

Higher Education, Neoliberalism, and the Need for *Borderless Philosophy*

Michelle Maiese

Over the last decade or so, it's become commonplace to hear about our "competitor schools," the importance of ensuring "value for the money," and the need for students and their families to see a "return on investment." The placement of banners on the side of the road, the construction of fancy dorms and fitness centers, and the increased focus on student satisfaction surveys all indicate that more and more, colleges and universities view students as consumers whose "business" they need to attract and sustain. In this competitive "market," there is a need to focus on efficiency, ensure that academic programs are "sustainable," and be flexible in the face of external pressures and demands. But what is "neoliberalism," and how does it relate to the shift in discourse I've sketched above?

While neoliberalism centers on minimal government regulation and the relatively unfettered operation of markets, it goes well beyond a series of policy objectives. It is better understood as an ensemble of ideological forces and norms whose primary aim is to construct a specific kind of social reality, one in which every aspect of human life is managed and evaluated in relation to market demands. In the United States, this ideology took hold in the late 1970s, became dominant in the 1980s, and has been guiding our thought and behavior ever since. Neoliberalism seeks to extend market logic to social realms where markets did not exist before. Needs formerly met by public agencies, via government provision, or through personal relationships in communities and families, are now to be met by companies selling services in the marketplace. On this view, the State is the market, efficiency is the highest value, and economic considerations always take priority. Market interference or regulations should be avoided wherever possible given that they restrict individual freedom, where freedom is understood in terms of buying and selling.

Neoliberalism emphasizes the values of individualism, self-reliance, consumerism, and personal gain; and these market values shape what we regard as rational and responsible forms of human agency. It is rational, for example, to focus on increasing one's "human capital," and irrational to engage in pursuits that are not valued in the marketplace. Thus, within the neoliberal university, the students' central goals are to land a well-paying job and become "a productive member of society": namely, a high

wage earner and an active consumer. The professors' central goals are to get tenure, be promoted, and attain status, prestige, and a bigger pay check.

Interestingly, philosophers have had relatively little to say about the influence of neoliberalism on higher education in general, or professional academic philosophy in particular.¹ This is problematic, especially in light of the fact that philosophy (as well as other fields in the Humanities) often are perceived as unnecessary when it comes to getting a well-paying job and participating in the marketplace. While philosophy once was thought to play a crucial role in educating people for their role as "citizens of the cosmos" (Diogenes) or enlightened members of a universal cosmopolitan "ethical community" (Kant), today's emphasis on economic innovation and competitiveness can make philosophy seem like a waste of time and effort. Unfortunately, many colleges and universities are responding accordingly and have begun to eliminate both philosophy programs as well as the (sometimes tenured) faculty members who populate them. Even more problematic, perhaps, is the fact that the field itself has been infiltrated by this ideology, as evidenced via philosophical "professionalism" and the fact that practicing philosophy often is approached primarily as a means to paid employment. Clearly, if, as professional philosophers, we want the discipline to survive and thrive, we need to pay more attention to this problem and to consider how we might respond to this increasingly market-driven environment.

However, as Robert Frodeman, Adam Briggie, and J. Britt Holbrook (henceforth FB&H) rightly note in "Philosophy in the Age of Neoliberalism," the discipline continues to ignore this pressing question of how to "respond to an increasingly market-driven university and cultural environment?"² Because philosophers form a professional class, their main audience is one another, and the field is sub-divided into various areas of specialization, philosophy is especially vulnerable to the criticism that is not sufficiently real-world in its orientation. The discipline seems to be out of sync with today's neoliberal world, and many parents and university students question what use it is to society. Increasingly, there is a demand to make philosophy more relevant to our lives. FB&H also claim that the discipline's 20th century response to demands for social relevance was applied philosophy, which seeks to demonstrate "the practical efficacy of philosophic

¹ There are notable exceptions, of course. See, for example, "I Am a Teacher, Not a Job Trainer: A Philosophy Teacher Pushes Back," by Olufemi Taiwo on the APA blog (published 1.24.18), available online at URL = <<https://blog.apaonline.org/2018/01/24/i-am-a-teacher-not-a-job-trainer-a-philosophy-teacher-pushes-back/>>, as well as numerous essays posted on the website of *Against Professional Philosophy*, at URL= <<http://againstprofphil.org/>>.

