Philosophy Beyond Critical Thinking

A common question I get from students and nonstudents alike is, "What's the point of taking a philosophy course, especially in a context geared towards workforce training and placement?" It's a fair question. It doesn't seem that an introductory course on Plato, Kant, and Bertrand Russell, for instance, has anything to do with welding, graphic design, or the respiratory therapy credentials that get real people real jobs. Many are under the impression that philosophy classes are merely "filler" courses, a way to check off the "Humanities" or "Liberal Arts" box on a degree plan. As a philosophy instructor, I struggle with how to best respond to this false belief. My immediate temptation is to highlight the fact that philosophy courses equip students with crucial critical-thinking skills. Since academic philosophy is the practice of questioning the assumptions of all kinds of stuff we take for granted—for example, knowledge, reality, science, morality, and more—then surely philosophical analysis of, or *thinking* and *reasoning* and *argumentation* about, real-world things is not an exercise done in vain or in a vacuum. Philosophers think critically even about *critical thinking* itself, and the data shows we're pretty good at it—philosophy majors consistently perform better than other students on exams such as the GRE (Muniz, 2017) and LSAT (LSAC, 2018). Moreover, STEM employers are increasingly hiring liberal arts degree holders, especially philosophy majors, due to their broad critical thinking abilities, a dire need for such companies in the modern global economy (Pimentel, 2019).

However, I must concede a sobering truth: philosophy isn't the only discipline that effectively teaches critical thinking. A recent issue of *Innovation Abstracts* conveys this very point in a thoughtful piece that demonstrates how philosophy, economics, and biology instructors at one institution intentionally work together to provide students with a more thorough, robust, and well-rounded approach to critical thinking than any one of their disciplines could do alone (Min, Lyman, & Signorelli, 2019). Furthermore, it can be argued that some disciplines may teach critical thinking better from within the context of a student's major and vocational goal rather than from beneath a philosophical lens. In nursing, for instance, critical thinking is the crucial skill that students must master, not only for the sake of passing the NCLEX licensure exam that tests students' ability to apply their knowledge-base to hypothetical medical scenarios, but especially for the sake of their future practice (Liberman, 2018). Even though I think philosophy has very important things to say about the content and practice of critical thinking, I'm fairly certain I want my nurse to be trained to successfully identify my medical problems and establish a proper course of treatment rather than to identify strawman fallacies and recognize valid deductive argument forms.

Instead of merely selling philosophy's capacity for increasing critical thinking, then, I emphasize to students (and nonstudents) the importance and uniqueness of philosophy for how it contributes to understanding our particular place in the world. In philosophy courses, students are faced with their own genealogy of ideas or worldviews—they are confronted by arguments that have influenced their beliefs and ideas without them having realized it along the way! Thousands of years of "dead" ideas come to life as students find their current beliefs about the world rooted, to some extent, in old ones. The philosophy course, then, is not just a vehicle for promoting critical thought; it facilitates students' recognition of the important truth that our beliefs about the world *came from somewhere*. Philosophy courses ultimately help students realize that beliefs don't pop into existence in the vacuum of our individual lives; they are our inheritance of thousands of years of reflection and practice.

Consider an example from the area I have found to generate the most interest and discussion from students, political philosophy. When I work students through various themes and theories in this area of study, they are often surprised to find that arguments for the best kind of political structure are not unique to our current political moment, but that they arose out of concerns expressed by Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Rousseau. Upon realizing this, students want to know why these thinkers argued for the positions that they did, whether that be some variety of socialism, having various branches of government checking and balancing one another, an absolute dictatorial monarchy, or a society governed by the democratic will of the people. What was going on in the philosopher's time and place that made their ideas seem cogent? What reasons did these thinkers have for believing their position was better than the alternatives? It is gratifying to see students wrestle with these questions, to try to answer them with the primary texts, to draw inferences from them, synthesize them, and measure them against modern conceptions. Students discover that many of the concerns in our current political discourse—individual rights, economic security, cost of living, law and order, overall wellbeing and quality of life for future generations, etc.—are the exact same concerns at the core of the figures' ideologies we study.

Students come to recognize the overlap of basic human concerns that permeate our world and that of the old philosophers. They come to understand that, though the arguments may have gotten more sophisticated and refined in our time, human needs tend to remain the same and so familiar questions resurface in every generation.

So, what's the value of intentionally approaching a community college philosophy class with an historical lens aimed at helping students recognize commonalities in human issues across time? Let me suggest a couple of benefits for students.

First, this way of approaching a philosophy course connects students to their past by shattering the misconception that it has no modern relevance. Instead, students are forced to reckon with the fact that they are part of a tradition and conversation of thought that stretches back thousands of years. In reaching this appreciation, students discover a new meaning about themselves and their world because this backwards-looking trajectory is inescapable. This recognition also elicits a particular sense of modesty since it reveals that our ideas are not truly not our own in a radically isolated sense, but have been fought for, scrutinized, and refined over generations. This recognition is also crucial for students who think that they have very little in common with the stereotypical intelligentsia or ivory tower elites that spend their lives discussing these issues. We are all connected to these old ideas. In a very real sense, we *all* are their intellectual progeny.

Second, students come to appreciate that the beliefs they hold, refine, and convey today will find their way into the *future*. Sometimes philosophers like to talk about the "personal benefit" of studying philosophy to get a good sense of the world and our place in it. I have no qualms with this. A core objective of a truly liberal arts education, after all, is putting diverse sources of wisdom into a coherent worldview of what it is to truly be human. But stopping there is misleading—once we understand our human connection to the past, we must determine what we're going to do with this connection in the future. Knowledge doesn't exist in a vacuum—you *will* do something with knowledge, for better or worse, good or bad. Once students start to develop a more coherent understanding of themselves and their world, class discussions tend toward possible obligations they have to others and to ensuring that the ideas we leave behind, as one student recently put it, "don't stink." This is where things get really exciting, because no matter the credential students are working towards—physical therapy, machining, culinary arts, or truck driving—students recognize at least some modicum of responsibility they have for others, especially those to whom they will leave the world they lived in and helped to shape. In this way, philosophy goes beyond critical thinking and reaches toward accomplishing a deeper objective: an ambitious determination to give the future world our very best ideas.

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