

The Critical Function of Fiercely Independent Journals

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A scholarly journal that reaches fifty years is an accomplishment to celebrate. I offer my respect to the *Reason Papers*'s series of editors—Tibor Machan, Aeon Skoble, Irfan Khawaja, Carrie-Ann Biondi, Shawn Klein—whose dedication made it happen.

On this occasion I would like to focus on a near-unique feature of *Reason Papers*, namely, that it is a scholarly and not merely academic publication. *Reason Papers* has published much written by scholars with academic positions as professors—I am happy to be among their number. Yet it has self-consciously remained open to publishing strong work by independent scholars.

This is crucial to the health of philosophical inquiry. Academies, including universities, colleges, and institutes, are valuable institutions but they come with hazards. One is that becoming a professor is too frequently a reward for merely being a good student, that is, one who has consistently done what is expected at an acceptable level of proficiency and who upon becoming a professor simply carries on the tradition. I am reminded of independent thinker Henry David Thoreau's exasperated remark: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers."¹

Another hazard is the conformity and ideological capture of academic journals that are de facto devoted to publishing only those within the editors' range of agreed-with opinion. Add to that the publish-or-perish pressure that younger academics especially experience, and academic publishing becomes prone to publishing too much low-quality and unoriginal work, even work that is groupthink or careerist.

By the exact same dynamic, original and high-quality work by independent scholars faces an institutional barrier. It is worth wondering how philosophers such as David Hume, John Stuart Mill,

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, chap. 1, in *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York, Penguin Books, 1986), p. 48.

and Jean-Paul Sartre—who never held academic positions—would fare in the world of contemporary academic publishing.

Further examples highlight this hazard. Galileo held an academic position in Italy, yet in 1633 he was silenced by the institutional publishing powers that be. The younger philosopher René Descartes reacted with alarm: “I inquired in Leiden and Amsterdam whether Galileo’s World System was available, for I thought I’d heard that it was published in Italy last year. I was told that it had indeed been published but that all the copies had immediately been burnt at Rome, and that Galileo had been convicted and fined. I was so astonished at this that I almost decided to burn all my papers.”²

For the rest of his life, Descartes pursued his philosophical career outside of orthodox France and, despite his being widely respected and celebrated, his writings were specifically excluded by institutionalized philosophers back in France. As one of his biographers reports,³ in his lifetime Descartes’s writings were never approved for publication in France nor ever included in curricula set by academic professors.

Arthur Schopenhauer, Albert Einstein’s favorite philosopher,⁴ was not a good fit for academic life, as his short-lived career at the University of Berlin proved. There Georg Hegel was the star and that social world left no room for Schopenhauer’s anti-Hegelian voice. The feeling was mutual, and Schopenhauer left voluntarily, yet it is also worth remembering that Schopenhauer’s now-classic *On the Basis of Morality* was rejected as unworthy by philosophers in the Danish Royal Society—for being too critical of Immanuel Kant, Johann Fichte, and Hegel⁵—even though Schopenhauer’s was the only entry in the contest.

² René Descartes, Letter to Mersenne, November 1633, in *Selected Correspondence of Descartes*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (2017), p. 27, accessed online at: <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1619.pdf>.

³ Richard Watson, *Cogito, Ergo Sum: The life of René Descartes* (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 2007), p. 43.

⁴ A fascinating essay by Notre Dame University philosopher Don Howard on how Schopenhauer’s metaphysical speculations may have contributed to Einstein’s reconceptualization of physics is Don Howard, “A Peek Behind the Veil of Maya: Einstein, Schopenhauer, and the Historical Background of the Conception of Space as a Ground for the Individuation of Physical Systems,” in *The Cosmos of Science: Essays of Exploration*, ed. John Earman and John D. Norton (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), pp. 87–150.

⁵ The Danish judges said: “[T]he Society cannot pass over in silence

The young iconoclast Friedrich Nietzsche received a chilly reception by (now-forgotten) philosophers at the University of Basel when Nietzsche assumed his teaching position there. As biographer Marianne Cowan tells it, the professors told their students not to take Nietzsche's courses because he was not doing anything that they recognized as philosophy and was not really a philosopher, anyway: "For a time, Nietzsche, then professor of classical philology at the University of Basle [sic], had no students in his field. His lectures were sabotaged by German philosophy professors who advised their students not to show up for Nietzsche's courses."⁶ University life was not a good fit from Nietzsche's side either; almost all of his highly original and now-classic output was written while he was a wandering, unaffiliated thinker.

A more recent example is the often shabby treatment by many academics of the independent and influential philosopher-novelist Ayn Rand.⁷

There is thus a consistent pattern across the centuries of excellent, original philosophy being done by outside-the-academy thinkers. There is also a consistent pattern of weak and derivative philosophy being done by those inside the academy. To be sure, many academics continue to produce good philosophy and many non-academics produce forgettable stuff.

So *Reason Papers* occupies a place of honor—given the historical record of philosophy publishing and our contemporary publishing world's struggles with careerism, in-group conformity, and ideological capture—by being committed to publishing what is in its editors' professional judgment the best philosophical work, whether written by academics or independent thinkers. That is an extraordinary asset to the world of philosophy.

the fact that he mentions several recent philosophers of the highest standing in an unseemly manner." Quoted by Arthur Schopenhauer, "Judicium Regiae Danicae Scientarium Societatis," in Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, trans. Arthur Brodrick Bullock ([1841/1860] London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1903), p. 112.

⁶ Marianne Cowan, "Introduction" to *Friedrich Nietzsche: Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions, 1962), p. 4.

⁷ For some evidence of and hypotheses about this phenomenon, see, e.g., Carrie-Ann Biondi, "On the Enduring Appeal of Ayn Rand's Philosophy," *The Institute for Art and Ideas*, July 25, 2017, accessed online at: <https://iai.tv/articles/the-courage-to-face-a-lifetime-on-the-enduring-value-of-ayn-rands-philosophy-auid-846>.

The market for ideas must remain open if it is to remain vigorous and even to progress. Among those publishing outlets that continue to encourage debate, take up controversial outlooks, and follow the highest quality editorial standard, *Reason Papers* with its now fifty-year track record holds a place of high respect.