

Running On Empty: Why Hasn't Professional Academic Philosophy Produced Any Important Ideas in the Last 48 Years?

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

By a *brilliant philosophical idea* I mean a philosophical idea that manifests great intellectual creativity, insight, and originality, opens up a new way of looking at a large domain of concepts, facts, phenomena, theories, and/or other information, and that would have significant sociocultural and social-institutional impact and influence if it were widely adopted and disseminated. By an *important philosophical idea* I mean a brilliant philosophical idea that is indeed widely adopted and disseminated, a brilliant philosophical idea *with legs*, that is, with actual significant impact and influence. And by a *revolutionary philosophical idea* I mean an important philosophical idea that brings about a shift in philosophical paradigm by inducing the adoption and dissemination of radically new *thought-shapers* by philosophers and non-philosophers alike, thereby permanently changing the course of philosophical, intellectual, sociocultural, and social-institutional history. The leading examples of revolutionary philosophical ideas would

be Marx's and Engels's *communist socialism* in the 19th century, and *the mechanistic worldview* in the 20th and 21st century (see, e.g., Hanna and Paans, 2020, 2021, 2022).

For the purposes of this essay, I'll leave aside *revolutionary* philosophical ideas and focus on merely *important* philosophical ideas. Correspondingly, I'll argue for two basic theses: (i) **first**, professional academic philosophy has produced no important philosophical ideas produced in the last 48 years, and (ii) **second**, the most obvious and plausible explanation for this disturbing fact is that (iia) the hegemony of leading trends in recent and contemporary professional academic philosophy, (iib) the hyper-disciplined, rigidified social-institutional structures of philosophical education, and (iic) the entrenched practices of professional philosophical research-and-publishing over the last 48 years, have collectively systematically discouraged, ignored, and suppressed new brilliant philosophical ideas.

Here is a working list of the 15 most important ideas in recent and contemporary professional academic philosophy, including the name of the philosophers who first produced them, the titles of the break-out/seminal publications in which they first presented those ideas, and the publication-dates:

1. *direct reference theory/externalism/scientific essentialism*

S. Kripke, "Identity and Necessity," 1971.

S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 1972

H. Putnam, "Meaning and Reference," 1973, expanded as "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," 1975

2. *scientific naturalism*

W. Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality*, 1963

3. *naturalized epistemology*

W.V.O. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," 1969.

4. *reductive or type-type physicalism*

U.T. Place, "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?," 1956.

J.J.C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," 1959.

5. *functionalism*

H. Putnam, "Psychological Predicates," aka "The Nature of Mental States," 1973.

6. *non-reductive or token-token physicalism*

D. Davidson, "Mental Events," 1970.

7. *non-reductive non-physicalism*

T. Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?," 1974.

8. *hard and soft determinism*

P. Edwards, "Hard and Soft Determinism," 1958.

9. *the compatibility of moral responsibility and freedom of the will, with the denial of alternative possibilities*

H. Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," 1969.

H. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," 1971

10. *agent-causal libertarianism*

R. Chisholm, "Freedom and Action," 1966.

R. Chisholm, "He Could Have Done Otherwise," 1967.

R. Chisholm, "Reflections on Human Agency," 1971.

R. Chisholm, "The Agent as Cause," 1976.

11. *critiques of the analytic-synthetic and a priori-a posteriori distinctions*

W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," 1951.

W.V.O. Quine, "Carnap and Logical Truth," 1954.

S. Kripke, Naming and Necessity, 1972.

12. *knowledge is not (merely) justified true belief*

E. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," 1963.

13. *new virtue ethics*

E. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 1958.

P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 1978 (essays published between 1957 and 1977)

14. *new liberal political theory and ethics: justice as fairness, original position, reflective equilibrium, veil of ignorance, etc.*

J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971

15. *problems-driven moral theorizing and non-Kantian non-consequentialism*

J. Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," 1971

P. Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 1972

B. Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," 1973

J. Thomson, "Killing, Letting-Die, and the Trolley Problem," 1976

Of course, there are other candidates for this list of the most important philosophical ideas in recent and contemporary philosophy: Tarski's theory of truth; Carnap's and Kripke's semantics for modal logic; and so-on. But in any case, nothing on this list, or even on an expanded list, has been published since 1977. Therefore, as of 2025, no important philosophical ideas will have been produced by professional academic philosophers in the last 48 years. In other words, professional academic philosophy has been *cognitively running on empty for the last 48 years* even while, at the same time, it has effectively controlled and dominated the individual and collective pursuit and practice of philosophy worldwide.

Now suppose that someone said, by way of critical reply to my argument:

"Well, the evidence you've provided shows only that there was a burst of brilliant and indeed important philosophical ideas produced between 1951 and 1977, i.e., roughly 25 years, and a lull in philosophical creativity for a few decades after that. But it's also plausible to think that it would take another few decades for philosophers, to absorb, ruminate on, and then critically respond to these ideas, before they could move on to creating new ones."

