



## Philosophy as a Profession, and as a Calling\*

by

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**ABSTRACT:** Philosophy hasn't always been, as it now is, an academic specialty conducted mostly in universities and colleges. One might think, Haack comments, that the professionalization of philosophy means that not only more, but better, philosophy gets done; but she continues, sadly this is not so. Here, Haack explores the differences between doing philosophy as a profession, a job, and doing it because one has a calling, and articulates why those for whom philosophy is more than a job are apt to find themselves at odds with the "administrative" values of the profession.

**KEYWORDS:** Philosophy, Profession, Calling, Amateur, Work, Values

**ABSTRACT:** La filosofia non è sempre stata, come lo è ora, un'area di studi accademici condotti principalmente nelle università e nei college. Si potrebbe pensare, sostiene Haack, che la professionalizzazione della filosofia significhi che non solo si produca più filosofia, ma anche che se ne produca di migliore. Sfortunatamente, continua Haack, non è così. In questo articolo Haack esplora le differenze tra il filosofare in quanto professione, in quanto lavoro, e il filosofare perché se ne ha la vocazione, e spiega perché coloro per i quali la filosofia è più di un lavoro siano inclini a trovarsi in contrasto con i valori "amministrativi" della professione.

**KEYWORDS:** filosofia, professione, vocazione, dilettante, lavoro, valori

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*[T]he philosophic nature [...] will inevitably grow to possess every virtue if it happens to receive appropriate instruction, but if it is sown, planted, and grown in an inappropriate environment, it will develop in quite the opposite way...<sup>1</sup>.*

*But yield who will to their separation,  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight.  
Only where love and need are one,  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For heaven and the future's sakes<sup>2</sup>.*

### *Introduction*

Of course, philosophy hasn't always been a profession, an academic specialty conducted primarily in universities and colleges. René Descartes (1596-1650) earned a degree in civil and canon law; but rather than practicing law, in 1618 he became a volunteer in the army of Maurice of Nassau and then, later, in the army of Maximilian of Bavaria. In late 1646 Queen Christina of Sweden began a correspondence that eventually led, in 1649, to Descartes's going to Sweden under her patronage<sup>3</sup>. Benedict [Baruch] de Spinoza (1632-1677) turned down prestigious teaching positions and instead made his living grinding lenses for optical instruments, collaborating on designs with Christiaan Huygens. His philosophical ideas caused him to be shunned by his own Jewish community, and his *Ethics*<sup>4</sup> was placed on the Catholic Church's *Index of Forbidden Books*<sup>5</sup>. John Locke (1632-1704)

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (c. 380 B.C.; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), 492a (Stephanus pagination).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Frost, "Two Tramps in Mud Time", in *A Further Range* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1936), 15. I learned of Frost's poem, by the way, from Robert B. Parker, *Mortal Stakes* (New York: Dell, 1973); and later discovered how much Parker learned from Frost. See especially Robert B. Parker, *Early Autumn* (New York: Dell, 1981), which is shot through with Frost's thinking about work, autonomy, etc.

<sup>3</sup> See Justin Skirry, "René Descartes (1596-1650)", *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP)*, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://iep.utm.edu/descarte/>. Unhappily, he caught pneumonia and died in 1650.

<sup>4</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, "Ethica", in *Opera Posthuma*, eds. Jarig Jelles and Jan Rieuwertsz (Amsterdam: Rieuwertsz, 1677).

<sup>5</sup> He died at age 44, from a lung disorder that (some conjecture) may have been the

was a trained in medicine, and later would be appointed physician to his patron, Anthony Ashley Cooper, first Earl of Shaftesbury<sup>6</sup>. George Berkeley (1685-1753) was the oldest son of William Berkeley, a minor Anglo-Irish nobleman. After lecturing in Divinity and Hebrew at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1721 he took holy orders. In 1721-1722 he was made Dean of Dromore and in 1724 Dean of Derry. In 1723 he received a legacy from Esther Vanhomrigh. In 1728 he married, and went to America until returning in 1732. He was appointed (Anglican) Bishop of Cloyne in 1735<sup>7</sup>.

David Hume (1711-1776) was a second son, and his inheritance was meager; so he moved to France, where he could live more cheaply, and there begin (at age 23) writing his *Treatise of Human Nature*. In 1745 he accepted a position as tutor to a young nobleman – who, however, turned out to be insane; so in 1746 he became secretary to his cousin, Lt. General James St. Clair, eventually going with him on a diplomatic mission to Austria and Italy. Between 1754 and 1762 he was a librarian to the Edinburgh Faculty of Advocates; and later secretary to the British Embassy in Paris before retiring in Edinburgh in 1769<sup>8</sup>. Thomas Reid (1710-1796) was a minister in the Church of Scotland until 1752, when he became a professor at King's College, Aberdeen; then, shortly after the publication of his first book, he was given the Professorship of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow formerly held by Adam Smith<sup>9</sup>.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was a colonial administrator for the East India Company from 1823 to 1858; and served as Member of Parliament for City and Westminster from 1865-68, during which years he was also Lord Rector of the University of St. Andrews<sup>10</sup>. Except for a few years as a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) spent most of his working life as a

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result of inhaling fine glass particles in the course of his work.

