

A Radical Solution For Haack’s “Perverse Incentives” Problem: Liberating Real Philosophy From The Professional Academy

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“Diogenes,” by J.-L. Gerome (1860)

In a recent essay, Susan Haack has argued—in her characteristically crisp, elegant, and incisive way—that the system of intellectual activity and intellectual labor that dominates contemporary universities is inherently self-undermining:

As I started work on this paper, I found myself recalling something I heard, many decades ago, in a class on Comparative Political Systems:[...] the UK, the US, and the USSR. Under the first Soviet Five Year Plan, production targets were set in terms of weight; which might have been reasonable (though it might have compromised quality) for wheat or steel or coal, but was obviously quite unsuitable for other goods. As a result, if I remember correctly, was that an enterprising chandelier manufacturer realized that the easiest way to meet his target was to make heavier chandeliers—in consequence of which several

fashionable Moscow ceilings collapsed. I found myself imagining what other distortions might have resulted: boots too heavy for soldiers to march in, saucepans too heavy for cooks to lift, gold-plated lead tiaras too heavy to raise to your head.. But my point here is, of course, about universities here and now, and the perverse incentives that cause no less bizarre, but even more costly, distortions. I used to think that the problem was that quantity is simply inappropriate as a measure of academics' productivity; but I have come to believe it is worse than that, in fact that *the whole idea of incentives for certain kinds of intellectual work is misconceived and inevitably self-defeating*. It's not exactly as if the Soviets had imposed "targets" on novelists and playwrights as well as on farmers, manufacturers, etc.; but as we'll see, it is disturbingly similar. (Haack, 2022: Introduction)

For convenience, let's call the very serious and indeed tragic problem about higher education that Haack has (I think bang-on-target correctly) identified, *the perverse incentives problem*.

Concentrating on professional academic philosophy in order to make the perverse incentives problem more concrete and specific, and by way of proposing a solution to that concrete and specific version of the problem, or at least describing "what would be a better state of affairs," Haack describes an ideal solution to be aiming at, and also a possible way of "get[ting] there from here" that includes no less than seventeen sub-proposals to be jointly implemented:

"Well," you may say, "and what's your solution?" That's a tough question. I'm tempted to say, simply: *hire good people who are serious about philosophy, and don't get in the way of their doing the work they see within their grasp*. Period. But how on earth could we get there from here? Here is what I'd like to see:

Philosophy departments move away from smorgasbord undergraduate offerings towards real, thought-out programs....

Philosophy professors give realistic grades, resisting the temptation to inflation, remembering that a course it's impossible to flunk is a course worth nothing at all....

We return to hiring according to teaching needs, not current philosophical fashion....

We don't allow graduate students to teach undergraduates without first giving them proper training and supervision....

We make full disclosure of the success/failure of graduate programs mandatory....

"Ranking" [of philosophy departments and programs, like Brian Leiter's *Philosophy Gourmet Report*, aka the PGR] is misconceived; we want, instead, to encourage potential

graduate students to investigate what might best suit them, perhaps consulting people whose books or articles interested them, using the information about which students get decent jobs, and checking which departments have real, structured programs, and serious comprehensive exams: in short, to do what they did before Leiter began the PGR....

We restore some sense to graduate curricula, so that they regularly cover the main areas Ph.D.s will likely need to teach if they find decent-but-not-prestigious academic employment. Make “qualifying” exams comprehensive again, so Ph.D.s can provide evidence of reasonably broad competence....

We insist on proper documentation: footnotes (no-one reads endnotes), and Chicago style references including original dates of material cited....

We cut back on those burgeoning teaching-load reductions for faculty....

We set reasonable, realistic expectations for faculty members....

We judge the work that faculty do *by reading it*, not by where it is published....

We make sure editorial work is serious and scholarly: not merely slapping a paperclip on a bunch of papers by eight or nine of your friends; not putting together an anthology you will use for your own large classes, not making textbooks out of snippets of work by others who aren’t even informed, let alone consulted....

The bloated cadres of administrative staff universities now employ, all those vice-deans, sub-deans, associate deans, assistant deans, etc., and their many, many assistants are severely cut....

We trim (or at least don’t expand) the lavish research grants that some faculty enjoy....

We report *the results achieved* with the help of grants, not winning the grants *per se*.

We insist that chairs’ recommendations for hires/for raises be based on their, or trusted and competent colleagues’ (not cronies’), actually reading the work, not on where it’s published, and that they not rely, instead, on unanswerable third parties.

