

In my penultimate semester studying Computer Science at Harvard, I walked into my very first philosophy course, “Early Modern Philosophy: Self and World,” taught by Professor Alison Simmons. At the time, my career path already seemed to have been paved with gold. In the two summers prior, I worked at Microsoft and Snapchat as a software engineer, and just after my very first fall at Harvard, I dropped out for a semester to co-found a startup for which I helped raise over a million dollars in venture capital. Those experiences made me confident that, after graduating from the Harvard–New England Conservatory dual-degree program a year later, I would work at a major tech company, build products used by billions, and eventually quit to found the Next Big Thing. So Prof. Simmons’ course seemed like just an easy way to fulfil a breadth requirement, or perhaps an atonement for my slight guilt of having never taken a philosophy course.

In that first lecture, Prof. Simmons began to tell the tale of Descartes’ *Meditations*. On the chalkboard, she drew a tree, with a thick trunk labeled Physics and wiry branches named after various fields Descartes thought grew out of Physics: Mechanics, Medicine, Morals, etc. (I thought that, today, computer science ought to be included too.) She then posed a question: If the study of medicine could only stem from a solid foundation in physics, might there be an even more fundamental prerequisite for physics? Would the tree trunk be firmly rooted to the ground by some other body of knowledge, or would it topple from the slightest breeze of doubt? The roots that Descartes found, according to Prof. Simmons, were Metaphysics, and philosophy as a whole.

I was hooked. In Prof. Simmons’ course, we discussed Descartes’ fear of an evil deceiver and his faith in a benevolent God, read both seminal works by Hume and neglected writings by Cavendish, and concluded with Kant’s *Prolegomena*. In my final term at Harvard, I took two philosophy courses, one on Kant’s first *Critique* and the other on Existentialism. Then in Spring 2019, my first of two semesters studying piano full-time at NEC, I officially took Philosophy of Music while auditing four other courses at Harvard and MIT. All the while, Descartes’ tree remained fixed in my mind. If the fields of science were branches on the tree, then their application, technology, would be fruits borne of those branches. And how could we freely consume the fruit if we lacked an understanding of the tree’s roots? Is modern technology Hercules’ golden apple or Satan’s temptation?

The only way to decide is through philosophical investigation. For instance, the field of technology ethics is flourishing due to the proliferation of AI. But ethics is far from the only philosophical field relevant to technology. Our reliance on smartphones and computers challenges an intuition in philosophy of mind in which the mind exists “within” us, for many of us are effectively amnesiacs without those devices outside of us. We consume media and buy products via recommendation systems that purport to make suggestions based on our subconscious preferences, but do they actually encourage inauthenticity by pushing us to regress to the mean? And why should we humans try to live the Good Life if a robot could one day do everything we can, but better?

These problems cloud my mind, and the once clear-cut, paved path before me is now an unmarked trail of tough philosophical questions. But I do not regret my years pursuing degrees in computer science and piano, because my diverse interests constitute a basis for philosophical inquiry. My background in technology equips me to solve the hard philosophical problems of tomorrow, while my 18 years of music-making enrich my passion for aesthetics and my faith in art’s profound ability to sustain deep meaning in our lives. The questions posed by philosophy are by far the hardest I have ever encountered, but I cannot wait to tackle them for the rest of my life.