

Shelly Kagan

## Why Study Philosophy?

A few years ago, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert came to Yale to give a lecture. He described an experiment in which psychologists studied how one's mood could affect what one perceived. The scientists needed to get people in a good mood, or a bad mood, so as to test the differences. Gilbert explained that to get some of the subjects in a good mood, they had them read a piece of paper on which were written expressions like this: "I see," or "I understand," or "now I get it." And to get a different group of subjects into a bad mood, they had them read a piece of paper on which were written expressions like this: "I don't understand," or "I'm lost," or "I just don't get it."

Now truth be told, I have no idea what Gilbert learned about the effects of mood on perception, because at this point I simply stopped listening to him. Instead, I was lost in thought, fascinated by the idea that you could get people into a bad mood just by having them say to themselves things like "I don't understand."

And what I found myself wondering was this: What does it mean that I work in a field where we find ourselves in exactly this situation all the time? When we do philosophy we are constantly putting ourselves in a situation where we don't really understand what is going on. And we are doing this to ourselves voluntarily! Indeed, not only do we do it to ourselves, we do it to one another: When we raise objections to our fellow philosophers, as we certainly love to do, frequently the upshot is that we are just heightening their sense of bewilderment. And of course we regularly aim to do this to our students as well.

It is a fact about philosophy, a plain undeniable fact, that our typical state when doing philosophy is one of limited understanding. Aristotle said, famously—and correctly, I believe—that philosophy begins in wonder. What he did not mention, however, and what seems equally correct, is that it continues in bafflement and it frequently ends there as well.

Now this is, I suppose, one central reason why many people have such a strong distaste for doing philosophy. Unlike many other disciplines, unlike all good and respectable sciences, philosophy doesn't seem to make progress. You start out puzzled and you end up puzzled. And even if you decide that you may have come

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up with half an answer to some philosophical question, you know perfectly well that the next philosopher you talk to will happily tell you not only why your answer is wrong, but why it is barking up the wrong tree altogether. Admittedly, those of us who become professional philosophers may have a taste for this sort of thing. But it is not everyone's cup of tea, as we say in America. Many people hate it.

So why study it? What role does this sort of thing—this endless asking of questions that we never seem to answer, the tireless probing and prodding and looking for objections and more objections—what role does it have in education? It may, I suppose, be harmless enough, at least in many cases. Someone who devotes his or her time to worrying about whether universals exist, for example, or whether we can correctly say that we know that there is an external world, isn't likely to be getting themselves into a lot of trouble. But if that is the best we can say for it, it is no wonder that many students consider philosophy a waste of time.

But there is, of course, more that we can say.

I once taught a class where I spent some time wondering aloud with my students about the point of a college education. Of course, for many people the primary goal in college is to receive professional or pre-professional training, whether in law, medicine, communication, science or the arts. But I was particularly curious about the point of what is known as a "liberal arts" education—the kind of education that many colleges and universities in America and throughout the world aim to provide, very much including Yale University. Here, the focus is not on training for a particular trade or profession. Indeed, often enough nothing like this kind of training is available at all. Rather, the idea is to expose students to a wide range of fields and disciplines, a panoply of distinct subjects and methods of study.

To be sure, even when this is the sort of education that one receives, it is almost always the case that you are required to eventually pick a major, a particular subject in which to specialize. But even here there is no particular expectation that you will go on to work in that field professionally after college. Very few psychology majors, for example, go on to become professional psychologists. And even fewer philosophy majors go on to become professional philosophers. The idea behind requiring students to have a major—even within the context of receiving a liberal arts education—is to ensure that at least some field is studied with sufficient depth so that one can actually begin to get a glimpse of what it is involved in serious research in a given area of study; to gain some understanding of the ideas and methods of a subject that goes beyond the merely superficial. It is to give the student some initial exposure—but from the inside, as it were—to the idea of mastering something.

But even with regard to one's major, you only take a handful or two of classes, so the level of expertise you attain is pretty limited. So, what is the point of the

whole undertaking? What is it that I hope my students will come out of Yale University having gained?

Often enough colleges will have “mission statements,” where they attempt to articulate the main goals of a liberal arts education, and similar statements are periodically produced by individuals writing for the public about the aims and purposes of education. So I had my students read several of these statements, and I tried to draw their attention to some of the common elements.

