

Philosophy Without Borders

An essay about real philosophy by Robert Whyte, extending a conversation between Robert Whyte, Robert Hanna and Carlo Cellucci

PHILOSOPHY CAUSES TROUBLE. It makes people want to think for themselves, and even worse, teaches them how to do it. We have to kill it! Let's fill its mouth with salt, sew its lips together, put a stake through its heart and bury it deep in the earth, beyond all human reach.

Just kidding. Playing devil's advocate to get your attention. Did it work?

The reality is, you can't kill philosophy. You couldn't even if you wanted to and we hope that's not the case, despite human history being strewn with attempts to suppress free thinking. Philosophy is as natural to humans as breathing. It's the inevitable outcome of minded animals, including humans. It will keep popping up like the heads in a Whac-A-Mole.¹ So, we're stuck with it. But what is it good for?

We know it used to be:

- the primary source for *Life, a user's manual*, as opposed to religion, which is deeply flawed by being based in illusion and delusion;
- a big influence in Ancient Greece, Confucian China, Christian empires (with some sneaky contributors like St Augustine and Descartes) and, more importantly
- the driving force behind the Enlightenment when European and north American societies drifted away from religion and monarchies, towards science, democracy, parliaments and arguably embarking on a trend towards emancipatory freedom.

But what now?

The modern era, culminating in world wars obviously capable of destroying civilization altogether and rendering the planet unfit for human life, has been a *monster downer* and a *scary lesson*, scaring humanity so much that no further equally-catastrophic global conflicts have occurred for the last 74 years.

This *monster downer scary lesson* was odd, because in the modern era humanity was starting to get some glimpses of progress in many areas, including physics, medicine, sanitation, radio, television, movies, literacy, respect for minorities, respect for the environment, respect for women, abolition of slavery and respect for other races. It's true parts of the world altered their relationship with the biblical value system which for good or ill, was doing a lot of the heavy lifting in the ethics area.² At the same time the world also saw some unwelcome and perhaps too rapid developments in overpopulation, capitalism, individual and economic depressions, urbanization, warfare and genocide. There was, go figure, a widespread positive belief in the possibilities of technological and

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whac-A-Mole>

² Ethics (moral philosophy) is a branch of philosophy for understanding, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct and considering matters of value. Yes, philosophy is that important.

political progress. But if things were going so great, why all the fascism, totalitarianism and war?

Strangely, after a promising start, the last 74 years also saw decline in the prestige of ethics, philosophy and philosophers. Can you name a universally recognised contemporary philosopher? (No, John Lennon, Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell don't count.) The relevance and cut-through of philosophy has been going down the gurgler. Is there a correlation between the decline of philosophy and humans rushing to their doom down the climate plughole? Maybe, maybe not. But we're just sayin'... there has been a lot of misinformation, dithering and a clear lack of critical thinking, people.

In 2019, it's pretty obvious. In the grand scheme of things, philosophy is a non-starter. It is no longer a force for reason, sanity, or getting a handle on shit that actually makes sense. The reason for this, however, is not for the lack of philosophers. There are hundreds of thousands of them teaching at universities, more than all the philosophers prior to the twentieth century combined.

Why do we need philosophy now?

It is generally acknowledged we face a catastrophic global threat caused by out-of-control, overpopulated, competitive, selfish and sometimes just-unthinkingly-following-along humans. In other words, us. We are responsible for mass extinctions, global warming and all the sorts of world-fuckers you can imagine and some you can't. These creeping and possibly unstoppable changes will play out over the next 100 years, for bad or worse. The writing has been on the wall for so long it's getting faded. This threat is more than just the obvious threat itself, it's the rise of denialism, post-truth, fake news and false thinking which is really setting off alarm bells.

This essay is first and foremost an attempt to address these challenges and to argue that philosophy might be part of the answer.

Do humans have a rosy future?

Briefly, no. But you already know this. If things go on the way they are, we are going to be in a pretty pickle sooner than you can say global warming. However, this is a theoretical rather than direct threat for most people, in practice affecting only a few thousand people whose rooves blew off last week because of global-climate-change-induced severe weather³ and some rather unhappy folk on Pacific islands who are finding their idyllic island home is rapidly disappearing underwater.⁴

Nevertheless, it's a clear and menacing danger. In response, you would expect rational humans to say, whoa, that's really bad, we ought to do something about it. But no one really cares. At least not when our self-interest gets in the way. Perhaps with the exception of Greta Thunberg. But she's having a hard time actually convincing any people in charge, who seem to have more than a passing

³ As the world has warmed so have changes in extreme weather and climate events, with increases in prolonged periods of excessively high temperatures, heavy downpours, severe floods and droughts.
<https://nca2014.globalchange.gov/highlights/report-findings/extreme-weather>

⁴ Since 1900 sea levels have risen by about 20 cm, rapidly accelerating since 1993. Levels are conservatively predicted to rise by 120 cm by 2100, or by 240 cm if Antarctic ice melts are factored in. This acceleration is due mostly to human-caused global warming, which is driving thermal expansion of seawater and the melting of land-based ice sheets and glaciers.

interest in keeping things as they are, a system which is the product of global economics, profits and the concept of nation states which enshrines the right of countries (nation states) to go to hell in their own fashion, even if it destroys the whole planet.

