

Is Philosophy the Most Practical Major?

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One of the many small surprises of the recession has been a significant growth in the number of philosophy majors, according to the Philadelphia Inquirer. It has slightly exceeded the growth of enrollments in the last ten years; many other humanities and social science fields have just kept up. At the University of California at Berkeley, despite or because of the state's economic turmoil, the number of majors has increased by 74 percent in the last decade.

What makes philosophy different? It can seem self-absorbed; philosophers themselves joke about Arthur Koestler's definition: "the systematic abuse of a terminology specially invented for that purpose." But it also is a tool (like history and religious studies) for thinking about everything else, and every profession from law and medicine to motorcycle maintenance.

It's also one of the most competitive disciplines. When I was a science editor I sometimes saw readers' reports on colleagues' philosophy manuscripts. There were often pages and pages of challenges to the authors' arguments, concluding with a recommendation to publish anyway. This could be confusing to faculty editorial boards that approved or rejected books. It had to be explained to them that philosophers honor each other by disagreeing with each other. The number of objections could be a sign of the importance of the arguments. From such experiences I learned the difference between the merely wrong, and the valuable wrong.

Thus philosophy is a demanding major. The chairman of the Villanova University department is quoted as counseling students with mediocre grade point averages away from concentration. Philosophy majors also score highest among disciplines in verbal reasoning and analytical writing on the GRE aptitude test.

Philosophy is also institutionalized beyond academia in ways that history and literature are not, for example in bioethics programs in medical schools and organizations. In one survey, working conditions for philosophers outranked some other prestigious fields like aerospace engineering and astronomy.

It is true that philosophy majors' salaries aren't especially high. On the other hand, when they do set out to make money, they often make lots of it, from George Soros and Carl Icahn to Peter Thiel. In fact, the late tycoon Max Palevsky once told a newspaper interviewer:

Many of us early workers in computers were philosophy majors. You can imagine our surprise at being able to make rather comfortable livings.

This doesn't mean we should replace humanities-bashing with humanities chauvinism. But it does suggest looking beyond the stereotypes.