

*'Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.'*

*(Bertrand Russell, Problem of Philosophy, pp. 93-94).*

*Discuss the usefulness (or the lack of it) of studying philosophy with reference to the statement above. Draw appropriate examples from your engagement with the subject so far as well as from your own personal experience.*

I agree with the above statement to a moderate extent, as I believe that while there are some definite answers to some of the questions Philosophy poses, it is true that Philosophy is to be studied for the sake of the questions themselves. I also feel that studying Philosophy can be useful to a large extent in many areas of life, as it is not limited by factors pertaining to a single subject, apart from the question of knowledge.

The mention of the word 'Philosophy' is more than likely to evoke images of old men with long beards and white hair, as well as abstract and incomprehensible truths and axioms. In fact, the phrase "a philosophical attitude" is often used to refer to a stoical and passive approach to life and taking things without caring too much about their consequence and implications. From my personal experiences with the study of Philosophy this year, I can attest to the fact that this is most certainly not the case.

Philosophy is alive, practical, and applicable to everyone in all walks of life, in every possible way imaginable. I believe that Philosophy can and does contain many areas in which there are chances for us to apply the knowledge we have learned through it in our lives, thus making Philosophy a highly practical and relevant subject to us. In this essay I will attempt to demonstrate the practicality, usefulness, and relevance of Philosophy in our daily lives, and to show the dramatic impact it has had on the way I view things now.

Firstly, let us define the term 'Philosophy'. In layman terms, Philosophy is often defined as the "love of wisdom", and is the transliteration of the Greek words *philos* and *sohpa*<sup>1</sup>. Another possible definition comparing the fields of science and Philosophy would be that "Science is what you more or less know, and philosophy is what you do not know."<sup>2</sup> However, these definitions are often too vague and somewhat inaccurate.

Instead, I feel that a more appropriate definition would be as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy>

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism," in his *Logical Atomism*, 141.

Philosophy is a discipline or field of study involving the investigation, analysis, and development of ideas at a general, abstract, or fundamental level. It is the search for a general understanding of values and reality by chiefly speculative means and covers a wide range of approaches, and is also used to refer to a worldview or to the positions argued for by a particular philosopher or school of philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

This definition more or less encompasses most of the aspects of Philosophy, and is useful in helping us to grasp what Philosophy is all about.

As stated earlier, I believe that the usefulness of Philosophy is mainly practical in nature. In this area I wholeheartedly agree with Socrates' belief that the study of Philosophy should achieve practical results. This is because Philosophy teaches us many new and important skills, which are highly relevant to what we know and believe about life. In philosophy, the concepts and ideas of which we approach the world are turned into the theme of investigation and the study of these concepts which structure our thinking, and to expose its foundations and beliefs can lead to many new discoveries which can enable us to understand more about what we do not know.<sup>4</sup>

Philosophy questions our beliefs and prejudices. It forces us to think, to think about what we do and do not know, to think about the world around us, and to question what we do not understand. In Philosophy, we are expected to think and analyse situations more closely, to think outside the box and look at things from a different perspective. Philosophy teaches us how we should live life, while at the same time refusing to dictate what we should and should not do with our lives. Philosophy is a means to understand in greater depth other disciplines, and it is all about learning skills which we can use for other purposes. Philosophy unites and divides. But most of all, Philosophy teaches. Philosophy teaches us more about ourselves and what we truly understand. It shows us where we are wrong, and what we can do to improve ourselves, and this is where Philosophy does play a part in our day-to-day lives.

Philosophy is also useful helping to understand the grey areas regarding many important questions about a discipline, such as the nature of its concepts and its relation to other disciplines<sup>4</sup>. Such questions are usually not pursued in the study of that discipline itself, and it is up to Philosophy to find the answers, if any, for these highly important, but neglected questions. An example of this would be to use the skills Philosophy teaches to try and understand how science relates to math and geography, or how history relates to literature. A critical look at the relationship between these subjects reveals that there are often close links between them. Mathematics has often been referred to as "the language of

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from <http://www.philosophy.uncc.edu/mleldrid/intro/odop.html>

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from [http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPs/PES-Yearbook/95\\_docs/hager.html](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPs/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/hager.html)

science<sup>5</sup>, while history can be used to closely trace the development of literature over time.

The key reason as to why Philosophy contains such tremendous flexibility is because of its very nature. It is not about memorizing facts and figures, but rather learning skills which can be used in other areas. This has been repeated several times throughout this essay, but I cannot overemphasize its importance. The skills I have repeatedly alluded to include critical thinking, personal reflection, logic, reasoning, an inquiring mind and a questioning spirit. The above skills are essentials when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of Philosophy, and one will never be able to fully appreciate and understand Philosophy without having at least a fair amount of these skills and a grasp of how to think critically.

Through the study of Philosophy this year, I feel that I have learned a great deal during the Philosophy lessons, and have also been able to apply my newfound knowledge. The study of Philosophy has enabled me to think more deeply and consider things we have never looked at before, as well as challenging my own beliefs. From the lessons on enculturation and ethical dilemmas, I have learned how much our surroundings affect our beliefs, values and the way we think, and the resultant decisions we make when it comes to a situation where there are no clear-cut answers and where both choices seem to be wrong. For example, the personal worldview of people can be considered as a Philosophy in its own right, and can unite or divide people. An excellent example of this would be the concept of religion.

As stated earlier, Philosophy provides a channel by which we can learn to live life to the full. An example of this would be Aristotle's Golden Mean, which encourages us to strive for a balanced and harmonious personality. Back onto the topic of what I have discovered through these lessons, I feel that although I have learned a lot, there are hardly any "definite answers." From learning to have a spirit of inquiry, to applying the skills taught here, in other subjects (e.g. improving my argumentative essays in subjects such as IHS and Language Arts), I have been able to catch a glimpse of the true beauty of Philosophy in my studies.

With reference to the quote of Russell's cited, I feel that while Philosophy is to be studied not necessarily for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, I believe that definite answers can be known to be true for some of the questions Philosophy poses. For example, my Christian worldview dictates that the answer to the question "Is there a God?" is a resounding "Yes." Although this is only a personal belief, it still constitutes a definite answer, as the answer to the question can only be a yes or a no, indicating that there has to be a definite answer to this question.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Mathematics>

That said, I do believe that there is far more benefit to be gained from the study of the questions themselves, and that the search for answers should remain secondary in nature. Thus my conviction is that Philosophy should be studied for the sake of the questions themselves, with definite answers only being far less important.

In conclusion, I feel that the primary usefulness of Philosophy is its immense relevance to our lives in the context of understanding our surroundings better, in the quest to gain a greater and more in-depth view of other disciplines. Philosophy involves the learning of skills which can be applied elsewhere, and teaches us how to think, reason and live our lives. The bottom line here is that Philosophy is useful because of its practical aspects. There may certainly be other possible ways Philosophy can be studied, such as solely for the sake of questioning, as Russell suggests. However, these methods pale in comparison to the practicality and versatility of studying Philosophy in order to learn new thinking skills.

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