The Erosion of Academic Virtue

Susan Haack

Distinguished Professor in the Humanities, Professor of Philosophy, Professor of Law, University of Miami, USA. E-mail: shaack@law.miami.edu

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Haack articulates something of what she takes the moral demands of academic life to be, calling for such virtues as industry, honesty, realism, patience, and consideration. She then explains why she believes the current academic environment is sapping the strength of character these virtues require, and why graduate students are caught in the middle. She writes primarily about philosophy, but much of what she has to say applies to other humanities disciplines and much of that to other disciplines as well---and while she writes primarily about the U.S. situation, much of what she says applies elsewhere too.

> *Remember that other world, within the [academic] microcosm, the silent reasonable world, where the only action is thought, and thought is free from fear. If you go back to it now, keeping just enough bitterness to give a pleasant edge to your conversation ... you will find yourself in the best of all company—the company of clean humourous intellect ... —F. M. Cornford.[1]*

In the course of the several decades I have spent in the academy, I have often found myself reflecting on the ethical, as well as the intellectual, demands of academic life. Once, prompted by an invitation to speak at a conference on the ethics of research, I wrote about the disastrous consequences for our profession of the burgeoning "research ethic"—the ever-increasing pressure to present and publish papers, the spread of the culture of grants-and-research-projects from the sciences to the humanities, and universities' enthusiastic embrace of a concept of "productivity" more appropriate to manufacturing widgets than to advancing knowledge.[2] At the time, like the friend who asked me, "Don't you have enough enemies already?" I feared this paper might be so outspoken as to be dangerous to my professional health. And perhaps it was.[3] But now, decades later, it seems to me distinctly too mild, the present situation much worse than I then foresaw.

Questions about the moral demands of everyday academic life are much less dramatic than those raised by hard cases about end-of-life decisions, abortion, and so forth, the usual fare of "moral problems" courses; and in one way they are easier: articulating what those moral demands are isn't as mind-numbingly difficult as figuring out the morality of, say, euthanasia or the death penalty. At the same time, though, these everyday questions are terribly hard to think about; they are so subtle, and so painfully close to home. But, I believe, they really matter—not least because we need to understand how an environment that systematically encourages skewed values is damaging the entire academic enterprise.

A crucial issue now that in our times an academic who conducts his (or, of course, her)[4] professional life in a way truly in accordance with the ethical demands of our profession is likely to find himself at a real professional disadvantage, and decidedly out of step with the ethos of the institution in which he works. So in what follows I will do my best first to articulate (something of) what I take the ethical demands of the academic life to be, and then to explain why I believe

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1. F. M. Cornford, *Monographia Academica: Being a Guide for the Young Academic Politician*, 1908. Reprinted in *University Politics: F. H. Cornford's Cambridge and His Advice to the Young Academic Politician*, ed. G. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.110.

2. Susan Haack, "Preposterism and Its Consequences" (1996), reprinted in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 187-208. As I explain below, the word "Preposterism" was adapted from Jacques Barzun.

3. Though it wasn't this paper, but a very sober article on affirmative action, that an anonymous referee for *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* wanted suppressed. (The press, I'm happy to say, resisted this demand.)

4. But I will say this only once; to keep repeating it would be tedious, and might risk suggesting, falsely, that this paper has something to do with feminism.

the present academic environment is sapping the strength of character needed to meet them. I will speak primarily about philosophy, since that is what I know best; but much of what I say also applies to other disciplines in the humanities, and much of that to other disciplines as well.

Our work as professors is, in many ways, highly agreeable. It carries no physical dangers and imposes no remarkable physical stresses or strains; the hours are very flexible, especially over the summer; and we have enviable freedom to pursue questions that interest us. Some of us, perhaps, could make a lot more money doing other things—or could have made a lot more money had we taken a different path early on; but few if any of us in the regular tenure stream could by any stretch of the imagination be described as poverty-stricken. Moreover, ours is honorable work, work in which one can take pride—more like the work of a craftsman, a doctor, or a nurse than the work of a salesman for an unscrupulous pharmaceutical company or a public-relations officer for an incompetent oil-exploration outfit. Indeed, that the work is honorable is part of what attracted some of us to our profession in the first place. Privileged with such agreeable employment, I'm tempted to say, the very least we can do is to make a decent job of it. But the kind of work we do—educating our students, working in our discipline, and all the other, second-order stuff that has to be done if this work is to be effective—if it is done responsibly and well, makes considerable demands not only on your time and energy, but also on your moral fiber. In other words, to do our job well requires good character.

