The Irrelevance of Contemporary Philosophy

Abstract: Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle in an essay "When Philosophy Lost Its Way" (2016), Susan Haack in *Putting Philosophy to Work* (2013), Myisha Cherry's "Coming Out of the Shade" (2017), and Philip Kitcher's *What's the Use of Philosophy?* (2023) rightly claim that the discipline of philosophy has become unproductive, despite many published journal essays and books. Their work is summarized. In addition, the sociology of professional philosophy is examined and suggestions on how to fix analytic philosophy are offered. The central issue is that the mainstream of philosophy fails to engage with ordinary people and has no value to society as a whole.

"When Philosophy Lost Its Way" by Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle in *New York Times* 'Opinion Column' January 11, 2016.

Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle teach in the department of philosophy and religion at the University of North Texas. They are the authors of *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21st Century Philosophy* (2016). The Prelude to their book (pp. 7-10) includes revised text from their opinion column. We will edit several paragraphs from the *New York Times* column sharing their perspective of philosophy (some italics added).

> (1) The history of Western Philosophy can be presented in a number of ways. It can be told in terms of periods—ancient, medieval, and modern. We can divide into rival traditions (empiricism versus rationalism, analytic versus Continental), or into various core areas (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics). It can also, of course, be viewed through the critical lens of gender or racial exclusion, as a discipline almost entirely fashioned for and by white men of European descent.

Yet despite the richness and variety of these accounts, all of them pass over a momentous turning point: the locating of philosophy within the modern research university in the late 19th century. This *institutionalization* of philosophy made it into a discipline that could be seriously pursued only in an academic setting.

(2) Take this simple detail: Before its migration to the university, philosophy never had a central home. Philosophers could be found anywhere-- serving as diplomats, living off pensions, grinding lenses, as well as within a university. Afterward, if they were "serious" thinkers, the expectation was that philosophers would inhabit the research university.

(3) Philosophers needed to embrace the structure of the modern institutional research university, which consists of various specialties demarcated from one another. That was the only way to secure the survival of their newly demarcated, newly "purified" discipline. "Real" or "serious" philosophers had to be *identified*, *trained*, and *credentialed*. Disciplinary philosophy became the reigning standard for what would count as *proper* philosophy.

(4) This was the act of purification that gave birth to the concept of philosophy most of us know today. As a result, and to a degree rarely acknowledged, the *institutional imperative* of the university has come to drive the theoretical agenda of philosophy departments. If philosophy was to have a secure place in the academy, it needed its own discrete domain, its own arcane language, its own standards of success and its own specialized concerns.

Frodeman and Briggle state that philosophers often feel envy and feelings of inadequacy when compared to the advancing 'progress' of the physical sciences. They continue:

> (5) …Much has been made of this inability of philosophy to match the cognitive success of the sciences. But what has passed by unnoticed is philosophy's successful aping of the institutional form of the sciences. We, too, produce research articles. We, too, are judged by the same coin of the realm: peer-reviewed products. We, too, develop sub-specializations far from the comprehension of the person on the street. In all of these ways we are so very "scientific."
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> (6) …Though it seems foreign to us now, before purification the philosopher (and the natural philosopher) was assumed to be morally superior to other sorts of people. The 18th century thinker Joseph Priestly wrote "a philosopher ought to be something greater and better than another man." Philosophy, understood as the love of wisdom, was seen to be a vocation, like the priesthood… As the historian Steven Shapin has noted, the rise of the disciplines in the 19th century changed all of this. The implicit democracy of all of the disciplines ushered in "the moral equivalence of the scientist" to everyone else… There was a brief window when philosophy could have replaced religion as the glue of society; but the moment passed. People stopped listening as philosophers focused on debates among themselves.