Almost every one of these statements emphasizes the importance of gaining certain skills. After all, very little of the specific content that we learn in courses gets used later. No doubt there are certain facts, the knowledge of which we will draw upon later in life—perhaps there are particular laws of nature, or particular discoveries, or certain central historical events, where we later make use of our knowledge of these things. But for the most part, whatever specific facts we learned in college will soon be surpassed by new discoveries, new inventions, new methods and new technologies. The specific content of what we study in class is far less important than the more general skills that we attain and sharpen by working through these particular ideas and discoveries. We improve our skills by putting them to work on the materials of the class, but the central goal is not the mastery of the materials on which we work, but rather the improvement of the skills themselves.

And what are the skills that are most important, those that a college education might most centrally hope to instill and enhance? Different mission statements differ in the details, of course, but two or three such skills seem most prominent. Not only were these three skills most frequently, explicitly mentioned, they were also the ones that seemed most central in terms of what educators hoped to help develop. The three I have in mind are: (1) improved critical thinking, (2) learning to write and communicate clearly and persuasively, and (3) creativity and originality.

Now I do think it fair to say—as I told my students at the time—that most classes at Yale University do try to teach and improve these skills to one degree or another. But the truth is—as I also told them—it isn’t as though all classes or all disciplines emphasize these skills to the same degree. For some fields, and some classes, whatever it is that one gains by way of learning to think critically, or creatively, or to write and communicate well—these things are somewhat incidental to the main purpose of the course (which might be focused on the specific content—the facts, or texts, or discoveries). But there are other fields, and other classes, where these skills are front and center. In some disciplines, but only some, I suggested, the emphasis is on learning to express oneself clearly and precisely, while thinking critically about the argument being put forward, so as to be in a better position to see whether that argument is a good one (or can be made into a good one), or whether, instead, the position being put forward is subject to

telling objections. In some fields, the emphasis is merely upon learning what has been shown before, while in other fields, the emphasis is on encouraging people to think for themselves, to try out new ideas, and to try to see things from a new and original perspective.

So your goal—I told my students—is to try to figure out which of the departments does a better job of teaching these skills, and then to take the classes that these departments offer.

When my lecture was over, a student came up to me and asked me if I had set out, when first thinking about the day’s lecture, to produce an argument for being a philosophy major and taking philosophy courses. I laughed, and replied that I certainly hadn’t had anything like this in mind at the outset, though by the time I was finishing up my lecture, I had started to realize that this was what I had in fact done. For it does seem to me to be true, as it seemed to my student, that of all the various fields and disciplines, there is one field that most centrally emphasizes the skills in question, and it is, indeed, philosophy.

So one reason to study philosophy, despite the fact that it typically leaves us puzzled and unsettled, is that there is nothing better at improving your ability to think for yourself, to see through the unsupported claims that others may be making, to examine critically the assumptions and presuppositions behind any given argument, to see which objections are troubling and which are insignificant or irrelevant, which arguments are compelling and which are simply unconvincing and inadequate as they stand.

Indeed, I would hazard the guess that it is precisely because philosophy is the discipline that has so much trouble settling questions—where everything remains open to reinvestigation and further challenge—it is precisely because this is the arena of human thought in which we choose to labor, that we are potentially able to do so much by way of helping our students learn to think critically. You do honor to a philosopher by recognizing the difficulty of the philosophical issues they discuss, and by examining carefully and ruthlessly whether the arguments they put forward are good ones or not. And it is precisely because the problems are so difficult and obscure that we emphasize as thoroughly as we do the importance of expressing oneself clearly and effectively—both in discussion and in writing. Indeed, it is precisely because the problems seem so intractable that we are so bent on encouraging original and creative thought from our students, in the hopes that if one of them looks at some traditional philosophical problem in a new way, they may open up a new solution to an old problem, or—which is equally good—discover a new philosophical problem that has not previously been noticed.

In short, one reason to study philosophy—or at least, to take courses in philosophy, whether or not one chooses to major in it—is that philosophy classes can best help teach many of the central skills that one should aim for acquiring

when getting an education. Somewhat more cautiously, this is something philosophy classes can do—it is something that they manage to do when they are taught well.