² R. Frodeman, A. Briggie, and B. Holbrook, "Philosophy in the Age of Neoliberalism," *Social Epistemology* 26 (2012): 311-330, at p. 314.

thought.”³ Applied philosophy showed that real-world problems have philosophical dimensions and that one can make interesting and important contributions to such problems acting as a philosopher. However, in part because institutionalization occurred late, the field has remained on the margins of philosophy.⁴ More importantly, “efforts by applied philosophers to reach out to a larger audience regularly end by falling back into the reference community of philosophy.”⁵

FB&H discuss environmental ethics as an example. Few such ethicists asked how the institutional and disciplinary nature of philosophy affected the practical efficacy of their work. And because environmental ethics remained largely a disciplinary endeavor, it “consigned itself to the margins of both philosophy and society.”⁶ The field has not played much of a role in policy-making, and graduate students interested in environmental ethics are still trained to work in philosophy departments rather than in the public or private sector.⁷ One does not find practical internships nor theoretical questioning of the disciplinary model (for example, how does the nature of our arguments change when our audience is non-philosophers?).⁸ While theorists highlight the need to take better account of policy concerns, the field is unable “to carry through on its promise to offer specific insights and strategies within the context of live controversies,” and this is because “the gravitational pull of disciplines becomes too great.”⁹ In short, in the case of environmental ethics, the message changed, but the disciplinary medium remained the same. Because the field has been overly tied to a disciplinary notion of rigor, (where rigor is defined, for example, in terms of the precision of one’s conceptual analysis), it “ignored the fact that rigor is a rhetorical concept that must adjust to circumstances.” Making applied ethics “rigorous” has led to more disciplinary insularity. The failure of applied ethics to put philosophy at the center of policy debates is rooted, they maintain, in its allegiance to disciplinary standards of scholarship.

FB&H wonder whether there is “a way to do work that is both socially relevant *and* richly philosophical.”¹⁰ Their proposed solution is “field philosophy,” whose initial audience consists of a group of *non*-philosophers. These non-philosophers define what counts as a problem and a solution, and philosophers play a marginal role in the beginning stages. Rather than producing knowledge in isolation from the context of use,

³ Ibid, p. 316.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 316-317.

⁶ Ibid, p. 317.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 318.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 322.

field philosophers engage in the co-production of knowledge with non-philosophers. In addition, field philosophy is “bottom-up” in the sense that it begins with a problem in the world that has a philosophical dimension and directs its attention toward working with the parties involved. In the case of environmental ethics, this would mean working with policy makers or scientists to define what counts as a problem and outline what a solution would look like. (In contrast, applied philosophy involves a “top-down” orientation whereby theory is higher than practice. Theories are first developed by “armchair” philosophers and then applied to real-world problems.) Field philosophers remain as open as possible to seeing the problem from multiple perspectives and at multiple depths.¹¹

I agree with Frodeman and colleagues that it is problematic that philosophy today (especially in the United States) has little public presence, and that the work being published often seems out of touch with real-life concerns. Because standards of merit (for example “rigor”) are defined in terms of disciplinary success (for example precision and clarity of argumentation), it can become nearly impossible to respond practically to real-world problems. They also are correct that at all but a few elite locations, universities will be pressed to become more “accountable” to society, and that accountability will be defined in neoliberal terms. Because philosophy does not drive economic innovation in the way that science and technology research do, it will be increasingly vulnerable to these external pressures. The authors say that they do not applaud these facts, but that this is simply the situation on the ground which must be addressed.¹² In their view, it would be a mistake for philosophers to resist these calls to account for the broader social impact of their research. Instead, they should start *owning* neoliberal demands.¹³ By de-disciplining philosophy, making it more focused on solving real-world problems and less on examining theories or a set of principles, philosophers can develop a new language that allows them to respond to neoliberal demands for accountability; and this can allow them to do groundbreaking philosophical work that simultaneously addresses societal needs.