We don’t expand the NEH budgets or the budgets of other grant-giving bodies *ad libitum*, which contribute to the illusion that you can’t do serious philosophical research without buckets of money and time off teaching; try to spread grants more evenly across a variety of institutions, and not to keep subsidizing the same people. (Haack, 2022: section III)

Now, I don't actually disagree with any of Haack's interesting suggestions, if we presuppose that *philosophy is and should be pursued and practiced inside the professional academy exclusively or at least principally*.

But if we *reject* that presupposition, as I strongly believe we *should*, for all the reasons Haack has provided (Haack, 2022: sections I-II) and many more (APP, 2013-2022), then what I'll call *a radical solution* to the perverse incentives problem emerges fully into view, namely: *liberating real philosophy from the professional academy*.

Now, what do I mean by that?

First, by *real philosophy*, I mean authentic (i.e., wholehearted, and pursued and practiced as a full-time, lifetime calling), serious (i.e., neither job-oriented nor Scholastic and shallow), critical, synoptic, systematic reflection on the individual and collective rational human condition, and on the thoroughly nonideal natural and social world in which rational human animals and other conscious animals live, move, and have their being.

Real philosophy fully includes the knowledge yielded by the natural and formal sciences; but, as I see it, real philosophy also goes significantly beneath and beyond the sciences, and non-reductively incorporates aesthetic/artistic, affective/emotional, ethical/moral, social/political, and, more generally, personal and practical insights that cannot be adequately captured or explained by the sciences.

In a word, real philosophy is all about the nature, meaning, and value of individual and collective rational human existence in the world, and how it is possible to know the philosophical limits of science, without being *anti-science*, and indeed while also being resolutely *pro-science*.

Finally, real philosophy is pursued by people working on individual or collective writing projects, or teaching projects, in the context of small, friendly circles of like-minded philosophers.

—Like-minded but not uncritical; for real philosophers read both intensively and also widely inside philosophy, and also widely outside of philosophy, critically discuss what they've read, write, mutually present and talk about their work, re-read, re-discuss, and then re-write, with the primary aim of producing work of originality and of the highest possible quality, given their own individual and collective abilities.

They also seek to disseminate and universally freely share their work, through publication, teaching, or public conversation.

Second, those who truly care about real philosophy *should work outside the professional academy*, whether this means resolutely *exiting* the professional academy if they're currently inside it, or resolutely *avoiding* the professional academy if they're not currently inside it.

Third, as soon as or insofar as they're outside the professional academy, then real philosophers should create a worldwide loosely-structured network of *real philosophy research groups*, each one composed of a small number (say, at most 10-12) of like-minded people who are all committed to the pursuit and practice of real philosophy, and who freely and regularly associate with one another in order to forward this purpose, thereby carrying our various philosophical projects either individually or collaboratively, not only online but also in person, such that each such group

(i) has its own website(s),

(ii) has its own publishing and dissemination/distribution capability, not only electronic but also hard-copy,

(iii) holds at least one in-person meeting per year for the entire group, and

(iv) engages in some real-world philosophical collective activism that the group has committed itself to or decided upon: for example, online or in-person teaching, empirical research, or political organizing.

Obviously, it would then also be necessary to have enough money to pay not only for these websites and for their publishing capability, but also for holding at least one in-person meeting per year for the entire group and for engaging in the group's real-world philosophical collective activism.

Fourth, there should also be a large-scale, universally freely accessible, online platform that operates essentially beyond the control of the professional academy and its associated academic presses or other mainstream publishing venues, for sharing their research group's individual and collaborative work, and for online discussion with other philosophers or philosophically-minded people, especially those who belong to other philosophy research groups.

In fact, such a platform already exists, namely, *academia.edu* (Academia, 2022), and even though it's for-profit, it's not paywalled and anyone can belong to it and use it for free; nevertheless, in order to screen out distracting sidebar advertising and use some other "premium" features of the platform, there's a roughly \$150.00 USD charge per year.

Fifth, and above all, there should be a reliable, sustainable, sufficient, and above all *no-strings-attached*, source of income in order

(i) to pay for the group's website(s), for their electronic and hard-copy publishing capability, for holding at least one in-person meeting per year for the entire group, and for their real-world philosophical collective activism,

(ii) to pay for "premium" features of using the large-scale, universally freely accessible online platform, and above all,

(iii) to provide an income adequate for all the purposes of ordinary living, for all full-time research-group members.

