Excerpt from “Philosophy: A Brief Guide for Undergraduates” by the American Philosophical Association

The Field of Philosophy

Introduction

Philosophy is quite unlike any other field. It is unique both in its methods and in the nature and breadth of its subject matter. Philosophy pursues questions in every dimension of human life, and its techniques apply to problems in any field of study or endeavor. No brief definition expresses the richness and variety of philosophy. It may be described in many ways. It is a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths, a quest for understanding, a study of principles of conduct. It seeks to establish standards of evidence, to provide rational methods of resolving conflicts, and to create techniques for evaluating ideas and arguments. Philosophy develops the capacity to see the world from the perspective of other individuals and other cultures; it enhances one's ability to perceive the relationships among the various fields of study; and it deepens one's sense of the meaning and variety of human experience.

This short description of philosophy could be greatly expanded, but let us instead illustrate some of the points. As the systematic study of ideas and issues, philosophy may examine concepts and views drawn from science, art, religion, politics, or any other realm. Philosophical appraisal of ideas and issues takes many forms, but philosophical studies often focus on the meaning of an idea and on its basis, coherence, and relations to other ideas. Consider, for instance, *democracy*. What is it? What justifies it as a system of government? Can a democracy allow the people to vote away their own rights? And how is it related to political liberty? Consider *human knowledge*. What is its nature and extent? Must we always have evidence in order to know? What can we know about the thoughts and feelings of others, or about the future? What kind of knowledge, if any, is fundamental? Similar kinds of questions arise concerning art, morality, religion, science, and each of the major areas of human activity. Philosophy explores all of them. It views them both microscopically and from the wide perspective of the larger concerns of human existence.

Traditional Subfields of Philosophy

The broadest subfields of philosophy are most commonly taken to be logic, ethics, metaphysics, epistemology and the history of philosophy. Here is a brief sketch of each.

* **Logic** is concerned to provide sound methods for distinguishing good from bad reasoning. It helps us assess how well our premises support our conclusions, to see what we are committed to accepting when we take a view, and to avoid adopting beliefs for which we lack adequate reasons. Logic also helps us to find arguments where we might otherwise simply see a set of loosely related statements, to discover assumptions we did not know we were making, and to formulate the minimum claims we must establish if we are to prove (or inductively support) our point.
* **Ethics** takes up the meanings of our moral concepts—such as right action, obligation and justice—and formulates principles to guide moral decisions, whether in private or public life. What are our moral obligations to others? How can moral disagreements be rationally settled? What rights must a just society accord its citizens? What constitutes a valid excuse for wrong-doing?
* **Metaphysics** seeks basic criteria for determining what sorts of things are real. Are there mental, physical, and abstract things (such as numbers), for instance, or is there just the physical and the spiritual, or merely matter and energy? Are persons highly complex physical systems, or do they have properties not reducible to anything physical?
* **Epistemology** concerns the nature and scope of knowledge. What does it mean to know (the truth), and what is the nature of truth? What sorts of things can be known, and can we be justified in our beliefs about what goes beyond the evidence of our senses, such as the inner lives of others or events of the distant past? Is there knowledge beyond the reach of science? What are the limits of self-knowledge?
* **The History of Philosophy** studies both major philosophers and entire periods in the development of philosophy such as the Ancient, Medieval, Modern, Nineteenth Century, and Twentieth Century periods. It seeks to understand great figures, their influence on others, and their importance for contemporary issues. The history of philosophy in a single nation is often separately studied, as in the case of American Philosophy. So are major movements within a nation, such as British Empiricism and German Idealism, as well as international movements with a substantial history, such as existentialism and phenomenology. The history of philosophy not only provides insight into the other subfields of philosophy; it also reveals many of the foundations of Western Civilization.

Special Fields of Philosophy

Many branches of philosophy have grown from the traditional core areas. What follows is a sketch of some of the major ones.