<sup>6</sup> "John Locke", *History*, updated September 20, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/john-locke>.

<sup>7</sup> See generally H. B. Acton, "Berkeley, George", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967, vol. 1), 295-304.

<sup>8</sup> See generally D. G. C. MacNabb, "Hume, David", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967, vol 4), 78-80.

<sup>9</sup> See generally S. A. Grave, "Reid, Thomas", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967, vol. 7), 118-121.

<sup>10</sup> See generally J. B. Schneewind, "Mill, John Stuart", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967, vol. 5), 314-315.

scientist at the U.S. Coastal Survey, until in 1891 he resigned and went to live on an inheritance from his father, mathematician Benjamin Peirce<sup>11</sup>. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) taught, not philosophy, but classical philology, at the University of Basel from 1869-1879, when he had to resign from his academic duties after finding he could use his eyes for only twenty minutes a day; but then, supported by a pension from the university and the City of Basel's Voluntary Academic Association, began writing his most important philosophical work. In 1889 he suffered a complete physical collapse, though he lived until dying of a stroke in 1900<sup>12</sup>. Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) taught, not philosophy, but mathematics, at the University of Jena; and during his early career survived on unpaid or poorly paid scholarships and lectureships, and had to be subsidized by his mother<sup>13</sup>. Jeremy Bentham lived on an inheritance from his father, Jeremiah Bentham, a very successful solicitor<sup>14</sup>.

More recently, Bertrand Russell (1879-1970) was fired from his position at Trinity College, Cambridge after he was convicted and sent to prison under the Defense of the Realm Act for his pacifism in World War I; later, his *History of Western Philosophy* (1945)<sup>15</sup> made him a secure income for life<sup>16</sup>. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1898-1951) – who had been a volunteer soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I – worked as a gardener and as schoolteacher before returning to Cambridge in 1929<sup>17</sup>.

Nowadays, however, the great majority of philosophers are profes-

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Brent, *C. S. Peirce: A Life* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1993), 139, 203.

<sup>12</sup> R. Lanier Anderson, "Friedrich Nietzsche", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, first published March 17, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/>. (One conjecture, apparently, is that he had a slow-growing tumor on the brain behind his right eye). The part about the pension is based on Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 276-277.

<sup>13</sup> *Frege's Philosophy in Context*, eds. Michael Beaney and Erich H. Reck (New York: Routledge, 2005), 25-27.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Milner Atkinson, *Jeremy Bentham: His Life and Works* (London: Methuen & Co., 1905), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945).

<sup>16</sup> "Bertrand Russell Biography", *Biography Online*, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.biographyonline.net/writers/bertrand-russell.html>.

<sup>17</sup> "Ludwig Wittgenstein: 1889-1951", in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Critical Assessments*, ed. Stuart Shanker (London: Croom Helm, 1986, vol. 1), 9-11.

sors or lecturers in academic institutions. Yes, there's also a cadre of "independent scholars"; but at least a good many of these are people who were unsuccessful in the pursuit of an academic job. And yes, quite a number of those who hold positions in philosophy departments probably don't think of themselves as philosophers, but simply as teachers of philosophy, with no pretensions or aspirations to *be* philosophers themselves. But with a few rare exceptions – such as the late Roger Scruton, who parted from the academy after several decades and instead supported himself, apparently, by consulting first for various businesses in the former Soviet bloc, and then for tobacco companies, working for think-tanks, etc.<sup>18</sup> – a philosopher, these days, is a professor of philosophy.

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You might think that this would mean that more philosophy gets done and, at least some of it, better, than in earlier times; after all, there are now thousands of people working at it rather than a few hundred, under no threat of official sanctions for heresy or political dissent<sup>19</sup>, most of them with relatively light other duties and, moreover, reasonably well-paid. But that isn't what we see; far from it. (Sometimes I wonder how much of the problem is just that the profession got *too* big<sup>20</sup> – and so, inevitably, includes too many time-servers).