In the nature of things, and in full view of the real world's being the thoroughly *nonideal* natural and social place that it is, it's the fifth condition or requirement for real philosophy outside the professional academy that's the most difficult, and perhaps—owing to the *no-strings-attached* requirement—even almost practically and pragmatically impossible, to satisfy.

In order to be fully intellectually, morally, and politically *autonomous*, members of real philosophy research groups *cannot*, without practical or pragmatic contradiction and self-stultification, "sell" either themselves as philosophers, or their specifically philosophical activities or productions, in any way whatsoever: as Plato correctly pointed out about the Sophists, *selling philosophy* means *selling out*.

And philosophically-minded and highly generous billionaire, millionaire, or even non-millionaire no-strings-attaching patrons or philanthropic supporters of real, extra-professional-academic philosophy are very thin on the ground indeed, and perhaps as rare as the good or honest person for whom the cynical, lonely, and nomadic Diogenes of Sinope searched with his lamp, as per the image I've displayed at the top of this essay.

(—Unless, of course, *you*, the very reader of this sentence, are one such highly generous philosophically-minded person. Haha.)

Therefore, satisfying the fifth condition or requirement for real philosophy outside the professional academy is an amazingly hard problem on its own.

But, perhaps the assumption *that there must be a single, universal solution to the income problem* is mistaken.

For, there might nevertheless in fact be *a finite set of structurally-related yet slightly different specific solutions.*

Indeed, there might be as many as *five* of these.

In what follows, for convenience, I'll abbreviate the phrase "real philosophy outside the professional academy" as "RPOPA."

First, a real philosopher outside the professional academy might have *a dual vocation for RPOPA + X*, such that

(i) *X is a kind of work that's able to be done in an independent way,*

(ii) *X yields a living income on its own, and*

(iii) *X is also highly compatible with or even fully complementary to RPOPA: for example, one of the fine or applied arts—say, architectural design.*

Second, a philosophically-minded patron or philanthropist *who wasn't in fact wealthy themselves* might nevertheless *be highly generously willing to work at a wage-paying job, and at the same time permanently support only one real philosopher outside the professional academy, for example, their life-partner or a protégé(e).*

Third, someone might in fact *be independently wealthy themselves*, perhaps by inheritance, or perhaps by making a lot of money when they were relatively young and retiring early, *and then use that income in order either to become a real philosopher outside the professional academy themselves for the rest of their life, themselves, or else permanently to support some other person who's going to pursue and practice real philosophy outside the professional academy as a full-time, lifetime calling, again for example, their life-partner or a protégé(e).*

Fourth, someone might have worked at a wage-paying job for many years, thereby accumulating an adequate pension and/or quantity of life-savings, *and then retire in order to become a real philosopher outside the professional academy for the rest of their life.*

Fifth, and finally, if there ever came to be *a truly generous universal basic income, aka TGUBI* (see, e.g., Hanna, 2018: part 3), in some society or societies, then *someone could use that TGUBI in order to be a real philosopher outside the professional academy for the rest of their life.*

Moreover, under any one of those five specific solutions to the income problem, the members of a real philosophy research group could pool their own resources in order to

pay for the group's website(s), for their electronic and hard-copy publishing capability, for holding at least one in-person meeting per year for the entire group, for their real-world philosophical collective activism, and for "premium" features of using the large-scale, universally freely accessible online platform.

Now, let's call the thesis that there exists a single, universal solution to the income problem, *the one-solution thesis*; and let's call the thesis that there exists a finite set of structurally-related yet slightly different specific solutions, *the multiple-solutions thesis*.

Given what I've just written, I think it's plausibly arguable *that the one-solution thesis is false, and also that the multiple-solutions thesis is true.*

If so, since it's really possible for all of the five conditions or requirements for RPOPA to be jointly satisfied, then *real philosophy outside the professional academy is really possible*, even despite the fact that we live, move, and have our being in a thoroughly nonideal natural and social real world.^{1,2}

¹ I'm grateful to Otto Paans for thought-provoking correspondence on or around the central topics of this essay, especially including how to solve the amazingly hard problem of satisfying the fifth condition or requirement for real philosophy outside the professional academy.

² In fact, there already exists a prototype of RPOPA, *Philosophy Without Borders*, a cosmopolitan group project for creating and universally freely sharing original philosophy, that *roughly* satisfies the five conditions or requirements for real philosophy outside the professional academy (PWB, 2022).

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