So let me begin with my list of "academic virtues":[1]

- industry: i.e., a willingness to work hard;
- patience, persistence: i.e., a readiness to follow through when results are not easily or readily forthcoming;
- judgment: i.e., the capacity to distinguish good, solid work from the sloppy, the superficial, the flimsy, and the half-baked, and good, solid people from the weak, the self-promoting, and the partisan;
- integrity: i.e., honesty, both with others and, no less importantly, with oneself;
- focus: i.e., an ability to discriminate between essential work, and work that is only peripheral, or a distraction;
- realism: i.e., a sense of what is feasible: the self-knowledge required to aim high and yet retain a decent humility; as well as a sense of others' capacities and limitations;
- impartiality: i.e., readiness to assess ideas, people, etc., on their merits;

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1. This should not be interpreted as signaling my commitment to a "virtue ethics." Just as a fully-developed epistemology would require an understanding *both* of questions about evidence and warrant, *and* of questions about epistemic virtues (and of the relations between them) so, I expect, a fully-developed ethical theory would require *both* an understanding of moral obligations *and* of moral virtues (and of the relations between them); and, of course—again like epistemology—of the relations between individual and social aspects. (I spell some of this out, with respect to epistemology specifically, in the foreword to the 2nd edition of my *Evidence and Inquiry*, 11-31.)

- independence: i.e., the strength of character not to back off from your best judgment even when following it is difficult or disadvantageous;
- consideration: i.e., an appreciation of the value of other people's time and energy;
- courage or, as one might also say, fortitude: i.e., willingness to face intellectual and other difficulties and obstacles squarely, and in particular to stand alone against the crowd when necessary.

I don't claim that this list is complete, nor do I claim that it is perfectly articulated. (And neither—do I really need to say this?—do I claim to have all these virtues in high degree. Sometimes, for example, I get impatient; often I bite off more than I can chew; and many, many times I am unrealistically optimistic about how long it will take me to figure something out.)

The virtues I have listed are desirable traits of character quite generally; but here I will consider them specifically as they apply to academics in our professional lives. Perhaps it is necessary to say explicitly that possessing these virtues is not sufficient by itself to guarantee that someone will do good academic work, which obviously also requires intellectual and other abilities. And perhaps it is necessary to add that some of these virtues can be put to work in the service of morally undesirable ends as well as morally desirable ones[1]—a point that will assume some significance later.

One way to bring out the character of these virtues is to contrast them with the corresponding vices. Industry contrasts, obviously enough, with laziness, a disposition to slack off or cut corners; patience with hastiness, a preference for the quick and easy over the difficult and demanding path; judgment with an inability to discriminate worthwhile work from the flimsy, the fashionable, the flashy, and the obfuscatory, or serious people from lightweights, charlatans, and clever self-promoters; integrity with a disposition to fudge, obfuscate, or mislead other people, or conveniently to deceive yourself, when it is to your advantage to do so; focus with a disposition to self-indulgence or a weakness for distracting yourself with busy-work; realism with a naive or cynically self-deceived readiness to imagine that truly remarkable results can be easily or quickly achieved, whether by oneself or others; impartiality with bias, i.e., undiscriminating enthusiasm for, or hostility to, this or that line, or these or those people, etc.; independence with a disposition to conform your interests, your opinions, your line, your approach, etc., to social pressure against your best judgment; consideration with a blindness to, or lack of concern for, others' concerns and priorities; and courage with a cowardly refusal to keep plugging away, or to hold your ground, when the going gets tough.

These virtues come in degrees: a person may be more, or less, industrious, focused, patient, and so forth (and may be disposed to work harder at one kind of task than another, or more patient with

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1. A point made by Jane Heal, "The Disinterested Search for Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 88, 1987-8: 97-108. As I argue in "Confessions of a Old-Fashioned Prig" (*Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (n.2), 7-30), however, the conclusion that Heal draws—that the ideal of disinterested inquiry is hollow—doesn't follow; and it isn't true.

one kind of detail than another, and so on). They also intertwine: to be realistic about how hard it will be to figure out some problem, for example, requires judgment—and actually figuring out anything genuinely difficult requires industry, patience, and honesty. Because of these intimate interrelations, I was half-tempted to use one word to encompass all the virtues on my list: seriousness. Unfortunately, however, these days seriousness is all too often confused with solemnity, grim earnestness, or self-importance. But taking pleasure in making even small steps forward, like having fun disentangling muddles or puncturing laughable intellectual pretensions, is perfectly compatible with being entirely serious about one's work;[1] and self-importance, so far from being an academic virtue, is an academic vice, standing immovably in the way of a true appreciation of what is needed to do worthwhile intellectual work.

Obviously enough, teaching—or, as I would prefer to say, educating our students—calls on all the virtues on my list. It is hard work: you are falling down on the job not only if you fail to show up to class, or show up late, or drunk, but also if you show up unprepared, or have put too little thought into what the course should achieve, or haven't ensured that the material you asked students to read is available, or don't bother to check whether they have actually read it, or have just skimmed students' work instead of really reading it, or ..., etc. It also requires patience: in explaining again, better, what fell on deaf ears the last several times, in drawing students out, in enabling them to realize potential strengths, in tactfully encouraging the under-confident to contribute and the over-confident to think before they speak. It requires judgment: in choosing appropriate materials and issues, dealing appropriately with students' questions, grading students' work fairly, appreciating and responding appropriately to the different strengths and different needs of individual students. It requires integrity: not only a refusal to tolerate plagiarism, gross or subtle, and doing whatever is needed to ensure that students understand what plagiarism is, and why it isn't acceptable, but more importantly being scrupulous about setting a good example yourself, by acknowledging when you are drawing on someone else's ideas, admitting candidly when you don't know, and owning up when (as sometimes happens) you realize that something you told your students was false, confusing, or misleading. It requires focus—pedagogical focus: current fashion notwithstanding, it really needs to be said that you are also falling down on the job if you structure a course around what you're hoping to write a paper on this semester, or talk only about what especially interests you, rather than giving thought to what would be best for your students to learn, and doing what is necessary to ensure they learn it. It requires realism: a sense of what this student, or these students, are capable of if helped, of what would be asking too much of them, and what too little. It requires impartiality: assessing students' work on its merits, regardless of personal likes or dislikes, or the expectations formed by this student's Mohawk, that student's wonderfully neat

