

Philosophy's Academic Viability: A Reply to Frodeman, Briggle and Holbrook
Daniel A. Kaufman, Missouri State University

This is an important article, one that says things that need saying and which are not said often enough, within philosophy. For a subject that has been known historically for its critical edge and its refusal to pay homage to dogmas or sacred cows, philosophy has become quite uncritical about itself and its role in the University and the larger world. Frodeman, Briggle, and Britt have built upon a conversation that Frodeman started in an article last September, in *Synthese*,¹ one that I believe is desperately needed, if philosophy is to survive the inevitable changes that are coming to the University over the next several decades and if it is ever going to regain the significance it once had, on the course of human affairs. For the record — and this will bear on the drift of my remarks — I think that the latter is far more important than the former.



The authors' central thesis is that philosophy has suffered for the University's transition to a largely pre-professional model and the cost-benefit type thinking that has pervaded university administration and governing boards, as a result. It has made things even worse for itself by its near-total disciplinization, in which virtually *any* broader value it might once have had — value, that is, beyond being concerned with the sorts of esoterica that are interesting only to professional philosophers — has been lost. So long as the University was still a place with a strong liberatory mission — a place charged with the task of educating citizens for life in a democratic *polis* — philosophy could survive, within its cloisters, but now that the pre-professional mission and monetization of the bachelor's degree has crowded that liberatory mission out, philosophy's lack of *both* pre-professional benefit *and* public interest, jeopardizes its very existence, within the University curriculum. The main culprit in this tale of philosophy's decline, has been the rise of a neoliberal political-economic system, since the Second World War, one key effect of which has been the breaking of the boundary between the public square and the market and the complete penetration of the former, by the latter. This not only has had the result of "defunding the public sphere", but has replaced the University's traditional imperative to develop thoughtful, critically acute citizens, with that of cranking out people who are good at producing and consuming, within the economy.

There are things that don't quite add up here, and I have to admit I find this discussion of neoliberalism and its alleged responsibility for the University's transformation — and thus, for philosophy's troubles — the least compelling aspect of the authors' argument. For a nation that is supposed to be in the grip of the mercenary logic of markets, the government spends an awful lot of money, and the United States has seen a steady and dramatic increase in public spending, from the turn of the century, to the present day, from less than ten percent of the country's gross domestic product to over forty.² This is

¹ Robert Frodeman, "Philosophy dedisciplined," *Synthese* (published online, September 29, 2012).

² http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/us_20th_century_chart.html

hardly a situation that one could describe as a "progressive defunding of the public sphere", and given the similarly dramatic increase in the percentage of those acquiring bachelors', graduate and professional degrees, since the Second World War — from less than three percent to over twenty — the idea that there has been a progressive defunding of the University is hardly credible either.³

The authors' observation that the University has adopted an overwhelmingly pre-professional focus, with all the attitudes and priorities that come along with it, is indisputable, but the claim that this displaced a prior liberatory function is, at best, overstated. Certainly, "education for democratic citizenship" has been part of the *rhetoric* of the University, for at least a century, now, but it is difficult to imagine how anyone could ever have really believed it, given how small a percentage of the overall voting population has ever acquired a college degree. Even in today's much-expanded higher-educational circumstances, the number of people of voting age who have received any higher education at all is still less than fifty percent, and when one limits one's focus to higher education that might plausibly claim a "liberatory function" — that is, when one excludes from consideration everything from dental assistant training to studying to become a computer technician — the numbers are even smaller.

The fact is that the University's liberal arts curriculum, with its roots in the *Studia Humanitatis*, was designed for the education of the ruling classes, in the manners, mores, and culture deemed essential for social and political stewardship, and the idea that this should comprise the substance of an emerging system of mass education, is neither reasonable nor affordable. The University has undergone and continues to undergo its dramatic expansion, in large part, because of the decreased need for human physical labor, in what is now a post-industrial economy, and its pre-professional focus is therefore entirely justified, if we care at all about whether people are able to find work that will provide them with a decent standard of living.

