

10 Philosophy Departments Reinvent Themselves: An Essay and a Story

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Abstract: First I argue that there is always a comical distance between the ideals of education and our human-all-too-human attempts to realize these ideals, and that specifically within the field of philosophical education this space is filled with comedy generated by philosophy professors, since all of us (myself included) are sophists. By analyzing the comedy that philosophy professors unfailingly create we can gain a deeper understanding of how to make philosophical education work better, and therefore it is a good and noble thing to write funny stories about philosophy professors. I then present one such story, which concerns some of the many ways that philosophy professors and philosophy departments have tried to reinvent themselves in order to prevent their greatest fear from being realized: a future when no students whatsoever will want to listen to them profess.

1-sentence description: An argument for the educational value of funny stories about philosophy professors in general, followed by a particular funny story about philosophy professors trying to reinvent their ancient discipline in order to make it attractive to 21st century college students.

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First, an Unnecessary and Very Disappointing Introduction: Why Teaching Philosophy at a University Is an Essentially Comical Business, and What We Can Learn from Analyzing this Comic Enterprise

What you are now reading is a rather long argumentative introduction to a rather short story, which seems like a rather bad idea. First of all, does any story need a philosophical introduction to argue for its legitimacy? Not if the story is any good; so apparently this story is not any good; therefore there's no point in reading either the introduction

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or the story and you should stop right now. Secondly, it is the first rule of good writing that the author should not lecture the reader on the meaning of the text, so how can this introduction possibly be excused?

I have 3 excuses: (1) That rule doesn't apply to me because I am not a good writer. (2) Since I am a philosophy professor I can't resist giving pedantic and completely unnecessary arguments to defend even something as innocent and trifling as a silly short story. I cannot be blamed for this inability to control myself. (3) What you are reading isn't really an introduction, it's an anti-introduction, as I will explain very soon. Having made all of my excuses, I'll now continue with the introduction.

There is nothing more important to the human race than education. It is the only advantage we have over other animals. As Jaron Lanier (in his book *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*, Vintage, 2011, 188-189) points out, if humans did not take time to educate each new generation there is every reason to believe that other animals with neural systems far superior to our own, such as cephalopods, would be running the planet, and we would be their pets. Given the importance of education in human life it is astounding how bad we are at it. So much of what we call education is actually just a show, a performance with no other goal than to create the appearance of education. The concept of compulsory education, for example, in practice simply means this: everyone is required to appear to be getting an education from ages 5 – 16 (or perhaps 17 or 18 depending on where you live). Appearing to get an education requires you to be physically present in a school building for a certain number of hours every day, and the police are authorized to prevent you from leaving the school building and also to come to your house and arrest you if you are not in the school building: so in this respect schools are not meaningfully different from prisons. Obviously no one can be compelled to learn at any age, they can only be compelled to appear to learn. Compulsory education, enforced by the machinery of the state, distorts this fundamental fact about learning, and this is just one example of how we are not particularly good at education in spite of how supremely important it is for the human race.

The fact that we are not very good at the thing that is most important and most valuable for us is comical. This comedy is due to the incongruity of our ideals and our actions. Education is in principle an extremely idealistic enterprise, perhaps the most idealistic thing that we do, and within the extremely idealistic field of education

philosophical education is perhaps the most idealistic activity of all. The idea that every generation has the responsibility to preserve everything humanity has learned so far about the philosophical dimensions of human life, every important idea humans have had about the ultimate nature of reality, knowledge and values, and to pass those along to the next generation is incredibly noble and perhaps the closest we ever come to being selfless and altruistic creatures. The practice of philosophical education, however, always falls far short—comically short—of that ideal. The distance between the noble ideal of philosophical education and the human, all-too-human, practice of teaching philosophy creates a space of incongruity that is by nature comical. The short story that follows this anti-introduction is situated in this space.

