

Dr. Seuss

and

Philosophy

Oh, the Thinks
You Can Think!



Edited by Jacob M. Held

Dr. Seuss and Philosophy

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Dedicated to those teachers who impressed upon me through their words and deeds that learning is about growing as an individual, and who helped me grow immensely—especially Dr. James B. South and Ken Fought



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Preface

When I first started college I was ecstatic. I was finally in a learning environment where I could take a class on anything I could imagine; where I was in control of my educational destiny. So I started looking for courses on topics I hadn't had before, courses beyond the simple English, history, and various sciences I had been instructed in since I was five. I saw Philosophy 151 and thought I'd try it out. While discussing my future class schedule with my dad, I asked him what philosophy was. He replied, and I paraphrase, "The only people who study philosophy are future philosophy professors." It wasn't hard to read between the lines: philosophy was a waste of time. I took it anyway. What I found was eye-opening. I discovered the history of humanity's collective attempts to understand, contextualize, and discern the meaning of existence, from politics, law, and ethics to God, art, and science. I could not think of anything more profound or important. But at the same time, I noticed no one else was taking these classes. On a campus where an introductory zoology lecture may have upward of two hundred students, my philosophy courses would max out at about fifteen. Philosophy was also the butt of jokes. It was treated as a flaky, irrelevant pastime, not a legitimate area of study. So it did seem as if only those interested in becoming philosophy professors took philosophy courses, and what a shame. It was in those classes that I found an appreciation of and engagement with ideas that have defined

and continue to influence our culture and our very existence as a human race. So I decided to become one of those philosophy students who wanted to teach philosophy. But it wasn't out of necessity; it's not that all you can do with a degree in philosophy is teach. Philosophy is a love of wisdom, and with wisdom you can do anything, usually better than most, including the most important thing of all, live well. I decided to teach because I had concluded at the end of my first semester at college that I was never going to leave campus. I loved being surrounded by curious, bright people discussing everything under the sun. Regardless of what I had majored in, I would have become a professor of it. Philosophy just struck my fancy. It covered every facet of the human experience. My enthusiasm translated into a desire to open up the world to others in the way it had been opened to me. I have been lucky enough to be in the position for some years now to do just that. But I still have to fight against the prevailing attitude that philosophy is worthless. It's not my dad with whom I have to deal, but students and their parents, who want to know, "What can you do with a philosophy degree?" I can't answer this question. Or rather I can, but no answer will satisfy those who ask this question. Whoever asks this question already presumes that an education is only as good as the job it secures, and whatever isn't a hireable skill isn't worth developing. But college isn't about getting a job; it's about getting an education, and an education is about developing the whole person. Music, art, history, philosophy, religion, as well as sciences, math, and whatever job training you get in Business 101 are all part and parcel of your growth as a person. Philosophy trains you to be open, thoughtful, and resourceful—a genuinely sharp, bright, and creative human being. This is valuable whether you get a job or not. Thankfully, there has been a recent trend in philosophy to popularize the discipline and bring it to a general audience. This trend is almost exclusively due to William Irwin and his wildly successful series on philosophy and popular culture, to which I have contributed previously. This use of popular elements to disseminate philosophical wisdom is useful both as a public relations move for my discipline but also in promoting the goal of philosophy, which is living well through a critical and reflective attitude. This book was produced in the same spirit. However, it is markedly different than other similar volumes in one regard—it is meant to be an introduction to philosophy in general. This is why I chose to focus on Dr. Seuss. From the outset I wanted to offer an accessible and fun introduction to that tradition that inspired me so many years ago. What I have sought to produce, with many thanks to my wonderful, helpful, and accommodating contributors, is an introduction to major

themes and traditions in philosophy through an aspect of popular culture with which almost everyone is familiar, Dr. Seuss. This introduction isn't exhaustive, it's merely a window into a discipline, but hopefully opening that window will let in a breath of fresh air and open the reader's eyes to the fact that it truly is "opener there in the wide open air" ("Oh, the Places You'll Go").



Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge all of those who supported me during the completion of this project, from my loving family to all of my contributors. I would also like to thank those colleagues/friends who have kept me sane over the years by being supportive, helpful, and always willing to lend an ear not only for my ideas but also my gripes. They remind me daily why we do what we do, and their company and support are appreciated more than they will ever know. Thank you, Ron and Tanya. In addition I'd like to acknowledge the University Research Council at the University of Central Arkansas for awarding me a summer stipend during the summer of 2010 to assist in completing this volume.



Editor's Note

Many of Dr. Seuss's works are not paginated, which can make citing them tricky. Luckily, the books are quite short, so if anyone wants to know on what page a reference occurs they merely have to flip through until they find it. So in order to make things simpler and to avoid vast amounts of endnotes, all references to Seuss's works will be parenthetical according to the key below. All works are published by Random House.

And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street (Mulberry)
Bartholomew and the Oobleck (Oobleck)
"The Big Brag" in *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* (Brag)
The Butter Battle Book (Butter)
The Cat in the Hat (Cat)
Daisy-Head Mayzie (Daisy)
Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are? (Lucky)
Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book (Sleep)
"Gertrude McFuzz" in *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* (McFuzz)
Green Eggs and Ham (Eggs)
Happy Birthday to You (Birthday)
Horton Hatches the Egg (Hatches)
Horton Hears a Who! (Horton)
How the Grinch Stole Christmas! (Grinch)

- I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew* (Trouble)
If I Ran the Circus (Circus)
The Lorax (Lorax)
McElligot's Pool (Pool)
Oh, the Places You'll Go! (Places)
On Beyond Zebra! (Zebra)
Scrambled Eggs Super! (Scrambled)
"The Sneetches" in *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (Sneetches)
Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose (Thidwick)
"What Was I Scared Of?" in *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (Scared)
"Yertle the Turtle" in *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* (Yertle)
You're Only Old Once! (Old)
"The Zax" in *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (Zax)



Unsettled Meddling: An Introduction in Verse

It started way back, when I was quite small
I would simply ask “why?”
one question, that’s all.
I would wait for an answer, sometimes it would come
“Because,” “I Don’t Know,” “Ask your father or mum.”
But it never stopped there
The questions kept coming.
And answers were lacking, adults kept “ho-humming.”
It would start out quite simply and then get all muddled
I’d ask just one question and end up befuddled.
Why is the sky blue? or Why are plants green?
Why are they poor? and Why is he mean?
Why should I be good?
Who put you in charge?
My mind would start racing as questions loomed large.
Why are we here?
What ought I do?
Is there a rhyme, or a reason, or two?
Can it be learned, can I learn it, from who?
Will the answers be certain, or guesses, who knew?
My mind was unsettled, my brain never rested
But everyone moaned when their answers were tested.
I meant them no harm, I truly did not,

But I wanted some reasons for “why,” “which,” and “what?”
Their moaning made sense when I learned that adults
Although bigger and stronger, respectable folks
Were confused just like me, but had stopped asking “why?”
They just didn’t care, so they just didn’t try.
Or maybe they cared and that’s why they had ceased
When you care about answers, doubt leads to unease.
The questions I asked were very unsettling
And unsettled folks don’t appreciate meddling.
But questions are things that are meant to be asked,
Meddling’s our nature, unsettling’s our task.
When I got older I went off to school
To college to learn from professors who knew.
I learned about dinosaurs, classics, geology
African poetry, gods, and psychology.
But philosophy, that was the first course to show me
That questions, not answers, are how we keep growing.
We ask them because we’re inquisitive beings
We’re naturally wonder-full, curious things.
I decided that asking is what I *should* do
And I’d help others get good at it too!
A philosopher, that’s what I wanted to be
I’d never leave college, I’d stay here and teach.
My parents were less than excited, you see
College for them was about a degree
And degrees are just things for getting good jobs
And good jobs pay lots, oh yes money in gobs.
But philosophy isn’t that kind of position
It won’t earn you fame and there is no commission.
And some don’t think teaching’s a worthwhile job
“Those who can’t do . . .” say the ignorant mob.
For people like this life is just about stuff,
Having more than your neighbor and never enough.
For these types of folks it’s all fortune and fame
What pays off is good, what does not is lame.
So they don’t, and they won’t, and they can’t understand
It’s wisdom, not money that makes a life grand.
So I kept on pondering year after year
Up to this point with me sitting right here
A professor, philosopher, questioning guy
Seeker of answers, asker of “Why?”
For questions are things that are meant to be asked,
And answers are things that are meant to be passed . . .

