

# Eleven Reasons Why Philosophy is Important

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**note:** I have written a newer essay on the importance of philosophy, which can be found [here](#).

I will (1) discuss 11 reasons why I think philosophy is important, (2) provide evidence that philosophy benefits people, and (3) defend philosophy from criticism. I will reuse much of what I've already said on these issues mentioned earlier. This is my attempt to compile a fairly comprehensive discussion of philosophy's importance.

## (1) Eleven Reasons Why Philosophy is Important

Perhaps the most obvious reason that philosophy benefits is simply that it helps us be more reasonable. Many other benefits it offers involves the fact that it can help us become more reasonable. However, there are certainly other reasons that philosophy is important that are worth discussing.

### 1. Philosophy helps us be reasonable.

Learning to be reasonable is of utmost importance because we all have to make choices and accomplish goals. Being reasonable enables us make good choices, accomplish our goals, live a better life, and become better people. Just about everyone knows that *other people are often unreasonable* and could benefit from taking classes that specialize in reasoning, like logic; but almost everyone is biased about their own reasonableness. We can often see the shortcomings of others, but not of ourselves. If “everyone else” should learn to be more reasonable, than so should we.

“Reasonableness” is the essence of philosophy and it can be taught in the specializations of logic (good argumentation) and epistemology (the study of knowledge). Everyone is already a philosopher insofar as they are reasonable, and everyone does some philosophy insofar as they think reasonably. However, no one is perfectly reasonable and philosophy has a lot to offer. There are many mistakes people make that roadblock their ability to be reasonable known as “fallacies” and a greater understanding of reasonableness can help us improve our ability to be reasonable because we can do so *deliberately* rather than merely

believing whatever “seems reasonable” in an intuitive sense.

Learning to be more reasonable can be aided by an understanding of good argumentation, formal logic (argument structure), informal logic (common unjustified assumptions and other fallacies), reading philosophical arguments, writing philosophical arguments, and practicing philosophical debate.

The fact that people don't learn enough about reasonableness is exemplified by (a) our increased interest in “critical thinking,” (b) the fact that we aren't always getting enough “critical thinking” in our education, and (c) common unreasonable beliefs and behaviors.

The fact that we are interested in “critical thinking” already reveals how unreasonable we are because “critical thinking” classes tend to only require a minimal understanding of logic and argumentation. Someone with “critical thinking” doesn't necessarily know how to think well. I'm not against critical thinking, but learning about critical thinking is about *lowered standards* insofar as we should learn a lot more about being reasonable than what would be taught in critical thinking classes. If we know how to be reasonable, we know how to think critically (and more). If we know how to think critically, we don't necessarily know how to think reasonably.

The fact that we aren't always getting enough “critical thinking” in our education is a preoccupation of many educators and it exemplifies the fact that we are a long way from expecting people to know how to be reasonable. One extensive study lead by Richard Arum found that “critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication skills that are widely assumed to be at the core of a college education” and I suggest that philosophy could very well help considering that he found that “[s]tudents who majored in the traditional liberal arts—including the social sciences, humanities, natural sciences and mathematics—showed significantly greater gains over time than other students in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills.”<sup>1</sup>

Common unreasonable beliefs and behavior is revealed by the manipulative behavior of politicians, propagandists, and advertising agencies that try to deceive people by using flawed reasoning and quite often succeed. Deception in politics is described in “[Top 10 Logical Fallacies Used in Politics](#).” Deceptive advertising is described in detail in [the wikipedia article on false advertising](#). Much of the deception and propaganda found in the US media was discussed in the free

<sup>1</sup> Rimer, Sara. “Study: Many college students not learning to think critically.” McClatchy. 2 March 2011. <<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/01/18/106949/study-many-college-students-not.html>>. Originally published January 18, 2011.

movie, [PsiWar](#), which is on youtube.

To refuse to be philosophical is to love one's own opinion rather than the most reasonable opinions possible. This makes us [dogmatic and increases the odds of becoming fanatical](#). Learning about philosophy can help us learn to be more philosophical.

