

PHILOSOPHICAL TRAINING, DYNAMIC THOUGHT, AND THE PLEASURES OF COGNITIVE POWER

I was a philosophy major. When I graduated, my parents attended graduation and met one of my professors, Donald Crosby, a Whitehead scholar (among other things). My dad asked him: “we’re proud that Rex graduated – but philosophy? What’s he going to do with *that*?” Crosby responded gently: “Well, among other things, he’ll be better off because he’s done philosophy.” My dad was incredulous: “Better off? How? He can’t make any money with a philosophy degree!” Crosby replied: “Well, sir, that only shows that there’s a distinction between being better off and making money.”

It’s a running joke that majoring in philosophy puts you on the royal road to a career in bartending or cab driving. Now, I happen to like and respect bartenders and cabbies, and I’ve known a couple who’ve made a good living. But it’s unlikely that they are alone responsible for the surprisingly high mid-career earnings of philosophy majors. In a recent survey, Philosophy ranked 15th out of 50 majors in average mid-career earnings, at \$81,000 a

year.¹ True, students earning a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy rank below the usual suspects, such as Engineering and Physics. But earnings fifteen years out from a B.A. in philosophy are on par with Finance and Information Management degrees and with International Relations degrees, and they're ahead of all other business degrees, all nursing degrees, all natural science degrees other than Physics, all social science degrees other than Economics, all nursing and health science degrees, all arts and humanities degrees, and all criminal justice degrees.

It's likely that part of the explanation of this surprising fact is that the population of philosophy students is a self-selecting set of unusually smart, somewhat obsessive, and attractively quirky students whose combination of intellectual skills and idiosyncrasies drives them to philosophy and keeps them there long enough to benefit from the discipline's virtues. It's likely too that those same traits in turn lead philosophy majors forward

¹ "Best Undergrad College Degrees By Salary," from: <http://www.payscale.com/2008-best-colleges/degrees.asp>; "Salary Increase by Major," *Wall Street Journal*; from [http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-Degrees that Pay you Back-sort.html](http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-Degrees%20that%20Pay%20you%20Back-sort.html)

to make career choices that turn out to be remunerative. And, indeed, we know that philosophy majors are well represented in law and medicine, which, historically at least, are among the highest paying careers out there.

Yet, I for one find these lucrative career trajectories a little unexpected. I've taught philosophy for twenty-two years, and in our department we disproportionately attract and keep students of four types more than all others combined:

- (1) the disillusioned trying to come to grips with a loss of childhood faith;
- (2) the super-brainiacs double or triple majoring in philosophy and Physics or Math or Fine Art or Computer Science for no better reason than doing so is hard;
- (3) the political and social radicals who find in philosophy an intellectual heft to buttress their activist commitments; and
- (4) the unlost wanderers who are bored with other majors, have no interest in conforming to anyone or

anything, and who find in philosophy departments a group of other similar misfits.

Of course, other kinds of philosophy students also exist, sometimes depending on the department's affiliation with other campus programs. For example, in the last few years our department has attracted a small number of Psychology double majors because we host an interdisciplinary Center on Cognitive Studies.

If you look at the list, you'll notice that three of the four types are demonstrably *not* career-minded, and that the only one that is – the brainiac double major – is only indirectly career-minded. Yet when these students are fed into the crucible of philosophic training, something remarkable emerges – graduates whose training is about as far removed from job preparation as can be imagined but which nevertheless provides them a readily transferable skill set that makes them promotable in whatever job they land in. That's what I'd like to focus on in this talk. What is it about a philosophy degree that turns out to be so useful?

Obviously and first, philosophic training is in the great problems of philosophy – truth, beauty, the categories of

existence, knowledge, justice, the moral good, and logic. Knowing how to think about these perennial issues helps philosophers understand others and the world better than most, for, among other things, we're quick studies at identifying others' core beliefs and we know how difficult knowledge acquisition really is, and we are, as a consequence, circumspect where others tend to the bombastic and overwrought. But I think this knowledge supervenes on something much more important, and that is the dual ability to read and think *well*.

The simple truth is that reading and thinking well are uncommon, scarce commodities that are goods for employers, and philosophy trains students how to cultivate these skills. The importance of this training simply cannot be overstated. Recently, I was in Los Angeles on a panel with Stacey Snyder, the co-chief executive officer of Dreamworks, and Monica Karo, the chief executive officer of OMD, the world's largest media buyer and the agency behind Apple's marketing campaigns for the last fifteen years. Our topic was the commodification of attention. During our panel, Ms. Snyder and Ms. Karo both said that what they value

more than anything else is a person who has an opinion and can make judgments, who can produce a dispassionate argument in support of their judgments, and who can speak and write clearly and directly. I wish I had a video of that episode, for their description is a description of what philosophy professors value and what we try to cultivate in all of our students.

I don't doubt for a minute that other majors also train students to have some of these abilities. But I'm prepared to defend the claim that no other major does this training as *directly* or as *relentlessly* as philosophy, for we work professionally with logic, we are professional critics of language, and we are trained to critically assess evidence across every domain we encounter. Such training is provided in most philosophy courses, but especially in courses in logic, critical thinking, the philosophy of language, theory of knowledge, and philosophy of science. In addition, ethics courses provide students training in thinking clearly and carefully about some of the most difficult questions they will invariably confront as they enter the professional world.

The result of an education in logic, theory of knowledge, and philosophy of science is a kind of cross-training for the intellect, made up of careful reading, clear writing, and rigorous, critical, thinking. When this intellectual cross-training is conjoined with the judgment cultivated by ethics courses and courses in the world's religions, the product is someone who is not only well-prepared to step into a wide range of jobs, but someone who is also well-prepared to know when it's time to leave a job.