Frodeman and Briggle conclude that philosophy has fostered a culture of technical writing that might be called "the genius contest":

> (7) Philosophical activity devolved into a contest to prove just how clever one can be in creating or destroying arguments. Today, a hyperactive productivist churn of scholarship keeps philosophers chained to their computers. Like the sciences, philosophy has largely become a technical enterprise, the only difference being that we manipulate words rather than genes or chemicals…[1]

Frodeman and Briggle's overall *Socrates Tenured* organizational solution is to suggest that philosophers should balance their work between a university setting and 'field work' that involves sometimes moving into think tanks, policy units, community groups, as well as working with other departments in medicine, law, and the sciences.[2]

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[1] In *Socrates Tenured* the authors recount a professor's comical explanation of the Ph.D. dissertation, and a philosopher's subsequent career: "Find a small topic that no one has studied; dig into it for years. Don't stop until you know it better than anyone—except for the other 30 or 40 specialists in the area. When you graduate you will spend the next 30 years writing for that group of specialists. That's how it works" (p. 7).

[2] In criticism of Frodeman and Briggle, their view of what philosophy was, and what it should be, is questionable. These authors depict Socrates as assimilating the role of a questioner, non-expert, and the gadfly, and believe that Socrates would *disapprove* of philosophers becoming experts (p. 7). They also conceive of philosophy as being concerned with 'living a good life' (p. 8) and that with its 'questioning nature,' philosophy was once viewed 'more as a process than product.' They state that "Knowing and being good were intimately linked, for the study of ethics elevated those who pursued it. The point of philosophy, after all, was to become good rather than only to collect or

***Putting Philosophy to Work* (2013) by Susan Haack**

Susan Haack is a distinguished professor of philosophy. She voices her complaints about the professionalization of philosophy. She writes (pp. 236-237):

> (1) …with philosophy increasingly professionalized, increasingly self-conscious about its status as a discipline, and increasingly splintered into sub-specialisms, it seems that many philosophers seek to define themselves professionally by their allegiance to a specialized sub-field or to a specialized method of philosophizing… Worst yet, in the culture of boosterism and self-promotion that now pervades the universities, many are tempted to tout whatever philosophical questions most interest them as *the* most important or critical issues, and whatever way of going about philosophy best suits their temperament or talents as the most fruitful, the most rigorous, the most up to date, the most scientific…
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> (2) …chairpersons competing for scarce resources want to impress deans with how "research-active" their faculty are; faculty jockeying for promotions want to impress chairs with their "productivity." No wonder, then, that many professors soon adapt to the reliance of deans, etc., on rankings, number of publications, amount of grant money, and so forth: by giving *more priority to their research* than to their teaching, and more priority to graduate than undergraduate students,

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produce knowledge" (p. 10). From my perspective, it is questionable whether Socrates would disapprove of philosophers arguing for a 'final product' (i.e., true theory) processed by experts. Also, the authors' perceived close connection between philosophy and normative ethics as inspired by Aristotle, can be questioned.

> by presenting and publishing more, and by putting time and energy into applying for grants and "promoting their department." (p. 262).
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> (3) …Conferences seem to become more and more occasions for making contacts, for networking, and for talking yourself, or your department up; and less and less occasions for the serious exchange of ideas. At one recent meeting, for example, I was struck by the frequency of mutually reassuring references from one speaker to others, and of shorthand phrases alluding to the very narrow seam of literature familiar to almost everyone present. (p. 263).

Haack sees the burgeoning "research ethic" as disastrous, with the ever-increasing pressure to present and publish papers and a spread of the culture of grants-and-research-projects from the sciences to the humanities. She says that the universities' enthusiastic embrace of the concept of "productivity" (writing specialty essays) is more appropriate to manufacturing widgets than to advancing knowledge (pp. 251-252).

"Coming Out of the Shade" by Myisha Cherry in *Philosophy's Future: The Problem of Philosophical Progress,* edited by Russell Blackford and Damien Broderick (2017).

