpose of studying philosophy is not merely to accumulate information about what various thinkers believed. It is to cultivate wisdom: the capacity to think clearly about fundamental questions, to recognize good arguments and identify bad ones, to understand the assumptions underlying different positions, and ultimately to live more thoughtfully. As Josef Pieper argues in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, genuine intellectual life requires a receptive disposition that goes beyond mere problem-solving. Philosophy, at its best, forms the soul.

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Soli Deo Gloria