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The General Uses of Philosophy

Much of what is learned in philosophy can be applied in virtually any endeavor. This is both because philosophy touches on so many subjects and, especially, because many of its methods are usable in any field.

General Problem Solving

The study of philosophy enhances, in a way no other activity does, one's problem-solving capacities. It helps students to analyze concepts, definitions, arguments, and problems. It contributes to students' capacity to organize ideas and issues, to deal with questions of value, and to extract what is essential from masses of information. It helps students distinguish fine differences between views and discover common ground between opposing positions. And it helps students synthesize a variety of views or perspectives into a unified whole.

Communication Skills

Philosophy also contributes uniquely to the development of expressive and communicative powers. It provides some of the basic tools of self-expression—for instance, skills in presenting ideas through well-constructed, systematic arguments—that other fields either do not use, or use less extensively. It helps students to express what is distinctive about their views; enhances their ability to explain difficult material; and helps to eliminate ambiguities and vagueness from students' writing and speech.

Persuasive Powers

Philosophy provides training in the construction of clear formulations, good arguments, and apt examples. It thereby helps one develop the ability to be convincing. Students learn to build and defend their own views, appreciate competing positions, and indicate forcefully why they consider their own views preferable to alternatives. These capacities can be developed not only through reading and writing in philosophy, but also through the philosophical *dialogue*, in and outside the classroom, that is so much a part of a thoroughgoing philosophical education.

Writing Skills

Writing is taught intensively in many philosophy courses, and many regularly assigned philosophical texts are unparalleled as literary essays. Philosophy teaches interpretive writing through its examination of challenging texts, comparative writing through emphasis on fairness to alternative positions, argumentative writing through developing students' ability to establish their own views, and descriptive writing through detailed portrayal of concrete examples: the anchors to which generalizations must be tied. Structure and technique, then,

are emphasized in philosophical writing. Originality is also encouraged, and students are generally urged to use their imagination and develop their own ideas.

The Uses of Philosophy in Educational Pursuits

The general uses of philosophy just described are obviously of great academic value. It should be clear that the study of philosophy has intrinsic rewards as an unlimited quest for the understanding of important, challenging problems. But philosophy has further uses in deepening an education, both in college and in the many activities, professional and personal, that follow graduation.

Understanding Other Disciplines

Philosophy is indispensable for this. Many important questions *about* a discipline, such as the nature of its concepts and its relation to other disciplines, do not belong *to* that discipline, are not usually pursued in it, and are philosophical in nature. Philosophy of science, for instance, is needed to supplement the understanding of the natural and social sciences derived from scientific work itself. Philosophy of literature and philosophy of history are of similar value in understanding the humanities, and philosophy of art is important in understanding the arts. Philosophy is, moreover, essential in assessing the various standards of evidence used by other disciplines. Since all fields of knowledge employ reasoning and must set standards of evidence, logic and epistemology have a general bearing on all these fields.

Development of Sound Methods of Research and Analysis

Still another value of philosophy in education is its contribution to one's capacity to frame hypotheses, do research, and put problems into manageable form. Philosophical thinking strongly emphasizes clear formulation of ideas and problems, selection of relevant data, and objective methods for assessing ideas and proposals. It also emphasizes development of a sense of the new directions suggested by the hypotheses and questions one encounters in doing research. Philosophers regularly build on both the successes and failures of their predecessors. A person with philosophical training can readily learn to do the same in any field.