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ARTICLE



Field Philosophy: Practice and Theory

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ABSTRACT

Field philosophy marks out a new path for 21st century philosophy, offering both a practical and theoretical alternative to disciplinary philosophy. The balance between disciplinary philosophy and field philosophy shifted in the late 19th century: philosophers were now almost entirely to be found in one location – on campus. Contemporary philosophy has not theorized the effects that location have on philosophizing. Field philosophy rebalances the philosophical ledger – reestablishing a multiplicity of sites, identifying a new practice, and offering an accompanying theory rooted in the differences that location makes to philosophizing.

KEYWORDS

Field philosophy;
institutionalization;
disciplinary philosophy;
history of the university

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.

Thoreau, *Walden*

1. The Places of Philosophy

Philosophy comes in many forms and appears in many places. It is a solitary affair where one sits ensorcelled by a book. It embraces intimacies explored with a companion. It comes via lectures to students in a class and to philosophers in a conference hall. But it also takes place at the dinner table and the local pub. It lives in the university, but also in offices and labs and construction sites. It inhabits textbooks, but also business strategies and management plans.

My introduction to philosophy did not occur via a book or a class. My first experiences came in a bowling alley, a place that set the course for my subsequent career.

Field philosophy divides into two parts. In the first the philosopher partners with non-philosophers to grapple with a live societal problem. This is the heart of the matter, what Gary Snyder calls the real work. But there is also a second moment: if such efforts are going to have staying power they must eventually be coupled one to another and theorized as part of a conscious attempt at institutionalization. A recent example of the latter is *A Guide to Field Philosophy* (2020), which I edited with Evelyn Brister. *A Guide* gathers accounts of philosophers working in a variety of locations beyond the university. These descriptions provide a roadmap for those wanting to make similar efforts.

Field philosophy marks out a new path for 21st century philosophy. It offers both a practical and theoretical alternative to disciplinary philosophy. Field philosophy has antecedents, ancient and modern, as Adam Briggie and I note in *Socrates Tenured* (Frodeman and Briggie 2016). *Avant la lettre*, there's always been a field element to philosophy – Socrates' time in the *agora*, Plato serving as counsel to Dionysus II, the diplomacy of Leibniz, Dewey in China and Russell in New York, and more

recently Peter Singer's nonprofit *The Life You Can Save*. These efforts complement the more recodite work that is primarily shared among philosophers.

Note, however, that the balance between disciplinary philosophy and field philosophy decisively shifted in the late 19th century. Philosophers were now almost entirely to be found in one location – on campus. Philosophy became one academic discipline among many, sharing with the sciences an inward focus on disciplinary problems, but lacking the countervailing outward pull driven by ties to politics and industry. Field philosophy rebalances the philosophical ledger – reestablishing a multiplicity of sites, identifying a new practice, and offering an accompanying theory rooted in the differences that location makes to philosophizing.

Focus on this last point: contemporary philosophy has not theorized the effects that location have on philosophizing. The social history of academic knowledge as disciplined, departmentalized, reduced to a major, and solely practiced in seminar rooms has yet to be written (Clark 2006 comes closest). It's a remarkable oversight: Aristotle noted long ago that place is a fundamental dimension of reality, and studies of material culture have become increasingly common. Nonetheless, the university has been tacitly assumed to be a neutral background that has little or no effect on thinking. Philosophers have not treated their current places, the classroom and the study, as distinctive and even problematic – even though they are both.

The places of the university are fine as far as they go. But prioritized to the point of exclusivity, they embody an impoverished view of the ways and places philosophy can be performed. Field philosophy expands our repertoire of locations to include:

- accompanying a hydrologist into a watershed as she gathers water samples, and helping her think through the epistemic perplexities of acquiring and interpreting these samples
- working as part of a community group as it struggles with selecting the next generation of textbooks for the local school system
- serving as a member of a European Commission expert group charged with revising the peer review of grant proposals

These are but three of the innumerable places where philosophy can be practiced. Today all such venues fall awkwardly under the category of 'service'. As such, they are understood as the least of our tasks, hardly counting as real philosophy at all. In fact, the dominant outlook is even more utopian than that. The classroom and the study are viewed as merely the quiet setting for the development of theories. It's an attitude that reaches back to the origins of Western thought, implicit in Plato's view of the body as the prison house of the soul and in Aristotle's dividing knowledge into the categories of the theoretical, practical, and productive.

Field philosophy is a form of philosophic practice where one works at the project level with non-philosophers over an extended period of time. The details of this practice have been described (e.g. Brister and Frode Man 2020, Frode Man and Briggie 2016, and in the introduction to this special issue). The point to emphasize here is that field philosophy also provides a theoretical account of public philosophy.