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1. As Cornford's marvelous phrase, "clean *humourous* intellect" signals.

handwriting, or another's eagerness to clean the board and carry your books for you, or ..., etc.; and the independence to do this even if colleagues judge a student very differently, or a student complains that everyone else gave him an A, or ..., etc. It requires consideration: at the most elementary level, not wasting students' energy on busy-work, or wasting their time by not being available when you said you would; in a subtler way, by taking students' serious puzzlement seriously. And it takes courage: to insist on educating your students rather than pandering to them, to stand firm against grade inflation even if this makes you unpopular, and so on.

No less obviously, what administrators call "research and scholarship"—but I think of simply as doing philosophy—requires all these virtues too. Industry: because, done responsibly and well, this too is hard, demanding work, and can be very frustrating. Patience: to take the time it takes to get a question clearer or a solution more detailed, to revise, revise, and revise again, to make sure all necessary acknowledgments are made. Judgment: to figure out what problems are most worth tackling, what paths most worth exploring, what sources most worth seeking out and mastering. Integrity: to be straight with yourself, with your readers, and with your dean, the body that funded your work, etc., about what you have achieved and what remains to be done, what is clear and specific enough and what still needs refinement, what is speculation and what thoroughly argued and documented; and fully to acknowledge what you have borrowed from others. Focus: because you are falling down on the job if you make things easy for yourself by tackling only minor questions or minor aspects of larger questions, or are satisfied to criticize easy targets or chime in on some fashionable debate. Realism: to choose questions that are within your powers if you work hard enough, but not so easy that you can answer them without breaking a real intellectual sweat. Impartiality: to judge available work on your topic on its merits rather than the fame of the author, or the likelihood that he might nudge some professional advantage your way, or ..., etc. Independence: to stay away from fashionable bandwagons, to keep probing when you suspect that a question others are rushing to answer may rest on false presuppositions. Consideration: not baffling or boring your readers by writing obscurely or self-indulgently, or wasting their time by giving them inadequate or inaccurate references; not wasting referees' time by submitting half-baked papers in hopes they will tell you how to fix them, or ..., etc. Courage: to take intellectual risks, to criticize the influential when they deserve it, to pick yourself up and start again when what seemed like a good idea collapses under you—and to say "no" to all those trivial requests, invitations to lunch, etc., that dissipate the energy and concentration you need to do real work.

As you probably noticed, my long paragraph about teaching made no distinction between undergraduate and graduate education. Now, however, I can add that educating graduate students who aspire to become professors themselves—if they in turn are to learn to educate their students, and to do philosophy, responsibly and well—also requires somehow instilling these virtues in them. In large part, this is a matter of setting the best example possible. But we also do something to instill industry, patience, and judgment, for example, when we reassure our students that it is to be

expected that genuinely good work will be difficult, will take time, will require numerous drafts, may call for starting over, perhaps more than once—and warn them that, chances are, the first idea that comes into their head *won't* be brilliant; we do something to instill independence and courage when we encourage them to pursue a promising but largely untraveled path, and to criticize fairly without fear or favor; we do something to instill honesty when we insist on proper acknowledgments, and resist the temptation to steer students in directions that will advance our own work or reputation; we do something to instill consideration when we insist that obscure or pretentious writing be repaired and poorly substantiated claims be nailed down; and of course we do something to instill realism when we help our students devise demanding but not hopelessly over-ambitious projects.

As you probably also noticed, so far I have said little, at least directly, about the relation of teaching and research. For now, I shall just say that how much of your time you spend on each will obviously depend, among many other things, on the nature of the institution in which you work; and that we put so much emphasis on the self-servingly overblown idea that a professor really needs to be doing original research in an area to teach it competently that we tend to forget that one happy consequence of teaching a reasonable range of courses is that—if you give this work the attention it deserves—you will surely broaden your philosophical horizons in ways that can hardly fail eventually to benefit your research.

