

# The Essentially Existential and Borderless Project of Philosophy

*Andrew D. Chapman*

The aim of this paper is to present a sustained argument for the conclusion that philosophy is necessarily *borderless*, that is, that philosophy — true philosophy — necessarily and actively extends beyond any attempts to hem it in with any nontrivial constraints, whether those constraints are geographical, political, administrative, intellectual, or of any other sort. In broad strokes, the argument for this conclusion looks like this: Philosophy is an existential project such that philosophy is a construction of, an example of, and an expression of our uniquely humanly lived lives. However, such an existential project is a necessary structuring precondition for, rather than a result of, any nontrivial human constructions. As such, borders of all sorts, one such human construction, presuppose, rather than delimit, philosophical activity.

Philosophy is the self-conscious evaluation of reasons for action and belief at the most general and universal possible level. Philosophy, according to this definition, asks questions that are foundational to other enterprises and that are fundamental in terms of manifest reality and our place in reality. Our abilities to perform evaluations of reasons at more specific or particular levels are grounded in our abilities self-consciously to evaluate reasons at all, to know what reasons are, to know what to do with them, to categorize reasons appropriately, etc. That is, our abilities to act and believe based on reason are ultimately grounded in our ability to do philosophy.

In this way, as many professional philosophers believe, and as a number of us tell our students, write on our syllabi or teaching statements, explain to friends, acquaintances, and family members who wonder what a philosopher is, or argue to university administrators skeptical of the value of the oldest intellectual pursuit within the modern contemporary university, *we are all philosophers*. Yes, some of us are better philosophers than others, but what separates the expert philosopher from everyone else is not that the expert philosopher is a *philosopher* while everyone else is not. Instead, it's that the expert philosopher has training and substantial practice self-consciously evaluating reasons for action and belief at the most general level (and, accordingly, one would hope, is better than the majority of the population at self-consciously evaluating reasons for action and belief).

What is it that's so important about the work of philosophy as to make it historically the first intellectual discipline? That is, what is it about the self-conscious evaluation of reasons that makes that activity so important? The answer refers to facts forced on us by circumstances outside of our control, facts whose importance to our lives we affirm and reproduce with each action we take: We are the sorts of things whose lived lives, whose total manifest awareness, whose interactions with the world, other people, and ourselves, is *meaningful*. Our lives are meaningful not just in a normative-ethical sense (although they are also meaningful in that sense!) but also in an existential sense.

Our lives themselves, as well as individual temporal slices of those lives, as well as the particular contents of the individual temporal slices of those lives, *are important to us*. Some lives or components of lives are more important to their possessors than are others—for example, a suicide's life is probably less important to her than is the life of someone who manages to keep going on, or for further example, a person's partner or partners are probably more important to her than a rock—but these relative rankings of importance all occur within a general field of importance. This importance and resultant structural nature of our lives, gives our lives and our awareness of our lives existential weight—meaningfulness.

Since philosophy is self-conscious evaluation of reasons, philosophy is in the business of the critique and evaluation of meaning—meaning's recognition, its analysis, its understanding, and its correct deployment. And since philosophy does its work at the most general possible level, philosophy is in the business of the evaluation of meaning in the most general, expansive, universal, and all-encompassing sense. What's important for our purposes is that without philosophy, it is impossible for lives containing meaning and that are meaningful themselves to exist. Insofar as a person carries on with the project of creating her life, she does so because of philosophy, and insofar as a person carries on living a specific sort of life or decides to change, minimally or radically, the specific sort of life she is living, she does so because of philosophy.

Philosophy, then, is important, not just in a downward justificatory sense in which the meaning of a person's life is grounded in her philosophical abilities but also in the upward determinative sense in which a change in philosophical abilities or a change in the content of philosophical foundations necessitates a change in the meaning of a person's life. Just as changing the shape of the foundation of a house changes the structure of a house, changing the (more metaphorical) shape of the structure of a person's philosophical abilities and the content of those abilities changes the structure and content of the meaning of her life.

Thus, there is no philosophical change for a person without a concomitant existential change for that person. An overall improvement in philosophical abilities changes the structure and content of the meaning of life. A change or development of philosophical positions changes the structure and content of the relevant parts of the meaning of life. Think, for instance, of the person who is finally persuaded by arguments for the moral permissibility of abortion. Or think of the person who becomes convinced that animals have rights that are incompatible with human consumption of meat. Or think, even, of the person who learns and can deploy in practice the difference between the validity of *modus ponens* and the invalidity of affirming the consequent. Philosophical changes are life changes, i.e., philosophy is life-changing.

