

# *Philosophia Longa, Vita Brevis*

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“The Death of Socrates by Means of the APA,” by Q (APP, 2013a),  
after “The Death of Socrates,” by Jacques-Louis David (1787)

Compressed into four words, here’s what I want to argue in this essay: *philosophia longa, vita brevis*. That neologized Latin aphorism means: “philosophy is long, life is short.” Of course, I’m riffing on the classical aphorism *ars longa, vita brevis*, which means “art is long, life is short.” We shouldn’t assume, however, that in this classical aphorism, the Latin word “*ars*” means *fine art*; instead, more broadly and more inclusively, its intended meaning is *applied art, craft, or practical art*. According to the online *Art and Popular Culture Encyclopedia*,

[a]rs longa, vita brevis are the first two lines of a Latin translation of an aphorism by Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates. The words are commonly translated in English as art is long, life is short. The full text in Latin is:

Ars longa,  
vita brevis,

occasio praeceps,  
experimentum periculosum,  
iudicium difficile.

In this commonly found Latin translation, the first two statements have been switched from the Greek original.

The full text is often rendered in English as:

[The] art is long,  
life is short,  
opportunity fleeting,  
experiment dangerous,  
judgment difficult.

The most common and significant caveat in this translation is that “art” (Template:Lang-la, Template:Lang-grc (techne)) is interpreted as “technique, craft” (as in *The Art of War*), not “fine art”, Hippocrates being a doctor and this being the start of a medical text. The following line “The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate,” makes the medical context clear.

The Latin is more clearly recognizable, but less idiomatic, using English terms descended from the Latin:

Art [is] long,  
vitality [is] brief,  
occasion precipitous,  
experiment perilous,  
judgment difficult. (APCE, 2026)

With due attention paid to the historical and textual context of *ars longa, vita brevis*, then, what it means is that any authentic applied art, craft, or practical art—like medicine, for example—is a *calling*, a *discipline*, and a *perennial project* that cannot and should not be forced, against its proper nature, into any procrustean compliance with and subjection to what A.N. Whitehead so aptly called “the goading urgencies of contingent happenings” (Whitehead, 1925/1967: p. 25).

Now, assuming my interpretation of *ars longa, vita brevis*, I also want to assert that *not only* does this classical aphorism have a salient measure of truth in it, *but also* that, metaphilosophically speaking, *philosophia longa, vita brevis* is even truer and indeed *highly importantly true*, provided that by the Latin term “philosophia” we mean *real philosophy*.

And that's because there are four significantly different, but equally important, metaphilosophical senses in which it's true that real philosophy is long, but life is short.

But before getting to those four metaphilosophical senses, for clarity's sake I'll quote the definition and explication of the term "real philosophy" from the 2013 Introduction to the blog *Against Professional Philosophy*:

By *real philosophy*, we 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 we 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! 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. (APP, 2013b)

The authors of that Introduction then go on to make it clear that real philosophy is to be understood especially by sharp contrast with *professional academic philosophy*, because, as the next paragraph says:

In view of this conception of real philosophy, we also share some serious worries about contemporary professional academic philosophy. More bluntly put, we think that professional philosophy is seriously fucked up in various ways that, ironically and even tragically, oppose and undermine the ongoing project of real philosophy. (APP, 2013b; see also Hanna, 2022)

Since I'm one of the authors of that Introduction—aka Z—then it's probably not too surprising that I fully endorse this conception of real philosophy.

Now, what are the four significantly different but equally important metaphilosophical senses in which it's true that real philosophy is long, but life is short?

**First**, real philosophy is *inherently a full-time, lifetime calling, and not a mere career or a job* (see also Haack, 2021).

Careers and jobs inevitably enslave people to the ideologies, coercive authoritarian rules of conduct, professional incentives especially including social status, and wages that inevitably flow from those careers and jobs (see also Schmidt, 2000). But real philosophy is inherently opposed to any sort of intellectual, caring-driven (i.e., felt, desiderative, and emotional), or practical slavery, and is autonomous and emancipatory to the core.

**Second**, real philosophy as a collective project *inherently outlasts the lifespan of any one individual philosopher*.

Even though individual real philosophers inevitably die, and therefore must existentially come to terms with this brute fact, nevertheless as an inherently intersubjective, inherently social-institutional, and inherently spatiotemporally extended—i.e., spread out everywhere and everywhen—enterprise, real philosophy is also inherently inexhaustible with respect to the total rational human condition.

**Third**, real philosophy *inherently takes a maximally synoptic, wide-scope view of the rational human condition in this thoroughly nonideal natural and social world*.

Narrowly-focused, hyperspecialized inquiries and claims, whatever their applicability and truth-value within their own restricted domains, all inevitably fall short of comprehending the total rational human condition.

**Fourth** and finally, real philosophy *is an inherently painstaking, slowly-unfolding, and time-consuming intellectual, caring-driven, and practical activity that cannot be adequately compressed into any easily marketable bite-sized units for popular consumption*.