No doubt it is true that the world has many problems to which philosophers can contribute. And Frodeman and colleagues are correct that the relationship between the philosopher and the polis is itself a philosophical question. In their view, the nature of this relationship is a central question for field philosophy to explore. Nevertheless, in recommending that philosophers “own” neoliberal demands for accountability, these authors presuppose a particular kind of answer to this question. After all, neoliberalism tells us to rethink the place of the university in society, as well as the role of academics

¹¹ Ibid, p. 324.

¹² Ibid, p. 323.

¹³ Ibid, p. 326.

and students, in accordance with market values. Thus, field philosophy is in danger of accepting the assumption that the only philosophical work that is “socially relevant” is that which addresses people’s role as producers or consumers, and that the societal needs which philosophical work can help us to address are economic needs.

In fact, many philosophers already are doing research that is socially relevant. For example, there is work in political philosophy that examines political practices, structures, and institutions. There is work in social philosophy and ethics that investigates the merits of a wide range of social practices. There is work that seeks to deepen our understanding of moral psychology, the nature of decision-making, and questions surrounding autonomy and responsibility. Much of my own research, for example,¹⁴ which focuses on the nature of various forms of mental illness and examines modes of treatment, has important implications for real-life psychiatric practice.

My worry is that field philosophy unquestioningly accepts the assumption that to be “practical,” philosophy must address the real-world challenges that are deemed important within a neoliberal framework. Operating within this framework, the demand to make Philosophy more relevant to our lives simply amounts to a demand to make Philosophy more conducive to market aims. Because the non-philosophers who define the problems that need solving may very well be practitioners who accept the fundamental assumptions of neoliberalism, this will impact what they see as problems and solutions.

Whether something counts as a problem will depend in large part on whether it impacts the market, and whether a solution is practical or feasible will hinge largely on economic considerations and market demands. For example, assessments of whether a solution to an environmental problem is “practical” will be made against the backdrop of neoliberal values and assumptions, for example, the assumption that policies that slow economic growth are always bad. Some solutions to real-world problems will be deemed impractical or even impossible, on economic grounds, before they are ever carefully considered. In addition, the “fundamental problems” and issues with which philosophy historically has been concerned, may be lost from sight. For example, questions about how to live a meaningful life, what brings genuine happiness, and the obligations we have to other people in our community may be deemed irrelevant and set aside in favor of addressing seemingly more pressing market demands.

There also is a danger that any possibility of critiquing neoliberalism or challenging its basic values and assumptions will shrink dramatically. However,

¹⁴ M. Maiese, *Embodied Selves and Divided Minds* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015).

philosophy at its best, as, for example, Socrates, Diogenes, Kant, and Marx understood it, involves acting as a social critic and questioning the fundamental assumptions and values of one's society. In this present context, this means questioning and resisting prevailing neoliberal assumptions and thinking critically about how they have impacted higher education in general, and professional academic philosophy in particular. However, field philosophy holds little potential to address the way in which neoliberalism has distorted how students, faculty members, administrators, and the wider public understand the meaning and value of education. Indeed, because it accepts neoliberal demands for accountability, field philosophy does nothing to challenge the detrimental impact that such demands have had on higher education in general and professional academic philosophy in particular. Field philosophy does not leave room, for example, for a radical segment of public philosophy that is open to liberationist critical politics and philosophical activism—for example, Marxist-socialism or social anarchism. In addition, field philosophy leaves in place the assumption that to establish the value of philosophy, we need to show that it has direct or immediate practical use and that it is “sustainable.” But this ignores the fact that the theoretical dimension of philosophy has great value, and that a necessary part of this value consists in its capacity to allow us to step back, reflect, and call into question the neoliberalism framework itself. By urging philosophers to “own” neoliberal demands, field philosophy is in danger of closing off opportunities to question the ways in which neoliberalism has infiltrated our practices of teaching and scholarship.

