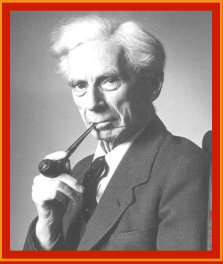


STUDYING PHILOSOPHY: A BRIGHT IDEA

By Will Hancock 2010

Bertrand Russell



PHILOSOPHY DEVELOPS...

- comprehension of complex arguments and texts
- The ability to think critically and objectively
- The ability to effectively argue a position and present cases convincingly
- The ability to write clearly and effectively
- Depth and breadth of view

What Is Philosophy?

So what exactly is philosophy?

There are a number of different answers to this question in large part because the word itself is used in different ways by different people. To the uninitiated philosophy often conjures up images of dead white guys with beards and furrowed brows, mulling over the meaning of life. We often speak of the “philosophies” of different people or organizations— the philosophy of the Democratic Party or the philosophy of a particular basketball coach for example. But philosophy as a discipline in academia is much different than what’s imagined in either of these scenarios.

Philosophy can be thought of as the inquiry into what Potsdam’s Dr. David Curry (personal communication, August 15, 2010) calls “the furniture of the world” – what is out there? How do we know or justify our knowledge of the world, and how do our beliefs about different things relate to one another? Are they consistent? Do we have good reasons for what we believe and what are these? These are just a few of the types of questions that philosophers ask. Philosopher Robert Audi defines philosophy as follows:

“It (philosophy) is a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths, a quest for understand-

ing... it seeks to establish standards of evidence, to provide rational methods for resolving conflicts and to create techniques for evaluating arguments....it enhances one’s ability to perceive the relationships among the various fields of study; and it deepens one’s sense of the meaning and varieties of human experience.”

(Audi, 1982).

Philosophy is concerned with every area of human knowledge, and it’s precisely because of the wide application of philosophical techniques of understanding to different subject areas that it is such a useful thing to study. Areas or sub-disciplines that are a part of an undergraduate degree in philosophy at SUNY Potsdam include Ethics (what makes an action or a thing good or bad?), Epistemology (the nature and foundations of knowledge), Metaphysics (what are the fundamental principles that govern the universe), Philosophy of Mind (what is the relationship between our brain and our conscious selves; what is consciousness?), Logic (the formal relationship between reasons and conclusions; the structure of rational thought) and the History of Philosophy.

How Is Philosophy Useful?

Depth and breadth of view, reflexivity,



photobucket.com

comprehension of complex arguments and texts, and the ability to think critically and objectively are all skills and abilities honed through the study of philosophy. Together these represent a mental toolkit that allows for a deeper and more systematic understanding and approach to the demands common in almost any competitive modern work environment. Philosophy is in large part concerned with the fundamentals that underlie our thinking, perceptions and beliefs. In thinking, as in most everything else, a sound understanding of the fundamentals is essential to success. For example, learning and knowing the mechanics behind what makes car engines work in *general*, means that you'll be able to look at any *particular* car and better understand how it works. Philosophy looks at the mechanics of rational thought and the fundamental assumptions that go into our general understanding of the world in order to better understand any *particular* theory, belief, idea, or problem.

You needn't take all this talk about improved critical thinking at face value either. There is plenty of convincing evidence for philosophy improving students' mental abilities. Test scores on the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) are one of the primary criteria that graduate schools use in deciding whether or not to accept potential students. According to a recent study, philosophy majors score higher on the GRE's than every other major in the humanities or any of the social sciences. Philosophy Majors do better on the verbal section of the test than English Majors, and better on the on the analytic section of the test than all but Physics and Math Majors (Fordham University

2010).

A common career choice for those who have studied philosophy on the undergraduate level is law. On the LSAT examination required for law school Philosophy Majors do better than all other majors except Physics. And yes, that includes Pre-law too (Fordham University 2010).

What kind of People Study Philosophy?

Philosophy attracts a wide range of people with varied backgrounds and interests. At SUNY Potsdam, as elsewhere, students who decide to major in philosophy often have an additional major that complements and or gives focus to their area of interest in philosophy. What unites people who come to the study of philosophy is a strong sense of curiosity about the world and the fundamental questions and assumptions that inform our interactions with it across academic disciplines. Common double majors in the philosophy department have included Psychology, Anthropology, Archeology, Math, Art Studio, Music Education, History, and Biology, to name a few.

Not many people come to college directly out of high school knowing that philosophy is what they want to study. Many people realize after a few semesters as a major in some other subject in the humanities or the sciences that many of the questions that are at the core of the field they have decided to major in are not satisfyingly addressed in normal coursework. Often people find their way to philosophy after taking an introductory class and realizing they like the abstract thinking and interesting ideas that are part and parcel of



photobucket.com

philosophy classes for their own sake.

Whatever the circumstances under which they come to philosophy, the typical major is not the aloof and pedantic caricature common in the popular imagination. Philosophy students like to talk to other people, and are highly inquisitive. They are the type of people who are not satisfied with a simple “yes” or “no” answers and have a passion for knowledge.

What Kinds of Careers Are Available With A Degree In Philosophy? (Undergrad, Graduate, Ph.D..?)

There are two well recognized career paths that have historically been associated with an undergraduate education in philosophy: Law School and graduate study in philosophy. But thinking of these two careers as the only ones that an undergraduate degree in philosophy prepares students for represents not only an oversimplified view of the practical applications of philosophy, but of the purpose and mission of undergraduate education in the 21st century.

