

The Crisis of Philosophy

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By [Jason Stanley](#)

In the recently announced results of the new American Council of Learned Societies “New Faculty Fellows” program, 53 recent Ph.D.s in the humanities were awarded post-doctoral fellowships. None of the initial list of winners held a Ph.D. in philosophy. This is only the most recent insult to the oldest of disciplines. Most American humanists are unclear about how the debates of philosophers are supposed to fit into the overall project of the humanities. We are ignored at dinner parties, and considered arrogant and perhaps uncouth. To add insult to injury, the name of our profession is liberally bestowed on those teaching in completely different departments. The great figures of American philosophy, lauded the world over, are passed over within American academy, in favor of lesser known lights. For example, in January, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a lengthy article praising two rather unknown philosophy professors, which concluded with the grandiose sentence, “They became philosophers in the grand sense that still draws young people to the subject today, until the phony logic choppers drive them away.”

Humans organize themselves into societies, cultures, nations, religions, genders, and races, and employ art and literature to represent their character. According to one view, the humanities should explain the nature of these formations – how the cultural artifacts the groups produce represent their respective identities. In so doing, we seek to advance a more sympathetic understanding of the differing veils humans adopt. The decades have taught us sensitivity to the risks of colonialist methodologies. Therefore, many humanists are members of the communities they seek to understand. The work of the humanities has also become ever more important, as we are brought in closer connection with once-unfamiliar groups. Confrontation with the other has become a necessity of modernity, and humanists have settled into playing a role as our arbiter with the unfamiliar.

Philosophy stands apart from this emerging consensus about the purpose of the humanities. Its questions – which concern the nature and scope of concepts like knowledge, representation, free will, rational agency, goodness, justice, laws, evidence and truth – seem antiquated and baroque. Its central debates seem disconnected from the issues of identity that plague and inspire the contemporary world. Its pedantic methodology seems designed to alienate rather than absorb. Whereas humanists have transformed into actors, using their teaching and research as political tools, philosophers have withdrawn ever more to positions as removed spectators, and not of life, but of some abstracted and disconnected realm of Grand Concepts.

That philosophy has become estranged from the humanities is ironic. Philosophy has shaped the modernity in which its role has been supplanted by the anthropology of the other. In his [grand volume on the subject](#), Jonathan Israel argues that Baruch Spinoza was largely responsible for the intellectual framework that led to the enlightenment ideals of freedom of speech and thought.

Nor was it exclusively the political writings of the philosophers of the modern era that led to the drastic rethinking of human relations that has enabled science and modern forms of government to flourish. Descartes never had any political writings – it was rather the “sweeping reverence for philosophical reason,” Israel writes, that pervaded the intricate metaphysics of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* that was considered so threatening that the Pope banned his work in 1663. However, appealing to past effect is no help in understanding current importance. Maybe the fact that we now occupy modernity, and no longer need to establish it, has made the discipline of Philosophy otiose. There is perhaps a place for the *history* of Philosophy – investigation into how abstract reflection on grand concepts led to the modern world – but no more use for the abstract theorizing of a Descartes, Kant, or Spinoza.

The activity of philosophy is also foreign to many American humanists. Fiction writers, artists, and directors create works generally outside of the academy, for audiences outside its walls. That work is studied inside the academy by humanists seeking to gain an understanding of the period, place, or identity it reflects. Like the fiction writer or the artist, and unlike her fellow humanists, the philosopher is focused on creating her own body of work, ideally a novel attempt at a solution to the on-going philosophical problems. But unlike the fiction writer or the artist, there is hardly an audience anymore for philosophy outside of the academy. Few bankers care to hear about the latest views on rational agency or vagueness. Humanists are used to studying cultural works created outside the academy for audiences outside the academy. Philosophical work is cultural creation formed inside the academy for an audience that is now largely inside the academy.

Philosophical problems also have a childlike grandiosity. When a philosopher announces that she is working on the nature of truth, she sounds like a teenager discovering the world of ideas for the first time. The notion that someone could come up with a new way to show that (say) we know that we are not brains in vats must seem infantile, even more so when the methods seem so dry and dilettantish. As the philosopher David Hill has described the discipline, it is “the ungainly attempt to tackle questions that come naturally to children, using methods that come naturally to lawyers.”

The view that there is no proper place anymore in the academy for the theorizing of figures such as Descartes, Spinoza, Hume, and Kant is well-reflected in the relative success philosophers achieve in competition with fellow humanists for various fellowships. To take a representative example, there are 17 American historians who have won the prestigious MacArthur “genius” grant. In contrast to this subfield of history, there are [six philosophers](#) who have won MacArthur awards, and they are an odd group. None of the great American metaphysicians or epistemologists of the last 40 years are among them, despite their world-wide influence and acclaim.

