

## The Role of Philosophy in a College Education

Why should anybody study philosophy?

Our ancient field encourages students to thresh over some of the deepest questions concerning human existence. But in today's tight economy, with its savagely competitive job market, few college students may feel that they have the luxury of pursuing such apparently lofty studies as philosophy. They may reflexively prefer majors that seem to offer more direct training in fields that are likely to garner a higher income after graduation, such as business, law, and medicine.

Moreover, philosophy is *hard*. There are few routes, if any, to that "easy A" in our program. So why would anybody want to make his or her own life difficult by taking on such a challenging course of study?

For one thing, it turns out that there are some surprisingly concrete benefits to sustained philosophical study. Philosophy majors fare remarkably well in pursuing the kinds of high-earning careers mentioned above—business, law, and medicine. In fact, philosophy students typically fare better gaining entrance to these fields than students who major in programs like business, political science, and biology, programs that one might more readily think of as providing training for those aforementioned careers.

Evidence of philosophy majors' success in this regard can be had from a survey of how they typically perform in standardized testing. Philosophy majors are near the top when one ranks mean GMAT scores by undergraduate department (GMAT is the standard entrance exam for business schools)—only math and engineering students fare better. It is especially striking that the average GMAT score for philosophy majors is

higher than that of every variety of business major, including management, accounting, and finance.<sup>1</sup>

One finds philosophy majors notching similarly impressive results on the LSAT, the law school entrance exam. According to the latest data available, philosophy students have the highest mean LSAT scores of all majors (they tie with economics students for this honor). Again, philosophy outperforms majors like political science and criminal justice, programs that one might expect to provide more direct training for law school.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth noting that this sort of success appears to be attracting student attention nationwide. In the last 15 years there has been exploding interest in the philosophy major among law-school bound students. In 1998-1999, there were 1,491 law school applications from philosophy majors. By 2004-2005, that number had climbed to 2,404, a 61% increase in just six years.<sup>3</sup>

Statistics on how philosophers fare on the MCAT (the medical school admissions test) are harder to come by, but we do know that philosophy students fare remarkably well in medical school *admission* rates. According to the 2000-2001 *Medical School Admissions Requirements* report, only .5% of all medical school applicants were philosophy majors in 1998—but 50.2% of these applicants were accepted. This is the second-highest admission rate of

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<sup>1</sup> See Table 4 of The Graduate Management Admission Council, *Profile of Graduate Management Admissions Test Candidates, 2005-2010*, available at [http://www.gmac.com/NR/rdonlyres/76FC2158-8497-48BA-8AC7-CF689D027B6A/0/ProfileofGMATCandidates\\_TY200607to201011.pdf](http://www.gmac.com/NR/rdonlyres/76FC2158-8497-48BA-8AC7-CF689D027B6A/0/ProfileofGMATCandidates_TY200607to201011.pdf). I am looking at mean GMAT scores by undergraduate major for 2009-2010, the last year for which such data is available.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Nieswiadomy, "LSAT Scores of Economics Majors: the 2008-2009 Class Update," *Journal of Economic Education*, 41 (3): 2010, p. 332.

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any major (behind history, surprisingly). Not even biology students fared as well, with an admission rate of 39.9%.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, philosophy students excel at the GRE, the entrance exam for many other graduate school programs. According to the latest data, they have the very highest mean scores of any major on both verbal *and* analytical writing portions. And they have the highest mean scores on the quantitative portion of the exam of any humanities field.<sup>5</sup> For a field that focuses on such abstract, seemingly impractical issues, these are impressive, concrete results.

So one answer to the question “Why study philosophy?” is that the field provides exceptionally good training (as measured by standardized test scores and graduate admissions rates) for highly valued careers like business, law, and medicine. Although economics majors also do well on the LSAT and history majors also do well in medical school admissions, one is hard-pressed to find a *single* major whose students fare as well as philosophy across the board on standardized tests and admissions rates.

Of course, this is not to say that the main *aim* of the philosophy program is to train students to excel on exams like the LSAT. So what *is* the proper aim of a course of study in philosophy?

Here I think we do well to look to history. Since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of research universities and their increasingly splintered sciences, philosophy has taken on the role of disciplinary integrator. “The

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<sup>4</sup> These statistics come from an unpublished report by Andrew Cullison, available online at <http://dl.getdropbox.com/u/120887/Philosophy%20Handouts/Philosophy%20Major/Philosophy%20and%20Medicine.pdf>. Competition for medical school admission is presumably fierce among biology students, but the point remains that philosophy students appear to be highly regarded by medical school admissions boards.

<sup>5</sup> Educational Testing Service, *Graduate Record Examinations Guide to the Use of Scores, 2010-2011*, available online at [www.ets.org/s/gre/pdf/2010-11\\_gre\\_guide.pdf](http://www.ets.org/s/gre/pdf/2010-11_gre_guide.pdf). See table 4.

queen of the sciences,” at it has sometimes been called, has often taken the role of helping mediate conceptual boundary disputes between other disciplines. Philosophy has thereby helped smooth over and clarify disciplinary boundaries, and in the process it has helped students synthesize and get to the root of their varied knowledge from other fields.

Thus, when philosophers ask “deep” questions like, What is the mind’s relation to the body?, they have implicitly (sometimes explicitly) been asking about the relationship between *disciplines*, in this case between psychology and biology.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, philosophy works very well as a second major—students who want to think more deeply about the conceptual foundations of various sciences and arts do well to pursue these questions through an appropriate course of study in philosophy.

At its best, this is one of philosophy’s central tasks in the modern university, I submit—through research and teaching, to provide students a forum for integrating what they learn through the rest of their curriculum. Perhaps this is what Wilfred Sellars had in mind when he characterized the main goal of philosophy this way: “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”<sup>7</sup>

In short, we can glean two kinds of broad educational goals from this discussion. A curriculum in philosophy should aim to sharpen the kinds of skills that tests like the LSAT and GRE presumably gauge—critical thinking,

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Klein, “*Divide Et Impera!* William James’s Pragmatist Tradition in the Philosophy of Science,” *Philosophical Topics* 36, no. 1 (2008); Alexander Klein, “Review of Francesca Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*,” *HOPOS: The Journal for the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* (Forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality*, *International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), 1.

analytical writing, problem-solving, logic, and so on. Second, the content we teach should help students probe questions that are foundational to other liberal arts and to the special sciences—questions about the basic concepts of mind, matter, and humanity.

There is one final reason worth mentioning for studying philosophy. Challenging as courses in philosophy often are, we like to think our students finish the semester just a bit *smarter* than when they began. String together enough philosophy courses to earn a minor or major, and we're talking about a serious accumulation. And after all, it's *cool* to be smart!