What I described earlier as the "other stuff" we do includes so many, and such a variety, of secondary academic activities that even to list them all, let alone show that each requires all these virtues, would be unbearably tedious. Instead, trusting you to extrapolate, I will take just a couple of examples from that long and seemingly ever-growing list. Refereeing papers, book proposals, grant proposals, etc., reviewing books, examining dissertations, etc., all require industry, to read whatever-it-is with due care; patience, to attend to crucial details, to suggest how work might be improved if it is potentially, but not yet actually, good; judgment, to determine what its merits and demerits are; integrity, to avoid deceiving yourself about the merits of a friend's work or the demerits of a rival's, and to report candidly; focus, to concentrate on the core merits and demerits of the work rather than on incidental distractions; realism, to recognize when a paper (etc.) simply can't be fixed, or when a book manuscript is good but the author capable of making it better; impartiality and independence, to resist the temptation to join a "citation cartel" or to write fulsomely on X's back cover just because he wrote flatteringly on yours; consideration—not taking a year to get around to the job, not making unreasonable demands; and courage, to write the tough

review the highly-praised but feeble work of a well-known scholar deserves[1]—or the excellent review the excellent work of an unknown scholar deserves.

Presenting papers, serving as commentator, editorial work, and so forth, done responsibly and well, require all these virtues too. I won't bore you by going systematically through my list again, but I will mention specifically the importance of consideration to these tasks: you are falling down on your job as presenter if you show up half-cut, or just chat from notes on the back of an envelope, or if you send your paper to your commentator two days before the conference;[2] you are falling down on your job as commentator if, instead of making a good-faith effort to respond to the work on which you are supposedly commenting, you just treat this as an opportunity to toot your own horn; you are falling down on your job as an editor if you solicit papers for an anthology while fudging the fact that you have as yet no publisher, or set a firm deadline for contributors and then tell them nothing about progress to publication as a year, eighteen months, two years, or more, go by, or ... , etc.

Participating responsibly in hiring decisions also requires all these virtues; and this time I think it's worth spelling out how. It requires actually reading the relevant material, carefully; patiently attending to the details of candidates' work, their qualifications, their relations to their referees, etc.; using good judgment in appraising which applicants are most suitable; honestly acknowledging a candidate's strengths even if he is a rival or an enemy of yours, and his weaknesses even if he is an ally or a friend; focusing on the aspects of candidates' work and character most relevant to the position—not, for example, on who their supervisor was, on where they have published, or on how many grants they have received, but on how good their work is; assessing those merits realistically rather than falling for candidates' or referees' exaggerated claims; impartially, even when the best candidate might be a threat to you, or hiring a weaker candidate might advance your interests; and independently, not falling in line with colleagues so as to ensure their support on some other issue; being considerate of potential candidates' time and energy by doing what you can to ensure that your department doesn't advertise in one area and then hire in another without re-advertising, or place an advertisement (or interview several candidates) *after* the intended candidate has already been identified, or etc. These days, all this is quite likely to require the courage to stand alone. For such lazy procedures are now—well, I have no way to know *how* common, but certainly *too* common. I will never forget the response when, over dinner at another university where I was presenting a paper, and which was also hiring, I

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1. A task that for some reason seems to fall to me more often than chance. See Susan Haack, "Vulgar Rortyism," *The New Criterion*, November, 1997: 67-70 (reviewing Louis Menand, *Pragmatism: A Reader*); and "All that glitters," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 3, 2009: 27-8 (reviewing Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Life*).

2. On one memorable occasion I received, about a week before a conference rather than the six weeks that, as I recall, I was told to expect, the 72-page paper on which I was to comment—the final sentence of which read "conclusion to follow." One of the authors was, in turn, to comment on my paper; which, however, was as complete as I could make it, of more modest length, and sent in good time.

mentioned that I was struggling to read 400 applications for a position: "Why bother?", one of my hosts asked; "after all, everyone's going after the same few people." Silly me.[1]

This leads us directly to the painful fact to which I adverted earlier: that the present ethos of universities, in the U.S. and, I suspect, many other parts of the world, is markedly inhospitable to the cultivation of the academic virtues.

Let me say at the outset that I don't suppose that universities have *ever* been perfect environments for academic work; I am under no nostalgic illusions about a supposed Golden Age when the ethos of the academy was really, really, good.[2] But now, I believe, we face new and distinctive pressures on some of the most important virtues. Part of my argument in "Preposterism and Its Consequences" was that some environments are more hospitable than others to good, honest, thorough intellectual work. Part of my argument here will be that, as the academic environment has changed in response to economic, political, social, and other pressures, and those who work in higher education have adapted to these changes, the effect has been a steady erosion of judgment, integrity, realism etc.—I'm tempted to say, a steady loss of moral muscle tone.

Fully to characterize all the relevant changes would take more time, and more sociological information, than I can muster. But these are clear to me:

- we have seen the rise and continuing growth of a new class of professional academic administrators, who perceive themselves as managers and faculty as employees (and sometimes, students as "customers");
- the insistence on publication for career advancement has become ever stronger, and by now extends even to graduate students;
- even in the humanities, where research doesn't require large sums of money for equipment and such, there is ever-growing emphasis on grants and research projects;
- concern about "rankings" is growing ever more insistent;
- students (and their parents) increasingly think of higher education as an essential credential for getting a decent job, rather than as having value in itself.

As we shall see, these factors interact and reinforce each other in complicated ways.

