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Nothing Much for Philosophers

Schliesser, E.

DOI

[10.1177/0048393117740826](https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393117740826)

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Philosophy of the Social Sciences

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schliesser, E. (2018). Nothing Much for Philosophers. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 48(1), 40-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393117740826>

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Nothing Much for Philosophers

Philosophy of the Social Sciences
2018, Vol. 48(1) 40–46
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DOI: 10.1177/0048393117740826
journals.sagepub.com/home/pos



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Abstract

In this article, I argue that by discarding the significance of philosophical methods and tools, the picture of field philosophy offered in *Socrates Tenured* is more akin to public interest consulting than to philosophy.

Keywords

service philosophy, field philosophy as public interest consulting, Kristie Dotson

I applaud Frodeman and Briggie for their attempt to offer a fresh perspective on a possible future for professional philosophy. I learned a lot from their vignettes, especially the cases involving the history of recent, applied philosophy, and I found myself in agreement with many of their concerns about the ways bioethics has evolved (chapter 5). Frodeman and Briggie advocate *field philosophy* in order to combat the perceived irrelevance of philosophy. They oppose this to both so-called “disciplinary” or “academic” philosophy and “applied philosophy.” (Many applied philosophers are also academic philosophers.) To be sure, field philosophy is not meant to displace or eliminate “the status quo, but supplement it” (119). In what follows, I focus primarily on an evaluation of their conception of field philosophy in light of

Received 2 October 2017

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what they say about academic philosophy (and so I ignore what *applied* philosophers may wish to say).

But before I get to the heart of the matter, I start with three general critical observations.¹ First, I wish to mention the geographic parochialism of Frodeman and Briggie. They often write as if they seem unaware that professional philosophy is an international enterprise which is embedded in many different kinds of institutional structures. For example, in much of Western Europe (as well as countries associated with the Commonwealth), research in philosophy is funded, sometimes even lavishly funded, in ways that resemble the sciences.² Funds are dispensed, in part, in light of guidelines that emphasize the “impact,” “social utility,” and “valorization” of all research.³ In many parts of the world, liberal arts colleges are sprouting up, often co-branded with elite U.S. universities; these institutions always include a philosophy program. Even Stateside, private agencies—Templeton comes to mind—have been quite generous to professional philosophy. While there are plenty of intellectual and sociological reasons to be concerned about these trends (cf. p. 3),⁴ Frodeman and Briggie mistake the

¹I do so *ex cathedra*, but the remarks were prompted by their chapter 2. Also, I ignore most misleading claims about the history of philosophy. But I will make one exception for the way Russell is presented in both Fuller’s foreword (xiii) and Frodeman and Briggie’s main argument (58). From the perspective of his scientific philosophy, Russell self-consciously treated many worthy activities (including his own) not as instances of philosophy: “The scientific philosophy . . . aims only at understanding the world and not directly at any other improvement of human life.” (In context he is describing Spinoza’s *Ethics*.) See Russell (1914).

²De Langhe and Schliesser (2017).

³They are aware of such criteria because they discuss the National Science Foundation’s use of the “broader impact” criterion (p. 58 and chapter 7), and they are aware that some such criterion has become standard in grant agencies outside the United States (139-140). But they do not reflect on the fact that this has not prevented funding of philosophy. (Of course, it may well have skewed where such funding is directed within professional philosophy—see my next footnote.)

⁴See Eric Schliesser, 06/30/2014, “Don’t become a professional academic in the Low Countries if you are not very good at Bullshitting,” <http://digressionsimpressions.typepad.com/digressionsimpressions/2014/06/dont-become-a-professional-academic-in-the-low-countries-if-you-are-not-very-good-at-bullshitting.html>; Eric Schliesser, 10/21/2014, “Financial Incentives Matter . . . But not for Philosophers (Templeton and all that),” <http://digressionsimpressions.typepad.com/digressionsimpressions/2014/10/financial-incentives-matter-but-not-for-philosophers.html>; and Eric Schliesser, 05/31/2014, “When Professors are in Glass Houses . . .” <http://digressionsimpressions.typepad.com/digressionsimpressions/2014/05/when-professors-are-in-glass-houses.html>.

possible, partial retrenchment of some philosophy programs Stateside with a more general disciplinary trend.⁵

This matters because Frodeman and Briggie treat the *disciplining* of philosophy as “the original sin of twentieth and now twenty-first century philosophy” (3). But one may understand the disciplining of philosophy, with its division of intellectual labor, as an autonomous, reasoned response to the simultaneous rise of the modern research university and the large-scale social threats toward reasoned thought.⁶

