

**Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggle.** *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield 2016. 182 pp. \$110 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781783483099); \$34.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781783483105).

Philosophers have always had an uneasy relationship with their institutions. As much as they might like to see themselves as gadflies who disrupt the established order, they have always needed the financial and cultural support provided by institutions—and particularly, in the last several centuries, by universities. But despite their dependence on institutions, philosophers have done surprisingly little to reflect on the ways their work is conditioned by them, for good and for ill. For that reason alone, *Socrates Tenured* is a welcome arrival. Frodeman and Briggle ask how philosophy does and should relate to its institutional homes. This inquiry is far from idle. The institutions that most philosophers occupy—university departments—are under threat, as neoliberalism remakes the university and governments become more and more hostile to higher education that does anything more than the most direct forms of job training. Frodeman and Briggle propose reforms that, they hope, will help philosophy withstand these threats, reforms based on ‘a de-disciplined and post-disciplinary model of philosophy’ (23). In some ways, this is an admirable goal. The question is whether the thing that emerges from these reforms still deserves to be called philosophy.

*Socrates Tenured* is divided into three parts. Part I, ‘Philosophizing in Neoliberal Times,’ describes some of the challenges confronting philosophy today. The authors take as granted the ‘cultural irrelevance’ of academic philosophy (14)—the fact that its practitioners have incentives to do highly specialized research of interest only to others in their subfields. As Frodeman and Briggle see it, this is directly related to ‘the emergence of the field as a *discipline*’ (14). With the birth of the modern research university, they claim, philosophy changed. ‘Philosophers were placed in departments. They inhabited libraries and classrooms. Their writings were restricted to professional diction and concerns. And they wrote for and were judged by their disciplinary peers’ (14). The authors also take it as obvious that ‘traditional disciplinary philosophy’ (4) does not have long to live. The number of tenure track positions is shrinking; faculty autonomy is being eroded; and both politicians and the general public are increasingly dubious that philosophy is worth supporting. Frodeman and Briggle find that they ‘can’t really blame non-academics for their skepticism,’ seeing it as a natural result of the ways ‘philosophical research has been (mis)conceived’ (45). If the discipline has a future, they say, it lies in a new vision of philosophical work—a vision of philosophy ‘getting its hands dirty, changing the world and itself in the bargain’ (45).

Part II, ‘Disciplinarity and its Discontents,’ deals more broadly with these matters of relevance and impact. To get a better idea of how philosophy can have an impact outside the academy, the authors investigate two branches of ‘applied philosophy’—environmental ethics and bioethics—which they see as responses to ‘the twentieth-century professionalization of philosophy’ (59). They trace the histories of these fields, and they survey the literature of each in search of explicit studies of the ‘various types of impacts’ (71) work in the field has had. For reasons that aren’t entirely clear, Frodeman and Briggle insist that it’s not enough for a field to *have* an impact outside the academy; it must also engage in explicit ‘reflection on *how* to have an impact’, including ‘best practices for how to have impacts’ and ‘metrics for evaluating impacts’ (71). By this measure, they claim, environmental ethics fares poorly. Even if some of its practitioners have influenced policymaking, they have ‘failed to return to the environmental ethics community to share accounts of their successes and failures’ (86). Bioethics fares somewhat better, since there exists a sizable ‘reflexive literature within bioethics that critically appraises its identity and functions and raises questions of best practices and impacts’ (102).

Part III, 'Reaching Escape Velocity,' asks how the rest of philosophy might have greater impact outside universities. It describes what the authors call *field philosophy*, a new type of philosophy that they think should replace the disciplinary kind. After more than a hundred pages on why a new, post-disciplinary kind of philosophy is necessary, the book's description of this alternative is exceedingly brief—under four pages—and vague to the extreme. Field philosophers, we're told, will be 'housed in the university (thus afforded the free speech protections of tenure)' but will do 'much of their thinking (like Socrates) with people out and about in the world who are struggling to solve and define problems' (123). What will they study out there in the world? 'Real-world policy problems' (124). How will they study them? On a 'meso-level ... where general points or policy issues are at stake' (125). What will they contribute to these problems? They will bring out their 'philosophical dimensions' by engaging in 'the co-production of knowledge with non-philosophers' (125). How? By 'seeing "the problem" from multiple perspectives and at multiple depths' (124). Anything else? Field philosophers will use 'whatever means necessary to accomplish the tasks presented' (125). In short, field philosophers will not just do curiosity-driven research. They will 'follow their curiosity, but ... do so in a way that takes more into account' (148). The thinness of this description is helped a little—but only a little—by a few examples of work that the authors think embodies the spirit of field philosophy. One is work that they themselves report doing with the U.S. Geological Survey (125)—though they don't specify exactly what they did or what difference it made. Another is what they call 'Mode 2 philosophy': work that is 'conducted by academic philosophers' but directed at 'non-disciplinary audiences' (127). The examples of Mode 2 philosophy that they give—philosophy cafes, efforts to bring philosophy into schools and prisons, and so on—are actually quite widespread, and far from new. Perhaps the many philosophers already involved in such initiatives will, in a manner akin to Molière's bourgeois gentleman, be delighted to learn that they've been doing Mode 2 philosophy all this while without knowing it.