* **Philosophy of Mind.** This subfield has emerged from metaphysical concerns with the mind and mental phenomena. The philosophy of mind addresses not only the possible relations of the mental to the physical (for instance, to brain processes), but the many concepts having an essential mental element: belief, desire, emotion, feeling, sensation, passion, will, personality, and others. A number of major questions in the philosophy of mind cluster in the area of *action theory*: What differentiates actions, such as raising an arm, from mere body movements, such as the rising of an arm? Must mental elements, for example intentions and beliefs, enter into adequate explanations of our actions, or can actions be explained by appeal to ordinary physical events? And what is required for our actions to be *free*?
* **Philosophy of Religion.** Another traditional concern of metaphysics is to understand the concept of God, including special attributes such as being all-knowing, being all-powerful, and being wholly good. Both metaphysics and epistemology have sought to assess the various grounds people have offered to justify believing in God. The philosophy of religion treats these topics and many related subjects, such as the relation between faith and reason, the nature of religious language, the relation of religion and morality, and the question of how a God who is wholly good could allow the existence of evil.
* **Philosophy of Science.** This is probably the largest subfield generated by epistemology. Philosophy of science is usually divided into philosophy of the natural sciences and philosophy of the social sciences. It has recently been divided further, into philosophy of physics, biology, psychology, economics, and other sciences. Philosophy of science clarifies both the quest for scientific knowledge and the results yielded by that quest. It does this by exploring the logic of scientific evidence; the nature of scientific laws, explanations, and theories; and the possible connections among the various branches of science. How, for instance, is psychology related to brain biology, and biology to chemistry? And how are the social sciences related to the natural sciences.
* **Subfields of Ethics.** From ethics, too, have come major subfields. **Political Philosophy**concerns the justification—and limits—of governmental control of individuals; the meaning of equality before the law; the basis of economic freedom; and many other problems concerning government. It also examines the nature and possible arguments for various competing forms of political organization, such as laissez-faire capitalism, welfare democracy (capitalistic and socialistic), anarchism, communism, and fascism. **Social Philosophy**, often taught in combination with political philosophy (which it overlaps), treats moral problems with large-scale social dimensions. Among these are the basis of compulsory education, the possible grounds for preferential treatment of minorities, the justice of taxation, and the appropriate limits, if any, on free expression in the arts. The **Philosophy of Law** explores such topics as what law is, what kinds of laws there are, how law is or should be related to morality, and what sorts of principles should govern punishment and criminal justice in general. **Medical Ethics** addresses many problems arising in medical practice and medical science. Among these are standards applying to physician-patient relationships; moral questions raised by special procedures, such as abortion and ceasing of life-support for terminal patients; and ethical standards for medical research, for instance genetic engineering and experimentation using human subjects. **Business Ethics** addresses such questions as how moral obligations may conflict with the profit motive and how these conflicts may be resolved. Other topics often pursued are the nature and scope of the social responsibilities of corporations, their rights in a free society, and their relations to other institutions.
* **Philosophy of Art (Aesthetics).** This is one of the oldest subfields. It concerns the nature of art, including both the performing arts and painting, sculpture, and literature. Major questions in aesthetics include how artistic creations are to be interpreted and evaluated, and how the arts are related to one another, to natural beauty, and to morality, religion, science, and other important elements of human life.
* **Philosophy of Language.** This field has close ties to both epistemology and metaphysics. It treats a broad spectrum of questions about language: the nature of meaning, the relations between words and things, the various theories of language learning, and the distinction between literal and figurative uses of language. Since language is crucial in nearly all human activity, the philosophy of language can enhance our understanding both of other academic fields and of much of what we ordinarily do.
* **Other Subfields.** There are many other subfields of philosophy, and it is in the nature of philosophy as critical inquiry to develop new subfields when new directions in the quest for knowledge, or in any other area of human activity, raise new intellectual problems. Among the subfields not yet mentioned, but often taught at least as part of other courses, are Inductive Logic, Philosophy of Logic, Philosophy of History, Philosophy of Mathematics, Philosophy of Medicine, Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of Feminism, Philosophy of Linguistics, Philosophy of Criticism, Philosophy of Culture, and Philosophy of Film.

# The Unexpected Way Philosophy Majors Are Changing The World Of Business

**The Huffington Post   By** [**Carolyn Gregoire**](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carolyn-gregoire/)

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Dr. Damon Horowitz quit his technology job and got a Ph.D. in philosophy -- and he thinks you should too.

"If you are at all disposed to question what's around you, you'll start to see that there appear to be cracks in the bubble," [Horowitz said in a 2011 talk at Stanford](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DBt9mVdgnI). "So about a decade ago, I quit my technology job to get a philosophy PhD. That was one of the best decisions I've made in my life."

As Horowitz demonstrates, a degree in philosophy can be useful for professions beyond a career in academia. Degrees like his can help in the business world, where a philosophy background can pave the way for real change. After earning his PhD in philosophy from Stanford, where he studied computer science as an undergraduate, Horowitz went on to become a successful tech entrepreneur and Google's in-house philosopher/director of engineering. His own career makes a pretty good case for the value of a philosophy education.

Despite a [growing media interest in the study of philosophy](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/why-study-philosophy-to-challenge-your-own-point-of-view/283954/) and [dramatically increasing enrollment in philosophy programs](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/education/06philosophy.html) at some universities, the subject is still frequently dismissed as outmoded and impractical, removed from the everyday world and relegated to the loftiest of ivory towers.

That doesn't fit with the realities of both the business and tech worlds, where philosophy has proved itself to be not only relevant but often the cornerstone of great innovation. Philosophy and entrepreneurship are a surprisingly good fit. Some of the most successful tech entrepreneurs and innovators come from a philosophy background and put the critical thinking skills they developed to good use launching new digital services to fill needs in various domains of society. Atlantic contributor Edward Tenner even went so far as to call philosophy the ["most practical major."](http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/10/is-philosophy-the-most-practical-major/246763/)

In fact, many leaders of the tech world -- from LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman to Flickr founder Stewart Butterfield -- say that studying philosophy was the secret to their success as digital entrepreneurs.

"The thought leaders of our industry are not the ones who plodded dully, step by step, up the career ladder," [said Horowitz](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DBt9mVdgnI). "They're the ones who took chances and developed unique perspectives."

