

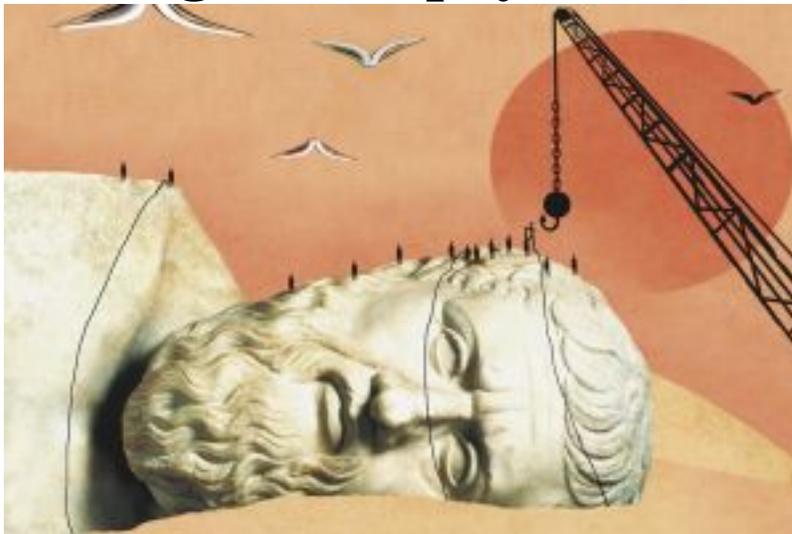
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Making Philosophy Matter—or Else



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle review

By Lee McIntyre

In March administrators at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas announced that, because of budget cuts, the entire department of philosophy would be eliminated. Philosophers rallied, the administration flinched, and within a month the crisis was averted. So all is well, right?

Not so fast. Unless systemic changes are made within the profession of philosophy over the next several years, we can expect that within a few decades, the entire discipline may be threatened.

In November 2010, *The Boston Globe* reported that student interest in humanities courses has cratered in recent years. And long-term trends are troubling, too. When adjusted for total enrollment, numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics show a 20-percent drop in philosophy and religion majors from 1970 through 2009. Of course, none of that is news to anyone who has worked recently in an American philosophy department. There is anecdotal evidence aplenty that our students are disappearing.

And how have we responded? Do we design better courses? Try to attract more student interest? Some members of our profession do, but by and large our response has been pitiful. We collapse tenured positions as soon as their inhabitants retire. We hire more adjuncts. Instead of trying to figure out how to reach more people with philosophy, we cut back. But in doing so, we eat our seed corn. (Note that in saving philosophy at UNLV, the department agreed to slate all its junior faculty members for termination.)

To those who are tenured, the threat may still seem distant. The barbarians are not quite at the gates. But if we do not intervene, soon the threats will be not just to our enrollments or course offerings (or junior faculty), but also to the ranks of tenured faculty—and whole departments. (If you don't think that can happen, take a stroll over to the classics department at your local university sometime—if it's still there—or to the library to check out a copy of Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath's bracing polemic, the 2001 *Who Killed Homer?*)

Something should be done about the growing crisis in philosophy, but no one seems to be doing anything. Who is to blame?

We are. Philosophers. We did this to ourselves.

The profession of philosophy has had ages to make itself more relevant to what people—even within the academy—care about, and we have largely ignored the issue. Now that the financial crisis has hit, the chickens are coming home to roost. The philosophers at UNLV are good folks; I do not wish anything that I say to distress them. And let me stipulate that the benighted administrators who proposed eliminating the philosophy department within a university with a liberal-arts college need some serious remedial education in what a university means. But the crisis is not about one institution, it is about the profession. It is about the way philosophy is handled within academe today: the way it is taught; the way we hire new faculty; the way we evaluate them for tenure.

How can we avert the crisis? We must recognize what is unique about philosophy, and I'm afraid it isn't us or the research we publish for one another. It is rather philosophy's historical mission, which is not merely to find the truth, but to use the truth to improve the quality of human life. In Plato's time, philosophy was meant to change lives. Today we settle for "service courses." Is it any wonder that our students are moving toward the exits?

Yes, we want our students to learn to think critically, to write analytically, and to express themselves with logical precision—there is clearly a crying need for that. The sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa reported in their book, *Academically Adrift* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), that in the first two years of college, 45 percent of students they tracked made no significant improvement in critical-thinking or reasoning skills. Of course we want our students to learn those things, but surely not just to turn out more people who "do" philosophy. There aren't enough jobs for them already. Rather the goal—especially at the undergraduate level—should be to help students recognize that philosophy matters. Not just because it will improve their LSAT scores (which it will), but because philosophy has the potential to change the very fabric of who they are as human beings.

