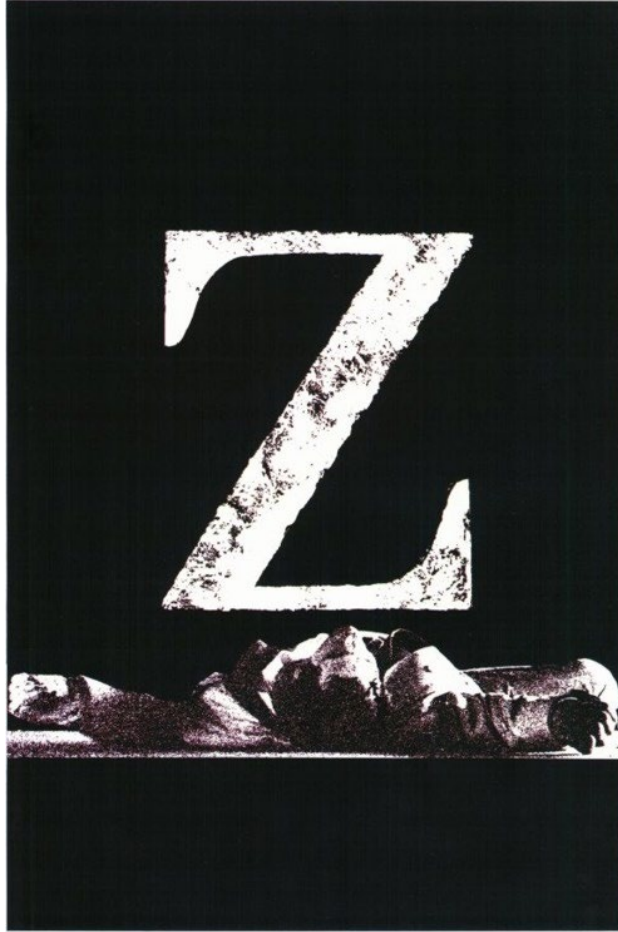


Philosophical Rigor as Rigor Mortis, *Or*, How to Write a Publishable Paper Without Even Having to Think

Z



(Costa-Gavras, 1969)

An earlier and exclusively online version of this essay was written and published in 2015 by the pseudonymous independent philosopher Z (Z, 2015), hence it appeared roughly five years prior to the “invasion of the chatbots,” i.e., the apocalyptic, revolutionary appearance of ChatGPT and other Large Language Models (LLMs). Hence some of the images and references are at least ten years out of date. But the core points of the essay seem to me essentially the same, whether professional academic philosophers (i) merely *act like machines*, or (ii) actually *turn over the work of philosophical thinking and writing to digital technology*. Indeed, it’s arguable that mainstream professional academic philosophy, especially including contemporary Analytic philosophy, could be done by chatbots (Hanna, 2025). So I’ve decided to create a slightly updated version of Z’s essay

from 2015, with many or most of the anachronisms left in place, and post a downloadable .pdf version on Academia.edu. What follows is that slightly updated version.

My anarcho-philosophical attention was recently drawn to a very interesting blog post, by Marcus Arvan, “Has Contemporary Philosophy Over-Fetishized Rigor?” (Arvan, 2012). By “rigor” Arvan means, and I also mean, analytical clarity, consistency, a preparedness to give reasons for one’s claims, attention to validity in arguments, and a preparedness to defend one’s claims and arguments against actual or possible rational critics.

It’s hard to see how *over*-fetishizing philosophical rigor could be much worse than simply *fetishizing* philosophical rigor. But anyhow, leaving that bit of logic-chopping aside, as I understand them, Arvan’s basic claims are: (i) that as examples from the Great philosophers amply show, big, original ideas are infinitely more important than mere philosophical rigor, and (ii) that contemporary professional academic philosophy fetishizes, i.e., excessively valorizes, rigor, especially in the areas of intersubjective/public philosophical interaction, publication-standards, and philosophical reputation/status, to its significant detriment, even to the point of killing real philosophy. So philosophical rigor, fetishized, is *philosophical rigor mortis*.

I agree with all that completely. But I would also want to add two things.

