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The Uses of Philosophy of Various Careers

The value of a field of study must not be viewed mainly in terms of its contribution to obtaining the first job after graduation. Students are understandably concerned with getting their first job, but it would be short-sighted to concentrate on that at the expense of developing potential for success and advancement once hired. What gets graduates initially hired may not yield promotions or carry them beyond their first position, particularly given how fast the needs of many employers evolve with changes in social and economic patterns. It is therefore crucial to see beyond what a job description specifically calls for. Philosophy need not be mentioned among a job's requirements in order for the benefits of philosophical study to be *appreciated* by the employer, and those benefits need not even be explicitly appreciated in order to be *effective* in helping one advance.

Employers want—and reward—many of the capacities that the study of philosophy develops: for instance, the ability to solve problems, to communicate, to organize ideas and issues, to assess pros and cons, and to boil down complex data. These capacities represent *transferable skills*. They are transferable not only from philosophy to non-philosophy areas, but from one non-philosophical field to another. For this reason, people trained in philosophy are not only prepared to do many kinds of tasks; they are particularly well prepared to cope with change in their chosen career field, or even move into new careers.

As all this suggests, there are people trained in philosophy in just about every field. They have gone not only into such professions as teaching (at all levels), medicine, law, computer science, management, publishing, sales, criminal justice, public relations, and many other fields. Some professionally trained philosophers are also on legislative staffs; their work prompted one senior congressman to say,

It seems to me that philosophers have acquired skills which are very valuable to a member of Congress. The ability to analyze a problem carefully and consider it from many points of view is one. Another is the ability to communicate ideas clearly in a logically compelling form. A third is the ability to handle the many different kinds of problems which occupy the congressional agenda at any time. (Lee H. Hamilton, 9th District, Indiana, March 25, 1982.)

In emphasizing the long-range benefits of training in philosophy, whether through a major, a minor, or a sample of courses in the field, there are at least two further points to note. The first concerns the value of philosophy for vocational training. The second applies to the whole of life.

First, philosophy can yield immediate benefits for students planning postgraduate work. Philosophy students regularly outperform students from other disciplines on graduate school entrance exams, such as the LSAT and GRE. As law, medical, business, and other professional school faculty and admissions personnel have often said, philosophy is excellent preparation for the training and later careers of the professionals in question. In preparing to enter fields which have special requirements for postgraduate study, such as computer science, management, medicine, or public administration, choosing philosophy as a second major (or minor) alongside the specialized degree can be very useful.

The second point here is that the long-range value of philosophical study goes far beyond its contribution to one's livelihood. Philosophy broadens the range of things one can understand and enjoy. It can give self-knowledge, foresight, and a sense of direction in life. It can provide special pleasures of insight to reading and conversation. It can lead to self-discovery, expansion of consciousness, and self-renewal. Through all of this, and through its contribution to one's expressive powers, it nurtures individuality and self-esteem. Its value for private life can be incalculable; its benefits for public life as a citizen can be immeasurable.