Perhaps philosophy has fallen into disfavor among humanists because philosophy has not been true to its roots. According to one sort of myth of this sort, traditional philosophers were commentators on culture. In the 1920s, philosophy was then ruined by the Logical Positivists, who created a new, dry, vision of philosophy. In their quest to declare the traditional questions of metaphysics meaningless, they divorced philosophy from the broader connections with culture and politics that give it life. The Positivists lost favor on the continent, and obtained posts in the

barren intellectual wastelands of Chicago and New Haven, bringing their dry, logical methodology with them from Vienna.

This story is false in every detail. Logical Positivists prized the deliverances of mathematics and science (as did Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant). But nothing follows about a lack of political and cultural presence. Core members of the Vienna Circle, such as Carnap, Feigl, and Neurath, all lectured at the Dessau Bauhaus. As Peter Galison has emphasized (“Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16, No. 4), what united the Logical Positivists and the members of Bauhaus was a desire to create an alternative vision of social relations than the one promulgated by Volkisch thought – the intellectual representative of National Socialism.

The Positivist repudiation of metaphysics must be understood in a cultural context in which the self-described “metaphysical” philosophers were arguing that the German Volk were ontologically prior to the members of the Volk. In the face of the anti-enlightenment ideology of the National Socialists, the positivists, together with allies in the art world, sought to articulate a progressive, rationalist vision of society that transcended ethnic and national divisions. The Positivists, like Descartes and Spinoza before them, played the role that philosophers are supposed to be play in society – challenging powerful social forces that appeal to mysticism and faith for support.

Logical Positivism, in its embrace of the transformational power of science and reason, does not mark a break with traditional philosophy. Rather, it is a continuation of it. Nevertheless, while contemporary philosophy shares positivist enlightenment values, the positivist anti-metaphysical program has fallen into disfavor. Many leading contemporary philosophers have achieved their status precisely because of defenses of metaphysical views. When the Wykeham Chair of Logic at Oxford University is writing a book defending the view that everything necessarily exists, it is safe to say that grand metaphysics is back in vogue.

In short, philosophy has not changed. David Lewis writes very differently than Nietzsche. But the unusual figure was Nietzsche, and not Lewis. The great philosophical works have always been difficult technical tomes, pursuing arcane arguments in the service of grand metaphysical and epistemological conclusions. None are easy reading for laypersons, and few base their arguments on anthropology or sociology. The conclusions they draw, and the methods they employ, are the same that one finds in the work of philosophers today. There are many philosophers working today who embrace and argue for Hume’s skeptical conclusions, just as there are many philosophers today arguing for Descartes’ view about the relation between the body and the soul in the *Meditations*. It is Slavoj Zizek who is markedly out of place in this tradition, and not Saul Kripke.

But given the role that the Humanities have adopted in modern civilization, what role does philosophy have to play? A thoroughgoing defense of science and reason is perhaps not now needed, and in any case it is quite clear that current philosophers are not engaged in this project. Rather, they have returned to the traditional philosophical questions one finds in classical philosophy – the nature of persons and rational agency, the status of free will, the nature and

reality of material objects. Is addressing these questions now a defunct and pointless enterprise, in an era in which issues of group identity have leapt to the forefront?

Most humanists challenge preconceptions by confronting students with alternative cultural identities. The philosopher instead focuses on the beliefs that constitute a religious or cultural identity. Instead of teaching Christians about Hinduism, the philosopher addresses the abstract structure of the problem of evil, thereby confronting the Christian student with some of the consequences of her system of beliefs. Instead of teaching the middle-class American person about the actual poverty and oppression in her society, the philosopher forces her to reflect on abstract problem cases in which that person's intuitions lead her to condemn the behavior of someone who is in fact behaving in all relevant respects similar to her. These are different methods of confronting complacency, but they are no less effective.

A typical humanist might be somewhat interested in the philosophical views of a certain group, but is probably more interested in the identity that results. The philosopher is interested in the logical consequences of the basic doctrines. Hence, many humanists find the discipline of philosophy baffling – the very project of investigating philosophical questions in isolation from historical context seems odd, like doing the mathematics of religious belief. Nevertheless, if the purpose of the humanities is to challenge preconceptions and basic beliefs, in the service of forming a better and more tolerant citizen of a diverse and globalized world, the methods of the philosopher and the methods of the historian are equally necessary.

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