Strictly speaking, the problem is soluble, by getting rid of the cause, which is humans. Yes, too many of us doing too much bad shit, of course, but also our wilful and absurd practical denial there is even a problem to begin with. We might pay lip service to action on climate change, but we aren't going to sacrifice anything for it. Go on, admit it, you're not doing anything. No-one is. Except Greta and her friends. You might be one of those, but the entire world-population of genuine Greta-friends amounts to only a vanishingly-small, ineffectual, brave but pathetic squeak from a far-away land.

What to do? Short of decreeing compulsory and immediate euthanasia for all humans on earth, which might seem to some of them a tad extreme, we can argue against climate denial and propose things to do about it. Why aren't we doing this already? Or at least, other than ineffectively.

Obviously⁵, each generation has challenges to meet. Distressingly, history has shown our first inclination is to avoid them. Is this because of the comfort in the old saying, better late than never? Is this why we need to see life-taking, body-maiming, freedom-crushing, baby-snatching, excruciatingly-painful in-your-face day-to-day horror before we do anything?

What crisis haven't we dealt with, eventually? Hitler and the Nazis? Ok we let that one go on a little too long. Stalin and the kill-the-peasants thing?⁶ The concept of allies got stretched a bit there, and yes Stalin was a big boo-boo, but he's gone now. Really, we are great when we put our minds to it. We'll leap into action to tackle this thing and whup its arse, you'll see. Any day now. Even the craziest denialist will be there re-refrigerating the polar icecaps after the first global famine makes life extremely unpleasant even in Wyoming. Yes, it will be late, but as the saying goes, better late than never.

But what if there is no difference between late and never?

Huh? No such thing! It's never too late.

Oh yeah? What if the lag between action and result gets so huge that when we start to act it is *already* too late? Can that happen? Oh yes, it already has. The much vaunted 350 parts per million upper limit of carbon dioxide was way back. We've passed 390 ppm and still rising fast. We're in the frying pan, the fire is right here and it's a big one. It's going to burn for decades. Harvard dude James Anderson⁷⁸ says this amount of atmospheric carbon hasn't been seen for 12 million years. We're being pushed into a new Eocene, with no ice on the poles, the ocean 10 degrees warmer than now, and no temperature gradient from the equator to the poles. "The chance that there will be any

⁵ If it was otherwise, we wouldn't encounter the problems, would we, because we wouldn't have any problems to deal with. La de dah de dah.

⁶ Stalin killed millions. A Stanford historian answers the question, was it genocide?
<https://news.stanford.edu/2010/09/23/naimark-stalin-genocide-092310/>

⁷ Not the English cricketer.

⁸ The Harvard dude <https://climatechange.environment.harvard.edu/james-anderson>

permanent ice left in the Arctic after 2022 is essentially zero,” Anderson said.⁹ 75 to 80 percent of permanent ice has already melted already in the last 35 years. The oceans will die, and the coral reefs will die first. We can see that happening already. Other parts of the oceans have also died.¹⁰ Those dead zones are expanding to kill one of the biggest biomasses on the planet, krill.¹¹ When they go it won’t be pretty and it will smell even worse.

If action were taken within the next five years, let’s say before 2025, it would need a WW2 scale global collaborative effort to take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and stop sunlight hitting the poles, to even have a chance of keeping the place habitable. After 2025, forget it. Even if we did take big action in time, the task requires getting the carbon footprint down to zero by 2040. That’s near impossible. Oh, we’ll try. After decades of denial and delay, we’ll have a good old British try. Say goodnight to Irene on your way out.

Is it really too late? Are we all doomed? In that case, what difference does it make? The answer is yes, it’s going to get ugly, but if we do something on a global scale by 2025, we can prevent most of the life-taking, body-maiming, freedom-crushing, baby-snatching, excruciatingly-painful in-your-face day-to-day horror.

Who knows about this? Why wasn’t I told?

Actually, you were. Everyone was. It’s common knowledge.¹²

All right, we’re fucked. So, apart from that, what’s the problem?

The real and very sinister problem is this is only one of many instances of concerted misinformation and spin campaigns at the highest levels, in favour of extremely powerful and wealthy vested interests, to deny a whole lot of bad shit so they can keep on doing what they are doing (the source of their vast power and wealth) long enough to see them out. These people are invariably over the age of 70, so they’ve got an average of 10 years to live. If they’re lucky, 20. Life expectancy for males in the UK and the US has actually dropped substantially in recent years. What do they care about 2040? Not a fig’s fart. It’s not their problem. It’s ours.