All the comedy that is generated within this space is generated by philosophy professors. Everyone knows that philosophy professors are extremely easy to laugh at. I am a philosophy professor and I am well aware of how ridiculous I am. Students like to say that certain philosophy professors love the sound of their own voice. They intend this as a criticism, but actually it is just a completely obvious statement of fact. All philosophy professors, without exception, love the sound of their own voice. Can you imagine what a torture it would be if a philosophy professor didn't love to hear himself talk? That would be like a truck driver who disliked driving trucks. The job of a philosophy professor is to profess—to keep on talking until the class is over—and then to do it again in the next class, and the next class after that. It's a job, just like driving trucks. And this is why all philosophy professors are funny: because they have turned teaching philosophy into a job, into a profession. The gap between the ideal theory of teaching philosophy and its less than ideal practice as a profession is plainly visible. To do something very noble, such as passing on to the next generation of humans all the philosophical insights that humanity has gained so far—but to do it as a job, and to insist on getting paid for it—that is incongruent and therefore hilarious. Every philosophy professor is the living, breathing, walking, talking (always talking) embodiment of this comic incongruity, and that's why all philosophy professors without exception are hilarious.

Socrates was the first to recognize this comic incongruity, and to mock it mercilessly. The targets of his ridicule were the sophists. "Sophist" and "sophistry" come from the Greek word *sophia* which just means "wisdom," so when the ancient Greeks called someone a

sophist it was intended as praise. Today “sophistry” has taken on a decidedly shameful meaning (and this is entirely due to the effectiveness of Socrates’ derision), so no philosophy professor would ever call himself a sophist, but in fact all of us undeniably are sophists. The most fundamental fact of sophistry, which is the focus of all of Socrates’ sarcasm, is this simple fact: sophists want to get paid to share their *sophia*. Socrates, on the other hand, went to work every day trying to teach the people of Athens but never asked to be paid for this work. Socrates was a philosophy teacher because he was convinced that the gods wanted him to be a philosophy teacher, and he was still getting out of bed and going to work every morning at age 71 even though almost everyone in Athens found his teaching to be extremely annoying and wanted him to stop.

In 399 BCE the Athenians decided that since no one was paying Socrates to teach philosophy, and therefore he couldn’t be fired, the only way to get him to stop was to charge him with a crime. The charges were: “Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others” (Plato, *Apology* 19c). Clearly it was only the third charge that mattered. No one would have cared if 71 year-old Socrates had busied himself studying things in the sky and below the earth and making the worse argument into the stronger if he had just kept it to himself. What the Athenians found unendurable was the fact that Socrates refused to stop trying to teach them philosophy—he refused to retire from what they considered to be a job. In his trial Socrates explained that he couldn’t retire because he actually didn’t have a job. He was a philosophy teacher, and that was a vocation—a calling from the gods—not a paid profession. “[I]f you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach people and charge a fee for it, that is not true,” he insisted (Ibid. 19e), and he went on to explain that the only way the Athenians could get him to stop teaching philosophy would be to put him to death; so that’s what they did.

The execution of Socrates made him a hero forever, a martyr for the cause of teaching philosophy, but it inspired exactly no one to follow his example. Even Plato, who reported all the noble arguments that Socrates gave for teaching-philosophy-until-you-die-without-ever-getting-paid-even-one-drachma, and who called Socrates “a man who, we would say, was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright” (*Phaedo* 118a), never considered the

possibility of teaching philosophy for free. Plato did just the opposite: he started the world's first university, thereby becoming the world's first university administrator. Plato created college. Plato clearly concluded that the Socratic ideal of teaching-philosophy-for-free-until-people-can't-stand-it-any-longer-and-decide-to-execute-you was more idealism than even he could stand, so he decided to throw his lot in with the sophists and find a way to teach philosophy and get paid at the same time. Plato turned teaching philosophy into a business, thereby creating the job of philosophy professor that sophists have held ever since.

There is nothing necessary about the fact that all philosophy professors have been sophists even since Plato created The Academy. This is not a logical, or epistemological, or moral necessity. It's simply the consequence of everyone considering what happened to Socrates and deciding they didn't want that to happen to them. The day Socrates was executed there was nothing he could say to Xanthippe when she asked him how she was going to take care of their 3 children now that he was about to die, leaving them with no money. All Socrates could do was ask one of his buddies to give her a ride home (*Phaedo* 60a). No teacher wants to die like that, leaving behind an angry spouse and three hungry children who need new shoes. Ever since Plato started offering philosophy teachers steady employment—with benefits—no philosophy teacher needed to sacrifice like Socrates did ever again. This created the career track that philosophy professors have followed ever since. Aristotle, for example, arrived as a student at Plato's Academy and quickly decided he never wanted to leave, so when he graduated he got a job as a philosophy professor so that he could stay at The Academy, and when he eventually got fired from that job he created his own university so that he could once again get paid to teach philosophy.