Because philosophy majors can both see the big picture and understand the most precise details and because they can question assumptions, analyze arguments, and occupy and understand alternative perspectives without getting lost, they tend to stand out. And because their training is in how to think well both in *and* out of the box, they are unusually nimble in dynamic environments in which complex decisions have to be made. And because they have been trained to think well and write clearly about basic questions, philosophy majors are well-prepared for talking and working with other humanities types, scientists, mathematicians, computer scientists,

lawyers, marketers, journalists, physicians, policy makers, indeed, anyone who has to think for a living.

Not surprisingly, businesses recognize the benefits that philosophy majors bring to their enterprises. Articles have appeared recently in *Business Week*, *The Guardian*, *The London Times*, *The Times Education Supplement*, and the *New York Times* extolling the benefits of being a philosophy major for business.² What these articles consistently note is that while businesses have more than enough experts working hard on specific problems, they also reliably need individuals who can “connect the dots,” employees who can extract knowledge from a specialist’s expert domain without getting trapped in the expert’s silo. For that kind of undertaking, a philosophic training is tailor-made.

But it’s not just business that benefits when philosophy majors are hired. Graduate and professional programs alike welcome philosophy majors because they know that philosophy majors will perform well. One measure of their readiness for graduate and professional school is

² “Philosophy is Back in Business,” *Business Week* 1/12/2010; David Brendel, “How Philosophy Makes You a Better Leader,” *Harvard Business Review* 9/19/2014; “In a New Generation of College Students, Many Opt for the Life Examined,” *New York Times* 4/6/2008; “I Think, Therefore, I Earn,” *The Guardian* 11/20/2007; “More Things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio,” *Times Higher Education Supplement* 01/09/2009;

their performance on entrance exams. If the following isn't already known to this audience, it should be: philosophy majors consistently score highest of all disciplines on both the Graduate Record Exam's and the LSAT's verbal reasoning and analytical writing sections, and highest of all non-engineering or natural science disciplines on the quantitative reasoning sections as well.³

Perhaps I've now done more than what is required to persuade you that the job prospects for philosophy majors are surprisingly good. In the remainder of this presentation, I'd like to comment on one way of understanding what it means to "be philosophical" about issues when those issues are not discussed professionally by philosophers or taught in the classroom.

One of the virtues of philosophic training is that it cultivates within us a type of cognitive pleasure enjoyed when we read carefully and exercise our ability to think. This cognitive pleasure is one of the many consequences of a training that insists on self-disciplining the

³ *Philosophy Majors and the Graduate Record Exam (GRE)* http://www.ets.org/s/gre/pdf/gre_guide.pdf

imagination, which, when left free to roam on its own, inevitably falls down one rabbit hole after another, often with disastrous consequences.

In his *Aims of Education*,⁴ Alfred North Whitehead puts the fundamental point succinctly: “freedom and discipline are the two essentials of education” (p.30), the former because without it education reduces to tedious indoctrination, the latter because with it the cognitive power required for what he calls “the adventure of life (Whitehead, p.98) is achieved. When we willingly (and sometimes, it must be admitted, painfully) subject our free-roaming imagination to the rigor and precision of philosophy, then so long as that training has been well-designed and is executed with care, the product is a human mind that has “an intimate sense” for the power, beauty, and structure of ideas (Whitehead, p.12). From that cognitive dexterity emerges a unique cognitive pleasure, a delight that we take in the ways ideas fit together and fall apart, in the unexpected implications that ideas sometimes have, and in the realization that

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (NY: Free Press, 1967)

our cognitive powers are actually greater than we might ever have imagined.

Having achieved some level of cognitive competence, a properly trained mind is progressively liberated from the blinders others want us to wear and which we all too often put on ourselves. For the curiosity and imagination characteristic of the Aristotelian human being, having been disciplined by philosophical training, are now free to wander where directed. And she may be confident that her habituated cognitive skillfulness will lead either to a positive outcome or to an opportunity for further reflection and deliberation. Even if the latter is occasioned because something awful has happened, it is for the well-trained mind not without consolation, for the reflection and deliberation prompted by a bad outcome is as much a cause for some, albeit different, cognitive pleasures as those that would have been occasioned by a good outcome.

I believe that it's this kind of puzzling response that marks people off as "being philosophical." True, we sometimes use the description to characterize people who are fatalistic or, if that goes too far, are at least

atypically restrained about misfortunes. But so long as we fail to acknowledge that one so described by the epithet might have reason not to be completely crushed by hardship, we miss a part of what it is to be philosophical, namely, to have an unquenchable capacity to be surprised and filled with wonder by the world and its inhabitants, even when their antics cause distress.

I've called the cognitive power subserving this cultivated cognitive pleasure a virtue. I think it is. Unfortunately, it can also be a vice, as occurs for instance when it is unleashed as a display on the unsuspecting. Moreover, even where it remains a virtue, cognitive power and the pleasure taken in it are often baffling to others who know nothing of them. The philosophically-trained and philosophically-minded person acknowledges both vice and puzzlement, and tries to avoid the former while explaining, where appropriate, the latter. Some of us become professors and have the opportunity to represent the type while providing elements of the training required for reproducing it.

I suspect that the habituated disposition to dynamic and measured judgment, judgment informed by multiple

levels of analysis and different perspectives, is part of what Crosby was after when he predicted that I would be better off for having been a philosophy major. Suffice it to say, it's what I took from the training that he and some of my other professors gave, and it's a significant part of what my philosophical colleagues and I try to exemplify and impart. We frequently fail, as we must, but the great works of philosophy continue to remind us of what has been, and still can be, achieved.

Rex Welshon