On page 22, Myisha Cherry, an associate professor at the University of California at Riverside, states the origins of the title of her essay:

> Dave Hume claims, "abstruse philosophy… vanishes when the philosopher *leaves the shade*, and comes into the open day (1975, 7). I read Hume's reference to "leaving the shade" as saying the complicated, other-worldly, and out-of-touch nature of philosophy disappears when, for example, philosophers get off of their

> isolated armchairs and become accessible, speak clearly, and engage with the public and with other thinkers. Coming out of the shade is the act of philosophers leaving their philosophical bubbles…

In the opening paragraphs, Cherry admits to anxiety that she cannot adequately express to laypersons 'what she does' as a 'professional philosopher.' That she writes and teaches, cannot make clear what philosophy's contribution to society is. Laypersons have difficulty in understanding how a philosopher does anything meaningful or relevant. She states that "At times what philosophers do in philosophy can be viewed as out of touch with the world or at least with real people and real issues in the world" (p. 21). She offers several suggestions for how philosophers can come out of the shade (paraphrased):

> (1) It is a requirement that philosophers no longer write so abstractly even if it brings with it the reward that the field will label it as "brilliant"—not because they understand it, but because it is *impenetrable*. As David Hume notes, they are wrapped up in principles and notions that they cannot possibly understand.
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> (2) Even if a philosopher's words are clear, it is important that this research isn't locked away in the hidden archives of philosophical journals for the discovery and viewing of only a few. (Open Access is presently unfolding which is progress).
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> (3) Philosophy prides itself on rigor. Some texts are excluded from the cannon and some articles are rejected by journals, not because they are not saying something intellectually valuable, but based on that they "lack rigor" … While I think rigor is important, it does not equate to abstruse, inaccessible prose… The

> obsession of some philosophers with rigor suggests intellectual posturing and elitism. On this view, the more rigorous a philosopher is, the smarter they look.
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> (4) Philosophy also prides itself on clarity. Philosophers, however, have a hard time understanding each other's work. If philosophers are to come out of the shade, they must also endeavor to make their work comprehensible not just to the public but also to those other philosophers who are not in their particular sub-field. Let us be honest, there are several sessions we attend in philosophy conferences in which we have no idea what is being talked about. This has nothing to do with technical language specific to the topic. It has everything to do with clarity. If philosophers cannot understand each other's work, what makes them think others outside of philosophy can understand it? (pp. 22-23).

Cherry proposes an organizational solution to philosophy's woes, one that promotes engagement with other disciplines and public forums, including television and podcasts.

***What's the Use of Philosophy?* by Philip Kitcher (2023)**

Kitcher's worldview of philosophy is strongly influenced by John Dewey (1859-1952) and the American pragmaticists of the early twentieth century. Kitcher believes:

> (1) Philosophers can do valuable work in clarifying and advancing the debates that arise in various individual domains of human life, and in supplying synthetic perspectives to help people with the perplexities generated when they think about the world and their own place in it. (p. 137).

According to Kitcher (paraphrased):

> (2) Philosophy seems remote. Philosophers appear as peculiar beings. Perhaps highly intelligent but with bizarre tastes in the way that they spend their "work" time. They labor over questions without answering them, spend hours in heated debates about very little (if anything), criticize one another with peculiar, and often distasteful, ferocity. Their employers, mostly colleges and universities, pay them for engaging in their pointless jousts. Even their colleagues in other academic disciplines seem to agree with the general judgment that their activities are incomprehensible. (p. 1).
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> (3) As philosophical questions diminish in size; disagreements and controversy persist, new distinctions are drawn, and yet tinier issues are generated. Decomposition continues downward, until the interested community becomes too exhausted, too small, or too uninspired to play the game any further. (p. 6).
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> (4) What's the use of philosophy? In part, the question gains force from suspicion that there aren't any special sources of philosophical knowledge. That suspicion is fueled by the apparent ineptness of philosophers to explain how they acquire any basis for their judgments. Philosophers seem to many people "just to be making it up" … They read, and sit, and think, and talk, and think again, and read again, and talk again, and think again… and write. (p. 84).

Kitcher's solution is to 'deemphasize the details' in the studies of analytic metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and metaethics, in their hyper-functional pursuit of clarity, formalization, and attention to previous philosophers. He questions the value of far-fetched hypothetical case studies. Kitcher states:

(5) Dewey advises us to think about particular domains of human life, about the sciences, the arts, political institutions, economic frameworks, religious practices, education, and so forth. Reflect on what is known in the areas on which you focus, and how it relates to other parts of human life. (p. 122).