Anyway, what we actually see is vast quantities of writing published, vast numbers of papers presented, etc., but a profession that is hyper-specialized, a discipline that is fragmented into cliques and fiefdoms; a raft of passing fads and fashions; a huge stack of journals, many published by the same few giant commercial concerns – and what there is of good work often crowded out or shouted down. And, rather than happy people grateful to be doing such interesting and challenging work, we see far too many who are anxious, depressed, or

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<sup>18</sup> Roger Scruton, "Curriculum Vitae", *Sir Roger Scruton: Writer & Philosopher*, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.roger-scruton.com/homepage/about/curriculum-vitae>. Ironically enough, Scruton died of lung cancer.

<sup>19</sup> Though there is, I suspect, a lot of self-censorship by those who fear expressing unpopular ideas.

<sup>20</sup> As Oswaldo Chateaubriand suggested to me in a discussion after I presented "The Fragmentation of Philosophy" at the Universidad de la República, Montevideo, Uruguay.

low-energy and exhausted after finally getting tenure – or else manically hyperactive, as if they can't producing the barely-publishable stuff that got them that far.

Hence my topic here: the difference between philosophy as an academic profession and philosophy as a calling, a vocation if you will – not, I should add, in a religious sense, but in the sense in which we might describe nursing, for example, as (for some) a calling. This cuts across the distinction between professional and amateur. Though both the amateur and the philosopher with a calling would continue to do philosophy even if they weren't paid to do so; at least, in my mouth "calling" is not intended to have any of the unfavorable connotation "amateurish" has acquired, that hint of "minor league, not major league". When I speak of those who have a calling I have in mind those who would do philosophy seriously, genuinely trying to figure things out, even if they weren't paid to do so. An obvious example is Peirce, who worked steadily and productively at philosophy, logic, semiotic, history of science, etc., long before and for decades after Hopkins fired him.

For some few of us, of course, philosophy is *both* profession *and* calling. But this, as I shall argue, often leaves us torn between competing values and competing aspirations. For doing philosophy successfully – by which I mean, making some progress on some question or questions, or for that matter honestly going wrong in a way that will eventually enable others to do better – requires very significantly different skills, different temperament, different attitudes, etc., from being successful in the philosophy profession, or indeed as a professor in a university. For the core aspiration of a philosopher is to storm the citadel of knowledge, or at least – as Peirce puts it, to be one of the corpses over which subsequent generations can climb to get to the truth<sup>21</sup>; and it's abundantly clear that this is *not* the core aspiration of someone who aims to be successful in the philosophy profession today. The "philosophical nature" of which Plato speaks hears the call, but it is only too easily corrupted in a bad environment.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that those for whom philosophy is a calling always or necessarily do a better job of advancing philosophical understanding than those for whom it's just a job. They

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<sup>21</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and (vols. 7 & 8) Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), 6.3 (1898) (references to the *Collected Papers* are by volume and paragraph number, followed by the original date).

don't. Even the most dedicated can waste time in blind alleys; and even the most cynical "professionals" may hit on something really helpful. I'm not saying, either, that someone for whom philosophy is just a job can't be entirely serious about the work, i.e., can't genuinely try to figure out the truth of the questions that concern him. He *will* stop working on these questions if he's no longer paid to keep at it, however; and he won't worry much about whether those questions are just niggles.

And neither am I saying that it's *impossible* to survive, let alone to thrive, in our profession while doing genuine, serious philosophical work; I *am* saying, however, that it's really *difficult* – much more difficult than it ought to be, or than it would be were our profession, and our universities generally, better oriented to the life of the mind than they are. As I shall argue, there is real tension between what I shall call, for want of a better word, the "administrative" values and goals of these institutions, and the intellectual or epistemological values of the genuine inquirer.

The argument will begin with an articulation of those competing values and goals, and continue with some thoughts about why, as Plato saw, the philosophical temperament can so readily be corrupted by an inhospitable environment<sup>22</sup>.

## I

I begin with a sketch – I'm afraid, a jeremiad – about the present condition of our profession.

*An explosion of publications, the formation of cliques and cartels, the decline of quality:* Publishers' book catalogues get fatter and fatter; but not to the benefit of philosophical advance. Many of these books, moreover, sell only a few hundred copies, at most – perhaps not even that, in the case of books published "print on demand"<sup>23</sup>; and often at prices so high that only a few libraries can afford them. And there has

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<sup>22</sup> A train of thought begun in Susan Haack, "Out of Step", in *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture*, expanded ed. (2008; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 2013), 251-268 (text) & 313-317 (notes).

<sup>23</sup> This doesn't mean, as you might imagine, that if you order the book, they'll print it; only that, if and when they have what they judge "enough" orders in hand, they'll print some.

been a huge explosion of journals – some, thank goodness, still independent, but many, at this point, owned by those huge commercial presses: Springer, Elsevier, de Gruyter, Taylor & Francis, etc., etc., and, yes, Oxford and Cambridge. These publish thousands of articles; but most of these articles are (deservedly) unread, or read only by members of the same small group of specialists who write them and referee them – and all too many are on such ephemeral and innutritious topics as X's critique of Y's interpretation of Z's commentary on W<sup>24</sup>.