## **2. It helps us be moral.**

Morality is of the utmost importance because our decisions can have a powerful impact on ourselves and others. Our decisions can help or hurt people. We want fewer criminals, more people to [help the poor](#), fewer [CEOs who dump toxic waste in third world countries](#), more people to demand that the government [stop handing out billions of dollars to oil companies](#) in “subsidies,” fewer [corrupt cops](#) and [politicians](#), fewer [judges who accept bribes](#), and so on.

Those who “specialize” in morality are philosophers. A reasonable understanding of morality is known as “moral philosophy” and “ethics.” Philosophers provide us with moral theories and the most reasonable methods of making moral decisions. In particular, we need to apply reasonableness to morality.

One way we can improve our ability to be moral is by applying good reasoning to morality. We can learn moral theories, read moral philosophy, write our own philosophical arguments involving morality, and debate moral issues with philosophical guidance.

Although philosophers don't always agree about what action is “right” or “wrong,” they offer the most we can hope for. There is no better alternative for understanding morality than moral philosophy. Being reasonable doesn't require agreement, it requires us to have “sufficiently justified” beliefs.

Additionally, moral education is valuable not only because it can [help people become moral](#) by getting people to think more about morality (and learn to think reasonably about it), but also because we can learn about psychological factors that help motivate people to be moral. We can teach these factors and implement them when possible. For example, we can learn how to nurture our empathy for others and stop behaviors or lifestyles that neglect it.

The fact that morality is of the utmost importance and we can become better people is not what I would consider to be a controversial fact. The fact that moral education has not been considered to be important enough to be an educational

“requirement” in high school or college is an outrage.

### **3. It offers us knowledge.**

Philosophy has offered us the knowledge necessary to understand formal logic, develop natural science, discover [highly plausible beliefs concerning being reasonable](#), [highly plausible beliefs concerning morality](#), and more. Even the highly speculative areas of philosophy involving the nature of reality, mental causation, the nature of mathematics, the nature of morality, and controversial applied ethics involves a great deal of knowledge. In particular, we can realize that certain hypotheses are untenable even when we have no way of knowing the absolute truth once and for all. This is not much different from how natural scientists develop scientific theories. Sometimes we simply can't prove which theory is “best” even though the experts know much more than the rest of us.

### **4. It is enjoyable.**

Why is philosophical knowledge so important? Again, it is important to be a reasonable and moral person. However, the knowledge we attain through philosophy is also enjoyable and perhaps even “good for its own sake.” It might be worthy of learning just because it's a good kind of knowledge to have, even when it's not used for anything.

### **5. It helps lead to many of the greatest achievements.**

Philosophy itself is often the greatest human achievement in itself because human beings using their minds to reason well about complexed issues includes some of the greatest work we've ever done. When we look at our history and other cultures, their philosophy is a reflection of the greatness of their entire civilization. However, the practical implications of philosophy are also of the utmost importance—the creation of logic, computers, and natural science.

### **6. It satisfies our sense of being a human being in a unique way.**

There is a sense of being a human being beyond our jobs, beyond our family, beyond our own benefit. There is a thirst for knowledge of the most difficult issues—reality, reasonableness, and ethics. We want to know how to make the world a better place and prioritize our lives in the best way possible. We want to know more about what it means to be a human being and to contemplate the majesty of our existence.

## **7. It helps us live a better life.**

Philosophy can help us live a better life in at least two ways. One, a “good life” can be, in part, a philosophical life. Two, it can help us decide how our lives can be improved.

**A philosophical life might be a better life.** – People used to want to seek enlightenment because enlightenment itself was one of the best things we could do. Philosophy offers the greatest kind of enlightenment that I know of. Not only could the knowledge of philosophy be good in itself, but a philosophical life (to try to live in accordance with philosophical knowledge) could also be good in itself. To become philosophical was once seen as to become a better sort of being. To become more “godly.” Someone who studied philosophy might even hope to become a god. (This was even agreed upon by some Christian philosophers, such as Boethius.)