The authors are entirely right, however, that philosophy, as a *subject*, has a liberatory function, as do literature and the fine arts, and that at the heart of that function is the meditation upon and critical examination of the ends that we pursue, both as individuals and as a society. They are also entirely correct in their assessment that this sort of examination has been largely abandoned, in favor of an unthinking acceptance of the economists' brand of hedonism, with our intellectual resources and energies devoted primarily to instrumentalist deliberation — "given that we want X, how do we get more of it?" — and I expect that they would agree with me that this has been terrible for our civilization, especially given the enormous transformations in social, political, and economic life that have occurred since the Industrial Revolution and through two world wars and the emergence of an unprecedented, totalitarian form of politics.

³ <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/historical/fig1.jpg>

This is the worst possible time, then, for philosophy to have removed itself from public discourse, yet that is precisely what it has done. The point is not that philosophers, as private individuals, have failed to take important and courageous public stands (Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer come immediately to mind), but rather that they have declined to engage the public conversation, in their *professional work*. This is perhaps clearest in the area of social-political thought.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Europe had been nearly destroyed by decadent monarchies, sectarian conflict, and outright religious war, philosophers responded with a remarkable body of work that had a direct and profound effect on the course that Western civilization would take thereafter, most notably John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* and *Letter Concerning Toleration* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and *The Social Contract*. But in the last century, when humanity descended to a previously unimaginable level of barbarity, global warfare, and mass murder, there was no outpouring of philosophical literature, in response. John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, the most significant work of analytic political philosophy of the last century, is essentially an *internal* conversation, a discussion of the presuppositions and logic of liberal democracy, for those who have already accepted it, and while the continental tradition offered a good deal more by way of a substantive response to industrialization, totalitarianism, and global war, it was as likely to be in the cause of villainy, rather than in opposition to it, with Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre being only the most ignoble examples. Even when the work *could* be described as "having humanity's best interests at heart", as it were, such as was the case with the philosophy of the Frankfurt School or of Michel Foucault, it was delivered in such an impenetrable prose style, with such a heavy dose of technical vocabulary, that it had no capacity to become a part of the public discourse and remained very much trapped in the University and in the highly educated quarters of a handful of sub-cultures.

It is impossible not to notice that this withdrawal of philosophy from the public conversation coincides quite closely with its disciplinization, and anyone who works as a philosopher in the current, disciplinary environment knows very well that to spend too much time engaged with public affairs and too little on disciplinary work is to court unemployment. Aristotle may have written *The Athenian Constitution*, but it is not an exaggeration to say that if a contemporary philosopher, employed at one of our top Universities, was to devote his time and energies to consulting on or even drafting a revision of the American Constitution — say, as part of a constitutional convention — he would fail to get tenure, on the grounds that his work had not been peer-reviewed. Such is the disincentive today for philosophers to do anything other than write the narrowest, disciplinary sort of philosophy that it is hardly a surprise that so few of us are engaged in the essential work of public affairs.

I agree with the authors, then, that disciplinization has done philosophy great harm, but not because it has made it impossible to survive within a "neoliberal" University. Disciplinization has hurt philosophy, because it has led to its withdrawal from public discourse and this, in turn, has hurt public discourse, by its exclusion of what would

otherwise be some of its smartest, most acute participants. Now it would be *very* interesting to explore the question of why philosophy chose to disciplinize, but this is something the authors barely address, other than to say that it was "unexceptional", in that other subjects did it too, and in any event, was part of the more general bureaucratization, characteristic of modern institutions. This last bit strikes me as true, to a point, but it is hardly exculpatory, in philosophy's case, since beyond obedience to general trends, science had very good reasons to disciplinize, the main one being that the body of scientific knowledge, by the early part of the twentieth century, had grown so large and complex that it demanded a systematic division of labor.