**Here are a few reasons that philosophy majors will become the entrepreneurs who are shaping the business world.**

**Philosophy develops strong critical thinking skills and business instincts.**



Philosophy is a notoriously challenging major, and has rigorous standards of writing and argumentation, which can help students to develop strong critical thinking skills that can be applied to a number of different professions. The ability to think critically may be of particular advantage to tech entrepreneurs.

"Open-ended assignments push philosophy students to find and take on a unique aspect of the work of the philosopher they are studying, to frame their thinking around a fresh and interesting question, or to make original connections between the writings of two distinct thinkers,"[Christine Nasserghodsi, director of innovation at the Wellington International School in Dubai, wrote in a HuffPost College blog](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christine-nasserghodsi/the-value-of-philosophy_b_1853333.html). "Similarly, entrepreneurs need to be able to identify and understand new and unique opportunities in existing markets."

Flickr co-founder Stewart Butterfield got his bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy at University of Victoria and Cambridge, where he specialized in philosophy of mind. After the highly profitable sale of Flickr to Yahoo!, the [Canadian tech entrepreneur](http://www.bcbusiness.ca/people/stewart-butterfield-philosopher-game-king) began working on a new online civilization-building game, Glitch.

"I think if you have a good background in what it is to be human, an understanding of life, culture and society, it gives you a good perspective on starting a business, instead of an education purely in business," [Butterfield told University of Victoria students in 2008](http://www.canada.com/vancouversun/news/business/story.html?id=a153f725-97f6-4651-8c62-5dec47060854). "You can always pick up how to read a balance sheet and how to figure out profit and loss, but it's harder to pick up the other stuff on the fly."

**Former philosophy students have gone on to make waves in the tech world.**



Besides Horowitz and Butterfield, a number of tech executives, including former Hewlett-Packard Company CEO Carly Fiorina and LinkedIn co-founder and executive chairman Reid Hoffman, studied philosophy as undergraduates. Hoffman majored in philosophy Oxford before he went on to become a highly successful tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist, and author of [The Startup Of You](http://www.amazon.com/The-Start-up-You-Yourself-Transform/dp/0307888908).

"My original plan was to become an academic," [Hoffman told Wired](http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2012/04/features/reid-hoffman-network-philosopher). "I won a Marshall scholarship to read philosophy at Oxford, and what I most wanted to do was strengthen public intellectual culture -- I'd write books and essays to help us figure out who we wanted to be."

Hoffman decided to instead become a software engineer when he realized that staying in academia might not have the measurable impact on the world that he desires. Now, he uses the sharp critical thinking skills he honed while studying philosophy to make profitable investments in tech start-ups.

"When presented with an investment that I think will change the world in a really good way, if I can do it, I'll do it," [he said](http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2012/04/features/reid-hoffman-network-philosopher).

**Philosophers (amateur and professional) will be the ones to grapple with the biggest issues facing their generation.**



Advances in physics, technology and neuroscience pose an ever-evolving set of questions about the nature of the world and man's place in it ; questions that we may not yet have the answers to, but that philosophers diligently explorethrough theory and argument. And of course, there are some questions of morality and meaning that were first posed by ancient thinkers and that we must continue to question as humanity evolves: How should we treat one another? What does it mean to live a good life?

The Princeton philosophy department [argues](http://www.princeton.edu/majorchoices/departments/philosophy/#whatsitlike) that because philosophers have a "better understanding of the nature of man and his place in the world," they're better able to identify address issues in modern society. For this reason, philosophy should occupy a more prominent place in the business world, says Dov Seidman, author of HOW: Why HOW We Do Anything Means Everything.

"Philosophy can help us address the (literally) existential challenges the world currently confronts, but only if we take it off the back burner and apply it as a burning platform in business," [Seidman wrote in a 2010 Bloomberg Businessweek article](http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/jan2010/ca20100110_896657.htm). "Philosophy explores the deepest, broadest questions of life—why we exist, how society should organize itself, how institutions should relate to society, and the purpose of human endeavor, to name just a few."

**Philosophy students are 'citizens of the world.'**



In an increasingly global economy -- one in which many businesses are beginning to accept a sense of social responsibility -- those who care and are able to think critically about global and humanitarian issues will be the ones who are poised to create real change.

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, philosopher, novelist and author of the forthcomingPlato at the Googleplex, recently told The Atlantic that doing philosophical work makes students "citizens of the world." She explains why students should study philosophy, despite their concerns about employability:

To challenge your own point of view. Also, you need to be a citizen in this world. You need to know your responsibilities. You’re going to have many moral choices every day of your life. And it enriches your inner life. You have lots of frameworks to apply to problems, and so many ways to interpret things. It makes life so much more interesting. It’s us at our most human. And it helps us increase our humanity. No matter what you do, that’s an asset.

This global-mindedness and humanistic perspective may even make you a more desirable job candidate.

"You go into the humanities to pursue your intellectual passion, and it just so happens as a byproduct that you emerge as a desired commodity for industry," [said Horowitz](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DBt9mVdgnI). "Such is the halo of human flourishing."