Can Philosophers Change Their Minds?

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Can philosophers change their minds? A friend of mine in graduate school used to say that almost all contemporary philosophers, after they've completed their PhD dissertations, *never* read anything new, *never* work on anything new, and *never* change their minds about their philosophical views, for the rest of their lives. This was cynical. But cynicism, as a jaded or pessimistic attitude towards human life and (especially other) people's motives, isn't *always* exaggerated or false. And in fact, my 35 years of first-hand experience inside professional academic philosophy fully confirmed my friend's cynical claim, provided that we introduce the following seven clarifications and qualifications.

First, "almost all" means "as many as 99%—but not absolutely all." There are a few exceptions, let's say, optimistically, 1%.

Second, "never" means "*almost* never, i.e., 99% of the time, not." As before, there a few exceptions, again let's say, optimistically, 1%.

Third, "contemporary philosophers" means "contemporary professional academic philosophers."

Fourth, "read anything new" means "read any philosophy *outside* their declared areas of research specialization (AOS) and teaching expertise." To be sure, many professional academic philosophers read lots of philosophy *inside* their AOS that's either new or at least that they haven't read before And many professional academic philosophers, if they ever teach new courses, correspondingly, will probably have to read some philosophy that they haven't already read.

Fifth, "work on anything new" means "work intensively and seriously, and then also publish, on any philosophical issues, problems, or topics *outside* their AOS." Many or even most professional academic philosophers work intensively and seriously, and then also publish on problems or topics *inside* their AOS, that they haven't previously worked or published on.

Sixth, "change their minds about their philosophical views" means "change their minds about their fundamental philosophical beliefs and commitments." This especially includes not only (i) their *worldviews*, i.e., the sets of basic presuppositions with synoptic scope, that underlie all their first-order philosophical claims and first-order theories, but also (ii) their *metaphilosophy*, i.e., their higher-order basic philosophical beliefs and commitments about the nature of philosophy itself. To be sure, many or even most professional academic philosophers will occasionally change their minds about some first-order philosophical claims or theories, without changing their fundamental philosophical beliefs, especially including their worldview or their metaphilosophy. Moreover, changing one's AOS, although it's comparatively rare on its own, doesn't itself entail changing one's mind. For among those who do change their AOS, a majority of them are crafty graduate students who choose a trendy topic and AOS for the purposes of their PhD dissertations and initial job searches, and then, once they have a tenure track job or tenure in hand, switch over to an even trendier topic and AOS for the purposes of gaining higher professional academic status and/or promotion to full professor. *Those* sorts of tactics couldn't be reasonably taken to imply changes of mind in the sense I described at the beginning of this paragraph, but rather only careerist, opportunistic professional scheming.

Seventh and finally, "the rest of their lives" means "the rest of their philosophical lives." This includes the period beyond retirement, when many or even most professional academic philosophers remain more-or-less intellectually active for several decades.

So, given those clarifications and qualifications, I think it's true that as many as 99% of all contemporary professional academic philosophers, after they've completed their PhD dissertations, as much as 99% of the time don't read anything outside their AOS, as much as 99% of the time don't work on anything outside their AOS, and as much as 99% of the time don't change their minds about their fundamental philosophical beliefs and commitments—especially their worldview and their metaphilosophy—for the rest of their philosophical lives.

Moreover, in view of what I call *real philosophy*, that seems to me to be a very bad thing. Real philosophy is the wholehearted pursuit and practice of philosophy as a full-time, lifetime calling, in order to grapple with fundamental philosophical issues, problems, and topics, whether successfully or not, thereby engaging in philosophy as a collective, perennial project (Hanna, 2024a). Moreover, being a real philosopher necessarily involves, over the course of a philosophical lifetime, the propensity to read philosophy *outside* their AOS and teaching expertise (for those real philosophers working inside professional academic philosophy, that is—there are also real philosophers working outside the professional academy), the propensity to work intensively and seriously, and then also publish, on philosophical issues, problems, or topics *outside* their AOS (ditto), and the propensity to change their minds about their fundamental philosophical beliefs and commitments at least once in their philosophical lives. Indeed, as we'll see later, by way of a *non*-cynical conclusion to this essay, at least *some* contemporary professional academic philosophers—namely, the exceptional 1% that I mentioned above—after they've completed their PhD dissertations, have *actually* read new things, have *actually* worked on new things, and have *actually* changed their minds about their fundamental beliefs and commitments, especially their worldview and metaphilosophy, all for the sake of real philosophy.

But for the time being, what about the 99%? To be fair, there are at least five very strong social-institutional pressures on newly-minted PhDs *not* to read anything outside their AOS, *not* to work on anything outside their AOS, and *not* to change their minds about their fundamental philosophical beliefs and commitments, especially including their worldview and their metaphilosophy, for the rest of their philosophical lives.

