**Question:** What do I, as a graduate student in philosophy focusing on the Capability Approach, do?

**Answer:** Quite a lot, really.

At an earlier session of this conference, Nigel Dower correctly remarked that philosophers are not the only ones who do ethics. It is also true that ethics is not the only valuable thing philosophers do. As a graduate student in philosophy I study epistemology, philosophy of language, feminist philosophy, history of philosophy, ethics and meta-ethics (as well as other areas of philosophy). I use tools from all of these areas to engage development ethics in general and the capability approach in particular. I will use my time tonight to briefly gesture at how these areas of philosophy allow me to do valuable philosophical work on development. Where appropriate, I will make reference to my work on the concept of empowerment in development.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. It is concerned with the nature, acquisition, and limitations of knowledge, beliefs, and other cognitive states and with “knowers.” Much of the development literature, including the Capability Approach, calls for individual empowerment through conscientisation, or the transformation of passive recipients into empowered agents. Training in epistemology facilitates the consideration of various approaches to understanding the epistemic states of agents and recipients. Epistemology provides the framework in which to critically examine the process and limitations of conscientisation.

**Philosophy of Language**

Among the many issues explored within philosophy of language are (1) how words acquire their semantic value and (2) how words refer to concepts and objects recognizable to others. Understanding the way language might work is important to understanding the use of buzzwords like ‘empowerment’ in development circles. Plato held that when used correctly words derived their semantic value or definitions from absolute and unchanging
universal ideals (i.e., the Forms). In contrast, Wittgenstein claimed that the various correct uses of a word might be united, not by an absolute Form or definition, but by “family resemblance” that is, a network of overlapping but discontinuous similarities. An understanding of the different ways language can (and should) work allows us to provide philosophical underpinnings for words like ‘empowerment’. Such underpinnings, in turn, allow us to give good reasons for claiming that good development requires that we accept some uses of a term/concept, and reject others.

**Feminist Philosophy**

Feminist theories are diverse and nuanced approaches to understanding and improving the social and political situation of women. Discrepancies in the treatment of men and women are especially acute in developing nations. Amartya Sen’s “missing women” – the number of women that would be alive if they had received the same level of care as their male counterparts – may provide the most compelling evidence for this phenomenon.¹ Familiarity of feminist philosophy facilitates a richer understanding of issues most relevant to improving the lives and treatment of women. Feminist insights might help us to recognize that, for example, in working towards female empowerment it is not enough to simply provide opportunities for girls to attend school as boys do. We must also ensure that the education girls and boys receive is not gender biased in such away that teaches them to see females as less valuable than males.

**History of Philosophy**

Knowledge of the history of philosophy is knowledge of the most influential thinkers and ideas in history. Such knowledge allows us to recognize and appreciate the influence of earlier thinkers on modern theories (for example Aristotle’s influence on the capability approach). It also enables us to recognize and avoid unsuccessful or dangerous modes of thinking (for example, anything goes moral relativism), and to propose tested potential solutions to problems (for example, reasonable moral pluralism).

Ethics and Meta-ethics

Doing ethics can mean taking a moral approach to activities, for example, trying to make sure that any distribution of goods, is a just distribution. Doing ethics can also mean doing meta-ethics, that is recognizing and sorting problems in accordance with general principles, theories, or explanations of morality. (Or, as Dr. Schmid would say, finding and explaining the “squirm factor”.) Philosophers and others who work in development ethics do both sorts of ethics. We cannot do development without doing ethics. Deciding not to adopt a moral framework or address moral issues is itself a moral decision. Implementing an economic plan without attempting to determine who will benefit and who suffer as a result of the plan is not an amoral act. It is an act of moral indifference (which is most theories consider to be immoral).

It is fortunate that philosophers are not the only ones who do ethics in development. It is also fortunate that ethics is not all that philosophers bring to development work. As a graduate student in philosophy I use valuable tools from epistemology, philosophy of language, feminist philosophy, history of philosophy, ethics and meta-ethics, among other areas of philosophy as I engage with development ethics in general and the capability approach in particular.
Following Discussion²

Asuncion St. Claire: Lori, thank you for reminding us of the many valuable tools philosophers use. I would like to say that in addition to the skills you mention; I use the critical thinking skills I acquired through my studies in philosophy everyday in development work.

Lori Keleher: Thank you. Yes. Logic provides the backbone of philosophical work and training in logic provides critical tools for sorting and working through the problems in any field. It allows us to assess theories, proposals, and arguments. Critical examination is the mark of a philosopher and an essential contribution to the field of development ethics.

David Crocker: In your ways of categorizing the concept ‘empowerment’, you mention Wittgenstein and Socrates, but left out pragmatist ways of understanding definitions.

Lori Keleher: Yes. Thank you. As philosophers we are giving access to all sorts of tools for categorizing and understanding concepts and the ways they might work in our language and in our minds. Marilyn Frye here at MSU has done extensive work on categories. As a graduate student here I was lucky enough to be in her Metaphysics and Epistemology seminar on categories, where we discussed several ways in which we might categorize the world.

² Please note that the questions and answers in this section are not transcripts of what took place on April 12, but rather my best good faith attempt to recall and represent the general nature of the discussion at the request of the conference facilitators. I am solely responsible for any misrepresentations and omissions.