Of course, I speak only for myself. I do not know whether all my fellow philosophy professors consider the honing of such skills to be one of the most important things that we can do for our students. But I certainly do believe it. I may lecture to my students about Kant or Plato, or Hume (I must confess here, I know little about the great Eastern philosophers, so my teaching is primarily focused on those from the Western tradition), but brilliant as these men may be, what I really care about is not whether my students learn and remember very much about the great philosophers of history and their ideas. I care, rather, about whether my students learn to think for themselves—to think critically and creatively—and whether they learn to express their thoughts to others clearly and persuasively.

These skills are ones that the student can and will put to use later in life, no matter what it is that they go on to do professionally. Indeed, I think that these same skills are important for achieving a vibrant, flourishing and open society, as such they are skills that everyone should hope to possess, so as better to fulfill their obligations as citizens. The ability to think critically and creatively, and to express oneself clearly—these are essential tools for many aspects of life, and they are gifts, I think, that philosophy can help one attain.

So, one reason to study philosophy is that it can help you to acquire skills that will be useful to you throughout your life. But this is not the only reason. A quite different line of thought starts with the attractive idea that there is value in knowing.

The kind of value I have in mind here is sometimes called intrinsic value, and the relevant contrast is with mere instrumental value. Now I take it to be obvious that knowledge can be instrumentally valuable in countless and varied ways. Knowledge of chemistry and engineering, for example, helps us to build better bridges, better cars and better manufacturing processes. Knowledge of biology and medicine helps us to cure disease, lengthen life, and improve our ability to function. Knowledge of agriculture helps us to grow more and healthier food; knowledge of economics helps us to better distribute goods and services. The list goes on and on and on. The human ability to know has always been our most powerful tool in improving the human condition. So, in countless ways, everyone would readily agree, knowledge is instrumentally useful in helping us to achieve our ends.

But it is important to resist the suggestion to say that this exhausts the value of knowledge. On the contrary, I believe that knowledge is intrinsically valuable as well—valuable in and of itself, above and beyond whatever use it may also have for helping us attain other goals. Knowledge is instrumentally valuable, to be

sure. But it is also valuable in its own right, worth having for its own sake.

Admittedly, I do not know how I would argue for this, so as to convince those who do not already agree. But the same thing could be said about many other things that have intrinsic value. If someone suggests, for example, that pleasure is intrinsically valuable, then I certainly do think this is normally true. But if we were to ask how to prove that pleasure is intrinsically valuable, I would have little to say, other than that when I think about it, carefully and reflectively, it does seem clear to me that it is so. Similarly, then, I have little to say by way of proof that knowledge is intrinsically valuable, other than that when I think about it, carefully and reflectively, it seems clear to me that this is so as well.

In particular then, it seems to me that among the constituents of the best form of human life, knowledge is one of the most significant ingredients. To be sure, it isn't the only ingredient. The best kind of life contains love as well, and friendship, and achievement, and pleasure, and virtue, and not only knowledge. But still, it does seem to me that knowledge belongs on this list of intrinsic goods. The knowing life is simply intrinsically more worth having than the life of ignorance.

Of course, this isn't to suggest that all "bits" of knowledge are equally valuable, as if all that matters is that you know something, rather than nothing, regardless of how trivial and insignificant the piece of knowledge might be. On the contrary, I think it clear that some knowledge is quite unimportant, at least as far as its intrinsic contribution to the best human life is concerned. If I happen to know, for example, the average daily rainfall in Syracuse, New York (a city in the United States), for the month of July 1982—well, this is not the kind of knowledge that adds much intrinsic value to a human life. To be sure, there are circumstances in which even this fact might turn out to be instrumentally valuable; but my claim is only that knowledge of this kind would not have much, if any, intrinsic value.

In contrast, some knowledge seems deeper, more profound—more basic and general. To know the fundamental laws of physics, for example, or biology, or psychology, seems to me to be in possession of the kind of knowledge that gives significant value to one's life. Once again, the point I am making is not that this kind of knowledge is instrumentally valuable. It might well be, of course; but then again, it might not. To have an understanding of astrophysics, for example, and to know something about the very origins of the universe—it might well turn out that this sort of knowledge has no instrumental use at all. But for all that, there would be a point in striving to gain it: to have such knowledge adds value, directly, in and of itself, to your life.

If we had more time, we could undertake a more careful examination of what it is that distinguishes the deep and valuable knowledge from the trivial and insignificant kind. But I do want to make clear that I think the valuable kind of

knowledge is not limited to knowledge of what is explanatorily and causally basic. Other kinds of knowledge can have a similar significant value. Thus, for example, I think that there is great intrinsic value in having self-knowledge about one's place in the world, and about the relationships that one has with one's friends and family. (To see this, imagine how much poorer someone's life is if he is utterly deceived about who his real friends are—even if he never learns about this. To be deceived in this way is to have a life that is going badly.)

