

## *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2018*

### **Types of Academics and Other Kinds of Intellectuals**

**By**

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**In photo: Luis Rubén Díaz Cepeda, Lewis Gordon, Enrique Dussel, Bernardo Cortés Márquez, and Jorge Alberto Reyes López**

*I recently had a wonderful breakfast conversation with Enrique Dussel and three of his former students after keynoting the Philosophy of the City conference in Mexico City. Our conversation took a turn to my thoughts on the types of academics I've observed over the years. The discussion occasioned much interest, and Enrique asked me to send him a letter outlining my observations so he could place it on his website. This is what I wrote:*

5 December 2015

Dear Enrique, Luis, Bernardo, and Jorge,

It was so good having breakfast with you today. As promised, here is a summary of my typography of professional intellectual groups with a focus on academics, particularly philosophers and scientists. I apologize for writing in English. Doing so in Spanish would take me a long time, and you asked me to send it as soon as possible.

My experience in the academy, the arts, and other intellectual communities has led me to conclude that there are basically three types, with mixtures and alliances across the lines with serious epistemological, historical, professional, and political consequences. They are basically those who are (1) smart/skilled, (2) those who are with one or two original ideas, and (3) those who are overflowing with creativity/originality.

Let's use the academic as the focus for the sake of argument. No one becomes an academic without being considered "smart." Thus, at first, all anyone who enters this world knows is that she or he is basically smart and can ascend through being considered "smarter" than those who weren't able to do so. At a certain point, everyone consists of those who distinguished themselves in secondary school, then at university, eventually to the masters and then the doctorate. Along the way, many others fall to the wayside.

Then there are those who distinguish themselves by securing academic employment. Eventually, there are those who become tenured and achieve the coveted rank of full professor.

At this point, all we have are “smart” or “skilled” people—in short, “academics.” They have met the criteria for each stage.

Now, if we go back to the point of initial employment, the only thing every employed academic in a society that understands reward in terms of employment knows is that she or he at least belongs to (1). Let us simply call this category *the ones*, and the others *the twos* and *the threes*. Correlatively, we could also say *the firsts*, *the seconds*, and *the thirds*.

The only way to know where anyone ultimately stands is through the work she or he produces. The world, as we know, has many people who have been called “smart,” “brilliant,” and even “geniuses” who have produced no work to validate such claims. In the end, it’s simply a judgment made by many who are impressed by things such as standardized examinations, witty conversations, or projected intellectual investments.

*The ones* or *the firsts* simply produce, over their entire body of work (writings, research, performance, whatever “production” model we seek), “smart” or highly “skilled” exemplars. The best among them are simply known as the smart getting smarter to achieve the status of the smartest or most skilled. Notice, however, that *the ones* don’t always have to produce, as their using their intelligence to secure their employment is also treated as evidence of their smartness. Thus, simply

acquiring a prestigious appointment deems members of *the ones* such even if they produce nothing afterward.

*The twos* are those who have one or two original ideas. All among them are basically smart. Some are smarter. Some are even among the smartest with the addition of the one or two original ideas they develop.

*The threes* should at this point be obvious. They are burgeoning with originality. They are creative and a constant source of new ideas. They, too, began as basically smart. Some are smarter. Sometimes, they are even among the so-called smartest. But more than often, the energy devoted to creativity leaves less time to focus on technique and other operational concerns (such as acquiring institutional power) that tend to be features of people who are smart without imagination.

In a psychologically and sociologically healthy environment, each sees her or himself as part of a community of people producing knowledge (or other expressions of the intellect and imagination, such as art) for the good of all. The goal of such a community is the flourishing of ideas for the welfare of humanity and ideally *all life* and even nonliving things—in short, all reality. There is in such environments an attunement with reality and ideas as ultimately greater in purpose and value than the self. In that world, *the ones'* contribution is using their smartness, whether through their own research or the institutions they manage, to facilitate and make better the original work of *the twos* and *the threes*. And *the twos* and *the threes* draw on the techniques and precision of *the ones* for a beautiful

marriage of imagination, evidential connections with reality, and the communicability of each in the form of content and technique.

