

The following document was created by Dr. Justine Johnstone as a public summary of responses to her query on the PHILOS-L mailing list (22nd January 2010):

I am curious to know about the prospects for doing philosophy outside the normal institutional arrangements, i.e. if you are not affiliated to a university or similar as either a staff member or student. Is this possible? How do you access journals and research? How do you present yourself when submitting work for publication or at conferences? How do you meet and interact with others? How do you earn a living – do you teach freelance, apply for research grants, or fund your philosophy from other types of employment? What if anything are the prospects for independent scholars? Could/should they be improved and if so how and by whom?

The document was originally posted to <http://www.zen74158.zen.co.uk/justine/PHILOSOPHY-OUTSIDE-THE-ACADEMY.pdf> (20th February 2010). It was later removed, but Dr. Johnstone has kindly granted permission for it to be hosted at http://rfjseddon.net/phil/Philosophy_Outside_the_Academy.pdf (28th October 2012).

PHILOSOPHY OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY

I had 50+ substantive responses to my posting, and also a large number of others expressing interest in the subject. By far the majority were UK based, but there were some from the US, Europe and Australia. It is clearly something of a live issue for many people. This is a digest of some of the main points.

WHO DOES IT AND WHY

Unaffiliated philosophers seem to be a very diverse bunch ranging from retired senior professors with decades of university employment behind them to new PhDs who haven't been able to get a job, to people pursuing projects that put them well beyond the pale of the traditional philosophy department. Several people made the point that historically many major works of philosophy have been completed by people working outside the academy. Currently the major groups of unaffiliated scholars and reasons for non-affiliation seem to be:

Interdisciplinary scholars – philosophical work on topics such as gender, or linking philosophy with biology, neuroscience, computing etc. is seen by some to be unwelcome in philosophy departments, leading these scholars to work in other departments or outside the academy altogether.

Women – possibly because many work in social or interdisciplinary areas.

The disillusioned – people who leave or are excluded from the academy for political, academic or personal reasons.

Young scholars – considering a PhD or newly graduated.

Foreign scholars – having degrees/referees/publications from overseas universities can make it difficult to get a UK job.

Non-philosophy degree holders – a PhD in another discipline may be a barrier to a philosophy job even if your work is philosophical.

Other academics – people working in other departments, in some cases because they see it as a stepping stone to a philosophy post.

Retired academics – either philosophers or others who take up philosophy in retirement.

Practitioners, writers, artists and teachers – people engaging in philosophy-related counselling, consultancy, education, art, journalism etc. in non-academic contexts. Some of these people do not have higher degrees in philosophy and do not wish to or see themselves as doing the same thing as academic philosophers; others see practice and academia as more continuous and publish research papers, attend conferences and aim at an academic career.

'Fringe' philosophers – people pursuing lines of investigation that would not be considered respectable within a philosophy department or university.

HOW PEOPLE REPRESENT THEMSELVES AND ARE VIEWED BY OTHERS

Being unaffiliated is not generally seen as incurring stigma or discrimination at conferences or in journals, thanks to blind peer review. 'Independent scholar' (IS) and 'independent researcher' seem to be the preferred unaffiliated designations, and both seem to be well known and accepted, though perhaps a bit more familiar in the US than the UK.

It is felt, however, that academic colleagues may tend to view IS with some suspicion, and there is a fairly widespread view that academic philosophy is a tight knit and

rather closed world. To some extent this is seen as justified in that some IS are considered to be eccentric, not doing work that is really philosophical or simply not up to standard. As one respondent put it a major advantage of affiliation is 'as a sign that one has a PhD, is not self-taught and not a crank'.

For similar reasons book publishers and invited book chapters can be problematic for IS, as publishers and editors will ask about biography and affiliation, but the consensus seems to be that if the work is good enough this is not an insurmountable problem. Factors that enhance acceptance include having a previous affiliation and contacts, being respected academically in another discipline and, crucially, having a good publication record.

A few people speculated about designating themselves as affiliated to their alumnus university or a university they had recently been employed at. Nominal and honorary positions, visiting fellowships, part-time or temporary teaching etc. are also seen as useful for the purposes of presenting oneself as affiliated to some institution. A more imaginative and long-term response may be to start your own organisation, whether business or charity, and affiliate to this.