First, the definition of “rigor,” as I intended it, means minimally adequate analytical clarity, minimally adequate consistency, a minimally adequate preparedness to give reasons for one’s claims, minimally adequate attention to validity in arguments, and a minimally adequate preparedness to defend one’s claims and arguments against actual or possible rational critics. In short, “rigor” in this *non*-fetishized sense is essentially equivalent with what I’ll call “low-bar” or nonideal cognitive rationality. As such, rigor in this non-fetishized sense is in no way special or unique to philosophy, and it is arguably built into our natural language competence, as a guiding norm.

Second, I think that much or even most of what passes for “rigor” in contemporary philosophy is in fact (i) an ability, learned in graduate school, to ape the formal and exact sciences, with excessive and even obsessive attention to the look of formal and experimental methods, when this is combined with (ii) a further resentment-driven need to devastate and deeply embarrass one’s philosophical colleagues, construed as competitors for success and status in the great zero-sum, winner-takes-all, professional academic Philosophy-Game, and (iii) this culture of philosophy-gaming is accepted as the normative ideal of the discipline by amply rewarding those who win the Game with jobs at the most highly-ranked universities in the most highly-ranked philosophy

departments, high-paying salaries, “named” professorships, prestigious fellowships and other prizes, etc.

To support this second set of contentions, I offer the following slightly satirical thought-experiment. By “slightly satirical thought-experiment,” I mean that the imaginary scenario I will present differs only *a little bit* from the actual world. You may even recognize some of the usual suspects. In any case, the question it raises is this:

Am I right that following the steps I will describe would enable any contemporary professional philosopher, including all PhD students in philosophy, and most MA students and undergraduate specialists in philosophy who desire and/or intend to become full-fledged professional academic philosophers, to write a paper that is publishable in a reputable professional journal, or am I right?

WELCOME TO THE PHILPAPERS/PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET/LEITER REPORTS AMAZING ONLINE PUBLISHABLE- PAPER-GENERATING SYSTEM

Hi Philosopher!

I'm David Chalmers!



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And I'm the one and only Berit Brogaard!



and I'm Brian Leiter!



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1. Philosophical Review
2. Journal of Philosophy
3. Nous
4. Mind
5. Philosophy & Phenomenological Research
6. Ethics
7. Philosophical Studies
8. Australasian Journal of Philosophy
9. Philosopher's Imprint
10. Analysis
11. Philosophical Quarterly
12. Philosophy & Public Affairs
13. Philosophy of Science
14. British Journal for the Philosophy of Science

15. Synthese
16. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society
17. Erkenntnis
18. American Philosophical Quarterly
19. Canadian Journal of Philosophy
20. Journal of the History of Philosophy
21. Journal of Philosophical Logic
22. Mind & Language
23. Pacific Philosophical Quarterly
24. European Journal of Philosophy
25. British Journal for the History of Philosophy. (Leiter Reports, 2013)

virtually* = this protects us against lawsuits

Hey philosopher! Are you ready to say *yay!* again, like this?



And are you now ready to write that PUBLISHABLE paper? All set? GO!

STEP 1: Go to the results of the AMAZING and TRUE, because SCIENTIFICALLY-conducted, 2009 PHILPAPERS SURVEY of contemporary professional philosophers at the LEADING DEPARTMENTS (PhilPapers, 2009a), and then find the TWO MOST ACCEPTABLE traditions in contemporary professional philosophy (PhilPapers, 2009b), namely, ANALYTIC and CONTINENTAL.

You'll find that the tradition ANALYTIC is favored by 81% (2486 out of 3057) of contemporary professional philosophers at the LEADING departments. Are YOU an analytic philosopher? Yes of course you are!

But even if you're not one yet, you CAN be an analytic philosopher, if you really WANT to be, just by being RIGOROUS!



Therefore, select ANALYTIC.

STEP 2: Still in the PHILPAPERS survey, on the Demographic Statistics page (PhilPapers, 2009b), find the list of the THIRTY MOST ACCEPTABLE primary areas of specialization in contemporary professional philosophy, rank-ordered by the scientifically-rigorous method of POPULARITY:

1. Philosophy of Mind
2. Metaphysics
3. Epistemology
4. Philosophy of Language
4. Normative Ethics
5. Social and Political Philosophy
6. Meta-Ethics
7. 17th/18th Century Philosophy
8. Logic and Philosophy of Logic
9. Ancient Greek Philosophy
10. Philosophy of Cognitive Science
11. General Philosophy of Science
12. Philosophy of Physical Science
13. Continental Philosophy
14. Applied Ethics
15. Philosophy of Action
16. Philosophy of Religion
17. Aesthetics
18. Philosophy of Biology
19. 20th Century Philosophy
20. 19th Century Philosophy
21. Philosophy of Law
22. Philosophy of Mathematics
23. Philosophy of Social Science
24. Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy
25. Metaphilosophy
26. Decision Theory
27. Philosophy of Probability
28. Asian Philosophy
29. Philosophy of Computing and Information
30. Philosophy of Gender, Race, and Sexuality

STEP 3: Still in the PHILPAPERS survey on the Demographic Statistics page (PhilPapers, 2009b), find out WHICH FIVE of the THIRTY MOST ACCEPTABLE primary areas of specialization are MOST favored by contemporary professional philosophers at the LEADING departments, namely

PHILOSOPHY OF MIND,
METAPHYSICS,
EPISTEMOLOGY,
PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE, and
NORMATIVE ETHICS,

—Not to be confused with META-ETHICS or APPLIED ETHICS or SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY! No way René!

Now select ONE of the FIVE MOST ACCEPTABLE specializations. For example, select PHILOSOPHY OF MIND.

STEP 4: Go to the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET and find the list of the TOP TEN PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENTS—which is really the TOP TWELVE (oh boy, those analytic philosophers sure know how to count!)—in the overall rankings (Philosophical Gourmet, 2026a).

1. New York University
2. Princeton University
3. Rutgers University, New Brunswick
4. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
5. Yale University
6. Harvard University
7. University of Pittsburgh
8. Stanford University
9. University of Southern California
10. Columbia University (incl. Barnard)
11. University of California, Berkeley
12. University of California, Los Angeles

STEP 5: Still in the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET REPORT, starting with the Advisory Board list (Philosophical Gourmet, 2026b), find any one of the members of the Board that belongs to one of the TOP TWELVE philosophy departments.

For example, Ned Block, New York University.

STEP 6: Still in the Advisory Board list in the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET REPORT (Philosophical Gourmet, 2025b) click on the names of those who belong to one of the TOP TWELVE departments until you find one who lists PHILOSOPHY OF MIND, METAPHYSICS, EPISTEMOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE, or NORMATIVE ETHICS or as a primary specialization, corresponding to the one you chose in STEP 3.

For example, choose Ned Block again!

STEP 7: Find the most recent article by that person in one of the TOP TWENTY-FIVE HIGHLY REPUTABLE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY JOURNALS listed above, for example,

Ned Block, "Seeing-As in the Light of Vision Science," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89 (2014): 560-572.

Now download that article.

Isn't information technology AMAZING? Especially in philosophy!

STEP 8: Using the topic of that article as a starting point, for example,

PHILOSOPHY OF MIND or PHILOSOPHY OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE,

now select the answers most favored by contemporary professional philosophers at the LEADING departments, to the most directly relevant questions for that topic (PhilPapers, 2009c), for example,

External world: idealism, skepticism, or non-skeptical realism?

Accept or lean toward: non-skeptical realism 760 / 931 (81.6%)

Other 86 / 931 (9.2%)

Accept or lean toward: skepticism 45 / 931 (4.8%)

Accept or lean toward: idealism 40 / 931 (4.3%)

Mental content: internalism or externalism?

Accept or lean toward: externalism 476 / 931 (51.1%)

Other 269 / 931 (28.9%)

Accept or lean toward: internalism 186 / 931 (20.0%)

Mind: physicalism or non-physicalism?

Accept or lean toward: physicalism 526 / 931 (56.5%)

Accept or lean toward: non-physicalism 252 / 931 (27.1%)

Other 153 / 931 (16.4%)

Now simply *adopt* the majority views on those positions, for example, non-skeptical realism, externalism, and physicalism. See? Now you're a non-skeptical realist, externalist, and physicalist in the philosophy of mind! You can tell this to your philosophical friends! And your philosophical enemies! In fact, don't you already feel in your bones that idealists, internalists, and non-physicalists are all really, really STUPID?

More generally, it's amazing that you don't even have to think about what your favored views mean, much less defend them with reasons! They're the majority views!

Isn't professional academic philosophy *easy-peasy*?



And so RIGOROUS too!



STEP 9: Now go back to the article you found in STEP 7, for example

Ned Block, "Seeing-As in the Light of Vision Science," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89 (2014): 560-572.

