

Against and Beyond Professional Academic Philosophy: A Synopsis

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(APP, 2013-2024)

Despite their often being conjoined nowadays, *being a professional* and *being an academic* are different and logically independent things.

Someone's being a professional means that they belong to a social institution (aka "a profession") which is composed of people (i) who are paid for doing a specific kind of work, and are also public practitioners of that kind of work, (ii) who must be accredited or certified by the governing body of that particular profession in order to be officially licensed, or otherwise explicitly permitted, to do and publicly practice that kind of work, (iii) who are further constrained by a set of special and highly restrictive normative rules for the doing and public practicing of that kind of work, and (iv) who are even further constrained by a special and highly restrictive code of conduct that goes beyond the work itself into their social-institutional lives more generally, such that, (v) if someone refuses to comply with either the highly restrictive normative rules for the doing and public practicing of the specific kind of work or the highly restrictive code of conduct, then they are publicly reprimanded, sanctioned, or expelled from the profession (see also Schmidt, 2000).

By contrast, someone's being an academic means that they belong to a scholarly or scientific (in the broad sense of "science" captured by the German term *Wissenschaft*) social institution devoted either to research alone or to research-&-teaching, originally Plato's Academy, but since the medieval or Scholastic period, and especially since the 18th century, to a university, college, or other social institution of higher education, not only including social institutions that are mainly or specifically devoted to teaching, but also including more-or-less loosely organized circles, teams, or other organizations dedicated solely to scholarly or scientific research without teaching. Academies can operate without either payment (after all, that was one of Plato's prime objections to the Sophists), normative rules for doing scholarly or scientific work, or codes of conduct.

Therefore, it's really possible to be a professional (say, a doctor or a lawyer) without also being an academic, and it's also really possible to be an academic (say, a member of Plato's Academy, The Vienna Circle, or any of various contemporary scholarly or scientific research groups or institutes not affiliated with or governed by the professional academy), without also being a professional.

Academics in general, and academic philosophers in particular, have often been gently or even sarcastically mocked for "living in an ivory tower." But it's simply a brute social fact that massively most contemporary philosophers are both academics *and also* professionals, which, in turn, leads to a serious *metaphilosophical* problem. For the vocational vices of professionalism are (i) careerism, (ii) conformism, and (iii) coercive authoritarianism as specifically applied to the members of the profession working under its highly restrictive normative rules of work and code of conduct; the vocational vices of academicism are (i) dogmatism, (ii) esotericism, and (iii) hyper-specialization; and contemporary professional academic philosophy not only has all six of these vocational vices, but also has them in superabundance (Hanna, 2022; see also Haack, 2021). More generally, in concert with the rest of contemporary higher education inside the professional academy, professional academic philosophy is thoroughly *commodified*, *mechanized*, and *moralized* (Hanna, 2024a).

This naturally yields the alienation and insulation of professional academic philosophers from the basic beliefs, concerns, needs, and activities of the rest of humanity outside the professional academy, even to the point of being fundamentally theoretically, emotionally, morally, and/or sociopolitically at odds with the rest of humanity, thereby entrenching them in an *ivory bunker*, a dire philosophical, moral, and sociopolitical situation which can be capsulized and summed up under the rubric of *essential irrelevance to humanity*. So it's an accurate and serious criticism of contemporary professional academic philosophy that it's essentially irrelevant to humanity; as Carlo Cellucci correctly puts it, although perhaps also understating the problem,

[m]ost of the questions considered by today's [professional academic] philosophers are of interest only to academics working in a little corner of philosophy, not to those working in other corners of philosophy, let alone to people working in other subjects or to cultured people at large. (Cellucci, 2018: p. 14)

Now, the metaphilosophical problem of essential-irrelevance-to-humanity is also a *perennial* problem for professional academic philosophy, as John Dewey pointed out at length a year before the end of World War I (Dewey, 1917), as Arthur Schopenhauer pointed out at similar length sixty-six years earlier, in 1851, (Schopenhauer, 2014), and as Henry David Thoreau formulated it very crisply and indeed epigrammatically in 1854:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates.... It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. (Thoreau, 1957: p. 9)

Indeed, if I'm right, then the problem of the essential-irrelevance-to-humanity of professional academic philosophy goes all the way back to mid-18th century philosophy, and more specifically to Leibnizian-Wolffian Rationalist philosophy, to Kant's critical (and indeed Critical, and philosophically revolutionary) response to it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and also to Kant's little-studied long essay or short book in metaphilosophy about philosophy's relation to the professional academy, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (Kant, 1798/1992; Hanna, 2021: ch. XVIII).

Unfortunately—or perhaps, thinking presciently about the philosophy of the future, fortunately—however, the 270 year-old metaphilosophical problem of essential-irrelevance-to-humanity has reached *its final crisis stage* in contemporary professional academic philosophy.

