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Philosophers Find the Degree Pays Off in Life And in Work

By Carol Marie Cropper

What can you do with a philosophy degree?

In an age of M.B.A.'s and computer scientists, more than 4,000 American college students graduate each year with a bachelor's degree in the ancient discipline. Sometimes their parents and friends wonder what will happen to them.

One thing is certain: Not many of them will go on to make a living as philosophers. Even those who persevere through a doctorate may wind up doing something else. More than 1,000 people with Ph.D.'s in philosophy applied for the 448 openings listed in the last year in "Jobs for Philosophers," said Eric Hoffman, executive director of the American Philosophical Association. And many of those jobs were temporary or nontenure-track teaching positions.

Yet students majoring in philosophy -- the study of the principles underlying conduct, thought and knowledge -- seem passionately unconcerned.

Shaharyar Khan, a philosophy major at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, is one of a handful of seniors selected to live in the early 19th-century academic village designed here by Thomas Jefferson. He awakens each morning in a dormitory room that opens onto the university's mist-covered lawn, with the rotunda that Jefferson modeled on the Pantheon rising to his left.

"We look at what we do, how we justify things," the 22-year-old said of his philosophy classes. "In that there is sublimity and nobility."

Mr. Khan plans to go to medical school -- if he is not seduced by an academic career. He considered majoring in a science but decided he would get enough of that later. Philosophy was his personal luxury. "This was something I could do for myself," he said.

But what of other philosophy majors? What do they do when confronted with the real world, where there are groceries to buy and mortgages to pay? How do they compete for jobs with all those sensible accounting and engineering majors?

For all the jokes about them, philosophy majors appear to do remarkably well. That, at least, is the conclusion one can draw from an unscientific survey, 20 years after graduation, of the class of 1977 at four schools: Princeton University, the University of Virginia, the University of Nebraska and Texas A & M University.

These 40-somethings fell in love with philosophy almost by accident and went on to careers in other fields. But for the most part they are convinced that their studies, which covered logic and ethics among other topics, helped them in their jobs and their lives.

Their professional success may stem from the fact that philosophy students seem more likely than those with other degrees to attend graduate or professional school. Of 20 philosophy majors interviewed from the four universities, only four had not added a graduate or professional degree.

“I suppose I’m lucky I got into medical school,” said Joseph P. Bruner, who graduated from Nebraska. “I would have probably wound up parking cars otherwise.”

Or maybe not. Jorge Secada, director of undergraduate studies in philosophy at Virginia, said his students almost always found jobs -- though not in philosophy. “We are doing better in finding employment for graduates than most majors in the arts and sciences area,” he said. “Apparently people in the real world think philosophy majors are well trained. They are trained to think, to analyze. They express themselves well. They write.”

At Texas A & M, philosophy majors -- like math and music students -- are benefiting these days from a job market desperate for computer scientists, said Dr. Leigh Turner, director of the university’s career center. Students with such majors are thought to have an aptitude for technology jobs, she said.

In the early days of this century, philosophy was thought of as fundamental to a well-rounded liberal arts education, Mr. Hoffman of the American Philosophical Association said. Considered more than just the teachings of Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, philosophy was regarded as a broad search for knowledge, encompassing the latest scientific and social theories.

But that was before those concerns became independent fields of study, leaving philosophy with a narrower focus. And it was before college-age baby boomers gave way to a baby bust. Cash-starved college started looking for departments to trim. And students, watching the cost of a college education at selective private schools soar, turned into pragmatic consumers weighing the economic value of a diplomat that could put them in debt by more than \$100,000.

By 1994, one survey found that a philosophy course was required at only 19 percent of colleges, Mr. Hoffman said. Between 1992 and 1996, more than 400 standalone philosophy departments disappeared, according to the Directory of American Philosophers. Schools offering a major in the subject slipped from 683 to 660; those offering even scattered courses plummeted from 947 to 606.

All this occurred despite the fact that philosophy, in the last 20 years, has taken a more marketable turn as the issues faced in industry and the professions have grown more complex.

Dr. Bruner’s career hints at the changes. He heads a medical team, including two ethicists, at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville that developed a surgical procedure for repairing spina bifida in fetuses. The procedure raised several ethical issues -- whether, for instance, it is appropriate to perform an operation that could kill a fetus incapable of giving consent to repair a condition that is not life-threatening.

“We’ve published almost as many articles on the ethics issues as on the medical issues,” Dr. Bruner said.

While so many other schools were cutting back, Princeton has maintained what is widely considered one of the best philosophy departments in the country. Its famous graduates include Carl C. Icahn, the financier, who earned his B.A. in 1957, his senior thesis was titled “The Problem of Formulating an Adequate Explication of the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning.”

Philosophy majors in the class of 1977 have spent the last two decades building striking resumes -- just not in philosophy.