First, without self-declaring an AOS by the time they've completed their dissertations, newly-minted PhDs will never get *any* sort of job, much less a *tenure track*

job, remembering of course that for the purposes of this essay, "never" means "*almost* never—i.e., 99% of the time, not."

Second, without publishing a few articles in their self-declared AOS, young philosophers will never get a tenure track job.

Third, without publishing a substantial number of articles or a book in that self-declared AOS, young philosophers in the tenure track will never achieve tenure and promotion to associate professor.

Fourth, without publishing another substantial number of new articles or another book in the very same self-declared AOS, not-so-young associate philosophers will never be promoted to full professor.

And **fifth** and finally, right from the very start of one's career, obviously one has to do some highly-focused reading on topics X, Y, and Z in order to teach courses on X, Y, and Z; and since each and every employed philosopher has been hired by a philosophy department specifically in order to teach courses on X, Y, and Z, then there's very little administrative incentive or interest in encouraging these philosophers, once hired, to change their areas of teaching expertise during the course of their careers, or indeed even to permit them to do so.

At least in principle, once someone has finally been promoted to full professor, then they could finally branch out, read new things, work on new issues, problems, and topics, and then change their minds about their fundmental beliefs and commitments. But in fact, they never do, remembering yet again that for the purposes of this essay, "never" means "*almost* never—i.e., 99% of the time, not." As a case-in-point that partially confirms that 99%, I remember chatting with a highly intelligent and philosophically very talented graduate student who was just about to start his PhD dissertation, whose real interest was in Hegelian metaphysics, but who opted instead, on his advisor's recommendation, to work on a highly technical topic in the philosophy of language, so that he could establish himself as a mainstream Analytic philosopher and get a good tenure track job. When I asked him about it, he confidentially told me that "after I get a good tenure track job and tenure, *then* I'll go back to the cool Hegelian metaphysics stuff." I nodded supportively, and said something like "yes, great plan." But that was only because I didn't have the heart to tell him what I then believed to be the truth, which was:

> "Actually and sadly, no you won't. After you have a good tenure track job and tenure, then you'll want to be promoted to full professor. But in order to get strong letters from referees in support of your application for promotion, then you'll have

> to demonstrate that you've continued to publish in your declared AOS, and have never deviated from that Shining Path. Alternatively, deviation from your self-declared AOS back to your original interest in Hegelian metaphysics would require years of intellectual re-tooling and new intensive, serious work, so that by the time you'd become a much-published specialist in your new AOS, you'd have become a member of the dreaded class of 'stalled associate professors' and either (i) never be promoted at all or (ii) be on the verge of retirement. Therefore, you'll never do it."

Unfortunately, I was right: he never did go back to Hegelian metaphysics, and to this very day he has officially remained a mainstream Analytic philosopher who works and publishes on highly technical topics in the philosophy of language.

Therefore, apart from the exceptional 1% of contemporary professional academic philosophers who *can* and *do* change their minds, the other 99% *can't*—or at least *don't*—change their minds.

Leaving aside contemporary professional academic philosophers, what about *great philosophers of the past*—by which I mean, all great philosophers now dead, from the pre-Socratics forward to 2025—many or even most of whom weren't professional academic philosophers: did any of them ever change their minds about their fundamental beliefs and commitments? Four leading examples come immediately to mind.

First, Saint Augustine's radical turn from worldly Manicheanism to ascetic Christianity, as recorded in the *Confessions* (Augustine, 401).

Second, Immanuel Kant's Hume-inspired awakening from his "dogmatic slumbers," as later recorded in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, and his corresponding radical turn from classical Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalism to transcendental idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, aka "Kant's Copernican Revolution" (Kant, 1781/1887/1997, 1783/2004).

Third, A.N. Whitehead's radical turn from logicism—i.e., the explanatory and ontological reduction of mathematics to pure logic—in *Principia Mathematica* to "the philosophy of organism," aka process philosophy, in *Science and the Modern World* and *Process and Reality* (Whitehead and Russell, 1910/1962; Whitehead, 1927/1967, 1929/1978).

And **fourth**, Ludwig Wittgenstein's radical turn from solipsistic ideal language philosophy in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the communitarian ordinary language

philosophy of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1921/1981, 1953; see also Hanna, 2017, 2021: chs. V-VIII and XI-XIV).

Generalizing over these four great philosophers' changes-of-mind, we can see three basic elements.

First, each philosopher's change-of-mind was *internally-initiated* or *self-motivated,* not *externally-initiated* or *other-motivated*. Worldviews cannot be changed solely or even primarily by engaging with other philosophers' contrary views, and especially not by means of professional academic philosophical debate—although it remains true that some philosophical progress can at least in principle be made, even in cases of fundamental philosophical disagreements (Hanna, 2025a).

Second, each change-of-mind involved the radical turn from a *reductive* or *bottom-up* worldview, to a *non-reductive* or *top-down* worldview.

