Five Reasons to Major in Philosophy

Contents

Critical Thinker Academy

I get a lot of students who tell me that they loved the one or two philosophy classes they took as an undergraduate student, and that they would have enjoyed taking more courses if their schedules allowed it, but since they weren't majoring in philosophy it just wasn't possible. This is really unfortunate when you find a student that really loves philosophy and you know isn't nearly as passionate about their chosen major.

So I ask them, have you ever considered majoring in philosophy? Or keeping your current major and adding philosophy as a second major?

Most often the student will say "no", they've never really considered philosophy as a major. Sometimes they'll say that they have thought of it but dismissed it for one reason or another. A lot of students express worries about the marketability of a philosophy degree. One student told me, half jokingly, that her parents would kill her if she said she was switching her major to philosophy!

I understand where these students are coming from, I sympathize with their worries,and their parents' worries, about employment and the marketability of their degree.

But too often I think these worries are based on misconceptions about the practical value of a philosophy degree. I'd like to address this question — "why major in philosophy?" — and along the way clear up some of the more common misconceptions about the value of a philosophy degree.

What You Learn When You Study Philosophy

Before we do anything else we need to spend a bit of time talking about what it is that you actually learn as a philosophy major.

It's helpful to distinguish the various **skills** that you're taught as a philosophy major, from the actually **content** of the material that you'll be learning.

Skills

On the "skills" side, the most obvious category, and maybe the most important, is the **ability to think logically, critically and independently**. Philosophy majors usually have to take at least one course in logic, and basic skills in logic and argumentation are reinforced in every class, since these are the basic tools of philosophical reasoning. Students get lots of practice in reading and analyzing the argumentative structure of various kinds of texts.

Alongside this instruction in logic and argumentation, philosophy students are taught to **value independent critical thought**, and to **scrutinize the arguments** they hear from tv, media, advertisers, politicians.

Philosophy also teaches and demands **strong communication skills**, both in speech and in writing. Philosophers pays close attention to language, and we value clarity and precision in the use of words. To do philosophy well you need to learn to say exactly what you mean, and to mean exactly what you say. I remind students that someone can write beautifully and still be unclear about what it is they're trying to say. Philosophy demands clarity above all else, because the issues we talk about are conceptually difficult enough to begin with.

Lots of degree programs demand basic reasoning skills, but philosophy develops **particular skills in reasoning with very general, sometimes very abstract, concepts and principles**. For example, in an ethics class we might want to know, is it wrong to steal in such-and-such a situation. But we also ask, if it's wrong, WHY is it wrong? What MAKES it wrong? And this moves us up a level, to discussing fundamental moral values and principles. And then students are required to think and reason and argue about different candidates for fundamental moral values and principles, which is an even higher level of abstraction still.

Now, these discussions don't just spiral off into the heavens. At all times we're concerned about **how general principles apply to specific, concrete cases**, and philosophy students become very good at **seeing the**

practical consequences of adopting different, higher-level principles. This is a skill with lots of practical value, just ask any lawyer or business executive or high-level administrator, they'll tell you how important these kinds of skills are in their field.

Content

Moving on to "content", not surprisingly, if you major in philosophy then you're going to be exposed to the **ideas and theories of some of the most influential philosophers** spanning the time of the Greeks to the present.

You'll learn about the most influential views on the deepest questions we can ask, about the **nature of reality**, about the **nature and origins of knowledge**, about the **foundations of ethics and morality**, about different **theories of justice** and the **role of the state in political life**, and much more.

Let me just pause a minute to emphasize an important point. Some might reasonably wonder what the relevance is of studying, in our day and age, the abstract philosophical theories of people, most of whom are long dead. Well, it is relevant, and here's why. The world we live in today — the economic and scientific and legal and political and religious institutions that make up modern societies — this world is a product of the ideas and the influence of philosophers, scientists and thinkers of various kinds across the span of history. The modern world has an intellectual history, and we can't hope to understand how it works and where it's headed if we're ignorant of how it came to be. Frankly, I can't think of anything more relevant than that.