The vast majority of majors on the undergraduate level don't prepare you for a specific career at all. Majoring in biology or physics, in English or sociology doesn't necessarily qualify you to be a biologist or physicist, a novelist or a sociologist. What an undergraduate education *does* give you is a set of useful widely applicable skills and abilities that are often geared toward certain job areas or types of graduate study, but not specific to any particular career. As far as this goes, a degree in philosophy is similar to

many other undergraduate degree in the humanities, sciences and social sciences. A key difference is that philosophy explicitly and systematically deals with critical thinking skills in a way that no other discipline does. The result is that an education in philosophy offers a better and more thorough grasp of many of these essential skills than any other undergraduate major.

That said, there ARE career paths that an undergraduate degree in philosophy does a particularly good job in preparing students for, and law school is one of the foremost. The training in logic and the evaluation and analysis of arguments that are essential to the study of philosophy have direct application in law. Medicine is another career path in which the evaluative and problem solving skills emphasized in philosophy are central, and the business and finance sectors are employing an increasing number of Philosophy graduates as well (Hoekima 1986, Seidman 2010). If a career in law, medicine or business is something you're keen on then studying philosophy along the way may give you an edge (Curry 2010).

It's important to remember that these are common career paths, but by no means the only career paths open to those who major in philosophy. A lot of ink has already been spilled in describing the types of skills that philosophy imparts in the “how is philosophy useful?” section of this article. Philosophy imbues a rich set of critical thinking skills that will be useful in any field that you might choose to work in and a second major in philosophy looks good on a gradu-



photobucket.com

-ate school application no matter what kind of program you are applying to. People with undergraduate or graduate training in philosophy can be found in almost any career area you'd care to think of. Some particularly noteworthy examples include: T. S. Eliot, Ken Follett and Susan Sontag in literature, Stone Phillips and Robert Pollock in journalism, Pierre Trudeau, Bill Clinton and Pat Buchanan in Politics, and Wes Anderson, Steve Martin, and Woody Allen in the arts/entertainment (Raymont 2008).

Studying philosophy as an undergraduate needn't and usually doesn't mean that you are planning on becoming a "Philosopher" with a capital "P". Instead it represents a commitment to rational thinking and inquiry that have relevance whatever path you choose in life.

Graduate School for Philosophy?

What about grad school? Potsdam's Dr. David Curry emphasizes that an MA in philosophy on its own is probably of less value than some other MA degrees if you're looking to enter the conventional job market (David Curry personal communication, November 15, 2010). Should you choose to go on to study Philosophy in grad school your best option may be either to earn an MA in philosophy on the way to an advanced or terminal degree (usually a Ph.D.) in another subject area, or to pursue a career in academia via a Ph.D. in Philosophy. It's important to consider in planning for the future that a commitment to philosophy on the graduate level is a very different thing than majoring in philosophy as an undergraduate, requiring a great deal of hard work, dedication and sacrifice. Although

there are Philosophy Ph.D.'s employed in many areas of both the private and public sectors, the vast majority teach philosophy at colleges and universities (Audi, R. and D. Scherer 1984). If you find yourself passionate about philosophy and are inclined toward teaching, earning a Ph.D may be something you'll want to consider doing.



SUNY Potsdam's Dr. David Curry

Before deciding on applying to Ph.D. programs in philosophy you should keep in mind several things. Firstly, good philosophy programs are some of the most competitive in academia, so high GPA and GRE scores and excellent letters of recommendation from your professors are very important. Secondly, the job market for teaching positions in Philosophy is also very competitive. There are far more applicants than jobs available in a given year, so finding a teaching position after you finish your hard-earned Ph.D. is not a guarantee. Thirdly, Ph.D.'s in Philosophy take a long time to complete. On average, finishing a Ph.D. in Philosophy takes about seven years though it may take up to ten and occasionally even longer (Curry, personal



photobucket.com

communication, November 15, 2010)

For those dedicated to philosophy, however, teaching can be a very meaningful and satisfying career, with the difficulties involved in get-

you to many of the major areas of Philosophy (Epistemology, Ethics, Metaphysics) and can help you decide if Philosophy is something you'd enjoy learning more about.



Photo butcket.com

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche came to Philosophy from the study of languages.

You might also want to talk to one of Potsdam's Philosophy professors to learn more about any of the things that have been mentioned in this article or to inquire about upcoming courses that might interest you. Even if you decide that philosophy isn't a subject that you want to major or minor in, taking courses in philosophy will introduce you to ways of looking at the world that are guaranteed to be a unique part of your undergraduate experience.

ting there well worth the reward (Hoekima 1986).

How can I be sure that Philosophy is something I want to study?

Take some classes!! The introductory philosophy classes at SUNY Potsdam are a great place to start. All sections fulfill the PI (Philosophical Inquiry) general education requirement and many also fulfill the FC (Freshmen Critical Thinking) requirement as well. Taking an introductory course will expose

"The SUNY Potsdam Philosophy professors have shown me how to think clearly and how to justify my position on an issue. This has helped me greatly in my other studies and will continue to be a great asset to me throughout my life."
- Gordon Millsaps, Philosophy/Psychology Major"

SOURCES

Audi, R. and D. Scherer (1984). Careers for philosophers. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 58(2), 299-352.

Fordham University (2010). Careers and philosophy. Retrieved October 5, 2010 from:

http://www.fordham.edu/academics/programs_at_fordham_/philosophy/undergraduates/rs_philosophy_30991.asp

Hoekima, D. (1986). What can you do with a philosophy major? *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 59(5), 729-739.

Seidman, D. (2010, January 12). Philosophy is back in business. *Business Week*. Retrieved October 2, 2010, from: <http://www.businessweek.com/print/managing/content/jan2010/ca201>