Subscriptions to these journals are sold, at vast expense, to libraries, the cost being “justified” by the fact that their contents are peer-reviewed; but whether such review is any kind of guarantee of quality, or even of minimal competence, is at best doubtful<sup>25</sup>. The fact is that the swollen tide of submissions, especially from graduate students hoping this will help them find employment, is overwhelming; and that as a result editors are forced to rely on referees who are probably unknown to them, and often far from competent. Indeed, I have been told that some editors actually call on their graduate students to decide which papers get refereed, and which get rejected out of hand – which is, by my lights, grossly inappropriate. The inevitable result is the rise of refereeing-and-reviewing cartels, which in turn is reinforced by, another disturbing feature of our profession – hyper-specialization and fragmentation.

Even the style of philosophical writing has become more uniform, more “samey”, and less engaged. Most of what's published, probably, is in more or less correct international-English or German or whatever – if necessary, it is copy-edited into conformity (usually by functionaries with no understanding of the topics at issue); so much so that by now a deadpan, lifeless manner is so much the standard fare that anyone who writes with real style or sense for the rhythm of English<sup>26</sup> is likely to leave some readers simply baffled. Contractions, for example, are now a big no-no; and a stylistically grim and often philosophically and historically misleading social-science style of references by parenthetical name, date, and page number is commonly

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Haack, “The Academic-Publication Racket: Whatever Happened to Authors' Rights?” *Borderless Philosophy* 2 (2019): 1-21.

<sup>25</sup> See also Susan Haack, “Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers” (2007), in *Evidence Matters: Science, Truth, and Proof in the Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 156-179.

<sup>26</sup> Or, I would guess, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, or whatever.



enforced. Few complain, for publication seems to have become largely a formality; after all, most authors have been obliged to give up all rights to their work to Oxford, Springer, or whoever, and have no way of knowing what becomes of it after publication.

Is there good stuff out there among the dreck? Probably. Is there even important stuff out there? Possibly. But some good stuff, doubtless, is turned down because it's not sufficiently *au courant* with the current literature; and even some important stuff because it's just too unconventional. And the chances of anyone finding the best stuff are, of course, slim, simply because the tsunami of forgettable articles is so enormous. Instead, too many rely on looking for work from other members of their clique – or from Big Names, which often means those in highly-ranked departments, those known to have landed big grants or those who are able to make a big splash on the internet. We rely, inevitably, on surrogate measures of quality.

*Hyper-specialization and fragmentation:* when I began, decades ago, a department would doubtless include specialists in ancient philosophy, in history of philosophy, logic, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, etc.; but these would be broad areas, not tiny niches, and all would have a reasonably informed interest in other areas, too. Nowadays, however, we see more and more people specializing in Aristotle's philosophy of mind or the analytic a posteriori in Kant and Kripke, fewer in broad periods of history of philosophy; more in social epistemology, feminist epistemology, formal epistemology, virtue epistemology, evolutionary epistemology than in epistemology generally, more in philosophy of physics, or quantum physics, or philosophy of biology, or evolutionary biology or in feminist philosophy of science than in philosophy of science generally – ever more specialists in ever tinier niches<sup>27</sup>.

There is a plethora of cliques, cartels, and passing fads and fashions. Moreover, the debates in these tiny niches have a shorter and shorter shelf-life, as questions once fashionable simply fade from view when people get bored with them. Rarely, it seems, are such passing problems resolved; rather, the person from whose theory they derived dies, or retires, or fades from view, and people just move on to yet another passing fad.

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<sup>27</sup> See Susan Haack, "The Fragmentation of Philosophy, the Road to Reintegration", in *Susan Haack: Reintegrating Philosophy*, eds. Julia Göhner and Eva-Maria Jung (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 3-32.

As a result, philosophy itself has become fragmented, and fewer people than ever are prepared to see cross-border connections even, say, between epistemology and metaphysics, or epistemology and philosophy of science. Moreover, much philosophy is largely cut off from its own history, strongly favoring the recent. And insofar as there are generalists, too often they are generalists with an axe to grind, some fad or some fashion to push, whether it be “experimental” methods, atheism, or whatever. And so we see today’s equivalent of the Sophists against whom Plato was warning – those out to make their professional way, or even to make themselves famous in a larger world, by promising more than they can possibly deliver. The latter half of the twentieth century saw many notable Sophists<sup>28</sup>, among them Karl Popper (selling his covertly skeptical, and therefore utterly hopeless, philosophy of science not only to philosophers, but to scientists, judges, etc., as a modest and realistic fallibilism)<sup>29</sup>, and Richard Rorty (selling his farrago of vaguely post-modern confusions as “pragmatism”)<sup>30</sup>. And today, we have the new Sophists who dismiss all questions of value on the basis of the unargued slogan that «physics fixes all the facts»<sup>31</sup>, or promise that neuroscience will solve all our philosophical problems for us, or ..., etc.