And this leads to the final item on my list — **intellectual history and conceptual foundations**. One of the great things about philosophy is that you can study almost any discipline from a philosophical perspective, so if you happen to love science, you can study the philosophy of science; if you love art you can study the philosophy of art; if you love politics you can study political philosophy; and so on.

The difference between studying science, and studying the philosophy of science, is that the philosophy of science focuses on the nature of science itself — what it is, how it works, what its methods are, what it can and can't tell us about the world — and it focuses on foundational questions within the sciences that are hard or impossible to answer by empirical means alone. The same goes for all these "philosophy OF" fields.

From a student's perspective, what's great about this is that if you pair up the study of your favorite subject with the philosophy of that subject — science with the philosophy of science, art with the philosophy of art, psychology with the philosophy of psychology, economics with the philosophy of economics, and so on — then you can potentially acquire a much deeper understanding of that subject than you otherwise would have.

To my mind, this naturally leads to an argument for adding a philosophy degree as a **second major** alongside another major, but even if you just major in philosophy, you can indulge your interests in these other subjects to whatever extent you like, since studying the philosophy OF any field requires that you learn something about that field.

But now we're getting into reasons for majoring in philosophy, and I don't want to get ahead of myself. Here, I think we should start at the beginning, with a deeper and more basic reason for studying philosophy.

Five Reasons To Major in Philosophy

1. Philosophy Has Intrinsic Value

The search for truth and wisdom about the most important issues that face human beings — this has intrinsic value, it's important for its own sake.

Now, I get that not everyone feels this way, but a lot of people do. For a lot of us, philosophy has intrinsic value and we value it intrinsically. It's something that we naturally feel compelled to do, we do it for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else.

Natural philosophers are easy to spot. You enjoy staying up late and arguing with your friends about God and ethics and politics and religion. You're frustrated by the superficial way that important issues are discussed in the media. It really bugs you when people adopt views just because their parents or their peers or their religion or the media tell them to.

You know who you are.

2. It's What a Liberal Arts Education Ought To Be

This term "liberal arts" is sometimes misunderstood. The original meaning dates back to Roman times, when a "liberal arts" education meant an education worthy of a free person, hence the word "liberal", with same root as "liberty", which means "freedom".

The liberal arts curriculum became standardized and in the medieval Western university the so-called "Seven Liberal Arts" included at its core the "trivium" — grammar, logic and rhetoric — which focused on basic thinking and communication skills, and the four subjects that made up what was called the "quadrivium" — arithmetic, astronomy, music and geometry.

That's the classical meaning of the term. These days the term is more often associated with an educational philosophy, *liberal education*, that captures the spirit of the classical tradition in a modern context.

Here's a definition of "liberal education" endorsed by the AACU, the Association of American Colleges and Universities:

> Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest.

Philosophy teaches students how to think critically and independently, and how to communicate effectively, both in speech and in writing. The

study of philosophy typically results in a broad, general knowledge of a lot of different subjects. It's what a liberal arts education ought to be!

But now I hear the voice of that student I mentioned in my head, who said her parents would kill her if she told them she was switching her major to philosophy. This is all well and good, they'll say, but really, what kind of a *job* can you get with a philosophy degree?

I get it. Philosophy has a reputation for being one of the more impractical university degrees. But I want to show you that this reputation isn't nearly as deserved as you might think.

3. Employers Are Looking For These Skills

For starters, employers really are looking for the skills that philosophy teaches. Business leaders routinely say that finding smart, technically competent employees isn't hard, there are tons of those on the market. What's much harder to find are employees who have strong communication, critical reasoning and problem-solving skills. They'll say "I can teach you how to program. I can teach you how to use a piece of technology. I can teach you policies and procedures. That's easy. What's much harder to teach, and what is increasingly lacking in university graduates, are these general communication and reasoning skills."