Public philosophy is overdue for theorizing. Until now it has assumed that its work consists in the doing, and that this doing does not call for its own account of philosophy. This has left public philosophy marginalized as a poor or even counterfeit version of proper philosophic work. Public philosophy consists of many parts – teaching in prisons, writing op-eds, and working with community activists – work that extends beyond the activities of field philosophy. But for all these parts field philosophy critiques current philosophic practice so that public philosophy can stand forth as its own legitimate form of philosophy.

It does so by naming a philosophic practice – disciplinary philosophy – that has gone unlabeled, but which has characterized 20th and now 21st century philosophy. This naming is no mere nominalism. It's difficult to call attention to a bias that hasn't been specified. No wonder the incentive structures of the academy discount public philosophy. Public-facing philosophy is scarcely

recognized *as* philosophy. It's labeled service or outreach, which is what it is when measured by the standards of disciplinary philosophy.

The theoretical account offered by field philosophy is rooted in a description of the modern research university. With origins in the University of Berlin, the disciplinary university was an invention of late 19th century America. The medieval university dating from the 12th century, and the American college of the 17th and following centuries, had an entirely different structure, based in two facts: that the point of knowledge was to guarantee a cultural inheritance rather than produce new knowledge, and the knowledge economy had yet to be invented.

The quick spread of the research university across higher education, first in America and then worldwide, profoundly changed the nature of knowledge, both in itself and in its relationship to society. Knowledge was now organized in terms of disciplines, ever-deepening domains of expertise. It is the nature of disciplines to turn inward: as they develop their work becomes increasingly specialized, and as specialized they become more isolated from society. Moreover, disciplines have no natural terminus: lacking an external governor such as time or cost, they become infinite research projects. Field philosophy treats the assumptions of disciplinarity as problematic, particularly for philosophy and the humanities, but for every other domain of knowledge as well.

In terms of research, disciplinary knowledge is knowledge produced for and judged by a small reference community seeking to make epistemic progress on an agreed-upon set of problems. What is produced is knowledge at a distance – general knowledge that stands apart from the particularities of individual people and situations. The resulting insights are then 'thrown over the wall' that separates that discipline from larger society (a phrase I first heard when working with the US Geological Survey in the 1990s). Distance from society is thus a feature rather than a bug of disciplinary knowledge. This distance serves as the guarantor of rigor and professional autonomy, while also enhancing the sense that the knowledge being produced is apolitical in nature. Conversely, a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge put the weight of its efforts into translation, communication, and public accountability rather than the production of new knowledge. This approach also expands the notion of peer beyond a disciplinary cohort to potentially include everyone.

Being a theoretical construct, disciplines require practical administrative counterparts. The most prominent of these are the department and the major. The department instantiates the inward turn of disciplinarity. It places researchers working in similar areas in physical proximity of one another, usually housed in their own building. The idea was that such proximity would spur collaboration and community. But the logic of endless specialization has meant that professors now feel greater kinship with a sub-disciplinary research cohort around the world rather than with their departmental colleagues.

Departmental members teach classes as part of a disciplinary curriculum, jointly manage a major, and perhaps supervise graduate students. The major makes disciplinarity manifest at the undergraduate level – a common curriculum for all students was abandoned at the end of the 19th century. As disciplined, professors publish in a limited set of specialist journals and attend conferences with their cohort. Decisions concerning hiring and promotion are managed by the department with the help of their larger disciplinary community. This disciplinary community identifies which topics are worthwhile and the proper manner for addressing these topics. Disciplinary self-governance, the walling off of outsiders from these processes, is the *sine qua non* of professional standing.

The creation of disciplines, departments, and majors – the work, most prominently, of Charles Eliot, President of Harvard from 1869 to 1909 – was a response to the changing social function of knowledge. Specialization was necessary if the knowledge enterprise was going to consist of continuous discovery and invention rather than being primarily a means of preserving a common cultural inheritance. This imperative, that knowledge should continually grow, is of comparatively recent origin. In the past, people were more interested in perennial truths, and viewed *libido sciendi*, the lust to know, as problematic (Shattuck 1984). The disciplinary university was created to serve the needs of a rapidly industrializing economy, which was itself a reflection of a culture that increasingly

put no constraints on the pursuit of desire. As I've noted in a recent work (Frodeman 2019), the logical outcome of this attitude is the movement known as transhumanism.

Disciplinarity has differing effects on different subject areas. Applied to philosophy, this approach has encouraged distance from society, as philosophy, the most practical of subjects, has become steadily more recondite. In the case of science, the result has been a steadily growing stream of innovations that feed the consumer market. The parameterizing of reality via the classic bench experiment has resulted in the creation of tremendously powerful instruments. But the effects of these products once they are unleashed upon the world have been much less predictable. Technoscientific knowledge has brought great benefits, but has also upended employment and unsettled societal relations. For instance, artificial intelligence may lead to tremendous advances or enable authoritarian regimes to micro-manage the lives of their citizens. Or both.