The healthy environment is not, however, the norm. Other factors such as market rewards and vanity come into play. With aspirations of glory in the form of academic prestige or fame, *the ones* use their smartness to convince the rest of the world that their (*the ones'*) work exemplifies the best that humanity can achieve, which by extension suggests that they *are* the best exemplifications of what academics could hope to become. Unfortunately, this involves suppressing the appearance of *the twos* and *the threes*. Worse, sometimes *the ones* would conspire with members of *the twos* for the elimination of *the threes*. So, together, *the ones* and *the twos* offer themselves as the best for which the academy could hope.

*The twos* in this environment vary, according to whether they exemplify a mixture of *ones* and *twos* and also those other factors of vanity and professional prestige. If the latter, then *the threes* are in big trouble.

*The threes* in truth are so captivated by ideas and their work that they have little time for the manipulation of power to which *the ones* and some of *the twos* may dedicate some (at times *all*) of their energy. *The threes* are thus the most vulnerable in this unhealthy academic environment. It is rare to find one among them who is cognizant of the nefarious forces encircling them and with the smarts to know what to do before it is too late.

At this point, Enrique, you pretty much recognize many of the players in your more than sixty years' participation in the academy, as we discussed this morning. I was

particularly struck—Luis, Bernardo, and Jorges—that you can already recognize this dynamic so early in your careers. They are pretty clear in many academic philosophical departments and associations, as you already know.

It is without question that *the ones* dominate professional philosophy. In fact, analytical philosophy, which is hegemonic in Australia, Canada, South Africa (and many former African colonies), the United Kingdom, the United States, and growing across Latin America (no doubt through foundational and continued counter-intelligence funding), could be called *the philosophy of the ones*. The coveted ascription in that branch of philosophy is to be called “smart.” And even better: “really smart.”

There is an equivalent in Euro-continental philosophy similarly across the countries I just mentioned with the addition of those in continental Europe. Instead of formal logical skill, they offer textual techniques of “readings” and historical knowledge (though there are many with preparation in formal logic).

The enemy of many members (I stress *not all*) of both the analytical and Euro-continentalists, however, is *the threes*, and *the ones* often invite *the twos* to work with them as the best model: an academy spending much energy on achieving at best one or two original ideas. *The threes* are in fact beyond all this stuff, which makes them often “guilty” of the offense of being “undisciplined.” If one looks at the history of philosophy, the players and the trends should be obvious. The rub, of course, is that over time, despite the efforts of *the ones*, posterity belongs to *the threes*, except in the healthy environment, where all three groups are recognized for

a collective achievement such as an intellectual movement or, as in technological science, a single event such as a human being setting foot on the moon.

Amusingly, some sociologists and historians of philosophy misrepresent the field through making themselves—often exemplars of *the ones* and *the twos*—models of what to seek in the past. And the Eurocentrism often leads to the misrepresentation of the past in that regard. Think of how much we learn about in fact minor Hellenic philosophers versus a creative giant in Northeast Africa such as Imhotep who preceded them by 2,000 years!

There was a time in which analytical philosophy could produce *the threes* (as attested to by Russell, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Austin, Carnap, Tarski, Ruth Barcan Marcus, and so forth), but that is long gone. What has been touted as “great” achievements since the 1970s are so pretty much through dominant narratives of *the ones*, colluding with some of *the twos*, who offer themselves as the best that could possibly be achieved. They do so through the colonization of journals, publishing houses, universities, and foundations and use that power to block the emergence of as many *threes* as possible. I can’t think of a single analytical philosopher since the 1960s who could seriously be considered in her or his achievements to be more than a member of *the twos*.

Euro-continental philosophers have done a similar thing, but they do so less in terms of *technique* but in terms of *identity* and location—namely, legitimation through Eurocentrism often in the form of “interpretation” or “hermeneutics” as appeal to “tradition.” Much of this is well known in the conservatism and fascism of

Heidegger, Gadamer, and Croce, elements of which were paradoxically in Arendt in terms of her Deutschophilia and Anglo-Americophilia. This is balanced by alternatives, as there are forms of vitalism, phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, and even poststructuralism, that are not exclusively “continental” in my view, as the work of Bergson, Husserl, Jaspers, Cassirer, Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Weil, Gasset, Foucault, and Derrida attest as among the most outstanding, and they, at least, addressed the world. Unfortunately, at times, the Euro-continentalists collude with the analytical philosophers, as we see in some members of recent Frankfurt School critical theory, in a common cause of excluding creativity, especially from philosophers who belong to the periphery of the Global North. For my part, I find only three members of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse and Fromm from the earlier period and Karl-Otto Apel, tolerable.