The path that Aristotle blazed is the one that I too followed, and that every philosophy professor since has followed: go to college; decide it's awesome and you never want to leave; become a philosophy professor yourself so that you can get paid to teach philosophy; enjoy all the money you get paid for being a sophist; do not suffer through life being an unpaid teacher and end up getting executed; always have plenty of money to buy your kids shoes and make your spouse very happy and grateful that she married someone with such an excellent, stable job; do not die from drinking poison; instead live to a ripe old

age and enjoy the thanks of a grateful nation during a long retirement, which will be well-funded by your TIAA(-CREF) pension.

The best way to make the best of this less than ideal reality—the fact that every philosophy professor on earth is a sophist—is to look the comedy of this situation right in the eye. In other words, what is needed is more funny stories about philosophy professors. That is why I have selflessly and very nobly devoted myself to this very important work. I believe this can be understood as a philosophical project. Looking back on the years I've spent studying the history of philosophy it's obvious to me that the authors and texts I have learned the most from by far have been those that are not allergic to humor. Every classic text in the history of philosophy is worth studying even if it contains no comedy at all, but those that do manage to integrate comedy and logical argument are the most effective. In these texts the distance between literature and philosophy is minimal, if it exists at all; the texts don't really care about respecting that distinction or those boundaries.

To sum up the argument of this unnecessary and very disappointing anti-introduction:

(1) Nothing matters more to humanity than education, and therefore nothing is more serious; but because the distance between the ideals and the actuality of education is so vast, especially when it comes to philosophical education, philosophical education is quite possibly the best scenario ever devised to generate comedy: it is a perfect comedy generating machine.

(2) In the case of philosophical education all of the comedy is generated by philosophy professors because they are all sophists and all sophists are ridiculous.

(3) I too am a philosophy professor, therefore I too am ridiculous. Any funny story about a philosophy professor that I write is a story about me. It is a confession of my own limits, my own stupidity, and my own failure to attain the high ideals of philosophical education. But I still believe in those high ideals and I still want to contribute to that project, which is all that separates us from the cephalopods. I believe that one of the best ways to illuminate the distance between our ideals and our accomplishments in philosophical education is by shining a comic light on the distance that separates them, and thereby take its measure more completely. The more we can laugh at the serious work of trying to teach philosophy the better we will understand it, and the better we will be able to do it.

All that remains in this anti-introduction is for me to explain how this is (or was) an anti-introduction, which at the beginning I promised to do “very soon.” That promise proved to be inaccurate, since waiting until the last possible moment can hardly be described as “very soon.” Nevertheless here at last is the explanation. This was an anti-introduction in at least 3 different ways:

(1) It broke all the rules of a good introduction. It was verbose rather than succinct; pedantic rather than plain-spoken and down-to-earth; obscure rather than clear. It was in every way badly written, and therefore an offense and an abomination to introductions everywhere.

(2) It didn’t make any effort to introduce the story that follows. In fact it didn’t say one word about that story, or even mention its title. If I promise to introduce you to an acquaintance but when that acquaintance arrives I instead just rant and rave about 15 other things that happen to be on my mind and don’t even mention your name, you would rightly think that I had failed to do the one thing I promised to do.

(3) At the very least, the primary purpose of an introduction is to seduce you to read the thing that it claims to introduce—to persuade you to keep on reading. But this introduction has clearly failed in that regard. Instead of persuading it has repelled, and absolutely nothing about this introduction has been seductive. If you have read this far you probably regret it.

But if you are still reading, in spite of all the excellent reasons you had to stop long ago, here at last is the story.

10 Philosophy Departments Reinvent Themselves

Almost every morning somewhere in the world a philosophy professor wakes up from the same terrifying dream. A few of the particular details of this dream may vary but the basic plot is always the same.