"Administration" used to be seen as a chore—disagreeable, but necessary to keep things running smoothly. A senior faculty member would agree to be dean (in Britain, chairman of the board of the faculty of Arts, or whatever); sacrifice a few years to administrative drudgery; and

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1. And now I feel obliged to say here that, after painfully learning that there is nothing effective I can do to ensure that my department follows what I believe to be proper (and considerate) procedures, I no longer participate in the hiring process—not, I hope, because I lack courage, but because realism demands that I put my energy into causes not already irretrievably lost.

2. Should there be any readers who *are* under such an illusion, I recommend Cornford, *Monographia Academica*; Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (1919; Stanford, CA: Academic Reprints, 1954); Jacques Barzun, *The American University* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Caroline Bird, *The Case against College* (1973; New York: Bantam Books, 1975).

then return to his teaching and research. When decisions had to be made, such a dean could, perhaps with the advice of trusted colleagues, use his own judgment. This system was far from ideal: some, naturally, had better judgment than others; some, probably, relied too much on unreliable cronies. But what we see today is much *farther* from ideal.

A new-style dean focused on climbing the administrative ladder will almost inevitably be much preoccupied with raising money, with presenting the institution (and especially his school) in the best possible light, and with impressing *his* bosses with the new programs he has introduced, the new "stars" he has hired, and so forth. And because he is likely to have put his own academic work on permanent hold, and to be less closely in touch with peers engaged in serious academic work of their own, he may well feel he has no option but to rely less on his own judgment of the quality of a department's program or of a person's mind than on surrogate measures:[1] a department's position in some ranking the worth of which he cannot judge for himself; the sheer number of a person's publications—perhaps, if he is scrupulous, adjusted by some weighting of journals or publishers the worth of which, again, he cannot judge for himself; or, better yet—so much simpler and more "objective"!—on how much grant money a person, or a department, brings in; or, in the case of hiring, on the prestige of candidates' home institutions. But systematically deferring judgment like this can have disastrous consequences—especially when, as we shall see, some of the people on whose opinions the whole edifice of deferred judgment depends may have built their reputations on relatively small contributions to a short-lived "niche" literature. (Many, it seems, have forgotten, if they ever knew, the etymological connection of "prestige" with "prestidigitation," "sleight of hand.")

Judging a professor or a department by volume of publications is—well, as Jacques Barzun put it, it is preposterous. "Valuing knowledge, we pre-posterize the idea, and say .... everybody shall produce written research in order to live, and it shall be deemed a knowledge explosion."[2] Of course, since Barzun wrote this in 1968, the pressure to publish has become much more severe. By 1994, Gary Gutting (then editor of the *American Philosophical Quarterly*) could write that publishing in philosophy journals had become less a way to communicate significant ideas than a form of professional certification.[3] And indeed, it is hard to deny that credentialing professors, and would-be professors, is now the *prime* function of academic publication; communicating with others in the field runs a very poor second at best. When chairs boast that their faculty are "research-active," what they mean, apparently, is that they run around to a lot of conferences (generally at

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1. "'But,' says one, 'I am a busy man; I have no time for the long course of study which would be necessary to make me ... a competent judge of certain questions. ...' Then he should have no time to believe." W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" (1877); reprinted in Timothy J. Madigan, ed., *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 70–97, p.78. Indeed.

2. Jacques Barzun, *The American University* (n.19), p. 221.

3. Gary Gutting, "The Editor's Page," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31.1, 1994, p.87.

the university's expense), and publish a lot of books and articles. And by this time, even graduate students—who are, with luck, just beginning to find their philosophical feet—are *also* expected to present and publish papers.

But as W. S. Gilbert taught us, "When everybody's somebody, then no-one's anybody."[1] When *everyone* publishes, other ways are needed to distinguish the somebodies from the nobodies. One way is to give greater weight to publications in journals, or with publishers, deemed "prestigious."[2] Another is to look to success in the game of grants-and research-projects. And a third is to rely on others' judgments in the form of departmental rankings.

But reliance on these surrogate measures is a very poor substitute for the informed judgment of someone in close touch with the demands, the temptations, and the pitfalls of intellectual work. That X has published a lot, even in supposedly prestigious journals or with supposedly prestigious presses, is absolutely *no* guarantee of the quality of his work; to build such a record, good contacts and a good sense of what topics are fashionable, along with fluency in that blandly chewy, pseudo-technical writing style that seems increasingly *de rigeur*, are likely to be at least as useful as just (just!) doing genuinely good, creative, careful, illuminating work—I suspect, more so. Neither is the fact that Y is good at getting grants; to build an impressive portfolio of grant money received, a knack for writing appealing proposals and, again, good contacts, are likely to be at least as useful as just (just!) doing genuinely good, creative, careful, illuminating work—again, I suspect, more so.[3]

And neither, in my judgment, is the fact that a department is highly ranked any guarantee that its faculty produces genuinely fine work, or that it offers its students a genuinely fine education. At any rate, the self-styled Gourmet Report that has such an influence (I am tempted to say, such a stranglehold) on the philosophy profession not only has a structural tendency to sideline the most seriously cross-disciplinary work and to encourage departments to over-specialize, but also concerns itself far too much with what supposed[4] "star" has moved from A to B, and far too little

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1. W. S. Gilbert, libretto of "The Gondoliers" (first performed 1889), Act II; in Deems Taylor, ed., *Plays and Poems of W. S. Gilbert* (New York: Random House, 1932), 519-81, p.565. The operetta is set in Barataria, a monarchy "tempered with Republican Equality," where the king has given *everyone* fancy titles—failing to foresee "[w]hat's as plain as plain can be/.../ when everyone one is somebodee/then no one's anybody!"