Go to the Introduction of the article you have chosen, and find its central claim, for example:

I will discuss the issue of what we see, using the framework of Tyler Burge's wonderful and monumental book *Origins of Objectivity* (Burge 2010).

On Burge's view, every percept is constituted by a "perceptual attributive" (that represents an attribute) and a singular element (that represents an individual). The format of a percept is map-like or iconic, and could be symbolized as "That F." The most basic perceptual judgments and beliefs are conceptualized and propositionalized versions of percepts in which the attributive need not be bound to a time and place."

Now, you simply negate the main thesis and assert some denial of what the author wants to argue, for example, you write:

According to Block and Burge, every percept is constituted by a “perceptual attributive” (that represents an attribute) and a singular element (that represents an individual). The format of a percept is map-like or iconic, and could be symbolized as “That F”. The most basic perceptual judgments and beliefs are conceptualized and propositionalized versions of percepts in which the attributive need not be bound to a time and place.

In this essay, I will argue that *NOT* every percept is constituted by a perceptual attributive and a singular elements that represents an individual, that it is *NOT* the case that the format of every percept is map-like or iconic, and also that the most basic perceptual judgments and beliefs are *NOT* conceptualized and propositionalized versions of percepts in which the attributive need not be bound to a time and place.

But you don’t have to capitalize the word “not”!



STEP 10: Now summarize the main points of the article, listing them from point 1 to point *n*.

Then, making sure that you’re still not thinking about what you’re doing, but being careful NEVER EVER to write anything that is inconsistent with the popular positions

you selected and adopted in STEP 8—for example, anti-skeptical realism, externalism, and physicalism—then criticize any one of the main points listed in 1-*n*, either (i) by finding an external inconsistency with one of your favored views, or (ii) by finding an internal inconsistency with any of the other points in the article, or (iii) by claiming that any of the points or any of the reasons given in support of the points, is under-supported, or (iv) by claiming that any of the points fails to follow validly from the reasons given in the paper, or (v) by claiming that any of the points or any of the reasons given for those points doesn't conform to some experimental results in contemporary natural science.

It doesn't matter which criticism you adopt! Or be wild and crazy and extra-RIGOROUS: use ALL the criticisms!

But in any case, if option (v) is selected, then go and find, and cite, some recent empirical studies with similar words in the title. No need to read them! Just read their abstracts and make sure that they can be interpreted as asserting something different from what the author of your article (for example, Ned Block) is asserting.

Now that's RIGOR for you!

STEP 11: Make sure that your criticisms are footnoted by citing some articles published within the last ten to thirty years, by any of the people who run PHILPAPERS, the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET, and/or the LEITER REPORTS, or their five avatars, for example,



or any other other people on the Advisory Board of the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET, listed on its home page, for example, one of the two David Chalmers:



Or the one and only Berit Brogaard:



But if any of the people you want to cite are NOT one or another of the people who run PHILPAPERS, the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET, and/or the LEITER REPORTS, or any of the other other people on the Advisory Board of the PHILOSOPHY GOURMET, then you can also choose someone who is a member of one of the TOP TWELVE philosophy departments listed in STEP 4, who lists as her/his area of specialization the area you selected in STEP 6, and ALSO has a VERY cool-looking picture on his/her departmental home-page, for example:



But—and this is really, really important!—NEVER EVER cite any article or book published before 1985, and ideally, cite ONLY articles or books published within the last ten years, i.e., since 2005.

STEP 12: Break your paper into numbered sections. Make sure that there is an Introduction section in which you say that you’re going to show that, for example, Block (and/or Burge) is mistaken in the article you’ve chosen to criticize in the article you’ve selected in STEP 7, for example,

Ned Block, “Seeing-As in the Light of Vision Science,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89 (2014): 560-572,

for the reasons you will spell out in the body of the paper.

And above all, make sure that your paper IS NOT LONGER than 25 pages! Referees at the TOP TWENTY-FIVE MOST HIGHLY REPUTABLE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY JOURNALS are very *busy* people with very *short* attention spans!

STEP 13: MOST importantly of all, when writing your paper, make sure that you do NOT introduce any BIG or NEW ideas of your own. This will only get you in trouble with the referees! In addition to to being very *busy* people with very short attention spans, they also HATE big or new ideas, because they are NOT rigorous!