It begins with the professor dreaming happily of readying a class for the upcoming semester, confident that he has thought of everything this time and therefore the class will be perfect. The syllabus has been revised and another 15 rules have been added to preempt all the disasters that occurred last semester, bringing the grand total of accumulated rules to well over 100. (Rules are always added in response to the disasters that occurred in the previous semester, and once a rule has been added to the syllabus it never gets removed since that would invite a repeat disaster, so the rules pile on top of each other with each new iteration of the ever-lengthening syllabus like layers of

slowly falling sediment on the floor of some ancient sea.) Every class period has been meticulously planned, every reading, every lecture, every assignment—even the hilarious jokes that he will tell at just the right moment in his lectures, which the students will certainly regard as proof of his spontaneous and youthful wit, reminding them all of how much they admire him. “He really is both incredibly smart and incredibly funny” they will say to each other as they exit the class together, filled with intellectual camaraderie and the love of learning—“and funny in a fresh and youthful way; not at all in a tired, eye-rolling dad joke way. He’s more of a brofessor than a professor; truly our respect and admiration for him know no bounds!” The dreaming philosophy professor is in a nearly rapturous state as he contemplates his upcoming class, convinced that this semester—at last—his courses will run like well-oiled machines from beginning to end, and that instead of his students very obviously loathing him at the end of their 15 weeks together this time they will all develop a deep and abiding and perfectly appropriate relationship of academic friendship and even love—and all because he is such an excellent and extraordinary teacher. This is part one of the dream, which is always sublime.

In part two of the dream the professor’s rapture is replaced by sheer horror. It begins when he walks into the classroom on the first day of the semester and finds that there is no one there—not a single soul to appreciate the class that he sculpted so lovingly into such a beautiful work of art. This is the realization of every professor’s greatest fear and deepest insecurity: that someday no one will want to listen to him profess. An empty classroom on the first day of the semester is all it takes to turn his rapturous dream into a terrifying nightmare. Or perhaps—to add an extra layer of cruelty to the professor’s nightmare—he may dream that when he walks into the classroom there are a handful of students, looking deeply confused, who ask what class this is, and when he tells them that it is a philosophy class they run screaming to the door as if *their* greatest fear had just been realized. Either way the professor finds himself at the end of his dream confronting the thing that he dreads most of all: a totally empty classroom.

What happens next after the philosophy professor wakes up from this nightmare is inevitable. He rushes to campus, calls an emergency department meeting, and tells his colleagues: “A horrible vision has been revealed to me! In the future no one wants to take any of our classes! I saw a future in which there are no students waiting for us on

the first day of the semester, no one who wants to listen to us share our prodigious learning and wisdom. It was utterly terrifying. We must immediately reinvent ourselves as a philosophy department or we will soon become extinct!”

An *ad hoc* committee is quickly organized to investigate the professor’s nightmare. The committee returns in a week to report these startling results: (1) Enrollment in philosophy classes has steadily declined over the past 30 years, and again if the current trend line continues unabated it will soon reach zero. (2) If current enrollment trends continue, within a few years college students will be taking nothing but courses in communication, psychology, computer science, marketing, and homeland security. (3) On end of semester course evaluations the most common answer that students gave to the question, “Why did you take this class?” was, “Because I had to,” and the most common answer to the question, “How could this class be improved?” was some variation of “Stop teaching philosophy.”

This evidence persuades everyone in the department that the professor’s nightmare was indeed prophetic, and that they must now—approximately 2,600 years after philosophy began—reinvent it, or else they are all doomed. This much is perfectly clear. However it’s not at all clear what it means to reinvent philosophy, and this is itself a philosophical problem, so every philosophy department that has tried to reinvent itself (which, by now, is all of them, without exception) has done it differently. Here are ten examples.

1

One philosophy department, which was composed entirely of faculty who wanted to get a better job at a more famous and prestigious university, and who therefore had developed the habit of reflexively mining every situation they find themselves in for a possible philosophy paper that would make them hot commodities in the philosophy job market, immediately sensed that a new area of philosophical research had just been revealed to them: the philosophy of philosophy departments. They all had this idea simultaneously but they did not say a word about it to each other; instead they all scurried back to their offices to begin writing papers on this topic before someone else got to it first. The project of reinventing the philosophy department where they were currently employed (and they all hoped, not for long) became entirely a research project, and everyone in the department immediately became single-mindedly specialized in the

philosophy of philosophy departments. They continued to teach their classes, since unfortunately that was contractually required, but all of their classes, regardless of the title of the class or the ostensive topic, become classes about the philosophy of philosophy departments. Students, who were already quite unhappy and confused in their classes, became even more so, but the professors were undeterred and pressed forward steadfastly with their research.