Jay M. Behmke, 42, did what so many philosophy majors do: He became a lawyer. But he built a practical career with a twist. After a few years in corporate law, followed by a year teaching in France as a Fulbright Scholar, Mr. Behmke returned to American wine country and became the chief financial officer at a winery. He then opened a law practice in Sonoma County, Calif., representing vineyards.

“Some days I’m sorry I didn’t go on as a professor, because I did have some things to say,” said Mr. Behmke, who taught undergraduate philosophy courses at Yale while attending law school there. “I have a fantasy of making a fortune and retiring early and teaching philosophy.”

More men than women study philosophy; Nanci Heller McAlpin, a freelance writer in Manhattan, was the lone female philosophy major in Princeton’s class of 1977. She knew from the start that she was not earning a practical degree.

“When we entered the department, we were handed a paper and it said, ‘Why not to go to graduate school in philosophy,’” Ms. McAlpin recalled.

Such discouragement by Princeton and other schools apparently worked. The number of students earning doctorates in philosophy dropped to 298 in 1995 from 382 in 1976 and dipped as low as 215 in 1984, according to various studies.

But almost 92 percent of those with doctorates in philosophy were employed full time in 1995, compared to 85 percent of those with music Ph.D.’s and 87 percent with Ph.D.’s in art history, according to a study by the National Research Council. The median income for philosophy Ph.D.’s that year was \$46,800, compared with median 1995 earnings of \$48,100 for engineers and \$124,000 for family doctors.

Unlike students who choose a major with a career in mind, philosophers typically fall into the subject by taking a class they enjoy, said Mr. Secada of the University of Virginia. One recent day here, students listened as Prof. James Cargile lectured on the utilitarian theory of justice, which holds that justice can be arrived at by weighing such things as the total happiness an act produces. But if that makes sense, he asked, should the person who enjoys wealth the most have more of it than others? In another class, Richard Rorty, one of the nation’s best-known philosophers, discussed Nietzsche’s thoughts on homosexuality and celibacy.

Like Princeton’s, Virginia’s class of ’77 produced its share of lawyers, but graduates also headed for such typical philosophers’ occupations as medicine and computing. And some who chose law came to it circuitously.

After graduation, Ralph Gilbert 3d turned to a profession of which Jefferson would have approved. He raised soybeans, sheep and pigs on his family’s North Carolina farm for five years before drought, corn mold and mounting debt drove him from farming into law.

Mr. Gilbert, who is 45, said he still read philosophy and enjoyed philosophical discussions with a friend who is an Episcopal minister. He toys with the idea of going back to school for a divinity degree. But he credits philosophy with helping him neither in farming nor law; it has only improved his life.

“I think it influences the way I go about doing things,” Mr. Gilbert said. “I think it’s given me a sense of the complications that we face as human beings. It gives me a sense of the beauty and wonder of life. It helps me understand people in dire circumstances.”

Of all the gifts that his philosophy degree has given him, said Dr. Bruner, the Nebraska graduate, creativity is probably the most important. Those who majored in science, then headed straight for medical school and years of practice can have a narrow outlook, he said.

“They don’t have enough raw data outside their scientific training to provide those insights, those flashes of creativity,” he said.

Philosophy has many strains, of course -- not all of them quite so evocative of those moments of Romantic inspiration. Briggs Myrick, a 1977 Texas A & M graduate, became a sales clerk and manager at a hardware store after college. But within three years -- and without further training -- he was programming computers at the university. The leap was easy, he said: A lot of the early computer scientists were philosophers.

“In philosophy, we study logic,” he said. “We have a very mathematical way of going about it. Computers are a lot like that as well.”

Both philosophers and computer programmers use Boolean logic, Mr. Myrick explained, though philosophers are more likely to call it Aristotelian logic. “Any assertion is either true or false,” he said. If it is true or false, it can be on or off. And it can be a switch. And computers have a lot of little, tiny switches.

Of course, philosophy majors work in fields other than law, medicine and computer science -- especially if they set out into the working world with just a bachelor’s degree.

One Princeton graduate shelved books in libraries to support his interest in acting before returning to school years later for a master’s degree in library science. One 1977 Virginia graduate sells herbs and flowers, another owns a service station.

Some 1977 philosophy graduates earn less than \$30,000 a year; the herb seller expects to clear \$6,000 in 1997. But more common are incomes of \$50,000 or \$60,000, and a few earn more than \$200,000.

Money aside, Dr. Bruner figures that his philosophy degree helped make his medical career possible -- though there were moments of doubt. The 44-year-old obstetrician still recalls sitting before the admissions panel at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, scrambling to explain why he wanted to be a doctor after majoring in philosophy.

“I told them that I could get a medical degree and still, to some extent, practice philosophy,” he said. “But if I stayed in philosophy and tried to practice medicine, they’d probably try to put me in jail.”

“Not one of them cracked a smile.”