And **third**, each change-of-mind involved the radical turn from a *deterministic* and *passive-minded* or *uncreative-minded* worldview, to a *non-deterministic* and *active-minded* or *creative-minded* worldview. In the cases of Augustine and Whitehead, this active-mindedness or creative-mindedness included not only *rational human* mindedness, but also *divine* mindedness.

If we expand the formulation of my initial question from "can philosophers change their minds?" to "can philosophers *or scientists* change their minds?," then we discover at least one famous case of a physicist, namely Stephen Hawking, who during the last twenty years of his life made a radical turn from the reductive or bottom-up and deterministic and passive-minded cosmology of *A Brief History of Time* to what his collaborator Thomas Hertog calls "Hawking's final theory" (Hawking, 1988; Hertog, 2023). Moreover, and most importantly for *our* purposes, Hawking's intellectual transition to his final theory clearly manifests the same three basic elements manifested by the four great philosophers' changes of mind: (i) internal initiation or self-motivation, (ii) the radical turn to a non-reductive or top-down worldview, and (iii) the radical turn to a non-deterministic and active-minded or creative-minded worldview (Hanna, 2024b: esp. ch. 15).

Of course, the fact that this basic three-element change-of-mind pattern has been shared by Augustine, Kant, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, and Hawking alike doesn't *in and of itself* guarantee that a non-reductive or top-down and non-deterministic and active-minded or creative-minded worldview is *true*. Nevertheless, I do also think that there are

good independent arguments for the truth of such worldviews (Hanna and Paans, 2020; Torday, Miller Jr, and Hanna, 2020; Hanna, 2024b).

Now, what about the exceptional 1% of contemporary professional academic philosophers? I can think of at least one famous philosopher inside the professional academy, namely, Susan Haack, and also of one philosopher-nobody outside the professional academy, namely, myself, who might qualify as having changed our minds in the relevant sense (Haack, 2025; Hanna, 2025b). So, have we indeed changed our minds in that sense?

In one sense, *no*. Over the course of our philosophical lives, after we completed our PhD dissertations, we both read philosophy outside our AOS and teaching expertise; we both worked intensively and seriously, and then also published, on philosophical issues, problems, or topics outside our AOS; and we both gradually developed and defended non-reductive or top-down and non-deterministic and active-minded or creative-minded worldviews. But we haven't actually changed our minds about *those* worldviews, yet. Therefore, although it's true that we haven't actually changed our minds in that sense, nevertheless over the course of our philosophical lives, we've both gradually come to end up in essentially the same place that Augustine, Kant, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, and Hawking ended up after their changes-of-mind.

Moreover, at least in my own case, my work has also been significantly influenced by repeatedly reading, thinking about, and writing about Kant, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein—each of them an exemplary philosophical mind-changer—over the last 45 years (Hanna, 2001, 2006, 2015, 2017, 2021: chs. chs. V-VIII and XI-XIV). So the intellectual virtues of philosophical mind-changing have been constantly on my mind.

Correspondingly, at the same time, in another sense, *yes*. Both Haack and I have indeed *metaphilosophically* changed our minds, from being *for* professional academic philosophy, to being *against* professional academic philosophy—i.e., from being, as it were, card-carrying members of professional academic philosophy, to being serious critics of professional academic philosophy—and that has ultimately made all the difference in our subsequent philosophical lives (Haack, 1996/1998, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022; Z aka Hanna, 2013-2025; Hanna, forthcoming), for better or worse.

For the sake of argument, let's assume that it was for better in both cases. Then I non-cynically conclude that *all* living philosophers, whether inside professional academic philosophy or outside professional academic philosophy, not only can but also ought to change their minds, or at least ought seriously to consider changing their minds, at least *once* in their philosophical lives, about their fundamental philosophical beliefs and

commitments, especially including their worldview or their metaphilosophy, for the sake of real philosophy. If they're inside professional academic philosophy, then it probably won't help their careers or professional social status. But to hell with all that. It's not what actually matters in the long run, after you're retired, dead, and gone, and everyone has completely forgotten who worked in the most prestigious departments at the most prestigious universities, and who was The Blinkety Blankety Professor of Philosophy there, as opposed to being The Clinkety Clankety Professor of Philosophy somewhere else. For *philosophia longa*, *vita brevis*—i.e., real philosophy is long, but "human, all-too-human" life is short (Hanna, 2024a).

Indeed, if Haack and I are right, then our collective change-of-mind from being *for* professional academic philosophy, to being *against* professional academic philosophy, plays not only the highly important contemporary Cassandran role of bearing witness to the decline-&-fall of contemporary professional academic philosophy, but also the even more important, and indeed essential, contemporary Promethean role of becoming and being the vanguard of the philosophy of the future. In this way, philosophical *mind*-changing can also be philosophical *game*-changing.

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