At the end of the semester, which passed in a frenzied blur for the professors but seemed like an endless death march to their students, the professors all sent their finished papers off to prestigious philosophy journals and anxiously prepared themselves for the many job offers which were bound to follow. All of their papers had the same title—“The Philosophy of Philosophy Departments: A Ground-Breaking New Field of Philosophical Research That Has Been Ignored Until Now”—and all of them were accepted for publication and appeared in print at roughly the same time. Initially this caused some confusion and consternation among the faculty in the department, but they soon stopped caring because they were in fact all offered new jobs at more famous and prestigious universities; so they all departed to assume endowed chairs in the hot new field of the philosophy of philosophy departments, which they had created. The university that had previously employed them saw this as the perfect opportunity to close its philosophy department entirely, thus solving the problem of decreasing enrollment in philosophy classes decisively.

2

Another philosophy department decided that their future depended on connecting philosophy to popular culture. They quickly replaced their entire curriculum with “Philosophy and ___” classes where the “and ___” is occupied by whatever happens to be popular and selling well at the time. All of their boring old courses in logic, metaphysics, and the history of philosophy were thrown out and replaced with much more exciting classes such as these: Philosophy and Tik Tok; Philosophy and The Masked Singer; Philosophy and Lady Gaga; Philosophy and the Kardashians; Philosophy and Instagram; Philosophy and The Lego Movies; Philosophy and Grinder; Philosophy and The Bachelor; Philosophy and Sponge Bob Square Pants; Philosophy and Game of Thrones; Philosophy and Fortnite; Philosophy and Pokemon; Philosophy and Etsy; etc.

This department quickly discovered that the half-life of popular culture is extremely short when no one at all showed up for the Philosophy and Lady Gaga class they offered, and while the Philosophy and Fortnite class was very popular the first time they offered it when they scheduled the class the following semester it too attracted no students at all. So they hired several work study students to keep them informed on what was currently popular among college students, but this only confirmed their worst suspicions because the work study students revised their lists of popular things sometimes on a daily basis. The faculty, therefore, felt like they were always behind the times, always chasing a pop culture caravan that they would never be able to catch. They did not give up, however, diligently creating new “Philosophy and ___” courses every semester, and sometimes revising a course multiple times within the same semester so that a class that began the semester as “Philosophy and Facebook” might morph into “Philosophy and Spider Man” and then finally “Philosophy and Pokemon Go.”

Through their relentless revisions the professors in this department did manage to keep philosophy fresh and young and hip, but they become so harried and anxious and exhausted in the process that while their courses remained eternally young and fresh the professors teaching these classes visibly aged before everyone’s eyes. Soon they all died *en masse* of exhaustion and stress, and the university administration instructed the campus police to cordon off the department office until they could investigate what killed all of their philosophy professors. They did this in a great show of sympathy and solidarity with their fallen comrades, but at the same time they also seized the opportunity to suspend all philosophy classes with no intention of ever restarting them in the future, which is something they had wanted to do for years. The fact that philosophy had literally killed an entire department full of professors only confirmed their suspicion that it is highly dangerous and best avoided.

3

Another philosophy department decided that the way to make philosophy popular is to kill philosophy. They came to this conclusion after taking seriously the suggestion from students, which was consistently repeated on end of semester course evaluations, that the best way to improve this philosophy class would be to “Stop teaching philosophy.” So this department decided to reinvent itself as the

Department of Anti-Philosophy. All of their classes were revised to focus on what was wrong with philosophy, how philosophy was a disease, and how philosophy deserved to die. This proved to be quite a popular approach, and their classes attracted many students who had taken philosophy classes in the past and didn't like them, which was quite a few students.

But then a clever undergraduate pointed out that even arguments against philosophy can't help but be philosophical arguments, so the Department of Anti-Philosophy might as well rename itself the Department of Anti-Anti-Philosophy. All the anti-philosophy professors in the Department of Anti-Philosophy agreed that the logic of this argument was flawless, and so they changed their name one more time to the Department of Anti-Anti-Philosophy.