Do people have the ability to realise this? Maybe, but it isn’t easy when governments are in denial. And it is not easy if you haven’t got the skills for, and experience of, thinking for yourself, gathering the facts, knowing which are true and which are false, having the ability to analyse an argument and detect bullshit. Not to mention scientific literacy. You are going to have to know why things

⁹ <https://www.sciencetimes.com/articles/23104/20190703/only-5-years-to-save-the-world-from-climate-change-warns-harvard-scientist.htm>

¹⁰ Oceans suffocating as huge dead zones quadruple since 1950, scientists warn
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/04/oceans-suffocating-dead-zones-oxygen-starved>

¹¹ Most [Antarctic krill](#) are found in an area from the Weddell Sea to the waters around the Antarctic Peninsula, the finger of land that juts up toward South America. They serve as an important source of food for various species of whales, seals and penguins. While those animals find other food sources during lean years, it is unclear if those alternate sources are sustainable long-term. <https://www.climatecentral.org/news/climate-change-could-put-tiny-krill-at-risk-20641>

¹² This will be essential, they say, to save coral reefs worldwide from a catastrophic decline which threatens the livelihoods of an estimated 500 million people globally. <https://www.uq.edu.au/news/article/2009/11/scientists-call-urgent-global-cooling-save-coral-reefs>

grow and why they don't, what are pollutants and what aren't and how to do agriculture on a human rather than agrobusiness scale without blanket pesticides and dump-on fertilizers. You might even have to learn the names of two or three plants and animals. You are certainly going to have to know what carbon dioxide really is, why humans need vitamin C in their diet and why bicycles use less fossil fuel than 18-wheeler, long-haul trucks. You might already be very familiar with the word *extinction*, but what does it mean for you?

Yes, you are going to have to know all this because knowledge is critical for understanding. You might think, since you are part of the western world living in relatively good times with a stable democracy¹³ why would governments and business interests lie to you either by omission, or spin? News flash. Everybody lies.

What's philosophy got to do with it?

This is where philosophy comes in. Thinking for yourself and not accepting with blind faith, explanations for the world ranging from "trust me I'm a doctor" to "if you don't put money in my donation box you're going straight to hell on the express lift."

We expect to be told the truth. In case you haven't heard, this doesn't happen any more. We have post-truth. We need help. The philosopher knights in shining armour will come to our aid in these dark times, won't they?

And who might they be?

Those hundreds of thousands of philosophers you were talking about in universities.

Nope. Sorry. They are way too busy disagreeing with each other about a) what sort of philosophy they do and b) why the other types (they aren't doing) are rubbish. If you look up contemporary philosophy, you'll find it is characterised by 1) increasing professionalisation and 2) the rise of *analytic* and *continental* philosophy — which in turn led to the *analytic-continental divide*, which (as it turns out) is entirely irrelevant to anyone other than philosophers. Unfortunately, whatever is *within* either contemporary *analytic* or *continental* philosophy is also entirely irrelevant, because it betrays the legacy of philosophy. This legacy is *the search for truth*. Philosophy which betrays the legacy of philosophy simply isn't philosophy. Sorry. It's not personal. There may be real philosophers in academia, but academic philosophy in the English-speaking world is not about doing philosophy. It's about existing in a tertiary education system, and Darwin knows that's hard enough without the added complication of actually having to do something. Here's a tip. If you want to gain some useful skills in thinking, steer clear of university philosophy departments. Except for the Critical Thinking program at University of Queensland, and other such exception-proves-the-rule outliers.

Just take one example, *a priori*. What does that mean? Lots of things, apparently. In a dictionary it might mean *Relating to reasoning or knowledge from theoretical deduction rather than observation or experience*.¹⁴ In a university philosophy department, or in a great heap of books on philosophy,

¹³ Never mind Brexit which is potentially destabilising, but it's never going to happen so we can leave it to one side.

¹⁴ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/a%20priori>

versions of *a priori* turn out to be not only complicated, confusing, esoteric, unclear, indistinct and unreadable but also fiercely contested, as Robert Hanna found when writing his book *Cognition, Content, and the A Priori*¹⁵ where he distinguishes, spells out and critically discusses *eleven* — fair dinks! — different conceptions of *a priori* before finally deciding to defend only the eleventh one.

What is real philosophy?

Real philosophy is your philosophy. If you want real philosophy, you are going to have to do it yourself. And be prepared to be a pariah. You will be vilified and excluded in the world generally because you will be branded a self-taught trouble maker. In the world of professional academic philosophy, practitioners and administrators will brand you a maverick, a malcontent and a traitor to their cause.

All right then, but what are the hallmarks of real philosophy. By the sounds of it, being ignored?