In recent decades these concerns have led to calls for interdisciplinary approaches to education and research. Such calls are offered as an alternative to disciplinarity, toward the goal of overcoming its worst effects. But the more common result is for these efforts to end up echoing the methods they purportedly critique. Area studies – black studies, women's studies, environmental studies, etc. – have brought vital elements into the curriculum. But the power of their insights have been vitiated by the embrace of disciplinarity, recreating the apparatus of traditional disciplines and turning their topics into another infinite research program.

In fact, the *de facto* result of most interdisciplinary efforts has been to further accelerate the production of knowledge rather than call into question the disciplinary model of knowledge production and its emphasis upon constant and accelerating epistemic and societal progress. Proposed as a radical critique of the disciplinary status quo, the most common result is for interdisciplinary efforts to foster the creation of new disciplines. Indeed, one prominent interdisciplinarian has proposed that interdisciplinarity itself should become its own discipline (Bammer 2013).

The lack of recognition that philosophers in the modern academy have been practicing a particular form of philosophy has made it difficult to articulate and defend an alternative. In terms of its practice, field philosophy is the name for a particularized, transdisciplinary approach to philosophy. In terms of its theory, it provides an account of what has been overlooked: the philosophical and societal consequences of an institutional history defined in terms of disciplines, departments, and majors.

Field philosophy highlights where a commitment to the infinite production of new philosophic knowledge has taken us – to an ever-increasing distance from the concerns of non-philosophers. Rather than being a general accounting of one's life that everyone needs to develop, the integrating capstone of one's education and life, philosophy has become one more regional area of study where philosophers are supposed to make 'progress'. As a result, the body politic has been starved of the insights and critiques that a healthy society needs. The theoretical account offered by field philosophy opens a space for public philosophy to take its place alongside disciplinary philosophy as a vital approach to doing philosophy.

2. Field Philosophy as Critique of Modernity, or Not

Whatever pleasure it offers the individual academic, disciplinary expertise exists to serve a political, economic, and ultimately a metaphysical purpose: it is knowledge that underwrites progress. Progress is an expansive term, referring at different points to scientific advance, economic growth, increased human longevity, the expansion of consumer culture, cultural or artistic novelty, and the achievement of a personal goal. But all its forms assume that something is lacking in the present that can be remedied by innovation.

The modern research university has created disciplines for all of these areas, even though disciplinarity and the notion of progress fits certain subjects and domains better than others. Subjects that can be parameterized (e.g. bench sciences or computer sciences) are the most

disciplinary in nature; fields that are historical, difficult to quantify, or involve complex webs of interaction are less so. The humanities are of a different order entirely, and it's doubtful whether they should qualify as disciplines at all.

These ambiguities, however, are not noted within the research university. Philosophers are housed in departments with similarly trained colleagues and write for specialist journals just like professors in the natural and social sciences. This is remarkable, for the concerns of the humanities range across all human endeavor in a way foreign to the sciences. Subjects like philosophy and literature raise questions of meaning, purpose, justice, and elegance that are relevant at every point and in any venue, whereas the sciences take a technical approach to issues. For them the idea of progress is limited and relatively unproblematic.

These differences could have been reflected in the organizational structure of philosophy and the humanities. The idea of a department of philosophy, and of philosophy being organized as one more discipline among disciplines, should have raised suspicions from the start. But people being the way they are, philosophers and humanists at the end of the 19th century sought the protection and autonomy offered by departments rather than running the risks of being scattered across the university.

Departments have their virtues. Insights come from philosophers working with one another, which then can be more widely disseminated. Note, however, that every field has narratives that need both questioning and elaborating; every discipline assumes some idea of the good that needs to be interrogated. Philosophers and humanists have a role to play in these other departments as well. Departments of the humanities should be complemented by humanists being embedded across the university. The same is true of our public and private institutions: philosophers and humanists should have found a home in these spaces as well.

These moves would cause difficulties. Philosophical questions threaten the pace of innovation and challenge the accelerationist mentality of contemporary society. This highlights the conservative nature of philosophy and its precautionary approach to progress: philosophers ask people to reflect on what they are doing. Of course, there is another side to the story: philosophy is also 'liberal' in the sense of promoting ideas that lie outside of tradition or beyond the Overton Window of acceptable conversation. Philosophy is thus in danger of being at once too conservative and too radical for the tastes of society, fulfilling the ancient stereotype of being absurd and out of touch.

It's true that given the structure and incentives of the academy over the last century, most philosophers are poorly adapted to contribute to practical enterprises. But misadventures can occur even for philosophers who are practiced at dealing with non-philosophers. Even here things can go badly, as Adam Briggie recounts in *A Field Philosopher's Guide to Fracking* (2016). Of course, the same is true of the contributions of disciplines (e.g. economics) that have a tradition of working alongside or writing for the wider world. And we may expect that over time philosophy and society would adjust to one another and the interactions would become more successful.

