Why Study Philosophy?

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The best reason to study philosophy is that you love philosophy. Indeed, this is the only sufficient reason a person could have to major in philosophy or to continue to study it in graduate school.

Let's suppose, though, that you are majoring in another discipline—English or science or business or psychology. Should you nonetheless reserve a place in your programme for philosophy courses? Yes, you should, for studying philosophy will contribute both to your understanding of the world and to the development of intellectual and personal skills you will value wherever life takes you.

What we do as philosophical thinkers, at least what many of us do, is to try to resolve tensions we notice among the various ideas that we hold. We sometimes find that two ideas, each of which seems perfectly fine looked at by itself, don't fit together very well. The discovery that they don't fit together very well irritates us, and stimulates us to think hard about the structure of the world.

Let me give you an example. Likely enough, you think that when you do something intentionally, you are doing it of your own free will. When you decide to call a friend on the phone, for instance, you think that calling your friend is up to you. Also, likely enough, you think that when something happens, something has caused it to happen, and caused it in such a way that that thing had to happen. Now, your deciding to call a friend on the phone is something that happened, and, so, something caused it to happen such that it had to happen. But if that is right, deciding to call your friend wasn't done of your own free will, or so one might worry. Given your psychology at the moment of your decision, you couldn't have decided otherwise.

It appears, then, that the two ideas you hold, that you act of your own free will and that things happen because of causes that require them to happen, don't rest together well. Though each is plausible if not obvious on its own, maybe they both cannot be true together. The philosophical task is to determine which idea is false or, perhaps, how to interpret the two of them to show that the tension is merely apparent.

For another example, consider what you believe about knowledge. You probably believe that you and others know lots of things about the world. You probably also believe that you must be certain of a belief that it is true before it counts as knowledge. Well, then, what are you *really* certain of? If you think about it, you might conclude that you're not absolutely certain of all that much. But, then, it seems, you are wrong that everybody knows lots of things. Or you are wrong that knowledge requires certainty. Or, maybe, there's a way to understand what it is

to know something on which people know lots despite the fact that standards for knowledge are high.

Now, of course, the idea that our beliefs are in tension one with another appears in areas of inquiry other than philosophy. Scientists, for instance, refer to anomalies, and much of their work is given to reconciling anomalies with theories and theories with anomalies. There's something more, then, that makes thought philosophical than just that it aims to resolve a tension among beliefs.

What that something else is is that the tension cannot be resolved by performing an experiment or collecting more data. In philosophy, we deal with tensions that arise even though all the data—all the tests and observations—have been collected. Philosophical thought is, then, interpretive thought. We try to find the interpretation of the facts that fits them all together best.

For some of us, thinking hard and trying to fashion interpretations of how the things of the world fit together (or fail to fit together) is invigorating and satisfying. We're vexed and prodded by our confusions and elated when we've resolved one of them. We love philosophy and we're happy for every moment we can dedicate to it.

If you also are excited by rigorous thinking and intrigued by philosophical problems, then you should seriously consider majoring in philosophy.

But how will you know whether you love philosophy? The only way is to study it for a little while. Commit yourself to an introductory philosophy course and work hard in it. There's no other way to determine whether you belong among the philosophers.

Even if you enjoy philosophy, though, you might have plans to concentrate on other fields. Yet, no matter what academic field you intend to work in, you have good reasons to take one or more philosophy courses each year of university. Let me list four reasons why students, even those majoring in disciplines other than philosophy, should take at least one philosophy course each year.

First of all, you want to be an educated and cultured person. That is why you wish to study at university. At its best, the university experience is one of overcoming ignorance and reliance on traditional or customary beliefs. Not only does an educated person know things, he or she is able and dedicated to thinking for herself. To come to think for oneself, one has to bring one's deepest beliefs to consciousness and lay them open to criticism and reform. Philosophy, though, as we have seen, is the discipline in which we look deeply at our beliefs and challenge them severely. That is why, since you wish to become educated and cultured, you should keep a spot open in your university programme each year for at least one course in philosophy.

Second, philosophy departments offer courses that examine philosophically the ideas and endeavours of the other academic disciplines. Philosophy of social science, for instance, investigates the fundamental ideas of sociology and anthropology, and seeks to determine the relations between social scientific understanding and the sort of understanding that the physical sciences provide. Philosophy of science, philosophy of literature, philosophy of economics—all of these courses enable students to think deeply about the basic ideas in their discipline. Taking philosophy courses associated with the topics of your major discipline will help you to understand that discipline better.

Third, philosophy departments offer courses in which students are invited to think hard about the practical and worldly problems that matter the most to them. Death and dying, medical ethics, philosophy of art, environmental philosophy, propaganda and truth, and sex and sexuality are among the topics students may investigate to help them enrich their thinking about the

political and social issues of the day. Surely a society will be a better one for having citizens concerned and knowledgeable about ethics and the problems of living.

Fourth, because philosophy is about thinking, about interpreting, constructing, and evaluating arguments and chains of reasoning, students who take philosophy courses throughout their university careers become powerful and subtle thinkers. The skills of critical thinking that they acquire even affect their characters, making them more tolerant of different ideas and keen to investigate and discuss important matters dispassionately. Because of its emphasis on reasoning and evaluating, people who study philosophy are rarely petty or dogmatic.

Let me summarize all these reasons for studying philosophy. Philosophy is fascinating; the study of philosophy opens and liberates the mind; studying the roots of a discipline (sociology, English, physics) will improve your grasp on that disciplines; understanding the arguments around social issues will help you to participate in contemporary debates; people who study philosophy acquire the skills of sound thinking and develop habits of dispassionate inquiry and tolerance.

The study of philosophy is, then, both interesting and useful.

People who study philosophy go on to have rewarding careers in a wide variety of fields other than philosophy itself. They do well in law school and as lawyers, and in medical school and as doctors. They also succeed as journalists and writers, as teachers, and as business people.

All the philosophy departments of which I'm aware are good places that look after their students. Philosophy professors love philosophy and they are keen to invite students to engage in the philosophical endeavour with them. My own school, Saint Mary's University, has a medium-sized department of eight, with an additional two or three part-time professors each year. It's a department that is neither so big a student gets lost among the professors and courses nor so small that it can offer only a few courses each year. (I should add that "Saint Mary's" is just our name; we have no religious affiliation.) We have a majors programme, an honours programme (for students who intend to pursue philosophy at the graduate level), and a Master's programme (for students who have an honours degree in philosophy). And we offer a variety of courses of interest to students majoring in other disciplines.

The Saint Mary's University website:
    http://www.smu.ca/

The website of the department of philosophy at Saint Mary's:
    http://www.smu.ca/academic/arts/philosophy/faculty.html

Here's the page with information for prospective students:
    http://www.smu.ca/future-students/welcome.html