2. Like "excellence," "prestigious" has become one of those foam-rubber public-relations words in which universities' publicity material now abounds. ("Foam-rubber PR words" is another of Barzun's wonderful coinages: Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], p.223.)

3. In Europe, where the culture of grants-and research-projects seems to be even more entrenched, I have seen applicants who list every grant they have received to the last euro, but say very little about the work they have done; apparently, the most important qualification for getting a grant is—having got grants in the past.

4. "Supposed" because I am not entirely convinced, either, that these rankings accurately reflect genuine achievement, rather than mirroring a kind of celebrity sometimes achieved by, for example, making very strong and implausible claims (e.g., that no one believes anything, or that it is pure conservatism to think there is any value in having true beliefs, or that *p* and not *p* are sometimes

with how adequate, how effective, how realistic—how serious—the education a department offers;[1] which depends, rather, on a high preponderance of people strongly imbued with those academic virtues.

Something I learned in a long-ago course on comparative political systems keeps coming to mind: under the first Soviet Five-Year Plan, which set production targets by weight, one factory manager realized that the easiest way to meet his target was to make heavier chandeliers—as a result of which several fashionable Moscow ceilings collapsed. It is no less bizarre to judge the real work of a university—educating intelligent young people and keeping the flame of inquiry alive—by numbers of students graduated, the amount of grant money brought in, its standing in this or that ranking, or (I can't resist) by the weight of the publications its faculty churns out.

But chairs competing for scarce resources want to impress deans with how "research-active" their faculty are; faculty jockeying for promotions and raises 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 to undergraduate students, by presenting and publishing more, and by putting time and energy into applying for grants and "promoting their department." (Probably they also spend more time on that "other stuff," since the more administrators there are, it seems, somehow the more administrative work there is for professors, too. Funny, that.)

And many professors, consciously or not, surrender their own judgment of the quality of a department's program or a person's work to the same surrogate measures on which deans, etc., rely. Last year, for example, the colleague who introduced the historian from another university giving a guest lecture admiringly listed all the grants she had been awarded, but said essentially nothing about the substance of her work. (Had I been the speaker, I would've been *very* cross; but either our visitor didn't mind, or else she had done he ck of a pok er face.)

Inevitably, the quality of teaching suffers: more and more introductory teaching is handed over to teaching assistants and ad hoc lecturers; and more and more graduate classes (and sometimes even undergraduate classes) are designed around "what I'm working on at the moment" rather than what aspiring professors of philosophy really need to learn. Graduate students may find the idea that they are "helping professors with their important research" flattering; and undergraduates who are too naive to know they're being fed intellectual junk food, or who are too timid to protest, or

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jointly true, or, ..., etc.) that generate large numbers of replies—or, of course, by writing obscurely or ambiguously enough to attract "disciples."

1. As external evaluator for a Canadian philosophy department, I found that it took me weeks of work reading faculty vitae and publications, curricula, examination arrangements, etc., and several days on site, to say anything helpful—significantly *more* time than I was given when invited to evaluate up to 99 departments for the "Gourmet Report" (an invitation I felt I could not in good conscience accept).

who care more about getting a degree than about learning things worth learning, won't complain—provided they get good-enough grades.

And as the quantity of research burgeons, its quality declines. Ever more journals are flooded with ever more submissions; the peer-review system (far from perfect even in the sciences, where it originated,[1] and much less effective as a quality-control mechanism in a field of schools and cliques) comes under intolerable strain. Inevitably, the average quality of what is published tends to fall; and sifting the good stuff from the dreck gets harder and harder. "Niche publishing" is on the rise: more and more work seems to be focused on what X said about Y's criticism of Z's interpretation of W's ideas about a question,[2] and less and less directly on substantive issues. It's easier, for one thing (and perhaps some are subliminally aware that, if they spell X's, Y's, Z's, and W's names right, one of them might recommend the paper for publication—knowing that if it is published, this will make *him* better known). Anyone with enough frequent-flyer miles to upgrade to publication-by-invitation does so; and many soon realize that you can quadruple those miles in no time if you join the right clique.

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 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. Nor could I fail to notice that, though contextualism was much-discussed, David Annis—author of a pioneering 1976 article on the subject[3]—was never mentioned. I shouldn't have been surprised by any of this; in a discipline increasingly fragmenting into small circles, it is only to be expected that insiders' work will take center stage, and outsiders' contributions tend to fade from sight.

By the same token, we are also witnessing a growing "parochialism of the recent[4]". The graduate student who told me, in all seriousness, that he had been taught that nothing published before 1994[5] was worth reading was only naively saying aloud what seems more and more to be taken implicitly for granted. Do I *really* need to say how utterly bizarre the notion is that what Joe Blow and Jane

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1. See Susan Haack, "Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers," *Stetson Law Review*, 2007, 36.3, Spring 2007: 789-819.

