

In Praise of Sneaky Irrelevance

Why philosophy matters in Las Vegas

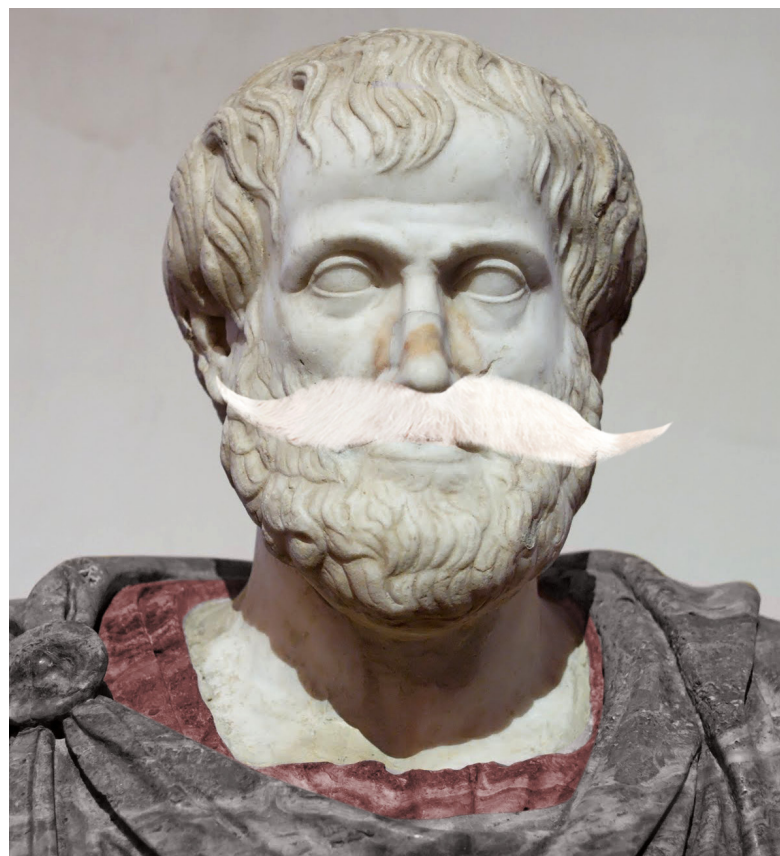
BY GREG BLAKE MILLER

There is a name for this in sports—a *stinger*. You get knocked upside the head and your whole body tingles for a moment, as if you were nothing more than a funny bone writ large. Next up: dizziness, disorientation and an unwanted seat on the bench. Having experienced this little anatomic joyride, I can sympathize with the smackdown recently experienced by the good people at UNLV's philosophy, women's studies and social work departments. You lace up the shoes one morning to go to work and the next thing you know your entire field of knowledge has been deemed expendable. Not to mention your job. Now, *that* stings.

The elimination of these departments—so-called “vertical cuts”—would save the university \$3.2 million, part of a proposal to cut \$17.5 million from its academic budget and about \$33 million overall. Most of the other reductions are “horizontal”—savings by starvation rather than decapitation—and are also serious stuff. But since the March 8 release of the plan, we've been hard-pressed to avert our gaze from the executioner's block. This is partly because of the peculiar selection of programs (shutting down a social work school in Las Vegas? Really?) and partly because of the lurid prospect of entire hallways of tenured professors shuffling into the elevator with cardboard boxes of files and ferns, never to be seen again.

The proposed cuts are not just technocratic redlining; they are value choices. And the looming impalement of the philosophers, that ancient caste devoted to the disciplined collision of mind and world, is the clearest statement of the university's misplaced pragmatism. In a man-plans-God-laughs world, UNLV chooses to ax precisely the people who teach transferable habits of thought.

Now, before the editorial board of the *Review-Journal* weighs in with well-considered opinions of the “Welcome to the real world, Sucker” sort, let's pause to note that a professor of philosophy puts in about 12 years of post-collegiate toil before learning the secret tenure handshake and being given permission to exhale, take out a mortgage on a smallish home and stop having nightmares about returning to the life of a roving 50-cent-an-hour adjunct instructor. He has taught



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hundreds of hungover students in freshman breadth courses, forever changed the lives of 19 of them, and devoted a third of a lifetime to interpreting the intellectual glories of the past so that Glenn Beck doesn't have to. That is to say, it would be difficult for the newly jobless Doc Flossifer to rapidly transform himself into a happy Zappos sales associate.

Because I am not only a person who's experienced a stinger, but also a print journalist, I identify perhaps a little too closely with people who have been told they don't matter anymore. (Full disclosure: I am also a doctorate-toting scholar of Soviet culture. I could play all five positions on the All-Irrelevant

team.) So let me momentarily set aside irony—which in this post-logical-argumentation era has been my only defense against political absurdity—and say in dead earnest that You Can't Have A University Without A Philosophy Department. Have I sufficiently capitalized the point?

The FOX-y narrative is that humanities professors are soft-handed, herbal-tea-sipping elitists who prepare students for a career in unemployment. My counter-narrative is that humanities professors are herbal-tea-sipping elitists who can play a crucial role in growing our metropolis. I can't really tell you about their hands.

To diversify the Las Vegas economy, we need to create knowledge clusters—groups of locals who have thought about the world from oblique angles and propose the kind of unique ideas that wouldn't cross a politician's mind. These people need to talk to one another, and do it regularly, both online and in person. They need to be able to capture one another's attention with both the quality of their ideas and the sophistication and empathy with which they present it. There is no college course that I am aware of called “Attractive Intellectual Form and Content—From Incubation to Presentation.” There is, however, a body of thought known as Philosophy. And while we're unlikely to have our local Zuckerberg & Saverin hang a downtown shingle to teach Nietzsche, we may well see a couple of erstwhile philosophy buffs figuring out, say, a whole new way for us to communicate with one another. In any case, we shouldn't forget that philosophy departments don't train philosophers; they train lawyers. So maybe we should eliminate them after all. Wait. Wrong narrative.

Higher learning is a sneaky beast. It introduces the fine art of finding the relevant in the seemingly irrelevant. It emboldens us to cherish the things that defy monetization and sparks the non-economic dreams that create new economic paradigms. In boom times, everybody thinks about getting into the real-estate business to make money. That's why they all end up losing money. The guy who makes money is the one who says, *Let's sell 10 Core Values over the telephone and include a box of shoes with every transaction.* Come to think of it, our erstwhile philosophy professor may have a home at Zappos after all.

In a city like Las Vegas, half-choked with its own brand of basic-instinct practicality posturing as audacity—*build more, eat more, drink more, fuck more*—we need to be impractical enough to envision life beyond the limbic system. This is where the dream-incubator of a first-rate liberal-arts education comes in: The odd magic of the university lies in its status as the last bastion of apparent irrelevance. Philosophy, like weight training, is not a revenue-generating sport. But it surely makes us stronger. ♣