## II

What explains all this? – A good part of the disaster, I believe, results from a serious mismatch between what’s needed to do serious philosophical work, and what’s needed to succeed in the present, “productivity”-oriented environment of universities. Indeed, on reflection

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<sup>28</sup> I’m tempted to add W. V. O. Quine to the list, because his superficially clear prose disguises so many fatal ambiguities. See e.g., Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), chap. 6, on the ambiguities of his conception of “naturalized epistemology”. Sandra Harding, with her grossly exaggerated claims about what feminism will do for philosophy, is another strong candidate.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Haack, “Just Say ‘No’ to Logical Negativism”, in *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture*, 179-194 (text) & 298-305 (notes).

<sup>30</sup> See e.g., Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, chap. 9; Susan Haack, “Pining Away in the Midst of Plenty: The Irony of Rorty’s Either-Or Philosophy”, *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, Summer 2016, 76-80.

<sup>31</sup> Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s View of Reality: Living Life without Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

I'm tempted to say that universities' preoccupation with incentivizing productivity is itself a mistake, that it would be better simply to concentrate on hiring the right people and getting out of the way of their work, and that the real problem is less a lack of incentives to good work than an overabundance of perverse incentives to *produce stuff*, whatever its quality.

Of course, however, not *all* the blame can be laid at the door of administrators. We must face the fact that we have, to some degree, brought the disaster on ourselves by meekly adapting to those distorted administrative values.

What, then, is really needed to do good philosophy? – interest, time, intellectual capacity, judgment, realism, imagination, patience, intellectual fortitude, persistence. In more detail:

- First, obviously enough, you must have an interest in answering some philosophical question or questions. This needn't be, so to speak, self-generated, spontaneous interest; it might be interest that results, for instance, from being invited to write on a certain topic, or from being provoked by some mistaken claim by someone else. But it needs to be a genuine interest in answering the question, not merely in debating inconclusively over it, or in just coming up with some plausible and convenient answer.
- Second, equally obviously, you need the time to think things through.
- Third, you need the right kind of intellectual capacity, and enough background knowledge to have some idea how to begin figuring out the answers you want. This "necessary intellectual capacity" doesn't mean you need to be quick, clever, or "smart" (indeed, slower, but patient and persistent may be much better). And that "necessary background knowledge" doesn't mean that you need to have read all the literature on the subject; indeed, being provoked by Plato may be a lot better than having read a hundred recent journal articles.
- You will also need a realistic sense of which questions might, with hard work, be within your capacity, so that you don't waste time and energy on questions beyond your powers, or spend it on questions too easy to warrant so much work.
- More than this, though, you need the imagination to come up with possible solutions, and the patience to work them out in

some detail; you will never get them exactly right the first time – indeed, you’ll be very lucky to get anything even approximately right the first time.

- On top of this, you need the intellectual backbone to start over should your ideas fail; and the courage to acknowledge that you had been mistaken, and had wasted perhaps weeks and maybe many years of work following false leads – or, even worse, trying to answer a question that was in one way or another misconceived.
- And this means you will need the persistence, sometimes, to figure out what’s wrong with your question: a false presupposition several steps back, perhaps, or a hitherto unnoticed ambiguity.
- All this requires a certain obstinate independence of mind; it’s simply impossible if you are preoccupied with trying to please others, or to get your ideas accepted by them.

Of course, no one starts out with all of this in place; and no one possesses all of it in equal measure. It’s something that, with luck, you grow into over time. Plenty of people, sadly, start out full of enthusiasm, but end up bored and jaded; the lucky few find they’re doing the work they were made to do, and happily keep on doing it – *if* their environment lets them.

But all this requires not only that you have, or develop, the right temperament and all the other necessary qualities, *but also that your environment allows you the time and peace of mind to exercise them and, most importantly, does not encourage haste, carelessness, impatience, fudging, etc.* Ideally, universities would attract people capable of doing really good work, give them incentives to keep at it despite the difficulties, and to keep producing the best work they can. But, sadly, the environment of universities today could scarcely be less suitable to getting real work done. Instead, it attracts and encourages plenty of would-be Names and would-be sophists, and plenty more just seeking an easy and quiet life.

