

Philosophy in Canada: Questions and Answers

Philosophical inquiry has a history of nearly three thousand years and is pursued in all cultures. Almost every institution of higher learning includes a programme in philosophy, where it is viewed as important for a well-rounded education. Formal instruction in philosophy is also offered at pre-university levels in many countries and some provinces, including in Quebec's colleges (CEGEPs) and, more recently, in Ontario's secondary schools.

This document of the Canadian Philosophical Association replies to questions often put to philosophers about their profession.

1. What Is Philosophy?

Philosophy is critical and creative thinking about fundamental questions, such as:

- φ What is a worthwhile life?
- φ Is there sense to the universe?
- φ What can be known?
- φ What moral obligations do people have to one another?
- φ What makes a society just?

To wonder about questions like these – as any reflective person sometimes does – is already to think philosophically. However, not everyone possesses the skills required to develop new perspectives on basic questions or for careful expression and defence of traditional approaches. Nor does everyone possess critical thinking skills. These skills are required to sharpen understanding by uncovering presuppositions, identifying core premises and evaluating arguments. The discipline of philosophy provides systematic training in framing basic questions and in creative and critical thinking about them.

2. What Has Philosophy Accomplished?

Contrary to a common misapprehension that philosophers debate unanswerable questions without results, there has been a great deal of progress in the history of the subject. This is most evident in honing rigorous thinking skills. Critical thinking got off to a good start, as in the methods of careful reasoning deployed by Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, and training in it has since made significant strides, for example in refinements and revolutions in logic. There has also been progress in creative philosophy, which has come a long way since it was thought that the basic stuff of the universe is fire, air, earth and water, or that it is right and just that some people should have slaves.

Less obviously, but no less importantly, advances in other disciplines often owe a debt to philosophy. Major developments in physics, mathematics, biology, economics and psychology all started as philosophical hypotheses.

3. What Use Is Philosophy?

A main reason to study philosophy is for its own sake: "The unexamined life," Socrates insisted, "is not worth living." Philosophy is the discipline that enables people to reflect on questions such as who they are and how they should live. In an age when everything is judged in terms of what purpose it serves, people sometimes forget to think about purposes themselves. In addition to this intrinsic virtue, philosophy helps people to understand their own and others' religious, moral, artistic, political and scientific traditions – all of which include philosophical conceptions about what is real, good, beautiful or just. By addressing these questions in a systematic way, philosophy promotes the mutual understanding indispensable in a shrinking and multicultural world.

Critical thinking skills have always been important, but are probably more so today than ever before. Once-secure traditions or ideologies have come to be questioned, and it is increasingly challenging to evaluate the competing claims of advertisers, politicians and self-styled advisors on a host of personal and public matters. A new development in philosophy illustrates how critical thinking skills are put to practical use. In recently introduced courses in “applied philosophy,” philosophical reasoning is brought to bear on moral and social challenges arising in the professions. All major universities now include courses in medical ethics, the philosophy of law, engineering philosophy or business ethics.

The creative function that philosophy has served for other disciplines in the past is no less important today. For example:

- φ New developments in artificial intelligence have been made in collaboration with philosophers of language, logic and the study of the human mind.
- φ Refinements by political philosophers in conceptions of rights and justice are applied by law-making bodies and Supreme Court judges.
- φ Cultural studies and literary film criticism have profited from recent work in the philosophy of language and interpretation.
- φ Ethics committees of hospitals and professional associations have begun to employ philosophers trained in the new discipline of applied ethics.

4. Who Studies Philosophy?

The large majority of students in Canadian colleges and universities enrolled in philosophy courses are not philosophy majors, but are taking one or two philosophy courses to supplement their major field. Such students come to philosophy from a wide range of primary specializations: the natural and social sciences, professional disciplines, and other humanities subjects. In many joint programmes, philosophy is combined with another subject such as law, medicine, politics or classics. Philosophy courses are also integral parts of women’s studies, environmental and other such programmes.

Among those studying philosophy are significant numbers of mature students who are returning to university or taking courses in a faculty of continuing education. These faculties select offerings on the basis of public demand, and nearly all of them include philosophy courses within their curricula because of that demand.

While some students specializing in philosophy go on to seek academic employment as philosophy teachers in universities, community colleges, Quebec’s CEGEPs, or in the philosophy courses in secondary levels in a growing number of provinces, many pursue alternative academic professions or careers outside the academy, for instance as lawyers, journalists, and the public service or industry.

5. Who Should Want the Study of Philosophy Maintained?

The short answer is, “everybody.” The reasons given below are especially pertinent for particular constituencies, but all the reasons apply to each constituency.

a) *Students and Parents*

Philosophical study broadens the horizons of students, and provides them with skills of critical reasoning that serve them well in other academic work and in their chosen careers. Studies carried out by the U.S.-based Institute for Philosophy for Children (which has shown that philosophy can be effectively taught even to primary school students) find that literacy and essay-writing skills are markedly improved by studying philosophy. This is because philosophy requires close reading of texts and careful attention to the structure of arguments. For this reason, many students of philosophy go on to law schools, where they typically excel.