There's survey data to back this up. In 2009 the Association of American Colleges and Universities sponsored a survey to investigate employers' views on college learning in the wake of the economic downturn. They interviewed over 300 business and government executives — owners, CEOs, presidents, and vice presidents — and asked them what skills they thought were important for their employees to have, and whether universities were successful at teaching these skills to recent graduates. The results are telling.

This summary table gives a list of skills and learning outcomes.

Proportion Of Employers Who Say Colleges Should Place **More** Emphasis Than They Do Today On Selected Learning Outcomes	
	%
The ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing	89
Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills	81
The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands-on experiences	79
The ability to analyze and solve complex problems	75
The ability to connect choices and actions to ethical decisions	75
Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings	71
The ability to innovate and be creative	70
Concepts and new developments in science and technology	70
The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources	68
The ability to understand the global context of situations and decisions	67
Global issues and developments and their implications for the future	65
The ability to work with numbers and understand statistics	63
The role of the United States in the world	57
Cultural diversity in America and other countries	57
Civic knowledge, civic participation, and community engagement	52
Proficiency in a foreign language	45
Democratic institutions and values	40

The percentage on the right is the proportion of employers surveyed who said that colleges and universities should place MORE emphasis than they do today on that particular skill.

Look at the top of the list. Number one, "the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing". Number two, "critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills".

If you're good at philosophy, you have these skills, they're central to philosophy.

If you look down this list, what you see are skills associated not with proficiency in technical fields, but with a broad liberal arts education: the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings, the ability to connect choices and actions to ethical decisions, understanding global context, cultural diversity, civic knowledge, proficiency in a foreign language, democratic institutions and values. Remember, this is what *business leaders* are saying they need in their employees, not academics trying to justify their jobs.

Employers are looking for these skills. Philosophy is one of the best liberal arts degrees for teaching these skills.

4. Your Income Expectations Are Higher Than You May Think

Here's another fact that might surprise you. With a philosophy degree, your income expectations are higher than you might think. And hopefully it's becoming more clear why this is the case.

Here's a table with a list of different university degree programs, from a 2008 survey[1]. The middle column gives the median starting salary for graduates of those programs. "Median" here just means the most common starting salary. The column on the right gives the median mid-career salary — this is the most common salary after 15 years of work experience. And these are salaries for people for whom this is their terminal degree, no degrees beyond the bachelor's degree.

Best Undergrad College Degrees By Salary - Full List

BEST UNDERGRAD COLLEGE DEGREES BY SALARY	STARTING MEDIAN SALARY	MID-CAREER MEDIAN SALARY
Chemical Engineering	$63,200	$107,000
Computer Engineering	$61,400	$105,000
Electrical Engineering	$60,900	$103,000
Aerospace Engineering	$57,700	$101,000
Economics	$50,100	$98,600
Physics	$50,300	$97,300
Computer Science	$55,900	$95,500
Industrial Engineering	$57,700	$94,700
Mechanical Engineering	$57,900	$93,600
Math	$45,400	$92,400
Physician Assistant	$74,300	$91,700
Civil Engineering	$53,900	$90,500
Construction	$53,700	$88,900
Finance	$47,900	$88,300
Management Information Systems (MIS)	$49,200	$82,300
Philosophy	$39,900	$81,200

Not surprisingly, engineering, computer science and the more technical business-related programs rank highest on this list. On the bottom of this

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1. http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2009_EmployerSurvey.pdf

list you see "philosophy". Not a great starting salary, just under 40 thousand. But look at the mid-career salary — $81,000! That's not bad.

What's more interesting is what programs fall below philosophy on this scale. In the figure below we've scrolled down the list a bit, and we're seeing the programs that have lower median salaries than philosophy.