I doubt that we can become gods, but I suspect that philosophy can help us become better people. Nietzsche thought that becoming godlike was asking for too much, so he just hoped to become an overman, a better kind of person. That might be the right kind of attitude to have.

**A philosophical life can help us achieve our goals.** – Philosophy offers us a path to improve our critical thinking skills far beyond anything else I know of. These skills are holistic and can be applied in every domain of our life. To learn to “make sense” means we can “make sense” in our personal life and figure out what mistakes we have been making day to day. We can use philosophy to help us figure out how to improve the world, improve ourselves, and have better relationships.

Philosophy offers one of the best sorts of “self-improvement” that self-help gurus tend to be too impatient to really learn about. This sort of “self-help” requires “too much thinking” and “too much work” when people want a “quick fix.” The best way to improve our lives isn’t to take a pill or to try to “get rich quick.” It’s to work on improving ourselves a little at a time. To learn about philosophy is to learn about the world, improve our critical thinking, and to use our philosophical knowledge and skills in everyday life.

## **8. It helps us identify deception.**

We know many religions are wrong and use manipulative techniques similar to cults. We know advertising agencies, propaganda, and politicians try to deceive

people because they are often successful at doing so. We know that there is bad science that can't be trusted. There is good reasoning and bad reasoning and it's possible to learn more about the difference between the two. Once we learn the difference, we will be able to identify deception, avoid deception, and help others learn about it. Fighting against deception is part of making the world a better place. Those using deception to attain more money and power often hurt people in the process.

### **9. It helps us understand the history of thought.**

Philosophy can teach you the history that is often taken out of history books—the history of worldviews and thought itself. You can't know how we have “progressed” and attained the wonders of science and technology without knowing the history of philosophy.

### **10. It helps us be more creative.**

Philosophy can help us learn how to think more creatively. Learning about the answers people have thought of to life's greatest questions opens possibilities that you would have a very difficult time to realize on your own. Philosophers often contribute to the world by thinking in entirely new ways and offering entirely new answers—and you can learn to do so as well through example. You might think you are creative now, but odds are that many of your ideas are the same as someone else's. Would you rather know what ideas are already thought of so you can make sure your own ideas are unique or do you want to end up developing the same ideas that many others have come up with?

### **11. Philosophy can help make the world a better place.**

I think philosophy is of the utmost importance. The horrors of the world can often be attributable to a *defect of the culture* rather than just an isolated case of immorality. Our lack of reasonableness and a lack of moral knowledge *is part of our culture*. If philosophy becomes widespread and valued in enough people's lives, then our entire culture will be improved and the behavior of people within the culture will be improved. This is a holistic way to make the world a better place.

## **(2) Evidence that Philosophy is Beneficial**

The fact that philosophy can help us is revealed by personal experience, statistical

evidence, and history. I will discuss both the statistical evidence and history that reveals that philosophy can help us. Much of what I will say above is based on my personal experience with philosophy.

## Statistical Evidence

There is some scientific evidence that philosophy can benefit people (mainly in the form of statistical information). Statistics have shown philosophy majors to do well in a variety of standardized test scores<sup>2</sup>, and even children around the age of ten were found to have benefited from philosophy education:

One hundred and five children in the penultimate year of primary school (aged approximately ten years) were given one hour per week of philosophical-inquiry based lessons for 16 months. Compared with 72 control children, **the philosophy children showed significant improvements on tests of their verbal, numerical and spatial abilities** at the end of the 16-month period relative to their baseline performance before the study... Now Topping and Trickey have tested the cognitive abilities of the children two years after that earlier study finished, by which time the children were nearly at the end of their second year of secondary school. The children hadn't had any further philosophy-based lessons but the benefits of their early experience of philosophy persisted. The 71 philosophy-taught children who the researchers were able to track down showed the same cognitive test scores as they had done two years earlier. By contrast, 44 control children actually showed a trend towards a deterioration in their inferior scores from two years earlier.<sup>3</sup>

Recently an applied logic class was found to significantly help high school students. The study was conducted by Dan Bouhnik and Yahel Giat from the Jerusalem College of Technology (in Jerusalem, Israel) and information about the study was published online in a PDF file entitled, "Teaching High School Students Applied Logical Reasoning." (You can download it for free [here](#).)<sup>4</sup> I discussed the study in more detail in "[A Study Finds That Formal Logic Can Help High School Students](#)."