We need to show our students that—when it is done right—philosophy can help them to be better, more critical thinkers and communicators in their jobs. It can teach them to be skeptical of political rhetoric and advertising. It can help them to consider what is worth caring about and so perhaps to begin to make the world a better place. And it can even be meaningful to them in their personal lives. I am reminded of Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale, the 1992 vice-presidential candidate and sometime philosophy student, who was tortured and held prisoner in the "Hanoi Hilton" for seven years during the Vietnam War. He later wrote that his survival during that time was due to reliance on the precepts of Stoicism, which he had learned in a philosophy course while studying international relations in graduate school. For the rest of his life, he called himself a "philosophical fighter pilot."

A good way to start might be to share with our students why we ourselves care so much about philosophy—how it has helped us in our own lives, as citizens or even personally. But how many of us actually do that? We extol Socrates, but how many dare to follow his example? Of course some philosophers are out there making philosophy matter, and we should talk more about them to our students: how Martha Nussbaum's political philosophy has influenced her work with the poor in India; how Peter Singer's theoretical ethics has informed his advocacy for animal rights; how Kristin Shrader-Frechette has defended the norms of good scientific reasoning in her watchdog focus on the nuclear-power industry. Most of us, however, prefer to keep a lower profile. We lament teaching the same old courses year after year, hoping for a reduction in our "load" so that we might get back to our "own work," turning out obscure

essays that may be read by 10 other scholars with whom we are already on a first-name basis. Meanwhile the world burns.

Over the last 20 years, income inequality in America has grown to unsustainable levels, genocide has devastated Rwanda and Serbia, modern slavery exists in Sudan, child prostitution is rampant in Southeast Asia, and 9/11 brought terrorism to American shores. Yet to look at the history of the philosophy of language, mind, science, metaphysics, epistemology, or even ethics, one would hardly know all that. Consequently, outside of philosophy no one cares much what philosophers have to say to one another—and I'm not sure we can blame them.

We have painted ourselves into a corner of irrelevance so completely that at times I wonder whether most philosophical work is even very interesting to other philosophers. There is, of course, genuine value to pure research in philosophy, just as there is in other fields. But what seems problematic is the widespread philosopher's prejudice that we are somehow sullyng our discipline any time we try to make a real-world connection.

Thus even when we have the chance to make a difference, philosophers often blow it. How many of us, when we teach ethics, have used the hypothetical example of whether torture is justified to get evidence in the face of a ticking bomb? But when a U.S. president actually endorsed the use of torture, there was mostly silence from the philosophical community, from both sides of the political spectrum. Few op-eds in national newspapers. Little attempt to make use of our terrific critical-reasoning skills in the public arena to cut through the fallacies of the politicians or the blowhards on cable TV. Too many preferred instead to brag of their brave political convictions to the captive audience in their classrooms.

Similarly, when a 2009 *Washington Post*-ABC News poll shows that 28 percent of the American public—and an alarming number of their elected representatives in Washington—refuse to believe the overwhelming scientific evidence for the existence of global warming, where is the voice of the philosophical community to right the ship on the norms of good reasoning? Personally, I'm tired of hearing members of Congress who couldn't pass an introductory logic class say that they are "skeptics" about climate change. Refusing to believe something in the face of scientific evidence is not skepticism, it is the height of credulity. How delicious would it be for philosophers to claim public venues to rap their knuckles over that?

And even when there are opportunities for public comment on philosophical topics, we tend to get passed over. How many newsworthy issues, which should have been the rightful domain of philosophy, have been usurped in recent years by religion, law, and psychology?

Then again, maybe the news outlets just don't know us. The profession of philosophy has kept such a low profile over recent decades that perhaps they don't know whom to call. Can most people outside academe name one philosopher who is a public intellectual, or even one philosopher at all? Of course, some people would disdain the idea that there should even be any public intellectuals in philosophy. But if that's so, then I think we give up the right to be shocked when we do have something to say in the public arena, and nobody cares much about our opinions.

The result is the threat on the near horizon: the closing of philosophy departments. Why are we surprised? We live in a country that is facing a financial crisis, an employment crisis, a debt crisis, and is heavily committed in overseas fighting. Outside the university, not many people may think that it is important to protect the rights of a few tenured professors to speak into an echo chamber. If we are not serving our students, the larger society, or making connections with other disciplines—if we are not prepared to defend philosophy, use it in the larger world, and show others why it is so important—we shouldn't be surprised if philosophy begins to disappear even within the one place where we thought it would be protected: the university.

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