Philosophy	$39,900	$81,200
International Relations	$40,900	$80,900
Chemistry	$42,600	$79,900
Marketing	$40,800	$79,600
Geology	$43,500	$79,500
Political Science	$40,800	$78,200
Accounting	$46,000	$77,100
Architecture	$41,600	$76,800
Information Technology (IT)	$49,100	$74,800
Business Management	$43,000	$72,100
Agriculture	$42,600	$71,900
History	$39,200	$71,000
Communications	$38,100	$70,000
Film	$37,900	$68,500

Some have higher starting salaries, but all of these have lower mid-career salaries. And look at the list. Chemistry is below philosophy. Marketing is below philosophy. Political science and accounting are below philosophy. Architecture is below philosophy.

Let's scroll down a little farther.

Film	$37,900	$68,500
Nursing	$54,200	$67,000
Journalism	$35,600	$66,700
Geography	$41,200	$65,500
Art History	$35,800	$64,900
Biology	$38,800	$64,800
English	$38,000	$64,700
Forestry	$39,100	$62,600
Anthropology	$36,800	$61,500
Health Care Administration	$38,800	$60,600
Psychology	$35,900	$60,400

Nursing, journalism, geography, art history, biology, english, anthropology, psychology — all with statistically lower mid-career salaries than philosophy graduates.

These figures surprise a lot of people, but by now you shouldn't be too surprised. Recall the survey about the skills that employers are looking for. Critical thinking, communication and analytic problem-solving skills are very much in demand, and philosophy graduates are better than average in these areas. But philosophy graduates are also good at high-level reasoning involving general principles, and this whole set of skills becomes more important, and less common, as you move up the administrative ranks in an organization. Philosophers who work in government and the business world will testify to this. Their skills don't give you much advantage when you're doing data entry and clerical work in entry level jobs, but they confer an increasing advantage as you move up the job ladder.

So, it's a reasonable speculation that philosophy ranks as high as it does on this list because philosophy graduates are better prepared than many other graduates to compete for mid and upper level jobs with higher salaries.

But we're not done yet. Here's our fifth and final reason for majoring in philosophy.

5. A Philosophy Major is the Ideal Springboard Degree

A philosophy major is the ideal "springboard" degree.

What do we mean by this? We mean that philosophy is an ideal springboard to graduate programs and professional schools beyond the undergraduate level. If you're interested in going to graduate school, law school, medical school, or an MBA program, philosophy is a great undergraduate major.

How do we know this? Well, each of these programs requires that students take an admission test to get in.

For graduate school programs, you have to take the GRE. For law school, you have to take the LSAT. For MBA programs, you need to take the GMAT. For medical school it's the MCAT.

It turns out that philosophy majors do very well on these graduate admission tests. In fact, when you average over all of them, the undergraduate major that performs best on these tests overall is the philosophy major.

Here's an example. Below is a list of GRE scores ordered by major, averaged over three years[2]. The GRE test has a verbal reasoning component, a quantitative reasoning component, and an analytical writing component. This table shows the verbal reasoning scores. Liberal arts majors do well in this category, but philosophy majors do the best, even above english majors.

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2. Data from the Graduate Record Examination's Guide to the Use of Scores 2010-11. Produced by Educational Testing Service.

	Intended Major	Verbal Reasoning		
		Mean Score	N	S.D.
1	Philosophy	591	3,870	101
2	English Language and Literature	560	18,439	102
3	Religion	544	2,969	106
4	Library and Archival Sciences	541	4,566	103
5	Foreign Languages and Literatures	539	4,470	121
6	History	539	11,750	103
7	Arts -- History, Theory, and Criticism	535	5,136	104
8	Physics and Astronomy	533	7,576	115
9	Anthropology and Archaeology	533	6,441	98
10	Political Science	527	21,969	109
11	Mathematical Sciences	507	9,391	119
12	Economics	507	8,966	124
13	Materials Engineering	494	2,463	118
14	Earth, Atmospheric, and Marine Sciences	493	9,512	103
15	Sociology	491	4,537	109
16	Chemical Engineering	487	4,015	119
17	Arts -- Performance and Studio	486	7,170	107
18	Secondary Education	485	8,957	96
19	Biological Sciences	484	47,334	109
20	Chemistry	480	9,698	112
21	Mechanical Engineering	470	10,079	115
22	Psychology	470	62,102	98
23	Architecture and Environmental Design	470	11,362	105

Now here are the quantitative reasoning scores.

