Hello everyone and welcome to the 2013 issue of our Department Newsletter!

An issue that concerns many of us these days is the future of the humanities at public colleges and universities—and philosophy at IPFW is one of them. Now, this doesn’t really seem to be a new issue, but indeed it is. Since the inception of the humanities in circa 1920—probably as a defense line against the perceived dominance of the natural and social sciences promoted by “War Aims” courses of the time—we regularly have heard of the decline of the humanities. We heard it at the time of the Sputnik crisis—which funneled public funding into the sciences—when the American Council of Learned Societies issued the “Report of the Commission on the Humanities” (1964). While the report led to the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities a year later, not much changed a generation later according to the 1980 Rockefeller Commission report, “The Humanities in American Life.” Interestingly enough, the “Position Paper” (2007) issued by the European Science Foundation is free from such lamentations; they simply state that the humanities “naturally interact with other fields of science and art.” Maybe the philosopher John Searle was right to presume that the American “crisis rhetoric” is a direct result of not having a “national consensus on what success in higher education would consist of.”

Be that as it may, the main current threat most of us see is not only the lack of proper funding—according to 2011 data, the humanities receive only 0.48 percent of what the science and engineering disciplines get— but a serious disconnect we are concerned about—namely, that educational resources get reallocated based on perceived needs that according to the intended beneficiaries, don’t exist. If true, then this mismatch would not only be bad for all of us in general, but would hurt philosophy in particular: we are prevented from making the unique contribution we could to what employers want to see in our graduates if resources were redirected.

So why am I mentioning this? Because you can help. How? Well, beyond the obvious (such as making donations), you can spread the word about the value of philosophy (and the liberal arts) among family members, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances; in discussions, letters, and phone calls you can insist that funding for the humanities won’t be cut; and next time Mike Spath, our newsletter editor, approaches you to make a contribution to our alumni section, simply say “yes” and thereby help us to encourage our students to pursue philosophy as their major.

All our best and yours in discourse,
Featured Alumnus Interview

Robert Larch "When were you at IPFW?

I wound my way through IPFW between 1998 and 2005.

Why did you choose IPFW?

I chose IPFW because, considering cost, value, and location, it was an obvious and easy choice.

What caused you to pick philosophy as a major?

You're asking a "causation" question. My upbringing—12 years of Catholic school—created more questions than answers, especially in the realms of God and good and evil and wrong. I was an English major and aspiring writer. My girlfriend at the time was a philosophy major at IPFW, and she shared her classes and professors with me. She would give me lectures when she talked about her classes and professors. She told me my creative writing was dealing with unanswerable questions and that you wanted to study philosophy. I saw that you had to make sense of those questions so I decided to become a philosophy major.

was there any particular philosopher, movement, or area of philosophy that you wanted to study?

To be honest, at that time, I wasn't aware of or able to distinguish different schools. I knew of Plato and Socrates but, honestly, not much more than that. I had never read a philosophy book before. Though of course there was lots of philosophy in the books I was reading. I remember lots of "off it", "on it", "fantasy", and I think I was also reading some Dostoevsky and Ayn Rand around that time. I did watch all philosophy movies that I could find. Though I believe any of those books didn't define philosophers or movements. I'm sure I just glanced over them and didn't understand any of the difficult-to-pronounce names in any great British book. So I didn't really go in with any specific interest—just dived into the classes that fit my interests. At that time I really saw it as using my writing skills. I wanted to test ideas I had been working on in a serious and analytic way. I have always been interested in social and economic justice—something I learned about while reading Pierre Bourdieu. So I'm not going to lie—it's almost cliché—after I graduated I worked at a coffee shop and wrote for the local paper. After philosophy, there was so much to read and catch up on. I went on the annual trip to Strasbourg, France, with Professor Butler as a graduation present to myself in 2005, and while there, he directed me to Will and Ariel Durant, who wrote The Story of Civilization, an 11-volume history of the world told in elegant, often stunning language that gave a wonderful focus on historical events and ideas from the distant past. After philosophy, I began to work with women studying Boyd and Professor Kathy Squadrito. I remember feeling a sort of剥离 essence and self-creation that the core curriculum was just a projection from the inside of my mind, and the experience was really an act of self-discovery that was awe-inspiring though I didn't realize it at the time. I am so thankful for my time in the philosophy department at IPFW. I became chair of the Philosophy department while I was here?

No it is not going to lie—it's almost cliché—after I earned my degree in 2005, I was a writer at CafePress.com. But that is not what I am going to to be. Before philosophy, I never touched a nonfiction book. After philosophy, there was so much to read and catch up on. I went on the annual trip to Strasbourg, France, with Professor Butler as a graduation present to myself in 2005, and while there, he directed me to Will and Ariel Durant, who wrote The Story of Civilization, an 11-volume history of the world told in elegant, often stunning language that gave a wonderful focus on historical events and ideas from the distant past. After philosophy, I began to work with women studying Boyd and Professor Kathy Squadrito. I remember feeling a sort of剥离 essence and self-creation that the core curriculum was just a projection from the inside of my mind, and the experience was really an act of self-discovery that was awe-inspiring though I didn't realize it at the time. I am so thankful for my time in the philosophy department at IPFW. It was golden. Becoming a philosophy major was a direct result of the ideas and experiences that I encountered in my life. I was one of the first independent, healthy-life choices I made, by which I mean I did it for myself without considering the expectations of others. I had often neglected the opinions of others and was not influenced by them. I was interested in their logic and assessment of the world as well as in the path choices, this was a big one and it was a first. I don't think many parents get excited about their child choosing philosophy as a major. This is probably because they do not consider it a major topic or a field of study. I cannot say that I have enjoyed my education or the several courses I have taken. My major has been a broad study in philosophy, but I have not been a philosophy major at IPFW. I can honestly say I love the people I met. Every single professor has been outstanding, outstanding qualities in my life. I remember everyone very fondly.

