

Publish and Perish

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These words exist for you to read them. I wrote them to try to convey some ideas to you. These are not the first words I wrote for you—those were worse. I wrote and rewrote, with a view to clarifying my meaning. I want to make sure that what you take away is exactly what I have in mind, and I want to be concise and engaging, because I am mindful of competing demands on your time and attention.

You might think that everything I am saying is trivial and obvious, because of course all writing is like this. Writing is a form of communication; it exists to be read. But that is, in fact, not how all writing works. In particular, it is not how academic writing works. Academic writing does not exist in order to communicate with a reader. In academia, or at least the part of it that I inhabit, we write, most of the time, not so much for the sake of being read as for the sake of publication.

Let me illustrate by way of a confession regarding my own academic reading habits. Although I love to read, and read a lot, little of my reading comes from recent philosophy journals. The main occasions on which I read new articles in my areas of specialization are when I am asked to referee or otherwise assess them, when I am helping someone prepare them for publication and when I will need to cite them in my own paper.

This tells you something about academic writing, and how deeply it is shaped—mostly not at a conscious level—by the refereeing process. The simple fact is that “success” in academia is a matter of journal-acceptance, which in turn makes for a line in one’s CV. The number of such citations, taken together with the prestige of the relevant journals, is what counts for getting, keeping and being promoted in an academic job.

“Counts” being the operative word. What can be counted is what will get done. In the humanities, no one counts whether anyone *reads* our papers. Only whether they are published, and where. I have observed these pressures escalate over time: nowadays it is unsurprising when those merely applying to graduate schools have already published a paper or two.

Writing for the sake of publication—instead of for the sake of being read—is academia’s version of “teaching to the test.” The result is papers few actually want to read. First, the writing is hypercomplex. Yes, the thinking is also complex, but the writing in professional journals regularly contains a layer of complexity beyond what is needed to make the point. It is not edited for style and readability. Most significantly of all, academic writing is obsessed with other academic writing—with finding a “gap in the literature” as opposed to answering a straightforwardly interesting or important question.

Of course publication is a necessary step along the way to readership, but the academic who sets their sights on it is like the golfer or baseball player who stops their swing when they make contact with the ball. Without follow-through, what you get are short, jerky movements; we academics have become purveyors of small, awkwardly phrased ideas.



In making these claims about academic writing, I am thinking in the first instance of my own corner of academia—philosophy—though I suspect that my points generalize, at least over the academic humanities. To offer up one anecdote: in spring 2019 I was teaching Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; since I don’t usually teach literature, I thought I should check out recent secondary literature on Joyce. What I found was abstruse and hypercomplex, laden with terminology and indirect. I didn’t feel I was learning anything I could use to make the meaning of the novel more accessible to myself or to my students. I am willing to take some of the blame here: I am sure I could have gotten something out of those pieces if I had been willing to put more effort into reading them. Still, I do not lack the intellectual competence required to understand analyses of Joyce; I feel all of those writers could have done more to write for me.

But whether my points generalize across the humanities or not, I will confess that I feel the urgency of the problem for philosophy much more than for some abstract entity called “the humanities.” I love Joyce, I love Homer, but I am not invested in the quality of current scholarship on either. It’s philosophy that I worry about.

When I am asked for sources of “big ideas” in philosophy—the kind that would get the extra-philosophical world to stand up and take notice—I struggle to list anyone born after 1950. It is sobering to consider that the previous decade produced: Daniel Dennett, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Derek Parfit, John McDowell, Peter Singer, G. A. Cohen and Martha Nussbaum. In my view, each of these people towers over everyone who comes after them in at least one of the categories by which we might judge a philosopher: breadth, depth, originality or degree of public influence. Or consider this group, born in roughly the two decades prior (1919-1938), remarkable in its intellectual fertility: Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Stanley Cavell, Harry Frankfurt, Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, John Rawls. These are the philosophers about whom one routinely asks, “Why don’t people write philosophy like this anymore?” And this isn’t only a point about writing style. Their work is inviting—it asks new questions, it sells the reader on why those questions matter and it presents itself as a point of entry into philosophy. This is why all of us keep assigning their work over and over again, a striking fact given how much the number of philosophers has ballooned since their time.