But there lurks a larger issue, one that introduces dissent within the ranks of field philosophers. In challenging the disciplinary model of philosophy, field philosophy also implicitly questions the ideology of progress that's assumed by both knowledge producers and society at large. For the invention and development of novel insights isn't the primary goal of the field philosopher. Contributing to the project is, even if this means sharing points that are commonplaces within the philosophic community. The difference between the disciplinary philosopher and the field philosopher is similar to the divergent responsibilities of the medical researcher and the physician: like the physician, the field philosopher mainly diagnoses and treats rather than invents.

A distinction should be made between the theoretical implications of field philosophy and its everyday practice. In terms of everyday practice, field philosophy can be pursued by those of any philosophical background and perspective. The suggestions of a philosopher of science or a feminist social theorist may well differ from that of someone trained in German Idealism. But this matters less than one might think. For the central goal of field philosophy is to raise questions, to expand the

universe of possibilities and the bounds of a conversation, rather than to provide answers. When suggestions differ this is something to celebrate rather than bemoan.

Similarly, different cultures may instantiate field philosophy in different ways. For instance, party control in China makes overt criticisms of governmental policy a questionable choice. But this danger can be over-emphasized: it's not as if other cultures do not have their own limitations. The fact that every political candidate in America must profess to being a Christian highlights the fact that every culture enforces limits to free speech. No matter what the culture, field philosophy involves calibrating one's rhetoric with care, attending to cultural context not to deceive but in order to avoid blowback.

But while most field philosophers will focus on specific cases, for this writer, field philosophy also implies questioning the disciplinary assumptions of the modern knowledge enterprise. Is the metaphysics of progress still a good idea? Or have we exceeded the Aristotelian mean to knowledge production?

Talk of continued epistemic progress often emphasizes its humanitarian aspects. It's true that the current system of knowledge production has had enormous benefits. The World Bank notes that in the 25 years from 1990 to 2015, extreme poverty dropped an average of a percentage point per year – from nearly 36% to 10%. Part of the credit for this goes to disciplinary knowledge production. But there's another side to this story. Continued knowledge production has enabled a culture of endless distraction, and the likelihood grows of an epistemically driven catastrophe where one or another of our technoscientific creations runs amok.

Field philosophy, then, has both a near and a far view. It not only attends to the practical aspects of bringing philosophy into public discussions. It can also raise questions about the ideology of invention that threatens as well as benefits society. In its latter mode, field philosophy challenges the philosophical underpinnings of not only the modern university, but also modern culture, which together have underwritten our narrative of progress.

To the question, what is knowledge for? The research university has offered a Nietzschean reply: to continually augment our powers. There once were other goals for knowledge, times when the highest expression of knowledge, and of life, was contemplative in nature – appreciating the clarity of an idea, the sharing of a meal, the joy of a work of art, and the pleasure of companionship without wanting to 'do' anything with any of these. This style of life is now viewed as idleness. It's a view that's enforced by our technologies: Amazon electronically tracks its warehouse workers in real time, informing them how many seconds they have until the current task should be completed, with termination for those who are not able to keep up.

Field philosophy is sometimes seen as a synonym for applied philosophy. But applied philosophy remains disciplinary in orientation: it *writes* about real world problems, mostly for an audience of other philosophers, whereas field philosophers talk and listen, onsite, working at the project level with people who are not philosophers, in spaces other than the university or the conference hall. We have gained much from disciplinary philosophy. But our times demand a countervailing movement where philosophy is practiced in the midst of society.

3. Origins

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.

Thoreau, *Walden*

Philosophy has a vexed relationship with particularity. Providing an example as an aid to understanding is acceptable, but the example must know its place: it must exemplify a larger theme rather than be the point of the discussion. Philosophers search for principles; their application to specific cases is a matter of individual judgment or personal history. It has not been the task of philosophy to solve specific problems. That's left to psychology or politics.

Philosophers have a history of belittling the use of examples. In the *First Critique* Kant describes the power of judgment as the ability to decide whether something falls under a rule. Those who have difficulty exercising the power of judgment Kant characterizes as stupid. Such people compensate for their lack of ability by relying on examples: 'This is also the sole and great utility of examples: that they sharpen the power of judgment.'

Thoreau views these matters differently. He's considered a 'philosophical' writer but is rarely taught in philosophy classes. The material is too anecdotal. There's a certain irony here, for Thoreau takes this approach as a matter of principle. It follows from his view of philosophy as a matter of embodying rather than merely professing the truth. He is hard on those who do not live their truths: 'There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live.'

Philosophy views such self-reference as dubious. In informal logic the point is labeled a fallacy, the *ad hominem*, which is committed when someone addresses a person's character rather than limiting oneself to with facts of the matter. Of course, at times one's personal credibility *is* relevant to the evidence being offered. It can be difficult to grasp the weight of an argument without including an account of the status of the person involved.