The Department of Anti-Anti-Philosophy proved to be even more successful than the Department of Anti-Philosophy. Students flocked to Anti-Anti-Philosophy classes because they assumed it must be some kind of postmodern performance art or hipster irony and they didn't want to miss the chance to receive college credit for witnessing what must be a fresh and hot new thing. Since all the professors in the Department of Anti-Anti-Philosophy were required to take at least one formal logic class in grad school they knew that any doubly-negated proposition is equivalent to a non-negated proposition, so they now felt comfortable just teaching philosophy again, just as they did before they became the Department of Anti-Philosophy. Their classes remained very popular, however, because students who registered for an Anti-Anti-Philosophy class expecting to witness avant-garde art were unwilling to confess publicly that they didn't get it when the class turned out to be about Leibniz or business ethics; and so after taking an Anti-Anti-Philosophy class students would tell everyone who asked that it was deep and profound and of course they totally got it.

4

Another department decided to kill philosophy in a more literal and dramatic fashion: with a public execution. They decided that the best way to do this was to recreate the death of Socrates with a professor playing the part of Socrates drinking actual hemlock and expiring in front of an ancient philosophy class that had just read Plato's *Phaedo*. All the tenured professors agreed that tenure obviously includes protection against death by hemlock, and therefore it was only rational that the one and only untenured professor in the department should be

the one to play the part of Socrates; and this assistant professor confessed that this was both a valid and a sound argument so he had no choice but to drink hemlock and die.

The department's plan was to kill philosophy once and for all by killing Socrates one more time, and this time making sure that philosophy stayed dead by immediately canceling all future philosophy classes and closing the department. The remaining, non-hemlock-drinking professors were content with this plan because they all planned to go home afterward and write a book called "Killing Socrates: This Time We Really Got Him," which they fully expected to be a best seller that would provide them with a comfortable retirement. But to their surprise immediately after their young untenured colleague drank the hemlock and died—to spectacular applause—students surrounded the remaining faculty and demanded to be registered in whatever philosophy classes were available next semester. The students did this because they truly enjoyed watching a professor die and considered it the highlight of their college experience, but the philosophy professors—blinded by their own vanity—imagined that the students were thirsty for the wisdom they had to impart. So the department decided to stay in business after all and their classes were well-enrolled from that point on, buoyed by the hope that still flourishes among students at this university that if they take a philosophy class they may get to watch a professor drink poison and die right before their eyes.

5

Another philosophy department decided that the appropriate response to their declining enrollments was to argue stridently that everyone else was wrong: every other department that was attracting students was wrong—and also immoral—because of the damage they were causing to philosophy by being successful departments that are not philosophy departments. These other departments should have realized that since philosophy is the oldest and most distinguished discipline it must be respected and honored by all the other younger and less distinguished disciplines, like an aged grandparent should be honored and respected by his many grandchildren. All of these departments, they argued, should immediately apologize, and stop being successful, because it is everyone else's duty to make sure that philosophy flourishes.

The department quickly drafted a manifesto to this effect, finding it very easy to write since the arguments were self-evident, and they sent this manifesto via email to every department and every administrator on campus. When they received no response to this email they dispatched their work study student to nail a copy of the manifesto to every department's door. The professors in this department also carried a copy of the manifesto with them at all times and read some of their favorite passages from the text at every faculty meeting, party, or chance encounter from that moment on, which made them even more unpopular than they already were. The manifesto made them feel confident and even proud of their superiority as a department, and when the number of students in their classes continued to decline every semester this only served as more evidence in support of the impeccable logic of their argument, so it added to their feeling of satisfaction.

6

Another philosophy department decided to purify their curriculum of any authors who had ever harbored any beliefs or attitudes that were less than enlightened with regard to women, children, people of color, non-European countries, animals, plants, colonialism, religion, war, art, or culture. They carried out this purification with gusto, and quickly realized that the only authors still available for class readings were Hypatia and Mary Wollstonecraft. They did not let this deter them, however. They revamped all of their courses, building every class—from logic to metaphysics to business ethics—around readings exclusively from Hypatia and Mary Wollstonecraft. In practice this meant that there were often very few readings, or even none at all (in a class on 19th century German idealism, for example), and really only in the feminist philosophy class was there any significant assigned reading; so students avoided the feminist philosophy class and instead flocked enthusiastically to classes where the professor was compelled to do imaginative re-enactments of what Hypatia or Mary Wollstonecraft might have said about the topic if they had ever given it any thought, such as classes on the ethics of engineering or computer science. Buoyed by high demand for these classes the department flourished.

