

Letter to a Young Philosopher

by Michael Flood (December 2015)

Dear Student,

Congratulations on choosing philosophy as your major. I hope you will find it a rewarding and life changing field of study. It has certainly been so for me and many of the people with whom I was privileged to go through undergraduate and graduate school.

Whether you decide to go on to take an advanced degree or leave after obtaining your Bachelor of Arts I wanted to pass along a few points of advice that will make the next few years of your studies more profitable (intellectually, at least). Most of them were taught to me by professors by whom I was strongly influenced, while a few I derived on my own from observation and contemplation.

I have tried to keep references to philosophers and their systems to a minimum; this is not the place to advocate for the study of one field or philosopher over another. You won't read anywhere in this letter any claim for the superior merit of Plato over Aristotle or Kant over Hegel. Unavoidably, however, my own biases have worked themselves into this letter, so I advise that you read this letter not as instructions but as recommendations.

There Are Answers, But You Have To Find Them

More than a few of your philosophical peers are going to be aimless, uncertain what to do, and find no satisfaction in their studies. This may discourage you from pursuing philosophy but you should realize that the problem is with them and the way they have chosen to study the subject rather than with the subject itself.

Philosophy attracts people because it promises to help them answer the deepest questions – Why am I here? What is justice? Do we have free will? Is there a God? This attracts lots of bright, eager, yet self-doubting young people who come expecting that some philosopher's work holds the answer to what troubles them. In my experience they tend to fixate on the texts of Nietzsche or Sartre and other existentialist philosophers* and be troubled because they don't find

the answers they are seeking.

These students would have been better studying theology or Eastern (Buddhist/Hindu/Taoist) philosophy, were it not for them having an allergic reaction to anything that smacks of faith or mysticism. They came to philosophy expecting to be given answers, and when the answers are not clear, and the courses are taught in a dialectical rather than didactic manner, they became disappointed and disillusioned.

Though philosophers have proposed many answers to the major questions the field is not fundamentally about those answers – it is about asking questions in a disciplined and self-conscious way, and learning to turn naive questions into better, more fully elaborated ones which are capable of being given a sound answer.

There are answers, but you have to come to them yourself. Being told by Kant that the good life is living by the categorical imperative will not persuade you of anything – you have to think through the idea fully and try to understand it in every facet before you can answer whether or not it is adequate to life. Maybe you'll become a Kantian or maybe not, but the effort to understand Kant's theories and his reasons for holding them will help add nuance to your own ethical understanding.

We study the works of great philosophers not for their particular answers but to observe some of the most brilliant people who ever lived grappling with ultimate questions and to find models of inquiry to emulate in our own studies.

*Do not take this as a mark against Nietzsche or Sartre: no thinker is responsible for what their audience ultimately makes of their ideas or who is attracted to them.

How To Tell Other People About What You're Studying

I was originally going to call this section "What Is Philosophy?" but you've probably encountered, by this point, more than enough attempts at a definition. Instead of giving you yet another one I'm going to provide you with something a bit more useful: a guide to explaining philosophy to other people.

If you have friends studying medicine they will have to put up with people

constantly asking them for health advice, to examine weird lumps or rashes on their bodies; friends studying law will have to put up with lawyer jokes and (often from the same people) requests for free legal advice. The difference between them and you isn't just your probable lifetime income after graduation (sorry, but it's true) it's that no one talking to them presumes to already understand the subject at hand.. By contrast, almost everyone you will meet who is not a trained philosopher will assume that they already know what you are studying and will want very much to share with you their "philosophy."

The personal philosophies, such as they are, that people have tend to be maxims they pretend to live by – "seize the day," "always turn the other cheek," "morning is wiser than evening." While these common sense sayings can do people some good, they are not philosophies because they are not systematic and fully worked out. They don't include any conception of the world or human nature that renders the maxims true (if they are) or about what circumstances they do or do not apply in.

Try explaining why you study philosophy this way:

Everything we do in life depends on a large number of accepted and unquestioned ideas. Engineers build bridges and skyscrapers using mathematics without having to ask what numbers are. Doctors treat illnesses without (as doctors) inquiring what exactly health is and how it is distinguished from sickness. Police enforce laws without having to question what a law is or what distinguishes a law from a mere preference or best practice.

Philosophy is the discipline that examines those concepts. We care about what truth is, what justice is, what beauty is – by seeking to define them, to understand what they are and are not, we aim to not only know what they are but also how to seek them better: to build more just societies, to create greater works of beauty, and to understand how to live more fully and virtuously.

I've found that one reasonably effective. It at least gets people to stop asking you about what you do or bothering you with their life maxims.

Alternatively, you can do what Nassim Taleb, a philosopher and economist, does whenever he travels: just tell people you are a limo driver – they won't feel

like pursuing the conversation with you beyond a few simple questions.

How To Study Philosophy

When reading great works of philosophy make an effort to learn about the time and circumstances in which the philosopher wrote. Though there are perennial questions that recur throughout all the ages, they are addressed in different ways with different assumptions depending on local circumstances. You don't need to become a professional historian in addition to being a philosopher but it makes a great deal of difference for understanding what a philosopher means if you understand the intellectual climate they are working within. This will particularly help you with the denser, more opaque philosophies of Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein.

