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A New Philosophy for the 21st Century

By Adam Briggie and Robert Frodeman

We have devoted our lives to philosophy. We want the field to survive and, if possible, prosper. But it is increasingly doubtful that academic philosophy can thrive in an era of declining budgets, soaring debts, antipathy to tax increases, and new technologies such as distance education.

Of course, philosophy is secure at America's elite universities. But what of the vast number of universities whose future is tied to the decisions of state legislatures or other financial conditions?

At these colleges, philosophy is now subject to powerful cultural trends that include a distrust of the public realm, a utilitarian habit of mind where only what is countable actually counts, and a widespread assumption that "values" are mere preferences to be tabulated and traded rather than critically assessed and debated. Recent cuts or threatened cuts to the philosophy departments at Howard University and the University of Nevada, and overseas at the University of Liverpool and the University of Greenwich, highlight the danger.

We are on the downside of a 60-year period that saw the expansion of colleges and universities nationwide and the development of the great state systems of education (for example, the University of California system, now being dismantled). Indeed, philosophy and the humanities have been in a hiring crisis since 1970. Now online education poses a more profound threat. Might it herald the academic equivalent of Napster, putting many of us out of jobs?

The philosophic community needs to respond to these dangers in a thoughtful and proactive way. In our view, there are four aspects to the challenge we face.

The status quo: We are saddled with early-20th-century modes of philosophy. In the 20th century, philosophy abandoned its Socratic heritage in favor of a disciplinary model of practice. Rather than engaging citizens in all walks of life on the issues they faced, philosophers spoke mainly to one another about problems of their

own invention. In this we are the heirs of Kant. In the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant argued that we must separate the role of the technical philosopher from that of the general philosopher. Philosophy would demonstrate its bona fides by developing a mode of inquiry that only other philosophers could understand. To attempt both philosophic rigor and public engagement would result in "nothing but bungling."

By the beginning of the 20th century, we had abandoned the public role. Like biologists or economists, we embraced expertise. We burrowed down into ever-smaller niches, coming to know more and more about less and less.

It was a model that became self-justifying, by defining its own goals and standards and creating a closed market for the supply and demand for philosophy. Decrying this development in his 1906 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, William James argued for the recognition of both technical and general roles for philosophers. James lost that battle. Yes, 20th-century philosophy dealt with issues of perennial importance. But this work came at the cost of increasing cultural insignificance. The specialist's task was not counterbalanced by an equal emphasis on the public role of the philosopher.

It is time to reclaim the public role of philosophy. This does not mean rejecting rigor. By venturing into the agora, testing his ideas out in the world, Socrates did not abandon standards. Rather, he embodied a different type of rigor, one sensitive to and partially defined by social context.

Academic philosophizing suffers from what Hegel called a bad infinity—that to every argument there is a counterargument, and a reply to that reply, without end. Of course, a number of philosophic questions are perennial in nature: The philosophizing lies in the asking rather than the answering, an asking that goes on without end. But without the rigors of everyday life, which often demand an answer, the debates of academia lack any governor on them at all.

The 20th-century paradigm of philosophy did eventually, reluctantly, make room for a few "applied" philosophers in fields such as bioethics, environmental ethics, business ethics, and the like. But even here, in the vast majority of cases, research consisted in talking about applied ethics rather than actually applying, or better, integrating philosophic insights with problems on the ground.

Applied ethics has been centripetal—scholars mostly go out into the

world only long enough to latch onto an issue and then bring it back into the fold of specialized academic journals. Applied ethics is written for other ethicists, rather than for the nonphilosophical audiences who actually wrestle with the problems being discussed—doctors and nurses, lab technicians and computer programmers, corporate toxicologists and managers of fisheries.

We speak from experience born of failure. In reading about the controversy surrounding the proposed wind farm on the Nantucket Sound, we came to believe that a great deal of rancor and misunderstanding hinged on aesthetics. But "aesthetics" had been poorly framed both in the official policy evaluations (for example, the environmental-impact assessments) and in public discussions. The controversy was not simply a matter of "views" or "visibility" but rather competing visions about the appropriate human presence in a place of natural and cultural significance. Reframing aesthetics as "visions" of the good life, we argue, could help improve the adequacy of policy and the productivity of public debate.