	Intended Major	Quantitative Reasoning		
		Mean Score	N	S.D.
1	Mathematical Sciences	737	9,391	77
2	Physics and Astronomy	736	7,577	74
3	Chemical Engineering	729	4,014	79
4	Materials Engineering	728	2,463	76
5	Banking and Finance	721	2,274	98
6	Mechanical Engineering	720	10,078	82
7	Electrical Engineering and Electronics	720	20,378	91
8	Economics	706	8,984	98
9	Industrial Engineering	706	3,426	99
10	Civil Engineering	698	8,871	90
11	Computer and Information Sciences	690	20,353	114
12	Chemistry	677	9,698	101
13	Earth, Atmospheric, and Marine Sciences	633	9,511	111
14	Philosophy	629	3,867	121
15	Biological Sciences	626	47,325	118
16	Architecture and Environmental Design	605	11,358	118
17	Political Science	586	21,965	129
18	Agriculture	586	11,473	122
19	Accounting	586	482	139
20	Religion	584	2,969	128
21	Secondary Education	579	8,958	129
22	Foreign Languages and Literatures	576	4,477	130
23	Business Administration and Managemen	568	7,506	142

Not surprisingly, math, engineering and physical science majors do very well in this category. They do better than philosophy majors, on average. But once you move below this category, philosophy is at the top of the list. Philosophy majors do better than biology majors, they do better than architecture and accounting majors.

The table below shows the GRE scores for the analytical writing section.

	Intended Major	Analytic Writing		
		Mean Score	N	S.D.
1	Philosophy	4.8	3,862	0.8
2	English Language and Literature	4.6	18,414	0.8
3	Religion	4.5	2,968	0.8
4	History	4.5	11,729	0.8
5	Political Science	4.5	21,930	0.8
6	Foreign Languages and Literatures	4.4	4,474	0.8
7	Arts -- History, Theory, and Criticism	4.4	5,132	0.8
8	Anthropology and Archaeology	4.4	6,435	0.8
9	Library and Archival Sciences	4.3	4,563	0.8
10	Physics and Astronomy	4.3	7,566	0.8
11	Sociology	4.3	4,526	0.8
12	Economics	4.2	8,933	0.9
13	Secondary Education	4.2	8,906	0.8
14	Psychology	4.2	61,911	0.8
15	Communications	4.2	17,934	0.8
16	Higher Education	4.2	3,777	0.8
17	Mathematical Sciences	4.1	9,368	0.8
18	Earth, Atmospheric, and Marine Sciences	4.1	9,481	0.8
19	Arts -- Performance and Studio	4.1	7,153	0.8
20	Biological Sciences	4.1	42,207	0.8
21	Chemistry	4.1	9,681	0.8
22	Public Administration	4.1	4,852	0.8
23	Curriculum and Instruction (Education)	4.1	3,104	0.8

Again, the liberal arts disciplines do well, but again, philosophy tops the list. And notice how low the math and physical science majors are on this component of the test. They win the quantitative category but lose on the other categories, with the result that philosophy is, on average, the highest scoring major.

This general pattern is played out over and over in these graduate and professional admission tests. They all have a verbal or language component and a quantitative or analytical reasoning component. Philosophy majors score very high on the verbal and language components and better than average on the quantitative and analytical reasoning components, with high average scores overall.

Here's a table showing the majors that perform best on the LSAT test[3]. The LSAT emphasizes logic games, analytical reasoning and

3. LSAT Scores of Economics Majors: The 2008-2009 Class Update, by Michael Nieswiadomy
http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1430654

argumentation; it doesn't really have as large a verbal component as the GRE, but it does have an essay comprehension section. Over 2007 and 2008, economics and philosophy tied for first place.