### III

Of course, the way universities are run isn’t the same everywhere. I’ll focus here on the U.S. and other parts of the English-speaking world; but will turn later to noting differences, and commonalities – most

importantly, among the commonalities, the increasing bureaucratization of universities – elsewhere.

Once upon a time (in the English-speaking world at least), universities were run largely by faculty: i.e., by working professors who took on the chore of being chair or dean for a few years, but with every intention of returning to their real work after that. This was what was called “service”, and was perceived as a temporary sacrifice of serious intellectual work for the common good. Even the presidents of universities were usually academics, though often at a late stage of their career. Other administration – of finances, admissions, registration of students, recording of exam results, and such – was the work of professional administrators, who were thought of (and, I believe, usually thought of themselves) as charged with the task of making the *real* work of the university run smoothly.

But now things are very different. U.S. universities are now mostly “managed” – what a revealing word! – by professional administrators who view faculty as “employees”, whose “productivity” they organize and monitor<sup>32</sup>. Indeed, at this point universities are enormous bureaucracies, some even with more administrators than faculty. (Some of us notice that, somehow, when there are more bureaucrats, there is also more bureaucratic work for faculty to do – administrators, after all, tend to care about how many people “work under them”, and are quite good at finding new tasks to delegate to underlings, including us academic “employees”).

University presidents are often former politicians, Deans former chairs; lower-level administrators may have the degrees in academic administration now offered by education departments. Deans, to be sure, were often once chairmen; but nowadays even the position of departmental chair is essentially an administrative position; and those who go into administration from the classroom, the laboratory, etc., only very, very rarely return; mostly, their goal is to rise in the administrative ranks, from Assistant Dean to Associate Dean, from Associate Dean to Dean, from Dean to Provost, perhaps even from Provost to President.

Most of these “managers” no longer have ongoing, serious intellectual interests, even if they once did; and while many are smart enough in political, practical, and bureaucratic ways, they aren’t

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<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty, the Rise of the Administrative University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

going to solve any hard intellectual questions. Moreover, they are simply not equipped to assess the worth of academic work other than by external, surrogate measures. And their values, naturally, are entirely different from those of old-fashioned working academics. I shall focus here on chairmen and deans – who are middle managers needing to gain the approval both of faculty in their department or their school and of the upper levels of administration – because it is they who make the most crucial judgments about the work of faculty, and who faculty are granted tenure, who is promoted, who gets what kind of raise, and so forth.

Remember: we professors are now “employees” who are supposed to be, above all else, “productive.” But what is it that faculty produce? Well-educated students, hopefully; but that’s not what’s at issue here; indeed, skill and success in teaching are held in less and less regard, perhaps because so many teaching duties are now assigned to graduate students and adjuncts. No, the important thing is research; hence the phrase “research-active” (which I *never* heard in my early decades of teaching), and the distaste for “dead wood,” i.e. unproductive faculty. Once upon a time, an academic wrote a book or an article when he or she had an idea he wanted to put forward and share; now, we must all be productive all the time, and administrators must determine the worth of what we produce.

Probably there are still a few department chairs who make a conscientious effort to stay abreast of the work of people in their department; but my experience suggests they are now the exception, not the rule. Chairs are too busy, for one thing; in the case of graduate departments, managing squads of teaching assistants and adjuncts as well as (hopefully) ensuring that essential course are taught, involved in endless meetings, running around using up their generous travel budgets, etc. And in any case, while once to be a philosopher was to be a generalist, familiar with many areas, by now the subject has become so hyper-specialized they may be simply unable to judge colleagues’ work. No wonder friendships and enmities count for so much; no wonder chairs rely on where work was published, not what it says.

Deans are even less qualified to make such appraisals. How could they? There is far too much to read, and even if there weren’t, most of it will be far beyond their comprehension. So they rely on the judgment of chairmen and women – often biased, and as I’ve said, only rarely based on seriously reading anyone’s work – and on such surrogate measures as the supposed “prestige” of this or that journal,

this or that press, on peer-reviewers, on the amount of grant money brought in and, of course, on “rankings”.

Faculty anxious to get tenure, a raise, or promotion soon internalize these distorted administrative values. The result, inevitably, is an erosion of the qualities of character and the habits needed to do serious work. We see this all the time in philosophy, as people focus on fashionable topics where (they hope) it’s easier to publish, rather than on topics where they really hope to be able to make progress; and concentrate on producing something publishable fast enough for the next annual report, not something solid and thought-through. They rush the work, and skimp the details; they are unwilling to admit it when they were wrong and need to start over. And they are too much concerned with the status of the journals or the presses with which they publish, and sometimes obsess over their department’s “ranking” in the PGR<sup>33</sup>.