Whatever route is taken IS have to work harder than affiliated colleagues at presenting themselves and their work to the wider world in a way that inspires confidence. This can be tricky since often they are addressing both academic and non-academic audiences but the Internet offers many options (websites, archives, blogs, discussion lists etc.) and is seen by many IS as crucial to getting themselves known. Some examples of unaffiliated websites:

<http://peoppenheimer.org/>

<http://henadology.wordpress.com/>

<http://adrianpiper.com/>

www.robharle.com

<http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/>

www.philosophyonline.co.uk

www.obligationsofreason.com

www.philosophersnet.com/

www.thephilosophyshop.co.uk and <http://thephilosophyshop.wordpress.com/>

ACCESS TO JOURNALS AND RESOURCES

Not surprisingly a major problem for IS is access to libraries, journals and databases. These are some of the solutions people have found:

- Obtain paid/free public/alumnus access to a university library where hard-copy journals can be photocopied; some also provide a degree of online access but this is very variable and patchy (in UK).
- Download from open access journals, and websites such as www.aaaarg.org and www.scribd.com.
- Take out personal subscriptions to journals or online collections such as Questia (www.questia.com/Index.jsp) or CogNet (<https://cognet.mit.edu/>).
- Request material from public libraries through interlibrary loans.
- Get help from friends and colleagues in academic institutions.

- Email authors privately (though there's a feeling that this is a bit cheeky and IS need to be careful not to overdo it).
- Search widely among online facilities including foreign language libraries – apparently some permit unaffiliated access.
- Link yourself to a university in some way (visiting scholar, temporary tutor, honorary/nominal position etc.) that gives access to library.
- Enrol for a part-time or evening course that gives university library membership
- Live in London and use British Library.
- Join RIP, which entitles you to free access to Senate House library in London.
- Live in New York and use NY Public Library (for hard copy journals, also day passes to NY university libraries) and NY Society Library (for remote access to e.g.. JSTOR, Project Muse).
- Live in Holland where university libraries give public access including to electronic materials.

Access to search tools seems to be a bigger problem for some than actual articles, since university libraries often do not allow non-affiliated users to access databases such as Philosophers' Index. PI is available at the British Library but if you are outside London this is a real problem. Publicly accessible online tools are available such as <http://philpapers.org/>, Google Scholar and multi-publisher portals such as <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/crossref.html> but none is felt to be as good as PI.

HOW IS MAKE CONTACTS AND STAY INFORMED

- Attending conferences – whether presenting or just in audience.
- Philosophy discussion lists (including Chora, Philos-L).
- Private email contacts – made through own websites or postings in forums.
- Going to philosophy meetings – especially good provision in London, with Institute of Philosophy at University of London, RIP and Aristotelian Society all laying on a stream of events most of which are open to all.

HOW IS FUND THEIR WORK

It seems to be generally agreed that it is well-nigh impossible to make a living from full-time freelance philosophy. People employ a variety of strategies to survive:

- Parallel career – art, consultancy, own business etc.
- Private income, pension, savings, family support.
- Grants and scholarships (only one person mentioned doing this but several made the point that some grants are open to IS).
- Part-time or occasional university lecturing/tutoring (Open University and Birkbeck were mentioned in particular).
- Private tutoring.
- Teaching philosophy in schools.
- Journalism, writing (print/web), broadcasting.
- Philosophical practice of various types (e.g. consultancy, counselling).

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF BEING INDEPENDENT

Main advantages:

- Freedom – to pursue own interests and ideas, to publish only when you want to, to do cross-disciplinary or non-traditional work.
- Flexibility – to combine careers, different ways of life, travel etc.
- Engaging with diverse audiences.
- Avoiding poor conditions of service/teaching in universities.
- Avoiding narrow academic culture.
- Money – for those able to earn a living at some more lucrative job than academia.

Main drawbacks:

- Money (lack of salary, but also cost of attending conferences, journal subs etc.).
- Time (if following another career as well).
- Credibility with colleagues and publishers – establishing you are not eccentric, self-taught.
- Limited library access.
- Open access information on the Internet – may make it harder to earn a living through writing textbooks, encyclopaedia entries etc.
- Writing style – hard to write in journal style if not immersed in academia.
- Loneliness and isolation.
- Difficult to get known.

WHAT COULD/SHOULD BE DONE TO SUPPORT INDEPENDENT PHILOSOPHERS

Respondents suggested a whole range of changes including:

Access to research, publications etc.