TABLE 1. Average 2007-2008 LSAT Scores

Rank	Major field	Average score	No. of students
1	Economics	157.4	3,047
1	Philosophy	157.4	2,184
3	Engineering	156.2	2,197
4	History	155.9	4,166
5	English	154.7	5,120
6	Finance	153.4	2,267
7	Political Science	153.0	14,964
8	Psychology	152.5	4,355
9	Sociology	150.7	1,902
10	Communications	150.5	2,230
11	Business Administration	149.1	1,971
12	Criminal Justice	145.5	3,306

Actually, this table is a bit misleading since it omits the math/physics majors, who actually do better. But they're such a small percentage of the students taking the LSAT, and this particular table omits the smaller categories.

The table below shows the smaller categories, with math and physics on top, and economics and philosophy tied for second.

TABLE 2. Average 2007-2008 LSAT Scores

Rank	Major field	Average score	No. of students
1	Physics/Math	160.0	577
2	Economics	157.4	3,047
3	Philosophy/Theology	157.4	2,581
4	International Relations	156.5	1,520
5	Engineering	156.2	2,197
6	Government /Service	156.1	578
7	Chemistry	156.1	632
8	History	155.9	4,169
9	Interdisciplinary Studies	155.5	652
10	Foreign Languages	155.3	1,084
11	English	155.2	5,899
12	Biology/Natural Sciences	154.8	2,201
13	Arts	154.2	1,438

Again, it's interesting to see what majors fall below philosophy. Engineering. Chemistry. History. Biology. English.

We can scroll down farther.

14	Computer Science	154.0	682
15	Finance	153.4	2,267
16	Political Science	153.1	15,181
17	Psychology	152.5	4,355
18	Liberal Arts	152.4	3,892
19	Anthropology/Geography	152.2	808
20	Accounting	151.7	1,439
21	Journalism	151.5	3,408
22	Sociology/Social Work	151.2	3,123
23	Marketing	150.8	1,574
24	Business Management	149.7	4,629
25	Education	149.4	484
26	Business Administration	149.1	1,984
27	Health Professions	148.4	703
28	Prelaw	148.3	1,078
29	Criminal Justice	146.0	4,016

Below english we have computer science. Finance. Political science. Psychology. Anthropology. Journalism. Sociology.

And ironically, the two lowest performing majors — the ones with the most students who arguably are looking to get into law school — are pre-law and criminal justice.

Summing Up

Here are five reasons to major in philosophy:

1. **Philosophy has intrinsic value, and we — or many of us, at least — value it intrinsically**. Some of you reading this are natural philosophers, you know who you are. A philosophy degree might be the perfect fit for you.

2. **A philosophy degree is what a liberal arts education ought to be**. Critical thinking and communication skills; broad, general knowledge. It's not the only way to get a good liberal arts

education, but it's one of the best, particularly if you combine with a more focused, in-depth study of a particular field.

3. **Employers are looking for these liberal arts skills**. They really are, they're a scarce commodity on the job market, and they become increasingly scarce and more important in higher level positions, which makes them even more valuable the higher you go.

4. **Your income expectations with a philosophy degree are higher than you may think**. It's just false to think that this is an impractical degree. It's certainly no more impractical than many other liberal arts and science degrees, and it does better than many in terms of expected income.

5. **Philosophy is the ideal springboard degree**. If you're interested in going on to graduate school or law school or medical school or business administration programs, the skills that you develop as a philosophy major can help you compete for admission to these programs. The combination of strong verbal and analytic reasoning skills results in philosophy majors doing very well on graduate admission tests.

If you're a student and you're interested, go visit your university's philosophy department website, check out what they offer, and schedule an appointment with a departmental adviser. They'll be happy to help out.