This unfortunate portrait also emerges among some who espouse the pragmatist tradition. Beyond the classic period of Peirce, James, Dewey, C.I. Lewis with occasional inclusions of Du Bois and Alain Locke, Richard Rorty is touted as the Great White Hope, when in fact his achievements amount to a strong member of *the ones* at worst and a solid member of *the twos* at best. In the end, they ultimately support legitimating practices that amount to legitimate intellectual work as that which is manifested by the Euro-north.

I wrote much about these issues in a different way in my book *Decadencia disciplinaria: Pensamiento vivo en tiempos difíciles*, published in Quito-Ecuador in 2013 and in a Chiapas, México edition of 2014. The original English edition,



*Disciplinary Decadence: Living thought in Trying Times*, was published in the states in 2006. I described the circumstances that occasion these three types as *disciplinary decadence* because the practitioners turn away from reality through investment in the professional and epistemologically limited rewards of methodological fetishism. Living disciplines reach for the world and grow. When they turn inward and become obsessed with themselves as if they are reality, they are in fact dying while under the illusion of being alive, which is why I call them the living dead. It really is a zombification of thought. I argued for transcending all that through what I call *a teleological suspension of disciplinarity*. This involves being willing to go beyond one's discipline and its received method for the sake of reality. In philosophy, I describe this as the paradox of *philosophy beyond philosophy*. Regarding the many disciplines, I encouraged disciplinary communication—a task more difficult and radical than interdisciplinarity—in the form of *transdisciplinarity*, which is a level of communication through which new disciplines more attuned to reality could emerge and in their turn may face eventual transcendence. As you already know, many of us have taken up such a task in our pursuit of knowledge across the Global South through freeing ourselves of the dialectics of recognition. Producing the work supervenes over quests for recognition. Strikingly, the greatest of the greats, so to speak, are *threes* who throughout the ages always addressed humanity. In terms of those from the Global South who became ancestors in the twentieth century, Sri Aurobindo, Joseph Auguste Anténor Firmin,

W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Steve Bantu Biko, Ali Shariati, Keiji Nishitani, and Abdul-Rahman Badawi are some that come to mind.

Although I'm mentioning philosophy here, one could apply it, as you correctly pointed out in our discussion, to nearly any given discipline or field. As this schema hasn't existed as an object of study, I cannot offer empirical data but instead an educated guess, given my going on thirty years in the profession and my historical research on the emergence of intellectual movements, their associations, and networks. I expect *the ones* to be about ninety-three percent of academics, *the twos* to be about six, and *the threes* to be about one percent and, in some fields, even less—that is a fraction of one percent. One could easily see why *the ones* would be very attractive to a market-oriented system of knowledge and its rewards. Their *raison d'être* is mastering a system of recognition and its rewards.

One thing I would like to stress, again and again, is that no one initially knows where she or he stands in these categories. It is the work that matters, and the committed among us cares most about that and its *telos* or purpose. The problem is that for too many it's about their egos. They would like advanced knowledge about where they stand, and even if that is not enough. If they could forecast their location, many would prefer to misrepresent the outcomes so they could appear as *twos* or *threes* who are also *ones*. Yes, they want it all.

The historical example of Robert Hooke, Edmund Halley, and Isaac Newton, which I had recounted in our breakfast conversation, illustrates my point. Recall Hooke was the head of the Royal Society of London for Improving of Natural Knowledge.

Through the study of wooden corks, he discovered the cell, which was a monumental achievement in biology. His inventions and studies of micro-reality, as documented in his meticulous drawings in his *Micrographia*, were indeed groundbreaking. Halley was an astronomer and geographer, whose observations, mapping of the sky and oceans of the earth, and techniques of measurement led to his membership in the august society. One day, Halley, Hooke, and some colleagues were at a pub engaging in scientific reflection when a discussion of the planets' orbits emerged. Recall that Copernicus ushered in the heliocentric view with the planets revolving around the sun. Why such precision in their orbits? Why not an equidistant circle instead of an elliptical orbit? The conversation took a turn in the form of a wager to see who could find the solution to the problem, which Halley (other accounts say Hooke) formulated in terms of Kepler's third law of multiple orbiting objects. The game was proverbially "on."