One key result of neoliberal ideology is a shift toward managerialism and quantification. As universities become increasingly dominated by market mechanisms, organic social processes are turned into codified, rote processes. Administrators and faculty members alike are encouraged to frame all matters in quantifiable terms, in relation to input-output efficiency and “sustainability.” Due to this increased focus on efficiency, systems of shared faculty governance become overshadowed by hierarchical, top-down decision-making models. Purely instrumental, economic metrics are used to evaluate academic departments, universities, and faculty members. A department's “performance” is measured by the number of graduates, the number of students taught, and the number of publications produced by faculty members. Scholarly “outputs” are measured in terms of “usage” and “impact factors,” and this kind of information is then used by administrators to grant or deny promotion and tenure or merit pay. And because merit increases, promotion, and tenure decisions typically focus so heavily on research, faculty members may come to view other aspects of their work—such as teaching and service—as vanishingly important. Often there is little incentive to work closely with graduate students, let alone undergraduates; and there also is little impetus to engage with the broader community or discuss the implications of one's work for public concerns.

Perhaps what is most striking about all this is that these pressures to view one's work in relation to market norms and values is not simply imposed from outside the profession. Instead, as professional academic philosophers, we do this to ourselves by perpetuating the very kinds of market norms and values that neoliberalism encourages. One obvious example is the *Philosophical Gourmet Report's* rankings of philosophy departments and the "scoring" of individual faculty members. The fact that people take these rankings seriously, and that young people obsess over them when applying to graduate school or going on the job market, creates a climate that hardly is conducive to the pursuit of higher learning. Another is the increasing tendency of professional philosophers to emphasize the importance of citation counts and a journal's "impact factor." No doubt this obsession with rankings contributes to increased competition, decreased collaboration, and mediocre, narrowly-focused, normalized, Scholastic (in the bad sense) philosophy. There also is a "cult of celebrity" which leads many professional philosophers to be overly concerned about prestige and cultivates a competitive spirit in the field; and anybody who has ever read nasty comments from a reviewer or responded to a hostile question at a conference knows that some of this competition hardly qualifies as "healthy."

In addition, because promotion and tenure or merit pay decisions often are based on number of publications, there is an incentive to divide up one's research into numerous small pieces and publish each as a separate article. Philosophers begin to write more and more about less and less. This also discourages the kinds of research that require years of intensive thought, as well as research that is interdisciplinary or draws connections between several fields. And encouraging philosophers to publish in the most prestigious journals tends to result in research that is focused on the tried and true, and which employs conventional methodology. Rather than asking new questions, challenging the status quo, or pushing the limits of philosophical investigation, such research tends to focus on puzzle solving and debating established theories. Here I strongly agree with FB&H that in many cases, little attention is paid to exploring the real-world implications of philosophical work or examining how philosophical theories might provide insight into issues of public concern.

If we want to make philosophy more relevant to our lives, we must promote work that enlarges our perspective, is not rigidly tied to disciplinary demands of rigor, and permits a range of styles and voices. We should be open to work that challenges the status quo, engages in social critique, and resists the neoliberal framing of social problems. And we should be open to work that engages in a critique of higher education in general, and academic philosophy in particular. What is needed, then, are new spaces in which people can produce and engage with philosophical work that sheds light on real-life issues and

concerns and is not constrained by disciplinary demands of “rigor” or neoliberal demands for accountability.