(6) So, for example, you might want to assess the goals of education in light of the existing political or economic constraints, asking whether reforms are needed, not to implement the currently identified political or economic desiderata, but rather to change the entire framework (Dewey 1916/1975). What the philosopher provides is a more general view; posing questions, offering concepts, suggesting useful analogies, putting forward ideals. If you read Dewey this way, there will be no mystery as to why he writes the kind of books he does unphilosophical as they seem to many. His books are notably short on references to "the latest journal literature." (p. 122).

(7) In many of his works, Dewey develops his version of the "whole function of philosophy" by linking it specifically to the advance of inquiry. Philosophy is in the business not simply of responding directly to the problems and controversies of the age… but also in helping with the general project of inquiry by working among various disciplines, developing conceptual tools to remove potential obstacles. (pp. 122-123).

(8) Philosophy challenges the ways people think, the way they see the world, by accomplishing a change of perspective. Experience is conceptualized differently. New possibilities come into view. Connections are made between aspects of life

> that were once "loose and separate." The audience is invited to pursue a certain line of reasoning. Questions emerge that had not been posed before. The proposals are best seen as signposts, pointing to signs of Gestalt. (p. 149).
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> (9) The progress of philosophy doesn't stand or fall according to whether the would-be synthesizer arrives at a true overarching theory. The crucial question is different: Do the efforts at synthesis generate resources that prove useful, whether for some systematic theory of inquiry, or for collective efforts to resolve difficult questions, or for people to make sense of their lives? I see the long history of Western philosophy as providing a resounding positive answer to this question… but after this past century's work, some positivity has diminished. (p. 151).[3]

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[3] In criticism, Kitcher's pragmatic worldview of what philosophy should be, is questionable. While Kitcher is dubious about the intellectual value of seeking a definition of "knowledge" and metaethical analyses, these projects seem to be fundamental in establishing a philosophical worldview. Kitcher also questions the methodological value of intuitions (p. 81). Dewey and Kitcher in their normative aspirations for eliminating problems and advancing societal 'progress' (e.g. in race and gender theory), understanding sources of misinformation (alternative facts), and issues in the philosophy of education, democracy, and justice, fail to address the nature of key epistemic concepts. Dewey just normatively *values* a secular-democracy over a theistic-authoritarianism which is today controversial. Questions about aesthetics, the nature of mathematical knowledge, and the philosophy of language (e.g., the nature of definition, concepts, the descriptive-prescriptive distinction) are all left unanswered.

The Sociology of Professional Philosophy

Let's recapitulate how philosophy is now practiced. The philosopher is typically a faculty member in a university setting, and usually conforms to the following norms:

(1) Career model: The professional philosopher is expected to present oneself as having designated interests, competencies, and expertise in respected area(s) of the discipline. Innate intelligence and raw talent (e.g., exceptional logical ability, capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving) are thought to be necessary requirements for success in the field. These mental capacities are analogous to raw and innate abilities of exceptional athletes in professional sports.

(2) Publish or perish: A philosopher's responsibility is to publish in the most prestigious journals, and in doing so refer to recent literature in the field. Many philosophers admit that they publish, not because they have something interesting to say, but instead there are professional requirements to publish. Philosophers need to write for tenure, job security, and promotion.

(3) Think small: Research contributes to a small well-defined debate in which substantive progress can be made. Production of short, highly specialized journal articles is expected. Narrowly focused articles are understood as 'minor moves' in a debate. The more *rigorous* (i.e., detailed, complex) an essay is, the better its chance for publication.

(4) Be contentious: Philosophers should approach each other's work with severe skepticism, criticism, and an eye for debate. Colin McGinn (2002) observes that live philosophical debates at universities are often "a clashing of analytically

honed intellects with pulsing egos attached to them. In fact, truth to tell, philosophy and ego are never very far apart. Philosophical discussion can be a kind of intellectual blood sport, in which egos get bruised and buckled, even impaled… No one likes to be publicly refuted, and in philosophy it happens all the time" (p. 63). Timothy Williamson (2020) characterizes this style of philosophical debate as "gladiatorial combat" (p. 20). Overgaard et. al. (2013) state: "Mathematicians and scientists, it is claimed, appear to make progress because they are trying to agree. Philosophers, on the other hand, try not to agree. This is not a question of individual psychology but a matter of professional temperament: philosophers as an academic profession, one might say, suffer from an excess of criticality" (pp. 51-52).