- University libraries to provide better and more consistent access for public members, especially to online journals, resources and tools such as Philosophers' Index.
- Organisations such as BPA and RIP to consider provision of access to some electronic resources.
- Academic publishers to develop more imaginative and realistic pricing models for independent scholars.
- Philosophy departments to hold more open lectures, seminars and workshops.
- All IS and other academics to put their own papers online, ideally in a permanent open archive. If necessary for copyright reasons a small change can be made to each paper which can then be presented as a 'revised version' with a link to the officially published version. Use pdf or html not MSWord files.

New models of affiliation

In general there's a widespread feeling that the current system does not serve either IS or universities as well as it could, and that the sharp distinction between inside and outside should be softened by new and more varied forms of recognition and affiliation for scholars. Two suggestions are for universities to:

- Recognise a category of 'local independent researchers' for giving those with a research degree some rights to attend seminars, access libraries etc. at their nearest

university. In return the university could gain some credit for IS publications, draw on them for occasional teaching, research bids participation etc.

- Introduce a new category of ‘associate fellow’ - unpaid in terms of salary but carrying full library rights, a university email address, access to the department (for peer conversations etc.), maybe some ad hoc teaching, and possibly payment for attending one domestic conference per year. In return AFs could hold seminars on new research and have their publications credited to the department.

IS organisation/s

- Some kind of IS association, organisation or network for mutual support, sharing resources, information, help with managing grants etc, possibly just for philosophers or perhaps for all IS (e.g. along the lines of NCIS in the US – see below).
- An organisation to promote the professionalisation of philosophy as a practice/activity - like psychoanalysts’, writers’ and artists’ professional bodies and in contrast to the philosophical *research* done at universities.

But see existing organisations listed below which already seem to be aiming at some of these things.

Grants

Few people seemed interested in grants and some were strongly opposed. Some comments:

- ‘I would not be in favor of any sort of government grant program for independent scholars. Money from targeted programs of this sort quickly gets absorbed by the same old same old rewriting their profiles to conform to the letter of the grant guidelines.’
- ‘[I] would never apply for grants as these are the ultimate intellectual and creative restrictive constraints.’

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Oxford Philosophical Society www.oxfordphilsoc.org based at Rewley House (Department of Continuing Education) in Oxford has about 240 members from all over the UK and also a growing number of overseas members. It aims to provide a focus for ‘amateur’ philosophers, publishes an annual Review, runs a Members’ Day and supports courses in Oxford

Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) encourages membership applications from UK women in philosophy, professionals or students within or outside academic departments. Further information is available at www.swipuk.org/.

Society for Philosophy in Practice represents the interests of philosophical practitioners engaged in Philosophical Counselling, Philosophical Business Consulting, Socratic Dialogue, and Philosophy in Schools. See www.society-for-philosophy-in-practice.org/.

National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) www.ncis.org/ - US organisation dedicated to improving life for all IS.

Higher Education Authority is currently involved in a project called 'philosophers beyond boundaries' which seeks to explore and support the teaching of philosophy outside traditional university philosophy departments. For details see http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/beyond_boundaries/index.html.

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ADDENDUM: PERCEPTIONS OF LIFE OUTSIDE AND INSIDE THE ACADEMY

These comments are included to give a flavour of the more subjective side of responses and how people feel about being independent and also about academic philosophy. Some views are quite extreme but I have included them without editing to give a sense of the full range of views.

HOW PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT BEING INDEPENDENT

'[I]t definitely is possible, and indeed in many respects preferable.'

'[B]eing outside of the official circles of academia has freed me, I believe, from a lot of the pressures of publishing at whatever cost, even at the cost of intellectual honesty. So I would like to think that my work has partly gained as a result, even if my situation is hard.'

'The prospects for independent scholars depend entirely on how the scholar in question regards her or his situation. If one thinks of it as a disadvantage, and as lacking the benefits and protections of institutional affiliation, then that is what it will become. But if one thinks of it as an advantage, conferring all the benefits of freedom, flexibility and self-determination, then it will be that. This is definitely what it is for me.

The prospects for independent scholars are going to look better and better as the teaching conditions in academic institutions get worse. Any satisfying day job, whether as an artist, a copy editor, a dentist, or a computer consultant may outcompete university teaching, when one reaches the point (as so many of my friends and colleagues have) of acknowledging to oneself that what one is doing in the classroom no longer qualifies as teaching at all.'