OK. And, looking back, it's true that it took roughly 25 years to get from Descartes's *Meditations* to Spinoza's *Ethics*; roughly another 25 years to get from Spinoza's *Ethics* to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; roughly another 25 years to get from Locke's *Essay* to Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*; roughly another 25 years to get from Berkeley's *Principles* to Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*; roughly another 25 years to get from the first edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*; and roughly 25 years to get from Husserl's *Logical Investigations* to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Perhaps, then, important philosophical ideas occur in roughly 25-year cycles.

So let's suppose that to be true, for purposes of argument. This means that by roughly 2002, philosophers should have been ready to produce new important ideas; but now it's almost 2025, i.e., roughly 50 years since 1977, and this still *hasn't* happened. Now at the same time, since 2002, there have been at least three important trends in professional academic philosophy: (i) Analytic metaphysics, (ii) experimental philosophy and debunking strategies, and (iii) feminist philosophy. But these trends have produced no brilliant philosophical ideas of their own, much less important ones: on the contrary, they've merely re-cycled ideas that already existed in the history of philosophy long before them. Analytic metaphysics is essentially a recurrence to classical pre-Kantian metaphysics, plus modal logic and logical empiricism, together with the growing professional academic influence of David Lewis and his Australian, Oxford-based, and Princetonian followers in the late 1990s and early 00s. To be sure, Lewis was a brilliant dialectician. But can you name one idea of his, that doesn't belong to classical pre-Kantian metaphysics or logical empiricism, or that's not already on the pre-1977 list, including the expanded version? Experimental philosophy and debunking strategies are essentially recurrences to empiricism, including Humean empiricism, logical empiricism, or Quinean empiricism, and scientific naturalism, together with the professional academic influence of cognitive neuroscience. And feminist philosophy is grounded on *feminism*, which

is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks an end to gender-based oppression. Motivated by the quest for social justice, feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on cultural, economic, social, and political phenomena. It identifies and evaluates the many ways that some norms have been used to exclude, marginalize, and oppress people on the basis of gender, as well as how gendered identities have been shaped to conform and uphold the norms of a patriarchal society. In so doing, it tries to understand the roots of a system that has been prevalent in nearly all known places and times. It also explores what a just society would look like. (SEP, 2024: section 1)

But feminism is an idea that has been around at least since Virginia Woolf and the early 20th century, if not since Mary Wollstonecraft in the 18th century, or George Eliot and Harriet Martineau in the 19th century. Therefore, even despite their popularity and social-institutional dominance, these trends in recent and contemporary professional academic philosophy have produced no brilliant (and a fortiori, no important) philosophical ideas in the last 25 years. Indeed, on the contrary, it seems very likely that the hegemony of these important trends since 2002 has contributed substantially to the scandalous and stunning fact that professional academic philosophy has produced no important philosophical ideas in the last 48 years.

Even granting that, moreover, it seems to me extremely unlikely that *no* brilliant philosophical ideas have actually been *produced* during the last 48 years. Indeed, on the contrary, surely, quite a few brilliant philosophical ideas must have actually been produced since 2002, that is, in roughly the last 25 years. Let's assume that to be true. But then, where are all those brilliant ideas now? Why haven't they become *important* ideas? Why has no one in mainstream recent and contemporary professional philosophy paid any attention to them? It seems to me that the most obvious and most plausible explanation for this disconnect between the actual production of brilliant philosophical ideas since 2002, and their adoption and dissemination by recent and contemporary professional academic philosophers, is this triple whammy: **first**, the hegemony of Analytic metaphysics, experimental philosophy/debunking strategies, and feminist philosophy, in professional academic philosophy over the last 25 years, **second**, the steady increase of hyper-disciplined, rigidified practices of undergraduate and graduate training for professional academic philosophers, over the last 25 years, and **third**, the gradual and now seemingly permanent entrenchment of a research-and-publication system, driven by and grounded on what Susan Haack aptly calls "perverse incentives" (Haack, 2022), that works at a snail's pace, is highly adversarial, highly subject to fads and domination by professional academic status-networks, and ultimately reinforces the "normal science" of insular, hyper-specialized, and ultimately unimportant Scholastic philosophical debate, in professional academic philosophy over the last 25 years.

Given that triple-whammy, therefore, **first**, all those who truly care about real philosophy should be working like crazy now to recover and widely disseminate those systematically discouraged, ignored, and suppressed brilliant ideas, and **second**, all those who truly care about real philosophy should also be working like crazy now to *resist*, *radically reform*, and if necessary, *exit* the professional-academic-philosophy juggernaut that has systematically discouraged, ignored, and suppressed brilliant philosophical ideas since 2002. Further progress in philosophy will not be possible until this happens, even if the juggernaut of professional academic philosophy goes on and on and on, cognitively running on empty forever.

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