(5) Write in a professional manner: An article should be a fragment within a specialty interest. Articles are to be abstract, dispassionate, and rigorous, similar to the sciences and mathematics. Philosophers should *respond* to other philosophers' views. 'Competing' theories and models are discussed. Essays encourage further debate (and publications) among (a small group of) experts' *active interests* within a field. Interests often include new (stipulated) distinctions and topics. Publish and flourish.[4]

[4] Scott Soames (2003, p. 463) lauds specialization: "Gone are the days of large, central figures whose work is accessible and relevant to, as well as read by, nearly all analytic philosophers. Philosophy has become a highly organized discipline, done by specialists primarily for other specialists. The number of philosophers has exploded, the volume of

How to Fix Philosophy?

The mainstream of philosophy fails to engage with ordinary people who have natural interest in philosophical questions (about knowledge, ethics, mathematics, aesthetics). Ordinary people aren't interested in philosophers' technical debates. Although the university setting that stresses 'productivity' (i.e., published works) for department prestige (and financial benefit) is partially to blame, much of the problem is the result of the follow-the-leader idolization that many philosophers have towards the subject. Philosophers tend to *respond* to the (historical) thoughts of others. As a first step, analytic philosophy needs to critically reassess its philosophical 'idols' and some 'sacred' beliefs. The following paragraphs suggest how to improve philosophy.

A. It is suggested that analytic philosophy needs to reconsider the influence of mathematician Gottlob Frege upon the philosophy of language, especially with respect to formal semantics. Among the major *false principles*:

> **(#1) The concept of 'linguistic meaning'** should be among the primary concepts of interest in a philosophy of natural language.
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> **(#2) The Principle of Linguistic Reference:** Linguistic entities found in complete sentences (a) can literally possess meaning, (b) can be about, or refer to things in context, (c) can denote (or refer to) their extensions.

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publication has swelled, and the subfields of serious philosophical investigation have multiplied. Not only is the broad field of philosophy today far too vast to be embraced by one mind, something similar is true even of the many highly specialized subfields."

(#3) The Principle of Compositionality: Words are the basic components of sentences, and the meaning of sentences depends (systematically) upon the meanings of the words that they are composed of. To understand the meaning of a sentence is to understand its compositional structure and to know under what conditions the sentence would be true.

(#4) Truth Conditions: A statement gets its meaning by being correlated with a state of affairs: that state-of-affairs is the statement's truth condition. Correlation between statement and truth condition is secured by (1) the referential relations individual terms bear to objects in the world, and (2) by the way that they are combined into sentence. To know 'the meaning' of a statement is to grasp its truth condition.

(#5) A meaningful declarative sentence S represents the world as being a certain way and is either true or false.

With a Fregean-inspired worldview, analytic philosophy maintains a metaphysical, mathematical, and formal format driving much published work. The core belief about *linguistic reference* and that words have meaning, in conjunction with the other three principles (compositionality, etc.), has overshadowed the methodology of conceptual analysis and attention to *speaker reference*. Formal semantics with its logical and metaphysical underpinnings, rather than providing an informative account of language, hinders our understanding of natural language, its definitions, and its intentional aspects. [5]

[5] These criticisms are found in my proposed monograph, *Descriptions, Prescriptions, and the Limits of Knowledge* which is pending publication (presently available online).

B. Currently many philosophers have a strong interest in theories that involve metaphysics, semantic formalism, and analyses of modality. For example, Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (1980) presents a 'modal metaphysics' that combines the concept of 'necessity' and a causal theory about how proper names (as linguistic entities) are known, and a theory of how names refer to objects. Timothy Williamson (2007) favors investigations of 'metaphysical modality.' In reply, it is *unlikely* that 'possible worlds' semantics and model theories have much value with respect to philosophical fruitfulness.