7

Another department decided that they must begin their project of reinvention by first answering the question, “What is it that 18-22 year-olds want?” Most of the professors in this department did not have any children of their own since they long ago concluded that their chosen career—teaching other people’s children—was so demanding that it obviously left them with no time to have children of their own. (Also they didn’t particularly like children.) There was only one professor in the department who had a son who was 18; not yet in college but close enough. This professor was tasked with doing an intensive study of his son and reporting back to the department what 18-22 year-olds want. The professor’s 18 year-old son had not spoken to him for several years, other than an occasional grunt or snarl (if such could in fact be called speaking—an interesting question in the philosophy of language that the professor intended to explore in his next paper), and the professor himself had long ago given up on saying anything other than “Hello!” and “Goodbye!” to his son, always in the most enthusiastic voice possible, since any other attempt to converse with him only seemed to provoke murderous rage; but the professor felt that the lack of any meaningful relationship between him and his son was a good thing because it made his research more objective, and the department agreed.

After one week of warily observing his 18-year-old son at a distance, which was in fact the normal state of affairs at his house, the professor reported back to the department that he had gathered significant data, all pointing to a single decisive result: what 18-22 year-olds want is to stare endlessly at whatever is on the tiny screen of their phones. There appeared to be no limit to their willingness—indeed their intense desire—to keep their gaze and their attention firmly focused on anything that appeared on the screens of their phones. Therefore, the professor who had conducted this ground-breaking research explained, the solution to the Department’s problem is self-evident: all they have to do is make all of their classes appear on the screens of their students’ phones. They didn’t need to change anything about the content of their classes (the substance of those classes, as Aristotle would say), they only needed to change their appearance (the form of those classes, as Aristotle would say). More specifically they needed to make all of their classes appear upon the tiny screens of their students’ phones.

All the professors in the department quickly agreed that the best way to accomplish this would be to ask the university's massive IT department—which seemed to have unlimited resources and was always more than willing to throw an enormous pile of money and technology at any pedagogical problem, since they believed that every pedagogical problem could and should be solved with technology—to construct a broadcast booth in all of the classrooms where the department held classes and staff that booth with a camera operator and also someone to run the control room. The professor would then enter the classroom, perhaps tip his hat to the assembled students, and then enter the broadcast booth that now occupied all the space at the front of the classroom where the chalkboard used to be. The professor would then proceed to lecture on Plato's theory of idealism, or Aristotle's 4 causes, or Descartes' arguments for rationalism, or Kant's theory of the categorical imperative, or whatever they were going to lecture on anyway, because the content of their classes did not change at all; but now the professor's lecture was captured on video camera and broadcast to the screens of the students' phones via a dedicated YouTube channel. The IT Department agreed immediately to build and staff these broadcast booths; the professors loved the arrangement because now they could simply talk nonstop for 75 minutes, entertaining themselves with their witty and insightful lectures and feeling no obligation to interact with the students or even make eye contact with them, which is the kind of teaching they definitely preferred; and the students came flocking back to philosophy classes.

It was clearly stated in the syllabus for each class that students were required and indeed expected to watch only their professor's lecture during their class periods, and every student earnestly promised to do so. One professor felt some concern when, after her course on modern philosophy which included at least 9 truly excellent lectures on Kant's 3 *Critiques*, most of the students could not answer even one question on the final exam about who Kant was, and the one answer from a student which did make some sense seemed to be a verbatim repetition of a video the professor found on YouTube called "Kant in 3 Minutes." But she dismissed these concerns when she reminded herself that enrollment in her department had soared and how even Kant would surely appreciate that every Copernican revolution in philosophy necessarily brings with it some growing pains.