I must admit that science has not proven all of the benefits of philosophy

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2 "Philosophers Excel in Standardized Tests." Washington State University. 2 March 2011. <<http://libarts.wsu.edu/philo/overview/excel.asp>>.

3 "Philosophy for Kids." BPS Research Digest. 2 March 2011. <<http://bps-research-digest.blogspot.com/2007/11/philosophy-for-kids.html>>.

4 Originally published in the *Journal of Information Technology Education*, Volume 8, 2009. <<http://jite.org/documents/Vol8/JITEv8IIP001-016Bouhnik681.pdf>>.

education once and for all, but the demand for scientific evidence that philosophy education helps people become more reasonable is a lot like demanding that historians can prove that history education helps people know more about history. Assuming that historians know anything about history, it would mark a complete failure in history education if they couldn't help people know more about history. The same is true for philosophy. If philosophy classes can't help people know more about reasonableness or morality, then philosophy education would be a total failure.

## Historical Evidence

Perhaps the strongest evidence that philosophy helps people is found in the real-life impact it has had throughout history. It led to formal logic, improvements in mathematics, computers, and natural science. The fact that philosophy was involved in the progress of these fields is a matter of historical fact. [Aristotle](#) and the [Stoics](#) developed [formal logic](#). [Formal logic is used by mathematicians and computers](#). Natural science is the most reliable method of discovery other than logic and mathematics and it was originally a branch of philosophy called “[natural philosophy](#).”

### (3) Defending philosophy from Objections

We have no choice but to embrace philosophy because of the role it plays in reasonableness and morality. It is the best we can hope for in helping us be reasonable and moral deliberately rather than merely intuitively. Without philosophy we should expect people to be [unreasonable, immoral, dogmatic, and fanatical](#). If we think it is impossible to know anything about reasonableness and morality, then we can't demand that people be reasonable or moral—but certainly we do make those demands and will continue to do so. If we want to demand that people accept certain moral commandments, then we must know *why it is reasonable* to accept those commandments. We can't demand that everyone trust our moral commandments without a good argument any more than we can be expected to accept the moral commandments of others without a good argument. And if we are expected to accept a “good argument,” we have to know something about what makes an argument reasonable.

There are various objections people give against philosophy. In particular, (a) people argue that philosophy doesn't lead to knowledge because even philosophers disagree and (b) people confuse argumentation with unproductive hostile human interaction.

## Does philosophy lead to knowledge?

First, people often think in black and white terms. They think “philosophers haven't figured it all out yet, so what's the point? Why should I trust them?” The point isn't that you should trust philosophers like a religious leader. Instead, you should realize that philosophers have spent their entire lives thinking about many issues and have built their life's work on the knowledge of philosophical history—the life's work of many other philosophers spanning thousands of years. You can benefit from the thoughts of philosophers precisely because it can save you the time of having to think of everything yourself. You don't have to agree with the philosopher's conclusions, but *the arguments philosophers give are relevant to what we should believe*.

Second, I think philosophy can lead to knowledge. I have discussed philosophical knowledge concerning [reasonableness](#) and [morality](#).<sup>5</sup> People often confuse knowledge with certainty. I know that I have two hands, but I could be wrong. I might actually be having a dream that makes me believe that I have two hands. All the same, it is very likely that I have knowledge that I really do have two hands based on my ability to reason and observe the world. I agree that philosophy doesn't lead to certainty, but it might lead to knowledge. Some people might think “moral knowledge is impossible” but I'm not convinced for reasons I discuss [here](#).

Third, “knowledge” might be more than we need. We don't need to attain knowledge concerning reasonableness or morality to warrant the fact that we should learn about these topics. It is possible to have *justified beliefs*, even when two people disagree. One person can think bigfoot exists and another can think it doesn't exist—and it's possible that both people's beliefs are sufficiently reasonable and justified. That doesn't mean all beliefs are up for grabs. Some beliefs are unreasonable. It's not reasonable to reject evolution based on the extensive evidence in biological science nor is it reasonable to trust a holy book over *extensive* scientific evidence.