And it’s not just a matter of a few exceptional figures. A few years ago, I happened to browse through back issues of a top journal (*Ethics*) from 1940-1950—not an easy decade for the world, or academia. I went in assuming those papers would be of much lower quality than what is being put out now. Keep in mind, this is a time when not only was publication not required for getting a job, even a Ph.D. was not required; there were far fewer philosophers, and getting a paper accepted at a journal was a vastly less competitive process.

In general, I would describe the papers from that decade as lacking something in terms of precision, clarity and “scholarliness,” but also as being more engaging and ambitious, more heterogeneous in tone and writing style, and better written. Perhaps some amount of academic competition is salutary, but the all-consuming competition of recent years, it appears, has been less productive of excellence than of homogeneity and stagnation. Because the most reliable mark of “quality” is familiarity, the machine incentivizes keeping innovation to a minimum—only at the margin, just enough to get published. It constricts the space of thought. Over time, we end up with less and less to show for all the effort, talent and philosophical training we are throwing into philosophical research. If I wanted to make progress on one of my own papers, I’d certainly be better served with a paper from *Ethics* in 2020—I’m much more likely to want to cite it. But if I were just curiously browsing for some philosophical reading, I’d go for one of those back issues. We might be hitting more balls today, but none of them is going far.

Some see a way out: they call it “public philosophy.” But it is a mistake to think that this represents an escape from the problem I am describing. We do not have two systems for doing philosophy, “academic philosophy” and “public philosophy.” “Public philosophy,” including the piece of it you are currently reading, is written mostly by academic philosophers—which is to say, people who studied, received Ph.D.s at and in the vast majority of cases make a living by working within the academic philosophy system.

I have no objection to applying the title “philosopher” broadly, including to those public intellectuals who have had so much more success in speaking to a general audience than I or any of my colleagues who operate more strictly within the confines of academic philosophy: from Judith Butler and Bruno Latour to Slavoj Žižek, Camille Paglia and Steven Pinker. But it is one thing to be a “philosopher” in the sense of being a source of intellectual inspiration to the public, or a subset thereof, and another to be a member of a philosophical community. The latter designation requires a person not only to be beholden to such a community argumentatively, but also calls for participation in the maintenance and self-reproduction of that community through education, training and management. Academic philosophy is the system we have. You can’t jump ship, because there’s nowhere to jump.



The sad thing about being stuck reading narrow, boring, abstruse papers is not how bad they are, but how good they are. When I am enough of an insider to be in a position to engage the writer in back-and-forth questioning, either in speech or in writing, that process of objection and pushback tends to expose a real and powerful line of thought driving the piece. Philosophers haven’t stopped loving knowledge, despite the increasingly narrow confines within which we must, if we are to survive, pursue it.

Some in the philosophical community will defend this “narrowing” as a sign of the increasingly scientific character of philosophy. But no matter how scientific some parts

of philosophy become, the following difference will always remain: unlike science, philosophy cannot benefit those who don't engage in it. Philosophical technology—ideas, arguments, distinctions, questions—cannot live outside the human mind.

One doesn't need to idolize Socrates, as I happen to, to think that philosophy is an especially dialogical discipline. All academic work invites response in the weak sense of "there is always more to be said," or "corrections welcome," but philosophical talks, papers and books specifically aim to provoke, to incite, to court pushback and counterexample. Our task is not to take some questions off humanity's plate, but to infect others with our need to find answers.

The philosopher is an especially needy kind of truth-seeker. Like vampires, zombies and werewolves, we are creatures who need company, and who will do whatever it takes to create it.

No one thinks that Plato, Descartes, Kant and the rest were right about everything; nonetheless, centuries and millennia later, we cannot stop talking not just about them, but to them, with them. They made us into one of them, and we need to keep paying that forward.

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