It will not surprise you to learn that I think that philosophy holds out at least the possibility of intrinsically significant knowledge of this sort. As philosophers, we aim to articulate and deepen our understanding of humankind and its place in the universe. To be sure, the knowledge here is not about what caused the world to come into being, or what caused humans to evolve in the way we did, or what caused societies to transform as they have over the course of human history. Rather, in philosophy we step back from the contributions of the various individual disciplines, and we ask ourselves how these different theories and pictures combine and hold together. We try to understand exactly what it is that we do understand, and what it is that we do not understand, and how our different contributions to that understanding connect and intertwine, how they can be put together into a larger, coherent picture. We ask ourselves about the basic categories of our thought and action, and how these categories work, and whether they are adequate to the task. This sort of knowledge, if only we were to attain it, would be fundamental in a different but equally important sense. We might say it would be conceptually fundamental. We could come to have a better understanding of ourselves and our thoughts, a better understanding of what we have come to know about ourselves and our world, and of our place in that world. We would have self-knowledge of the most fundamental sort.

It will be noted, of course, that I just said that this sort of knowledge would itself be valuable and fundamental, if only we were to attain it. But this brings us back to a point I made at the outset, that in philosophy we never quite seem to stably attain the kind of understanding to which we aspire. We aim high—indeed, in one sense we aim as high as it is possible to aim—but our results are always more piecemeal, more limited, more tentative and modest. And even that is only on those rare occasions when we feel emboldened to claim any kind of success at all.

So we still need to ask: Why study philosophy? Or more precisely, why is the study of philosophy worth undertaking, given the fact—for I do take it to be a fact—that we never manage to answer our questions altogether satisfactorily, we never manage to agree upon an answer so that philosophy could rightfully say: This is something that we know, let us now move on to a different question.

In effect, I am saying that although we can say to our students that this kind of knowledge would be intrinsically valuable if you gained it—your life would be the richer for its possession—at the same time we have to admit to our students

that we have very little of this sort of knowledge to pass along. So what is the value of studying a field where the knowledge gained is so minimal?

To answer this question we would need to explore yet another, related question: What value, if any, is there to undertaking difficult and important tasks, if one is almost certainly only going to have limited and partial success? I think it is helpful to think of inquiry in a given domain as an attempt to achieve something: It is an attempt to achieve understanding of the basic issues within that given domain. Now I take it that we all (or almost all) believe that our lives are more valuable when we have achieved something significant. And here too, of course, the point is that achievement is not only instrumentally valuable; rather, the right sorts of achievements are valuable in and of themselves. So what we need to know is this: What is the value of attempting to achieve something noble and fine, even when you know that you are not likely to succeed, and that almost inevitably you will have only partial success at best? For that is the situation we have with regard to philosophy.

My own view is that there is intrinsic value even here. And this is partly because philosophical knowledge, if only we were to attain it, would be fundamental in the way I have tried to describe. Precisely because it is such important knowledge to desire, the very attempt to gain it—whether or not it ends in success—is itself valuable. Or so it seems to me. And this, too, we can say to our students.

But there is one thing more to add: Philosophical questions are not questions that occur only to those of us who have studied the subject, and are trained professionals. Far from it: Philosophical questions are ones that emerge from the natural state of wondering that all of us engage in, at least in our more reflective moments. When we ask, as philosophers, how we can know anything, whether reality corresponds to our perceptions of it, how thought manages to express itself in language, whether we are truly free as we take ourselves to be, how we can live with one another in a just and fair society—when we ask after the nature of the true, and the good, and the beautiful—when we ask all of this, we philosophers are not introducing a new set of questions that ordinary people have never tried to ask before. We are simply asking, in a more systematic and refined way, about the very issues that all people ask about at one time or another, even if the press of daily life leaves them little time to ponder the questions for very long. Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder, and the most important point to remember here is that the sort of wonder that he has in mind is a wonder that occurs to all of us, at various times in our lives, naturally and spontaneously.

So we can say one last thing to our students. In studying philosophy, you have a chance to return to the questions you have always wanted to ask. In studying philosophy, you have a chance to return to the self who wonders about everything.