8

Another philosophy department decided that if they did not have any shame at all (which they did not), they could make their enrollments soar simply by taking advantage of something that every college professor figured out long ago, probably on the first day of their first semester: students will flock to any class that involves watching movies or TV shows. What this meant, effectively, is that they would transform their department into the department of watching movies and TV shows, but they were fine with that because, as I mentioned, they really didn't have any shame. So they hastily printed large posters explaining that in all of their classes next semester, from introduction to philosophy to advanced meta-ethics, students would watch the following movies and TV shows (which were then listed in great detail, and at such length that prospective students quickly deduced that nothing else would be happening in these classes except watching movies and TV shows; and they were correct). The curriculum for a class on Hegel, for example, consisted of watching every episode of all 5 seasons of *Breaking Bad*, and after every episode the professor would call out to the students—as they were rushing out of the classroom and completely ignoring her, high-fiving each other and celebrating their enormous good fortune because that had found a way to get college credit for watching TV—“What we watched today was closely connected with Hegel’s philosophy....” But no one heard her because they had long ago stopped paying attention to the person who showed up every day to turn the TV on and off, and in fact they weren't even sure who she was.

This reinvention of philosophy was hugely successful in terms of increasing enrollments, but it also had the effect of making philosophy itself completely irrelevant. After a few years even the professors in this department could not recall what “philosophy” meant. “Something about the love of wisdom,” they thought; “or maybe it was the love of movies and TV shows, we can't remember.”

9

Another philosophy department decided that the key to reversing their enrollment decline was to take advantage of the fact that studying philosophy has always been used by undergraduates to frighten and anger their parents. “We know that at least half of our current students are studying philosophy just because it makes their parents profoundly unhappy,” they said to each other, “and we got those numbers without

any marketing campaign—these students figured out completely on their own that taking philosophy classes is the single best way to make their parents miserable. If we actively market philosophy as a way to get even with Mom and Dad we can easily triple those numbers.” So the department created a marketing campaign focused completely on the fact that taking philosophy classes—or even better, majoring in philosophy—will make your parents furious. The posters featured pictures of fathers red in the face and pulling out their hair, while in the background a mother wept in obvious despair. “Want to settle a score with your parents?” the caption asked. “Then take philosophy classes and soon your parents will be deeply unhappy!” Everyone in the department agreed that this marketing campaign was shameful and profoundly unethical, which is why they were confident that it would be highly effective.

And it was highly effective. Philosophy classes were soon completely full of angry students intent on making their parents regret paying for their college education, and professors discovered that their students seemed to love their classes the most whenever they emphasized the uselessness of philosophy, so they began to do that a lot. It soon became a very safe bet that any student taking a philosophy class had some serious parental issues that were far from resolved; and every day the philosophy faculty gave thanks to the United States Congress for creating the FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) statute which makes it not just optional but actually ILLEGAL to speak to parents if they happen to call and ask why the hell the Philosophy Department was practically begging students to persecute their own parents.

10

Another philosophy department decided that there was no reason to think of philosophy as merely a way to exact revenge upon your parents; really philosophy is a form of revenge against the entire world, so they decided to focus on this fact in their marketing. If you study philosophy, they reasoned, and especially if you major in philosophy, you will offend almost everyone in the world, and this is very easy to demonstrate: just notice that when you tell someone that you’re studying philosophy you will instantly provoke this angry response: “What are you going to do with that?” You will spend the rest of your life responding to that question. Even after you have been employed for decades, perhaps even as a philosophy professor, people

will still ask you, “What are you going to do with that?” There’s no other subject you can study that will provoke this sort of angry, reflexive response, as if you had just punched someone right in the liver. You could see this as something negative, because perhaps you don’t want to spend the rest of your life making people angry or offended; but on the other hand just think of the power this gives you over the world! All you have to do is take an interest in understanding the nature of this very strange world that we all fell into, and this will offend most people more than if you decided to spend the rest of your life standing completely naked on a busy street corner shouting insults at everyone who passes by. That sort of behavior would only provoke laughter, but daring to ask questions about the true nature of reality, knowledge and values will make most people feel deeply and personally offended.

However there will always be a small and perverse band of humans who delight in doing this, so this philosophy department decided to market itself explicitly to those weirdos. When it did this, it attracted just enough students to muddle on, and so the study of philosophy survived for one more generation.