Now, a standard response to the essential-irrelevance-to-humanity problem that's been proposed by recent and contemporary professional academic philosophers, is to wheel out what they call “public philosophy” and “popular philosophy”:

Philosophical practice is a public good and should therefore be practiced in and with various publics. Public philosophy is philosophy that has the explicit aim of benefiting public life. Public philosophy should be liberatory, i.e., it should assist and empower those who are most vulnerable and suffer injustice, particularly through a critical analysis of power structures. (Meagher and Feder, 2010: p. 9)

A civilized society has popular philosophy just as it has popular physics, popular psychology, popular history... So, one might expect the relation between popular and academic philosophy to resemble the corresponding relations for other disciplines. Thus, popular philosophy would communicate recent research in academic philosophy to a wider audience. (Williamson, 2020)

I've critically examined public philosophy and popular philosophy, and activist philosophy vs. quietist philosophy more generally, elsewhere (Hanna, 2018a, 2020a, 2020b), so I won't repeat those critical examinations here. Moreover, and most importantly, I've also presented and defended an alternative to public philosophy and popular philosophy alike, *life-shaping philosophy*, in the concrete format of a collaborative philosophical project called *The Shape of Lives to Come*, that's not only specifically designed to be essentially-relevant-to-humanity, but also *doesn't* presuppose that philosophy must be or even ought to be conducted and pursued in a way that's dependent upon or inside *either* the ivory bunker of contemporary professional academic philosophy in particular *or* the social institution of professional academic philosophy more generally (Maiese and Hanna, 2019; Hanna and Paans, 2021; Maiese et al., 2023; Hanna, 2024b). On the contrary, life-shaping philosophy in the concrete format of The Shape of Lives to Come project is specifically designed to be conducted and pursued *independently and outside of* professional academic philosophy. Correspondingly, I also won't repeat the presentation and defense of life-shaping philosophy here.

Instead, I want to raise an amazingly hard question: *what are the material conditions for the real-world implementation of life-shaping philosophy?* This question is "amazingly hard," precisely because, unlike most hard questions in philosophy, it's essentially *practical or pragmatic*, and *not* essentially conceptual or theoretical.

Nevertheless, taking this particular philosophical bull by the horns, it seems to me that *the following three material conditions need to be jointly satisfied* in order to implement life-shaping philosophy in the real world.

First, there must be a worldwide loosely-structured network of *philosophy research groups*, each one composed of a small number (say, at most 10-12) like-minded people who are all committed to the pursuit and practice of philosophy as a full-time, lifetime calling, 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.

Second, there must 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, 2024), 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 \$100.00 USD charge per year.

Third, and above all, there must 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 third condition 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 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, relevant, and extra-professional-academic philosophy are very thin on the ground indeed, and perhaps as rare as the good or honest person for whom Diogenes searched with his lamp. (—Unless, of course, *you*, the very reader of this sentence, are one such

highly generous philosophically-minded person.) Therefore, satisfying the third material condition 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 "life-shaping philosophy" as "LSP," and the phrase "someone who pursues and practices life-shaping philosophy as a full-time, lifetime calling" as "an LSP-er."

First, an LSP-er might have a dual vocation for LSP + 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 LSP: 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 LSP-er, 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 an LSP-er themselves for the rest of their life, or permanently to support only one LSP-er, 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 an LSP-er 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, 2018b: part 3), in some society or societies, then someone could use that TGUBI in order to be an LSP-er for the rest of their life.

Moreover, under any one of those five specific solutions, the members of a 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 written above, I think it's plausibly arguable *that the one-solution thesis is false*, and also *that the multiple-solutions thesis is true*. If so, then since it's really possible for all of the three material conditions for LSP to be jointly satisfied, *life-shaping philosophy is really possible*, even despite the fact that we live, and move, and have our being in a thoroughly nonideal natural and social real world.

In fact, moreover, a prototype of life-shaping philosophy already actually exists, namely, *Philosophy Without Borders*, aka PWB, a cosmopolitan group project for creating and universally freely sharing original philosophy (PWB, 2024), that has been running a blog called *Against Professional Philosophy*, aka APP, since 2013 (APP, 2013-2024; Hanna, 2020c), and also a journal called *Borderless Philosophy*, aka BP, since 2018 (BP, 2018-2024), that *roughly* satisfies the three material conditions for the real-world implementation of life-shaping philosophy. Perhaps you've never heard of either PWB, APP, or BP until this very moment. That wouldn't be terribly surprising. What matters is that they're resolutely against and radically beyond contemporary professional academic philosophy, a paradigm case of a destructive, deforming neoliberal social institution spiralling downward into the ash-heap of history (Maiese and Hanna, 2019: esp. chs. 3-4). From that ash-heap will arise the phoenix of life-shaping philosophy

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