

The Value of Philosophy

At Emmanuel we pride ourselves on offering a “values based” education, as the title of this publication indicates. As Chair of the Philosophy Department, I want to say a word or two about the value of philosophy in the context of such an education. But first a word or two about what we mean by ‘values’. Simply put, values are things that we want, things that we desire, things that we believe are good for us. Philosophers have always taught that we ought to want the things that are truly good for us, the things that fulfill our deepest desires, the things that are essential for us to lead a full, rich, flourishing life. They have also taught that it is important to distinguish between things that we want for the sake of something else and things that we value in themselves. The former are called *extrinsically valuable*, while the latter are referred to as *intrinsically valuable*. So what is the value of philosophy? Is it something that is to be valued in itself, or does its value lie solely in its ability to produce other goods, such as a good job? Let’s take these questions one at a time.

Traditionally, the study of philosophy has been valued especially for its own sake, not for something it leads to. As Aristotle says in his *Metaphysics*, “...we do not seek (philosophical wisdom) for the sake of any other advantage; but as the free man is free, we say, who exists for his own sake and not for another’s, so we pursue this as the only free science, for it alone exists for its own sake.” For someone who loves philosophy, understanding for its own sake is the whole point. Anything beneficial that may result in addition to this is secondary. The intellectual rewards of studying philosophy need no justification beyond themselves; they are intrinsically valuable. The intellectual excitement associated with thinking about the big questions—questions about God, reality, good and evil, the meaning of life, and so on—is one of the things that makes life worth living. This is as true today for those of us who love philosophy as it was for Socrates twenty-five hundred years ago. We may be less inclined than he was to end our lives rather than give up philosophical activity, but if for some reason or other we had to do so, it would be felt as a loss of what is essential to life itself. If a good way to tell what you value the most is to see what you would be the least willing to give up, then the activity of philosophy surely would be among the highest values for those of us who have been bitten by its bug.

While it may be enjoyable to spend our days doing philosophy, nevertheless we do have to live in a world with others and to earn living as well. Of what value is philosophy beyond the life of the mind which it fosters; what can it contribute the wider needs of life? For one, studying philosophy has always been associated with preparation for life. Not only does its study lead to personal growth, but it also prepares people to participate fully in free and open societies, where different ideas and policies compete for attention. Successful students of philosophy know how to think critically, to question assumptions, to base their beliefs on evidence, to sort out the wheat from the chaff. Further, they are trained to see connections among various ideas, to be interdisciplinary in its broadest

sense, and to use this type of insight to solve problems in creative ways. In addition, they can write clearly, organizing ideas into coherent patterns which express support for or against their claims. Usually, they can also think on their feet and express their ideas orally with persuasion. These are some of the benefits of philosophy, some of its extrinsic value, the creation of skills beneficial to personal and social life.

“This is all very nice,” you may say, “but people do have to make a living. The last time I checked the employment section of the newspaper there were not that many listings for philosophers.” True enough. While some philosophy students go on to graduate school and become professors in philosophy departments of colleges and universities, most do not. Some have taken their philosophical training in practical directions, especially in areas of applied ethics. Philosophers trained as ethicists work in hospitals and medical centers, for government agencies and for various large corporations among others. As is the case with available positions in academia, however, these jobs are relatively scarce and not easy to get. It would appear that in uncertain economic times the wisest course of action would be to forego the pleasures of philosophy for some more “practical” field of study, something that will result in a job. At best, one could double major in a vocational area and in philosophy—the best of both worlds!

But what is someone to do who loves philosophy yet finds double majoring not to be an acceptable choice? They should be practical and give up their interest in philosophy, right? Not necessarily. This is because philosophy is itself excellent preparation for many of the most interesting careers to be found in today’s world. Take legal studies, for example. Successful philosophy students have always had among the highest scores on standardized tests--- tests that measure verbal and reasoning skills, as does the LSAT. In addition, during an era where people change jobs and even careers more and more frequently; where the ability to learn quickly, think critically, analyze ideas and write well are prized, students are beginning to understand that, in addition to its intrinsic value, philosophy is an excellent pathway to many careers. Far from an ivory tower luxury, philosophy has come to be acknowledged by many as one of the best ways to prepare for the rapidly changing world that awaits today’s college graduates.

Evidence that many students are beginning to understand the extrinsic value of philosophy is the growing number of philosophy majors in colleges and universities across the country. A *New York Times* article (4/6/08) outlines some of this growth. At Rutgers, for example, the number of undergraduate philosophy majors has doubled in the past few years. The same is true of CUNY, Notre Dame, Umass Amherst, Texas A&M, the University of Pittsburg and many others. In fact, nationwide the number of programs in philosophy has increased during the past ten years from 765 to 817. Typically students say that philosophy teaches them a way of studying that can be applied to any subject as well as

enriching their lives in many ways. They have taken their skills into such professions as medicine, the law, investment banking, writing, academic administration, secondary school teaching, and many areas of self-created employment, such as consulting. The American Philosophical Association lists nineteen categories of non-academic careers which now employ those trained in philosophy. In the general category of "Business", for example, philosophers work as advertising executives, consultants, bank managers, commodities traders, and even as a manager of a winery. Philosophers are also employed as systems analysts, owners of computer firms, college presidents, provosts, county commissioners, TV producers, magazine editors, and sales managers, among many other professions.

The so-called "first" philosopher, Thales, was said to prove that philosophy had practical value by predicting the weather for the next olive growing season. On the basis of this prediction he bought up as many of the olive presses as he could and made a fortune. His first love remained philosophy, but the money helped. Today it turns out to be the case that the salary of philosophy majors at mid-career are higher than all but one major offered at Emmanuel--math. So philosophy does have extrinsic value, even though most of us who have been lucky enough to spend lots of time with philosophy are inclined to side primarily with Aristotle and love it for its own sake.