If someone asked you how philosophy helps you in your profession, how would you answer them? If they asked, "Why should I study philosophy?" what would you tell them?

I am interested in the link between philosophy and law in pretty well established. Logic and rhetoric are great attributes for lawyers.Ethics should be, too. I think people should study it on their own. It is an introductory course is a great idea as a corset to a curriculum for all majors, but I don't think philosophy is for everyone. Studying philosophy is about approaching the world with eyes wide open. But with eyes wide open, difficult not to be taken by the facile dictatorships and false equivalences that frame our national discussions on healthcare, armed conflict, gender roles and identity, etc. In that sense, the honesty and transparency that philosophy requires can be daunting. Studying philosophy also doesn't necessarily inform a person on how to try to practice into. Ethics can help, but ethics doesn't teach practice. Why should we study philosophy? How would you study philosophy help you to face it and form your worldview?

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Art and Thought of the Minimum
by Jeffrey Strayer

I work in two areas of investigation that can be understood to pertain to the same basic question: What are the minimum conditions of making and apprehending works of art? Although this query is easy to state, it conceals a deep complexity that is extremely difficult to answer. Once it is answered philosophically, it is just as hard to determine what can be done artistically should one want to focus on working with, as I do, those necessary conditions.

Attending philosophically to the issue of the basics in art means both looking at what is minimally required for making a work of art and stating what must occur for the intended identification of a particular artwork with a particular entity to be apprehensible. What one thus identifies for that making and apprehending is essential, and what is inessential is dispensable. Accordingly, this philosophical inquiry could be thought to parallel abstract art that focuses, reductively, on what is aesthetically necessary and discards what is not. When one abstracts material or information from something else, one takes something away and leaves something else behind. Therefore, stating the minimum conditions of making and apprehending works of art is not only philosophically interesting and valuable but can form the basis of a rigorous artistic program by determining that on which any investigation of the limits of artistic Abstraction must be based. If it is possible to identify what is essential to producing and apprehending art, then it may be possible to work creatively with the minimum conditions, considered “material,” to produce objects that reside at the limits of Abstraction. This is what I am interested in doing, and as I am working with only the essential elements for making and apprehending works of art, I call what I am doing “Essentialist Abstraction” or “Essentialism” for short.

My philosophical work, Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction, states and examines properties of subjects and objects, or persons, and objects that are required for making and apprehending works of art, and it considers relations that hold between subjects and objects, and facts that pertain to them, that are essential to that production and apprehension. This requires attending to a number of things that are relevant to that inquiry, such as kinds and forms of conscious event; different kinds of dependent and independent object; the notion of a medium in art; and the relation of art and the aesthetic.
Additional considerations include looking at the concepts of object, property, identity, and diversity as they function as parts of the foundation of our conceptual scheme. What can be done with the indispensable material philosophically identified requires creative inquiry. This comes with a number of challenges that are as deep and intellectually taxing as the philosophy that forms the groundwork of that investigation. Not only do Essentialist investigations result in novel artworks and a different aesthetic, but artistic solutions to the problem of the limits of Abstraction provide knowledge that cannot be obtained in any other way.

Essentialist Abstraction is based on understanding that an artist must single something out that an artwork is to be understood to be. What is singled out is a particular entity with a particular identity. Identity is indispensable. Comprehension of identity is required. One way to understand the pursuit of ultimate Abstraction is for the identity of an artwork to be constructed in relation to things, such as consciousness and agency, that are required for making and apprehending even the more reductive works conceivable. Thus, it may be possible to produce an artwork whose particular identity reflects things that are essential to the construction and comprehension of that identity. And consciousness and agency can be used as media to result in an identity that not only presupposes them, but bears the imprint of their relation to its production. Anything of any sort of thing that an artwork is meant to be is this particular thing that the work is meant to be. The word ‘haecceity’ comes from the Latin for “thisness”; and I call the individual artworks in which different limits of Abstraction are determined Haecceities. And the evolving collection of these works the Haecceities series.

My forthcoming book, Haecceities: Essentialism, Identity, and Abstraction, examines selected works from the Haecceities series and considers their artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical import. Language must be used to determine the limits of Abstraction, and I use language in such a way that its comprehension is a necessary condition of the identity of that to which the language refers, and with which the artwork is meant to be identified. This replaces the standard percipient with what I term a ‘concipient’, namely, someone who must conceive of what the work is to be understood to be, so that the identity of the work is tied to that conception. At the most fundamental level, comprehended language can single out nothing—understood at least as a concept—something, or everything. The identity of an individual thing between nothing and everything is determined in relation to language that uses the material of essentialism to result in what is singled out by the language comprehended. In addition to Abstraction, Essentialism investigates the subject-object relationship, thingness, and the complex nature of identity within a conscious aesthetic context.

For information pertaining to the two books mentioned, as well as works of the Haecceities Series, JeffreyStrayer.com.