2. As witnessed, for example, by the article I recently ran across entitled "X and Y on Z's Wittgenstein."

3. David Annis, "A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15.2, 1976: 213-19. Subsequently, contextualism has become fashionable; but Prof. Annis isn't even an honorary member of the new contextualist party, and his work seems to be ignored.

4. As witnessed, for example, by the paper for which I was recently asked to suggest a referee, the abstract of which began like this: "X (2007; forthcoming), Y (2009; forthcoming), and Z (2007; forthcoming) have argued that knowledge requires intellectual ability. W, however, has offered a counter-example ...." X, Y, and Z, by the way (and for all I know, W too) all hold named chairs in epistemology.

5. This was, as I recall, around 2006; my guess is that the young man had been given this advice in 2004, but hadn't thought to update it!

Doe published in the last decade or two is more significant than all the work of Plato, Aristotle, ...,
Descartes, ..., Kant, ..., Frege, Peirce, ..., etc., put together? It would be different if, like some areas
of the sciences, our subject were advancing so fast that earlier work really was soon out of date. To
the contrary, however: at the moment it sometimes seems that attention-grabbing niche problems
—or even old problems in twenty-first century dress, as with the recent revival of the "Gettier
paradoxes"— are welcomed much more warmly than work that makes lasting headway on
substantial issues. And now I'm reminded of Peirce's complaints about the literary dilettanti of his
day, who have "so perverted thought to the purposes of pleasure that it seems to vex them to think
that the questions upon which they delight to exercise it may ever get finally settled"; so that "a
positive discovery which takes a favorite subject out of the ... debate is met with ill-concealed
dislike."[1]

Graduate students are caught in the middle. They are indulged: by "recruitment" efforts that
feed their self-regard; by inflated grades and over-praise; and by the ever-commoner practice of
relating to them as if they were already junior colleagues, rather than still students.[2] But they are
also exploited: often offered a smorgasbord of whatever their professors are working on rather than
the genuinely rigorous, systematic, durable philosophical education they need; often carrying the
most burdensome undergraduate teaching; sometimes acting as unpaid research assistants;
sometimes waiting an unconscionably long time for input from faculty members preoccupied with
their own agenda of presentation-and-publication; sometimes obliged to do the scut work of
organizing conferences for which a faculty member will take the credit; and generally faced by a
conspiracy of silence and half-truths[3] about how many of those who begin a Ph.D. program ever
finish, how many of those who finish ever get a real academic job, and how many of those real
jobs will allow time for the important research agenda they have all been encouraged to imagine
they will undertake.[4]

It should come as no surprise that —dissipating the time and energy they should be spending
exploring new ideas, building and stretching their intellectual muscles, trying and failing and
learning from the failure how to do better— many graduate students become no less anxiously
obsessed than their teachers with those wretched rankings, scrounge shamelessly for money to

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1. Peirce continues: "This disposition is the very debauchery of thought." *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss
and (volumes 7 and 8), Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938-51), 5.396 (1878). References to the
Collected Papers are by volume and paragraph number.

2. Sidney Hook: writes that a teacher "must be friendly without becoming a friend." Sidney Hook, *Education for Modern Man: A
New Perspective* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p.203.

3. See Susan Haack, "The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXIII, 2008: 20-35.

4. I am reminded of a warren that the heroic traveling rabbits of Richard Adams's *Watership Down* encounter on their journey:
these rabbits are suspiciously well fed, but severely punish anyone who dares mention "the wire"—the traps in which the people
who have lured them with carrots and lettuces then catch and kill the unwary. Richard Adams, *Watership Down* (1972;
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Puffin Books, 1973), chapter 17, "The Shining Wire."

attend conferences, strain to publish, and stress over building their résumés or impressing visiting speakers who might conceivably give them a leg-up. In my experience, some arrive having already internalized distorted values; some don't survive to complete the PhD; some are corrupted, sooner or later, in greater or lesser degree; and only a few—for whom I have nothing but admiration—somehow survive with their integrity, and even their idealism, intact. Sadly, not many of those admirable few will be the somebodies of the next generation. *Those*, more likely, will be the confident products of "prestigious" departments, well-trained in survival tactics for the current climate: ambitious philosophical go-getters, capable, clever, quick, fluent, fully *au fait* with intellectual fashion—but blithely oblivious to the deeper demands, and rewards, of mature reflection.[1]

The erosion of the academic virtues is gradual: at first, some succumb to the temptation to cut corners in their teaching just a bit; rush to publish the paper or the book that could be made much richer or more rigorous with a little more time; write an easy critique of a wild idea rather than struggling to identify and build on the tiny grain of truth it contains; or persuade themselves that they really have made the remarkable breakthrough they promised in their grant application, or that the most recent fad coming down the pike really is worth their and everyone else's attention; and so on. Judgment is weakened as more and more defer to surrogate measures; integrity is weakened as more and more embroider their achievements to others and then, almost inevitably, in their own minds; focus is weakened as the "narcissism of small differences" within a clique looms large, and the dubious shared assumptions fade from notice; realism is weakened by more and more preposterous announcements of supposedly stunning breakthroughs; independence, consideration, and courage are weakened with every small compromise to careerism. And as time passes, the erosion feeds on itself, and the pace of decline quickens.