Philosophy's disciplinization, I am afraid to say, has mostly been in a misguided effort to mimic science. The reasons for this are many and I shall not go into them here; but, suffice it to say, none of them are any good. Those subjects which truly demand a heavily technical, rigorously analytical treatment have largely been taken over by the sciences, and to the extent that philosophers purport to dabble in them, under the guise of subject headers like "the philosophy of science" or the "philosophy of psychology", they have done so mostly for the sake of themselves. As leading scientists such as Richard Feynman, Stephen Hawking, Freeman Dyson, and others have indicated, the work of these philosophers-of-X has had little to no impact on the development of contemporary science, and the embarrassing circle-the-wagons style response of many of the leading lights in the philosophical community to scientists who have pointed this out has only served to emphasize their isolation. (So shrill and defensive were some of the responses to comments by Dyson, on *Leiter Reports*, a disciplinary-philosophy insiders' blog, that it caught the attention of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, who did an article, just on the spectacle.⁴)

Meanwhile, those human subjects for which philosophy and its distinctive methods remain useful — and which are, for the most part, but not exclusively, normative in nature — neither require, nor benefit from a heavily technical, analytical treatment and thus, do not need the systematic division of labor that disciplinization provides. As Frodeman himself pointed out in "Philosophy dedisciplined":

Chemistry is a limited domain — a regional ontology — filled with technical work. It is reasonable that most of us will not be able to decipher the papers in a leading journal. Not everyone can, or should be, a chemist. But everyone is faced with philosophical questions across the course of their life — a fact that should be reflected in leading philosophy journals.⁵

This is a point that the authors address with tremendous subtlety and skill, and their discussion of contextually sensitive conceptions of rigor and philosophy's capacity to

⁴ <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/nov/08/what-can-you-really-know/>
<http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2012/10/why-the-new-york-review-of-each-others-books-asked-freeman-dyson-to-review.html>
<http://chronicle.com/blogs/percolator/has-philosophy-really-lost-its-bite/31406>

⁵ "Philosophy dedisciplined," p. 4.

establish its relevance to other disciplines and to the broader public, is one of the strongest elements of their essay. Of course, philosophers have known this for almost as long as there has been philosophy — Aristotle, memorably, commented that “it is a mark of an educated person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the nature of the subject permits. Accepting from a mathematician claims that are mere probabilities seems rather like demanding logical proofs from a rhetorician”⁶ — but bruised egos and professional anxiety are remarkably strong motivators.

One thing that I am saying, then, is that the authors are actually too kind to disciplinary philosophy. Another is that we should concern ourselves a lot less with how philosophy is going to retain its position in the University and a lot more with how it might re-engage with public discourse and thus, with the course of human affairs. The authors may be of the view that the latter is only possible, if philosophy retains its current position in the University, but I don't think that this is true. To the extent that we are truly concerned with philosophy's *liberatory* function, its most important role in the University has always been as part of the general education curriculum, and its place there has never really been in jeopardy.

I frankly could care less if there are fewer articles produced on the reference of an indexical or seminars taught on disquotational and deflationary theories of truth. And if we are really serious about philosophy's liberatory function and really mean what we say, when we claim that philosophy and the liberal arts are essential to citizenship in a democracy, then these subjects must be introduced at a point in peoples' education, at which the largest possible percentage of voters can be reasonably expected to benefit from their study — that is, in *high school* — and those responsible for developing an expertise in them must actively participate in the public discourse, as it is manifested in those print and media outlets for which the greatest possible number of conventionally educated citizens can reasonably be expected to comprise the audience.

Disciplinary philosophy can only serve as an obstacle to these sorts of developments, and given the self-interested, inbred circle of personalities and institutions that currently define, control and benefit from it, I don't see how it can be convinced to change on its own. In that sense, the University's new pre-professional focus and insistence on financial and practical viability, may actually be a blessing, for by breaking the back of disciplinary philosophy, it may, in fact, free it and its practitioners to pursue these other, more meaningful avenues of work.

Contact details: DanielKaufman@MissouriState.edu

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b-1095a (tr. Roger Crisp).