

August 2018

Dear past and present members of the Harvard Philosophy Department,

This letter concerns Tom Fehse, a former member of the department who committed suicide in his Berlin apartment on the last day of October, 2017. Tom was a graduate student at the department from 2005 to 2012 and wrote about Kant's theoretical philosophy. He and I became friends after I joined the program in the fall of 2008. He left the program seven years in without submitting his dissertation prospectus. He continued to work on his prospectus until his death.

I spent the summer of 2016 in Berlin and lived a block from Tom's apartment. Tom and I met regularly and had long conversations. We talked about many things unrelated to philosophy, but philosophy was the recurring theme. He spoke fondly of the Harvard Philosophy Department and was still deeply engaged in philosophical thought. In fact, he spoke of his hope of finishing the prospectus and rejoining the program to complete his PhD. But he had difficulties writing and couldn't make significant progress on his prospectus. I do not know if he shared his drafts with anyone; he never shared them with me.

I cannot explain or comprehend the reasons for Tom's suicide, nor will I try. Such an explanation would have to rely on many facts about Tom's life that I either do not know or do not fully understand. But it is clear to me that Tom's feelings of inadequacy with respect to his philosophical aspirations were an essential part of his despair. His insistence on finishing his prospectus and writing his dissertation was motivated by a longing to be part of a community he cared about deeply; his inability to do so frustrated and wounded him. Since Tom's death, I have come to believe that I must try to say something about the experience of being oppressed by philosophy and reflect on how we might support each other in the face of this experience. It is difficult to make distinctions in darkness, but the shadow that philosophy cast over Tom is not unfamiliar to me. Perhaps you recognize it, too.

As I understand it, the Harvard department was the last place where Tom felt he belonged. He had good friends in Berlin, but as late as June 2017 Tom told me he missed the conversations he had with people at the department. When Tom left Harvard I thought that going back to Germany might free him from the pressures of academia and allow him to focus on what he loved about philosophy. But I suppose quitting the program had the opposite impact. The daily labor of philosophy became less concrete and tangible, more isolating, and its demands more intimidating. Talking to Tom, I got the impression that he was thoroughly embarrassed by everything he wrote and could not give himself the space for experimentation, for trial and error, a space which he so readily granted others. In conversation he was as eloquent as can be, his ideas clear and convincing, but the commitment implied by the written word seemed to terrify him. It had to do, I think, with the fact that genuine, original writing emerges from a very solitary place, and yet one's words can, in principle, be read by anyone. Such self-exposure can, at times, feel indecent, dangerous, even shameful. It requires a certain leap of faith, it requires love for oneself and one's readers.

As those of you who knew him can confirm, Tom was a loving person—his eyes and smile made it abundantly clear. He was brilliant in and beyond philosophy, and he was a very funny man. But he was also very severe, especially, perhaps exclusively, towards himself. In those long conversations in Berlin, drinking into the night, I made fun of his earnestness, I told him it was all too German of him. He laughed and nodded but remained alone inside himself, out of reach. The thought that he didn't realize how much he meant to others breaks my heart. And then there's the thought that he did realize, that he knew he was loved, but it wasn't enough to sustain him. In any case, I feel that because Tom's loneliness was so intricately related to his devotion to philosophy, because it was the loneliness one feels when one stands paralyzed at the feet of Philosophy, his death, his conclusive despair, rings out and makes the part of me that knows that loneliness—that sense of philosophical defeat—reverberate with it.

A devotion and vulnerability to philosophy is something we all share, I believe. This is why this letter is not addressed only to those who knew and cared about Tom, but to those who have studied and worked in Emerson Hall and can recognize in themselves a *passion* — in the most serious sense of the word — for philosophy. The talk of passion might sound overblown or pompous. But I find it difficult to believe that we are studying philosophy merely in order to make a successful career for ourselves in a subject we enjoy. Academic philosophy does not offer a realistic career path, and those who pursue it are either disconnected from reality or so seriously devoted to the prospect of immersing themselves in philosophy that they are willing to take considerable risks to achieve their goal. For the sake of academic philosophy we often sacrifice some of the most important things in a person's life: being close to our family, friends, and partners; living in a place we call "home"; knowing where and how we will get by in the near, or slightly more distant future. To many reasonable people, these sacrifices seem outrageous. But these reasonable people do not share our passion.

Whether we eventually decide to live a more reasonable life or continue on this tortuous path, we have all, at one point or another, taken very seriously the idea of devoting ourselves to philosophy. We have all felt the force of philosophy's demands: to make a genuine contribution, to understand, to find ways around the many impasses of philosophy's maze. I believe we shouldn't belittle this passion, or pretend that we were never under its spell. We shouldn't be ashamed of it and we shouldn't deny that we ever confronted the prospect of devastation by philosophical failure.

I would go as far as to speculate that any philosopher worthy of the name knew the taste of philosophical humiliation. We have all faced the fear of being exposed as a sham, as inadequate or foolishly disoriented, and at one point or another these things were true of us. Failure is the philosopher's starting point. Tom's death made me think that it is important to acknowledge our shared predicament. All too often we shy away from making our philosophical vulnerabilities public, and for understandable reasons. We fear that admitting our dread will make the prospect of failure all the more real. But I believe that we are thereby making matters worse. In concealing our insecurities we often turn our self-castigation onto others. We cast ourselves in the role of philosophy's judge in order to deflect its verdict from ourselves. We thereby exacerbate each other's dread. Too often the very vulnerability that could form the foundation of our community creates a social dynamic that undermines community.

