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Reflections on *Academic Agonies and How to Avoid Them* by Joseph Agassi

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*Academic Agonies and How to Avoid Them: Advice to Young People on Their Way to Academic Careers*

Joseph Agassi

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323 pp.

What is an “academic career?” After many years pursuing opportunities both inside and outside of academia, and now back inside again, I am not sure I can define that term, but I certainly welcome advice on how to either build a successful academic career or, at the least, how to avoid a painful one. In *Academic Agonies and How to Avoid Them: Advice to Young People on Their Way to Academic Careers* Joseph Agassi addresses more the latter than the former, along with many tangents and commentaries along the way in a discursive compendium of insights and observations from a lifetime in the academy. As my advisor once told me, a professorship is a good gig, if you can keep it, and thus any hidden and hard-won tips on how to avoid or maneuver around academic pitfalls, poor decisions, difficult colleagues, overwhelming bureaucracy, research roadblocks, and other obstacles and hazards scattered within the ivory tower are worth searching for, whether you are a student or a faculty member. Many such tips to have more of a good academic life than a painful one can be found inside Agassi’s book, if you ignore his adamant and frequent advice on not reading his book in the first place.

### **A Winding Path**

According to the author’s preface, he began writing this book in 1965 almost as a way of self-healing, having reached a low point in his own academic career. His career rebounded and Agassi went on to much success. He nevertheless completed the outline he started to help prevent the doubts and misgivings he once had. After the Synopsis and Preface, the Prologue gives direct attention to the specific reader at hand: the learned reader, the hurried reviewer, the student counselor, and the bewildered reader. Each type of reader may want to focus on certain aspects of Agassi’s book. Without such focus the reader may find the text wanders, in a wise uncle telling stories after dinner sort of way.

The main of the book is divided into four parts: Diagnosis, Etiology, Prescriptions, and Prognosis. An Epilogue and Index of Names follow. This book is not so much one to be read from front to back, but like a conversation with that wise uncle, it is one to enjoy in bits, returning to again and again for more insights and bon mots. And the stories abound. The wise uncle does not so much lecture as regale with anecdotes, both personal and from well-known, canonical, names from the history of science, such as Einstein, Planck, Mendel, and Priestley, as well as hits from other fields and arts, such as Marx, Kant, Balzac, Durkheim, Huxley, and, perhaps most notably in this book’s case, Karl Popper.

Agassi, you see, was Karl Popper’s student. Karl Popper, of course, is known for many things in the philosophy of science, including advocating for empirical falsification rather than induction as a necessary component of proper scientific theory. Agassi’s motivation for

providing anecdotes and stories highlighting the non-utopia that is modern Academe then fits squarely within a proper Popperian approach. One must keep a critical mindset, for confirmation does not lead to learning. Just as a story without conflict is not much of a story, only when we illuminate the flaws in a theory, method, or approach can we learn and grow.

### **On Being an Academic**

A larger motivation of the book seems to be to give faculty the guidance and permission to help restore within Academe its lost integrity, mission, and honor. An institution whose faculty leadership is often replaced by bureaucratized administrators, an institution that can become too subservient to corporate interests, and an institution that can too willingly support questionable research programs, such as nuclear armament, is an institution that has lost its way from serving as a beacon to the world for learning, reason, and philosophical inquiry. I think we—society—could all use this reminder, perhaps now more than ever, and that is why I think you should spend some time with Agassi and his insights.

The core theme around which Agassi weaves his examples is that it is important for you, as an academic, to decide and do what you sincerely want to do rather than what you feel others want from you. In academia there are many conventions, protocols, requests, and expectations on how you as a scholar, teacher, researcher, and member of Academe should act, but Agassi recommends you set much of that aside, for it is with those restrictions that an unhappy life as an academic can be found. Some of this advice is frank, and needed: “You will not gain any administrative experience from being conscientious and from volunteering. This will only encourage everyone to dump dull work on you, which will make for more waste of time on administration, and so on in a frenzy until someone will blow a fuse” (86). For Agassi, intellectual freedom is an essential component of the Academic Good Life, and to keep that freedom you as member of the faculty must maintain your self-esteem, integrity, and courage.

### **A Love of Deliberate Learning**

The style of the book is conversational, with anecdotes and stories extended with digressions on tangents. As with the *slow food movement*, which emphasizes locality and custom as a bulwark against the increasing pace of modern life, the book’s discursive approach leads to a slow read, giving you time to dip in, ponder, and reflect. If you consider the breadth of the anecdotes, across fields of study and centuries of time, from science to art to poetry to literature, the overall effect is to remind the reader of the love of learning, which gets at why we are in academia in the first place. We need this reminder because especially for new faculty it is easy to stray from that path, chasing (or being chased) by the lures and hazards of grants, publication-pressures, tenure, endless service committees, fame, and administrative overgrowth.

In reading these stories you may be able to extract out the tacit knowledge to lead if not a good academic life, then at least a non-agonizing one. There is no recipe. Yet to many a

young modern academic, tackling such a slow read might be a challenge. Another challenge to the young academic ignoring Agassi's entreaties not to read his book is that to fully appreciate the anecdotes and hopefully absorb the tacit knowledge contained within, the reader should probably be as well-read, broad-minded, and intellectually curious as Agassi himself. This book then is more of a course of study, if the challenge is sincerely taken. The earnest young scientist for example, newly minted and hoping for a successful academic career, is likely unfamiliar with the philosophy of science. That young scientist likely extended or improved the theory, algorithm, or whatever their advisor is known for, yet they might not quite fully understand *why* their science works. And, so, when they encounter discussions and asides within Agassi's book about Popper and Bacon, for example, well then they should set Agassi down, read more elsewhere about the philosophy of science, then pick Agassi back up. And similarly for Kafka, Wittgenstein, Shaw, Maugham, Plato, Hume, and Russell. Remember the love of learning—a lifetime awaits. To help this exploration, though a bibliography is lacking, there are often citation crumbs to follow in the text and footnotes, and the Index of Names gives helpful pointers to their use within.

Given the state of academia today, deciding to pursue a Ph.D. with the assumption you will be able to find an academic job once you finish is, if not unwise, then at least risky. More should be done to help Ph.D. students and faculty learn how to navigate careers outside of academia. Yet for those who feel Academe is worth defending, "the future of Academe largely depends on the future of the attitudes of our society to the life of the intellect" (313) and this book can help.