

Why Study Philosophy?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Philosophy is sometimes stereotyped as an "ivory tower" discipline that does not apply to the "real" world. In this lecture, we will cover four areas in which the benefits of philosophy are easy to see: higher education, the sciences, society, and the people who study philosophy.

This section answers the question, "Why Study Philosophy?" in five parts:

1. [Philosophy and Higher Education](#)
2. [Benefits of the Philosophical Mindset](#)
3. [Benefits Through the Sciences](#)
4. [Benefit to Society](#)
5. [Benefit to the Individual](#)

1. Philosophy and Higher Education

Recall that **philosophy** is the pursuit of truths that cannot be wholly determined empirically. Philosophy pursues wisdom and is therefore crucial in defining methods for the development and refinement of knowledge in all fields. As a result, philosophy is nearly synonymous with higher learning. Indeed, the words "academia" and "academic" come from the name of Plato's school of philosophy, the Academy. The highest degree attainable in academia is the PhD—Latin for *philosophiae doctor*, or doctor of philosophy.

Asking "why care about philosophy" is like asking "why care about higher education?" Philosophy is a collegiate activity that signifies intellectual maturity. One can question the status quo—not to be belligerent but out of a genuine desire to understand it. All you have learned previously becomes a starting point, not an end.



TERM TO KNOW

Philosophy

The pursuit of truths that cannot be wholly determined empirically.

2. Benefits of the Philosophical Mindset

In enumerating the advantages of philosophy, 20th century philosopher Bertrand Russell pointed out that it enlarges our thoughts and frees us from the “tyranny of custom.” How does philosophy do this? By asking “why” questions, and determining whether the answers are satisfactory. Philosophy requires that all beliefs be justified. What does this mean?



State a belief: “I believe (fill in the blank) is true.” Next, ask “why” you believe what you've stated. Why do you think your belief is true? If you can provide a good answer, one that is good enough to convince a reasonable skeptic, then you have justified your belief and, therefore, *know* it. If you cannot provide an answer or only an answer that a skeptic would find unsatisfactory, you have an *opinion* but do not *know*. You should not believe what you've stated, or should believe it only provisionally.

Philosophy's requirement that beliefs must be justified leads to regular questioning of beliefs and refinement of answers.

➦ **EXAMPLE** For thousands of years, people believed that only certain organic matter (composted plants and excrement) were adequate fertilizers. In the 20th century, someone finally asked the crucial question: “Why do we think that we can only use organic matter as fertilizer?” No one could provide a good answer to this question. What people had believed for thousands of years was opinion, not knowledge—something handed down through generations of farmers. It was Russell’s “tyranny of custom.” When freed from this tyranny, scientists developed nitrogen-based fertilizers, more land was farmed, and every acre produced more crops. Millions of people were spared famine and starvation, thanks to the philosophical mindset and its determination to hold only justified beliefs.

This is only one example, but it represents how progress has taken place over the centuries.

3. Benefits Through the Sciences

As the last example demonstrated, the philosophical mindset is key to progress in the sciences. However, the connection between philosophy and science is deeper than that.

Philosophers have made significant contributions to scientific methodology, and have contributed to the formation of science as we know it today. **Epistemology** set the standards of knowledge, and the philosophy of science developed methods to attain it. Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, is considered to be the father of physics and biology. He contributed to the development of the foundations of science. His concepts were later refined and incorporated into the modern scientific method by Francis Bacon, who was also a philosopher.

Aristotle



Francis Bacon



Aristotle and Francis Bacon were key contributors to the foundations of science and to the modern scientific method.

Philosophy has inspired breakthroughs in theoretical science. Isaac Newton's *Principia* is, in part, a text on natural philosophy. Albert Einstein cites the work of philosopher David Hume as the primary influence on his development of the Theory of Relativity. Hume's work also inspired much of Adam Smith's economics.

Many philosophers were also mathematicians and/or scientists, including René Descartes (perhaps you have heard of Cartesian coordinates), and G.W. Leibniz, who developed the binary number system and symbolic logic, without which we would not have computers. When someone's passion is knowledge, and that knowledge is groundbreaking, distinctions between philosophy and theoretical science disappear.



TERM TO KNOW

Epistemology

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of knowledge and the methodologies used to attain it.

4. Benefit to Society

Although you may have hesitated to give philosophy any credit for developments in theoretical science, you need only look around you to see what it has done in ethics and political philosophy. As a result of its influence in these areas, philosophy has led to improvements in society and culture.



DID YOU KNOW

The U.S. Constitution, including much of the Bill of Rights, is based on the political philosophy of John Locke. Many of the Founding Fathers were Lockeans.

General acceptance of democracy as the fairest form of government was a philosophical development. Similarly, most of our modern concepts and advancements with respect to justice, fairness, and equality originated with political philosophers. If you appreciate the end of slavery, the fight for racial equality, women's suffrage, or other instances of social progress, thank a philosopher.

Philosophy has also contributed to advancement in ethics. Philosophers are often employed as consultants on hospital ethics boards, as well as in other fields of applied ethics including environmental and business ethics. Philosophy has influenced societies' views on right and wrong for millennia.

5. Benefit to the Individual

Do you think you would benefit from being wiser? More moral? A better critical thinker? Being better equipped to distinguish knowledge from opinion? Making decisions based on reason instead of emotion? Acting according to your beliefs? Having a consistent worldview? Recognizing value? Minimizing bias while maximizing objectivity?

The study of philosophy does all this and more. It makes you a better person, but it can also have more immediate, tangible results. The study of philosophy has been shown to increase standardized test scores and performance in other courses. And, despite opinions to the contrary, philosophy degrees are highly sought by business employers because "thinking outside the box" is vital to business solutions and strategy.

Like your other courses, you will get out what you put into a philosophy class. If you make an effort in "Ancient Greek Philosophers," you will be rewarded.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, we discussed **philosophy and higher education**, **benefits through the sciences**, **benefit to society**, and **benefit to the individual**. Philosophy brings value from the global level to the individual. A **philosophical mindset** is required for any sort of progress. Philosophy has advanced (and continues to advance) the sciences; it has contributed to the growth of more ethical and just societies; and has broadened and improved the minds of those who study it.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Image of Francis Bacon](#) | License: Public Domain
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TERMS TO KNOW

Epistemology

The branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of knowledge and the methodologies that attain it

Philosophy

The pursuit of truths that cannot be wholly determined empirically