

A Plea for Philosophy by Yvonne Raley <http://faculty.felician.edu/raley/A%20Plea%20for%20Philosophy.htm>

It isn't exactly a conversation starter: "Hey, I'm Yvonne, I do philosophy." That's like, "when a tree falls in the forest and nobody's there....", or "my own personal philosophy (read: opinion), is"...

So, let me start the conversation over: "Hey, I'm Yvonne, and I'm curious about pretty much everything." That's extremely vague, but as a first stab, it actually describes philosophy fairly well.

The word "philosophy" comes from the Greek Philo-Sophia, or love of wisdom. In fact, when the more formal study of knowledge began in the West, it more or less *did* encompass everything (the practical professions, mathematics and poetry are some exceptions). As we advanced in knowledge, the separate fields of study developed: the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities. And that's where we are today: philosophy now occupies a tiny space in the big field of the humanities. Compared to English and History, it doesn't have a lot of students or professors. The love of wisdom is relegated to its proper place.

Well, I personally feel crowded in by that. Everyone should do some philosophy, I say, and in fact, I think everyone already does, regardless of what they do for a living. Once we get a clearer idea about what philosophy is and does today, the reasons for this turn out to be perfectly straightforward. I should issue a warning, though: definitions can be restrictive. So in trying to define what philosophy is, I'm invariably going to leave something out, and will thus invite the criticism of fellow travelers.

What is philosophy, then? First of all, philosophy is about questions. In particular, it is an attempt to answer, or at least get clearer on, the hard questions, the fundamental questions, questions so many of us gave up on a long time ago. Are we really free? What is knowledge and how do we acquire it? What is real? What is consciousness? What are the fundamental assumptions made in the other fields of study, like physics, mathematics, psychology, economics, history even? How is knowledge in those fields acquired?

Because of this odd looking collection of questions, doing philosophy is rather a long and drawn out process (some of its problems are more than 2000 years old). But there's another reason why it's so hard: philosophy is also a way of doing things. Philosophy is the study of *how* questions, any questions, are answered. Philosophy examines the very nature of argument and reasoning itself. It looks at the logic of what we say, both formally (very much like mathematics) and informally: philosophy dissects reasoning patterns and looks for holes. That, by the way, is why philosophers can be so annoying to talk to. We're a nitpicky bunch. On the other hand, those of us who enjoy this stuff are convinced that being nitpicky is the only possible way to get some answers.

Lastly, in my view, philosophy is the study of the good life. And I don't mean, the "how do I get really really rich" life. Sure, I like money too, but as we all know (and as, in fact, studies prove), money and happiness aren't the same thing. Thus, philosophy attempts to find out how an individual can truly *flourish*. Philosophy is, to put it more practically, the pursuit of the following questions: what kind of society or government should we have? What are the basic moral principles (and hence laws) that we should live by to make true human flourishing possible?

Well, "that's all fine and good", you might say, but what about results? "So I pick up some philosophy book, and what does *that* get me? After all, you don't exactly find many philosophers employed outside their own field of study." Perhaps you'll grant me that what philosophers do is interesting, but it doesn't follow that it is useful.

I say philosophy *is* useful, but because of its nature, the results doing philosophy produces are subtle. Learning to do philosophy isn't like learning to cook or learning to drive a car, that's for sure.

So, what does the pursuit of the deep questions get us? For one, it brings us back to the natural curiosity we all had before we started our formal education. Paradoxically, going to school is so often what kills that instinct. That was my experience, anyway. Yet, this curiosity is what makes us human, and, to get down and dirty, it is what makes progress possible. It makes the study of the not so hard questions seem much easier, and thus helps propel us forward.

What about the study of the logic of things? This is extremely useful: have you ever needed to convince someone of something? Like, to give you a job, for example? Or have you ever felt that "someone pulled a fast one on you", that is, that someone argued you into a corner and you ended up making a decision you regretted (bought the wrong car, perhaps)? And that because of this, you wished you had possessed, at that moment, the skill to better analyze and counter your opponent? Reasoning skills can be very powerful that way. That's why they're so important. To know how to reason well provides us with the foundation for autonomy, or self-governance, so that we don't end up beholden to what somebody else tells us.

Lastly, can philosophy really contribute to us living a better life? Actually, it already has. It was, at least in part, the writings of philosophers like John Locke that contributed to the government we have in the U.S. Political philosophers and ethicists have helped us, and continue to help us to find better ways to live. They are in the minority perhaps, but they are engaged in fields like business ethics, legal ethics, environmental ethics and medical ethics. Their aim, among other things, is to provide an understanding of what our rights are (and correspondingly, our duties to others), and they help the respective fields to promote these rights. If the promotion of such rights, and discourse about them, is of any importance to you, then you are already convinced of the importance of philosophy.

So, pick up a book that talks about an issue that matters to you. Study it, carefully, taking apart the arguments. Or, just sit down and think about the issues that were important to you before everything got so rushed. Discuss these issues with friends. Debate. Oh, you do that already? Well, then you're already a member of the club. Welcome to the field of philosophy!