The philosophy of science once separated the logic of discovery from the logic of explanation. Similarly, philosophy more generally has separated the personal origins of its ideas from an evaluation of their status. But I cannot so easily separate my origins from my involvement in philosophy. I've spent much of my adult life as a member of philosophy departments, although I have also consulted for the US Geological Survey and worked in a policy center. And today, to paraphrase Thoreau, I am at present a sojourner in the wider, non-academic world. My positioning toward philosophy is a product of early experiences. These incidents were then buttressed by reading *Walden*, where I absorbed Thoreau's insistence that philosophy is something lived rather than merely thought.

I was raised by a philosophical spirit: my father viewed every situation as an occasion for analysis. He had been an indifferent high school student, and college was never a part of the plan. I don't believe he ever opened a philosophy book. But what he called philosophizing defined his approach to the world.

When I was five he was ticketed for speeding. To pay the ticket he took a temporary job working the desk at a bowling alley, a job that lasted for the next 14 years. I soon started working there, gaining experience that have proved decisive for what followed. In part this is a matter of class consciousness: most philosophers come from a decidedly different background, and I've not detected among my colleagues the same imperative to make philosophy relevant to just folk. The bowling alley also served as training in working with a wide range of the public.

From the perspective of its current decline, those were the halcyon days of bowling. On Sundays we worked a double shift. Mornings were quiet, when most of St Louis was in church; afternoons were frenetic, as the waiting list to bowl grew to two hours; evenings found the house filled with the adult leagues. The job required responding to people's appeals under noisy, demanding conditions. People grew cranky waiting, and you needed to keep things moving, cajoling some to wrap up faster and others to wait a little longer by not charging them for shoes or by cutting them slack in some other way. There were similar elements to my father's regular weekday position as a traveling salesman for Weiser Lock Company. In that job he would visit lumber yards across Missouri and Illinois and would sometimes take me along on his calls. Afterward he would demand that I evaluate his skills at reading people and communicating to different audiences.

There was one other field element to the bowling alley. By my teens I had moved on to fixing the automatic pinsetter machines. Much of that work consisted of being on call in case a machine broke down. This left me with a lot of time for reading. I had taken to reading 19th and 20th century authors and would sit reading on the concourse. On a number of occasions one of the regulars would grab the book and read a passage at random. Great fun would be had at its absurdity. This roused me in defense, driving me to explain how the passage actually illustrated one or another local drama. This soon became a contest, and a type of improv, not of comedy but of thinking, in relating ideas to the

issues of the moment. It also affected how I read: I came to look for ways that arcane parts of *Dead Souls* or *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* tied into everyday events.

My reading would often take me to a local park. My high school was far from rigorous, and by junior year I had largely stopped going. I would be suspended for not attending, and when I pointed out the absurdity of this I was suspended again for insolence. By the end of that year I was described as 'not suitable for a high school environment' and invited to not return. I might have gone to college at that point, but instead my father fashioned a deal where my labors at the bowling alley counted as work-study. And so I spent the senior year reading on my own. I was admitted to St. Louis University only through the kindness and understanding of an admissions officer; but for his intercession I might have missed out on college entirely.

I brought all these experiences with me to St. Louis University. It led to a rude awakening. I thought I wanted to major in philosophy, but I was surprised by the version of philosophy I was introduced to, which lacked the sense of it being something that was done out in the world. I did, however, find a few connections. Socrates seemed a kindred spirit. He's often presented as a plaster saint, but in the dialogues I heard the pointed tone that I was familiar with from the bowling alley. I also discovered the existentialists. Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* spoke of an alternative tradition of philosophy closer to what I was looking for, and Nietzsche was a thinker whose combination of conceptual clarity and psychological awareness were similar to what I had grown up with.

I was fortunate that St Louis University had just received a NEH grant to start a second track within their philosophy major in science and technology studies. I never would have made it through a standard philosophy curriculum: especially in those days I wouldn't have fared well in the typical class in epistemology or the philosophy of language. I was fortunate that I was able to take a wide range of courses, and while officially majoring in language and history, I was *de facto* able to fashion my own interdisciplinary major. The Jesuits can be quite tough-minded, but they showed great patience with me and mostly let me go my own way.

There is one other element of my undergraduate education worth noting. I spent a semester in Flagstaff, Arizona as a participant in the Grand Canyon Semester. Professors and students alike lived in a hotel for the semester in downtown Flagstaff. Class consisted of a single three-hour meeting each day attended by everyone where subjects blended together and the roles of teachers and student were interchangeable. The program was experiential as well as interdisciplinary in nature. In geology we not only read about the Grand Canyon, but also spent days hiking there; in anthropology we not only studied Hopi culture but also traveled to the reservation, waking up before dawn to see the Kachinas return from their stay in the San Francisco Peaks.