Never settle for reading just the excerpts from great works of philosophy your courses (particularly in first and second year) provide you with. Read the entire work on your own time, making the time to absorb what the philosopher is saying. If at all possible, reread each work. You'll find your comprehension grows by leaps and bounds after having gone through the text just once and passages that were obscure will become clear.

You'll likely be taught philosophy in separated chunks – as epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, logic, metaphysics, and the endlessly multiplying philosophies “of” whatever – but you must remember that these are largely arbitrary divisions. Any serious position in epistemology or ethics will depend upon commitments to metaphysical positions, and any metaphysics will have epistemological and ethical consequences. All of them in turn will be connected together by an understanding of logic and the philosophy of language. The division of philosophy into separate sub disciplines aids career building and pedagogy, though primarily by aiding the teacher rather than the student.

Understand When And Why To Argue, Not Just How

If your teachers have done an at all tolerable job you should by now know the distinction between a mere disagreement or debate (where each side seeks to win) and a true argument, a laying out of true propositions in a logically valid order leading to a sound conclusion. You should also be aware of the purpose of argument among philosophers – we argue not just to convince, but to understand.

You're going to discover that almost no one outside of philosophy departments (and precious few within them) argue to increase their understanding. Arguing is about winning, because people have their egos and personal sense of worth bound up with the ideas they believe in. This can be valuable – it makes people fight for just causes, persevere in the face of opposition, and elaborate ideas in seeking to defend them – but it can also be crippling: people cling on to irrational or outmoded beliefs long after evidence and arguments that they are untrue should have persuaded them to change their mind. Don't be too smug – you are doing it as well without realizing it.

Among philosophy undergraduates and grad students there is an unfortunate tendency to fall into what I call “performative arguments” – where one student takes one position, another student takes the opposite position, and they just rehearse the tired, worn out, historical arguments for both positions rather than developing new ones or really understanding the structure of the disagreement. If you come out of a debate with another philosopher or philosophy student and haven't understood either your position or your opponent's better you have both failed. You should encourage each other to spell out your positions fully and consistently – be midwives to each other's ideas like our great forefather Socrates (though try to be less annoying).

Be Wary Of Non-Debates

Often the two sides of a disagreement are arguing about the truth or falsity of a proposition but share a common premise they are not aware of. When this is the case, ask yourself whether the shared proposition is true – if it's not, you've just discovered a non-debate: one that cannot get anywhere or produce anything because both sides are wrong. To give you any specific examples of non-debates would be to expose my own prejudices and philosophical views too much – something I feel as a teacher would be unjust, especially when you are just starting to form your views about this subject.

Be warned: your attempts to show a debate is ill-founded or unnecessary will not be appreciated. People build entire careers upon arguing for positions in non-debates, developing elaborate intellectual edifices with epicycles within epicycles to defend their positions against equally well prepared opponents. To question the soundness of an entire debate is to question the value of someone's entire career and, by extension, life.

While you may not be able to change the debate, you can at least remain a true lover of wisdom and stop bothering yourself with false and profitless discussions. At the same time, finding common premises that you and your opponent both agree on is an excellent means of building common understanding. Once the common premise is identified then you can more readily identify where in the course of argument you truly differ from one another – in a discussion of reproductive ethics it is valuable to realize that both you and your opponent believe in the dignity of human life, but disagree about when it begins.

You Are Not A Psychologist

One (bad) argument tactic is to psychologize your opponent's position – rather than addressing their premises directly, you try to explain why they hold that position. This is a version of the *ad hominem* fallacy, when you dodge the issue at hand and try to discredit the entire worldview of the person in question by their experiences, background, previous statements, etcetera. The reasons a person believes a proposition are beside the point – what matters is whether the proposition is true and whether it is argued for soundly. That someone believes in or doesn't believe in God because they were raised to do so has no bearing on the truth or falsity of their argument concerning the Problem of Evil, Pascal's Wager, or the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument.

It can be very tempting to do so, particularly when you feel your argument is sound and your opponent simply refuses to see reason. Resorting to psychologizing, however, degrades the standard of argument. Soon both parties are only insulting each other and no progress in understanding or the pursuit of truth is made. Then you might as well be practicing law or politics, the sole difference being that you're not making as much money.

Take It Seriously

The most fundamental question you have to ask yourself now is not only where you'll devote most of your attention as a philosopher – ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics, or epistemology, or logic – but whether or not you will take philosophy seriously. By serious I don't just mean paying attention in class, studying hard, and getting good grades – I mean whether or not you will live your life by what you think.

You'll meet a lot of people in your philosophy department and in grad school who

are really historians or cataloguers of ideas, not philosophers. They teach students, go to academic conferences, and publish papers and books but are not affected by what they study in the least. That's a comfortable way to live, but it is passing up an opportunity to take both your subject and life itself seriously.

As an example of taking philosophy seriously I was taught Plato and Aristotle by a brilliant lecturer who was happened to be a vegetarian. Her vegetarianism was not for health or financial reasons but because she believed, on the basis of argument, that animal suffering was indistinguishable ethically from human suffering and thus one should not contribute to its perpetuation. I didn't agree with her, but I respected (and still respect) her willingness to live life by what she thought was true.

Taking philosophy seriously isn't just learning how to argue and how to analyze and construct arguments – it involves asking yourself whether the ideas you are studying are true and if they are (or are not) what the consequences are. This is not an easy thing to do and takes a lifetime of effort but it is the only way to live the truly examined life.

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