So we wrote a paper on the subject. Yet rather than sharing our insights with policy makers or the concerned public, we published our work in an academic journal, one that relevant decision makers probably did not even know existed. Of course, it counted as a peer-reviewed publication—the coin of the realm for academic production. But the Socratic task of public philosophizing remained undone.

New theory: For the reasons we noted at the outset, the 20th-century model of philosophy today is politically and economically unsustainable. It is also irresponsible. Philosophers at public universities are state employees, and the rest of us are dependent in various ways on public funds, not to mention on the tuition paid by students and their families. It should be obvious that we need to reflect on the questions raised by the current crisis.

What is the nature and extent of a philosopher's obligation to society? How should this get worked out on a day-by-day basis? How does this affect our closely held notions of tenure and academic freedom, and our assumptions about what counts as excellence and rigor?

Philosophers work within one or another canonical field—ancient philosophy, the philosophy of science, ethics, metaphysics, or phenomenology—categories that have remained stable over generations. These categories need rethinking. (Introductory logic courses, for instance, strike us as icons of a past age.) Within each of these areas, aspiring philosophical experts move to the leading edge

and make a small indentation in the outer boundary of knowledge. This needs to be questioned. Why, for instance, is there no tradition of philosophers being trained as specialists in the general, to work in the public and private sectors?

But the crux of the problem is this: Questions concerning the institutional forms that philosophy takes are not considered topics for philosophic reflection. There is little or no research into how our philosophic questions and standards of excellence are shaped by the particular bureaucratic forms that philosophy takes.

Why, for example, are philosophers housed in philosophy departments? Should groups of two or three philosophers be placed in departments across campus, to draw out the philosophic aspects of chemistry, economics, and business? Why is there no "lab" or "field" component for philosophy courses? Given the transformative nature of contemporary science and technology, in areas from synthetic biology to nanotechnology to climate change, are there opportunities for philosophic research—and employment—within the public and private sectors? Why are we not training philosophers to work at the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Education, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Park Service, and a similar set of places across the private sector?

Note that the questions we are raising are different in kind from the questions asked in fields such as social and political philosophy. The insights of philosophers in these areas are often quite relevant to society. We are posing a different type of question: How can philosophic insights be translated or integrated with other disciplines and with the wider world? Political philosophy contains insights important to practical issues; but our concern is with the different ways that philosophical theory (whether in political philosophy, or metaphysics, or epistemology, or any other area of philosophy) becomes involved with social practice. This is a philosophical question that philosophers have left unasked.

Ideas do not exist in the ether; they take form within a material context that shapes them in subtle and profound ways. The current institutional dimensions of philosophy—training, teaching, promotion, and tenure—need to be thought through afresh. We need to train future philosophers so they can recognize philosophical disputes happening in the world and insert themselves artfully into the public and private spheres. And when they come up for tenure, we need means for properly assessing their success in such endeavors.

Areas of reform: We see three broad, interrelated areas in need of reform.

First, we need to reconsider what counts as expertise, rigor, and excellence—the single-minded model of specialization that keeps us writing philosophy papers for each other. We should develop new, more interactive models of rigor that take account of the need for timeliness, sensitivity to context, and rhetorical skill in communicating with multiple audiences. And we should rank philosophy departments on measures other than publication counts in philosophy journals; other factors would include grants, for instance, or mentions in the press.

Second, a new philosophy calls for new types of philosophers trained with the skills necessary for being successful "interactional" experts. Interactional expertise means knowing enough about another field so that one can engage others in conversation and raise penetrating questions. The pedagogical challenge before us consists in educating students so that philosophy is understood not as an isolated body of ideas, but as indistinguishable from human existence and interwoven throughout contemporary social issues.