## Is argumentation an unproductive hostile interaction?

People think “debating” politics, religion, and morality is a waste of time and is little more than an emotional power struggle or “we have a right to believe whatever we want.” People think it's oppressive to “tell others that they should agree with you” and it's impossible to be reasonable about these things or to convince another person to believe something because it's “reasonable.” I don't see any reason to believe such a position—and *it is impossible to have any reason*

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<sup>5</sup> I wrote about “[10 Myths about Beliefs](#)” and discussed knowledge concerning “reasonable beliefs” and I wrote about “[10 Myths about Morality](#)” to discuss moral knowledge.

*to agree with it.*

I have two responses to this position. First, if it's impossible to believe something based on good reasoning, then we have no reason to believe “it's impossible to believe something based on good reasoning.” Second, we have reason to reject this position because we do have reasonable beliefs based on good reasoning. We should believe that we have hands because we observe we have hands. We should believe that torturing people is wrong without a very good reason for doing it because we know how horrible it is to feel pain. And so on. Perhaps the best reason to agree that some beliefs are more reasonable than others is attained when we have experience with *good arguments*. I attempt to give uncontroversial examples of good arguments in my free book “[What is Philosophy?](#)” (PDF)

### **Why do people have so much resistance to philosophy?**

I have four suggestions:

One, many people simply don't know philosophy exists (as a field of research). Philosophy has been removed from our education to the point that many people don't know about it anymore. People can't talk about the importance of philosophy education because they don't even know about it.

Two, they haven't learned to think perfectly, so some of their beliefs are unreasonable—including the belief that philosophy is a waste of time. They are used to thinking in simple terms. If we don't know for sure who is right, they think they are entitled to keep their “unjustified beliefs” because “no one can prove they are wrong.” Of course, this is asking too much. We don't always have to prove someone wrong in order to prove that their belief is unreasonable. I might believe that aliens live on Jupiter and no one can prove me wrong, but there is no good reason to have that belief. It's unreasonable because *there is reason to think life can't exist there*. Not all beliefs are “up for grabs” even though we can't prove everything for certain.

Three, [philosophical language has been corrupted](#). Words like “argument” have an important meaning in philosophy, but now they have a different meaning. For example, “argument” is now synonymous with “unproductive hostile interaction” involving insults and so forth. This cripples our ability to communicate about the reasonableness of beliefs or even have philosophical thoughts, and it encourages people to equivocate words. People often use the word “argument” in a sense quite close to the philosophical meaning—a method of being reasonable—but it is assumed that even “intellectual” arguments are “unproductive hostile

interactions” just like the immature yelling and screaming we have observed. In fact, philosophical arguments *can and do* lead to bitter feelings despite the fact that they aren't always unproductive or meant to offend people. Disagreement is like being told “you're wrong,” and many of us feel like being wrong is a weakness. It's often embarrassing to “be wrong” and many of us think we are “better people” if our beliefs are true and based on better reasoning than the beliefs of others.

Four, many people might reject philosophy and the possibility of being reasonable in favor of the belief that “everyone is entitled to their own beliefs” because they don't want to offend anyone. As I said above, many of us feel like “being right” makes a person superior to those who are “wrong,” and we can avoid offending anyone by saying “all beliefs are equal” so that we can also say “all people are equal.” This is an egregious and dangerous kind of “political correctness” that makes it impossible to judge criminals or punish the people in power who harm many people.

The fact that many people are either unimpressed with philosophy or don't know about it was discussed in more detail in “[The Marginalization of Philosophy.](#)”

## Conclusion

This list pretty much sums up of why I am so interested in continuing to learn about philosophy and attempt to be a philosophical person. Additionally, it also describes why I think we should promote the [philosophy campaign](#), strive for a [philosophical community](#), and make [philosophy education a requirement in high school and college](#).