Some features of *Socrates Tenured* are genuinely admirable. It's positive that the authors look head-on at the threats posed to philosophy by the neoliberal university. With the possible exception of those who work at the wealthiest private universities, all philosophers will have to face these threats, and the authors perform an important service by insisting on that point. But while it's easy to like some of what Frodeman and Briggie want to do, it's hard to like much of what they actually do. Part of this is a matter of tone and style. *Socrates Tenured* reads like a PowerPoint presentation by an especially uninspired Assistant Provost. All the familiar tropes are here: the breathless praise of 'innovations' (23) and 'entrepreneurial,' 'stakeholder-centered' work (4); the smears on 'curiosity-driven research' that is 'an excuse for indulgence or an exclusive focus on issues of interest only to a coterie of disciplinary connoisseurs' (119); the ominous insistence on 'changing our profession before our profession is changed by others' (1). Even when the book has legitimate points to make about disciplinary philosophy, its criticisms are distressingly facile. At one point the authors launch an attack on the *Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics* (19-20) that might have been penned by a bored freshman. (To wit: the book contains 'no references to people's actual lives' (19), and in any case the topic of personal identity would be better approached through a video game (118).) Just as depressing is a story about Frodeman's first philosophy conference, where he faulted the 'abstract, disembodied and passionless' presentations for being insufficiently 'erotic' and 'dangerous' and for being less enjoyable than the post-session drinking (115). But perhaps the book's lowest point comes in its response to a rhetorical question posed by Brian Leiter. While casting doubt on the idea that philosophy consists of several 'competing "camps"', Leiter once asked: 'Which "camp" of philosophy could possibly be committed to less careful analysis, less thorough argumentation?' (*The Future for Philosophy*, Oxford University Press 2004, 16). Frodeman and Briggie think this question has an answer: namely, 'a camp that is interested in being timely, within budget, and understood' (80). The authors present Socrates as their

hero, but if Socrates ever urged his followers to think less carefully and argue less thoroughly in order to remain ‘within budget,’ the evidence has, alas, been lost to history.

Perhaps I’m being uncharitable. But even the most charitable reader will be left wondering how the reforms proposed in *Socrates Tenured* are supposed to do anything to solve the problems that the book identifies. Frodeman and Briggie tell us, truthfully, that the threats facing disciplinary philosophy are political and economic. Legislators ‘will not continue to pay for research that is directed towards a small set of our disciplinary peers’ (3). But the authors do not explain why these same legislators *will* be willing to pay for field philosophy. If legislators in (say) Saskatchewan are unwilling to pay for 19 year olds to reflect on the meaning of life, why will they be willing to pay for utility companies to appreciate the philosophical aspects of their business? Nor do the authors explain why universities will continue to hire and tenure philosophers—let alone rent workspaces for them in shopping malls (117)—when those philosophers plan to spend much of their time seconded to other enterprises. I can just imagine my dean’s reaction if I told her that, rather than teaching next semester, I plan to spend the term ‘with people out and about in the world who are struggling to solve and define problems’ (123)—but that I still expect my salary and ‘the free speech protections of tenure’ (123). Frodeman and Briggie toy with the idea (2, 122) that Silicon Valley will save the day, and that ‘entrepreneurs like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel’ will support philosophical explorations of consciousness and the good life, ‘with or without the (academic) philosophers’ (122). But those of us without patrons in Palo Alto will still have to convince university administrators, and ultimately legislators, that philosophy is worth investing in. I see nothing in this book that will convince them to loosen the purse strings.

*Socrates Tenured* identifies a real problem and urges philosophers to look at it directly. That’s a good thing. But the solutions that the book proposes do nothing to address that problem. Old-fashioned, disciplinary philosophers might think it’s enough to raise a problem without knowing how to solve it. But a book that pans disciplinary philosophy in the name of taking more into account needs to do more than that.

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