Borderless Philosophy is a new journal that doesn’t adhere to the framework of traditional academic/professional philosophy either in terms of the review process or the material it aims to publish. The review process aims to be collaborative and to offer constructive feedback that allows authors to improve their work. Like *Public Philosophy Journal’s* “formative review” process, *Borderless Philosophy* utilizes cooperative practices to stimulate ongoing dialogue between authors and reviewers and create a culture of shared scholarly practice. However, while works published by *Public Philosophy Journal* must be “relevant” in the sense that they are timely and responsive to an issue of public concern, *Borderless Philosophy* recognizes that there may be issues of great philosophical interest and concern that have not yet been identified by the broader public. And while works published by *Public Philosophy Journal* must be examples of “scholarly engagement,” *Borderless Philosophy* is more open to works that would not count as scholarly in the traditional sense, for example short stories or stream of consciousness.

Indeed, one central goal is to publish a broader range of philosophical work, from a wider range of voices, and to be more inclusive in terms of methodology and style. This includes non-English voices, voices of those without a Ph.D. in philosophy, and voices of those who wish to do creative work that doesn’t adhere to the usual demands of “rigor.” By opening up a space in which people can do philosophy differently from the way that the academy and professional philosophy demands, *Borderless Philosophy* can publish work that is richly philosophical and yet doesn’t adhere to the disciplinary demands imposed by most journals.

Thus, the journal has the potential to address the concerns raised by FB&H about the impact of specialization and the imposition of disciplinary standards of “rigor” that do not take into account context and audience. *Borderless Philosophy* will not consist simply of philosophers writing for other philosophers, but rather will be accessible to philosophically-minded writers and readers with a broad range of educational backgrounds, interests, ages, languages, and cultural heritages. The works published will not presuppose that readers have training in modal logic or are familiar with the extensive debate surrounding specific philosophical problems or traditions. One overarching goal is to bring philosophically-minded individuals, whatever their background or field of focus, into conversation with one another. This will involve being open to working outside the bounds of what are considered worthy topics of philosophical investigation, utilizing a broad range of writing styles and formats, and generally rethinking what it means to do philosophy. Dialogues, poems, short-stories, plays, cartoons, and stream-of-consciousness are all possibilities, and the journal invites

contributors to be experimental in terms of presentation. Works need not feature an abstract, introduction, or consideration of standard objections. *Borderless Philosophy's* guiding idea is that moving beyond self-imposed rules about "how to do philosophy" may lead us to broaden our perspective, challenge some of our presuppositions and biases, and put us in a better position to be the sorts of social critics that Socrates envisioned.

In addition, *Borderless Philosophy* will not be beholden to neoliberal demands for accountability. This is because it will be universal free access and published online, without publishing fees, and will not be accountable to any publishing company or academic institution. We have little interest in impact factors or prestige. Instead, we aim to create a venue for those who wish to read and write philosophy simply for the sake of gaining insight and understanding. Unlike "field philosophy," *Borderless Philosophy* does not assume that to be "practical," Philosophy must have worldly focus and help us to address problems "out in the field." Rather, there will be plenty of room to turn our attention to matters that have been deemed more "private," and to a discussion of the sorts of issues that have interested philosophers from the very beginning: the nature of human existence and what makes up the good life. As FB&H note, these are the sorts of investigations that the neoliberal university threatens to render "quaint" and irrelevant. But rather than accepting these "facts on the ground" and "owning" neoliberal demands as these theorists do, this journal creates space where people from a broad range of backgrounds can engage with interesting and original philosophical work that addresses these existential questions. This is the sort of work that young people and those without formal training in philosophy often find especially compelling, and which changes the way that they think about their lives; thus, such work has great potential to impact the world outside of professional academic philosophy.

In summary, "field philosophy" is in danger of accepting

both (i) the idea that to have value, philosophy must be "practical," and (ii) that what it means to be "practical" is properly understood in neoliberal terms.

As a result, "field philosophy" does little to question or challenge the borders and limitations that often encourage narrow and stale academic work which seems to lack meaning for the broader public. I have argued that these limitations result, in large part, from approaching philosophy from a neoliberal stance. *Borderless Philosophy* aims to move us beyond these borders, and to open up new space for creative and collaborative philosophical engagement.