

Why Study Philosophy?

Gabe Ormsby, '93

One challenge we all face as life goes on is the risk of complacency. Patterns of thought may ossify, habits will form and become comfortable, and routines may deepen into seemingly inescapable ruts. Philosophy, however, can serve as a powerful elixir against such threats as these, when used properly and according to the instructions on the back of the bottle.

Perhaps a story can illustrate. The other day, I was assigned an apparently simple task as part of the random assortment of duties collected under the rubric of "my job." This particular task was to review some text for style, content, and grammar before it was to be published. The text, a collection of news relevant to protecting water, habitat, and all things good and true, began with a short epigraph stating something to the effect that water is never newly created — that the water existing on the Earth is all we'll ever have and there will never be any more. While the implication that we should protect the water that we do have is heedworthy, I couldn't resist entertaining a few questions, such as...

"Didn't we make water in 8th grade Earth Science?"

"Where does all that steam pouring out of smokestacks and auto exhausts come from?"

"How did water ever get here in the first place?"

So that was the first line of the text. I did some research and continued on. By the time I reached the last line, about four pages later, I had not only marked up the text significantly with my trusty Red Pen of Doom, but I had also:

- Refreshed my understanding of the chemical processes of combustion and respiration (debunking some poor well-meaning poet in the process);
- Scanned the Saint Paul, Minnesota, zoning code;
- Read far too much about the Oxford comma;
- Supplemented my knowledge of the history of Wales;
- Supplemented my knowledge of the history of whales;
- Verified that subject-verb agreement is anything but a modern proscriptivist fad;
- Alienated a few co-workers with supposedly "annoying" questions;
- Confirmed that, as I had suspected, Mac OS X uses UTF-8 encoding by default;

- Noted that while Scots is indeed a fully-qualified Anglic tongue, most Midwesterners are likely to prefer American English for their day-to-day reading;
- Fixed the duplexing setup on the office printer;
- Identified a very strange choice of HTML markup made by a web developer at some plant physiology web site;
- Learned a lot about a class of objects, "green things" (mostly plants); and
- Investigated several options for my next red pen purchase (with any luck, one destined to be much less blotchy than the incumbent).

Were all these tangents necessary in order to complete the task at hand? Probably not. But they certainly were informative, and a few led to some important discoveries that most definitely improved the quality of the final product. And, more to the point of this piece, I would assert that my previous study of philosophy played an important role in ensuring that these tangents, whatever their relative relevance, were followed. The philosopher is one who is not inclined to accept any answer, be it "No," "Just because," or "a solution of sodium bicarbonate in water," without looking into things a little bit further.

Indeed, "Looking into things a little bit further" is an important skill wherever it may be applied. It drives major realms of human endeavor — Science, the arts, and the better sort of politics. It can help keep people honest (or, on the flip side, get you in a lot of trouble). If nothing else, it will certainly help keep the boredom at bay.