One final thing that is important to recognize about philosophy in this sense is that there is no such thing as *individualist philosophy*. Thankfully, as most professional philosophers recognize—and encouragingly, as a growing number of young people in States whose official ideology is one of individualism and self-sufficiency and zero-sum competition recognize—the project of the liberalization of public life (that’s liberalism as a philosophical position, not the amorphous political position adopted by the centrist-left, although there are substantial similarities) begun in the Early Modern period, most famously by Locke, is a project based in incoherence. There is no such thing as individualist philosophy because there is no such thing as individualist life, even for the desert island castaway. All thought and all action are necessarily dialogical and constitutively dialectical: essential normative features of both thought and action make it such that thought and action are only intelligible in terms of standards and conditions of intelligibility that cannot possibly be possessed or understood only by a single individual. Of course, Kant could have told us this, as could Hegel, as could Marx, as could Nietzsche, as could Husserl, as could Heidegger, as could Wittgenstein, as could Horkheimer-&-Adorno. But liberalism’s defenders have often managed to be both louder and less well-read than are liberalism’s opponents. It’s taken the implosion of liberalism since WWI and the subsequent practical crises felt by citizens of all purportedly liberal states for the individualism of liberalism to be revealed as not only a false god, but an impossible one.

I’ve thus far presented philosophy as the broadest possible self-conscious evaluative activity, the target of which is reasons for action and belief in their most general and fundamental sense, specifically, as manifested in terms of the meaning present in and provided by the lived lives of creatures like you and me. And philosophical activity, I’ve said, by its very dialogical and dialectical nature, is anti-individualist, and the results of philosophical investigations or of the possession or modification of philosophical abilities is life-changing.

A consequence of this picture of philosophy as all-encompassing is that philosophy cannot be subjugated to or made to play a secondary role to some set of facts or other procedures external to philosophy. In fact, insofar as we are able to interact reasonably with specific and particular parts of the world that aren't directly philosophical at all, it is ultimately due to philosophy—never the other way around. That is, philosophy undergirds all reasonable action and all resultant reasonable structures, organizations, constructs, and institutions, no reasonable action, structure, organization, construct, or institution undergirds philosophy.

This is one way of saying what the broad philosophical project we are here to represent and explicate—*Philosophy Without Borders*<sup>1</sup>—is an expression and manifestation of, and that Philosophy Without Borders takes as its guiding ethos: that philosophy, in any version of philosophy that does justice to the essence of philosophy itself, cannot be made secondary to any type of classificatory scheme, division, or process of in-grouping and out-grouping. Philosophy is borderless.

It may initially sound somewhat odd to speak of the fundamental, foundational, general, universal, and all-inclusive nature of philosophy in terms of the concept of borders, but this oddness is a mere artifact of the narrow geopolitical conception of borders that most of us employ—those of us who aren't borders theorists, at least. While a geopolitical border is certainly a border, it is only *one type* of border. Other types include national borders, ethnic borders, cultural borders, linguistic borders, historical borders, genre borders, administrative borders, and bureaucratic borders, to name just a few.

In the sense of the concept of a border that I am employing here—a broad, although entirely coherent sense—borders are a form of subjugation, power-assertion, and violence. They are an insertion into a domain, realm, or space of a claim to categorical superiority within that domain, realm, or space of the source of those borders. Thus, if border B is present in domain D and O is the source of B, a constitutive component of B is a claim of categorical superiority of O within D.

As we've seen, philosophy cannot properly be subjugated to or made secondary to any reasons-based construct. As such, philosophy cannot be subjugated to borders of any kind, whether those borders are geopolitical, national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, historical, genre, administrative, bureaucratic, or of some other sort. Philosophy's necessarily public essence cannot be minimized by employing any sort of border that pushes philosophy from the realm of the public into the realm of the private.

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<sup>1</sup> Home-based online at URL = <<https://www.patreon.com/philosophywithoutborders>>.

However, as should be obvious, too often we *do* see philosophy claimed to be present only in some walled-off section of life, only in some domain surrounded by linguistic, genre, geopolitical, administrative, bureaucratic borders. Take, for example, the thankfully dying, but still nonetheless present, so-called Analytic/Continental distinction—that there are fundamentally different types of philosophy, distinguished by characteristics no one seems to be able to articulate but that many nonetheless claim to be able to know when they see. Many of those who freely employ the border between analytic and continental also do so in an attempt to claim that one or the other type of philosophy is either second-rate philosophy or not philosophy at all. Or take, for further example, Richard Rorty’s famous claim that philosophy is just writing about Plato, or writing about people who wrote about Plato, or writing about people who wrote about people who wrote about Plato.... Or take the apparently widespread, although nonetheless seldom articulated belief that philosophy has a specific genre: written didactic prose that appears in journals or is read at conferences. In all of these cases, we have a claim that philosophy is subjugated to, and a real attempt to subjugate philosophy to, some set of reasons that is treated as prior to philosophy.