Moreover, when new professors are hired, the ones chosen are those judged likely to succeed in this environment, meaning the quick and the plausible, not those with slower but deeper and more painstaking minds. And when professors train graduate students (another revealing word! – years ago we used to think in terms of *teaching* and *educating* graduate students, not “training” them), naturally they aim to make them employable<sup>34</sup>, which means..., well, you can finish this sentence for yourselves.

That’s the U.S. Elsewhere, things are somewhat different. In Europe, for example, the bureaucratic pressures may be, not local, but primarily from central governments; and the focus will likely be somewhat on rankings, especially of journals, but above all on grants – indeed, I have seen some European *résumés* that say to the nearest Euro how much money a faculty member has brought in, but offer very little detail about the work they actually *did* with all that money! (Grants will help your philosophical career in the U.S., too; but they don’t – not yet, anyway – have the same grip as in much of Europe). But the consequences of the culture of grants-and-research projects

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<sup>33</sup> *The Philosophical Gourmet Report*, eds. Berit Brogaard and Christopher A. Pynes, last accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/>. Perhaps you think my skepticism about these rankings is due to my department’s not being more highly ranked. Far from it. If I thought the rankings were worth anything (which I don’t), I’d say my department was *too* highly ranked!

<sup>34</sup> Not, of course, that all those graduate students *do*, in fact, find themselves employable; there have long been far more Ph.D.s produced than there are jobs available.

that soon grows up in this situation are disastrous<sup>35</sup>.

As graduate education comes to depend on those external grants, its quality inevitably suffers: being X's research assistant is simply no substitute for actually working on your own. Faculty members increasingly divide into two very unequal classes: the *élite*, with their big grants and light teaching duties, and the academic peasants who bear the brunt of the teaching. And of course the whole grant business distorts what topics people work on; they do what they believe they can get a grant to support. And it encourages people to exaggerate what they will achieve if they land the grant, and, even worse, to exaggerate what they have achieved using it. In time, inevitably, they begin to believe their own propaganda, and lose all sense of the real quality of their work.

How far all this extends to the rest of the world, I don't know for sure. But there have been straws in the wind: a Mexican correspondent tells me how anxious he has felt about the pressure he feels to be productive; a Chinese visitor tells me that his university pays him a bonus if he publishes a paper in a journal that is indexed in an "approved" place; and an Iranian correspondent writes that his university is pressing faculty to publish abroad. But I knew I had hit some kind of nerve internationally when my paper *Can Philosophy be Saved?*<sup>36</sup> was recently reprinted, and I posted the reprint on academia.edu, I was told that within two days it had been viewed by people in 39 countries: the U.S., China, Hungary, Brazil, Poland, U.K., Uruguay, Slovakia, Spain, Argentina, Ireland, Italy, Australia, Mexico, Germany, Ukraine, Canada, Chile, Turkey, Colombia, Costa Rica, Portugal, Peru, Ecuador, Israel, India, France, Bulgaria, the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, South Africa, the Republic of Korea, Greece, Norway, Austria, Finland, Lithuania, Mozambique and El Salvador. Gosh.

#### IV

Perhaps you are hoping that I will tell you how to fix all this. I'm sorry

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<sup>35</sup> A train of thought begun in Susan Haack, "Preposterism and Its Consequences", (1996), in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 188-204.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Haack, "The Real Question: Can Philosophy be Saved?" *Free Inquiry* 37, no. 6 (2017): 40-43.



to disappoint you, but I can't do that – the causes are too complex, and too thoroughly institutionalized, and frankly I wouldn't know, realistically, where to begin. Moreover, just now, with the global health crisis, the work of universities in many parts of the world has been so grossly disrupted that it's impossible to predict what they will look like in a year, or even several years – very different, I suspect. Or perhaps you are hoping that I will tell you what to do if, for you, philosophy really is a calling. Again, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't really offer any generic advice here, either – each person's situation will be so different: some outside academia altogether, some academic job-hunting, some hoping to get tenure, some hoping for a raise or a promotion, and so forth. Each of us can only do what he or she can.

If you're outside the academy working as a taxi driver, computer consultant, caterer, or whatever, your first problem will be to carve out time to think and read and, if you get a good idea, to write; and the next, to find some way to be heard if you do produce something worth sharing. The internet has made the last part somewhat easier; but you should not expect an enthusiastic response from “the profession” – like the two former lumber-jack tramps in Frost's poem, who resent his chopping his own wood for the love of it – *they* should be doing that, for money! – professional philosophers will likely give you the cold shoulder.