Students and parents should also support effective teaching of philosophy because there is a demand for it. Even in the current, narrowly “practical” educational climate, enrolments in philosophy courses have remained high in major Canadian universities. Teachers report that when some Ontario secondary schools introduced a course in philosophy in 1996, student demand far exceeded expectations and classroom space. It is important to meet student interest in philosophy with resources adequate to teach it properly.

b) *Universities and Colleges*

The same reasons apply to those charged with administering universities and colleges. In addition, philosophy serves an important “adjunct” service for other fields of study. This includes courses in the professional faculties mentioned earlier: business, medicine, engineering, journalism, law and public service. As well, knowledge of the history of philosophy is indispensable for the study of history generally:

- φ Courses in ethics, political philosophy and the philosophy of human nature usefully supplement studies in social and political science.
- φ Art and literature courses benefit from studying the philosophy of art (aesthetics).
- φ Understanding epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge), logic and the philosophy of science is invaluable for students of mathematics and the natural sciences.
- φ Religious studies as well as speculative physics and astronomy make use of the philosophy of being (metaphysics).

c) *Governments*

Governments should encourage philosophical study because a healthy democracy requires thoughtful and well-rounded citizens with sound reasoning skills. Such citizens are inclined to take the long view of problems governments face and to resist demagoguery. Philosophical training also alerts people to the possibility and value of reasoned dialogue about political and social controversies. The skills required for such dialogue are general and thus can be usefully employed by people who take a variety of stands on central social issues and who embrace alternative political viewpoints.

In their personal orientations, professional philosophers in Canada represent the widest possible range on secular, religious and political spectrums. It is worth noting, too, that when institutions of higher learning face tight budget constraints, philosophy is one of the most cost-effective disciplines. Very little capital outlay is required to supplement philosophy’s major investments, namely books and brains.

d) *Business and Industry*

Critical reasoning talents are by far the most “transferable” of skills. Philosophy trains students to:

- φ address problems in an open-minded way;
- φ analyze them into their component parts;
- φ survey and construct alternative solutions carefully and critically;
- φ demand of themselves and others rigour in resolving a problem.

Evidently, these are important skills in any enterprise, and especially so when changing technologies and economies demand universally applicable skills. As the most general of the liberal arts subjects, philosophy also requires and encourages students to be read widely. Because philosophy cannot be learned by rote, but only by engaging in philosophical writing and discussion, its students can be relied upon to be literate and articulate. For these reasons, many philosophy students have gone on to successful careers in business, and some businesses have sought out students with philosophical training.

Philosophy and the Community

We hope that these responses to frequently asked questions help to explain the importance of philosophy. From the time of Plato's Academy in ancient Athens to the present, philosophy has occupied a prominent place in education and teaching, and its skills, traditions and creative advances have been maintained and nurtured. In Canada, the study of philosophy has been an important part of all institutions of higher learning from their inceptions.

During the current period of economic constraints, philosophy, like nearly all other disciplines, has undergone contractions in course offerings and teaching staff. Assuming that such contractions are temporary effects of changing national and provincial economies, the profession can likely survive them. It would, however, be a tragedy if philosophy were to be so severely diminished that the continuity of its 2500-year-old history is ruptured.

Discussions about how to preserve the profession are, naturally, carried on within departments of philosophy. However, we in the Canadian Philosophical Association would like to engage a wider public in such discussion. This means educating people about the nature of philosophy. More importantly, it means inviting active public input to discussions about directions that philosophical teaching and research should take.

One way to do this is to phone or write to "The Chair, Department of Philosophy" at your local university or college to share opinions, request information about the department's offerings, or ask to be put on a mailing list of departmental events such as public talks or seminars.

Prepared by the Canadian Philosophical Association

☉ THE CANADIAN PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION was founded in 1958 to promote philosophical scholarship and education across Canada and to represent the interests of the profession in public forums. To these ends, it organizes scholarly meetings at the annual gathering sponsored by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, publishes a *Bulletin* and a quarterly journal, *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, maintains contact with sister organizations in Canada and other countries, and intervenes in policy issues pertaining to the profession.

From its inception, the CPA has been resolutely bilingual. All offices alternate between the two official languages and *Dialogue* has two editors, one Anglophone, the other, Francophone. Membership includes professional teachers of philosophy, graduate students, and some 'lay philosophers'.

The Association's administrative offices are located at Saint Paul University. Requests for more information may be addressed to the CPA; Saint Paul University; 223 Main Street; Ottawa ON K1S 1C4. E-mail: acpa@ustpaul.ca.

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