

Philosophy

at Michigan State University



Why study philosophy?

Everyone faces philosophical problems and has philosophical opinions. Philosophy reflects on the most general questions and makes us examine our most basic assumptions. In other words, it helps us focus on who and what we are, what is possible for us now and in the future, and what we should do as individuals and as societies.

Questions that philosophy helps us think about:

- What should be our priorities both as individuals and as members of groups?
- Is it possible to act with integrity in a world like ours?
- Should we take issues of justice seriously?
- What can we know about the nature of the universe?
- Do we really have freedom to make important choices about our lives?
- How is it possible to know anything about the objective world?

Philosophy can also help with controversial issues:

- What does it mean to belong to one race rather than another?
- Is the readiness to go to war something inherent in human nature?
- Is there really such a thing as "human nature"?
- Who should decide what new technologies are developed?
- Should we be concerned about the suffering we cause animals?
- Are human rights just a slogan invented in the West?
- What relation do/should you have to the poverty of societies on the other side of the world?
- What should we do about global warming?
- What exactly are the implications of cloning?

Though philosophy is a distinct discipline, it is not really something separate from other kinds of thinking and acting. Every science encounters philosophical questions. Technological change raises questions about how we want to live and how we should direct social investments. Business and law pose questions about how institutions should behave and what relation economic concerns have to matters of morality and justice. Mass media introduce issues about communication and truth in public life.

Philosophical issues are part of social conflicts as well. How should we deal with the legacy of past injustices without creating new ones? Who assesses the relevance of scientific knowledge to changes in the environment? What is the relevant ideal when thinking about changing forms of the family?

Interested?

MSU's philosophy program offers a strong practical focus and explores the ways that philosophy connects with urgent social questions. It is well regarded nationally and offers a unique mix of theoretical and practical courses. Before taking a course, you should see what the course aims will be and even consult with the instructor so that you have an idea of what you will be doing. Our faculty and graduate students are happy to talk with students individually, both before and during the semester.

Students interested in philosophy have many options beyond taking individual courses. In addition to the philosophy major, there is an 18-credit philosophy minor, and there are various specializations students can pursue in which philosophy plays a key role, including Bioethics, Humanities, and Society; Women's Studies; Peace and Justice Studies; and Cognitive Science. Students can also pursue philosophy as a second major. We have undergraduate students who are double-majoring in philosophy and pre-med, computer science, history, and many other areas.

Ask your instructor about the possibilities and visit the department or its website for more information:

<http://www.philosophy.msu.edu>

The Practical Side

Most philosophy majors do not become philosophy teachers, but they do get jobs!

Philosophy

A few years ago, *The Times* (London) noted that “the great virtue of philosophy is that it teaches not what to think, but how to think ... In the U.S., where the number of philosophy graduates increased by five percent a year during the 1990s, only a very few go on to become philosophers. Their employability, at 98.8%, is impressive by any standard. Philosophy has always been a good training for the law, but it is equally useful for computer scientists. In this country, the Higher Education Statistics Survey puts philosophy of science right up with medicine in its employment records for graduates. Philosophy is, in commercial jargon, the ultimate ‘transferable work skill.’”

Careers for which philosophy is great preparation:

Enjoy computers? Software creation, ontological engineering, axiomatizing, language development, and systems engineering are activities for which philosophy is good preparation.

Enjoy aesthetics? Philosophy prepares you to be an archivist, curator, or museum manager – the philosophy major’s appreciation for aesthetic taste, as well as organizational skills, means you have the right balance for a career in these art management fields.

Enjoy ethics and social and political philosophy? Nonprofit organizations and governmental organizations hire philosophy majors for their experience setting policies on the environment, the arts, education, health, the sciences, and culture.

Teaching – Majoring in philosophy gives you communication skills as well as a solid understanding of learning itself, which can make you a highly effective teacher.

Creative writing – Philosophy and logic can prepare you for a career as a novelist, a nonfiction writer, or a poet.

Technical writing – This is one of the biggest growth areas for philosophy majors.

Executive-level administration and management – Many Fortune 500 CEOs have degrees in liberal arts majors like philosophy, because these majors develop your interpersonal communication and organization.

Editing and publishing – These fields require a strong facility with language, combined with the communication skills that philosophy majors develop.

Law – Many lawyers got their undergraduate training in philosophy, because the skills involved in reading and thinking

clearly and arguing effectively apply to brief-writing as well as litigation techniques.

Mediation – Philosophy majors’ skills at communicating and analyzing all sides of issues make them ideal mediators (mediators are used in divorce cases or to settle disputes between unions and corporations).

Public relations and journalism – PR and journalism both require a careful use of language – something at which philosophy majors excel.

Philosophical counseling / Philosophical practice – Did you know that not all counselors and therapists study psychology? The American Philosophical Practitioners Association trains and certifies philosophy majors to do work similar to psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and is now beginning to build and accredit graduate programs in philosophical practice.

Philosophy provides unique intellectual training that is useful in other academic and social settings. Philosophy students tend to score well on standardized exams (philosophy majors as a group receive exceptionally high scores on the LSAT, GMAT, and the GRE). On the GRE, philosophy majors rank first in terms of their average combined GRE score, perhaps in part because of the analytical skills they have developed. By emphasizing critical reflection, philosophy challenges the imagination in ways that bear on creative activity in the arts and literature. This is crucial in a democratic society, especially one in which the onslaught of images and strategic messages can be daunting. Some very practical benefits to majoring in philosophy are that students become expert in the close reading of complex texts; in the careful analysis and evaluation of arguments; in original and creative thinking; in the clear, precise, and personal communication of ideas; and in asking the right questions. Securing and honing these skills is a valuable asset in any profession.