If you are in the academy, you may discover that, for you, philosophy is a calling precisely in virtue of the tension you feel with those “professional” values. If so, you will have to «keep your head, when all about you [a]re losing theirs and blaming it on you»<sup>37</sup>. If you're a new Ph.D. seeking a job (assuming you haven't already been corrupted by one of those “prestigious” Ph.D. programs!), the best advice I can offer is: don't think it's terrible to fetch up in a department with no graduate program. It's not: undergraduate teaching can be very rewarding<sup>38</sup> – especially if you're not under pressure to get graduating students into supposedly elite graduate programs.

If you're on tenure-track, your position is especially difficult. Up to a point, you will have to be a political animal – prudent, but not buying into it all, keeping those administrative values at arms'

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<sup>37</sup> Rudyard Kipling, “IF—”, in *Rewards and Fairies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1910), 181.

<sup>38</sup> Now I think of the young professor reaching in an undergraduate-only department (Oakland University) who told me, “this is the best job you never heard of”.

length. You must of course get clear what's required of you, be alert to changes in your department or college that might affect this, and figure out when what's required of you crosses the line beyond which you can't stomach it. You'll probably have to be more sociable than you might ideally like. Still, unless your institution insists that publications be peer-reviewed to count, be open to invitations to write for lesser-known journals, and willing to resist if referees make unreasonable demands.

And I can offer a little advice, from my own experience, to relatively senior academics with a real calling who find themselves chafing against those distorted values. Be helpful when you can. But learn to say, politely, "no sorry, I can't do that" – to invitations to lunch, to requests that you referee what sounds like a really weak paper the author hopes the referee will rewrite for him, to proposals that you serve on this or that "important" university committee for sifting sawdust...<sup>39</sup>, or whatever. Decide which meetings are essential, but don't attend others; they are a waste not only of time but also, more importantly, of spirit; and learn to say calmly, when it's true, "No, I disagree; that's a bad idea, and it would be better to do this..."<sup>40</sup>. (Probably this won't change the outcome; but at least you will likely feel a *bit* better than if you would if you just let that bad idea go without objecting).

I would continue: publish when you have something to say, not on some administrator's timetable; don't meekly do whatever the referees for a journal ask of you – if their demands are unreasonable, or obviously a way of getting you to cite their or their friends' work, try saying, politely, "No, I don't think that would improve the paper". Try at all costs to avoid turning into a crank pushing his Big Idea or a guru collecting disciples; and beware of what Peirce called «the vanity of cleverness»<sup>41</sup>, an overweening belief in your own wonderfulness. We are all fallible.

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<sup>39</sup> The phrase is from Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918), 253. As Veblen said (in 1918!) these committees are "designed chiefly to keep the faculty talking while the bureaucratic machine goes on its way under the guidance of the executive and his personal counsellors and lieutenants". *Ibid.*, 253. Indeed; these committees are 98% pseudo-consultation.

<sup>40</sup> This, I confess, I find extremely difficult, not to say impossible; it's very hard not to lose your cool when colleagues are behaving badly. I find myself silently squirming so as not to scream; but I hate myself afterwards for not speaking up!

<sup>41</sup> Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 1.31 (1869).

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But now I'm getting distracted from my main theme: that, desirable as it is to unite your avocation and your vocation, in practice nowadays there are very significant tensions between professional and philosophical values and aspirations – tensions none of us for whom philosophy is a calling as well as a profession can avoid, and all of us for whom philosophy is a calling as well as a profession must, somehow, deal with.

No one puts this better than Sinclair Lewis's Max Gottlieb, Martin Arrowsmith's mentor and hero. He is talking to Martin about a calling to science, not to philosophy; but he expresses the key idea brilliantly<sup>42</sup>:

To be a scientist – it is not just a different job, so that a man should choose between being a scientist and being an explorer or a bond-salesman [...]. It is a tangle of ver-y obscure emotions, like mysticism, or wanting to write poetry; it makes its victim all different from the good normal man. [...].

But once again always remember that not all men who work at science are scientists. So few! The rest – secretaries, press-agents, camp-followers! [...]. If you haf [something of the scientific calling], [...] there [are] two t'ings you must do: work twice as hard as you can, and keep people from using you.

Replace “scientist” by “philosopher”, and there you have it. Not all who work at philosophy are philosophers, I will say; and those “victims” for whom philosophy really is a calling may pay a steep professional price. But in my experience, at least<sup>43</sup>, it has been a price worth paying<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith* (1925; New York: Signet Classics, 1961), 278-279.

<sup>43</sup> See Susan Haack, “Not One of the Boys: Memoir of an Academic Misfit”, *Cosmos + Taxis* 8, no. 6 (2020): 92-106.

<sup>44</sup> My thanks to Mark Migotti for his helpful comments on a draft and to Nicholas Mignanelli for his help finding references.

