

WHY MAJOR IN PHILOSOPHY?

You are thinking about what your Major should be, you found the Philosophy courses that you have taken so far very interesting, but you are worried that a Philosophy Major will be a bad preparation for the world of jobs and other harsh economic realities. ‘What *use* is philosophy?’ your parents ask. ‘Who ever heard of a rich philosopher?’ says your roommate.

Your roommate’s question is the easiest one. One of the richest men in the world, George Soros, looks back to his philosophy teacher as the most important influence upon him. Carly Fiorina, CEO of Hewlett Packard, majored in philosophy as well as medieval history. And there are a surprising number of other such. But philosophers come in every shape and size – saints (Aquinas and Edith Stein) and haters of sanctity (Nietzsche), despisers of riches (Diogenes the Cynic) and believers that there are virtues that only the very rich possess (Aristotle), emperors (Marcus Aurelius), grinders of lenses (Spinoza), and novelists (Sartre) – even professors. Even if you do not end up extremely rich and powerful, you can be very successful not just after, but as a result of majoring in philosophy. Studies show that philosophy majors tend to do well on the GRE and the LSAT and rank very high among those who are admitted to law schools, to medical schools (of course, you need the science subjects too), to business schools, and to Ph. D. programs. They have made careers in journalism and in the arts, as entrepreneurs and as labor lawyers, as administrators and as teachers. Your problem as a Philosophy Major may be too many exciting career choices, not too few.

Why do those Admissions Committees and employers who favor Philosophy Majors think so highly of an education in philosophy? It is because of the qualities of mind that such an education develops. They are at least threefold. First, you will be introduced in an intellectually rigorous way to those large questions that are inescapable for genuinely reflective people. How do we draw the line between what we know and what we don’t know? To what standards are we appealing when we make moral judgments? What is it to be rational? Is belief in God rationally defensible? With what kinds of explanation do the natural and social sciences provide us? What is it to be responsible for our actions? A mind that has been informed by engaging with those questions will be much less likely to become the victim of false, but popular beliefs. And the habits of mind that are developed by engaging with them seriously and systematically are reinforced by two other aspects of an education in philosophy.

One is skill in argument, the ability to distinguish the valid from the invalid, the sound from the unsound. Such skill is of course useful in debating with others about disputed issues. But it is perhaps even more important in thinking through such issues with oneself, so that the conclusions that one reaches are as well founded as possible. And one cannot acquire any high degree of skill in argument without also acquiring clarity in speech and writing, so that one is rescued from the confusions and obscurities that lead to so much bad communication and misunderstanding.

A third important set of abilities developed by an education in philosophy are those that enable us to formulate relevant questions and to identify the important problems in a wide-range of different areas. Often our difficulty is not so much in solving problems as in seeing where the problems are and how they arise. And the ability to recognize as problematic what others have so far taken for granted is indispensable for anyone engaged in philosophical enquiries.

These three are of course not the only skills and habits of those who have benefited from a philosophical education. They will also have learned how to read and interpret difficult texts, they will know something of the history of how questions and problems that we now confront took their present shape, and they will not only be aware of a range of conflicting approaches and opinions in various areas, but will know how to negotiate their way through these disagreements. Some of these latter skills can perhaps be acquired through the study of other disciplines. What is distinctive about a philosophical education are the three sets of skills and habits of mind that we have emphasized.

The requirements for a Philosophy Major at Notre Dame are well-designed to develop just those skills and habits of mind. Courses in the history of philosophy enable you to understand the different ways in which the large questions have been asked by the greatest minds of the past and the most important attempts that have been made to answer them. The 400-level courses on contemporary philosophical issues give you the opportunity of confronting those same problems in the form in which they now present themselves. The logic requirement provides you with the resources for developing your argumentative skills. But your philosophical education will also be furthered by discussions with other students, both those informal conversations that are sparked by lively classes (What did he mean by *that*? How could anyone accept her argument?) and the discussions of talks organized by the undergraduate Philosophy Club.

If you would like to talk about this further, please feel free to speak to any faculty member. If you have particular questions about the requirements, please consult the Director of Undergraduate Studies, Professor Freddoso.