In addition, the disciplining of philosophy has not prevented philosophical thought to have an impact through class room teaching. Undergraduate teaching is notably absent when they discuss “who [philosophers] have been speaking to” (73).⁷

It is also odd that they treat philosophy as the “technical enterprise” that “manipulates words” (10; see also the peculiar focus on “texts” on p. 15) rather than the enterprise that focuses on arguments and concepts.⁸ That is to say, Frodeman and Briggie fail to convey adequately even the barest outlines of the nature of professional philosophy as practiced today.⁹

⁵It is especially remarkable that they ignore the work done on placement data by Carolyn Dacey Jennings during the last few years. See, for example, “Philosophy Placement Data and Analysis: An Update (guest post by Carolyn Dacey Jennings),” 4/15/2016, <http://dailynous.com/2016/04/15/philosophy-placement-data-and-analysis-an-update/>, and the many links to previous work. Her Academic Placement Data and Analysis has now become a project sponsored by the American Philosophical Association, see here: <http://placementdata.com/about/#>.

⁶See, for example, Stone (2006). Frodeman and Briggie claim that “institutionalizing of philosophy” is “the great unthought of contemporary philosophy” (7). It is peculiar claim because there is huge scholarship on this issue prompted by Reisch (2005) (which they cite on p. 18). In addition, the philosophical blogosphere is dominated by discussions of the norms and incentives that structure contemporary philosophy.

⁷Teaching is generally ignored in evaluation of academic impact. For a corrective, see Burgoon et al. (2017). When “Frodeman and Briggie” do address “training the next generation” (75ff.), they tend to mean PhD/professional education not other students (126).

⁸One can say this while being distinctly reserved about the focus on argument as essential to philosophy.

⁹So, for example, “the institutional trappings of the field were treated as simply the banalities necessary to provide a space for the pure flower of philosophy to bloom” (15). But from the start, analytic philosophy had two functions: “Analytic philosophy has thus a double function: it provides quiet green pastures for intellectual analysis, wherein its practitioners can find refuge from a troubled world and cultivate their intellectual games with chess-like indifference to its course; and it is also a keen, shining sword helping to dispel irrational beliefs and to make evident the structure of ideas.” The second function “has repercussions upon social theory and practice, as recent events have amply shown.” See Nagel (1936). For the significance of Nagel to the history of analytic philosophy, see Schliesser (2013).

Second, they treat contemporary professional philosophy as culturally irrelevant (14). This is a peculiar claim because so much of what they take to be the status quo (e.g., neoliberalism) is rooted in philosophical thought of the (recent) past. In addition, some of the evidence they report for the “crisis motif surrounding philosophy” (30) is culled from the popular press—they neither reflect on the fact that “crisis talk” has a philosophical provenance and significance nor on the fact that the popular press would show no interest in philosophy if it were really taken to have cultural irrelevance. One rarely reads popular press articles on the crisis in stamp collecting. Moreover, they seem to miss not just the high cultural status of much continental philosophy in the art world, but also the many ways in which the “output” of analytic philosophy is now embedded in practices as divergent as linguistic software, just war theory, medical ethics, Bayesian networks, population ethics, and so on.

Third, in the main chapter (six) on “field philosophy,” the authors introduce us to the idea that the right sort of “philosophy is existential, dangerous, erotic” (115). They cash this out in terms of alcohol-induced “playfulness” and “excitement,” and offer us positive instances of philosophy when “people, laughed, argued, flirted” (115). They treat this as a species of nonconformism, and hold up Alphonso Lingis, who spent most of his career at Penn State, as a positive exemplar of nonconformist, dangerous philosopher (116ff.).¹⁰ One hates to be a party-pooper, but it is striking that Frodeman and Briggie make no mention of the problems with sexual harassment (some of which were alcohol induced)¹¹ that have plagued professional philosophy.¹² I suspect that many risk officers of organizations that would wish to hire public

¹⁰Earlier they had presented Dewey as an exemplar (17-18). But they do not engage with the excellent literature on the nature, if any, of this displacement from the professional mainstream. See, for example, Richardson (2002).

¹¹Another troubled philosophy program, UC Boulder, was recommended to do the following, “Because of its history, the Department needs to sponsor only those events that are alcohol free and are held during weekday business hours.” “Summary of Report by the American Philosophical Association to the University of Colorado Boulder” (12), http://spot.colorado.edu/~tooley/The_Site_Visit_Report_and_Administration_Summary.pdf.