C. An associated problem with an 'expert' metaphysical and formal semantics worldview is that it encourages students with *innate intelligence* and raw talent (e.g., exceptional logical ability, capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving) to study philosophy without necessarily having any really inspired 'new' ideas. Philosophers are trained to react to the views of others. The contentiousness aspect of philosophy's culture creates a field of philosophers with 'competing' theories, models, and arguments, many times variations of one another, or of existing predecessors. Being *critical* of *existing theories* (among a philosophical genre) is a 'follow-the-leader' format. It stifles attention to competing worldviews, or critical counters to existing consensus views (e.g., the consensus that a definition of 'knowledge' is impossible). As stated, with the demand to publish short, specialized essays for job security and promotion, there is little time and incentive for philosophers to think about broader areas within philosophy or be critical of existing paradigm beliefs within their own genre.

D. The "peer-review crisis" about the role and function of journal publications in the advancement of philosophical careers needs to be resolved. Semantha Copeland and

Lavinia Marin (2024) document the problems with the 'publish or perish' model in a university setting that stresses 'productivity' (i.e., published works) for personal and department prestige and financial benefit. Since publication works as a currency for academic jobs, professionals in academic philosophy want to make their CV's stand out with a large number of publications appearing in prestigious journals.

With this, there are too many papers to review. A major source of the problem is that peer review is unrewarded and voluntary. It is a service that academics perform for one another. This creates a circular system where philosophers labor to produce papers and also review them. As a result, it is difficult to find reviewers for philosophy papers with the staggering volume of submitted essays. Reviewers are overburdened.

Copeland and Marin argue that ideally, peer review should provide a site for developing 'skills' in writing and argumentation. Philosophical skills "include clarity and precision in writing… recognizing a good argument, a relevant point, the precise use of concepts or examples, as well as a willingness and ability to critically engage with both one's own ideas and those of others" (p. 138). Philosophical skills are dialogical skills; one cannot develop these without engaging with other philosophers. Philosophical writing is learned by practicing a lot and by receiving expert feedback. For many philosophers, the process of peer review is a necessary and welcome step to produce a good paper. It is expected that an essay might go through several rounds and several journals. The need for systematic dialogical engagement is inherent in the practice of being a philosopher. The Socratic method is a back-and-forth standard for engaging in philosophy. Persons become proficient philosophers by refining their skills.

Copeland and Marin note that Jennifer Whiting (2015) has suggested that authors should only select their best publications for job applications, making the number of aggregated publications less significant. As a result, universities should decrease their emphasis on the number of publications produced by a philosophy department. A second idea might be to add financial and academic compensation for reviewers.

E. Philosophy can improve itself by excluding itself from the Humanities. The Humanities are the disciplines that study aspects of human society and culture, including (1) foreign languages, (2) history (or social science), (3) language arts (literature, writing, oratory, rhetoric, poetry) and (4) the arts (painting, sculpture, photography, filmmaking, theater, music, dance). Philosophy (maybe history) should *not* be in this discipline list.

Conclusion

The critical problem with contemporary analytic philosophy is its *failure to engage* with *ordinary people* who have interests in basic philosophical questions. It is contended here that Philosophy should aspire to be relevant like the social science of Economics. Within the discipline of Economics, semi-descriptive assumptions (viz. stipulations, postulates) play a prominent role in theory construction. In the social sciences, scholars seek to describe expectations of how persons will behave on the basis of the beliefs and desires attributed to them. Social science theories explain beliefs and behavior by rendering them intelligible. Models and theories attempt to simulate a world that explains human intentions. Philosophy should not aspire to mimic the narrow-specialized work of physical scientists. The methodology of analytic philosophy when functioning as a social science, employs intuitions, conceptual analyses, and the method

of cases. Philosophers should: 1) Focus less on publishing, more on teaching, 2) Focus less on mathematical and formal methodologies, 3) Be less contentious. Be impartial. Be ready to assess ideas on their merit, 4) Avoid formalized technical definitions as they are always stipulative, 5) Focus on core issues: knowledge, philosophy of language (including a theory of definition, concepts, descriptions-prescriptions), metaethics, mathematics, and aesthetics. (These conclusions are elaborated in my unpublished book).

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