

## Why Philosophy is Important, in Brief.

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Here is an argument on why philosophy is important. (I would say it expresses *the* central reason why philosophy is important...but that is a further claim I do not defend here.)

**Premise 1:** People (vague) think that the most important questions are: Is there a God? Is there a soul? What is our purpose, if any? How should we live our lives? Etc. [Evidence: Do a search on “what are the most important questions?”]

**Premise 2:** The questions listed in Premise 1 are philosophical questions.

**Lemma:** So, people think that the most important questions are philosophical questions. [From Premises 1 and 2]

**Premise 3:** If Lemma is true, then people should believe that philosophy (understood as the attempt to answer such questions) is an important activity.

**Conclusion:** So, people (incl. university administrators, general ed students, parents/guardians, etc.), should believe philosophy is an important activity. [From Lemma, Premise 3]

Objection 1: Much of philosophy is not concerned with those questions, but rather questions like “what is the nature of natural kinds?” “is there an external world outside my mind?” “are there analytic truths?” Etc.

There are at least two possible replies to this objection, either of which the reader may find suitable.

*Reply 1:* The argument is not a defense of *everything* that has been called “philosophy” but rather philosophical attempts to address the kinds of questions listed in Premise 1. If that leaves out much of philosophy, then (perhaps) so much the worse for those parts of philosophy. Yet this would not indict all of philosophy.

*Reply 2:* The more specialized questions often bear crucially on the “big” questions. For instance, some have thought that it is true by definition (analytically true) that a Perfect Being exists. Accordingly, one can make progress on the theism debate by supporting/attacking the existence of analytic truths.

Caveat: This is not to say that the specialized questions are just as important. On the other hand, the analyticity question bears crucially not just on the God question, but on other questions as well (e.g., consciousness and physicalism). So all things considered, even some specialized questions could still have sizeable importance.

Objection 2: Philosophy fails to make significant progress. In which case, Premise 3 is false: If it fails to make much progress, philosophy should not be seen as an important activity, even if it is seen as addressing important questions.

Again, there are two possible replies we might entertain here.

*Reply 1:* Grant that philosophy does not make progress comparable to the sciences. It still could make significant progress. See [http://tparent.net/pessimism\\_args.pdf](http://tparent.net/pessimism_args.pdf) for more details. Plus, if (some) philosophical questions are the most important questions, then one should admit that any noticeable progress on such questions is, itself, significant.

*Reply 2:* The importance of philosophy does not depend entirely on what it produces. The process of exploring the questions has value to the individual as well. Not only is it intrinsically interesting, but the process also has valuable effects, e.g., in expanding horizons, sharpening reading/writing/speaking skills, etc.

Caveat: Many students never receive those benefits to any significant degree. But I suspect this is more due to a lack of motivation in such students rather than some defect of philosophy. This does *not* mean philosophers are absolved of responsibility in trying to motivate students. But motivating students is a pedagogical issue faced by all disciplines, and it is different from the value of the philosophical enterprise per se.

**In brief:** Philosophy is important because it addresses the most important questions humans face, and not without some success. And generally, the process itself has benefits, even if some students miss out on those.

I don't claim to be saying anything original here. But perhaps it helps to distill the case for philosophy to its most basic elements.

(This still leaves open many related questions, e.g., about the *degree* to which philosophy is important, especially on the degree to which it should be funded. But hopefully the foregoing offers something, even if it does not settle everything.)