After a year off I applied to graduate school. At first the experience was less than ideal. I was more or less booted from the philosophy program at UT-Austin after the first year after being told that my interests did not count as real philosophy. I gave philosophy one more try at Penn State, where I found the curriculum, based in the history of philosophy with an emphasis on the continental tradition, much more congenial. The program emphasized a fundamental point, that what counts as philosophy had varied greatly across time – Plato being a dramatist, Aristotle (at least outside of his dialogues) a logician, Hegel a system builder, Derrida a deconstructionist. Montaigne and Nietzsche were seen as engaged in an enterprise that overlapped with that of Augustine and Spinoza.

I was lucky, too, in finding Alphonso Lingis, a professor at Penn State, who had developed his own special form of philosophical practice. Lingis had worked out a distinctive teaching schedule: teaching across the summer and the fall, he then left for an obscure overseas location in December for six months. He would set up shop in a cheap motel in Managua or Timbuctoo or Bangkok – I once spent a week with him in the latter location. His days were spent reading and writing, while the evenings were given over to experiencing the local culture and street life. He created in a distinctive type of philosophy essay (for instance his 1983 book *Excesses: Eros and Culture*), an existential phenomenology where reflections on Aristotle's and Kant's notion of

friendship were juxtaposed with accounts of his interactions with people on the streets of Kolkata. It was an *Erlebnis* philosophy where ideas were field-tested in ways where you had real skin in the game – an approach I would eventually turn toward environmental questions, science and technology, and policy.

Finally, Lingis owned six acres on Bald Eagle Mountain outside of State College, the result of a euphoric excursion with David Allison in the 1970s. Visiting the land one summer day in the 1980s, I casually mentioned that if he'd give 5000 USD my wife and I would build a cabin on the land. I had Thoreau in the back of my mind, but was also thinking of writing a dissertation on Heidegger and the concept of place while engaged in the actual building of a place. It was an offhand remark, but six months later when dropping him off at La Guardia for another overseas excursion he gave me the check for 5000. USD

To that point we had not built so much as a doghouse. Nonetheless, we took the task on, and my wife and I designed and built a 16 by 24-foot cabin with a 6' by 6' bathroom on the side. The construction took nine months. I got little work done on the dissertation during this time, and I worried about whether I would be able to pick back up my theoretical tasks when we were finished. But I found that, as Thoreau says, my thinking had grown like corn in the night. The dissertation flowed in a quick fashion, exploring how the cultural, historical, and geological place of one's thinking influences the universality of one's claims. After moving from Hegel to Heidegger and Derrida the dissertation ended with a chapter that consisted of the letters I had written people during the building of the cabin.

4. Field Science and Field Philosophy

I defended my dissertation in December of 1987 and turned the cabin over to Lingis. I was fortunate to gain a tenure-track position for the next fall, at the University of Texas-Pan Am (now the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley) in the Rio Grande Valley. The Valley was and remains an unusual place – an enormous immigrant population, massive *colonias*, an entrepôt for drugs, and the site for the somewhat more legal cross-border *maquiladora* trade. In spite of the practical aspects of building a cabin in the woods, I had drunk deep of the post-modern perspectives typical of those days. McAllen, Texas would remedy this, as it quickly became clear that I had no business deconstructing logocentrism in a location that was still waiting for the advent of the Enlightenment.

Of my four courses a semester three were sections of Introduction to Logic. This was portrayed as the genial hazing of a newbie faculty member, but I soon found the situation to my liking. I began by teaching logic in the standard way (e.g. Copi), but soon saw that I would have to shift gears. Some 85% of my students were Hispanic, and many had crossed the Rio Grande with their parents seeking a better life. In many cases they had then been passed through the grades: in some cases, they were barely literate in Spanish much less English. I was warned about all this at my hiring, but assumed the stories were exaggerations. They were not. An Intro to Logic class would start out with an enrollment of 50; by the 12th week, 14 students would remain. Of those 14, a third would end up with an F for the semester.

Standing each day before an uncomprehending audience takes a toll. One day I passed back exams to the class. A student came up afterward to argue that he should get partial credit for a particular answer. We debated the point for a bit, and I gave in; he'd get the extra point. He then handed me his exam: his grade was 11%.

In desperation, I turned my logic courses into the analysis of the logic of everyday life. Rather than Venn Diagrams and modus ponens we looked at commercials, political ads, and the logical structure of 22-minute TV situation comedies. I found satisfaction in these efforts, and the students seemed to as well. It was with my one upper division course each semester that I had trouble. These courses were populated by philosophy majors, students who had learned the disciplinary lingo. Philosophy seemed to have become a means for divorcing themselves from their surroundings, and most of the majors disdained my attempts at find practical relevance in our readings.

