Achieving Escape Velocity: Breaking Free from the Impact Failure of Applied Philosophy

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As in the sciences, the humanities also feel the pressure to demonstrate societal relevance. Applied philosophy is a natural place to look. But how has it fared in terms of having an impact? **Adam Briggle**, **Robert Frodeman**, *and* **Kelli Barr** *are investigating the impact of philosophical work on both the STEM disciplines and society. Historically, philosophers have not been particularly self-conscious about how their insights are being taken up outside the academy. They argue the problem is not what they say, but to whom they are speaking and where.*

Escape velocity is the speed needed to break free from the gravitational attraction of a massive body without further propulsion. Achieving it takes lots of energy, especially if the gravitational pull is strong. That's why most things on the planet stay on the planet. This is a useful concept for thinking about academic impact. In the case of the humanities, for several decades now some philosophers have wanted to escape the ivory tower and have a real-world impact. They've been trying to break free of forces that kept them grounded within isolated and insular discussions.

This philosophical equivalent of the Apollo program usually goes by the name of applied philosophy. One way to mark its start is by noting that the first journal in the field, the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* (IJAP), was founded in 1982. IJAP states that it is "committed to the view that philosophy should be brought to bear upon the practical issues of life." Similarly, the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (1985) states that it aspires to provide "a unique forum for philosophical research which seeks to make a constructive contribution to problems of practical concern."

We think this mission has largely been a failure. Make no mistake, the last 30 years has produced a great deal of subtle philosophic analysis of practical problems. But the field has failed in terms of having an extra-disciplinary impact. We believe this is because philosophers have not been self-conscious about the gravitational pull of the massive body against which they must struggle.

MAVEN at Mars, Artist's Concept. Credit NASA JPL (Wikimedia Public Domain)

Philosophers thought they were trying to break free from the chains of an abstract discourse and that talking about real-world issues would be enough fuel to achieve escape velocity. But the gravitational pull holding them back was not discursive but institutional in nature. The problem wasn't with the content of philosophical thought. It wasn't about *what* they said, but to *whom* they were speaking.

The institution holding them back was the discipline-based university. Disciplines do a great job of developing new knowledge. But they do a poor job at transmitting that knowledge to society. Indeed, the word 'applied' forms part of the problem, because it indicates that the philosopher *first* does the intellectual work in specialized journals for one's disciplinary peers.

Afterward that work is supposedly 'applied' to society as a finished product. The passive voice is intentional here, because there is no account of who does the applying or how. At the core of the applied model of scholarship, then, is a faith in what we might call the passive diffusion model of knowledge transfer whereby peer-reviewed articles somehowlead to societal benefits. Of course, it's just this kind of hand-waving nonchalance that precipitated the accountability culture now taking hold of the academy. A faith-based impact story just won't do.

The applied philosophy literature is full of insights about practical problems. But in our survey of the literature we find essentially no accounts of how a philosopher is supposed to ensure that these insights have an impact. It's a bias rooted in the discipline: one has exhausted one's intellectual task and professional obligation when one deposits a peer-reviewed publication in a reservoir of knowledge. Whether and how that knowledge gets used…well, who can say?

Instead of talking about abstract notions of free will in peer-reviewed journals, applied philosophers talk about concrete problems of, say, euthanasia or endangered species. But they still talk in the pages of peer-reviewed journals, and without including an account of how these insights are supposed to be taken up by people outside the academy. Absent is any reflection about how to actually get involved with the stakeholders in particular policy processes, how to effectively interject insights into conversations, or how to track the impacts of one's efforts.

We have a National Science Foundation grant to study the literature in applied philosophy, in order to improve the impact of philosophical work on both the STEM disciplines and society. As part of this work we have surveyed some

4,500 articles published in five applied philosophy journals for a) accounts of success (or failure) in affecting ongoing social concerns, and b) accounts of 'best practices' for how to have an impact.

What we found was striking. Only about 1%, some 55 articles, included any self-conscious reflection on the question of how to actually do applied philosophy or what applying philosophy means. And many of these articles were only concerned with defending the status of applied work as 'real' philosophy, a project that ironically entails affirming the very disciplinary standards and structures that keep them earthbound.

Only 8 papers – some 0.18% of the total – made the recursive move, giving attention to whether their efforts had mattered to non-disciplinary audiences. And only 1 explicitly discussed impact as a problem for the field as a whole (!). Applied philosophers have produced reams of articles *about* real-world issues; but this work is fordisciplinary peers. Applied philosophers have changed the types of things they talk about, but they have unthinkingly reproduced the very gravitational forces that keep them locked on their own planet.

People can cavil with our numbers. And we acknowledge that these articles can be interpreted in different ways. Another reckoning might find a higher percentage of essays that report some type of interaction with non-disciplinary audiences. But double or triple the number and you still have a shocking lack of reflexivity about broader impacts. Where are the stories about how philosophy must change when its audience changes – about how to do philosophy when you leave the armchair and enter the fray?

Others will claim that, by definition, disciplinary philosophy journals are not the places where we would find philosophers actually *doing* interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work. We agree. But these *are* the places where we should see philosophers *reflecting* on such work.

We also know that there is a growing cohort of public philosophers who are challenging the applied model. Yet they remain a tiny minority, and even they are not offering accounts of best practices for how to work out in the field.

Finally, others will argue that bioethics is a field that has successfully achieved escape velocity. We agree: bioethicists are an interesting exception – even if they did not show up in our literature review – for they often work in the field with stakeholders from other disciplines and various walks of society. But bioethics didn't so much propel itself out of the gravitational forces of disciplinarity as it was pulled out into space (that is, society) by doctors, patients, hospitals, and scientists who demanded help with their problems.

Bioethics exposes the importance of the demand-side within applied philosophy. People out in the world recognized a conceptual space that was philosophical (or at least ethical) in nature, and helped to clear a social space where this new creature, the bioethicist, could take root and speak with some measure of authority.

This has not the case for other types of applied philosophy. In the main they have practiced a kind of supply-side philosophy, trying to convince stakeholders to buy the notion that their problems have philosophical dimensions. On endangered species, for example, people have not reached down asking for help. Rather, they saw the issue as economic, political, ecological, and/or biological in nature. No ready-made space was carved out for the philosopher. And environmental philosophers, lacking (with a few exceptions) that tug from the beyond, have fallen back to disciplinary ground. It's no wonder, then, that (for instance) environmental ethics has not matched the success of bioethics.

Philosophers and humanists generally have suffered from disciplinary capture. The first step to breaking out of this gravitational pull is to name it. From there, philosophers need to change incentives so that they write for and work with a wider set of peers; in particular, they need to cultivate a demand-side aspect to their work. Moreover, those few who have traveled to the great beyond need to occasionally visit their home planet to train the next generation. For as a community, we cannot sustain escape velocity if our rare successes remain one-off ventures rather than the self-conscious, collective creation of a new paradigm for philosophy.

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