'For me, not being a full time "academic" has been a godsend - none of that awful intellectual snobbery, that bitchiness, that back biting, that money-is-everything mentality that academia has now become -and which has formed the basis of academia (in my experience) since time immemorial. Let's face it, the only reason anyone becomes an academic is because they don't have the imagination to do anything else. It's easy!

On the other hand, I keep my toes in - part time teaching which I love and the BL is just up the road (so who needs an institution?) It's funny, only those working in institutions seem to worry about those of us writing and publishing outside of them. I think it's jealousy quite honestly - we've escaped the asylum!'

'...the prospects are awful. It turns you off academic philosophy after a while.'

'I suspect many [independent scholars] will complain that they don't get taken seriously, but to be honest, most who say that are probably bad! There are plenty of examples of publishers and conferences accepting work from unaffiliated scholars, if it's good. Often, independents are either doing something different to academics, and so understandably of little interest to them; or failed academics, and so, likewise understandably of little interest to them. It's genuinely tough for people who just couldn't get an academic job at the key point in their career and found themselves outside the loop. For every average-poor academic there must be at least one other equally able to fill their socks, but without a post.'

'I was inches away from accepting an academic job for this current academic year. However, on closer inspection, it turned out that my (as I had thought, fairly modest) academic duties would have completely swamped anything else I had planned to do! Since this included a paying book deal (which was considerably more money and less work than the teaching), I regretfully had to decline. I say "regretfully" with sincerity, because there is still a part of me that would like to be part of a department, where you can benefit from the exchange of ideas, etc. (ploughing a lone furrow is very isolated at times). However, given my insight into what would be expected of me (and it is always worse when you are starting off on a course, I know), it has I think permanently changed my attitude to academia: I no longer want to be involved (which is a shame). So, whilst money is a constant worry, the freedom to write more or less what I want is great.'

'Being an independent researcher means I am not bound by the often rigid pigeon holes created at universities. My work is cross disciplinary, sometimes speculative (based on sound reasoning and research) and totally disrespectful of dominant paradigms. The down side is a lonely existence intellectually, the local butcher just doesn't get Plato's Cave! However, the Internet is my saviour and main means of communication in this respect.'

... AND HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THE ACADEMY

'I am of the opinion much of contemporary 'academic' philosophy is of little value beyond being a means of gaining tenure for the author.'

'The institution of philosophy is largely there to provide an air of professionalism, not to speak of the publishing industry, which is mostly geared to provide status rather than to improve learning. Many scholars are therefore compelled to publish by sheer professional necessity, not by any advancement of learning or by the conviction of explaining something. Of that much I am sure from experience.

Ultimately, what you are asking would lead us to question the role of philosophy in a society like ours. Must it be institutionalised and follow the same criteria as other sciences? Must it follow the same logic as any other commodity? If so, what are the consequences? On the contrary, must it resist these tendencies and be critical of them? In that case, being outside of the official institutions is probably one of the best ways to contribute towards its advancement. It is, after all, an old question. Should the teacher charge fees for his teaching? *Nihil novum sub sole.*'

'It seems that academics [with notable exceptions] show no interest in promoting non-academic applications of philosophy. But in the current economic climate there will be increasing pressure on philosophy departments to demonstrate impact on society;

the ivory-tower mentality that is characteristic of academic philosophy will have to change.'

'I don't think it is entirely a good thing that philosophy has become so academe-bound - it keeps an eye on standards, but it also has produced a narrowness of vision and debilitating specialisation.'

'...the analytical philosophy community teaches itself that in order to be taken seriously as a philosopher you need to write papers that pay a lot of attention to the writings of well known contemporary philosophers and if what you talk about or write about does not relate to any currently accepted 'hot' topic you must be some sort of crank not to be taken seriously, especially if that requires learning something about developments in another subject... There are exceptions of course: philosophers who work in philosophy departments but straddle boundaries, especially doing philosophy of X, e.g. X= physics, biology, mathematics. Some of them find it necessary to acquire knowledge of X itself, not just its philosophy.

But not always: I recently went to a philosophy workshop where people talking about relativity had read only what philosophers had said about it. They had not read even Einstein's popular exposition.

In my case, I have more or less given up trying to get philosophers interested, since I can communicate philosophical ideas to people in other disciplines ...though it's sad to read and hear the professional philosophers going round well-trodden circles ...

And I think it is particularly sad that the teaching of philosophy draws bright youngsters into that narrow mode of working and thinking.'