I lasted two years at UT-Pan Am. Worn down by the teaching, the heat, and the systemic racism, I quit, and my wife and I moved to Boulder, Colorado. I thought I might be done with academic life; in any case, I wanted to study geology and write a phenomenology of hiking the Grand Canyon. I started sitting in on undergraduate classes in geology at the University of Colorado. The Grand Canyon Semester had taught me the basic trick of geology – rocks are petrified environments, pieces of fossilized time, and hiking the Canyon a form of time travel. I wanted to ground such points with an education in geology as part of a phenomenology of geological time.

The University of Colorado Geology Department was a welcoming environment, and I eventually was taken into the Masters program. This was not part of a change of career; I viewed it as simply an opportunity to dive deeper into geology for philosophic reasons. I was pursuing these private interests when events took a turn. Christine Turner, a US Geological Survey scientist based in Lakewood, Colorado, had heard of a philosopher getting a masters in geology. She called and asked for books in logic. I gave her a couple titles and thought no more of it, but a month later she called again asking me out for coffee.

This turned out to be a job interview. The Republican takeover of the House would not occur for another year, in 1994, but there already were storm clouds on the horizon. Newt Gingrich was arguing that if public science was relevant it could be monetized and thus privatized, and if it could not be, then this demonstrated that there was no need for a public Earth Science agency. The Republicans were evidently ignorant of the concept of market failure.

I was asked to help combat this by offering lectures on logic at various branch offices of the USGS – in Menlo Park, Anchorage, Woods Hole, and elsewhere. The idea was that I could improve the logical rigor and thus the persuasiveness of USGS research. This struck me as foolish: the challenge facing the USGS was political and rhetorical in nature, not logical. But I needed the money and I wanted to see how things developed.

Fortunately, one of my first three-hour lectures was at the Menlo Park offices of the Survey. The audience of GS 14 and GS 15 geologists dutifully went through the exercises I projected on an overhead, but it didn't take long for one of them to ask, how this was going to lead to a better appreciation of public Earth science among politicians and citizens? I said that I thought it was unlikely to, and that the central issue was rather one of understanding the relation between science and society.

The Venn Diagrams were set aside and a lively conversation ensued. The off-topic discussion got positive reviews, and I was invited to revise my lectures: I would now be talking about science and culture, with excursions into politics, ethics, and metaphysics. This led to an eight year, off-and-on again consultancy with the Survey. Over the next few years I visited nearly all the USGS field offices as well as the headquarters in Reston, Virginia. I ran workshops, attended leadership meetings, and gave a series of five-day, three-hours-a-day seminars. Not everyone liked it, of course – I had a senior scientist stand up in the middle of a session and declare 'This is a bunch of bullshit' and walk out – but I kept being invited back. Lectures had titles like 'The Dilemmas of Scientific Advocacy' and 'How Science is Responsible for the Growth of Fundamentalist Religion'. I put together reading packets that included selections from *How the Laws of Physics Lie*, *Aristotle's Ethics*, and section #125 of the *Gay Science*.

The process of education went both ways. I learned about Vannevar Bush and Pasteur's Quadrant, and was tutored in how to be more relevant to the needs of the USGS. Sometimes the lessons were a little rough: geologists can be enthusiastic drinkers, and at an open bar after a lecture a participant came up to me. With lubricated enthusiasm he threw his arm across my shoulders, and said: 'Great stuff today, Frodeман. Loved it. But if you mention Aristotle again I'll break your neck.' My scholarly scruples were of little interest to this audience. They just wanted the information straight up.

My time with the USGS was intermittent, but the trend was generally upward. I was invited to present at retreats and to meet with the Director. Eventually this led to a proposal: rather than working as an outside consultant, I would be hired as a USGS employee. The wheels were put in

motion for this in 1999, and I started a two-year stint in 2000. None of us had the foresight to anticipate that this would mark the end of our relationship.

In hindsight, it's remarkable that none of us spotted the problem beforehand. When I was an outsider, my ideas and suggestions possessed deniability, for I wasn't speaking as an USGS employee. The status of my comments changed instantly once I became a USGS employee housed at the Denver regional headquarters: I became a potential danger, and my lectures and writings were monitored for controversial opinions. In a matter of weeks the relationships cultivated over seven years were destroyed. Looking back I'm embarrassed that I, supposedly the one sensitive to the political and cultural aspects of science, missed so completely on this. I lasted at the USGS for only the first of my two-year contract. My relationship with the USGS ended in 2001.

In the meantime I had finished my masters, which involved fieldwork in southern Colorado mapping cycles of climate change in the ancient sediments making up the Rock Canyon Anticline. One day in 1993, while working in the library and needing a break, I tried a search for 'philosophy of geology'. I found no entries in the Philosopher's Index. Turning to GeoRef, the geology search CD of the time, I found a total of seven citations. These, however, consisted of claims that that there was no such thing as the philosophy of geology. Geologists had been persuaded that the philosophy of science consisted of the philosophy of physics, and what geologists did in the field was a poor imitation of real science, which occurred in the lab.