To guarantee this, DON’T THINK about any of the larger issues, if any, raised by the paper.

For example, DON’T THINK about the implications of what you are writing for anti-skeptical realism, externalism, or physicalism!

If this begins to happen, then put on your headphones, then go to YouTube and listen to and watch the original version of DEVO’s classic cover of “Secret Agent Man” (Devo, 2026), as loud as you can stand it, with your eyes wide open staring at the screen of your smart phone, laptop, or pad, until the thoughts disappear.

Think ONLY either about DEVO or else about following our amazing TWENTY-STEP ALGORITHM!

STEP 14: Conclude your paper by repeating, in slightly different words, what you asserted in the Introduction to your paper, for example,

In this paper, I argued that some percepts are not constituted by a perceptual attributive, that some percepts have a format that is not map-like or iconic, and that the some of the most basic perceptual judgments and beliefs are non-conceptual and non-propositional.

STEP 15: Now add a clever, punning title for the paper, using the title of the original article you selected in STEP 7 as a guide, for example,

“Blinded by the Light: How Vision Science Actually Shows that not All Seeing is Seeing-As.”

STEP 16: Show the penultimate draft of your paper to at least ONE of the people who run PHILPAPERS, the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET, and/or the LEITER REPORTS, or to any of the other people on the Advisory Board of the PHILOSOPHICAL GOURMET, listed on its home page, or to someone at one of the TOP TWELVE philosophy departments, provided that they list as a primary area of specialization, one or another of the sub-disciplinary areas that overlaps with the topic of the article you selected in STEP 7, for example,

PHILOSOPHY OF MIND or PHILOSOPHY OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE,

one of the two David Chalmers:





Or the one and only Berit Brogaard:



Or someone else equally cool or even cooler:



and have them RIGOROUSLY CRITICIZE YOUR RIGOROUS CRITICISM of that article. Revise your paper accordingly, doing EXACTLY what they tell you to do, and then thank them politely in the Acknowledgments!

STEP 17: Submit your paper to one of the TOP TWENTY-FIVE MOST HIGHLY REPUTABLE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY JOURNALS, for example,

1. Philosophical Review
2. Journal of Philosophy
3. Nous
4. Mind
5. Philosophy & Phenomenological Research.

Don't be afraid to THINK BIG, professional-philosophy-journal-wise!, even when you don't have to think philosophically!

STEP 18: Now sit back and wait for your paper to be ACCEPTED WITHOUT REVISION, or receive a REVISE-AND-RESUBMIT judgment.

The former is quite rare! because even though the referees at the TOP TWENTY-FIVE MOST HIGHLY REPUTABLE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY JOURNALS are very *busy* people with very *short* attention spans, they don't at all mind forcing you to use up your MUCH LESS valuable time repeating back to them what they've told you to write!

So if, as is most likely, you receive a REVISE-AND-RESUBMIT judgment, then just repeat back to them what they've told you to write!

Then thank them VERY politely in the Acknowledgments!

Then resubmit your paper!

Then go into the nearest park and just kick back, relax, and wait for your paper to be accepted!, like this:



Above all, DON'T THINK about what you've written! Forget it! Just enjoy the park and the sunshine!



STEP 19: As soon as you've received your acceptance letter from one of the TOP TWENTY-FIVE MOST HIGHLY REPUTABLE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY JOURNALS, then list the acceptance on your *Curriculum Vitae*, and post the penultimate draft on your departmental or personal website.



STEP 20: Now you're professionally successful and truly happy!

POSTSCRIPT: In further confirmation of one of the main points I'm satirically making—that much of what is published in the Leading or even Not-So-Leading Professional Journals is merely cleverly done-by-rote, hyper-scholastic, and ultimately philosophically trivial—see also Daniel Dennett's lovely essay in critical metaphilosophy, "Higher Order Truths about Chess" (Dennett, 2006).

But my other main point is even stronger than Dennett's. What I'm saying is that nowadays, and for the foreseeable future, succeeding at some or another version of

“chmess” (aka, The Glass Bead Game) is and will continue to be *the leading normative ideal of contemporary professional academic philosophy*, and that therefore *some serious alternative to contemporary professional academic philosophy* is most urgently required (see, e.g., Hanna, 2024).¹

¹ I’m grateful to Simone Mahrenholz for encouraging me to update and share this essay.

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