

# What Can A Person Do With A Degree In Philosophy?

Let's begin with the basics. What is Philosophy? Philosophy is the study of reality, knowledge, values, logic, and related topics—The existence of free will or God, the nature of science, art, emotions and language, ethical theory, proofs, fallacies, and so on. It is one of the oldest subjects of study in the Western world.

As a future university student, you want to know that you will graduate with experiences, knowledge and skills you will value for the rest of your life. That's why there's a good chance you should take philosophy courses, minor in philosophy, or even major in philosophy.

Now, I have a hunch that you're thinking "Philosophy? That sounds like a good way to end up in the service industry for life, asking people 'Would you like fries with that?'" But consider a few facts:

- Top law schools release statistics on the majors of students they have accepted. Every year, philosophy is one of the three most common majors of students admitted.
- High-tech companies in Silicon Valley such as Kanisa and Tacit Knowledge Systems actively recruit people with degrees in philosophy.
- There are people with degrees in philosophy who are medical doctors, rock-climbing instructors, air-traffic controllers, management consultants, lawyers, psychological counsellors, professors and bee keepers, to name just a few.

How can all this be true? Well, philosophers are dedicated to understanding reality through pure intellectual effort. Philosophy students are thus trained to think abstractly, write clearly, and rationally assess ideas in a way that few others can equal. Philosophy students graduate with intellectual skills that are valuable anywhere, and so they thrive everywhere.

Let me make this a little more concrete by describing three pathways through university involving philosophy and ending happily outside of the academic world.

## 1. The Pre-Professional Philosophy Major

Philosophy is an excellent preparation for the law. No other undergraduate major focuses to the same degree on clear, rational argumentation, and there are classes such as the Philosophy of Law and Environmental Ethics with obvious relations to future law practice.

Philosophy can also be an excellent preparation for a career in business consulting, government, or many aspects of high technology. In these fields, clear thinking, clear writing, and the ability to defend your view to other people is valued more than knowledge of last year's buzzwords.

Consider the story of Dave (his real name). Dave had a B.A. in philosophy but decided not to finish his Ph.D. So what did he do? He took a job with a consulting company in San Francisco because his company recognized that he was trained to think in a rigorously logical way. After philosophy, offering intelligent, useful advice to large corporations was something he could do, and the consulting industry realized that.

## 2. The Friend Of Philosophy

Some people like the idea of studying philosophy because the issues philosophers look at—free will, the nature of the mind, the objectivity of beauty or knowledge or truth, the scientific method, and so on—seem fascinating, but they are reluctant to take a major in philosophy. Instead, they see themselves becoming famous biochemists, or computer programmers, or teachers of English as a Second Language. These people often enjoy becoming a 'friend of philosophy': someone who takes lots of philosophy courses but not a major. These people graduate with some of the intellectual

training philosophers receive, plus the satisfaction of having thought about issues they find meaningful.

### **3. The Humanist**

The humanities involve the study of things that are distinctively human: literature, art, culture, language and philosophical questions. Some people come to university just because they want to know more about what it is to be a human being, to be self-aware to a degree that is impossible without special study. Such people might be called 'humanists', and philosophy is an excellent major or minor for such people.

The humanistic student is one who does not come to university to get a job, but to be transformed. For this reason, the humanistic student is brave: she or he pays a lot of money to have his or her world expanded, without thinking too much about what will happen afterwards. But is this bravery also a kind of suicide?

Far from it. For example, Stu (his real name, or at least as much of it as he likes to use) did his undergraduate work in philosophy, and graduated with a solid but not spectacular G.P.A. He didn't really worry about what he was going to do after graduation—he just loved philosophy. When he did graduate, he moved to Calgary and bounced between well-paying but limiting jobs. In the end, he became an air-traffic controller, with such a good income that he now plans to retire by the age of 45 in order to travel.

Does Stu still use his education in philosophy? Not professionally, but in a sense he uses it every day, because now it is a part of him, of who he is. He enjoys his job, but if he hadn't had his philosophical education, his life would be less meaningful to him.

So why major in philosophy (or minor, or take courses in it)? Let me sum up:

- Philosophy is good training for specific professions such as law
- Philosophy develops reasoning and writing skills better than any other major, and these are skills with permanent value in any career
- If you want your university education to be more than white-collar industrial training, philosophy is a subject to which you should be exposed