

Philosophy Professionalized: How We Killed the Thing We Loved

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[T]he main benefit [of university philosophy] might be that many a young and capable mind will be introduced to and inspired to study philosophy. Meanwhile it must be admitted that whoever has talent for it and thus is in need of it, might very well encounter it and get to know it in other ways. For things that love and are born for one another converge easily; kindred souls greet each other already from afar. Any book of a genuine philosopher that falls into the hands of such people will excite them more strongly and effectively than is possible through the lecture of an academic philosopher of the garden-variety.... [I]n general I have gradually formed the opinion that the benefit of academic philosophy just mentioned is outweighed by the disadvantage that philosophy as a profession produces for philosophy as the free search for truth, and that philosophy by government order imposes on philosophy practised on behalf of nature and humanity. (Schopenhauer, 1851/2014: p. 125)

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold:
The kindest use a knife, because
The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,
Yet each man does not die. (Wilde, 1898)

We, the writer and readers of this essay, are all either philosophers or philosophically-minded people, yes?, and also, I take it, what we all fell in love with when we first encountered philosophy is “real philosophy”:

By *real philosophy*, we mean authentic, serious, synoptic, systematic reflection on the individual and collective human condition, and on the natural and social world in which human 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 exact sciences, and non-reductively incorporates aesthetic, artistic, affective/emotional, ethical/moral, 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 human existence in the natural cosmos, and how it is possible to know the philosophical limits of science, without also being anti-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 their work, through publication, teaching, or public conversation (APP, 2013-2025).

If that’s not what you mean by “real philosophy,” then please substitute your own definition—for example, Arthur Schopenhauer’s, as per the first epigraph of this essay, according to which genuine philosophy is “the free search for truth,” or Wilfrid Sellars’s, according to which philosophy is “understanding how things in the broadest sense of that term, hang together in the broadest sense of that term” (Sellars, 1963: p. 1), or what

Susan Haack calls “serious philosophy” and “philosophy as a calling” (Haack, 2016, 2021), whose primary aim is also the free search for truth.

Indeed, my argument in this essay will work pretty much no matter what you mean by “real philosophy,” provided that (i) it’s at least in the spirit of classical or perennial philosophy as formulated by Schopenhauer, Sellars, and Haack, (ii) hence it’s animated by the sincere and wholehearted search for truth, (iii) it’s rationally critical but not skeptical, and (iv) it’s directly opposed to what I call *professional academic philosophy*. On the other hand, if you think “real philosophy” is necessarily equivalent to professional academic philosophy, and if you somehow or another loved professional academic philosophy even when you first got into philosophy, then I’m strongly tempted to say, *you’ve killed the thing you loved*. More generally, the main thesis of this essay is that since at least the beginning of the 20th century (and if Schopenhauer is right, then since the mid-19th century), but especially since the end of World War II, real philosophy, the thing we all loved, has been killed by professional academic philosophy.

What is “professionalism”? It includes at least six necessary elements (see also Schmidt, 2000).

First, professionalism implies being engaged in a specific activity as one’s paid (usually full-time) occupation or practice. As a paid occupation or practice in the context of the modern and contemporary world, professionalism directly entails capitalism, neoliberalism, and technocracy.

Second, professionalism is the contrary of amateurism, in the sense that amateurs are not paid to engage in the specific activity they truly love. Amateurs engage in that activity for its own sake, whereas professionals do it for the money. Of course, many professionals love what they do, but, sadly, virtually all professionals would stop engaging in that activity if they weren’t paid for it and therefore are doing for the sake of being paid. Plato called this “sophistry.”

Third, professionalism implies the end of one’s apprenticeship, hence in order to become a professional there is an extended process of training, ending in the possession of a certain competence or skill, by which virtue of which one becomes a fully-licensed, paid practitioner.

Fourth, professionalism implies that there is a governing body, or collection of such governing bodies, that determines the training program and licensing procedures, as well as certain codes and standards by which one competently and skillfully conducts one’s licensed, paid occupation or practice.

Fifth, these licensing procedures, codes, and standards are used by that governing body or collection of governing bodies as devices to control the means of production relevant to that specific activity, and also the services provided by the practitioners engaged in that specific activity.

Sixth, this governing body or collection of governing bodies possesses coercive power with respect to the enforcement of that profession's licensing, codes, and standards, and with respect to the control of that profession's means of production and provision of services.

What is an "academic"? An academic is a teacher, scholar, and/or researcher in a university or other institute of higher education, for example, a public or state university, or a liberal arts college, but also any social institution committed to higher education and the search for truth. Not necessarily all academics are professionals (say, the members of Plato's Academy), and not necessarily all professionals are academics (for example, most doctors and lawyers).

By a "State-like institution," I mean any institution that issues commands regardless of the moral content of those commands, claims the right to issue such commands, and possesses the coercive power to compel obedience to these commands. In practice, every command-issuing institution that has its own gun-carrying police force or security guards, is a State-like institution. Hence all colleges and universities are "States," in this extended sense. The total collection of these is what I call *The Professional Academic State*.

Since the beginning of the 20th century at least, but especially since the end of World War II, virtually all philosophers have been professional academics in all six senses of professionalism, living, and moving, and having their occupational and practical being inside The Professional Academic State.

