

Evaluating the Profession of Philosophy
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Who counts as one's peers? The university gives a disciplinary answer to this question, with each specialty or subspecialty judging their own. The same for philosophy: even as they claim that philosophy has special relevance to everyday life, philosophers have written for and been evaluated by their disciplinary peers. A philosopher is not considered successful unless he or she contributes to professional, peer-reviewed publications in the field. But should philosophy have the same relation to disciplinarity as the other disciplines — the same degree of technicality, citations, insularity, and peer control?

One of the oddities of present-day philosophy is how rarely this question is asked. Go to a philosophy department with a graduate program, and sign up for a course in ancient philosophy: the professor will be expected to know ancient Greek and to be up on the scholarly literature in the area. Such are the signposts and gatekeepers of philosophic discourse. And in themselves these are not bad things. The irony is that there *was* no secondary literature for the Greek philosophers who are being taught. In fact, there was no scholarship at all in the sense that we mean it today. Philosophers were thinkers, not scholars.

This situation can be seen as partly a matter of technology; paper was expensive and reproduction of a manuscript laborious. But it is still odd to assume that Plato and Aristotle would have been proper scholars writing for an audience of adepts if only they'd had access to an Internet connection and the *Philosopher's Index*. The Greeks recognized the difference between the many and the few, or between exoteric and esoteric knowledge. But these choices are not the same as disciplinarity. Socrates was notorious for speaking with people from all walks of life, and when he came to be evaluated it was by a jury of his peers consisting of 500 Athenians. He may not have liked the verdict, but he did not dispute the jury's right to pass judgment.

As I noted, facility with language and a grasp of the scholarship are not in themselves bad things. But life and philosophical reflection is a zero sum game, at least for those who are paying attention. Time spent in learning Greek and keeping up on the scholarly literature is time not spent thinking about how the insights of Plato or Aristotle (or Quine) can illuminate challenges faced by NASA or the US Geological Survey. Yes, a modicum of knowledge about Plato is needed before one can use it in another context. But the question of how this modicum is defined is itself a philosophic one.

Across the long sweep of Western history we find the point repeated: Bacon, Machiavelli, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Marx and Nietzsche all wrote for and sought the judgment of thoughtful people across society. One wonders how they would have looked upon what counted as philosophy in the 20th century — a highly technical, inward-looking field that valued intellectual rigor over other values such as relevance or timeliness.

Extending the idea of a peer beyond disciplinary bounds could occur in a number of different ways. We could draw non philosophers and non-academics into the peer review process. And we could judge philosophical prowess by a number of other criteria: publications in popular magazines or newspaper articles; hits on blogs or retweets of books and articles; media interviews or contacts; or grants awarded by public agencies to conduct interdisciplinary philosophic work.

Such suggestions will run into a stiff headwind. Compare them with the only prominent ranking system in philosophy, Brian Leiter's *Philosophical Gourmet Report* (PGR). Now, the PGR itself is exceptional, in that it thinks about the institutional aspects of the profession. While this subject is the topic of a thousand conference dinner conversations, it is ignored by the profession as a philosophical matter. The PGR itself tacitly adopts a disciplinary approach to the profession.

Leiter posts the list of the philosophers whose opinions determined the results of the survey. In 2011, 500 philosophers were canvassed; a bit over 300 replied. Why these 500 philosophers, out of the 15,000 or 20,000 PhDs in philosophy employed in universities and colleges across the US? Leiter's criteria:

Evaluators were selected with an eye to balance, in terms of area, age and educational background — though since, in all cases, the opinions of research-active faculty were sought, there was, necessarily, a large number of alumni of the top programs represented. Approximately half those surveyed were philosophers who had filled out the surveys in previous years; the other half were nominated by members of the Advisory Board, who picked research-active faculty in their field (<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/reportdesc.asp>).

How qualities like area, age, and educational background are balanced is left unstated. Nor are any of these qualities defined, when it is obvious that a variety of positions can be taken on each. For instance, 'area' could include or exclude any number of research fields, which also could be divided or subdivided in a variety of ways (e.g., in terms of the question of granularity: is the category 'ancient Greek philosophy', or 'Plato', or 'Plato's early dialogues', etc.). We can assume that 'research active' means 'publishes a lot'; but this is also tendentious, because this likely means 'peer reviewed' and in what goes by the name of 'first tier' journals. The insularity is complete with current members picking their colleagues.

It will come as no surprise that Leiter's results have been "remarkably stable" over the years. But more to the point: Leiter not only fails to consider what the rankings might look like if a random cross-section of employed philosophers were surveyed. He also gives no thought to how non-philosophers would rank departments, or how programs could be evaluated according to citations outside philosophy journals, or by the amount of sponsored research they attract. Leiter's thinking about the institution of philosophy is

thus remarkably disciplinary in nature, not even considering alternative methods of rating PhD programs.

The exclusive and un-self-aware dominance of disciplinary philosophy is indicative of a failure that is itself philosophical in nature. The dogmatic nature of 20th century philosophy is expressed by the fact that its disciplinary nature has not been a topic of philosophical reflection.

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References

Leiter, Brian. 2011. "Description of the Report." *The Philosophical Gourmet Report*
<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/reportdesc.asp>