¹²For details about Penn State’s philosophy department’s history of sexual harassment, see some hints here: <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2011/11/the-misleading-climate-for-women-guide-redux.html> and here: <http://www.alternet.org/news-amp-politics/one-womans-account-how-abuse-corruption-and-silence-penn-state-perpetuate>. And here http://www.collegian.psu.edu/archives/article_7f957c8b-8ad4-5319-8212-6406dafa70dc.html.

philosophers may recoil from doing so after reading Frodeman and Briggles' cavalier attitude to such problems.

So much for preliminary setup. Let's get to the nub of the matter. There seems to be two key features of field philosophy. First, it should help "non-philosophers reimagine and work through their own problems." That is, it is a form of *service philosophy*.¹³ I borrow the term, service philosophy, from Kristie Dotson in part to alert the reader that Frodeman and Briggles are not the only game in town. To simplify, as a service philosopher, Dotson provides theories and theoretical frameworks to activists and other academics (e.g., "social scientists") who wish "to do research on Black women that does not presume a serial pathology." She does so not from a distant arm-chair, but she tries "to get a sense of what they need in a theory and whether, from [her] area of specialization, [she] can help." Dotson's specialization is epistemology. It will be useful to keep Dotson's example in mind below.

The second key feature involves, in turn, two aspects. First, Frodeman and Briggles distinguish among three roles that a philosopher can occupy: disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary. They reject the increasing division of labor even within professional philosophy,¹⁴ and, rather, wish to "encourage" philosophers "to circulate through the three roles, giving them time to recharge their batteries [in the safe confines of a disciplinary home in academia] after a period in the field" (119). The third role is field philosophy and is itself distinctive: it is characterized, in part, by its audience, which is "one or another group of non-philosophers" (125), in part characterized by its site of operation, being embedded in "real world settings" where the field philosopher takes on "problems as defined by non-philosophic actors" (124). The emphasis on problems is the second key aspect; it is important because Frodeman and Briggles understand philosophy as not providing "answers," that is reserved for "the sciences" (50 & 136), but as engaged in "questioning" (50) or, alternatively, "as a way of listening" (110).

In the spirit of experimentation, I would like to agree that we need more field philosophy. But one wonders what role "philosophy" has in field philosophy. For, one could just as well replace "field philosophy" with "public interest consultant" (or some variation thereof).¹⁵ I am not just trying to be cheeky when saying this. Not unlike the consultants produced by today's

¹³See Kristie Dotson, 1/9/2015, "Philosophy from the Position of Service." <https://politicalphilosopher.net/2015/01/09/featured-philosopher-kristie-dotson/>. All subsequent quotes from Dotson are, unless otherwise noted, to this post.

¹⁴On the long history of the division of labor in philosophy, see Schliesser (2011).

¹⁵I am most familiar with work done by forensic economists. For an introduction, see Zitzewitz (2012).

professional business and public policy schools, the field philosopher works on “projects” (125), and uses “case studies” (125). Now, they are not quite like consultants because they are not focused on offering answers; yet it is not entirely clear how to take this because they also wish to be ameliorative, and presumably this involves offering some answers. Either way, Frodeman and Briggie fail to theorize the nature of amelioration qua field philosophy.¹⁶

I close with a final criticism. In reflecting on the role of philosophy in field philosophy, Frodeman and Briggie leave it unclear, what exactly, the particular philosophical expertise is that the would-be-field philosopher is drawing on. They make no mention of the advanced tools of professional philosophy (different kinds of logic, the thought experiment, conceptual innovation, argumentation theory, etc.); this is no surprise because they are, in fact, critical of method (125-126) and the profession. Nor do they mention the use of insights developed by different philosophical specializations (recall Dotson’s use of epistemology above) because they are also critical of specialization as such.

Thus, one gets the impression one can be a bona fide field philosopher with the tools of philosophy circa 1850. For all I know that’s fine. After all, it is possible many of the theories that consultants learn in business school may well be damaging when applied in real world cases (fill in your favorite example from the theory of finance). Anyway, the term “Philosophy” is not a protected trademark. So Frodeman and Briggie can call their enterprise whatever they wish. I wish them luck peddling it to interested would-be-stakeholders. It seems their book was written more for them than for existing professional philosophers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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