Passed on to the next generation of Why-er
Passed by when they're old, outdated, and tired.
I've met many strange birds as I've travelled this road
And some of them helped write the book that you hold.
These doubters and why-ers these fabulous scholars
Address some big questions and offer some answers.
We begin with a huge, spectacular query
One for which all thinkers have their own theory.
The meaning of life, now we are talking
A question so big it leaves everyone gawking.
A question so big it can't fit in one mind
So I've gathered a few to help with this bind.
But the number of answers is too great to count
And the answers we've counted are too great to mount
In the pages that follow, you'll just have to deal
with a brief introduction to a very large field.
Ancients and Moderns, Greek, German, and French
All play the game, no one's left on the bench.
They'll tell you to flourish, live well free of pain.
Or perish and suffer, and struggle in vain.
They might be quite playful or doleful and dry
But at least these dear fellows do give it a try.
We have theories and guesses and tries by the oodle
Enough twisted fellows to twist up your noodle
And when thoroughly twisted we'll keep right on going
We'll ask about knowledge our minds over-flowing.
Epistemology! "What can I know?"
And why does it matter and how does it go?
This stuff is important for one cannot travel
The road of the wise if one can't unravel
The true from the false, the sense from the babble
The solid and firm from the dribble and drabble.
And once we begin to get smarter on smarts
We can move ourselves on to the ethical arts.
There's so much one can think o'er the good and the bad
And so many dear thinkers and thoughts that they've had.
We'll do our best to give you a view
A snapshot or glimpse o'er a theory or two.
We've got Greeks once again, and our German friend Kant
As well as a Scotsman, that's more than you'll want.
We'll do all the theory, apply it as well
To issues like nature and business pell mell.
We'll give you a history as well as some praxis

And then we'll move on to grind other axes.
It's off to the realm of political thought
Where it isn't just personal questions of "ought."
Now we will wonder about our relations
How people should be and what of their nations.
Contracts and property, how to divide it
Diversity, needs, all the ways to contrive it
And once we've wound through these odd wiggled roads
we will find that our story has not all been told
there are questions that still have yet to be asked
but this book isn't big enough for such a huge task.
Clearly one book can't hold all the big thoughts
So we haven't discussed all the whys, whats, and oughts.
This book offers a glimpse
It's merely one look
If you seek understanding you'll need more than one book.*

*Thanks to Kim Newman for her suggestions on the rhyme.

CHAPTER ONE



Oh, the Places You'll Go! The Examined, Happy Life

Benjamin Rider

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go. (Places)

On the journey of life, we face many choices: What career should I pursue? Where should I live? What should I do with my money and time? What kind of person should I be, anyway, and what should I stand for? As we make these choices, large and small, we chart the courses of our lives, creating our unique selves and making an impact on the world and the people around us. And whether we think about it consciously or not, we want these choices to turn out well. We want to live good lives and be happy. Of course, people have different ideas about what it means to live a good life. One person might think her life is good when she has lots of money; another when he has a large family; another when she contributes to making the world a better place. Nevertheless, each of us seeks the paths that will bring us happiness and success while navigating the inevitable Bang-ups and Hang-ups, Lurches and Slumps, that get in our way. There is a reason that Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* is popular as a graduation present. In this book, Dr. Seuss's

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