After months of effort, none of them was close to a solution. Halley was not so much concerned with winning the bet, however. He really wanted to know the solution. So he sought counsel among other scientists who eventually recommended his consulting a cantankerous young man over at Cambridge who was busying himself with, among other interests such as mathematics and optics, alchemy and theology. That young man, Isaac Newton, was from modest means (a farmer's son). He had in some accounts hoped to achieve wealth through turning bronze into gold with the assistance of some good grace from his beloved Christ.

Things didn't start well when Halley met with Newton. When he explained to the latter that he was working on a challenge between Hooke and other colleagues, Newton immediately told him to get out. He hated Hooke, who had some years earlier placed Newton in ill repute over his theory of optics, white light, and its status as a wave or a particle. As Hooke was the head of the Royal Society and a specialist in many areas, including optics, Hooke's challenge had much weight. Hooke, Newton insisted, was a charlatan and a crook and he would have nothing to do with an enterprise of which Hooke was a part. So, Halley headed back to London in his horse-drawn coach.

Newton, however, had a sudden change of heart. He realized that if Hooke were to find someone who produced the solution, he would simply claim it and continue enjoying his undeserved status of being the best scientific mind in Britain. So, Newton placed his energy into developing a solution and quickly fetched a messenger to deliver it to Halley in London. When Halley arrived home, the letter was waiting for him. Reading it, Halley was stunned and immediately went back to speak with Newton at Cambridge. Newton had invented the infinitesimal calculus and used its formulations to explain the gravitational forces through which the planets were kept in their orbit. (In Germany, Gottfried Leibniz had also invented the infinitesimal calculus, but it is Newton's formulation that is more known, and the latter had not known about this development in the work of the former.)

This idea was so radically new that Halley insisted it be published in the form of a treatise. So, he went to the Royal Society to seek funds for its publication.

Unfortunately, the society had no money. It had spent its funds on books categorizing fish. Yes, fish. See, for example, Francis Willughby's *De Historia Piscium*. Not to be deterred, Halley placed himself into debt and worked with Newton on fine-tuning the communicability of his ideas for publication.

At the point at which the book was to be printed, a problem arose. Halley explained to Newton: Hooke claimed the theory was his, and he wanted that to be acknowledged in the preface. Newton was outraged and insisted he would prefer the book be burned than published with an acknowledgment to Hooke. Halley offered another solution. He gathered the members of the Royal Society together in a meeting to discuss Hooke's demand for acknowledgment. At the meeting, he asked Hooke to explain the theory to the rest of the society; as it is such an important development, he wanted to make sure they understood what they will be celebrating. Hooke, however, insisted that they should simply take him at his word that it was his theory based on the formulations from the initial wager. Halley, however, pointed out that they couldn't do so unless they knew the theory, which required its explanation. Hooke couldn't offer the explanation, which led Halley to demand his admission that he had not developed the theory. The treatise, Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, was then published without any acknowledgment to Hooke. And, as we all know, a scientific classic—indeed, a revolutionary work, in many historians of sciences opinion *the greatest work*—was born.

There are different versions of this story. In some, Hooke's charge of plagiarism against Newton was after the first edition came to print and that the events leading to his being expunged from the text was from the second edition onward. Other accounts placed Halley in a minor role. What is clear is that Halley was playing mediator in all this.

It also turned out that Halley was up to much more with the famous wager. He had a hypothesis about comets of doom in the historical record. Using Newton's equations, he was able to defend his hypothesis that it was the same comet by predicting its next appearance. His successful prediction led to its namesake: Halley's comet.

We see the three groups in this tale, specifics here and there notwithstanding. *The ones* were the producers of those books about fish. Their correlates today are the gatekeepers of the many academic journals in which the goal is simply to demonstrate professional expertise or skill or take advantage, by way of financial support, of the given system. Hooke, monumental though his contribution to cellular biology was, belongs to *the twos* in the overall scheme of things, though in microbiology he was clearly among *the threes*. Newton is obviously a member of *the threes*. And Halley was within his fields of astronomy mapping and geography clearly *the threes* and overall a member of *the twos* or somewhere between *twos* and *threes*, though I'm sure there will be debate as comparing biology and astronomy is much like doing so with apples and oranges. These categories are, after all, fluid.