This is not to say that real philosophy cannot be expressed as aphorisms—after all, *philosophia longa, vita brevis* is itself an aphorism—or effectively presented in other ways, for example, in emotionally compelling artworks,<sup>1</sup> but instead only that the adequate,

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<sup>1</sup> An excellent and indeed paradigmatic example of the concrete, intuitive presentation of real philosophy in an artistic and more specifically literary format is Harriet Beacher Stowe's world-changing novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852/2001; see also Gordon-Reed, 2011). In my opinion, the main reason why *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so spectacularly persuasive was that Stowe was able to put a human face on abstract fundamental moral concepts—human dignity and dignitarian morality and politics (see Hanna, 2023a,

complete, and full philosophical explication and defense of the implications and meanings of those aphorisms and effective presentations, is an inherently painstaking, slowly-unfolding, and time-consuming activity.

As a consequence, it's a sad and sobering but undeniable fact that many or even most people, especially including many or even most contemporary professional academic philosophers, simply don't possess the flexibility of mind, gumption, patience, rational stick-to-it-iveness, and at once passionate-and-stoical wholeheartedness that are required for real philosophy, and inevitably find it boring, exhausting, frustrating, incomprehensible, socially unrewarding, and/or risible, not to mention morally or politically dangerous and threatening. A perfect and highly prescient example of this from the history of philosophy is what happened to Socrates.

Of course, real philosophy can convey many different kinds of content and be expressed in many different specific formats. My own preferred version of real philosophy, not only content-wise but also format-wise, is what I call *rational anthropology* (Hanna, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). In terms that are directly relevant to our existential, moral, and political predicament in 2026, rational anthropology is inherently the kind of philosophy that *cannot* be practiced or replicated by Large Language Models (LLMs) or chatbots, or for that matter, by digital replicas of famous Analytic philosophers generated by LLMs/chatbots, or by even the world's most sophisticated future robots, *not even in principle* (Hanna, 2024, 2025). This is because rational anthropology is not only epistemically, metaphysically, and practically grounded on, but also it's all about, a unified set of essentially embodied rational human innate capacities whose activation consists in the *authentically creative* performance of cognitive, affective/emotional, and practical *uncomputable functions*. And this is true, even despite the brute fact that we're always and everywhere only "human, all-too-human"—that is, finite, fallible, and throughly normatively imperfect in every other way too. Indeed, it's true partially *because of* that brute fact, since our authentically creative real free will and practical agency is necessarily predicated on our rational human animal capacity for freely making good *or* bad choices and freely performing good *or* bad acts (Hanna, 2018b, 2018c).

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2023b)—so that people could grasp them emotionally and immediately, without requiring arguments. In this respect, her novel and its massive impact were very like Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*. To be sure, the leading characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are sentimentalized and oversimplified—as are Dickens's leading characters; but that was necessary for securing the direct emotional literary-moral-political effect Stowe intended. Correspondingly, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century readers who are offended by *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* supposed racial stereotypes—are not only being anachronistic and moralistic but also displaying a serious failure of historical and moral imagination.

By way of concluding, I think it's essential to recognize that the four significantly different but equally important metaphilosophical senses in which it's true that real philosophy is long, but life is short, each illuminate distinct aspects of a single often-unnoticed yet fundamental metaphilosophical truth: real philosophy is *neither* a fine art, *nor* a science, but instead a unique kind of applied art, craft, or practical art that consists in pursuing and practicing *radical enlightenment*. And this of course brings us back to the intended meaning of "*ars*" in *ars longa, vita brevis*.

So what, more precisely, is the applied art, craft, or practical art of radical enlightenment? Here's how the authors of the 2013 Introduction to *Against Professional Philosophy* spelled it out, which I think is even more cogent, relevant, and timely today and in the foreseeable future than it was thirteen years ago:

Another, more classical way of stating the purpose of *Against Professional Philosophy* is that it is essentially the same as Kant's, in the justly famous opening sentences of "What is Enlightenment?" —

"Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from [their] own self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding! is thus the motto of Enlightenment."

In other words, we think that it's up to all of us, as lovers of real philosophy, to dare to think for ourselves against the conventional wisdom of contemporary professional academic philosophy. But that's only the beginning. We hope to help contemporary philosophers, whether inside or outside the professional academy, to (re)discover their true vocation as *rational rebels for humanity* —

"When nature has unwrapped, from under this hard shell, the seed for which she cares most tenderly, namely the propensity and calling to think freely, the latter gradually works back upon the mentality of the people (which thereby gradually becomes capable of freedom in acting) and eventually even upon the principles of government, which finds it profitable to itself to treat the human being, who is now more than a machine, in keeping with [their] dignity." (APP, 2013b; see also Kant, 1784/1996: pp. 17, 22 [Ak 8: 35, 41-42])

In other words, radical enlightenment is *daring to think, feel, and act for yourself, in an explicitly and fully dignitarian and radically universalist moral and sociopolitical setting* (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b; see also Boehm, 2025). So, less pithily but more unpacked, I'm saying that *philosophia longa, vita brevis* means "real-philosophy-as-rational-anthropology-&-dignitarian-radical-enlightenment is long, life is short." And I'm strongly recommending

a life lived according to this conception of real philosophy, no matter what the conventional wisdom about such matters might be.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I'm grateful to Matti Vesa Volanen for reminding me to make the dignitarian component of real philosophy as I'm conceiving of it, more explicit; and I'm also grateful to Mark Pittenger for drawing my attention to (Gordon-Reed, 2011) and thereby reminding me that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a paradigmatic example of the concrete, intuitive presentation of real philosophy in an artistic, literary format.

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