

Killing Philosophy While Hungering for Meaning

Liberty University recently announced that it is ending its B.A. in Philosophy program. The university's [press release](#) cited declining enrollment – employing five full-time professors to serve only 20 philosophy majors simply isn't sustainable – as its reason for the cut, while promising that its students would still receive a rigorous philosophical education through Liberty's core curriculum. The newly unemployed professors "have been offered generous severance packages and are immediately eligible for rehire in any area that they are qualified for at the university."

While some commentators [castigated](#) Liberty for its supposed anti-intellectualism, the giant evangelical university appears to be justified in cutting the philosophy department. There's no sense in providing a service for which there is little to no demand.

Still, it's sad to see the low regard with which philosophy is now held, in our universities and in our culture at large. The prestige of academic philosophy is best summed up by a joke I heard in college:

Question: "How do you get a Philosophy major off your porch?"

Answer: "Give him twenty bucks for the pizza you ordered."

Even those who make their money practicing philosophy aren't thrilled with the state of their field. In 2006, philosophy professor Daniel C. Dennett published an [article](#) asserting that "[m]any projects in contemporary philosophy are artifactual puzzles of no abiding significance." When the professor who taught the ethics class I took as a freshman announced that he was going to a philosophy conference, several students chuckled. Even though we'd chosen to take a

philosophy elective, we couldn't imagine what one might do at such a silly conference.

A few entrepreneurially minded doctors of philosophy have managed to salvage some degree of relevance by saying things so obscenely wicked that they cannot be ignored. The most visible philosopher working in academia today is probably Princeton's Peter Singer, whose infamy derives mainly from the outrage he engenders by offering justifications for [infanticide](#) and bestiality.

For most, though, there is only the slow decline into irrelevance. In the popular imagination, little separates the dissertations of grad students who have spent years studying Kant or Althusser from the ramblings of stoners. Even the eminently likeable ethicist Chidi Anagonye from the sitcom *The Good Place* probably won't be enough to make philosophy cool again.

For some, philosophy simply doesn't matter. In a world in which Netflix, Amazon, GrubHub, and PornHub place every possible diversion at our fingertips, and in which the therapeutic regimes that govern college campuses encourage us to live our truths and to not think too hard about anything that upsets us, the heavy existential questions of life recede into the background. The great metaphysicians simply have nothing to offer to a society with so much to consume and enjoy and so few incentives to challenge presuppositions. Nothing, that is, apart from the occasional Instagram caption.

For others, philosophy has been displaced by scientism. "Why are we here? Where do we come from? Traditionally, these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead," the late physicist Stephen Hawking [said in a 2015 speech](#). "Philosophers have not kept up with modern developments in science. Particularly physics." How is physics supposed to tell us anything about why there is something rather than nothing, the existence of the soul, or whether "right" and "wrong" have any

objective meaning? The best argument against Hawking's assertion that philosophy is dead is that, by proclaiming the death of philosophy, he is actively engaging in philosophy.

Thankfully, though, our society is still full of people who continue to believe that man does not live by equations and free two-day shipping alone. To get out of bed in the morning, to live anything beyond the numb, distracted, "unexamined" life which Socrates spoke of, requires us to engage in philosophy. There's a hunger for it. Why else would dozens of hours of Jordan Peterson distilling ethical and existential truths from the Book of Genesis attract as many viewers as it does? The man has 2.7 million YouTube subscribers and nearly 150 million views on his channel alone.

It's hard to blame Liberty University for getting rid of a department that nobody cared about. Academic philosophy in general has done plenty to run itself into the ground, but it would be a grave error to give in to society's trend of abandoning philosophy.

Despite our culture's pampered state, millions of people yearn for meaning. They are quite ready to set aside self-indulgent, unreflective relativism for the possibility of living a righteous and fulfilling life. But they need someone to tell them what that looks like. There are some questions that can only be answered by the now ill-regarded science of philosophy.

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