More precisely, since the beginning of the 20th century at least, but especially since the end of World War II, (i) virtually all philosophers have been professional academics, (ii) virtually all of them would not do philosophy unless they were paid, (iii) the widgets that professional philosophers relentlessly produce in their academic factories are publications, (iv) the primary competence or skill that is acquired by professional academic philosophers through their process of training is critical analysis and formally valid, rhetorically persuasive argumentation or logical reasoning, detached from substantive content, (v) the full process of training for professional philosophers terminates in the writing and defense of a dissertation, for which they receive a PhD, which in turn gives them a license to practice, (vi) the primary service that professional

philosophers provide to larger society is teaching undergraduates how to criticize effectively and argue well, with a working knowledge of the full set of debater's tricks known as "informal fallacies," so that, as soon as possible after graduation, these young people, with huge smiley faces like these—



and "critical reasoning skills" ideologically hammered into their brains, will enter the workforce of the capitalist, neoliberal, and technocratic world economy, especially including the what I call *the military-industrial-digital complex*, and hammer away there for the rest of their working lives, (vii) in the USA at least, professional philosophers are governed and coercively controlled by their departmental and college or university administrations, the American Philosophical Association (APA), and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and (viii) the primary means of this governance and coercive control over the professional lives of philosophers is the tenure-&-promotion system imposed the administrations of colleges and universities.

It's a notable fact, however, that the three philosophers who have won Nobel prizes since 1945—Bertrand Russell, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre—were all fully outsiders, or "strangers," to professional academic philosophy, and also that one of them, Russell, had even been officially expelled by The Professional Academic State in 1916 for his dangerously pacifist political views. Moving further backwards into the history of

philosophy, neither Descartes, nor Leibniz, nor Spinoza, nor Locke, nor Berkeley, nor Hume, nor Schopenhauer, nor Kierkegaard, nor Nietzsche, nor Charles Sanders Peirce, nor early Wittgenstein, was a professional academic philosopher. Kant *was* a professional academic philosopher, indeed among the very first professional academic philosophers, but as Schopenhauer points out, Kant was also the one-&-only truly great real philosopher of the past who was also a professional academic; and of course, Susan Haack in contemporary philosophy is both a real philosopher and also a professional academic, essentially the first but only accidentally the second, principally by virtue of her courageous and stubborn determination to dare to think for herself and, as a consequence, suffer the slings and arrows of an “academic misfit” (Haack, 2020).

Correspondingly, it’s my contention that recent and contemporary professional academic philosophy is inherently inimical to real philosophy, and what is more, that the secret agenda of recent and contemporary professional academic philosophy is to kill real philosophy at its psychological and theoretical source, because it is essentially too creative and rebellious, and ultimately uncontrollable by The Professional Academic State, by making us hate the thing we loved. Indeed, the decline and impending fall of professional academic philosophy is demonstrable (Hanna, 2022, 2025a).

Therefore, to the extent that professional academic philosophy, since the beginning of the 20th century at least, but especially since the end of World War II, has gradually come to dominate the world of contemporary philosophy, it has killed real philosophy inside The Professional Academic State. What are my reasons for asserting this claim? I have six.

The **first** one is that, as James Campbell’s *A Thoughtful Profession* clearly shows, by 1927, virtually all philosophers in the USA were professional academics in the six senses of professionalism spelled out on pp. 3-4 above (Campbell, 2006).

The **second** one is that the “Analytic” vs. “Continental” divide, which has divided and indeed riven professional academic philosophy since 1945, and still continues to afflict it, is in fact fundamentally the expression of various oppressive cultural and political forces that undermine the very idea of real philosophy (see also Rorty, 1982; Hanna, 2008, 2021 2025b; for a contrarian take on The Great Divide, see Spode/Ludlow, 2026).

The **third** one is that in the decade immediately following 1945, the McCarthy era, professional academic philosophers, like all other academics, especially US academics, learned all too well that daring to think, speak, or write for yourself could get you fired,

or forced out of the Professional Academic State in disgrace, and blacklisted (see, e.g., McCumber, 2001).

The **fourth** one is that since 1945, professional academic philosophers have also learned all too well that the tenure-&-promotion system is an extremely effective device for ideological discipline or thought-control (Schmidt, 2000).

The **fifth** one is Plato's classical dual objection (i) in the *Apology*, to coercive, authoritarian States and State-like institutions, and (ii) in the *Protagoras*, to the Sophists, that so-called "philosophy" that is under the direct coercive control of any authoritarian State or State-like institution, and that is done only for the money paid by and according to the rules laid down by that State or State-like institution, is inherently inimical to real philosophy—as contrastively represented by the examples of Plato's own teacher, the anti-Sophist and real-philosophy martyr Socrates, and Plato's own anti-professional Academy.

And the **sixth** and final one is my psychosociological hypothesis that after a "lifer" sentence under the tenure-&-promotion system, many or even most professional academic philosophers in their 50s and 60s—which should be the prime age for real philosophy—instead end up suffering from what James C. Scott calls "a mild form" of "institutional neurosis":

It is a direct result of long-term institutionalization itself. Those suffering from it are apathetic, take no initiative, display a general loss of interest in their surroundings, make no plans, and lack spontaneity. Because they are cooperative and give no trouble, such institutional subjects may be seen by those in charge in favorable light, as they adapt well to institutional routines. In the severest cases they may become childish and affect a characteristic posture and gait....and become withdrawn and inaccessible. (Scott, 2012: p. 79)

Otherwise put, my psychosociological hypothesis is that, on the not unreasonable assumption that nearly all professional academic philosophers went into the Professional Academic State truly loving real philosophy, by the time they have actually slithered up the greasy pole of tenure-&-promotion, and have been shaped by the neoliberal demands of the contemporary professional academy, pre-reflectively realizing that their academic professionalization has forced them to substitute the pursuit of their careers for the pursuit of truth, most of them have effectively killed the thing they truly loved, real philosophy, thereby inducing "a mild form" of a specifically professional-academic, social-institutionally-submissive state of intellectual and moral catatonia.

How can this philosophical zombie apocalypse be ended and reversed? – Only by thoroughly criticizing professional academic philosophy and then wholeheartedly resuscitating real philosophy (see, e.g., Hanna, 2022, 2024).

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