Or take perhaps the most egregious and violent example in our present philosophical culture: Philosophy has become ghettoized in the administrative state that is the contemporary university. The story is this: Philosophy is just one more discipline and in the contemporary university, which has become a massive trade school whose purpose is preparing students for jobs in the capitalist state, the goodness of these university disciplines can only be measured in instrumental terms—typically in terms of future money-making prospects. My own department celebrates this fact with a television monitor hung in the hallway above the department’s main office that intermittently displays a slide that celebrates the supposed ability of a major in philosophy to result in more future earning potential than a major in some other discipline.

Nonetheless, an astute observer should point out, whatever the status of my claim that philosophy cannot be subjugated to some construct claimed to be prior to philosophy, most philosophers *do in fact* seem to subjugate philosophy to some construct claimed to be prior to philosophy, but these philosophers *are in fact* still doing philosophy. Isn’t this just a refutation of my claim that philosophy cannot be subjugated to some construct claimed to be prior to philosophy?

What is happening in almost all cases of philosophy-in-practice today, and what I want to suggest it is our central imperative, as philosophers, to fight against, is conscious surrender to—and unfortunately sometimes conscious embrace of—a form of

inauthenticity. *Inauthenticity* is a technical term for the existentialist that means, very briefly, a conscious denial to oneself of one's own manifest lived situation and of one's own abilities to change one's own manifest lived situation. The claim, then, is that even though bordered philosophy itself is an impossibility, engaging in philosophy while presenting that philosophical activity as bordered, either outwardly in words and actions or inwardly in assertions and reassurances to oneself, is not impossible. Nevertheless, this activity of bordered philosophy is pretense, understood as pretense upon brief self-conscious reflection, and so the life of the bordered philosopher is a life of inauthenticity.

I want to be careful here to make clear that I am not presenting this identification of the inauthenticity of bordered philosophy as a moral condemnation of nearly all philosophers. If it is immoral to be inauthentic, then that immorality is a very special type of immorality, not the same sort as is present in torture or lying or selfishness. While a fully authentic life is *possible*, it is almost certain that a fully authentic life has never been *actual*. Inauthenticity is a sin against our very natures as meaning-making creatures, but it is also a direct result of our very meaning-making nature. To engage in standard immoral behavior is, in nearly all cases, unnatural. To be inauthentic, however, is our default setting.

And yet we, self-identified philosophers, have chosen a life for ourselves that places special demands on us in terms of how much inauthenticity we ought to be comfortable excusing ourselves for. We freely have chosen not only to recognize the foundational and all-pervasive nature of philosophy, but also to present ourselves publicly as examples of "the philosopher." We freely have chosen a philosophical form of life, a way of being, an essence, and, as I noted a moment ago, it is our duty, as the embodiment of the philosophic life, and as public representatives of that life, to make clear to ourselves and to others that philosophy is secondary to nothing, that philosophy is a result of nothing, that philosophy and the philosophic life are without borders.

What this means in practice is that we must identify, deny, and work against chauvinistic impulses that would constrain philosophy to one sector of life, to one nation, to one language, to one culture, to one tradition, to one genre. It means that we must identify, deny, and work against powerful interests that demand that we act as though philosophy is a result of institutions, organizations, or constructs. It means that we must radically collectivize and radically universalize the practice and project of philosophy.

—A radical collectivization and a radical universalization that can be exceptionally difficult in a contemporary capitalist society in which most of us would need to starve or give up practicing philosophy if some institution didn't pay us to be philosophers. But it isn't a form of inauthenticity for us to work for a university—what would be inauthentic would be to see the university as the source of philosophy, to see philosophy as just one more job amongst others. The capitalist situation that we were born into gave most of us no choice but to beg someone to give us money so that we could stay alive. This is regrettable. But for the philosopher employed as a philosopher, there's a serious upside: We have chosen to make philosophy our lives and someone is going to pay us to live parts of our lives within the walls of a university. We were going to be philosophers *anyway* and we are now lucky enough, given that capitalism is the law of the land, we can continue to be philosophers while at work. The only danger we need to be aware of is a tendency mentally to invert the relationship between the life that we chose with the necessity that was forced on us to work: we are philosophers first, employees second—and this is merely a result of the foundational nature of philosophy.

The point here, in conclusion, is that we know what philosophy is and what our choice of a life of philosophy demands of us. To pretend that our self-chosen lives or their resultant obligations are less than all-pervasive is to deceive ourselves in a way that is inauthentic. Similarly, to allow philosophy to be anything less than all-pervasive is to deceive ourselves in a way that is inauthentic. The borders that threaten to do violence to philosophy and to the nature of our lives as meaning-making creatures—and as philosophers—are what we must be ever-vigilant to protect ourselves and each other against. As philosophers, and as meaning-making creatures in general, this is a life-long project that requires creativity and interaction and an ever-expanding conception of what counts as the philosophical life. And this philosophical life can and must manifest itself in public so that philosophy inhabits its rightful place in the lives of all people.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented at the *Public Philosophy Network* conference in Boulder CO USA in February 2018. I'm grateful to the conference organizers for giving me the opportunity to do so.