Notice also how Hooke's psychological motivations mirror so well what dominates the academic world today. Halley, however, appears to be the hero of this story, or at least the possibly apocryphal account I've offered. After all, he worked through the entire theory with Newton but selflessly left all the glory to Newton, who, by the way, claimed to have developed the theory years earlier. Halley could have easily colluded with Hooke and produced a purportedly co-authored version at Newton's expense. He was, however, more concerned with finding the solution to the problem, and in doing so played an extraordinary role in one of the great achievements of our species. After all, had the wager not been made, had Halley not visited Newton, the young mathematician and optical scientist would have continued devoting his intellectual energy to alchemy and theology (which, oddly enough, he returned to later in life). We should also bear in mind that Newton's initial efforts on an impossible task might have prepared him well for an achievable one. We should also add that, as we know with relativity theory and quantum mechanics, Newton wasn't the last word, but he was a giant condition for the possibility of work through to this day.

Halley had also faced many obstacles in the course of his career. His former mentor John Flamsteed had become jealous of his achievements and did everything in his power to prevent his securing a post at Oxford. Halley's employment included work for the government as Master of Mint through the aid of Newton during his period in parliament. He obtained a post many years later, to Flamsteed chagrin, and eventually replaced Flamsteed in the most coveted chair in astronomy there.

Enrique, I think that our students and you could easily see where many philosophers in the past and present are located in this schema. A sad feature of our present, however, is that the market colonization of knowledge and intellectuals, which I wrote about in *truthout* some years ago, has fortified the grip of *the ones*. We are in an age hostile to creativity and reality. As that stranglehold tightens, certain areas of philosophy will become even more hostile environments for the production of great ideas.

And, as you rightly pointed out, this applies to the arts and many other areas of social life. We already know how the commercialization of music has enabled unimaginative recordings and performers to dominate, with occasional appearances of artists with one or two moments of genuine creativity. And truly creative artists are often the proverbial starving or little known ones. This is also connected to a serious error made by the Frankfurt School (a collusion of *ones* and *twos*) in their very racist attacks on jazz and other forms of Afro-modern music. They literally set up the musical equivalent of *ones* in the form of Euro-classical music as the model. What they failed to see is that each art form has *within it* these categories. Thus, Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were *threes* in a sea of some *twos* and mostly *ones*. In jazz, one could think of Armstrong, Waller, Ellington, Strayhorn, Parker, Monk, Mingus, and Coltrane, among others who are *twos* (very excellent and creative musicians) and *ones* (those of fine technique who simply imitate or play standards perfectly). We could think similarly in rock 'n' roll, rhythm and blues, reggae, soul, salsa, samba, and even now in hip hop, where similar forces come into play.



I think there is much we could learn from the Halley model, in the form characterized here, a story that was repeated in other areas such as philosophy and the arts. There are great artists who understood they needed to create conditions for even greater art to emerge. I see Miles Davis (though his personality left much to be desired) and Art Blakey to be of this kind as they mentored and created opportunities for so many great musicians. The same could be said among researchers and scholars. Devotion to the greater project—producing what ultimately belongs to humanity—requires creating opportunities.

I think that's a problem (among so many) in the current situation of hegemonic knowledge in the Global North. *The ones*, who are reducing the conditions by which *threes* could emerge, dominate and are growing beyond the estimated ninety-three percent. The problem with *threes*, after all, is that they are pretty much like the Jewish story of the Messiah: She or he could be the homeless beggar or prostitute or gangsta youth—in short, not immediately seen as what she or he is. If we think about the creativity it takes to survive in the world of illicit economies—conditions marked by so many dangers but there for populations who must engage such because of catastrophic unemployment and violent policing of borders—what, we may ask, might or could such produce with increased access to the material conditions for the production of knowledge?

Past communities of knowledge offered some openings for those who are forced to devote so much energy to alchemy and other challenges of the imagination. Today, however, only cracks remain, and they are getting sealed.

It's crucial, then, for us to put on the table the building of alternative institutions for the production of knowledge and learning. Even if *the ones, the twos, and the threes* are the inevitable groups to emerge, as we see, a world in which they work together for a cause greater than themselves is one in which so many, if not all, of us will benefit.

Thanks again, Luis, for organizing our breakfast discussion. And, yes, you have my permission to share this letter and post it on your website, as, given my argument, such reflections are best suited for public reflection and debate.

Irie tov y en solidaridad,

Lewis.