The possibility of failure is of course an essential part of philosophical activity, and I certainly do not mean to deny that some are better than others in doing philosophy. But these obvious truths do not settle the question of how philosophical failures reflect on us as individuals or how they reflect on our philosophical devotion. Just as anyone, in virtue of being someone, is entitled to ask and contemplate the questions of philosophy, so anyone who seriously and consistently engages philosophical questions might very well make a valuable contribution to the great philosophical conversation that spans across the ages. We should remember this in addressing each other; we owe each other a modicum of philosophical faith. And while we should also hold each other to the highest intellectual standards, our faith in each other should support our efforts to meet these standards rather than be conditioned on having already met them.

Of course, decisions must be made about who will be awarded resources—who will be permitted to speak, who will be admitted to graduate school, who will win prizes, who will be published, who will be given a job, and who will get tenure. But it is easy to forget that these decisions do not and cannot touch on the genuine value of anyone’s philosophical engagement. Competition can and does contribute to the institutions of philosophy, but as in other parts of social life so in academic philosophy competition tends to overthrow the values it is meant to serve. Gaining institutional status (at the expense of others) is often pursued as a goal unto itself and seen as a hallmark of valuable philosophical work. But even *if* academic institutions are set up in the optimal way to track philosophical quality (and that is a big “if”), they are merely instruments for resource distribution when resources are scarce, not final arbiters of philosophical quality. Academic success might be a sign of philosophical achievement but it is not philosophical achievement in itself.

I do not mean to suggest that we can completely shield our sense of self-worth from the prospect of philosophical failure. Even if the oppressive potential of philosophy can be mitigated, it can never be extinguished. If our sense that our lives are meaningful depends on future success in our philosophical endeavors, then vulnerability to failure is inevitable. But we can restrict failure’s personal damage in a few important ways.

First, we should *not* encourage students and colleagues to make philosophy the *sole* source of meaning in their lives. Our loved ones, our community, as well as our other causes and activities, can give us support and stability as individuals and as philosophers. These other devotions need not detract from our ability to pursue philosophy but rather free us to do so without being paralyzed by the existential fear of failure. Philosophy shouldn’t be granted a monopoly over our love. Furthermore, to the extent that philosophy is concerned with human life, retreating from other forms of commitment, devotion, and activity would undermine our ability to produce valuable philosophy. We would be out of touch with our subject matter, able to view it only through the eyes of the theories we devise to explain it.

Second, philosophical contemplation has genuine value in itself, and this value cannot be reduced to the value of its product. Though the dissertation is the goal of our PhD research, it does not exhaust the value of our philosophical work in graduate school. Waking up in the morning and asking philosophical questions can be a valuable activity in itself, even if every morning we ask the same questions. This is also true of teaching philosophy and talking to others about philosophy. The possibility of failure in our philosophical pursuits cannot be eradicated,

but the reality of failure need not drain our philosophical pursuits of their value, nor should it rob our life of the meaning philosophy gives it. Even if we fail to find a genuinely new argument, or problem, or view, a life devoted to philosophical contemplation is a life well spent and worth cherishing.

Finally, and relatedly, the prospect of failure should not eclipse the joy of doing philosophy. Our deepest passions might bring about our demise but they are also the source of our most profound pleasures. It is easy, in doing philosophy, to be paralyzed by the prospect of failure and to lose touch with the pleasure of philosophical activity. We should help each other and our students to remain open to philosophical joy. This involves, I think, encouraging them to take risks and make mistakes. There is joy in putting forward preposterous generalizations; there is joy in making spectacular philosophical errors; there is joy in realizing how misguided you were; there is joy in, after all those years, finally getting it right; and there is joy in knowing that you will never really get to the bottom of the problem that has consumed you. More immediately, there is the joy of posing to oneself and to one's interlocutors the most ambitious questions ever to be asked and to be doing so every morning in the seminar room and every night as one falls asleep. Enjoying philosophy is part of taking it seriously.

I cannot and do not mean to speak for Tom. I have no idea how or whether things might have been different for him. But I believe that any sincere appreciation of the circumstances of Tom's death must take into account the ways in which we fail each other as a community. And I believe that we owe him, each other, and ourselves more.

Last June I was in Berlin again, for the first time after Tom's death. I met with some of Tom's friends. They told me about Tom's favorite spot in Berlin, a bench overlooking Landwehr Canal, on the border of Neukölln and Treptow. At the request of Tom's friends, the City of Berlin agreed to dedicate this bench to Tom's memory. The plaque will be installed soon.

I went to see it. Tom's bench is one of four benches located on this particular spot on the canal bank, where the canal breaks off in two and a large triangle of water opens up. I came by on a warm Wednesday evening. The streets were full of people riding their bicycles, strolling with beers in their hands, sitting around and enjoying the warm evening. I sat on Tom's bench. On the benches to each side of me there were couples, their arms around each other's shoulders, sipping drinks, looking at the sun beams hitting the water and at the sky changing its colors. The sun was setting over Berlin. I imagined seeing it through Tom's eyes.

Oded Na'aman



Tom's bench



The view from Tom's bench at sunset