"One sign that the valuation of the contemplative life has declined is that scholars now compete with men of action in a kind of precipitate pleasure, so that they seem to value this kind of pleasure more highly than that to which they are really entitled and which is in fact more pleasurable."[2] Thus Nietzsche, more than a century ago; "agitation is growing so great that higher culture can no longer allow its fruits to mature; .... as though the seasons were following upon one another too quickly."[3] This is just what is happening before our eyes.

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1. "Why are some young faculty so *arrogant* and so *rude*?" a friend once asked me (the same friend who described out profession as "in a nose-dive"). In part, I'm afraid, at least sometimes, because their graduate training inflates their self-esteem but undermines their self-respect, encouraging precisely this.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878), trans. Marion Faber (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), §284.

3. *Id*., §285.

I foresee three objections: that I have somehow missed the point that the new academic environment provides incentives to hard work; that my approach is unrealistic, not to say hopelessly quixotic; that I am blind to the virtue of loyalty. I will take these in turn.

What I have been presenting as an environment increasingly inhospitable to the real academic virtues, it may be said, in fact provides —indeed, it is *designed* to provide— incentives to hard work. This is true. So I need to add that when the academic virtues I have identified work together, all is well; but when judgment, realism, integrity, and independence have been sacrificed, and industry and patience are focused on the wrong ends, this makes matters not better, but worse. (A hard-working safe-cracker or hit-man, after all, is a worse menace than a lazy one.)

But this reply will probably prompt a second objection: that my conception of "right ends" is hopelessly old-fangled and idealistic. "It's time to stop complaining that the environment is getting less and less hospitable to making buggy-whips responsibly and well,"[1] some might say, "and to get with the new program." My first response is to insist that genuinely educating our students, making genuine intellectual progress, however slow and halting, and doing whatever we can to make our program or institution genuinely better, is honorable work; but that playing the game of grantsmanship, publishing for the sake of building your résumé, or "promoting your department" (or your institution, or your area, or your line) simply because it is yours, is not.

Some might reply to this reply that advertising the wonderfulness of your department, even if at present this wonderfulness is in large part wishful thinking, *is* a genuinely good thing —a way of making your department genuinely better; after all, if you succeed, better graduate students will apply, and then the department might actually *be* a bit better. I have my doubts about the premise; exaggerated advertising is more likely, I fear, to attract the credulous than the capable.[2] In any case—even supposing, for the sake of argument, that the hope that better students will apply is well-founded—the argument for the sake of which we are assuming that they will is so vividly reminiscent of the rationale those Enron executives (remember them?) offered for *their* deceptions that it scarcely deserves an answer.

Others may accuse me of a failure to appreciate the value of loyalty, of "team spirit." My reply has to be that there's loyalty, and then there's loyalty. It's true, I don't put much stock in the relentless enthusiasm of a university president or provost for his institution, a dean for his school, or a chair for his department—the kind of loyalty (or "loyalty") that would readily be transferred to his new institution should he move elsewhere. And I don't put much stock, either, in loyalty to "the profession"; at least, not if what that is means circling the wagons of the neo-analytic professional-philosophy establishment against would-be philosophers in the literature departments

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1. I can just imagine the cartoons of myself as a happy dinosaur, busily crocheting buggy-whips!

2."The credulous man is father to the liar and the cheat," writes W. K. Clifford in "The Ethics of Belief" (n.22), p.77.

and other threatening outsiders.[1] What *I* value is the serious professor's loyalty to the worthwhile work with which he is charged.

Sadly, many of these loyal servants of the life of the mind will face painful moral dilemmas if their university, school, or department —or their profession generally— begins to forget its real mission. (Should I embroider my letter of reference for a new Ph.D. a little, given that others will certainly exaggerate theirs, or risk jeopardizing his prospects by writing realistically? Should I focus a graduate course on fashionable recent literature, as others will, or risk making students less employable by focusing on more durable but less trendy work? Should I advise a talented and idealistic student aiming for graduate school to apply to the prestigious department where he might become one of those up-and-coming somebodies that everyone's trying to hire, or to another where he would get a better foundation for a lifetime's useful work, but risk finding no job at all? Etc., etc.) Too often, such painful dilemmas are the price of caring about the work we do.

And now, I suppose, some will accuse me of simply falling back on my old-fashioned, idealistic conception of what our real work is. (How ironic, I note in passing, that "idealistic" is now a term of censure!) To this I can only reply that *no* enterprise—not even a public-relations firm or advertising agency—can be in the business simply of promoting itself; someone actually has to produce the goods or services being promoted. In the academy, that's our job.

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1. I would feel differently, to be sure, if I believed that "the profession" served an important function as bulwark against anti-intellectualist currents in the larger society. But I'm afraid I don't.

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