Students need to learn how to identify and create opportunities for integrating philosophy outside of the discipline. Undergraduate students need courses that draw out the philosophical dimensions of everyday life—what a colleague of ours has called "found philosophy." Graduate students need training in grant writing and multimedia communication; policy and budgets; and rhetorical skills in how to make ethical theory relevant to different audiences within severe budgetary, time, or political constraints.

Third, the case for reform made here involves an appeal to prudential self-interest—devising ways to survive in a harried, impatient, and increasingly market-driven age. Philosophers have broad social responsibilities that require directly engaging social problems. This can mean activism, but in a bureaucratic age it is more likely to mean working at the project level with scientists, engineers, and policy makers. Rather than philosopher kings, our future is more likely to lie in becoming philosopher bureaucrats.

Of course, everyone hates bureaucrats. But they serve us well in keeping the trucks and trains and planes running on time and our food and medicine safe. As philosopher bureaucrats the two of us have helped the U.S. Geological Survey think about acid mine drainage; the city of Denton, Tex., rewrite its ordinance governing natural-gas drilling and production; and the European Commission devise better criteria for peer review of research grants.

Such work raises the worry that philosophy may compromise its essential function as social critique and become captured by powerful interests. In seeking to adapt, might philosophy risk selling its soul? Or, in speaking truth to power, might we be forced to drink hemlock?

These are real concerns. But such concerns simply highlight the need and opportunity for serious philosophic work. We must recognize that clinging to the status quo in the name of academic freedom is not just unsustainable but also irresponsible. Philosophers, like any professional group, have a moral responsibility to serve the community. We need to embody our own professional code of ethics.

New models: What new approaches to philosophy should we develop? Fortunately, we need not start from scratch, as alternative models are springing up daily. Individual philosophers, and occasionally whole departments, are striking out in new directions. The recent launch of the Public Philosophy Network is one indication of the growing interest in bucking the status quo. This past October, PPN hosted a conference on "Advancing Publicly Engaged Philosophy" in Washington.

Another indication is a conference we ran at the University of North Texas in March, called "A New Practice of Philosophy." Thirty-five philosophers shared their experiences about doing engaged work in the world and in the classroom. That was followed later that month by a conference at Mount Holyoke College on "Engaging Philosophy." The conference was in honor of Mount Holyoke's new president, Lynn Pasquerella, a philosopher who has engaged a broad range of real-world problems, from hospital ethics to potable water in Africa. Linda Martín Alcoff from CUNY's Hunter College (and a former fellow graduate student at Brown with Pasquerella) gave the opening talk, making a powerful case for reviving the role of the public intellectual.

Yet another signal of changing times was the 2009 creation of PIN—the Philosophy of/as Interdisciplinarity Network. Founded by philosophers from the United States and Europe, PIN seeks to develop the theory and practice of "de-disciplining" philosophy.

These are exciting indications that new models are beginning to set roots within our community. Yet these philosophers continue to work largely at the margins of the profession, with little institutional support. We need to grow this nascent community of practice.

At the department of philosophy and religion studies and the Center

for the Study of Interdisciplinarity at the University of North Texas, we have christened our approach "field philosophy." Field philosophy means working outside the library or study, doing philosophy at the project level, with scientists, engineers, and policy makers. Unlike applied ethics, where the value of the work is still largely expressed within the discipline, field philosophy adds value out in the world by responding to societal needs.

Our own work, with Britt Holbrook, on peer review is an example. Today Congress and grant makers are asking that the peer-review process become more publicly accountable. Society wants to support scientific work that is not only of high quality but also socially relevant. We have worked with both the National Science Foundation and the European Commission to think through these challenges. In other cases, department members have worked with the EPA, the United Nations, and the Chilean government.

Field philosophy, found philosophy, public philosophy, experimental philosophy, philosophy of/as interdisciplinarity—these are all expressions of a growing feeling that change is afoot. We seek to promote this change. We view 20th-century philosophy as an aberration—academically challenging work that forgot half of philosophy's task. It is time to strike out in new, intellectually exciting, and socially useful directions.

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