This bias toward lab science led to a paper on the nature of geological reasoning in the field. I claimed that field science offered its own distinctive way of practicing science, grounded in interpretation and lived experience. It remains my most cited article (Frodeman 1995). Eventually it occurred to me that an analogous point could be made about philosophy, that an inter- and transdisciplinary philosophy is akin to field science as philosophy in the academy is similar to lab science. At that time field geology was dying. The computer revolution had infiltrated geology: 'old hand' field geologists who read rocks were giving way to geologists who analyzed satellite data and seismic profiles. But the distinction remains relevant, for ground truth, or what phenomenology calls the lifeworld, whether in geology or human experience generally, remains the source for every computer code or algorithm.

5. Instantiations

I had thus developed a version of field philosophy – not in name, but in deed – by the spring of 1997. During a one-year appointment at Fort Lewis College one of my tasks was to teach environmental ethics. In the fall semester I took the standard approach, running through a series of philosophy articles on intrinsic and instrumental value, animal rights, and the varieties of anthropocentrism. Frustrated by the abstract nature of the conversation, in the spring I tried something new: I built the course around an analysis of the newly created park, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah.

I broke the class of 30 into groups of two or three: students were tasked with thinking through the various aspects of design for the new park. Where would the roads be placed, which ones would be paved and which left gravel or dirt, and what would be the speed limits? How many campgrounds should the park have, and would they consist of pads with electricity for campers, or be limited to tent camping? What kinds of interpretive signage were appropriate? How would the visitor center be designed, and what kind of training and background should the staff have?

At the start of the semester I contacted the principals in charge of the development of the park. The National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management had been tasked with jointly managing the park. I also contacted officials in San Juan and Garfield counties and the mayors of Escalante and Boulder, Utah. The class agreed to spend their spring break together at the park, and we drove the four hours to central Utah in two 15-person vans borrowed from the College. We met with Park personnel and the local mayor, and also found a few ranchers in the area. We asked about their reaction to the new park. A rancher wearing a cap that said 'Bitches for Hillary' explained that

they had come to have greater sympathy for the Native Americans who had been displaced by their grandfathers: 'we're the goddamned Indians now.'

There were elements of this approach that still needed to be worked out. One problem was that the 15-week semester did not allow for the development of sustained relationships. Nor did I succeed in influencing the development of park policy, at least, as far as I know. The overall model, however, seemed promising, and I continued to work on improving this approach through a series of real-world experiments. These have included:

- A three year, NSF-sponsored Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) (1997–1999) program where students did fieldwork on questions surrounding environmental restoration on lands damaged by acid mine drainage in the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado, and where we also worked with a local stakeholder's group.
- The launching *New Directions in the Earth Sciences and Humanities*, a vehicle for a series of case studies in interdisciplinarity. Raising money from a number of public agencies, we were able to fund six teams consisting of Earth scientists and humanists who worked on multi-year projects.
- A second REU (2001–2003) titled *Global Climate Change and Society*, run in cooperation with the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), which took a field approach to questions surrounding global climate change.

In 2004 I took over as chair of the philosophy program at the University of North Texas. In that capacity I engaged in other experiments in interdisciplinary fieldwork:

- The creation of the University of North Texas Field Station in Cape Horn, Chile, which continues to conduct 'field environmental philosophy' in the Cape Horn region of Chile.
- An NSF-funded project, the Comparative Assessment of Peer Review (CAPR), a four-year research program that examined the nature of the peer review processes across six public science agencies (three US, two European, and one Canadian) and how these agencies integrated broader societal impacts issues into the review of grant proposals.
- This led to our working with and eventually running a number of workshops for these agencies, helping them improve the promotion of broader impacts.

6. Conclusion

Rather than being an antagonistic relationship, I see field philosophy as an insurance policy for disciplinary philosophy. Society increasingly demands accountability for its investments in higher education; field philosophy provides an answer to those who claim that philosophy makes no practical contribution to society. But for field philosophy to play a complementary role to disciplinary philosophy it will need to be viewed as 'real' philosophy.

The institutionalization of field philosophy will have moved forward when philosophy departments embrace this approach, advertising themselves as places where students can engage in field philosophy, by whatever name they call it. There are signs that this is happening, for instance at Michigan State and at my former institution the University of North Texas. Of course, there will need to be corresponding developments in the wider world, so that it becomes more common for philosophers and other humanists to be hired for their particular skills. This is not unlikely as one might think, for as my time with the USGS shows, it has been happening in an ad hoc fashion for some time. My hope is that in the future we will be able to regularize the process on both the supply and demand side so that field philosophy becomes established as a way to live the philosophic life.

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Notes on contributor

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