For the moment, yes. Any real philosopher is on a hiding to nothing, ignored and vilified both inside and outside the academy as “one of those” but sooner or later, the present philosophical establishment will be crushed out of existence by the remorseless drive to eliminate every type of education if there isn’t a dollar in it. Independent thinkers, who keep the light on the hill alight by seeking to say important things clearly and cogently, will be realised as pioneers, one day. You might be dead by then, but at least you can live with yourself in the meantime.

Fake philosophers (philosophy teachers who don’t do any real philosophy) can be spiteful, exclusionist, nasty and evil in their treatment of real philosophers. But where does spite come from? It comes from inadequacy and doubt. In forgetting to align their intentions with the task of answering humanity’s need for philosophy, contemporary professional academic philosophers abjure their right to call themselves philosophers. On the other hand, we know there is good and bad in everyone, so we don’t hate them. We just consider them imposters as far as philosophy is concerned.

Philosophy can help clarify humanity’s shared understanding of reality, or *zeitgeist*.¹⁶ It can help with aligning shared reality with truth, by helping people achieve clarity of expression and the capacity to understand. Individual real philosophers *can* make a difference, whereas the professional academy is severely limited, being mired in squabbles about philosophical schools, abandoning the need to make sense to ordinary humans, and at the same time being whittled away by bean counters. Individuals like you can make a difference by telling the most important truths and being alive to the spirit of inquiry, not the death of “understanding.”

¹⁵ <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/cognition-content-and-the-a-priori-9780198716297?cc=us&lang=en&>

¹⁶ Yes, every view of the world and universe is subjective, but philosophically this doesn’t get us anywhere unless we also realise *the map is not the territory*. This means what we construct in our subjective view of the world and universe is necessarily not the real thing, it is our understanding of the real thing, and may not be entirely correct. This notion is obvious to science which requires the scientist to remain open to the possibility of being wrong. Mapping the territory is a natural, good, worthwhile, helpful thing to do and the closer the map is to the territory it represents the better, as Korzybski said. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Map-territory_relation

Philosophy Without Borders

Like a club for non-conformists, *Philosophy Without Borders* is an open-source, open-minded forum for sharing original philosophy, produced by critically thoughtful, insightful, reflective people for other critically thoughtful, insightful, reflective people, with no restraints on what form the philosophy may take and with no restriction by borders or boundaries of any kind. It is a small but growing cosmopolitan community of people, widely distributed in space and across time-zones, connected by the Internet. Its two basic aims are 1) to enable and support the pursuit of philosophy, worldwide, and 2) to create and share original works of philosophy freely available to anyone, anywhere.¹⁷

Philosophy Without Borders assumes universal enfranchisement and emancipation as a goal, so that all people may participate in the generation and discussion of philosophy. Its only requirement is that the cultural products shared contain real philosophical thinking.

Real philosophical thinking means unhindered and not self-censored by subservience to any so-called philosophical authority or canon, aimed at least in some way at generating, elucidating or commenting on philosophical ideas and respectful of the assumed universal enfranchisement and emancipation of all people and therefore communicated in a spirit of love, peace, and understanding — not hate, conflict, or vilification.

Radically enlightened philosophers have existed in all cultures and all ages, readily recognised by their support of unrestricted reason and universal respect for human dignity as the two primary vehicles for creating understanding, and calling for disputes and conflicts to be resolved or avoided by means of the search for logically-guided, evidence-based truth rather than personal beliefs, creeds, mysticisms, or other ideological constructs. *Philosophy Without Borders* is a safe haven for thinkers to explore and warn against the incursions against radical enlightenment by abuses of greed, power, control, oppression, obedience, censorship, hate, advertising, derision, bullying, xenophobia, nationalism, feudalism, group-think, expensive bottled water and other crimes against and limitations of humanity. *Philosophy Without Borders* in this sense can be thought of Enlightenment Redux, not just a passing phase, but the underlying principles of all humane activity. *Philosophy Without Borders* opposes oppression by complacency, stupidity, and evil, which persist all around the world, not only in despotic regimes, but also in supposedly enlightened ones, mostly as a result of an obsession with self-interested competition and the possession of coercive power, rather than mutual aid and constructive cooperation as the bases for rational human activity.

There is a place for all sorts of stuff in *Philosophy Without Borders*. The readership, in the last six months to June 30 2019, has quadrupled to almost 8000 readers a month. Even if this one outpost trying to do real philosophy is being ignored by the philosophical establishment others are arriving and staying — and in the end, it's the free agency of all those others that *Philosophy Without Borders* is trying to prime via its work. We welcome your contribution, to Hugh Reginald, Editorial Team Leader, *Philosophy Without Borders*: philosophywithoutborders1@gmail.com

¹⁷ <https://www.patreon.com/philosophywithoutborders>